Quality Design at a Reasonable Price: Brochures and Newsletters

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This paper discusses some of the steps in creating a cost-effective a brochure or newsletter and presents design principles based on a synthesis of the literature and personal experience.

Although many technical and professional communicators are not directly involved in the design and layout of a document, an understanding of design issues allows writers and editors to discuss design in a knowledgeable way. This knowledge provides credibility for them when arguing for design modifications that will make a document more audience centered. Design and content, visual and textual elements, must work together, just as writers and designers must, acknowledging each other’s expertise. Documents that are visually and esthetically pleasing must also contain necessary information, organized and expressed appropriately, for a particular audience; the visual impact alone, of course, does not guarantee a successful and effective document.

Many good design books are available to enable writers and editors to become satisfactory designers through self-education. However, two problems exist in this body of literature:

1> Some authors address design directly by discussing principles and elements, but their terminology differs. A close examination of the various lists of principles reveals that the same terms are defined differently or different terms are defined the same.

2> Authors address design information indirectly and scatter this information throughout a text or embed it in a how-to or instructions style of writing. In these cases, the author might provide design ideas for creating a business card, for example, but not name or discuss the specific design principles or elements driving its development.

By learning about design principles, technical communicators can prepare documents, especially brochures and newsletters, that are attractive and professional-looking, often without the cost being prohibitive. Writers and editors with beginning or intermediate level experience can benefit most from the information presented in this electronic proceeding paper. We first briefly discuss some of the decisions that they must make in regard to brochures and newsletters, as well as some specific tips. Then we discuss design principles that affect their development, synthesizing various authors’ discussions with what we have learned from our own experiences in preparing these documents.

The complexity of the design process
Before deciding the specifics of a document, writers and editors must be aware of possible constraints imposed upon them by the environment in which they work and of other issues which may influence their project. Normally, they cannot control the non-rhetorical parameters of budget, time, personnel, and hardware and software available. Their preparation of a document can be influenced by such considerations as the social construct of the workplace and its organizational culture; political constraints; and ethical and legal policies. Writers and editors usually decide the rhetorical aspects of a document: purpose and scope, audience, document “genre” (i.e. brochure and newsletter), and the delivery system or distribution media (such as hard or soft copy). Occasionally, however, decisions about these aspects of a project are also out of their control.

All of these factors operate throughout a project’s development and the amount of control writers and editors have will vary. All, nonetheless, influence the project, its planning, creating, and publishing. The decisions made by writers and editors must be made in the context of these parameters. A complete discussion of design in terms of all these factors is beyond this paper. This article focuses on design decisions that writers and editors must make within the context of these factors, although in this paper, we will not discuss specific brochure or newsletter situations, such as how a specific purpose and audience influence design in terms of the typography or paper chosen.

**Preparing a brochure and a newsletter**

Steps in the process we describe implies a linear procedure. However, the process is not strictly linear, but recursive; decisions made later in the process can modify earlier decisions. For example, an initial decision about paper size and number of folds for a brochure may be modified by the way panels must work together.

Although we advocate some understanding of design principles, important decisions that make a significant impact on a document can be made with minimal instruction. We have discovered, almost to our dismay, that novices (i.e., undergraduates in introductory writing classes) can create an effective brochure by following a few guidelines, even though they may not comprehend the design and rhetorical reasons for their success. But all writers-designers should know, as covered earlier in this paper, that visual impact alone will not ensure a document’s success if the rhetorical decisions about purpose, scope, and target audience, are neglected or ignored. A brochure may be picked up because of its visual effectiveness. If, however, it does meets its audience’s needs, that document will be worthless.

**1> Physical properties**

Early in the process, technical and professional communicators must make decisions about the physical properties of a document.
• For a brochure, determine paper size and folds.

The common paper sizes (8 1/2- x 11-inches or 8 1/2- by 14-inches) are readily available and usually most cost effective, but a slightly larger size (9x 12) that still fits in a legal-size envelope may be worth the extra cost because of the space and look it provides, especially if the brochure is to be printed, rather than xeroxed.

