CREATING KILLER FACTS AND GRAPHICS

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?
‘Killer facts’ are those punchy, memorable, headline-grabbing statistics that make reports special. They cut through the technicalities to fire people up about changing the world. They are picked up and repeated endlessly by the media and politicians. They are known as ‘killer’ facts because if they are really effective, they ‘kill off’ the opposition’s arguments. The right killer fact can have more impact than the whole of a well-researched report.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW TO DO IT
There are various kinds of killer facts. Most involve some kind of comparison:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Big number:</strong></td>
<td>• Armed conflict costs Africa $18bn a year;</td>
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<td>The single statistic showing the size of</td>
<td>• A Eurozone breakup could cost the poorest countries $30bn in lost trade and foreign investment;</td>
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<td>the problem</td>
<td>• 21,000 children die every day from preventable causes;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Remittances from overseas workers to developing countries are worth $372bn a year, three times the global aid budget.</td>
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<td><strong>Juxtaposition</strong></td>
<td>• It would cost $66bn to get everyone on the planet out of extreme poverty – 4 per cent of global military spending (<a href="https://www.povertytopower.org/">From Poverty to Power</a>);</td>
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<td>to highlight injustice and doubled</td>
<td>• A woman’s risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes ranges from 1 in 18 in Nigeria to 1 in 8,700 in Canada (<a href="https://www.povertytopower.org/">From Poverty to Power</a>).</td>
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<td>standards</td>
<td>And <strong>absurdity</strong> can make a juxtaposition much more memorable</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• It is easier to trade in guns than bananas... <em>bananas are subject to more regulations</em> under EC rules than sales of AK47s;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Every EU cow <strong>receives over $2 per day</strong> in support and subsidies, more than the income of half the world’s people.</td>
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<td><strong>Surprising stats</strong></td>
<td>• More people die from <em>road traffic accidents in developing countries</em> than die of malaria, HIV and TB;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Mexico is the <em>second most obese country</em> after the US.</td>
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<td><strong>Humanizing</strong></td>
<td>• 12 million more children will go hungry by 2050 because of climate change.</td>
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<tr>
<td>abstract issues</td>
<td><strong>Human scale:</strong> Statistics can be incomprehensibly big. Re-scale them to a size we can relate to.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• <em>A child dies every four seconds</em> from preventable causes;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• UK aid spending per person per day is less than the price of a cup of tea;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• There are nearly <strong>two bullets</strong> for every person on the planet.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Killer Graphics

Graphs can speak louder than words, as can infographics. They can illustrate the contrasts of killer facts but in addition:

- Show sudden changes in long term trends, e.g. food prices (as in the FAO Food Price Index);
- Show projections into the future (as in Oxfam’s The Right to Survive report).

Dos and Don’ts

Do

- Be totally certain of the data you use to create your killer fact. The sources must be reliable, respected, up to date and referenced in your report.
- Check before recycling old killer facts, as the data may well have changed (here’s an example from this guide).
- Check your argument for fallacies with someone with statistical training.
- Be ready to provide sources to media or politicians – if the killer fact succeeds, they will be on the phone very quickly and you need your sources ready.
- Make sure that the fact can’t be misinterpreted, i.e. that the language is not too convoluted. Otherwise journalists rewriting it in plain terms may accidentally twist your meaning.
- Try and avoid using ‘weasel words’ like ‘could’ or ‘up to’ (damages credibility), for instance ‘up to 50 per cent off the world’s poor will die of preventable diseases’ could mean any percentage between 0 and 50, but invites the reader to assume the larger number.
- Make sure the best killer facts are included in the executive summary and the press release – ask someone other than the author, e.g. a media officer, to read through the paper and pick out the best ones.
- Plan ahead: early on when working on your report, decide on the kind of killer facts you would really like to have. Does the data already exist to fill it out? If not, is it possible to generate that data?
- Working out killer facts can take a long time – it often involves adding statistics up in a way that they are not usually added up. So make the time, or get a research assistant to help you with the calculations.

Don’t

- Don’t cut corners on killer facts. They are crucial to a report’s impact. If you are exhausted and have run out of inspiration (a common problem late on in the writing process), ask a media officer or campaigner to help with ideas.
- Don’t use too many killer facts in one paper: focus on the most powerful. Otherwise they overwhelm the reader.
- Avoid using killer facts that are not credibly sourced, even if they fit your message. It is not worth damaging your credibility for a quick hit.

And remember: if in doubt, leave it out!
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For a concise account of how one of Oxfam’s most successful killer facts came into being, see Leila Smith’s Researching the Killer Fact That Highlighted Global Economic Inequality.

Researchers may also want to consult other Oxfam Research Guidelines, including Integrating Gender in Research Planning, Reviewing the Existing Literature, Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews, Researching Human Interest Stories, Planning Survey Research, and Writing for Impact – Lessons from Journalism.

LINKS

All links last accessed April 2019.


Today, around 21,000 children died around the world: http://www.globalissues.org/article/715/today-21000-children-died-around-the-world

Remittances: bigger than ever: https://www.ft.com/content/4cf69352-3bb4-3cd7-bd95-7980617674bf

From Poverty to Power: How active citizens and effective states can change the world: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/from-poverty-to-power-how-active-citizens-and-effective-states-can-change-the-world-115393

Stay on Target: Will the UK fight the battle for tough arms controls?: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/stay-on-target-will-the-uk-fight-the-battle-for-tough-arms-controls-220271

Cows are better off than half the world: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2002/aug/22/worldsummit2002.earth4


UK spending on foreign aid: https://fullfact.org/economy/uk-spending-foreign-aid/


Are women really 70% of the world’s poor? How do we know?: https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/are-women-really-70-of-the-worlds-poor-how-do-we-know/


Reviewing the Existing Literature: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/reviewing-the-existing-literature-252995

Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/conducting-semi-structured-interviews-252993


