

Tips and tools
FOR THE WRITING WORLD

20 Tips for Editing Graphics

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a graphic is worth 10,000 — but only if it's accurate, clear, and understandable. Below are 20 points to keep in mind as you edit graphics.

1. MARGINS.

Does the graphic fit within the margins of the page? Check any type, artwork, or borders around the edges. Is anything cut off?

2. LEGIBILITY.

Are colors, general design, and typefaces consistent within each graphic and among all graphics? Is all content legible? Check for blurry screenshots, poorly cropped photos, or type that's too small. Check that spacing around graphics, legends, and captions is consistent.

3. NUMBERING.

If you're editing a document with more than one graphic, are the graphics numbered sequentially? If the numbering convention calls for starting over in each section, make sure this is done.

4. LEGEND.

Should there be one? If different colors are used in the graphic — for example, some bars are green while other bars are blue — is it clear what each color means?

5. SOURCES AND CAPTIONS.

Is there a source line or caption if required? They should conform to the requested style (e.g., colon or period after caption label, period at the end of the caption) and should be formatted consistently. Is the graphic from a published work under copyright? If so, query about permissions or add the legally required language.

6. ORIGINAL FILES.

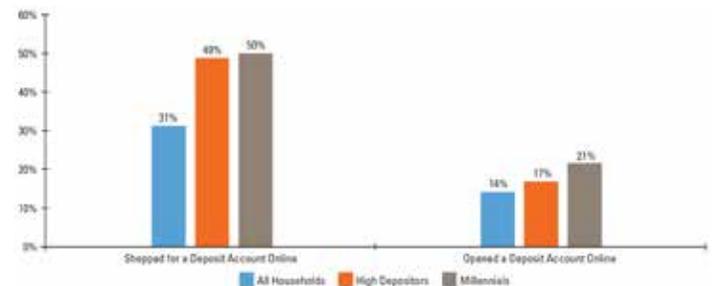
If you have an original source file, check the numbers in the newly created graphic (e.g.,

percentages in bar graphs or along lines in line graphs) against the source material. Labels should be complete and match those in the original file. Also, if colors are different from those in the source file, make sure the new colors align with the correct data.

Source file



Re-created

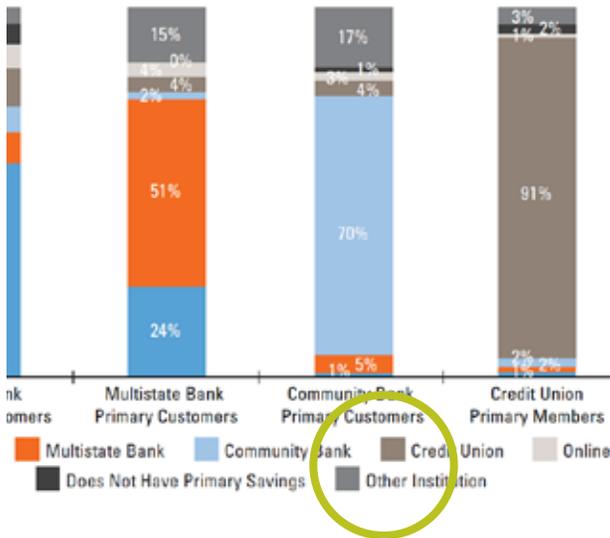


7. COLOR.

Remember that color perception can be affected by factors such as print quality, blue light glasses, and color blindness. To ensure the graphic clearly communicates its data, colors shouldn't be too similar and should be easily discerned from one



another. Designers may sometimes be constrained by corporate branding color palettes (see the example below, in which the colors for Credit Union and Other Institution may be too similar), but it's important that color helps understanding instead of hindering it. See Dragonfly's [Field Guide to Designing for Accessibility](#) to learn more.



8. CAPITALIZATION.

Apply title case or sentence case consistently to elements such as labels and legends.

9. SURROUNDING TEXT.

Capitalization and spelling should reflect the surrounding text. Apply any edits made to the surrounding text (e.g., changing “non-profit” to “nonprofit”) to the graphic as well.

10. ACRONYMS AND INITIALISMS.

Make sure these elements are easily recognizable or explained in a key or legend.

11. UNITS.

Provide the units of measurement for any numbers in the graphic (e.g., dollars, percentages, tons). Also, check that the legend/labels and graphic content don't repeat information unnecessarily (e.g., the legend says values are in USD\$M, and the axis values read USD\$10M, USD\$20M, etc., repeating the information in the legend).

12. CONTENT.

As you edit the content, keep an eye out for misaligned text and copy-and-paste errors. (In the example below, the label of one category has been accidentally repeated for the following category.)



13. NUMBERS.

Ideally, graphics should be understandable without the surrounding text, but if the text refers to information in the graphic, check the data in the text against the data in the graphic.

Given these percentages, the most important predictor should be the consumer's main transaction account; however, these percentages have shifted markedly since 2015. Then, the most used checking account defined 81 percent of primary relationships (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Phrases That Best Describe the Primary Financial Institution, 2020 vs. 2015



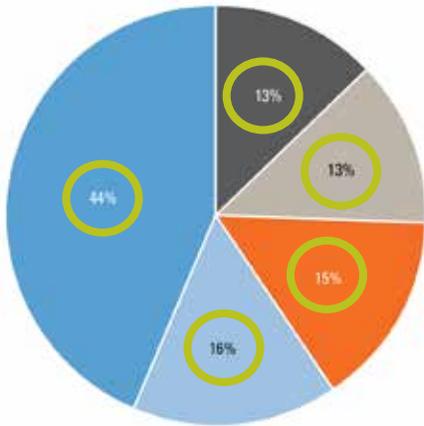
14. VALUES.

