

design matters

February '00

Plain Language and the Document Revolution

by Carol M. Baldwin

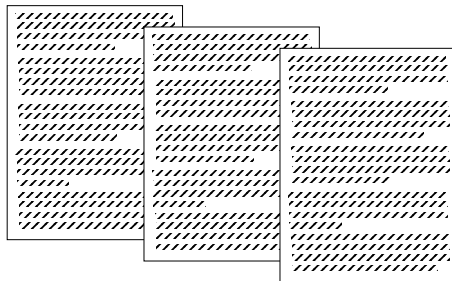
Design matters? Why?

Because it is part of a document revolution.
Because it is part of the Plain Language movement.
Because it is part of a world-wide response to the information age.

To understand why design matters, you need a wide-angle lens. Notice how computers are changing everything about documents: new people, new methods, new look. Then you have a very different perspective. Then you can see that today's emphasis on design is part of the Plain Language movement. And the changes have just begun.

The past: the Typewriter Age

Today, we can use tables instead of paragraphs, but often, we don't. Instead, many documents still follow what I call the Piles of Paragraphs style:



Whether we realize it or not, everyone is affected by a long tradition of type:

- The 60 years when the typewriter created most business documents.
- The 500-plus years when books piled information via moveable type.

For hundreds of years, work got done through words put on paper—a printing press, or a typewriter. From moveable type through the IBM Selectric typewriter, the medium limited the average business document to words—words in type. And this medium limited the message.

During the typewriter era, if you wanted to add more visual language to a document, you needed to go off the desktop. You needed a printer, typesetting, and a graphic artist. This was a costly procedure; one that was only used on a small percentage of business documents.

Our legacy of verbal language

This typewriter look—the Piles of Paragraphs style—became the standard. And this typewriter look stayed long after microcomputer technology let us break through these limitations. In fact, many organizations still consider the Piles of Paragraphs style to be the standard for documents.

In short, the typewriter look became today's legacy system. The typewriter age left a legacy of verbal language that can hinder the way we assimilate our new computer tools. And yesterday's legacy has become today's problem.

The computer age:

Rejoining verbal and visual language

The computer gives us the tools to add visual language to our everyday information. That is why design matters.

When we use visual language, we can go forward and catch up with the traditions of our past, when the pictures on the cave walls told the story of the hunt. In fact, visual language has a long history in documentation. Indeed, written language started with pictures. (The Chinese language still consists of pictures. An alphabet, on the other hand, expresses the sounds of the words.)

Design and Plain Language

How do we use these new tools that let us create visual language? Add clip art to every page?

...continued on page 5

The newsletter
of the STC
Information
Design SIG

Scam or Resource?

by Beth Mazur, Assistant Manager, ID SIG

On January 27th, someone on TECHWR-L noted that he was "was confounded by [STC's] offer of joining Special Interest Groups (SIGs). ... I don't actually think I've received anything from the other groups that I couldn't otherwise get for free." As you might imagine, this generated a number of responses, both for and against the SIG system (to see these, go to www.raycomm.com).

The simple matter is that some SIGs are more successful than others. But if a SIG fails, it is because there is not enough interest on the part of the **membership** to do the real work that is involved. Too many members feel as the TECHWR-L poster above: all they have to do is pay their \$5 and sit back and let others take the responsibility for generating things you can't "get for free."

In the case of the ID SIG, your \$5 goes primarily for the printing and mailing of this newsletter. Our budget for the 1999-2000 fiscal year is \$13,893, of which all but \$1,000 goes for the printing and postage for this newsletter (which is currently mailed 3x a year). The rest of our budget is targeted for our new member letters (\$335), conference PR (\$390), and some other minor items. As you can tell, this budget doesn't include money to pay authors or sponsor lots of local events.

Does it sometimes seem like SIGs are a black hole? Sure. I've stopped paying my dues for the Visual Communication SIG since it didn't seem to be able to get off the ground. But that is hardly a scam...that simply means that there aren't enough people willing to put in the extra effort for that particular SIG.

Thus if I were to point to something that the ID SIG has not done well over its first three years, it would be that we have been less successful at recruiting the solid volunteer base that is **critical** to any SIG's success. Right now, fewer than three-tenths of one percent of the ID SIG's members contribute in a way that is visible to SIG members. If even **one** percent volunteered to contribute in some small way, that would be 30 more contributions for the benefit of the entire SIG! Think about 30 more articles for *Design Matters* or 30 columns for the web site. Could I possibly dream about 2 percent?

