

often writers and speakers intend their readers or listeners to understand and retain information. To these two ends—understanding and retention—these six general principles of presenting information apply: directness, conciseness, organization, clarity, redundancy, and multisensory messages. It is our conviction that the application of these principles will help your readers and listeners to manage the “message mania” in their professional lives.<sup>2</sup>

## Directness

Put simply, the strategy here is to get to the point. Routine memos and letters, as well as positive or good-news messages, can be organized according to the direct plan. As Chapter 5 will explain and illustrate, the direct plan takes its name from the placement of the main point of the message, usually in the first sentence.

A wise approach to presenting information is to think of the direct plan as the rule and any departure from the direct plan as an exception. Most executives should be able to employ the direct plan in 75 percent of their writing and, in doing so, make their writing easier to understand and retain.

What are the exceptions to presenting information by the direct plan? The two major categories are negative or bad-news messages and persuasive messages. These two types of messages usually require an indirect plan. Chapter 6 will explain and illustrate indirect-plan messages in depth. At this point, let it suffice to say that in the indirect plan, the beginning of a message is the position of most emphasis, the end is the position of the second-most emphasis, and the middle is the position of least emphasis. In routine and positive messages the main point should be given the position of most emphasis: the beginning. In a persuasive message, the main point should be delayed because resistance from the reader is expected. The main point is accorded the position of second-most emphasis and preceded by a series of steps designed to motivate or induce the reader to accept the writer’s point of view (more on persuasion later in this chapter). In negative messages, the main point should usually be de-emphasized by placing it in the middle of the message and preceding it by an explanation preparing the reader for the bad news.

In short, while situations will occur in which you will want to de-emphasize the point, employing the direct plan to get to the point will be appropriate in most of your writing. In doing so you will create a more efficient document—that is, less effort (input) will be required by your readers to understand your memos or letters (output).

## Conciseness

Conciseness may be expressed in two ways: use as many words as you need or use as few words as necessary. In either case, conciseness will improve the presentation of information.

Chapter 4 will offer some specific suggestions for making your writing more concise. The purpose in this chapter is to make an important distinction between conciseness and brevity, and in doing so to clarify the notion of conciseness.

Conciseness does not mean brevity. Brevity simply means using few words. We would all agree that a memo consisting of a two-sentence paragraph is brief. But it is not necessarily concise. Conciseness requires that the message contain an adequate

number of words to achieve the writer's purpose. If, for example, the two-sentence memo leaves the reader puzzled, it has sacrificed both conciseness and the reader's understanding for the sake of brevity.

Some organizations have missed this important distinction with their insistence on one-page memos and other such requirements. If, after eliminating any unnecessary words and phrases (see Chapter 4 for examples), a writer still requires a page and a half to make a point clearly, explain a problem adequately, or offer a few recommendations, then it makes sense to use the extra space. Use as many words as you need to adequately convey information to your readers. Be concise.

## Organization

The understanding and retention of information is enhanced when the appropriate mode of organization for a message is employed. Here are nine basic patterns of organization to consider while planning messages. They may be employed singly to organize an entire message or in combination to organize sections within a message or even paragraphs within sections. The nine basic patterns are direct, indirect, order of importance, chronology, problem-solution, causal, spatial, structure/function, and topical.

1. **Direct Plan.** As noted above, this is the pattern of choice when planning the organization of an entire message, particularly messages that are routine, neutral, and pleasant. The basic outline for the direct plan is

Main point

Support for, or explanation of, main point

Restatement of the main point (optional)

The paragraphs in support for or explanation of the main point may be organized according to the patterns described below. (See Chapter 5 for illustrations of messages organized according to the direct plan.)

2. **Indirect Plan.** The second major pattern to consider when planning an entire message is the indirect plan. Again, the indirect plan of organization is most appropriate for messages that the reader may find unpleasant and that may meet resistance from the reader. The basic outline for a negative message is

Buffer (delayed opening)

Reasons for negative message

Negative message

Positive ending

Persuasive messages, organized according to the indirect plan, often have their steps labeled differently by different writers. We outline the steps of a persuasive message as

Attention

Interest

Desire  
Conviction  
Action

(See Chapter 6 for illustrations of messages organized according to the indirect plan for negative or persuasive messages.)