Writers and editors must also decide on the number of folds, which determines the number of panels, and the type of fold for the brochure. An accordion fold (three fold) may be most convenient for the audience and the content than a single or double fold.

These decisions are also influenced by the arrangement or order of content, panels working together or individually, and column widths.

• For a newsletter, determine paper size and number of columns.

Writers and editors can choose a standard 8 1/2- by 11-inch page or select an oversized page (8 1/2- by 14). Note that, if the newsletter is being printed, it can be modified from 8 1/2- x 11-inches to 8 3/4- x 10 3/4-inches to obtain a different look, but at no additional cost for paper. The size of paper chosen will affect the number of columns used.

Developing a newsletter, in addition, involves deciding on the number of pages, use of illustrations, arrangement or order of content, and facing pages seen conceptually as one. The pages can all have the same layout (identical pages from a template or master page) or have different layouts, such as having primarily two-column pages, with a section being set off by having three columns.

2> Selected design decisions

When choosing textual and visual features, technical and professional communicators should use restraint. Simplicity in design never is out of style.

• Textual features: headings and body

Writers and editors need to decide about typography—decisions about font, style for the font, and size. Often recommended is the use of a sans serif font for the headings and a serif for the body text. Purpose and audience of course, will influence the category of type chosen, such as oldstyle, modern, slab serif, sans serif, script, or display or decorative type. As with the number of fonts to be used, the number styles used (i.e. bold, italic, underlined, and shadow) should be limited. Overuse of these highlighting techniques will quickly destroy the unity of the design.

Communicators must determine the type of alignment to be used for headings and text: centered, left justified with ragged right, right justified with ragged left, and justified. Alignment creates a
tone, such as formal vs informal. Justified type can create “rivers” in headings and text. Centered headings tend to create a formal look, but centering also creates a sedate, often boring appearance; centered text, while appropriate for some documents, such as the text of wedding invitations, can be hard to read if used for long passages of text.

Another textual feature involves spacing for the lines of type. Writers and editors must decide about spacing between lines (leading) and paragraphs and whether items such as paragraphs and lists will be indented. They should not both indent paragraphs and space between them.

- **Visual features**

Communicators must decide whether to use illustrations and/or other visual features. As appropriate, they can choose generic illustrations (clip art or click art) or specific ones (e.g., line drawings, tables, organization charts, and flow charts). Other visuals include such items as drop caps, small caps, lines or rules, and borders.

### 3> Tips about details

- Avoid all caps and underlining usually. Underlining affects readability of type, especially lower case type, because underlining cuts off the descenders of lower case type.
- Replace “typewritten” characters with “typeset” punctuations. To illustrate, instead of using two hyphens (--) for a dash, use an em dash (—).
- Use one space, rather than two, after periods to avoid “rivers” of white space.
- Use tabs, instead of spaces, to ensure perfect alignment.
- Don’t indent the first line of text under headings.
- If xeroxing, create “light” pages both in terms of text and visuals because xeroxing (with black ink) darkens both of these items.
- If printing in one color, choose a color other than black. Be sure that the color is readable however.
- If xeroxing a document with visuals such as photographs or detailed clip/click art, check into the cost of having the visuals scanned on a high quality scanner, if you don’t have one, and then sending the copy to a printer, instead of using a laser printer.

### Design principles and elements

These suggestions for a visually effective document are derived from a variety of theorists who have identified various principles of design and specified particular design elements. At the same time, our limited review of the literature of authors considered trustworthy in this area revealed the variety of terms used when discussing design principles and elements (see table 1).

Immediately it is apparent that, while these authors do discuss some of the same principles and elements, many different terms are used. And in studying their discussions, one discovers that sometimes two different terms mean the same thing while the same term is defined a bit
differently by different authors. Furthermore, principles and elements overlap. No wonder we technical and professional writers and editors are baffled and frustrated when we attempt to educate ourselves about design.

