

design matters



Spring 1997

Welcome to the STC Information Design SIG!

by Cheri Taylor, ID SIG Manager

I hope you're as excited about this new SIG as I am! This is a wonderful opportunity to expand the boundaries of traditional technical communication. As you all know, effective technical communication involves much more than writing. There are skills in usability, graphic design, instructional design, and globalization that can help us in our work. This SIG is all about learning and sharing the information design skills that will help each of us as we enter the "information age."

The newsletter of the STC Information Design SIG

What is my definition of information design? "The science of the organization of information." An information designer transforms complex, unorganized, or unstructured data into useful, usable information. The information designer articulates the meaning in data, and creates the map that allows others to use the information easily. Going beyond traditional products such as manuals and online help, the information designer can work with products such as computer user interfaces, forms and applications, and public signage. Simply put, it's about presenting information in the best way possible for the user.

There are other definitions besides mine! For example, the

International Institute for Information Design (IIID) emphasizes "improved visual communication. Special attention is paid to the potential of graphic information design to overcome both social and language barriers." (*ID News 7*, January '97)

The field of information design is clearly still developing. One aspiration of STC's Information Design SIG is to be involved in defining this new part of our profession!

As technical communicators affiliated with STC, the Information Design SIG plans to contribute to the professional community within a broad scope of information design. We are concerned not only with writing and editing a piece of information for technical accuracy, but also with questions such as: Can the user find the information easily? Is the user interpreting the information as we intended? Can the user readily perform the task for which he or she sought the information? Have we used as little of the user's time as possible? Is the information aesthetically pleasing and inviting? Will the information last as long as possible before requiring an update? Is the information appropriate if the audience is (or will be, or could be) international?

Why We're Here

The ID SIG is here for two reasons: **(1) To help STC members meet their professional development needs in the area of information design.** If you're learning and growing, find what you need from us; if you're expert, share with us; if you're somewhere in between, do both! **(2) To act as a conduit between STC and the larger information design community.**

Join us in the SIG activities. Our main communication vehicle is this newsletter. We also have our own web site and listserv. We have begun a comprehensive bibliography on information design. We plan a presence at the annual conference in Toronto in May. Since we are relatively new, our conference

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Hello ID SIG!

by Beth Mazur, ID SIG Assistant Manager

Six months ago, I sent email to the TECHWR-L and InfoD-Cafe mailing lists looking for 25 people who might have "interest in creating an information design PIC." Well, nearly 500 email messages later, here we are ... over 100 members!

This is the first issue of *Design Matters*. It's actually the second newsletter that I have produced, the first being the newsletter for the Three Rivers Rowing Association. My expectation is that the *Design Matters* audience may be just a bit more discerning than your average bunch of sweaty rowers, so I've tried hard to create a publication that you'll find interesting and useful. I'd love to hear your comments, especially if you have any suggestions for future issues.

Our first SIG business meeting is currently scheduled during the annual conference in Toronto on Tuesday, May 13th from noon until 1:30PM in the Norfolk room at the Sheraton Centre. Please join us if you'll be in town. We're also going to have three tables at the SIG/PIC networking lunch on Wednesday, so stop by to say "hi"!

Thanks!

I owe lots of thanks to many people who helped me get this SIG off the ground. I don't have the space to name everyone, but I'd particularly like to thank Shirley Hancock, AP to the President for SIGS who helped throughout the process, and Saul Carliner, Ginny Redish, Jonathan Price, and Karen Schriver who provided expert commentary during the grueling "what is our mission?" process. Thanks to George Hayhoe for providing wonderful editorial expertise (and for taking a look at this before it went to print). Thanks also to Conrad Taylor, deputy chair of the UK-based Information Design Association, who took great interest in our group's creation (and who told me that you have to get these things started and then let the group go). Thanks too to everyone who has sent mail of support!

But I have to reserve special thanks for Cheri Taylor, who is the reason that this entire effort was more than an intellectual exercise in defining information design. Besides being the suitable senior member to head up our SIG, she has been a great asset, writing much of our SIG material, representing us in the SIG Advisory Committee, and being a constant source of great ideas. Thank you Cheri!