3. **Order of Importance.** Suppose you have outlined a direct-plan memo with the main point being a recommendation to promote an employee to a supervisory position. You have three reasons to support your recommendation.

A sensible way to organize the presentation of the reasons is by decreasing order of importance—that is, state the most important reason first, then follow with the next-most important and the least-important reasons. Here is an example of how an actual outline of such a memo might look.

Recommend Denise Brown for supervisor (main point)  
She has great interpersonal skills (most important reason)  
She possesses excellent technical knowledge (next-most important reason)  
She has the most seniority among staff (least important reason)

This is an effective and efficient way to organize a message.

4. **Chronology.** The organizing criterion in this case is time. A clear example of this type of organization is seen on the typical résumé. The chronological résumé format is so named because the work experience section of the résumé is organized in reverse chronological order.

Chronology is a useful organizing principle for other types of messages as well. For instance, accident reports are usually written using the chronological approach. Also, sections of memos or longer reports that provide background on a problem under study are often organized chronologically. Here is an outline illustrating how a section of a report might be organized chronologically.

1995 LDDS Changes Name to WorldCom  
1998 WorldCom Acquires MCI  
2000 Justice Department Blocks Bid by WorldCom to Merge with Sprint  
2002 WorldCom Declares Chapter 11 Bankruptcy

Another important use of the chronological pattern of organization is the writing of instructions and directions. The steps or stages are explained and presented in chronological order. Here is a partial outline of instructions prepared for a customer service representative answering a telephone.

Greet caller.  
Identify yourself.  
Ask for the customer's account number.  
Ask how you may assist the customer.

This is a natural and useful way to organize information for readers.

5. **Problem–Solution.** Readers and listeners are very comfortable with this pattern of organization because it is used so frequently. In short messages, the first part of a message describes a problem, and the second part proposes a solution. Here is an example of a problem–solution outline.

Employees accepting gifts from contractors (problem)

Christmas gifts

Other gifts

Communicate corporate policy prohibiting gifts (solution)

Memo to employees

Letter to contractors

Such a familiar pattern as this facilitates a reader’s understanding and retention.

6. **Causal.** You have two options here: moving from cause to effect and from effect to cause. With the cause-to-effect pattern, you begin by identifying a present cause and then describe a probable effect—you reason forward in time. With effect to cause, you begin by describing an observed effect and then propose to explain the probable causes—that is, you reason backward in time. Both are common ways to organize messages or parts of messages. Here are examples of both patterns.

Cause to Effect

The high school population in the city has declined by 20 percent (cause).

Therefore, companies face a shortage of clerical help (effect).

Effect to Cause

The high school population has declined by 20 percent (effect).

The declining middle-class birth rate is the likely cause (cause).

7. **Spatial.** Also called the geographic pattern, this is another common pattern of organization. The basis for this pattern is spatial relationship, or geography. Where physical objects or their locations are described, this pattern may be appropriate. An example of a spatial pattern of organization is

Sales forecast by region (2003):

Northeast region

Southeast region

Midwest region

Northwest region

Western region

For such a topic, the spatial pattern seems most appropriate.

8. **Structure/Function.** Typically, this is a two-part pattern: The first part describes the structure of something; the second part describes the functions of the structural parts. Another variation of this theme is to describe

the structure and function of each part in turn. An illustration of the latter version is

- Employee Relations Division
  - Affirmative Action (structure and function)
  - Compensation and Benefits (structure and function)
  - Personnel Operations (structure and function)
  - Labor Relations (structure and function)
  - Training and Development (structure and function)

9. **Topical.** Sometimes called the categorical pattern of organization, this is often used to organize messages, particularly when the patterns described above seem inappropriate. With this pattern, topics or subjects are broken down into subtopics or categories. Here is an illustration of the topical pattern.