Robin Williams, for example, names four general design principles: proximity, alignment, repetition, and contrast. Mary Lay, on the other hand, considers repetition a design element which aids in achieving her principles of unity, balance, proportion, emphasis, and sequence. Embedded in Lay’s discussion of unity is the concept of proximity, one of Williams’ four principles. The juxtaposition of terms in the table reveals that researchers may indeed be discussing an identical, or at least similar, concept using different terminology. Other examples include Roger Parker’s identifying “tonal balance” as one part of principle of contrast, and Lay uses balance as one of the design principles. Yet both identify proportion as a design principle.

Identifying design elements produces more consistency among the theorists. Most acknowledge type or text and graphic elements as important and Table 1 shows that three of the authors name them specifically; the Williams’ text used for this table concentrated on decisions about type. Others not on the table identify the same concepts, although they, too, show variety. The significance for novice and intermediate writer/designers is that any one of the texts available will probably provide a good start in designing an effective brochure or newsletter, or other documents. And many other texts which we do not mention specifically are also available.

In our discussion, we define design principles as contributors to a document’s overall effect, while design elements are those features which help the designer achieve that effect. An additional problem we faced in discussing these design issues is another confusion of terms. “Format,” “layout,” and “design” are used and defined in overlapping ways. Generally, though, authors use these terms when dealing with the placement of text and graphics or the features of verbal and visual elements in a text.

Some approach design by beginning with the overall visual concept, rather than the textual content. Grossman, for example, stresses the picture created, rather than the words (iv). To be good at design, writers, editors, and designers need four qualities: (1) be “open to new ideas and have] a sense of adventure,” (2) “be able to see the big picture,” not the specifics, but how those specifics will fit together, (3) be able to convert his or her vision of the big picture into a concrete one, and (4) be able to avoid “technical and mechanical mistakes.” All possess the capacity to be creative.

On the other hand, information design specialists sometimes work from a rhetorical approach focusing on the text and then its formatting or visual design.

Writers and editors should strive to create documents in which textual features and visual features work together in terms of both communication function/relationship and physical placement on the pages/environment (Parker, Williams). To this end, design principles enable writers and editors to organize text and visual elements, such as color, illustrations, 2-points
horizontal lines or rules at top and bottom of page. As a part of organizing, these principles help writers and editors unify elements on a page and in a document; indicate relative importance of an element or elements; and guide the audience through the page or document. Of special significance, writers and editors can create interest, particularly visual interest, and attract attention.

**Design Principle #1> Consistency and repetition**

- Handle in the same way items that continually appear, but also go beyond normal consistency by repeating an element of design throughout a document. Each page will have margins, but a repeated horizontal line (rule) across the top of the page, possibly in color, serves as a repeated design element.

For effective design, consistency in treatment of visual elements is important. For example, in a brochure about Lake Mattamuskeet, NC, all photographs of the area are printed in blue and are scanned and then screened so that landscape images are recognizable but blurred, while images of the animals and birds are all stylized clip art in deep barn red.

Grossman and Parker focus on the matter of consistent presentation of elements that continually appear, not really addressing how to use the design principle of consistency or repetition to add visual interest. Grossman discusses consistency within a document as well as consistency among documents for a company or organization. He reviews achieving consistency among graphics or photographs used; between heads; and within body text in terms of font, type size, and leading. One type of consistency—treatment of items—could contribute to visual interest as design; writers and editors should treat each item the same, e.g., framing all photos or placing color behind headings for example. Parker does warn that writers and editors should be consistent without being boring.

Williams strongly urges writers and editors to go beyond this natural consistency involving the same sized margins or same font and size for each level of heading. Lay suggests using repetition to give motion to the page and document.

**Design Principle #2> Proximity or relevance**

- Group, physically, items related by communication function and relationship as well as by environment and physical placement on a page or in a document. Grouping results in having less white space between each of the items grouped than is outside of them as a group. On a business card, name, title, and company name might be grouped while address, phone number, and other contact information might be grouped.