Beth Mazur is a technical specialist (they decided that sounded better than technical generalist) at MAYA Design Group, where she is a part-time webmaster, part-time programmer, and part-time technical writer. She can be reached at mazur@maya.com or 412-488-2900.

Design Matters

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Submissions

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

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44th Annual Conference

by Kathryn Whitver

The 44th Annual Conference of the Society for Technical Communication convenes in Toronto, Canada, May 11-14. Those who attend this conference will find a wide variety of sessions in the field of Information Design. To help you sort through the array of sessions and tours, here is an overview of tours and sessions that may be of particular interest to Information Design SIG members. In each time period, one or two sessions are described as “must see” sessions for information designers (printed

in bold). These sessions were so chosen because of their multidisciplinary view toward technical communication or emphasis on elements of design.

Program Tours

Monday, May 12, 1:30 pm - 5:15 pm

IBM Canada Workshop on User-Centred Design

This three-hour session offers an in-depth exploration of the user-centred design approaches used at IBM. There will be plenty of opportunity for hands-on work and question-and-answer sessions with IBM staff working in the User-Centred Design department.

Tuesday, May 13, 9:15 am - 12:15 pm

Tour of the Bell Centre for Creative Communications

Tuesday, May 13, 9:15 am - 12:15 pm

Tour of IBM Canada Usability Lab

Technical Sessions

Monday, 11:00 am - 12:00 noon

MU 2H • Seeing is Believing: Communicating Information Graphically

Communicating graphically is a critical factor to enable users to successfully and safely use products. Participants will learn to analyze tasks visually and then communicate them graphically in documentation.

MU 2I • Creating Online Documentation for International World Wide Web Audiences

PD 2F • Fanning the Creative Spark

TR2A • Applying Research to Practice: Helping Users Find What They Need

TR 20 Document Design: A Brief Primer

Learn to organize and present information in a consistent, logical structure that is easy to read, use, and understand. Information Mapping implements research principles on how people learn and process information.

- TT 2T Retrofitting Paper-Based Documentation for Hypermedia Delivery

Monday, 2:00 pm - 3:30 pm

ET 3J • Teaching and Evaluating Oral Performance, Teaching Design for “Difficult Subjects”

MU 3A • Standards for Visuals for Online Help: Selected Examples

TR 3B • Putting Users Needs First — Tips and Techniques

Learn from these interactive speakers how best to put the user first — by designing usability into the product and performing user analysis using prototyping and design techniques. We’ll explore ways to prototype documentation and online help to improve usability and customer satisfaction. We’ll also walk through the analysis, prototyping, and usability testing activities performed when developing an Electronic Performance Support System.

TR 3E • Usability Testing and Diagnostics Workshop

TT 3P • Moving from WinHelp to HTML: Design Issues (Pt 1)

WE 3K • Topics in Online Documentation

Monday, 4:00 pm - 5:30 pm

MU 4A • Presentation by Honorary Fellow Edward Tufte

Come hear Dr. Edward R. Tufte speak about the visual design of information and his 1997 book, *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative*. In this book, he focuses on how to represent verbs and actions through visual means, building upon his two previous books, focused on the visual presentation of data and concepts. Dr. Edward R. Tufte will receive the 22nd Honorary Fellow Award from the STC President at the beginning of this session.

TR 4H • Designing It Right the First Time for Your Users

TT 4Q • Moving from WinHelp to HTML: Design Issues (Pt 2)

WE 4N • Finding the Best Mix of Paper and Online

Tuesday, 8:30 am - 10:00 am

MU 5C • Ten Common Design Flaws and Their Solutions

Learn ten of the most common flaws in the visual design of technical and scientific documents, the problems these designs create, the causes of the problems, advantages, disadvantages and solutions to these problems.

The *Technical Communication* Makeover: Designing for Our Audience

by George F. Hayhoe

When I became editor of *Technical Communication* 16 months ago, I was faced with a significant challenge. Most STC members acknowledged that we should publish a journal, but relatively few people actually read it. Instead of serving the needs of the informed practitioner, *Technical Communication* was perceived to be an academic journal. My mission, then, was to change the membership's perceptions of the journal's purpose and audience by making appropriate changes to its content and appearance.