I realize how whiny this sounds. But we really, really do need **your** help in order to make SIG membership valuable for all. Please join our volunteer list by sending email to idsig-admin-subscribe@egroups.com. It may be trite, but we honestly believe that you will get back more than you will put in.

Beth Mazur is a Communications Specialist for AARP and the Newsletter Editor for the ID SIG. She can be reached at mazur@pobox.com.

Design Matters

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■ <http://stc.org/pics/idsig>

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Submissions

We welcome submissions from SIG members for publication. Submissions via email are appreciated. Please send to mazur@pobox.com.

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Looking Forward to 2000

by Cheri Taylor, ID SIG Manager

January 2000 is the third birthday for the Information Design SIG. STC approved our charter as a SIG in January 1997, and we have grown to over **2900 members** strong since then. Here are a few of the things we as a SIG are looking forward to in 2000.

Pay special attention to the May 2000 issue of the STC journal, *Technical Communication*. The issue will feature a special section on Information Design. Dr. Michael Albers, our SIG Membership Coordinator, is the special section editor, and many of the contributors are ID SIG members.

The ID SIG website grew a little stale when our webmaster Lisa Pere had to turn her attention to a newborn baby, but a team of enthusiastic volunteers has come forward to carry on her work. Check the website for some recent changes.

There are several conferences related to information design to look forward to in 2000. Don't miss the list of them on page 4. If you attend one, please con-

sider reporting your experience back to the rest of us through this newsletter. We'd be very interested.

Of course, our favorite conference is the STC annual conference, held in Orlando, Florida, USA, on May 21-24, 2000. Do try to make plans to go, as it's hard to imagine a setting more "fun" than smack-dab in the middle of Disney World! The ID SIG will again be hosting several tables at the SIG Luncheon, and we will hold our annual business meeting to make plans for the 2000-2001 year.

Speaking of the SIG Luncheon, I was remiss in the last newsletter to leave Donna Doucette out when I was thanking the volunteers for hosting the tables at last year's conference. We filled 12 tables at the luncheon, and each host was invaluable in greeting their table and leading the discussion. Thank you, Donna!

The ID SIG is also sponsoring another Information Design Progression at the conference. With topics like single sourcing, usable forms, minimalism, job aids, and the role of the information designer on a web team, we hope to be as popular a session as we were last year!

Cheri Taylor is the owner of TechWords and the manager of the ID SIG. She can be reached at taylorcvt@compuserve.com.

Going to Orlando? If you would like to host an ID SIG table at this year's SIG Luncheon, please email Cheri or Beth!

Call for Abstracts: Practical Information Design for Software Documentation

Many theoretical and disciplinary perspectives inform information design theory and practice. While information design has a rich, historical tradition internationally, it is just beginning to be recognized as a legitimate field within technical communication as it applies to the software industry. As such, while information design can substantially contribute to better quality documentation (in both traditional and contemporary forms), interface design, and web design, it tends to be undervalued or infrequently used.

The STC Information Design SIG is seeking abstracts for book chapters to complete a proposal for an edited collection that will gather together innovative approaches to information design in software documentation. With accepted abstracts in hand, we will submit proposals for the collection to potential publishers later this spring. After a contract has been secured, we will set a schedule for manuscript drafts.

Our new anthology will explore the issues facing information designers as they work within the world of software documentation and the constant compromises made between ideal design and getting the product out the door. It will address the media information designers must work within (print and electronic) as well as the related fields they must be familiar with (interface design, instructional design, and usability / human performance technology).

We envision at least three approaches to these essays: 1) innovative uses of information design to structure technical material; 2) innovative ways of integrating information design within the current development methodologies and social aspects of the workplace, and 3) innovative theoretical approaches that have some practical application of information design, especially where the theories of ID meet the reality of the workplace.

The essays that grow out of these abstracts should be designed to address the needs of both academic researchers, and, more importantly, practicing information designers or technical communicators within the software industry. We want this collection to explore the aspects of information design that bring forth user advocacy at its best.

Send a 500 word abstract no later than March 8 (email preferred) to:

Michael J. Albers
Department of English
University of Memphis
Memphis TN 38152
malbers@memphis.edu

In your abstract, please summarize your main argument. Then, in a separate paragraph, please tell us a little about your background as it relates to information design. We intend to complete the review of the abstracts by late April. ♦

ID Conferences

The following was retrieved from the ID-Cafe list. Note that some websites are still under construction.

