

Visual Design Strategies

Making complex data visually accessible

The workplace poses a difficult problem for writers and presenters: hurried professionals do not have time to read lengthy, multi-paragraphed essays, yet their jobs require that they regularly receive and transmit a great deal of complex, detailed information.

Technical communicators solve the problem by mating precise, concise language with visual design: page layout, headings & lists, and figures & tables. Rather than ask the reader to work through all the paragraphs of a lengthy document, the technical writer creates a series of highly visual, self-contained blocks of information that fit into a coherent scheme, but can be read selectively.

This unique combination of language and visual elements enables busy professionals to

- see the overall point of the message and its main points instantly
- read selectively in order to locate precisely what they need now,
- understand complex details and see important relationships quickly
- return quickly to key details as necessary.

Strategic design —3 basic components

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| Page design | Use of data position & sequence, white space, eye travel patterns, layout & font conventions to distinguish key ideas from supporting material, indicate relative importance, and facilitate rapid understanding. |
| Headings & lists | Use of highly descriptive but concise headings & subheadings plus bulleted or numbered lists, to make transparent the message's main idea, primary components, supporting detail and transitions. Permits immediate access specific details. |
| Graphics: (figures & tables) | Use of tables to condense and arrange complex, related data for quick comparison and reference. Use of figures to demonstrate & emphasize idea relationships, indicate trends, show application, etc., quickly and accurately for busy audiences. |

The Effect

Precise, concise language *coupled with* a careful visual design makes it possible to convey complex information efficiently so that busy, interrupted audiences can receive, understand, use and recall that data with quickly but accurately. At the simplest level, the following replacements take place:

- topic sentences by precise, concise, descriptive headings
- paragraphs by blocks of information in tightly worded, bulleted or numbered lists
- lengthy narrative descriptions by precisely introduced, labeled, documented and explained figures
- internal transitional devices by a variety of list and layout techniques

As the information becomes increasingly complex, and multiple audiences and purposes come into play, the technical communicator continues to use simplified language in concert with increasingly sophisticated visual elements in order to guide his/her audience through the complexity with the speed and accuracy a technical audience demands.

But you must design the message visually from the outset, not simply tack on visual elements to text.