- Employee behavior subject to disciplinary action
  - Unsatisfactory work performance
  - Insubordination
  - Violation of safety rules
  - Falsification of company records
  - Destruction of company property
  - Absence from work
  - Theft
  - Use of controlled or intoxicating substance

These nine ways to organize messages, used alone or in combination, present information in a way that enhances reader understanding and retention of information.

## Clarity

Ensuring that information is clear to readers and listeners requires careful consideration of your audience and the application of these four techniques: define or eliminate unclear words; compare or contrast unfamiliar information with information that is familiar; exemplify; and quantify meaningfully.

1. **Define or Eliminate Unclear Words.** If you believe that your reader or listener might not understand a word, either define it or substitute another word more likely to be understood. This is particularly important when making oral presentations. Although a reader can reach for a dictionary, the listener is condemned to sit there puzzled or confused.

Be especially careful about professional jargon when writing or speaking to people outside the profession. Many words and expressions you use daily may be baffling to an audience unschooled in the lingo of your profession. Even when writing to someone within the same organization, be careful to avoid this barrier to clarity—for example, a data-processing specialist writing

to a marketing manager, or a benefits manager speaking to a group of management interns, must tailor the speech to the audience.

2. **Compare or Contrast the Unfamiliar with the Familiar.** One of the best-known techniques for ensuring that information is clear to an audience is to compare or contrast information that may be unfamiliar with information that is known to the reader or listener. Economist Paul Krug, writing for *The New York Times*, illustrates the principle beautifully in a column in which he describes the business scandals associated with Enron, Dynegy, Adelphia, and WorldCom in terms of the behavior of a manager of an ice cream parlor, who is trying to get rich with a not-very-profitable business.<sup>3</sup>
3. **Exemplify.** Information is usually clarified when a writer or speaker offers an example, real or hypothetical, brief or extended. A benefits manager explains how a major medical insurance policy supplements the basic plan by offering a hypothetical example of an employee filing a claim after a hospital stay. A sales manager, writing a directive for the sales force, offers examples of correct and incorrect uses of an expense account.
4. **Quantify Meaningfully.** Business writing and speaking usually contain numbers or statistics that often require a context to be meaningful. For example, “We are proposing a modest budget increase of 6 percent” is not as meaningful as “We are proposing to increase the budget \$7,800,000, or 6 percent, over last year’s budget of \$130,000,000.” Or, compare “Net income for common stock in 2000 was \$4.26 per share on an average of 123 million shares outstanding” with “Net income for common stock in 2002 was \$4.26 per share on an average of 123 million shares outstanding. This is down from last year’s record of \$4.48 per share on an average of 130 million shares outstanding, but better than 2000 when we earned \$4.16 per share on an average of 129 million shares outstanding.” The comparison of financial results over three years places the 2002 results in a more meaningful context.

An interesting exception to such strategies employed by business communicators to ensure clarity is the practice of strategic ambiguity. As Eric Eisenberg explains, some communicators achieve their goals by creating messages that are deliberately and strategically unclear. The strategy works because of the inherent ambiguity of language, which allows people to assign different meanings to the same message. Examples are a strategically ambiguous corporate mission statement that allows members of the same company to assign different meanings yet subscribe to the same statement (Ford’s “Quality Is Job One”), or a strategically ambiguous statement to the public by a corporate spokesperson during a time of crisis which later allows for more specificity, or even deniability, as more information on the crisis becomes available to the corporation.<sup>4</sup>

## Redundancy

Writers and speakers enhance the understanding and retention of information when they design their messages to include a degree of redundancy. This is especially important for oral messages because listeners, unlike readers, do not have the message in front of them to consult or reread.

### **Repetition and Restatement**

Repetition (repeating the same words) and restatement (expressing the same message in different words) ensure that writers and speakers emphasize key points and ideas. For example, in criticizing a newspaper article about her firm, a speaker, over the course of her presentation, could refer to it as “inaccurate, incorrect, faulty, fallacious, unreliable, imprecise, inexact, wide of the mark, mistaken,” and “off-target.” Get the impression that she didn’t care much for the article? Her audience could hardly miss her point. Note, too, that as a matter of style, it can be more effective to restate and rephrase the same point ten times than to simply repeat the word “inaccurate” ten times.

