

Hints and tips on presenting information

Tables versus Graphs

Tables

Data are usually most effectively displayed in either tables or graphs. Use a table if it is important that numerical details are maintained. When creating tables, remember that the use of colour and special shading patterns can enhance visual appeal, but too much colour or too many different shading patterns can lead the table to appear cluttered, or ‘noisy’. In the same way, tables exported from software programs in the program’s default format *may* be appropriate, but sometimes can require formatting changes to improve readability.

Make sure that headings in your table are accurate descriptions of the content below them. In addition, ensure that units are placed in the headings or in the table where appropriate (e.g., %, \$, metres, etc). It can be frustrating for a reader to read a column of figures and not know whether they refer to metres or centimetres, Australian dollars or US dollars!

After you have entered data in your tables, double-check the data for accuracy – or better still, ask a colleague to check it for you. It’s easy to make data entry mistakes.

Graphs

Graphs are useful when you want the reader to grasp a pattern or trend in the results, and when precise numerical details do not have to be communicated through the graph. However, there are many different types of graphs available, and not all graphs are suitable for all types of data. It’s important that you try to use the appropriate graph.

In addition, remember that the same “no clutter” rule applies equally well to graphs as it does to tables. It’s easy to crowd a graph with patterns, formatting, special labelling of axes, and numbers. However, often the inclusion of all of these features actually detracts from the clarity and readability of the graph.

Graphs should be as simple as is possible and should communicate the required information. Consequently, the inclusion of appropriate labels is an important and often over-looked aspect of graph presentation.

Types of Graphs

Remember the type of data dictates the style of graph!

When making your decision about the ideal type of graph to use, think about what sort of data you have. Data can usually be categorised into:

- Discrete or categorical data
- Continuous data

Discrete or categorical data is data which falls into two or more of discrete categories. For example, if you had information about how many cattle, sheep and pigs were kept as livestock within a given area, you have categorical data (with the three categories being cattle, sheep, and pigs).

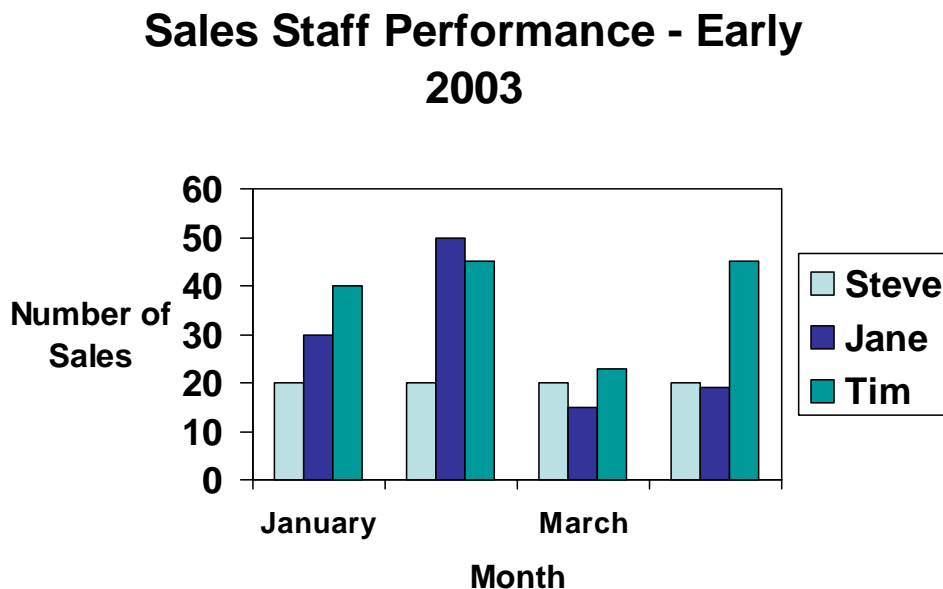
Data on a scale are usually thought of as (and treated as) continuous data. For example, numbers of people scoring a grade between 1 and 100 on an examination would constitute continuous data.

In general, categorical or discrete data are best presented using graphs which emphasise the different categories. These usually include bar graphs and column graphs. Continuous data are often best presented using histograms.

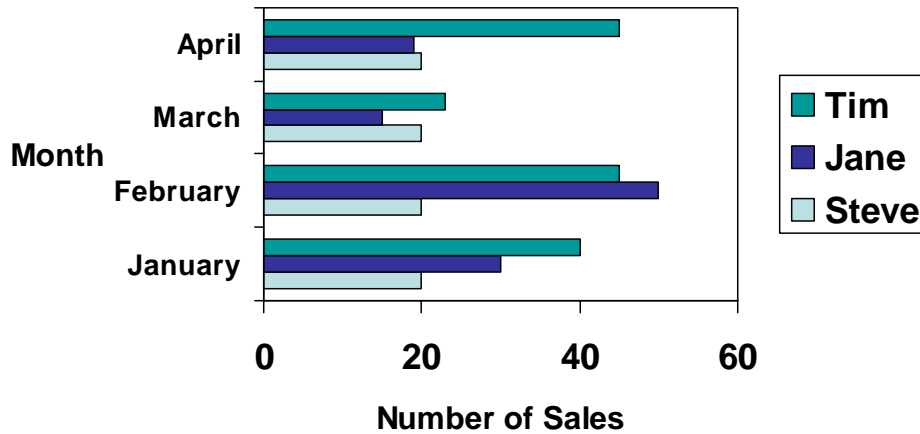
Examples of Ways to Present Categorical/Discrete Data

Column Chart

Assume that Steve, Jane and Tim are sales staff in a company. Their number of sales for the first four months of 2003 has been recorded, and plotted in this graph:



Sales Staff Performance - Early 2003



Examples of Ways to Present Continuous Data

Histogram

Assume that a group of people who completed a scuba diving course rated their overall course satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 10. The histogram shows the number of people who gave each of the scores from 1 to 10.

Histogram of Course Satisfaction Scores

