

Thinking Graphically: Connecting Vision and Cognition During Graph Comprehension

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Task analytic theories of graph comprehension account for the perceptual and conceptual processes required to extract specific information from graphs. Comparatively, the processes underlying information integration have received less attention. We propose a new framework for information integration that highlights visual integration and cognitive integration. During visual integration, pattern recognition processes are used to form visual clusters of information; these visual clusters are then used to reason about the graph during cognitive integration. In 3 experiments, the processes required to extract specific information and to integrate information were examined by collecting verbal protocol and eye movement data. Results supported the task analytic theories for specific information extraction and the processes of visual and cognitive integration for integrative questions. Further, the integrative processes scaled up as graph complexity increased, highlighting the importance of these processes for integration in more complex graphs. Finally, based on this framework, design principles to improve both visual and cognitive integration are described.

Keywords: graph comprehension, diagrammatic reasoning, eye tracking

Supplemental materials: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/1076-890X.14.1.36.supp>

Imagine a health scientist attempting to contain the flu epidemic. The scientist may study a population density graph (similar to Figure 1) depicting the number of flu cases by county. To allocate the limited flu vaccine, the scientist may want to know the specific number of cases in a particular county or the general trend of infected cases. What cognitive and perceptual processes are used to extract these different types of information from a graph?

Specific information extraction involves searching for a specific data point and determining the quantity represented by the data point. Integrating information, which is required to determine the trend in a graph, demands the extraction of multiple data points and interpretive processes to combine this information into a

coherent representation. The goal of this article is to examine the cognitive and perceptual processes used to extract specific information and to integrate information, with an emphasis on the integration process. We elaborate on existing frameworks of integration and provide guidelines to facilitate integration in graphs.

Specific Information Extraction

Most theories of graph comprehension have focused on the cognitive and perceptual processes underlying specific information extraction from graphs. Specifically, task analytic theories (Kosslyn, 1989; Lohse, 1993; Pinker, 1990) provide process description of specific information extraction with a focus on relatively simple graph types (i.e., bar and line graphs). These theories are remarkably consistent, suggesting the following stages of processing: (a) pattern recognition occurs, whereby graph readers encode the visual array and identify visual features of the graphical pattern; (b) conceptual relations are determined, giving rise to the quantitative meaning of the visual features; and (c) referents of the graph are related to the encoded visual features.

Several empirical studies have provided support for the task analytic theories' account of specific information extraction by examining the specific processes that comprise the general stages outlined previously (Carpenter & Shah, 1998; Lohse, 1993; Peebles & Cheng, 2003). First, parts of the question may be read multiple times (Peebles & Cheng, 2003). Next, the participant searches for the specific information on the graph (Stage 1), shifting from the axes to the main part of the graph and back again (Stage 2; Carpenter & Shah, 1998; Lohse, 1993; Pinker, 1990).

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This research was supported in part by Grant 55-7850-00 from the Office of Naval Research to J. Gregory Trafton. We thank Mike Schoelles for his help in programming the experiments. We thank Brandon Beltz, Cara Stitzlein, and David Cades for their help with coding. Parts of Experiment 1 of this article were previously published in Ratwani, R. M., Trafton, J. G., & Boehm-Davis, D. A. (2003). Thinking graphically: Extracting local and global information. In R. Alterman & D. Kirsch (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*. Boston, MA: Erlbaum.

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Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition

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Table of Contents Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition

1. Understanding the eBook Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition User Reviews and Ratings
 - Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition Free and Paid eBooks
 - Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition Public Domain eBooks
 - Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition eBook Subscription Services

- Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition Compatibility with Devices
 - Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - Interactive Elements Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
- 8. Staying Engaged with Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - Setting Reading Goals Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Thinking Graphically Connecting Vision And Cognition
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
- 14. Embracing eBook Trends

- Integration of Multimedia Elements
- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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