Trying something different: using A3s to best effect

We've seen A3s used as an effective alternative way of presenting information and advice on issues. They allow for different ways of presenting information, all at a glance. While most often used for "strategy" sessions, or to present ideas at the beginning of a piece of work, we've also seen them replace some advice papers completely!

We see a whole range of them in our reviews of the quality of policy advice – some good ones, and some which are extremely hard to follow.

In this Masterclass we provide some simple tips and tricks for choosing when to do an A3, and how to make it a good one.

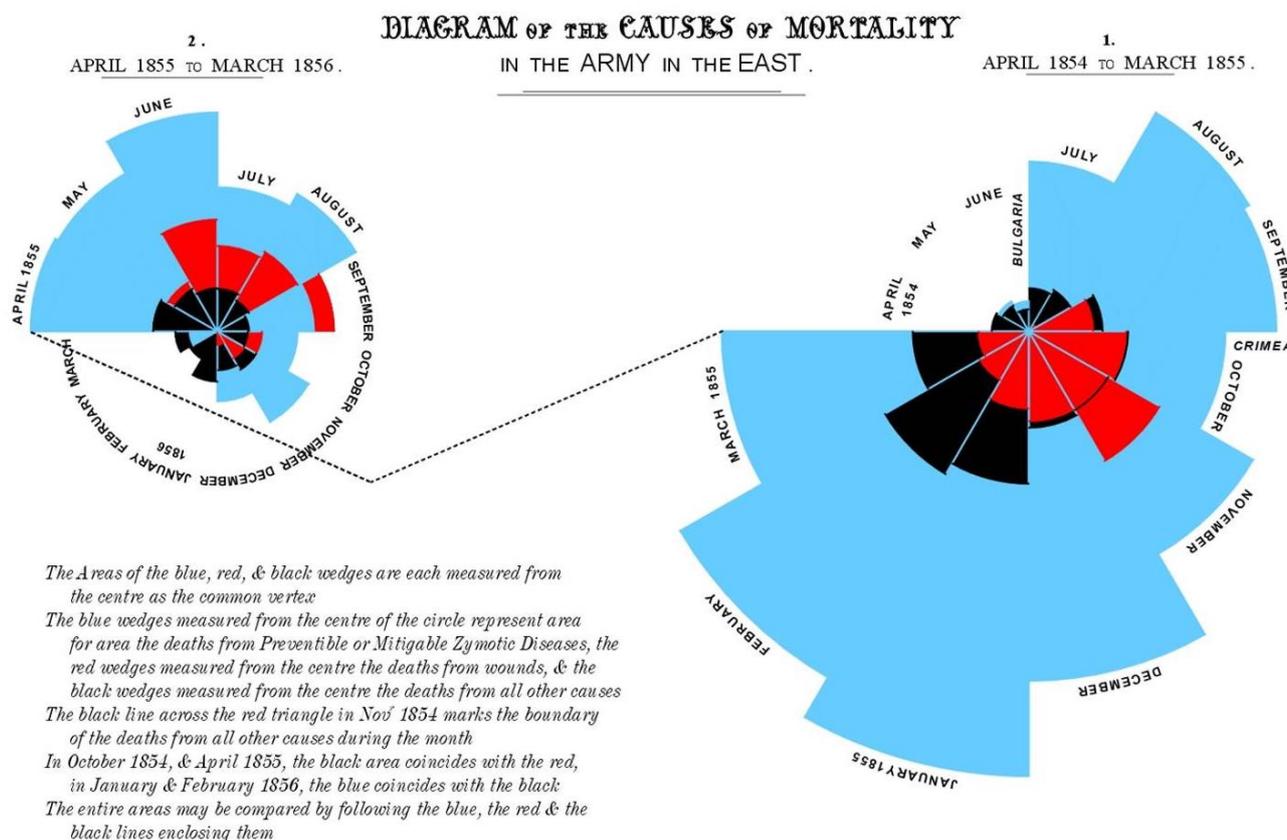## A picture paints a thousand words

This sort of visual presentation of data and analysis has a long history.

