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Legal submissions need visuals: Here's how to create them

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Jennifer Brevorka

Effective legal submissions are persuasive and clear, meeting audiences on their terms. Those terms, however, are evolving: Our increasingly digital world sees us absorbing information via screens more often than ever before. Still images are now videos, we use our fingers to zoom in on details, and we layer graphics on top of digital maps. Counsel have noted the pervasive trend and are adjusting their strategies, turning to visual aids as part of their advocacy. Whether using emojis and pictures in a LinkedIn post, TikTok videos with case analysis, or bookmarked PDFs for Case Center, sharp lawyers know that modern-day audiences analyze much of our legal analysis on screens. "Thanks to a range of technological and cultural transformations," Professor of Law Elizabeth Porter explains, "images are moving out of the evidentiary margins and are driving argument in litigation documents from pleadings to judicial opinions."[1]

In its Summer 2021 issue, *The Advocates Journal* published an article in which I discussed analytical visuals[2] – images that organize, interpret, or represent data and arguments. That article contained information about the different types of analytical visuals and when to use them.

For advocates comfortable with artificial intelligence, graphic design, and computer editing programs, creating images for use with prose is cinchy. Other lawyers, however, are starting to strengthen this muscle and may want to stay within their comfort zone with programs we all use, such as Microsoft Word, Google Earth (great maps and street images), and Adobe.

This article is for both camps, with illustrations and discussions on how to create them using Word and additional information about advanced programs, details, and approaches to making images more sophisticated. My hope is that the article advances analytical visuals into mainstream legal thinking.

WHAT PROGRAMS CAN I USE OTHER THAN WORD?

Graphic Creation
- Canva
- Vector
- Adobe Photoshop or Adobe Illustrator

A.I. Programs for Editing Images
- Google Gemini
- Canva
- Lensa
- Adobe Photoshop

From paper to pixels: The digital reading brain

We are still learning about what some writers have termed the "digital reading brain," with findings on how a greater volume of readily available digital information is shifting attention spans and changing brain circuitry.[3]

Research, however, suggests that we understand *and* retain a significantly greater proportion of information when it is presented to us visually as well as orally – roughly 50 percent more information after one day, and 55 percent more after three days. As one lawyer puts it, "Vision trumps all other senses."[4]

In "Using Visuals to Better Communicate Logic in Legal Reasoning," administrative law judge John H. Larsen writes of the tendency of visual aids not only to expedite but even to increase our understanding of an argument or concept based on our innate preference for signs and symbols:

> As we think, visual images serve as signs and symbols we use to form abstract concepts. Such concepts include our depth perception and logic, which may be visualized.
>
> Similarly, images can help thinkers to focus on what is most relevant by dismissing from visibility the signals from the noise. In such a way, concepts are formed by visually

perceiving their relevant features. An effective visual can be as simple as a group of shapes that are labelled in a way to put them into the context in which they arise. Appropriate shapes combined with text serve to clearly present complex information and to symbolize concepts. Concepts can more persuasively guide us in figuratively drawing conclusions when we understand the logic of how arguments combine to form reasonable conclusions.[5]

Images work better for digital reading because studies show that when we read on screens, as opposed to the printed page, we scan and browse prose as opposed to the traditional left-to-right reading on the printed page, where we may highlight and annotate important text.[6] Visuals help serve as guideposts for the scanning eye, breaking up the bright white screen.

Practical uses of visuals in legal arguments include images that
- simplify complex concepts;
- enhance clarity and credibility;
- increase emotional appeal;
- improve engagement and retention;
- make numerical data digestible; and
- facilitate an understanding of spatial and procedural relationships.[7]

A review of Canadian and US decisions demonstrates these points. It also shows that there is no shortage of examples where effective visuals should be used more frequently in case law,[8] or where judges plead with lawyers to use pictures more often.[9]

Clutter to clarity: Tables make the point
Tables in legal submissions help to organize complex information into a digestible format that enhances readability and comprehension. Tables can highlight key patterns, discrepancies, or relationships lost in dense narrative text, making it easier for judges, arbitrators, or opposing counsel to quickly grasp essential points. A common purpose of tables is to inform the reader quickly about a cast of characters – or about parties in the proceedings – and their roles. I presented that example in my Summer 2021 *Journal* article.

