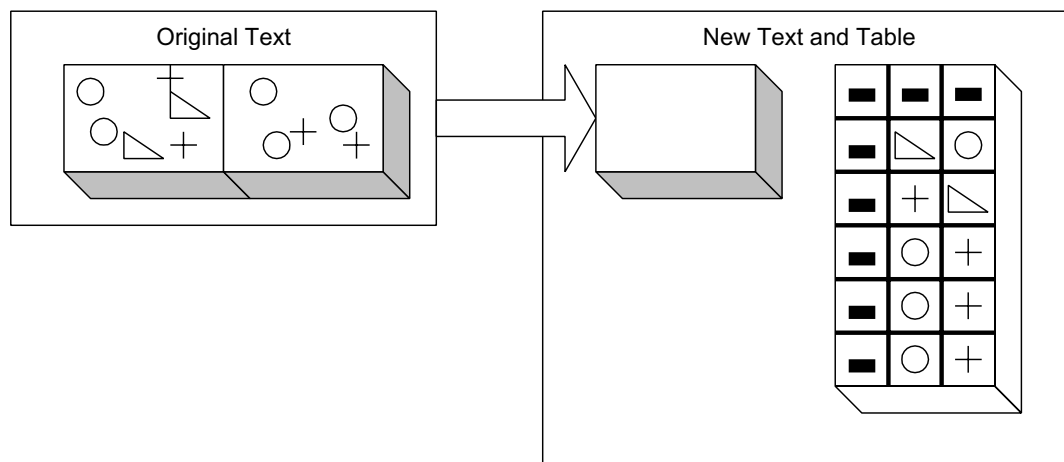


Move Repeating Categories of Information into Tables, Charts, or Graphs



BACKGROUND |

If you want people to compare the data, move it out of the text

The great data visualizer, Edward Tufte remarks, “The conventional sentence is a poor way to show more than two numbers because it prevents comparisons within the data.”

By removing the numbers you want people to compare, you simplify your text. But where do you put the numbers?

Help people visualize the data

You make the numbers easier to compare by yanking them out of the running text and lining them up in rows and columns.

If you want to stress a progression, use a chart or graph to make the overall trends easier to spot.

If you have a small data set, or need to offer a lot of particular comparisons, use a brief table.

EXAMPLES

Before

Steel shipments rose dramatically during the first five years of this decade, then declined over the last three years, as estimated by the American Steel Institute. Steel used for automobiles rose from 14,610,000 short tons, in 1990, to 20,123,000 in 1995, and if trends continue, will dip to 14,475,000 for 1998, putting us behind the high point of 1990. Similarly, steel for construction rose from 9,664,000 tons in 1990 to 11,836,000 tons in 1995, then sank below 1990 levels, in estimates for 1998. Other market sectors showed 1998 slightly ahead of 1990, but still substantially behind 1995. For instance, rail manufacturers of freight cars and passenger cars bought 2,525,000 short tons of steel in 1990, then bought 3,805,000 short tons in 1995, and only 3,098,000 in 1998. The only sector showing an advance over 1995 levels are the growing number of steel distributors, who bought 11,125,000 short tons in 1990, then moved up to 14,813,000 short tons in 1995, and soared to 16,025,000 short tons in 1998.

167 words.

After

Steel shipments rose dramatically from 1990 to 1995, then fell in most market categories to levels below 1990 (in autos, and construction), or at least below the swollen figures of 1995 (railroad cars). The only group that continued to increase shipments beyond the highs of 1995: steel distributors. (See [table](#)).

50 words

Steel Shipments Comparison Table			
Steel Products	Net Shipments by Market Classes, in thousands of short tons		
Market Class	1990	1995	1998
Steel for converting and processing	2,928	3,932	3,443
Independent forgers	841	1,250	1,048
Steel distributors	11,125	14,813	16,025
Construction	9,664	11,836	8,913
Automotive	14,610	20,123	14,475
Rail	2,525	3,805	3,098

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Yes, get those serious numbers out of the text. I may not look at the table, but I will eventually look at a chart, after reading the caption (Nielsen 2000b).
TO LEARN	Very helpful. Tables isolate the data and make it easier to study. Ditto charts and diagrams.
TO ACT	Much faster if I have to pick one item, or compare two or three.
TO BE AWARE	Relevant data backs up your argument best if you separate the numbers out in their own world.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Unless you are trying to relate to a scientist or an engineer, numbers are not going to build intimacy. If you must provide them, move them out of the text, as a courtesy.

See: Brusaw, Alred, & Oliu (1997), Horton (1990), Nielsen (2000b), Tufte (1983).

For your review only.

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