In the 1850s during the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale realised that wounded soldiers were dying unnecessarily in hospital from things like infections, malnutrition, poor sanitation and lack of activity. She collected data on causes of death and used specially designed charts, called Coxcombs, to present this information.

Her aim was to change the practice of doctors and improve hospital facilities, as well as cement the importance of professional nursing practice. They led to considerable change in the way hospitals were run during the war and then in peacetime at home. They still form the some of the basis for practice in hospitals today.

Nightingale's work was an early example of an A3 – presenting information in a pictorial form to raise awareness, and to seek a change in the way things are done. Figure 1 presents an example of one of her charts. It was accompanied by a set of recommendations for change.

Figure 1 Florence Nightingale's early A3

DIAGRAM of the CAUSES of MORTALITY
IN THE ARMY IN THE EAST.

2.
APRIL 1855 TO MARCH 1856.

1.
APRIL 1854 TO MARCH 1855.

The Areas of the blue, red, & black wedges are each measured from the centre as the common vertex

The blue wedges measured from the centre of the circle represent area for area the deaths from Preventible or Mitigable Zymotic Diseases, the red wedges measured from the centre the deaths from wounds, & the black wedges measured from the centre the deaths from all other causes

The black line across the red triangle in Nov 1854 marks the boundary of the deaths from all other causes during the month

In October 1854, & April 1855, the black area coincides with the red, in January & February 1856, the blue coincides with the black

The entire areas may be compared by following the blue, the red & the black lines enclosing them

Source: Webb (2010)[i]

More recently A3s have been used in methodologies like Six Sigma, which have been derived from the Japanese Kaizen. They were used as a structured approach to present an analysis of a problem and a set of recommendations. It was a way of boiling down the issues and analysis, so decisions could be easily taken by management. It also covered the implementation and monitoring phases, so included a check on progress and follow-up actions.

The layout followed a standard format, represented in

Figure **2**.