June 12-14, 2000: Forum 2000. Technical communicators leading the way. ISTC. Commonwealth Centre, London, England www.istc.org.uk/forum.htm

July 10-11, 2000: Infodesign 2000. Information Design Network & Information Design Association. Technocentre, Coventry, England. www.infodesign2000.com

July 13-15, 2000: IIID Vision Plus 8: Turning Information into Corporate Knowledge/Innovative Information Management. International Institute for Information Design. Vienna, Austria. www.iiid.net/Vision-Plus/index.html

July 19-21, 2000: IV2000: Symposium of Information Visualisation Theory & Practice. University of London, London, England. www.graphicslink.demon.co.uk/IV2000

Aug 14-18, 2000: UPA 2000: Designing the New Millenium Today. Usability Professionals Association. Asheville, North Carolina, USA. www.upassoc.org/conf2000

Sept 1-3, 2000: DIAGRAMS 2000: Conference on the Theory and Application of Diagrams. University of Edinburgh, Scotland. www-cs.hartford.edu/~d2k

Nov 6-8, 2000: IIID 2000: Design of User Manuals. International Institute for Information Design. Expert Forum. Eskilstuna, Sweden. www.visuellforum.com/eng/2000/index.html

ID Lists

When you join the ID SIG, we send you a welcome letter that includes information on how to sign up on various email lists related to Information Design.

In case you need them, here are the instructions for signing up:

(1) STC Information Design SIG mailing list—For those interested in information design topics and related STC activities. This is a moderated, low-traffic list. To subscribe, send an email to join-stcidsig-l@lists.stc.org. No message is needed.

(2) STC ID SIG Leaders mailing list—For those who would like to get more involved with the running of the ID SIG. Volunteer for a task, suggest an idea, or give us your feedback about our plans for the SIG. To subscribe, send an email to idsig-admin@egroups.com. No message is needed.

(3) InfoDesign mailing list—For discussion of information design topics among the ID community at large (moderated). To subscribe, send a message to majordomo@wins.uva.nl, put

SUBSCRIBE INFODESIGN *your_email_address*
in the body of the message.

(4) InfoDesign-Cafe—For informal discussion of information design topics among the ID community at large (unmoderated). To subscribe, send a message to majordomo@wins.uva.nl and put

SUBSCRIBE INFODESIGN-CAFE *your_email_address*
in the body of the message. ♦

Defining Information Architecture Boston, April 7-9, 2000

*Sponsored by the American Society for
Information Science*

Information Architecture is an emerging and rapidly growing field, merging ideas from many traditional disciplines with the goal of designing better information systems. If you are an information architect or are interested in the field, *Defining Information Architecture* is your opportunity to:

- Explore various definitions for Information Architecture with a panel of leading thinkers and practitioners.
- Understand the types of expertise that should and will have an impact on Information Architecture.
- Learn about the role that the Information Architect plays within different settings.
- Meet your colleagues and build a broader community of information architects.

The American Society for Information Science has assembled a compelling list of speakers representing many relevant perspectives: Anthropology, Data Modeling, Graphic Design, Meta-Data, Human Computer Interaction, Information Design, Information Retrieval, Interface Design, Markup Languages, Librarianship, Technical Communications, Usability Engineering.

Attendance is limited, so please register soon. Visit www.asis.org/Conferences/Summit2000/ for details. ♦

Plain Language... ...continued from page 1

In my book, *Plain Language and the Document Revolution*, I explain that today's Plain Language contains two kinds of language:

- **Verbal language.** Suggestions for writing sentences and paragraphs—these suggestions include readability guidelines from the typewriter era.
- **Visual language.** Guidelines for creating bulleted lists, flow charts, tables, and other visual language elements.

Why does design matter?

Design matters because today visual language can substitute for sentences. Not only are we using more visual language, we are using it in place of paragraphs—and that may be one of the most revolutionary aspects of the document revolution. Back in the typewriter era, graphics were usually illustrations of the words, placed several paragraphs or pages away from the text concerning them. In the computer era, writers use graphics to substitute for sentences. But then, we always knew that one picture is worth a thousand words.