### **Internal Summaries**

Long written or oral messages benefit greatly from internal summaries. Such summaries permit a writer or speaker to remind the reader or listener of what main points have been made before moving on to the next. For example:

So far, I have offered two reasons as to why we should move the firm to New Jersey: a 30-percent reduction in the cost of utilities, and substantially lower state and local taxes. Add to these two reasons a third: quality-of-life considerations.

If this were the last reason, the summary at the end of the message could recapitulate all three reasons.

### **Multisensory Messages**

One more technique to consider as an aid to understanding and retaining information is the use of multisensory messages—that is, the combination of oral, visual, written, and graphic messages. As we noted in Chapter 1, research suggests that oral and visual messages together increase recall over just oral or visual messages alone. We devote an entire chapter, Chapter 3, to visual support.

In sum, the effective communication of information can be enhanced by attention to these six principles: directness, conciseness, organization, clarity, redundancy, and multisensory messages.

## **The Persuasive Process**

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Sometimes, even when information is presented according to these six principles, the message still will be ineffective. Usually, these cases involve writers or speakers asking readers or listeners to do something that they do not want to do—that is, the readers or listeners resist the purpose of the message.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the likelihood of resistance on the part of readers or listeners is one rationale for employing the indirect plan of organization. With this plan of organization, the request or call for action is delayed until the end of the message. By delaying the call for action, the beginning of the message is used to secure the attention of the reader or listener, and the middle of the message is used to motivate the reader or listener to accept the purpose. Because resistance is

expected, we do not risk a reader rejecting the request at the beginning of a memo and reading no further; we do not risk an audience tuning out our oral presentation at the very beginning. As we employ the term, persuasion is a process by which we motivate readers and listeners to (1) change existing attitudes and behavior or (2) adopt new attitudes and behavior or (3) do both.

### **Changing Existing Attitudes and Behavior**

Often our persuasive goal is to change attitudes and behavior that already exist. For instance, your company might discover that employees view pilferage (taking home pens, pencils, pads of paper, and so forth) as a kind of fringe benefit. You are asked to write a memo that will persuade them that it is more like petty theft and that they should desist. Or a survey by the Human Resource department might find that most employees view the forthcoming merger of your organization with another larger firm as something very negative. You must draft a letter from the president of the firm, to be sent to the home of all employees, that seeks to persuade them that the merger will be beneficial and positive.

In both cases, the assumption underlying the decision to employ persuasion is that simply requesting employees to stop pilfering company supplies, or telling them that the merger is a good thing, will not work. They know that the company does not approve of pilferage; yet they still do it. They have been told that the merger will benefit them; they do not believe it. Persuasion is needed.

### **Adopting New Attitudes and Behavior**

At other times, the persuasive purpose is to motivate readers or listeners to adopt new attitudes or behavior. For instance, you might write a proposal to persuade management to adopt a centralized database management system for your company. Or a department store might decide to persuade customers who use American Express and VISA cards to accept and use the store's own credit card. For this, the persuasive letter is designed.

Just like the examples of changing existing attitudes and behavior, both of these examples assume resistance by readers and listeners. For instance, simply proposing and describing a central database management system to a group of senior executives is unlikely to motivate them to approve the expenditure. They need to be persuaded. Similarly, writing to customers who use VISA or American Express and offering the department store's credit card is likely to be ignored or rejected. Why should they bother? They need to be persuaded, too.

### **Changing and Adopting Attitudes and Behavior**

At times, you may need to pursue both of the goals simultaneously. That is, you need to change attitudes or behavior and induce the adoption of new attitudes or behavior. The design of your message will reflect this more-complex purpose.

The most obvious case of such a dual purpose is the task often faced by salespeople: they must change the attitude of a potential customer toward the product that they are using and motivate the customer to buy a new product or service. In another example, to motivate an executive to replace the firm's photocopying



equipment with a competitor's brand may require persuading him or her that (1) the equipment in use is not as good as thought, and (2) the firm should choose the competitor's particular brand of new equipment. Failure to achieve the first purpose may make the second purpose superfluous. The executive may respond, "Yes, your photocopier is impressive, but our present equipment seems just as good. Why should I change?"