Time Magazine, and the National Geographic have traditionally been great users of diagrams to explain complex situations and to present data. They've been doing it very effectively for decades. It's well worth having a look through back issues to get a sense of the range of the possible. One example is presented in Figure 3.
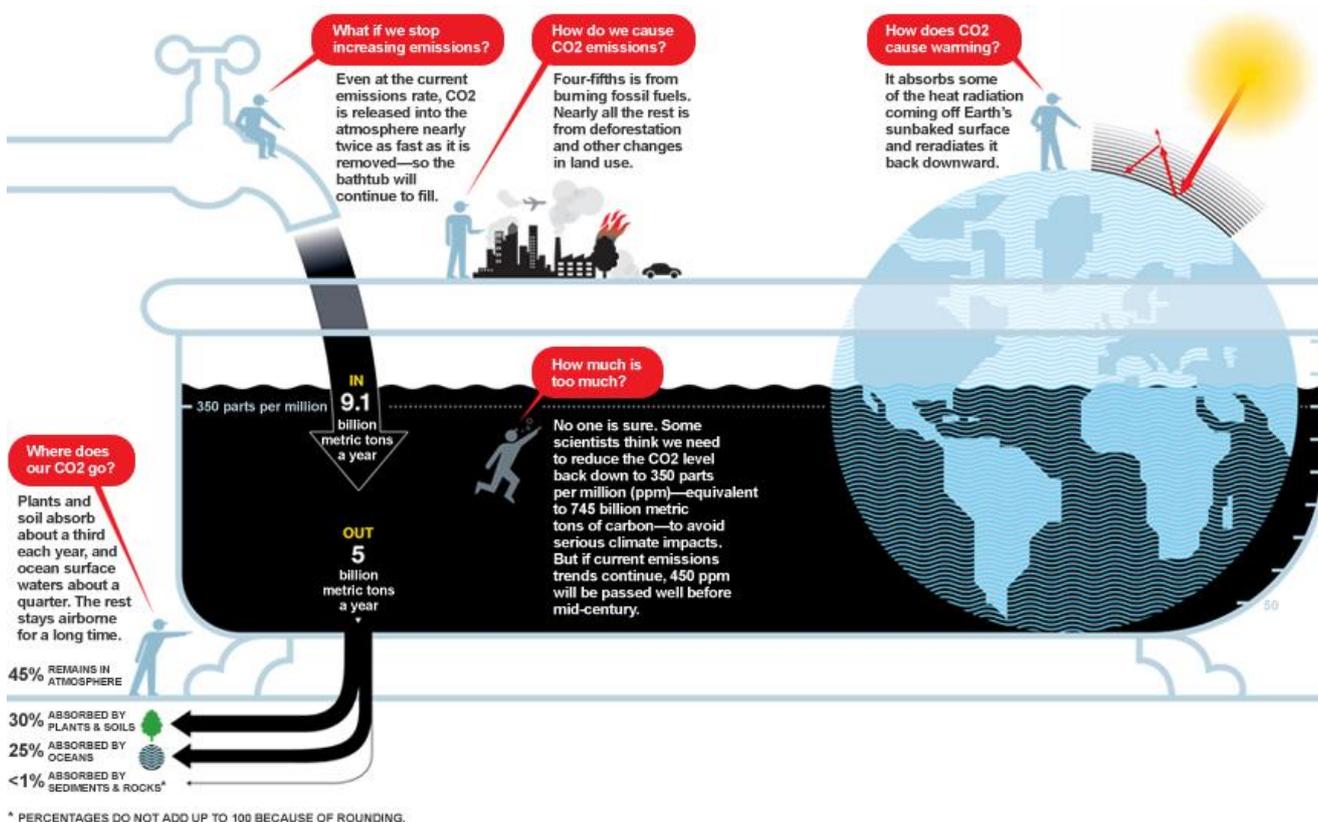
Figure 2 Kaizen A3

Traditional layout

Title	
Background	Action plan/ recommendations
Current situation and problem	Results. Trend reporting - monitoring of the actions in relation to the current state
Goal or objective	Follow up processes and further action required
Root cause analysis (often using diagrams)	Follow up processes and further action required

Source: NZIER, based on general information about Kaizen

Figure 3 The carbon bathtub (excerpt)

Source: National Geographic (2009)[ii]

A3s are a different way of presenting information

A3s allow you to break away from traditionally presented written papers. The main advantage of A3s is that they boil down content to only the essential information, and present this on a single page, all of which can be seen at the same time.

Some things to remember about the layout of A3s:

- **Don't make it too text heavy** – break it up by using visuals.

- **Use a range of different ways of displaying information** – charts, tables, diagrams, maps, pictures, timelines, process diagrams etc. Make it look interesting.

- **Don't use too many different fonts** – it makes the A3 harder to read, and can look messy. But remember to use different heading sizes – just as you would in a paper to delineate major headings, subheadings

and the text. Make sure the text doesn't get too small and become difficult to read.

- **Use colour** – start with your organisation's standard colour palette. That makes sure the colours don't clash and gives a house look and feel. But don't go mad: too many colours are like too many fonts; just confusing.

- **Write as crisply as possible** – use dot points, short sentences, short paragraphs, and informative headings. Slogans can be effective.

- **Not too simple** – if it is just a single chart or diagram it may not need to be an A3.

- **Leave white space –** people like to write notes.

We don't have strong views about how A3s are produced electronically. We've seen great ones done using PowerPoint, or Visio (or less commonly specialised publishing programmes).

But just remember, not everyone has Visio, so people receiving these files may have trouble opening them let alone editing them (if needed).

Structure is important in aiding readability

Develop a logical and well-ordered structure. Effectively you are putting an argument across, so it needs to start somewhere, and finish somewhere. The purpose and conclusions must be easy to spot.