Tables lend professionalism to a submission, reinforcing the credibility of the advocate's legal argument. When used strategically, tables streamline evidence presentation and support persuasive legal storytelling. Additionally, Microsoft Word offers a diverse number of choices for table design and layout once you opt to insert a table into your prose.

If you are a Crown or criminal defence counsel, you have likely included a table (or perhaps you should have) when summarizing dates and delay reasons for an application pursuant to section 11(b) of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.[10] Rather than pages of text, a table in, or responding to, a "*Jordan* challenge"[11] allows counsel to list dates, summarize who delayed and when, and count days from when charges were laid until the end of trial.

An effective table should
- possess clear labels, with clearly defined rows, columns, or axes;
- avoid clutter and ambiguous words;
- use colour to enhance readability (because it can contrast actions or emphasize the difference between groupings of numbers); and
- preserve the context of data.

Use a table for
- a cast of characters or names and identifying facts about parties;
- visual representation of key information;
- comparing and contrasting positions or detailed lists of numbers;
- highlighting costs submissions; and
- points of agreement and disagreement.

One example of an excellent use of tables, shown below, is this re-created table from a Toronto Local Appeal Body (TLAB) decision in which that administrative board reviewed the Toronto Committee of Adjustment's denial of request for severance of a land parcel and building variances. The decision relied on several tables. The first compared two different data points while also including images in the table:[12]

Table 2. Variances sought for lot to be called Part 1 (fronting on Ellsworth)		Required/Permitted	Proposed
1	Encroachment by rear deck into the required rear yard setback. (see diagram which follows)	2.5 m	5.1 m
	Note for Variance 1: The required rear yard setback of 7.5 m is separate from "deck encroachment" setback. The proponents require a variance from both. The rear deck projects 5.1 m into this 7.5 m by the sum of 2.47 m and 2.63 m as shown in the architect's sketch.		
2	Lot area	180 m²	163.40 m²
3	Rear yard setback	7.5 m	4.87 m.
4	FSI	0.6	0.96

The second table, below, included shading to incorporate the data used above as a third comparison point. To orient readers, I have included the lead-in text before the table.[13]

Mr. Rendl summarized his findings in a table below. The shaded column to the right sets out the required/permitted numbers from Table 2.

Rendl summary of Minor Variance Approvals			Bylaw	
Variance	Approvals	Minimum	Maximum	
Floor Space Index	32	0.70	1.4	0.60
Rear Yard Setback	2	4.56 m	7.0 m	7.5 m
Parking Space Width	2	2.09 m	2.44 m	m
Lot Area	2	166.8 m²	239.6 m² (sic)	180 m²

TLAB decisions and opinions issued by the Ontario Land Tribunal[14] include a cornucopia of tables and clarifying images such as marked-up photos, multi-layered maps, and 3-D artist renderings from which to draw inspiration for any pleading or correspondence involving a dispute about land or building dimensions.[15]

Timelines tell the story
Visual timelines are used when a chronology of events is central to the argument or when a case involves a complex chronological sequence difficult to follow in text alone. Timelines should be used when explaining chronological events is essential to a judge's comprehension of the facts. Timelines help distill dense factual narratives into a clear, linear format, allowing judges and opposing counsel to quickly grasp the progression of key actions, decisions, or incidents.

Timelines differ from chronologies, which I frequently use and almost always include as an appendix with an initial pleading (e.g., a statement of claim, statement of defence, or dismissal motion). Consider always appending a chronology with your initial statement of claim or statement of defence as an appendix. If clerks and judges come into a case cold, why not help them out with a succinct list of key dates and events? A simple chronology in table form allows you to "Inception"[16] your audience by planting a seed in their subconscious about the facts to which they should pay attention.

Chronologies are often simple tables or bullet lists that present key events and the dates on which they occurred to orient a reader to what events came first and whether events occurred repeatedly. Timelines, on the other hand, merge chronological events with an analysis about the import or significance of certain listed events, sometimes layering a second set of facts on the picture.