## Summary

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Effective managers present information that can be understood and retained. To this end, we have considered the principles of directness, conciseness, organization, clarity, redundancy, and multisensory messages.

Effective managers also design persuasive messages to change existing attitudes and behavior and to motivate others to adopt new attitudes and behavior.

The themes presented in this chapter about the communication of information and the process of persuasion will be developed more fully and illustrated with concrete examples of business communication in the chapters that follow.

## Discussion Questions

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1. Nikolai Bezroukov observes: "In Greek mythology, Sisyphus, an evil king, was condemned to Hades to forever roll a big rock to the top of a mountain, and then the rock always rolled back down again. A similar version of Hell is suffered every day by people with forever full e-mail boxes."<sup>5</sup> How bad is your e-mail in-box? How do you manage your messages?
2. What is the distinction between brevity and conciseness? How might an emphasis on brevity reduce the effectiveness of business communication?
3. Take a random sample of memos and letters received over the course of a week at work. Assess the directness, conciseness, organization, and clarity messages in the sample. Based on that assessment, if you were asked to recommend a training session on business writing for your department or company, what emphasis would you recommend?
4. Consider the following scenarios. Which of the nine patterns of organization would be appropriate for each?
  - a. You need to write a memo in which you document how an employee's performance has declined significantly over a period of several months.
  - b. You need to prepare an oral presentation in which you explain how territories for sales representatives in the Northeast have been reorganized.
  - c. You need to write a memo in which you identify serious lapses in security at corporate headquarters and propose measures to improve security.

5. Think of a time when you failed to be persuasive at work, at the university, or in your personal life. Why do you think you failed? Think of a time when you succeeded at being persuasive at work, at the university, or in your personal life. Why do you think you succeeded?

## Communication in Action

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### Internet

1. First, read Eric Eisenberg's article on strategic ambiguity (see note). Next visit a half-dozen Web sites of Fortune 500 corporations and read some recent press releases. What examples of strategic ambiguity are you able to identify in the press releases?
2. Visit Kaitlin Duck Sherwood's Web site, <http://overcomeemailoverload.com>, and read her "Top Tips for Overcoming Email Overload." Visit the *USA Today* Web site and retrieve two articles by Del Jones published in the Money Section on January 3, 2002: "E-mail avalanche even buries CEOs" and "Speed-read and don't spare the key." How much advice from Sherwood or the CEOs interviewed by Jones do you already follow and how much do you plan to adopt?



### InfoTrac

3. Retrieve Jim Paul and Christy A. Strbiak's article, "The ethics of strategic ambiguity" (A19527181).<sup>6</sup> What are some of the important ethical issues raised by the authors regarding strategic ambiguity?
4. Retrieve both W. H. Weiss's article "Writing clearly and forcefully" (A80853855), and Jennifer Laabs's article "Make It Your Business to Write Clearly" (A65650795).<sup>7</sup> Each year numerous articles are published for business professionals about how to improve writing in the workplace. These two articles you have retrieved are fairly typical. Write a summary of the advice offered in the two articles on presenting information and then compare it with the advice in Chapter 2.

## Notes

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1. Jones, D. (2002, January 4). E-mail avalanche even buries CEOs. *USA Today*, p. A1; Jones, D. (2002, January 4). Speed-read and don't spare the delete key. *USA Today*, p. A2.
2. Memo 4/9/97, FYI: Messages Inundate Offices. (1997, April 8). *Wall Street Journal*, p. B1.
3. Krugman, P. (2002, June 28). Flavors of fraud. *New York Times*, p. A27.
4. Eisenberg, E. M. (1984). Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication. *Communication Monographs*, 51, 227-242. (See Eisenberg, E. M., and H. L. Goodall. (2001). *Organizational Communication*, Third Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, pp. 24-25 and 30-31.