Changing Readers' Perceptions

Some of these changes were introduced immediately. In my first issue (Second Quarter 1996), I revised the "Guidelines for Authors" to require a practical focus even for articles that report results of research or present theoretical contributions to the field. I worked with authors to ensure that they kept the practitioner audience in mind in their word choice and method of development. And together with the Editorial Advisory Board, I developed a new editorial policy for *Technical Communication* to ensure that our practitioner orientation is clear to prospective authors and to peer reviewers.

The major problem with perceptions, however, is that they are largely based on superficial characteristics. Such has been the case with our journal: it looks "academic," with all the pejorative connotations of that word. It became clear that the redesign of *Technical Communication* that I had already planned would

likely play a significant role in reshaping readers' perceptions of the journal's purpose and audience.

To begin the redesign project, the Editorial Advisory Board helped me write a request for proposals that was sent to two dozen design firms and independent designers who were recommended by colleagues or who responded to a posting on the TECHWR-L Internet e-mail list. The RFP made clear that the new design's purpose was to shape our readers' perceptions of the journal's purpose and audience. Six companies submitted proposals in response to the RFP.

The firm chosen to execute the redesign was Publication Design of Allentown, PA and Bozeman, MT. In the design community, Publication Design's two principals, Robert Ayers and John Johaneck, are acknowledged masters of magazine and journal redesign. They have won awards in professional competitions and are regular presenters at the FOLIO periodical design conference.

Over the past six months, Publication Design has worked with the journal staff and with Cadmus Journal Services (our prepress and printing vendor) to prepare the design that will debut in the Third Quarter 1997 (August) issue. This new look will attempt to change readers' perceptions of the journal in many ways, some obvious and some subtle, but I'll focus here on only two. The journal's new cover design makes clear that communication relies on media other than words. The design also introduces a new style of summary that gives readers quick access to an article's major points.

Covers That Communicate Visually

It is not understatement to say that, consistent with typical journal style, *Technical Communication's* covers have never attempted to be visually exciting. For several years in the not-too-distant past, the cover featured a grid along with a box containing the issue's contents. From 1991 to 1996, most covers featured winning entries in STC's International Technical Art Competition as did the contents box.

The logo of the newly designed *Technical Communication* is reproduced here in grayscale.



Vision Plus 2 Conference Report

by Paul Stiff

Vision Plus 2: Seeing, feeling, understanding: controversial views on developments in communication, was held 11-13 July 1996, Schwarzenberg, Vorarlberg, Austria as the annual conference of the International Institute of Information Design. This review was written for the *Information Design Journal*. Excerpted with permission.

Vision Plus 3: Design on the fly will be held 10-12 July 1997 in Schwarzenberg, Vorarlberg, Austria; for info, send email to ps.id@magnet.at.

Vision Plus 4 will be held 26-28 March, 1998 at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA; for info, send email to iid@andrew.cmu.edu.

Vision Plus 2 was relaxed, friendly, convivial, and well resourced. It was impressively sponsored and had fair claims for international scope. Its good company thrived in a beautiful setting, and flourished under the warm hospitality and efficiency of its organizers and sponsors. There were high standards of visual presentation in the designers' "show and tell" sessions. The supporting hardware and software provided for the speakers was first rate. German and English were spoken, with good simultaneous translation. Chairman Erik Spiekermann and moderators Harm Zwaga, Robert Waller, and Roland Mangold were, in their different styles, funny and sharp. There were some smart and some slick examples of designing in "new media", both prototypes and commercial releases. The audience was meant to gawp at these, and some did.

The two education sessions displayed impressive feats of clarity and compression (starting at 08.00, the 12 speakers had 15 minutes each, so unlike some headlined speakers they had to rehearse and cut the waffle). Among these, Jenny Waller described designing an undergraduate course at Coventry which integrates technical communication and graphic design, and in passing raised a

question—rarely heard elsewhere—about "accuracy" in writing and editing. Tina Reineke, a student at the Hochschule der Künste, Berlin, gave an excellent account of designing a pathology handbook for clinicians, including a splendid series of teaching illustrations which combined formal elegance and editorial precision. Heiner Jacob, of the Fachhochschule Köln, asserted the superiority of multimedia over print in education: that claim is arguable, but his showing of a student-designed multimedia prototype to help adults with reading and writing difficulties was welcome and intriguing; his defensive twitch—"these dry boring things"—was unnecessary. Michale Renner, from the Schule für Gestaltung in Basel, described visual designers as team workers in communication projects and as advocates of end-users; he also showed student projects, including a WWW home page, an "interactive portfolio", and fine graphic and cartographic work for Swiss national parks.