There are choices to be made in laying out content. What matters is that the logic works for the topic – and usually the simpler the layout the better. Finding the right format can be a matter of trial and error. Figure 4 illustrates some options.

Look at using website design techniques, which provide many pathways into the content but still allow the conclusion to stand out. You'll no doubt have some people in your organisation who are specialists in this. Get advice from them.

We've seen sets of A3s, with each individual A3 discussing a different aspect of an issue. Done well these can work. Conceptually they become more like a slide-show, as the same basic pattern is repeatedly applied. For example, presenting the results of cost benefit analyses of various items in a budget package. But done badly, they are a real danger. They can easily lead to confusion and be overwhelming.

Whatever layout you choose, plan it out carefully

You can do this using a set of post-it notes/pieces of paper on a whiteboard, moving the content around until you get the structure right.

Test it out on your colleagues. A good A3 is a joy; a poor one just leads to confusion and re-work.

Make sure there is a careful peer review of any A3s before they are finalised. Choose someone to do this who has a real flair for A3s. But also test the reception on someone who knows little about the topic to see if the chosen layout works in getting the points across.

Figure 4 Options for structuring an A3

Three examples
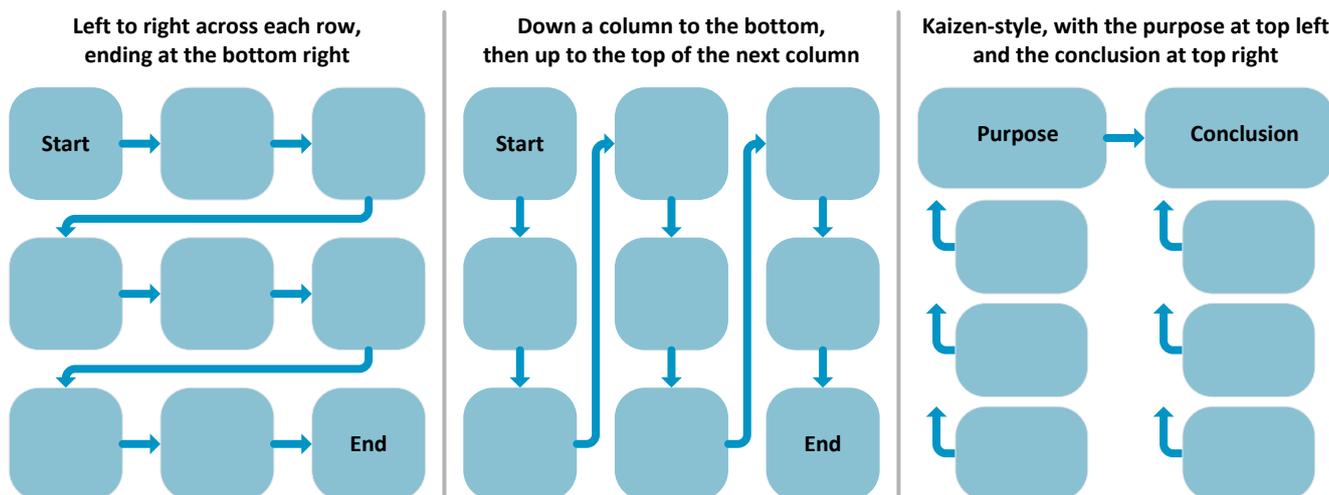
Source: NZIER

A3s are best in specific circumstances

Normally A3s aren't used for formal decision-making e.g. at Council meetings. But we've seen them best used in the following circumstances:

- **To support a discussion on a complex issue** amongst Councillors in committee, working groups, project teams or your senior leadership teams. They can be particularly useful in strategy sessions.

- **To present the conclusions** of some data analysis, research or an evaluation, and its potential implications. Typically, this is at an early stage of a policy process, and is attempting to challenge existing thinking and set a programme for future work.

- **As regular performance reports** – both on a project or initiative or as regular agency reporting. A3s allow for a simple dashboard of indicators, and then more detailed commentary if targets have not been met. Users will get familiar with the layout and information contained if they see it regularly.