5. Bezroukov, N. (n.d.). Information/work overload annotated webliography. Retrieved October 8, 2002, at <http://www.softpanorama.org/Social/overload.shtml#E-mail>
6. Paul, J., & Strbiak, C. A. (1997). The ethics of strategic ambiguity. *The Journal of Business Communication, 34*(2).
7. Weiss, W. H. (2001, September). Writing clearly and forcefully, *Supervision, 62*, 14; Laabs, J. (n.d.). Make it your business to write clearly. *Workforce, 79*, 22.

## Advanced Visual Support for Managers

In many ways, the visual support that accompanies your written or spoken words has the most powerful impact because it clarifies, enhances, and emphasizes the message content. Research indicates that visual data are usually retained longer and more accurately than text or oral presentations alone. This is especially true when the information is complex, difficult, or new. Further, the way you deliver your visual support can have a direct influence on your professional image, particularly during corporate presentations. According to Walter Kiechel III, formerly of *Fortune's* board of editors,

Let us in no way minimize the opportunity, or the danger, involved. The thirty minutes an executive spends on his feet formally presenting his latest project to corporate superiors are simply and absolutely the most important thirty minutes of that or any other managerial season.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter discusses how to extend the impact of written and oral communication through visual support, which can enhance such business media as reports, presentations, and training sessions. Five main topics are presented: principles of graphic excellence; types of visuals; when to use visual support; media selection, preparation, and usage; and planning and execution hints.

### Principles of Graphic Excellence

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Too many of the visual aids that businesspeople use are poorly thought out, incorrectly prepared, and misleading. Unfortunately, many are also either drab and lifeless or so cluttered that they are incomprehensible. Others demonstrate high-quality presentation yet fail to present the data in a comprehensible manner. All of these visuals fall outside the principles of graphic excellence.

Successful visuals integrate substance, statistics, and design to achieve four principles: clarity, precision, efficiency, and integrity.<sup>2</sup> The best visuals give the viewer the greatest number of ideas as quickly as possible in the least amount of space. Clarity, precision, and efficiency come with effort and reflect understanding of some general design concepts: emphasis, unity, balance, space, scale, shade and color, texture, and pattern.<sup>3</sup> Let us look at each of these design concepts in detail.

**Emphasis** makes an item stand out from others through special treatment, such as typeface or pattern. Overuse of emphasis, such as too much of a bright color, just causes confusion.

unity is the relationship among parts that makes the whole work. Figure 3.1 shows, in the top example, a lack of unity—eight bars of varying heights and widths. In the unified revision below it, one sees four pairs of bars.

**Balance** refers to the placement of elements in space. One type, formal balance, has shapes arranged symmetrically. The other type, informal balance, can combine multiple smaller objects on one side against a sole larger object on the other. An example of informal balance would be a large photograph balanced by two small graphs.

**Space** is either positive or negative. An image such as a bar is positive and is surrounded by empty, negative space. Place positive elements in negative space so that the bars or other images seem to be resting upon the negative space. One way to accomplish the desired effect is to make sure that for bar graphs, the bars are wider than the space between them.

Applying **scale** involves presenting data so that it is not disproportionate; for instance, a small x-axis compared to a much larger y-axis is a scale problem. Figure 3.2 illustrates a scale problem with the y-axis on a graph. By varying the scale, the same data give a much different impression. To avoid giving a biased presentation, most statisticians follow the convention that the height of the y-axis should be about three-fourths the length of the x-axis and then make the appropriate adjustment to the scale increments.

**Shades and colors** should be planned as well. Light and bright colors jump forward and should be used for emphasis, while darker and more muted colors recede. If you use multiple colors that are not trying to emphasize specific elements, arrange the colors from dark to light. Many colors carry specific connotations—some of which are positive (green signals growth) and some of which are negative (red shows danger). Additional comments about color appear near the end of this chapter.