For example, a timeline can distinguish between similar cases by highlighting factual differences – such as the number of individuals involved or the duration of events – making it easier for the court to grasp the relevance of those distinctions. Timelines can contrast actions of two parties along a horizontal axis, with the steps one party takes placed above the horizontal line, and the actions of the other party detailed below that line. Use timelines when the narrative is complex or when a visual representation can reinforce the logic of the argument.[17]

An effective timeline should
- reside near the relevant written analysis;
- possess clear labels of parties, events, dates, or times; and
- use neutral design elements to avoid distraction or clutter.

Use a timeline for
- demonstrations of statutes of limitations;
- claims involving multiple stages;
- demonstrations of complicated procedural history;
- establishing causation (by showing the progression of events); and
- cases involving multiple parties or events (with one party's actions above a horizontal line and the other party's actions below it).

The following timeline is from a US bankruptcy proceeding in which the reader is oriented to events preceding the bankruptcy, the declining value of the company, and the acts of a third party that played a role in the company's financial demise.[18]
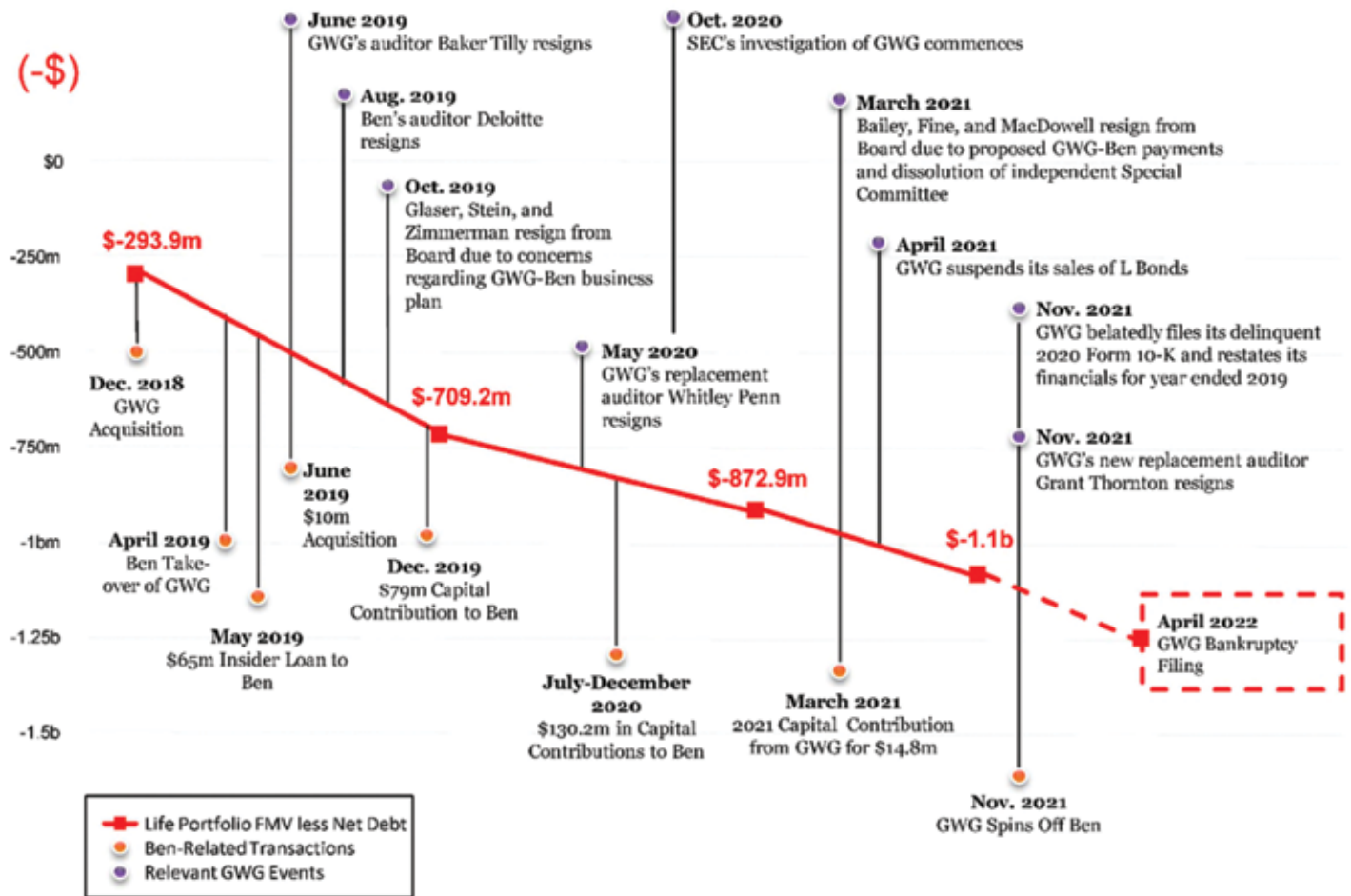
Chronology of GWG's Collapse