These talks were an implicit rejoinder to more fashionable accounts of designers' intentions—that haze of free-floating signifiers through which designers force readers to struggle against the "tyranny of linear objectivity" and where "it doesn't matter what you read into this presentation, meaning is free for you to decide." It was good to be reminded by the schools that, on the contrary, it does matter: just how reading is done, and with what effect, is still important in learning to diagnose tumours, or simply to catch the bus from Schwarzenberg to Bregenz.

Anyone who has organized meetings knows that it is often thankless, and that quality control of the programme can be a devilish problem. There were indeed problems of this sort, which will need fixing in the future, and no doubt will get it. There was not much discussion in the formal sessions (though plenty of lively coffee-break exchanges). Early complaints about this seemed to have little effect; and as ice-breaking in formal sessions needs to be done early, many participants were still frozen by the final afternoon. Some who had attended other information design meetings experienced the 'well-known speaker gives well-known paper' syndrome. Some speakers made big claims on slim evidence; others drew grand generalizations from modest particulars. Not all the "pee-are" was successful, since damning designer-on-designer peer review could be heard, *sotto voce*. The gawping at new media got in the way of older and arguably more challenging questions: for example, about the work required of readers by

Illuminating Information

by Michael Sharp

Good design illuminates information, making it more accessible. In his book, *Illustrating Computer Documentation*, William Horton tells how to use graphics to illuminate information. This article is based largely on that book.

Horton distinguishes between text and graphics by seeing text as lines of words arranged into paragraphs—blocks of lines that appear sequentially on a page. Each paragraph represents one concept or cluster of related concepts. Paragraph sequence develops meaning, or communication.

According to Horton, everything else is graphics—lists and tables as well as diagrams and illustrations.

Text is highly linear and needs to be decoded; graphic designs range from being less linear (as with lists) to completely non-linear (as in an illustration). Graphics tend to have greater information density than text.

Good Design Illuminates Textual Information

It seems intuitive that good design applies to text as well as graphics—the former a job traditionally assigned to writers. For expository writing, principles of good design would include:

- Arranging concepts from the general to the more specific
- Developing patterns of concepts using consistent rhetorical form
- Using common words arranged in short sentences

Horton suggests that text works best for describing sensual experiences such as taste or smell, expressing abstract concepts and nuances, and describing emotion.

Good Design Illuminates Graphical Information

Graphics excel at showing what things look like and in distinguishing among similar concepts or objects. In learning and reference materials, combining text with graphics boosts comprehension and is best for dealing with complex subjects and critical tasks; jobs that are common to most technical documentation.

Horton refers to three broad classes of information and recommends somewhat different graphical tech-



niques for each:

1) Showing what things look like—where photographs and line drawings work best.

Photos can show exact details and create interest. Line drawings work well to show only selective detail and in situations where photos are either difficult or impossible to obtain. Computer screen captures illustrate software procedures in documentation.

2) Showing processes and procedures—where numbered lists, tables, and diagrams work well to show both simple and complex relationships.

Text works well for very simple procedures with well-known sequences, and to introduce numbered lists. Numbered lists and procedure tables work best for the multi-step, complex procedures and processes so often encountered in technical writing.

3) Showing organization—where marked lists, tables, and diagrams work best.

Marked lists might be thought of as a different way to arrange paragraph text. The markers aid visual tracking, show hierarchical relationships of the various list items, and boost reader understanding and retention. Tables can present a large amount of detailed information in a small space, aid item-to-item comparisons, and precisely show individual data items. Diagrams can show information structure by connecting symbols into patterns such as chains, rings, trees, and webs.