**Figure 3.1** Lack of Unity Versus Use of Unity

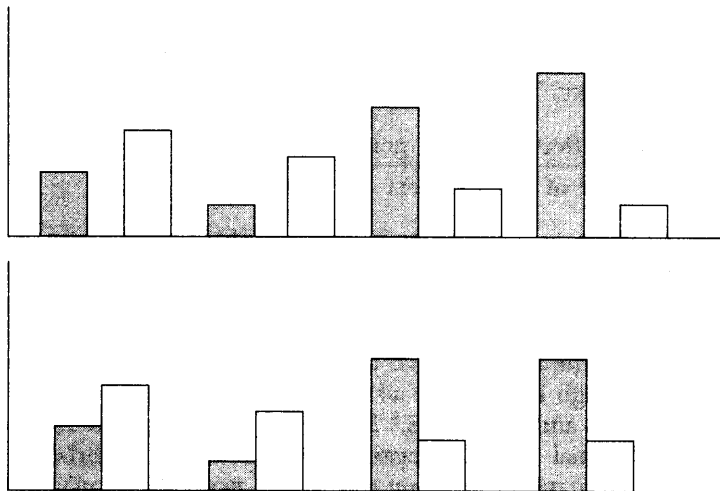
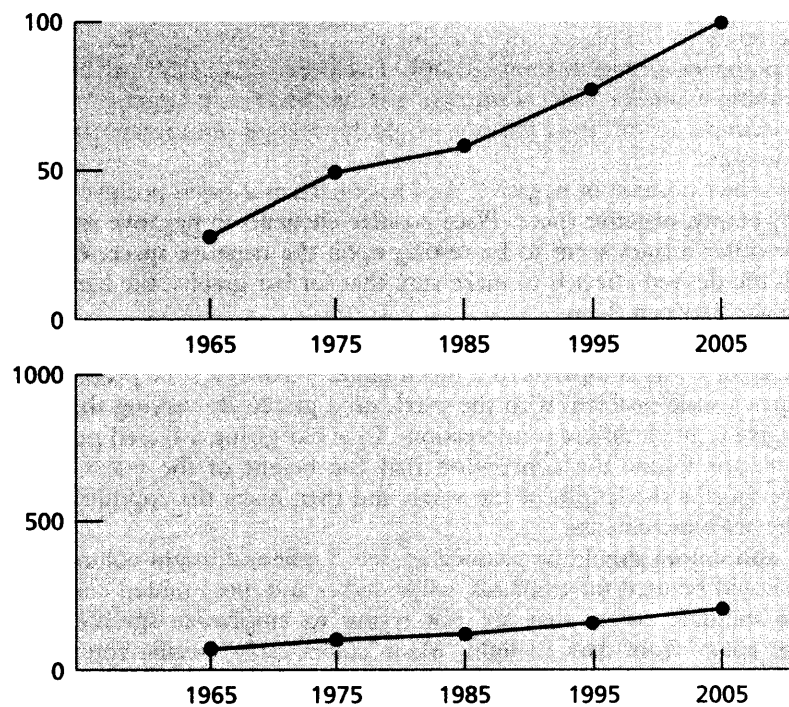


Figure 3.2

Variation in Impact Because of Scale Change



In using **texture and pattern**, avoid visual distortion by not putting patterns that interact visually, such as diagonal lines in opposite directions, next to each other. Bear in mind that vertical lines make items appear taller whereas horizontal lines make them look shorter.

The goal is to represent data accurately; that is, to achieve graphic integrity. To measure graphical integrity, Tufte uses his lie factor.<sup>4</sup>

$$\text{Lie factor} = \frac{\text{Size of effect shown in graphic}}{\text{Size of effect in data}}$$

For example, if a graph is drawn to exaggerate a bank's financial resources by 50 percent more than the data support (by using a bar that is too large, or a three-dimensional object rather than a two-dimensional object), the lie factor is 1.5. A 1.0 factor reflects accurate representation.

The debate between the artistic delivery of data regardless of the cost in accuracy versus avoiding a high lie factor at all costs brings out interesting philosophical and artistic questions and arguments.<sup>5</sup> Being aware of these potential pitfalls in both directions is a partial safeguard against major blunders in either direction. Careful observation of graphics in many prominent newspapers, magazines, and television advertisements will identify lie factors well above 1.0. Sometimes the