(-$)

$0
-250m
-500m
-750m
-1bm
-1.25b
-1.5b

$-293.9m

$-709.2m

$-872.9m

$-1.1b

Dec. 2018
GWG Acquisition

April 2019
Ben Take-over of GWG

May 2019
$65m Insider Loan to Ben

June 2019
$10m Acquisition

Dec. 2019
$79m Capital Contribution to Ben

June 2019
GWG's auditor Baker Tilly resigns

Aug. 2019
Ben's auditor Deloitte resigns

Oct. 2019
Glaser, Stein, and Zimmerman resign from Board due to concerns regarding GWG-Ben business plan

May 2020
GWG's replacement auditor Whitley Penn resigns

July-December 2020
$130.2m in Capital Contributions to Ben

Oct. 2020
SEC's investigation of GWG commences

March 2021
Bailey, Fine, and MacDowell resign from Board due to proposed GWG-Ben payments and dissolution of independent Special Committee

April 2021
GWG suspends its sales of L Bonds

March 2021
2021 Capital Contribution from GWG for $14.8m

Nov. 2021
GWG belatedly files its delinquent 2020 Form 10-K and restates its financials for year ended 2019

Nov. 2021
GWG's new replacement auditor Grant Thornton resigns

Nov. 2021
GWG Spins Off Ben

April 2022
GWG Bankruptcy Filing

Legend:
- Life Portfolio FMV less Net Debt
- Ben-Related Transactions
- Relevant GWG Events

2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022

The devil is in the details … with clarifying images showing key facts

Effective legal arguments about complex information contain clarifying images. These visuals include photographs of key aspects of a case, maps of relevant geographic areas, or enhanced visual representations of space and dimensions. These pictures help contextualize dense concepts.

Lawyers should consider how best to use their image to improve the communication of the message they are trying to convey. For example: What will the framing of the image be (how will it be centred)? What level of detail will it include? And what will *not* be captured? This final consideration is especially important for a manually created image such as a map, where the designer has determined the legend, scale, and additional elements included (or not included).

The Court of Appeal for Ontario opinion by Justice John Laskin in *R v Hamilton* contains an excellent example of a clarifying image – a map marrying critical details about a defendant's cell phone pings with the location of where each ping occurred.[19] The image on page 44 takes what would have been a laundry list of dates, times, and street names and contextualizes each ping in a picture for the reader to see.

An effective clarifying image should
- be high resolution and easy to see or read;
- be clearly labelled, where appropriate;
- be directly relevant to the argument at hand;
- be captioned or inclusive of scale or directional markers where appropriate; and
- use colour to evoke emotion or concepts.

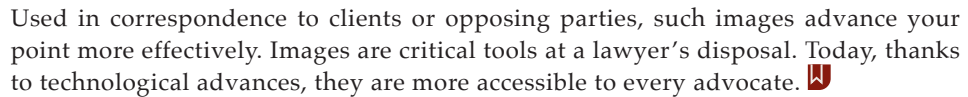Examples of when to use a clarifying image:
- labelled photographs that simplify a complex machine or process;
- visual representation of space and images;
- map of a physical space relevant to a case; and
- evidencing the condition of someone or something, or the damage at stake.

Considering colour

Electronically dispersed court decisions are now in technicolour, with judges no longer inhibited by the simple black and white of a typewriter. If you don't feel comfortable including clarifying images or multi-layered maps, consider using colour in textual visuals (e.g., tables, chronologies) to emphasize

a position.

Colours are associated with a range of feelings: red represents anger, yellow shows happiness, and blue connects with feeling sad or down. The use of colour in an image or table may help evoke an emotional response from your reader.