Criteria Exist for Good Graphic Design

Edward Tufte has made a reputation by writing an expanding library of books on good graphic design. His first two books, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Data*, and *Envisioning Information*, have become classics in the field. Just this spring he added a third volume to the collection, *Visual Explanations*. Tufte suggests these criteria for judging the quality of graphic design:

- Above all else, show the data.
- Avoid decoration; simplify.
- Avoid distorting data; keep data consistent.
- Put as much data as possible into graphics.
- Strive to:
 - Clarify large data sets.
 - Lead the eye to compare different pieces of data.
 - Maximize ink used for data (versus ink used for non-data).
 - Show data at several levels of detail.
 - Show multiple variables.

Find Your Role in Crafting Good Graphic Design

Ideally, writers and graphic designers work together to achieve information products that exceed what either could do alone. We know that sometimes these two roles combine into one person. Then the person needs to look at the job alternately from the writer's and graphic designer's perspectives.

As a writer, pay attention to how you arrange infor-

mation in the document:

- Sequence information chunks according to the nature of the information:
 - Chronologically
 - From most to least important
 - From most general to most specific
 - Alphabetically or numerically
 - Ordinally (from first to last)
- Use white space to group text and graphic elements. Elements that are closer together are seen to belong together; those farther apart are seen to be independent or separate.
- Strive to use text to support graphics, not the opposite.
- Study the Horton and Tufte books carefully to gain an appreciation of specific graphic techniques and the necessary balance between text and graphics.

Finally, begin to train your eye to actually look at various publications and see how different designers approach this subject.

For many technical writers, learning to actually see the written word on the page is an unpracticed skill. Begin to practice! Your readers will thank you for it.

Michael V. Sharp is currently creating documentation and a document management system for Advanta Corporation. Mike is Vice-President of STC's Philadelphia Metro chapter. Previously he served as the chapter Employment Information Manager. Mike can be reached at msharp@snip.net.

Information is in a way the opposite of garbage, although in our contemporary commercialized world they may at times appear identical. As a rule, information is something to preserve, garbage is something to be destroyed. However, both can be looked on as a kind of waste product, a physical burden, and for contemporary society both are among the most pressing problems today.

—Bill Viola

"History, 10 Years and the Daydream" in Reasons for knocking at an Empty House, MIT Press, 1995 (as quoted in Emigre magazine, #40).

The cover of the new *Technical Communication* proclaims that this publication intends to make a visual impact on its audience.

- Each cover features a four-color graphic commissioned exclusively for that issue.
- A new logo boldly proclaims the title.
- Large display type prominently announces the major articles
- The new logo provides a new identity for STC's journal.

From the moment that readers pick up the first redesigned issue, it will be apparent that this is definitely not the same old *Technical Communication*. The increased use of color and graphics on the cover makes the journal look anything but "academic." The intention is that the increased visual excitement of the cover will motivate readers to actually open the journal and read.

Inside, the visual emphasis continues through greater use of graphical elements such as icons, drop caps, and rules.

From the moment that readers pick up the first redesigned issue, it will be apparent that this is definitely not the same old *Technical Communication*.

Technical Communication will also commission graphics to supplement those provided by authors when appropriate to illustrate articles.

Summaries That Cut to the Chase

The typical academic journal article includes an abstract that describes in a few hundred words the article's thesis and the major evidence supporting it. In the past, *Technical Communication* has printed such a summary at the beginning of each article. The new design, however, acknowledges that our readership needs a more efficient way to determine the potential usefulness of an article. Busy practitioners do not read a journal from cover to cover; instead, they look for articles that offer information relevant to their current projects or otherwise helpful on the job.

Acknowledging this fact, each article in the newly designed journal will include an executive summary consisting of three or four bullets that encapsulate the article's major points instead of a 150-word discursive summary. The executive summary will allow readers to gauge quickly whether a particular article will be useful to them.

Authors will continue to submit the longer summaries with their manuscripts, and those summaries will continue to be submitted to abstracting services and included in the journal article database at the STC World Wide Web site.

The Bottom Line

Will the redesign have the desired effect? Will it succeed in changing the membership's perceptions of *Technical Communication's* purpose and audience? Will it be worth the money that STC has spent? Watch for the first redesigned issue (to be mailed in late July), and let me know what you think.

Note: Information Design SIG members attending the STC Annual Conference in Toronto can get a preview of the journal's new look by visiting the exhibit at the *Technical Communication* booth.

