

# 5 Ways for Engineers to Use Visuals Effectively

“A picture is worth a thousand words,” as the saying goes; however, when visuals are used incorrectly or ineffectively, they can:

- Cause confusion
- Cause misunderstandings
- Waste valuable space

Engineers often have a reputation for overloading their visuals and making them largely inaccessible to outside audiences. But that can be fixed! Here are five guidelines for engineers on how to use visuals effectively in their documents and presentations.

## 1. Identify your overall goal.

Your visual should help you achieve your overall goal. What do you want your reader to do after they've read your document? How does your chosen visual help you achieve that overall goal? In addition, ensure that each visual does new and important work by moving the reader toward your desired goal.

## 2. Place information strategically.

Readers expect that the most important information will be first in documents and visuals. Often, what's first with visuals are titles/headings and subheadings, which are opportunities to set the reader's expectations for the visual. What will the visual be about? What is the visual's overall message? What is the visual's importance?

## 3. Use both text and graphics.

Research shows that concepts communicated with pictures and words, rather than pictures or words alone, are more likely to be remembered. Ask yourself if you can represent information visually. If so, consider what type of visual would be the best for communicating that—graph, table, picture, flowchart, etc.? The text should support the visual, not take the place of the visual.

## 4. Provide context.

Use captions to explain the visuals and tell readers why they're important. Those in the sciences may have been taught to provide objective descriptions only in a visual's caption. However, this is a missed opportunity! Explain the importance of the visual, which will help you with #5.

## 5. Make the “What’s in it for me?” (WIFM) clear.

Readers view documents through the lenses of “How does this impact me,” “What am I supposed to do with this information?” and “What’s in it for me?” Clarifying the answers to these questions will encourage readers to pay attention to what you have to say and your visual’s significance without having to work hard (which risks losing a reader’s attention and/or creating miscommunications).

### Application Tool

Question	Answer
What information can be represented visually?	
Do my document’s headings and subheadings guide the reader to what this visual is and why it’s important?	
Have I clarified the significance of the visual? Is the visual’s WIFM clear?	
Have I given my visual sufficient context?	
Do these visuals support the overall goal?	
Is every visual I’ve included necessary?	

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