Some people will hate A3s!

We know some people will prefer traditional, tightly written papers. That's fine, you do have to take into account the preferences of your key customers.

But others like information presented in a visual manner.

It's worth trying out, as they can make quite an impact.

Electronic papers make A3s more difficult

We discussed this issue in our Masterclass 9: Going Electronic. The standard A3 can present some challenges in electronic form.

This can be addressed by developing visual design templates especially for use on tablets or similar devices.

You might want to think about simpler A3s or landscape A4s using similar (but smaller scale) design techniques.

That being said, electronic A3s can actually be more technologically advanced than traditional paper A3s, as you are able to use hyperlinks, layers of data that you can go into more deeply, and other techniques more common to website design.

Advanced A3s

There are some particularly specialised types of A3s and techniques that can be used within A3s which can help you take your A3s to the next level.

Mapping and Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

These allow you to show data on maps. Think of the additional maps in traditional atlases, but much more advanced and digitised.

Several agencies already have this sort of capability. Local Councils can be adept at this; most probably because of the nature of the services they provide. Census data has been able to be presented in map form for a number of years; and LINZ, of course, leads the way in developing some of the infrastructure to enable this. Statistics NZ has even produced a guide to the design of maps.[iii]

Infographics

By infographics we mean using graphical visual representations of information or data to present it in a way which is more easily digestible. Statistics NZ uses such techniques in many of their reports (e.g. Figure 5). Another interesting example is MainPower, a small electricity network company covering North Canterbury and Kaikoura. Every year they send out a two-page Annual Review to all their customers, reporting on their performance, with the second page being an infographic (Figure 6).

Statistics NZ has a whole section on their website devoted to presenting infographics. It's well worth a look.[iv]
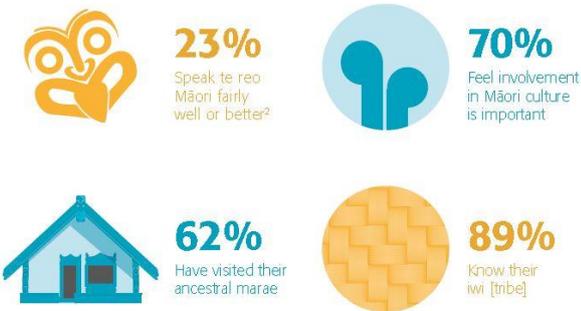
Figure 5 Infographic elements used to present of key statistics
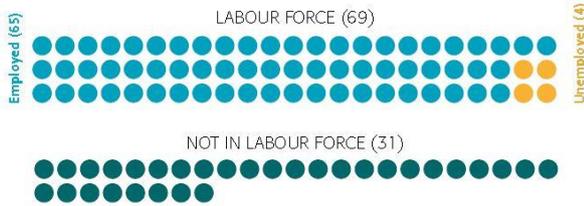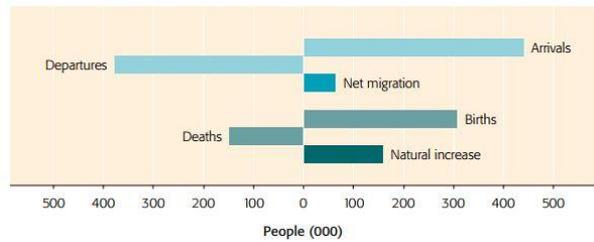
Source: Statistics NZ (2015)[v]