Colours presented in a sequential palate or an ombre can represent a progression of events over time. Remember those colour-coded COVID-19 maps showing us in red and purple the extent of the virus outbreak across Canada? That was an effective use of colour as opposed to myriad data points on a map. Colour may also guide the reader's eyes – especially when they scan a screen – to a particular part of a page. Think about the red squiggles under a word in Microsoft Word when you have misspelled something. That makes the point: Colour draws the eye to what you want the reader to see.

Picture the winning case

Strategic use of visual aids in legal submissions is a necessity. Effective analytical visuals distill complex facts, clarify legal arguments, and enhance persuasiveness before courts or tribunals.

Used in correspondence to clients or opposing parties, such images advance your point more effectively. Images are critical tools at a lawyer's disposal. Today, thanks to technological advances, they are more accessible to every advocate. ◪

Notes

1. Elizabeth G Porter, "Taking Images Seriously," 114(7) Colum L Rev (2014), 1687, 1721.

2. Jennifer Brevorka, "Visuals Matter," *The Advocates' Journal* (Summer 2021) 40:1, 23. The term "analytical visuals" was coined by Johansen and Robbins in an excellent article about the use of visuals in legal writing. See Steve J Johansen and Ruth Anne Robbins, "Art-Iculating the Analysis: Systemizing the Decision to Use Visuals as Legal Reasoning," 20 Legal Writing 57 (2015).

3. Maryanne Wolf, "Our 'Deep Reading' Brain: Its Digital Evolution Poses Questions" *Nieman Reports*, June 29, 2010. Maryanne Wolf, "Skim Reading Is the New Normal: The Effect on Society Is Profound," *Guardian*, August 25, 2018: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/25/skim-reading-new-normal-maryanne-wolf.

4. Kerri L Ruttenberg, *Images with Impact: Design and Use of Winning Trial Visuals* (Chicago: American Bar Association, 2018) at 10.

5. John H Larsen, "Using Visuals to Better Communicate Logic in Legal Reasoning," 25 Legal Writing 285 (2021), 290–91.

6. Ziming Liu, "Reading Behavior in the Digital Environment: Changes in Reading Behavior Over the Past Ten Years," 61(6) Journal of Documentation (2005), 700, 707–8.

7. Kato Nabirye H, "The Use of Visual Aids in Legal Presentations," 4(1) Research Invention Journal of Current Research in Humanities and Social Sciences (2025), 49–54.

8. See, e.g., *Reed v Town of Gilbert,* 134 S. Ct. 2900 (2014) (Petitioner's brief for a writ of certiorari); *Sandifer v U.S. Steel Corp.,* 678 F.3d 590, 594 (7th Cir. 201), aff'd 134 S. Ct. 870 (2014); *Moreira et al v Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corp. et al,* 2012 ONSC 2304 at 2, n1.

9. *Coffey v Northeast Illinois Regional Commuter RR Corp. (METRA)*, 479 F.3d 472, 478 (7th Cir. 2007) ("[This] case illustrated the curious and deplorable aversion of many lawyers to visual evidence and exact measurements (feet, inches, pounds, etc.) even when vastly more informative than a verbal description. We have noted this aversion in previous cases … once remarking that some lawyers think a word is worth a thousand pictures.")

10. See, e.g., *R v Oyeniyi,* 2016 ONCJ 581 at para 3.

11. *R v Jordan,* 2016 SCC 27.

12. *Martin Rendl Associates (Re),* 2024 ONTLAB 190 at para 5.

13. *Ibid* at para. 23.

14. See, e.g., *St. Pierre v Tay Valley*, 2025 CanLII 18346 at para 9.

15. See, e.g., *1254 Davenport Inc. (Re),* 2023 ONTLAB 152.

16. *Inception* is an excellent 2010 movie by Christopher Nolan starring Leonardo DiCaprio as a professional thief who steals information by infiltrating his targets' subconscious. One can do the same in legal pleadings by putting forth the most important facts in a visually appealing manner.

17. Timeline image from Adam L Rosman, "Visualizing the Law: Using Charts, Diagrams, and Other Images to Improve Legal Briefs" (August 2013) 63(1) J Legal Educ, 74.

18. Doc. No. 1250, *In re GWG Holdings, Inc., et al.*, No. 22-90032 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. Dec. 15, 2022).

19. *R v Hamilton*, 2011 ONCA 399 at para 241.