Using numbers in your assignment

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Information Skills

This guide can help you use numbers and graphs in your assignment. It is not an introduction to maths or a technical guide on how to create graphs!

Why use numbers?

They can help you get your message across more clearly, by supporting statements in your text and making it easier for the reader to understand.

Tables and graphs are good for showing patterns (general trends), as well as exceptions (something unusual).

What will help the reader understand?

Arrange things logically. Put data and figures in a sensible order, e.g. A-Z, by date, by size, and make sure it's consistent. Provide totals or percentages if they help to explain the data. Averages often help to provide comparisons.

Choose your scale carefully. Use a sensible scale and keep things consistent. If you are comparing 2 graphs and the first graph has a scale of 0 to 100, make sure the second graph has the same scale. The same applies to units. If you start by talking about kilometres, don't switch half way through and use miles.


Round figures for clarity. How much detail do you need? Will a little less detail make things clearer for the reader? For example:
- 25,000 is easier to take in than 24,837
- 82.5% is easier than 82.483657%
- A newscaster would probably say that the population of the UK is 62 million rather than 62,178,341.

Use the layout of your assignment to make things clear. If you have a set of data, it's easier to read in a table. Make sure things are clearly spaced and tables are lined up. Give titles to tables and graphs, and label your data. Make it easy to compare numbers by putting them close together on the page. (Note: It's easier to compare numbers in a column than a row.)

Using Graphs

A graph is used to show numerical trends and relationships in a visual way. Using a graph can get your message across more quickly than a table. The most common types of graph are:
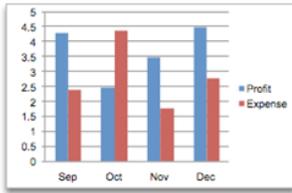
Bar or column graphs – good for comparing different quantities, e.g. the number of people buying different types of mobile phone.

Line graphs – good for showing changes in a series, e.g. over a period of time.
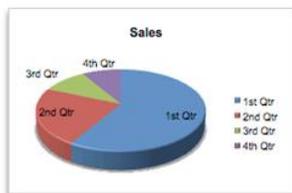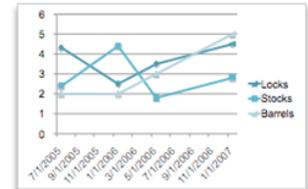
Pie charts – good for showing parts of a whole, e.g. by percentages.

Note: Microsoft Office Excel can help you select an appropriate type of graph.

Linking the text and the data

If you use a table or graph in your assignment, refer to it in the text. Don't just leave it unexplained.

The text guides the reader to the important parts of the table or graph. What do the figures show you? You may want to summarise the main points from the data but you don't need to write everything out again in words. Select the important features.

Remember: if you use figures from a website or book, say where you got them from.

For more detailed information on using tables and graphs, take a look at this book – 'Presenting numbers, tables and charts' by Bigwood (000 BIG).

A useful search engine for finding data on the web is Zanran, http://zanran.com.