Figure 6 MainPower annual review (excerpt)
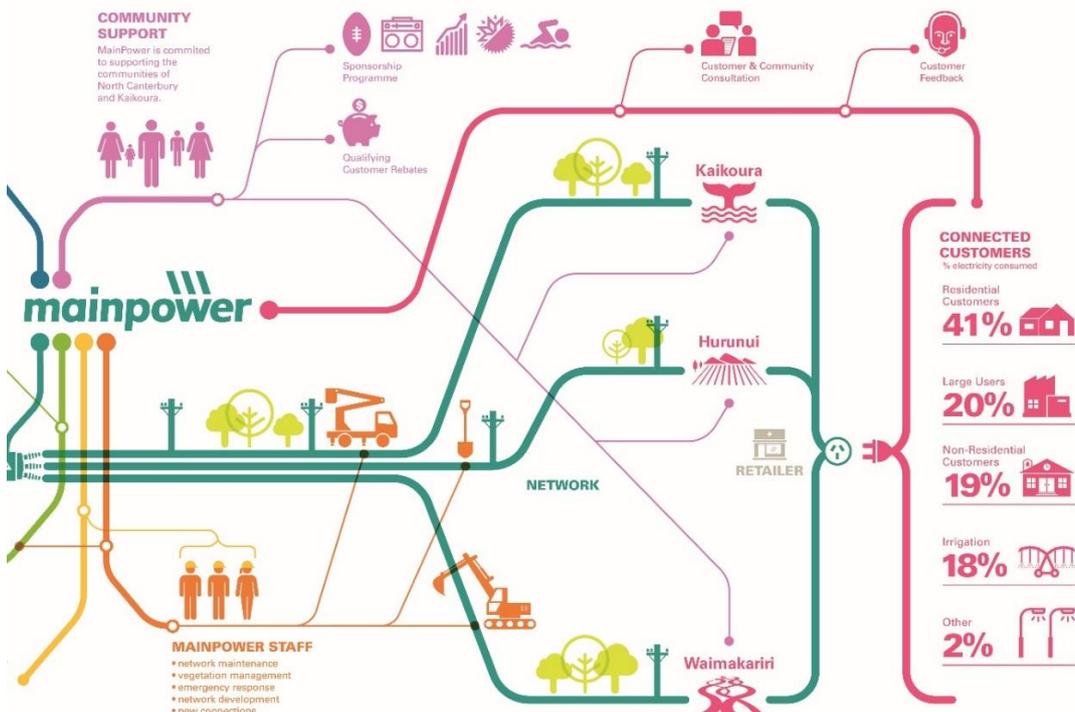
Source: MainPower (2016)[vi]

Actively develop the skills amongst your team

Some people are better at designing A3s than others. It's worth investing in these people and helping them become experts, so they can assist others in the team. Get them trying different design packages, and building their skills in visual presentation of information.

Some others may not have the same natural abilities and interest in visual design. But it's still worth them learning the basics.

As mentioned above, typically your communications people and website designers have expertise in design which can be applied to A3s. Use them to help, at least in a peer review role.

Try to build up a library of great A3s from your own organisation or from others. Often published reports are a good source of design and presentation ideas. Keep these so others can adapt and use them if required.

Microsoft Word (and other word processing programmes) make using visuals much easier these days through SmartArt, Shapes and Icons, and quick links to your picture libraries. There are also a range of standard infographic templates and symbols which can be found on the internet or purchased through Microsoft.

Keep at it

It's hard work getting good at A3s. You must keep working at it. But, it can be extremely effective done well.

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[i]   Webb, Cynthia L. 2010. Florence Nightingale, data visualization pioneer. http://www.stateoftheusa.org/content/florence-nightingale.php.

[ii]   National Geographic. 2009. The Carbon Bathtub. The big idea. http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/big-idea/05/carbon-bath

[iii] Statistics New Zealand. 2014. Design Principles for Maps Using New Zealand's Statistical Data. http://www.stats.govt.nz/about_us/who-we-are/home-statisphere/resources-info/design-principles-maps.aspx

[iv]   See http://m.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/snapshots-of-nz/infographics.aspx.

[v]   Statistics NZ. 2015. New Zealand in Profile 2015. http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/snapshots-of-nz/nz-in-profile-2015.aspx.

[vi]   MainPower. 2016. 2016 Annual Review. http://www.mainpower.co.nz/assets/Disclosures/AR-2016.pdf.