George Hayhoe is an STC fellow, president of George Hayhoe Associates and editor of STC's journal, Technical Communication. You can reach him at george@ghayhoe.com.

And remember: once you've learned all the rules, break them!

—Erik Spiekermann

Foreward in
Collier's Rules for Desktop Design and Typography,
Addison-Wesley, 1991

different graphic formats, or about how to productively incorporate well-informed user advocacy into the design process.

There was not much doubt. The prevailing tone was upbeat, can-do. Information design here sounded pretty confident, even self-satisfied: it has the 'new media' sorted; it doesn't see that it has much to learn from industrial design, engineering design, ergonomics, applied psychology, interaction design or HCI [human computer interface] design.

... you need to know your users, because they're not the same as you ...

Apart from Harm Zwaga's nagging at speakers, the only question from the floor about evaluation of design outcomes was put by Wes Ervin (who has set up the Information Design Association of North America); he asked: have you done formal analyses of return on clients' investment?

The few people present who mentioned "usability" stuck out. For example: Jettie Hoohhout, a psychologist from Utrecht University, reported a simple evaluative study of icons used in a Dutch WWW site. She talked about how well or badly these icons could be described, understood, and selected from the full set of 24, and asked some methodological questions along the way. Her positive message to designers—you need to know your users, because they're not the same as you, and there are ways of checking whether design proposals meet ease of use criteria—is part of the common understanding of usability. But it drew a hostile response from some in the audience: it was "just too negative", "everyone knows that there are problems with icons", "why didn't she design new ones?" So the version of information design which emerged looked a bit like literary criticism: "a laboratory in which some staff are seated in white coats at control panels, while others are throwing sticks in the air or spinning coins." At Schwarzenberg there were many coin spinners and few white coats, while at Lunteren in 1994—certainly a different kind of meeting—it was the other way round. A good balance is hard to find.

What and who was Vision Plus 2 for? The difficulty was that it wanted to be all things to all people. In his opening remarks, Erik Spiekermann observed that information design has for too long ignored people's eyes, ears, spirits, and emotions. And as the meeting progressed he welcomed the new "soft"

information design, embracing feelings absent in the old hard version ... Information design is no longer just about supporting and explaining "the things that people need for their daily existence" (transport, welfare, health, justice ...). It is about the pleasure of abundance, about applying designers' skills and knowledge in "new" areas: no longer "big bad corporations", no longer "designers good, advertisers bad." Now, "everything we do is, by definition, information design."

This sounds like everything and nothing. And I don't recognize the existence of an old hard version of information design. The soft shift weakens an earlier position, from which Erik has put tough questions to positivists: about the need "to grab someone's attention and then keep it there for a while", about how "to convince people, but also to persuade them to take notice." I have written in admiration of MetaDesign's articulate advocacy, based on confidence that everyday information can be presented with as much visual wit and verve as design for shopping, and also on a conviction that people need to be persuaded to attend before they will read, and that graphic objects should offer a surplus of pleasure over utility. But Vision Plus 2 missed a chance to really engage these questions.

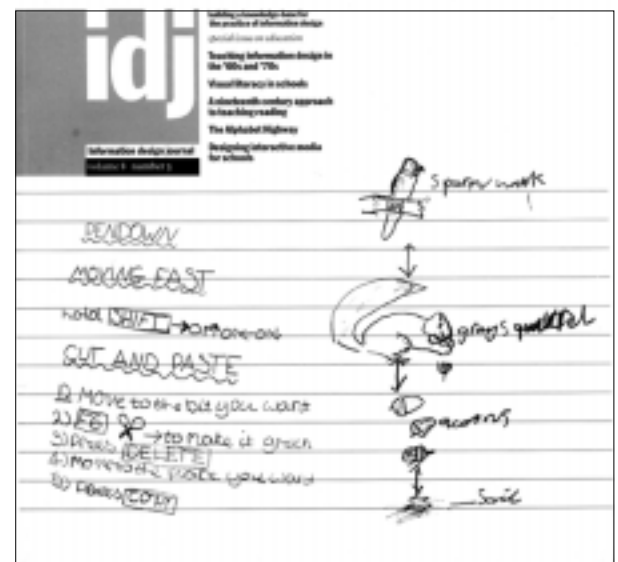
Paul Stiff is the Editor of Information design journal. This article appeared in Volume 8, number 3. The subscription rate for Volume 9 (3 issues; personal subscriptions) is £22 or \$44 plus £10 or \$15 for airmail. Address subscription requests to:

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activities include holding our first annual business meeting and hosting three tables at the SIG Networking Luncheon. Look for the Information Design SIG flyers at the conference, and attend the sessions related to information design!