Editor's note: For more information, please visit www.compro-inc.com. Another interesting aspect to Carol's approach is that she suggests a process referred to by the acronym DIWE, which stands for document design, information displays, writing, and

editing. She also suggests this order for this process, meaning that you should answer the questions about basic document design and the types of information devices (e.g., graphs, tables, bullet lists) before you even begin to write! Carol believes this makes the writing tasks much easier...and gets people away from Piles of Paragraph thinking!

Carol Baldwin is President of ComPro, Inc. in Washington, DC. She can be reached at cbaldwin@compro-inc.com.

ID for Beginners ...continued from page 6

My talk included several sample real-life job descriptions in information design, both commercial and academic. One thing that often comes out in ID job descriptions is passion! How many jobs do you know of that ask you to have a "love for typography, images, movement, and sound" or ask you to be "curious and innovative"?

I also provided a list of resources you can use to learn more, such as lists of schools, seminars, books, periodicals, associations, conferences, newsgroups, and websites.

For the complete presentation online, visit <http://stc.org/region4/soc/46thconf/handouts/begid.pdf>. (Comments on this presentation? Please email taylorcw@compuserve.com.) ♦

ID SIG Web Site Team!

The new ID SIG webmaster is Stacy Kissinger Leeds, who is the lead Information Architect at Aegis Creative Communications, Inc. in Littleton, Colorado, USA. Aegis Creative specializes in developing interactive media, particularly technology-based learning products and web sites. Stacy belongs to the Rocky Mountain STC chapter.

Stephanie Ramsey will act as an ID SIG web coordinator. She's a member of the Atlanta STC chapter.

Other team members from the ID SIG include:

- Renee Dekenah
- Beverley Henderson
- Kevin Sangwook Lee

There's also a project for you! Big or small, you name it. To volunteer with the web team, please email Stacy at sleeds@aegiscreative.com or Stephanie at slr@mindspring.com.

ID SIG Progression

A number of those who participated at the ID SIG Progression in the last STC conference in Cincinnati responded to Design Matter's invitation to summarize their session for SIG members.

Using Information Design to Convey Concepts
by Marilyn Barrett-O'Leary

Two basic principles of communication are especially important to information design and they are essential to visually or graphically conveying concepts. One is physiological and the other, psychological.

The physiological principle of eye-brain: Each eye functions like a camera, taking a series of still "photos." Each eye sees something different. These pictures are transmitted to the brain, and, when combined with messages from the other senses, a person recognizes an item, a scene, an idea. However, in today's world, we must remember that each eye has to "snap or record" many more photos than the eyes of our ancestors, and the simultaneous messages to the brain from the other senses may be related to other things or scenes other than the ones each eye records. Physiologically, then, the body adjusts in a couple of ways. The eye scans, focusing on separate points or concentrating on something for a maximum of a second, minimum of an eighth of a second. The ear becomes more essential, serving as a sorter or sense maker for the messages from the eyes.

The psychological principle of selection: Points or "photos" that tell us something, that inform, attract more fixations than less informative points. Familiar points attract the eye. Instructions on viewing a picture given before the image can guide the eye to seek particular fixed points or to change the time spent on a point. Readers will see what they are told to see in an image. Lawyers use this in courtrooms; we can use this in our work. Information transmitted visually is valued when it includes new information. Be careful: Perceived image content may differ from intended image content.

In the progression, I displayed two images that represented the use of these principles. My goal was to convey the concept of world ocean and the concept of unique as applied to the Gulf of Mexico. The original audience for these concepts was young Coast Guard officers, in training for onboard enforcement of safety, nonindigenous species, and commercial fishing regulations. I selected maps with familiar points on them to convey the principles. The images were used first in training as slides, projected on a large screen; second reduced in size for a training manual. Eventually, the Coast Guard requested that I adapt the second image, of unique, to some-

thing about 4"x3" that they could use to justify their enforcement when challenged by fishers or boat captains. Although the map remained the basis of the image, this final image was more symbolic than the ones used in training and in the manual.

Once the progression group understood how the two principles were applied to the development of the concept images, they tackled the concept of "consensus." Although the final image differed with each group, the same concerns were discussed in the exercise. Group members chose images that had something familiar and relevant in them, that conveyed new information, and that provided instructions to the audience to guide their interpretation. Remember: a concept is successfully conveyed when the target audience automatically identifies the image as the concept.