If you're looking at bar charts, make sure there's a discernible difference between bars of different values (see 24% and 25% in the previous graphic). Similarly, bars of the same value should be the same size (see the 71% bars in the graphic above).

Sometimes, slight differences may result from rounding. For example, if the data input is 20.7% for one item and 21.4% for another, the bars may be different sizes, but both should be labeled 21%.

15. MATH.

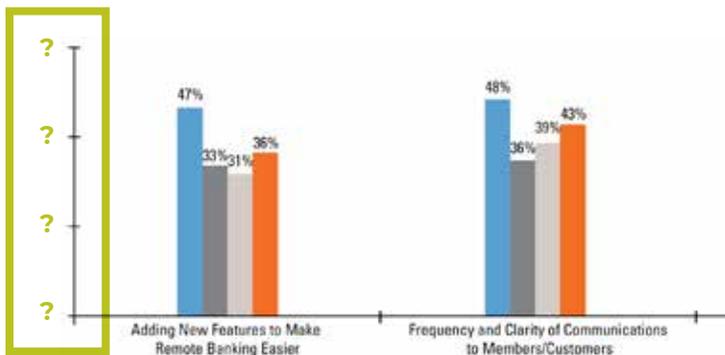
In addition to checking the obvious math in tables and charts, check the math in graphics where values should add up to 100. Be aware that they might occasionally add up to 99 or 101 (see pie chart below, where the values add up to 101%). You might consider adding a note to the graphic, explaining that amounts may not add up to 100 due to rounding.



$44 + 13 + 13 + 15 + 16 = 101$

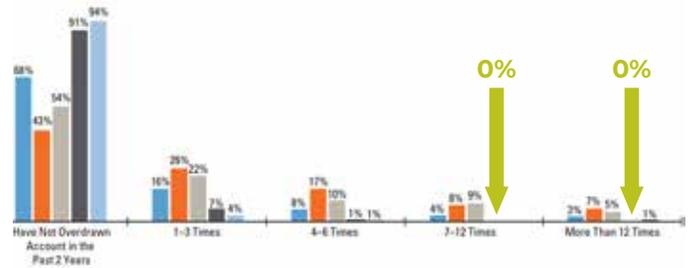
16. AXES.

Check that all x- and y-axes are labeled. And, unless values have been specified elsewhere, make sure all hash marks have a value.



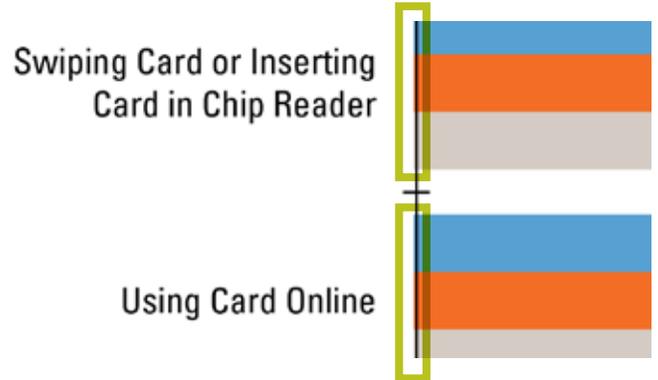
17. MISSING DATA.

All data should be accounted for. Query any spots where data seems to be missing. (In the graphic below, the “missing” data should have been shown as 0%.)

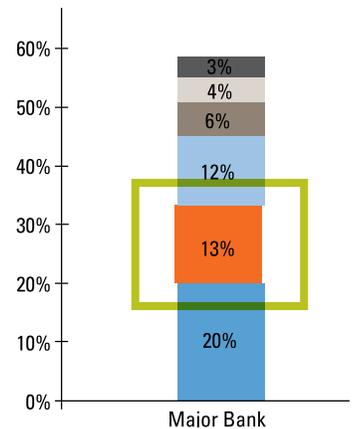


18. CLEAN LINES.

Look closely to make sure bars aren't running over the axis, as in the examples below.

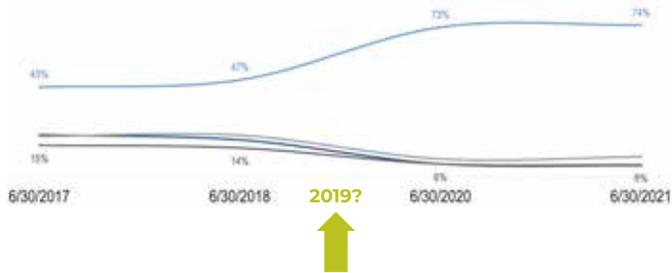


Also check that the sides of the bars are even on all sides, with no missing or excess pieces along the borders, as shown at right.



19. GAPS.

Be sure to check for any data gaps in the graphic. For example, in the graphic below, data for 2019 is missing. Without the percentages for 2019, there's no way of knowing whether the lines below increased and decreased smoothly, as shown, or whether there might have been a more substantial change, resulting in a graphic that looks quite different.



To remedy this situation, the designer added a "break" in the graphic between 2018 and 2020, as shown below, and the missing data was noted in the text.



20. DISTORTION.

Check that data intervals are consistent. In the graphic below, the years along the x-axis are spaced in two-year intervals through 2020, but then 2021 appears where 2022 should be. This introduces distortion by "stretching" the last segment of the colored lines over two years instead of one.

