

Harry Beck Was Told No. Then Everyone Copied the Wrong Half.

The 1933 Tube map throws away geography on purpose. Here is the test for when you are allowed to do that.

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A schematic map is a map that gets the shape wrong on purpose.

Harry Beck drew one in 1931. He worked for the Underground, and he had spotted something. Because the trains run below ground, where a station really sits does not matter to the person holding the map. Only the order of the stops matters. He sent the drawing to the publicity department. They called it too revolutionary and threw it out.

A year later he redrew it. Frank Pick, still doubtful, ordered a risky first run of 750,000 copies in January 1933. Another 100,000 went to print a month later.

Beck did not simplify the Tube. He picked one question, which trains do I take, and deleted every fact that did not answer it.



The diagram said two stops. The walk was ninety seconds.

1. The rejection was not stupidity

The story you know: a lone genius, blocked by bureaucrats.

What he was really asking for: permission to publish a map that was wrong. Every Underground map before his was geographic. It told you where you were standing. Beck's told you nothing about that, and the people who owned the old map could see exactly what was being given up.

The rule: know the name of the thing you are deleting. Beck did. He was deleting the street.

2. Everyone copied the wrong half

The famous half: horizontal, vertical and 45 degree lines only. The grid.

The quiet half: he stretched central London so the gaps there look bigger than they are, and pulled the far suburbs in close. Every station got the room it needs to be read, not the room it takes up in the city.

The evidence: in June 2026 three researchers put a geographic Paris Metro map against a strict 45 degree version of the same network. Twenty people planned routes on both, half of the time against a clock. Speed, map handling and reported effort came out level. The only real gap was accuracy, and it favoured the geographic map.

The angles are the part every city copied. The change of scale is the part that was doing the work.

3. The lie does not stay on the paper

What we assume: people know a diagram is a diagram.

What they do: a 2011 study modelled London Underground journey data from 1998 to 2005. Distance on the map pulled twice as hard on route choice as real travel time did. That held for the most experienced riders too.

The bill: the map now prints walking distances between some stations, because the diagram had quietly hidden them. That note is not a feature. It is a patch.

4. It was maintained, not launched

Beck kept drawing the map until 1960, changing the interchange marks and the line colours as the network grew. He fell out with the publicity officer that year, who then drew his own version. His name came back in 1997, after he had died, and every Tube map now says the design was conceived by him in 1931.

The rule: a diagram that lasts is one somebody is still arguing with.

5. The test for lying about the data

You can distort when three things are true. The reader has one clear task. The distortion serves that task. And the facts you cut are facts nobody will act on.

Beck passed the first two. He failed the third, and London has been walking the long way round ever since.

YOU ARE KEEPING	YOU ARE CUTTING	SAFE TO CUT?
Order of the stops	Distance between them	Only if nobody walks
Which line to take	Real direction	Only if nobody exits and turns
Where lines meet	Length of the change	Rarely
Shape of the network	Journey time	Never, if it costs money

Run this on your own work

Open the last chart, map or flow you shipped. Write down the one question it answers. Then list what you bent to answer it. If a reader could make a real decision from any line on that list, you have not simplified anything. You have moved the error onto them.

Checked against

Read on 21 September 2026.

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