Information Design for Beginners

by Cheri Taylor

Information design, being a newly revived and broad field, has many definitions! The STC Information Design SIG defines an information designer's work as "transform[ing] complex, unorganized, or unstructured data into useful, usable information. . . . The information designer discovers and articulates the meaning in data, and creates the map that allows others to use the information easily."

The little something extra that information designers like to provide is essential, as Stephan Boyd Davis of Middlesex University in the UK describes: "I take design to include fulfilling the practical needs of the intended users and incorporating an element of affect in the user's experience, often pleasurable and including surprise, delight, satisfaction, and other responses." So, give users what they need and make them smile, too!

The key disciplines in information design are technical writing, design, and usability. Information designers seek to combine skills in these fields to make complex information easier to understand. These three disciplines cover the content, the interface, and the interaction of an information product. These fields are so broad, and use so many different complex technologies, that information design is often done in team or project environments. Specialists in the different fields often work together, led by a generalist with vision and leadership skills.

The different people practicing information design represent an incredible diversity of background. Often individuals have a multi-faceted history themselves. Useful background areas for ID include (but are certainly not limited to!) communications, computer science, engineering, graphics, psychology, teaching, technical communication, and usability.

...continued on page 5

Call for Proposals for Special Issue: Modeling Information in Electronic Space

Technical Communication is pleased to announce a special issue on modeling information in electronic space to be published in February 2001. The guest editor for this special issue is Jonathan Price.

Description

Over the last 30 years technical communicators have learned how strongly the two-dimensional layout of text and art affects the accessibility, legibility, and readability of a printed page. Recently, publishing information online has forced many designers to modify layout rules, just as writers have had to retool their style for online delivery. But the electronic environment demands a new understanding of verbo-visual structure that goes beyond the dimensions of height and width. Now outline topics become options in a menu. Clicking an item, we explore a third dimension—depth. We have also become more sensitive to the dimension of time: how long does it take to traverse an individual web, to bring up a page, to dig down into the details?

Possible Topics

We'd like to hear from people who are exploring questions such as these: How do you create a three-dimensional visualization of a web space? Is there some way to analyze the meta data about all the documents on a site and build a three-dimensional model of the information for users to explore? How much can we learn from the research and practice of

landscape designers and architects? What can technical communicators learn from three-dimensional interfaces, virtual and simulation worlds, and animated interfaces? Can we learn how to structure our information in volumetric displays, as in visual displays of gigabyte data sets from space or credit card transactions? How can an object-oriented approach help us visualize and construct a variety of "reports" on our information, assembling units like Lego™ pieces? How well does XML help us identify components of content, and how can we use that meta data to construct customized structures for individual users?

Types of Submissions

We look for presentations about research, theory, and practice to give technical communicators a glimpse of the environment in which they will be working over the next decade. We welcome the perspectives of human-factors experts, interface designers, architects, landscape designers, virtual reality artists, librarians, scientists working on data visualization, as well as specialists in technical communication.

Issue Deadlines

These deadlines will be observed:

500-word proposal	15 March 2000
Draft paper	15 June 2000
Final paper	15 September 2000

Sent proposals by e-mail to jprice@swcp.com. All proposals and papers will be peer-reviewed.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about your proposal idea for this special issue or if you wish to be considered as a reviewer of proposals and manuscripts submitted for this special issue, please contact Jonathan Price by e-mail at jprice@swcp.com or by telephone at +1 (505) 898-4912.

Technical
COMMUNICATION
Journal of the Society for Technical Communication

Information Design

The field of information design applies traditional and evolving design principles to the process of translating complex, unorganized, or unstructured data into valuable, meaningful information.

The practice of information design requires an interdisciplinary approach which combines skills in graphic design, writing and editing, instructional design, human performance technology, and human factors.

Although its reach extends far beyond traditional boundaries of technical communication, the essentials of information design profoundly affect our work. The products of information design occur in any domain in which clear communication is essential, from those familiar to technical communicators, such as reference manuals and online help systems, to those outside the traditional realm of our work, such as public signage in public buildings, insurance and tax forms, and user interface design.

Our Mission

The mission of our SIG is to meet the professional development needs of our members and to act as a vital conduit between STC and information designers at large. Our objectives include:

- advancing awareness of information design among STC members;
- assisting members interested in acquiring information design skills;
- encouraging information design research and making available information design resources;
- examining the roles and practices of the information designer;
- and providing a forum for the discussion of relevant topics.

Please visit the ID SIG website at <http://stc.org/pics/idsig/>



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