Williams advises having no more than three to five items in a group, advice reflecting Miller’s magic number seven, plus or minus two. In our experience, that number should probably be the magic number five, plus or minus two.
**Design Principle #3> Alignment**

• Align elements vertically and horizontally.

In addition to grouping elements, connect them visually through alignment, even if they are not in close proximity. Every element, including items such as illustrations and horizontal or vertical lines, should be visually connected whether or not the elements have a communication relationship. This connection tells the audience that the elements all belong on the same page or in the same document.

Williams suggests that writers and editors generally should use one alignment to a page (flush or justified left, flush or justified right, centered, or justified) and should use centered alignment infrequently because that alignment is not dynamic.

**Design Principle #4> Balance**

• Balance elements horizontally and vertically. Balance, however, does not mean that elements must be symmetrical. A dynamic balance often results from an asymmetrical arrangement of elements and an odd number of elements, rather than an even number.

In addition to using proportion to refer to size, Lay uses proportion when discussing the placement of elements on a page. Audiences, when processing a page, divide a page with an imaginary horizontal line; visual center or optical center is about one-third from the top of the page above the actual center of the page. Uneven proportions in terms of this imaginary horizontal line generally give more interesting design. To create uneven proportions, writers and editors should use an odd instead of an even number of elements. Elements should also balance according to an imaginary vertical line down the center of the page. Balance can be symmetrical or asymmetric, although asymmetric balance usually produces much more interesting design than symmetrical balance.

**Design Principle #5> Continuation, sequence, and direction**

• As a corollary to aligning and balancing elements, place them so that readers are guided through the panels or pages of a document. Writers and editors should be aware that some audiences usually have an established reading pattern, such as English-speaking readers who process a page from the upper left corner of the panel or page to the lower right corner.

Applying the design principles of proportion or contrast/emphasis discussed below, however, can cause an audience to read or look at a document in another way. Technical communicators could design a page so that readers are guided as follows: beginning by noticing a large, colored graphic in the lower right corner, then going to the headline for an article related to the content of the graphic at the upper left corner, and finally continuing to read the text of the article printed
in three columns (down first column, to top of second and down it, and finally from the top to the bottom of the third column).

Continuation, according to Lay, involves creating a continuous line or direction that moves the audience from one element to another such as aligning a list. Sequence is the path that the audience’s eyes travel as they read or look at a panel/page or document. Furthermore, audiences seek motion in design. Horizontal lines, be they formed by text or visual elements, tend to be static, while vertical ones are dynamic (Lay). Parker uses the term “direction” when he discusses design that guides an audience through a document.

**Design Principle #6> Proportion**

• Make elements a size that indicates their relative importance and relationship to other elements on a page. However, the environment in which an element appears will also influence what is its proper size.

**Design Principle #7> Contrast and emphasis**

• Create contrast by using elements that are very different, but do not conflict. Following this principle will enable writers and editors to create visual interest. Note that emphasis and contrast also aid in creating sequence and direction.

When Parker discusses contrast, he emphasizes contrast achieved through use of light and dark elements. By looking at a page upside down, writers and editors can check for “tonal balance.” For Lay, emphasis results from an item or items having the greatest proportion, thus attracting the most attention. Contrast also provides emphasis. Without such emphasis, whether it results from proportion or contrast, an audience doesn’t know where to begin reading or looking at a page or document; readers will probably follow an English-speaking persons typical “Z” pattern, beginning in the upper left corner. Lay also briefly mentions Philip Rubens advice for designing computer screens; he suggests considering the screen to be a “Golden Rectangle” and placing essential elements in the upper left of a screen and the second most important in the lower right.

In conclusion, understanding the principles of design and knowing how to use design elements comes from many opportunities for reading, writing, and designing. But with the suggestions we provide in this limited space, writers can begin to understand some of the important decisions that need to be made in designing a document.

**References**


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### Table 1: An Overview of Some Design Principles and Elements

<table>
<thead>
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