

WRITING FOR NON-READERS

Impressive stuff! And perhaps that kind of narrative is what the written word does best – storytelling that transports us *emotionally* from one place to another. As opposed to this type of narration:

Consumption of moosemeat declined significantly during the first three decades of the ninth century. Marauding hordes of Vikings averaged 14.3 pounds per capita of moosemeat monthly during that period, while consumption among Druids climbed to 22.8 pounds (for males) and 16.3 pounds (females) during winter months, up from 15.5 pounds in summer.

“Yaarrgggh,” as Ragnar might say. For most of us, data turns deadly dull in narrative form. Our eyes glaze. Our bosoms heave. It feels like we’re staring into the drooling jaws of The Statistician From Hell.

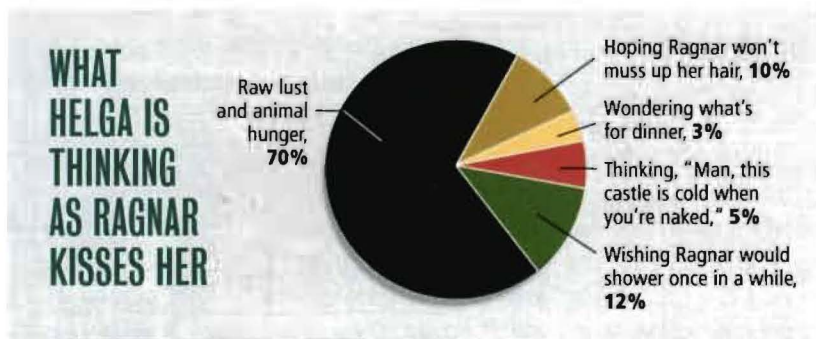
Such data might work better as a chart or graph:



That’s a fine match of medium and meaning. It’s quick. It’s visual. It’s precise. And best of all, it’s interesting . . . almost interactive.

It’s *non-text*, a form of writing that’s — well, a kind of *non-writing*. Which is perfect for today’s generation of non-readers.

Now, these *non-text* formats work fine for business reports, government statistics, news features and so on. But they won’t work for everything. Take Helga the Moose Queen; something’s missing when you write her love scene like this:



Obviously, some types of information are best expressed in narrative form. And that’s fine . . . usually.

But pause for a moment and ponder these past two pages. Notice how *visually* we presented our material. Would it have held your interest if we’d explained it all with normal narrative text?

SIDEBARS & INFOGRAPHICS

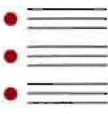

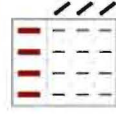
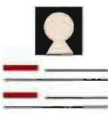

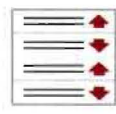
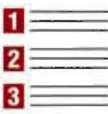

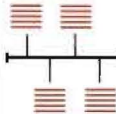


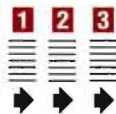


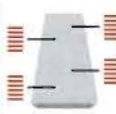
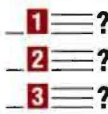


A *sidebar* is any short feature that accompanies a longer story. And an *info-graphic* (short for “informational graphic”) blends text and images to convey information visually — illustrating the facts with charts, maps or diagrams.

Years ago, sidebars and infographics were considered optional. Nowadays, they’re essential for effective publication design. Here’s why:

- ◆ They carve up complicated material into bite-size chunks.
- ◆ They offer attractive alternatives to gray-looking text.
- ◆ They let writers move key background information, explanations or quotes out of the narrative flow of the text and into a separate, highly visible spot.
- ◆ Because they’re tight, bright and entertaining, they add reader appeal to any story, whether news or features. In fact, they often attract higher readership than the main story they accompany.

Sidebars are usually specially packaged — boxed or screened — to help them stand apart from the main story. Notice how that’s true for our sidebar below: a visual index to all the sidebars and infographics we’ll explore in the pages ahead.

SIDEBARS & INFOGRAPHICS: THE MAJOR CATEGORIES

 <p>FAST-FACT BOX</p> <p>Nuggets pulled from the story to give readers a quick grasp of who, what, when, where or why.</p>	 <p>Q&A</p> <p>A way to ask and answer hypothetical questions, or capture an interview’s verbatim dialogue.</p>	 <p>TABLE</p> <p>A way to arrange data into columns or rows so readers can make side-by-side comparisons.</p>
 <p>BIO BOX</p> <p>Brief profiles of people, places, products or organizations, itemized by key characteristics.</p>	 <p>PUBLIC-OPINION POLL</p> <p>A survey that samples opinion on a current topic, collating responses into key categories and statistics.</p>	 <p>RATINGS</p> <p>A list of people or products (sports teams, movies, etc.) that lets critics make predictions or evaluations.</p>
 <p>LIST</p> <p>A series of names, tips, components, previous events — any categories that add context to a story.</p>	 <p>QUOTE COLLECTION</p> <p>A series of relevant comments on a topic by newsmakers, readers or random passers-by.</p>	 <p>TIMELINE</p> <p>A chronological table or list of events highlighting key moments in the history of a person, place or issue.</p>
 <p>GLOSSARY</p> <p>A list of specialized words with definitions (and/or pronunciations) to help clarify complex topics.</p>	 <p>FEVER CHART</p> <p>A way to measure changing quantities over time by plotting key statistics as points on a graph.</p>	 <p>STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE</p> <p>A brief “how-to” that explains a complex process by walking readers through it one step at a time.</p>
 <p>CHECKLIST</p> <p>A list of questions or guidelines that itemize key points or help readers assess their own needs.</p>	 <p>BAR CHART</p> <p>A way to compare two or more items visually by representing them as columns parked side by side.</p>	 <p>DIAGRAM</p> <p>A plan or drawing designed to show how something works or to explain key parts of an object or process.</p>
 <p>QUIZ</p> <p>A short list of questions that let readers interact with a story by testing their understanding of the topic.</p>	 <p>PIE CHART</p> <p>A way to compare the parts that make up a whole — usually measuring money or population percentages.</p>	 <p>MAP</p> <p>A quick way to give readers geographical information by showing the location of events relevant to a story.</p>