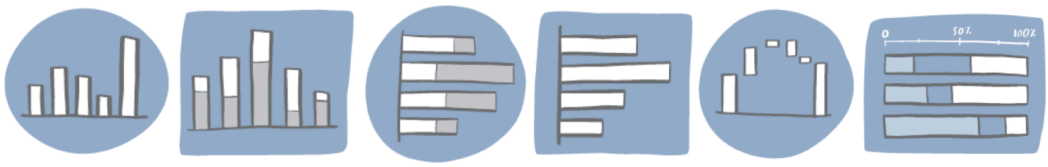

The Basics

Bar Chart (= horizontal bars) vs. Column Chart (= vertical bars or columns)

In a bar/column chart, the data values are encoded as length of the bar/column.

- Bar/column charts are excellent for showing categorical data, but not for showing change over time.
- Make sure that the order of the bars/columns is intentional.
- Use a legend if needed.
- Direct labeling is easier with bars than with columns.
- You need to use a zero baseline (no truncated y-axis please!).
- There are also more complex bar/column charts: paired, clustered, stacked, and 100% stacked.

Column charts have two advantages: 1) they make direct-labeling easy and 2) the order of the columns can 'match' the rows of the associated data table, making it easy to go back-and-forth.

(Horizontal) Bar Chart
Easy to read as it mimics how we process information in western cultures: read left to right, starting at the top. (also matching a corresponding table). Good option for long category names, because there is more space on the left side for horizontal labels or place the labels inside the bars. A much better choice if the text on the x-axis of a vertical bar chart would have to be diagonal (or worse, cut off) to fit.

Vertical Bar (Column) Chart
Often better if data is ordinal/numeric, meaning the categories have a natural sequence, and ordering them left to right is more logical (time, age ranges, west-east or other binned groupings of quantities (e.g., 1-10, 11-20, etc.).

Great Resources

- Bar Chart (by FlowingData)
- What is a bar chart? (by SWD)
- Which bar chart orientation should I use? (by SWD)
- Bar charts with Andy Kirk (3:53 minutes)