Graphics in the electronic age

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Preparing Scientific Illustrations: A Guide to Better Posters, Presentations, and Publications by Mary Helen Briscoe, Springer, 1996. 204 pp. $29.95 ISBN 0-387-94581-4

This book is a great starting point for making a graphic presentation. The author surveys the most common graphic formats and outlines ways to optimize them for posters, slides and journals. For each option she gives good advice for presenting anything: clearly identify your message, your audience, the limits of your graphics medium, and then eliminate anything in your medium that distracts your audience from your point. As a set of specific instructions for refining particular graphic and media types, this book is a must-read for newcomers to graphics presentation. Nevertheless, I found Briscoe's discussion about production techniques and strategies for graphical display limited. If you are the least bit comfortable working with computers, or if you have unusually extensive or complex data, you will need additional information.

The largest gap in the information provided relates to electronic manipulation of data. Although the author alludes to computers frequently, she does not explain how easy it is to do every phase of graphics production on computers. She goes into great detail about using a photocopier, rub-on letters, and a T-square to resize, label, and compile figures, but does not give the same detail about how to perform those tasks on a computer. Instead, Briscoe suggests that computers may, at times, sacrifice production quality and speed. This is not the case. For quite a while now, the average PC or Mac has been very capable of creating and reproducing full-quality monochrome and color images for direct output to everything from 35 mm slides to room-sized posters. Very powerful computers and/or graphics production help can be hired by the hour at local copy or print shops. Whether you rent or own a computer, you would do well to spend your allotted graphics production money and time on software instead of photocopies, rubber cement, rub-on letters, and so forth. Once you know what you're doing, producing slides, posters and journal figures on a computer provides unmatched flexibility in creating and revising current presentations and in re-using graphics for future presentations. Special software may not even be necessary. Most word processing and spreadsheet programs now have graphics tools built in. With so much computer power and software readily available, computer use in graphics production is more the rule than the exception, but the book doesn't reflect this.
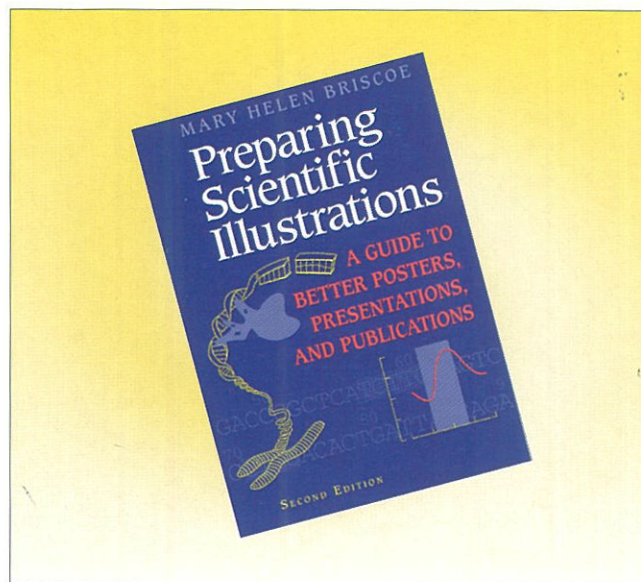
The other area where Briscoe's dicussion stops short is with her advice for graphing data. She explains when a bar graph might be better than a line graph, but she does not help you decide when and how to display data that doesn't fit easily into these basic graph types. For inspiration about displaying especially complex or unusual data, check out *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* and *Envisioning Information* by Edward R Tufte. Both books are published by Graphics Press and may be ordered through any large book store or by writing directly to the publisher: Box 430, Cheshire, CT 06410, USA. The Tufte books will pick up where this book leaves off.

The limited information on graphing techniques and computer-based graphics production does not diminish the value of the author's tips for figure design. The basic rules for making something easily comprehensible apply no matter how graphics are made and displayed and this book documents those rules well.

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