We are only getting started, and yet we've already broken new ground. The Information Design SIG is one of the first to have either a web site or a listserv, and we have both! We are also pioneering the idea of creating an advisory panel composed of experts in information design to advise us and help us grow.

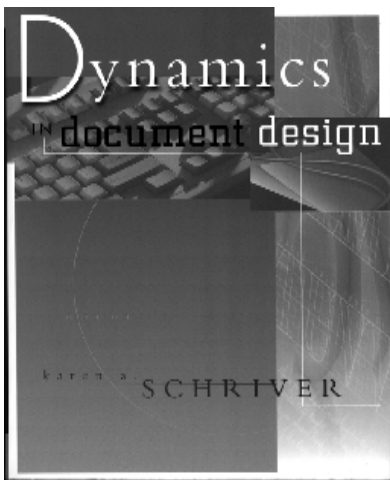
A special note about the founder of this SIG: Beth Mazur of the Pittsburgh chapter. She has done a wonderful job of getting the SIG organized, proposed, and approved. The only glitch she ran into was toward the end of the approval process, when she discovered the requirement that a SIG manager must be a senior STC member. My congratulations to her on a job well done, and I am proud to be helping her bring this SIG into being.

Now that it is up and running, it's ready for the rest of you to join us!

Cheri Taylor is the owner of TechWords and the manager of the STC Information Design SIG. Her email address is taylorcw@compuserve.com.

Kudos!

Karen Schriver (Chair of the ID SIG Advisory Panel) has recently published a new book on document design



titled *Dynamics in Document Design*. This 560-page volume should be a must-read for those interested in the document design; in fact, it is likely that this will be the required text for many technical communication classes.

Congratulations!

ISBN: 0471-30636-3, John Wiley & Sons. Available at 10% off list at <http://www.amazon.com/>.

And to...

Maria Stiteler for working under an impossible deadline to design the title art for *Design Matters*. Af-

ter others wasted valuable time without producing a usable design, Maria, a member of Carnegie Mellon's Master in Communication Design program, came to our rescue. I hope you like the design, and if you are looking for a designer in the near future (as we went to press, Maria was finishing her thesis), please send her mail at stiteler+@andrew.cmu.edu. ♦

ID SIG Online

With status as an official STC special interest group, the ID SIG sponsors a web site to promote the new group and support its purpose and members. Two Chicago SIG members, Donna Roberts-Luttrell and Elizabeth Hennessey, will work with other members to develop and maintain the web site. The new web site will be "unveiled" just before the Annual Conference in May.

<http://stc.org/pics/idsig/>

<http://stc.org/pics/idsig/>

<http://stc.org/pics/idsig/>

"We want the web site to provide content that will be helpful to SIG members and that will also educate STC members about the ID SIG. Of course, we'd also like the web site to be a model of excellent information design," Donna commented. "We'll build on the good ideas already in place." Donna and Elizabeth are working with SIG officers Cheri Taylor and Beth Mazur to define the content and structure of the web site, and are also soliciting suggestions from the SIG membership through the ID SIG mailing list (see your welcome letter for how to subscribe).

If you'd like to volunteer to help with the web site, send email to donna@plaintech.com.

WWW Resources

One of the important parts of our web site will be the resource list. This list will also be published periodically in this newsletter for those without web access. One very useful web site is Jakob Nielsen's useit.com site, where Nielsen publishes Alertbox, a monthly column on usability issues. For example, in his March column, Nielsen addressed writing for the web, and provided three main guidelines:

- Be succinct: write no more than 50% of the text you would have used in a hardcopy publication.
- Write for scannability: don't require users to read long continuous blocks of text.
- Use hypertext to split up long information into multiple pages.

He goes on in more detail explaining each guideline, emphasizing usability constraints as rationale.

To read more about this topic, check out Nielsen's web site at <http://www.useit.com/>. ♦

MU 5U • Anatomy of a Successful Multimedia Application

WE 5L • Minimalism

Tuesday, 10:30 am - 12:00 noon

ET 6N • Bringing New Technologies into the Technical Communication Classroom

MU 6G • Guiding Your Home on the World Wide Web: Researching, Designing, and Maintaining a Web Home Page.

Web Home Page design concepts including chunking, dynamic links, visual perception, using color, graphics, CGI scripts, and images. Development of a Home Page Style Guide will also be discussed.

MU 6X • Designing for Usability: Prototyping Techniques for User Interface Design

TR 6H • How Effective Are Animations as Documentation?

TT 6T • Innovative Approaches to Internet Documentation

WE 6E • The 90-Minute Information Engineer

A 90-minute crash course in using information to drive product design.

Tuesday, 2:00 pm - 3:30 pm

MU 7X • Color as Communication: Human Factors Theory and Practice (Part 1)

Practical guidelines for using color effectively in all forms of information design—from paper to the World Wide Web. Part one of a two-session workshop.

PD 7K • From Information Worker to Knowledge Worker: Emerging Technologies, Trends, and Skill Sets

TR 7J • Advanced Usability Topics

WE 7O • What Happens When You Make Things Easy for Your User

WE 7Q • Useful Topics in Documentation: Using Examples, Open-Ended Tasks, Designing for the 21st Century

This session combines topics that confront technical communicators on a regular basis: how to use examples, how to guide users through open-ended tasks, and how to design for the future.

Tuesday, 4:00 pm - 5:30 pm

MU 8C • Designing for the Web—Tricks of Page Layout for Usable Navigation

MU 8T • Designing for Hypermedia and the WWW

MU 8V • Color as Communication: Human Factors Theory and Practice (Part 2)

Practical guidelines for using color effectively in all forms of information design—from paper to the World Wide Web. Part two of a two-session workshop.

PD 8J • Tools to Trade: Transfer Your Skills to Develop Professional Presentations

TR 8G • Putting the User First by Analyzing Their Needs and Creating Quickly Accessible Information

WE 8H • Creating Job Aids

Wednesday, 8:30 am - 10:00 am

TR 9B Lessons Learned from Usability Testing Web Pages

TR 9G Conveying the Right Information to the Right Audience—Online

As documentation is increasingly being built directly into the interface, technical communicators move into areas of interface design and usability. These panelists will help you make this transition effectively. Topics include building documentation into the interface, using Web site surveys, and understanding inter-textuality.

TR 9H • Help! Six Fixes to Improve the Usability of Your Online Help

WE 9N • Style Guides—The New and the Improved

Wednesday, 10:30 am - 12:00 noon

PD 10M • Proposing and Preparing Your Successful STC Presentation

TR 10I • Finding Solutions for Your Challenges—Multidisciplinary Progression

Includes information about science and space, illustration and design, presentations and academic programs, Web page design, and international documents, with some reality checks for balance. Explore new subject areas and find solutions to existing challenges.

TT 10A • On Beyond Help: Interface Design Paradigms for Online Documents

TT 10F • Building Hypermedia Information Systems That Work

WE 10R • How to Approach Systems and Programming

Wednesday, 2:00 pm - 3:30 pm

MU 11A • Visual Literacy Crash Course

Today, communication requires more than just pages or screens of printed words. Producing effective documents and training requires the ability to understand, think, and communicate graphically.

TT 11O • Intranets: The Role of the Technical Communicator

TT 11Q • Maximizing Windows Help

For more info...

The descriptions of the “must see” sessions are copied directly from your Preliminary Program & Registration. See the program for descriptions of all sessions that are offered at the Annual Conference as well as a list of other tours and post-conference tutorials.

You can also check out program descriptions at the STC web site at <http://www.stc-va.org> and follow the link for **Conference Details**.

Kathryn Whitver is a Technical Media Specialist for Diamondhead Documentation, Inc. She can be reached at kawhitver@juno.com.

Karen Schriver will be hosting an ID SIG forum in *Sheraton Cinema II* from 10:30-12 on Tuesday. The ID SIG business meeting will follow at noon in the *Norfolk* room. See your registration program for more details.

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/>



The Information Design SIG
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