

## Image is Everything ...

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At least that is the message Andre Agassi, in his Canon EOS camera commercials, would have us believe, and to a certain extent he is not too far off the mark. Today, thanks to the new technology our era affords us, it is very easy to produce such things as posters, brochures, newsletters and the like, for the institutions that we find ourselves in. Twenty five years ago, to produce these types of public relations materials meant a trip down to a commercial printer and the accompanying time and expense that went along with production process. The end result however, was a product that was done professionally and represented your business in a very effective manner. Today however more and more institutions are finding that they can use the computer and the supporting resources (page layout applications, clipart, laser printers, scanners, etc.) to produce these same documents much more conveniently {the cycle of paste-up, revisions, paste-up is more immediate} and much cheaper — but at what cost!?! The product that is produced is often that important "*first appearance*" that is sending a message about our institution. It is because of the importance of this vital visual impact, that our youth should be introduced and trained in the principles of presentation. Our students are becoming increasingly proficient at acquiring the information through such avenues as CD-ROM material, the Internet and other resources. They are given instruction on how to use word processors, spreadsheets, databases, and graphic applications to process this data into information yet when it comes to presenting this material in an effective manner, are we giving them the proper tools? With today's technology, our students will have to compete with peers that are producing visually appealing websites, resumes on CD-ROM – providing future employers not only the customary items found on typical resumes but also showcasing their work using the multi-medial tools available to them; or giving multi-media presentations to interested audiences. Are what they are producing of high quality, effective presentation or are they being left up to their own initiatives?

### Reading Behavior

Through research, it has been found that today's average reader has a definite reading behavior. Due to the influence of the various media outlets, the average person has a very short attention span, will turn to documents that are visually appealing, and that have a message that is concise and easy to discern. Three (3) stages of reading behavior have been identified as the *scan*, *skim*, and the *scour* phases. The scan phase lasts approximately two to ten seconds and is where the reader will visually scan a document and mentally ask themselves whether it might be of interest. After the reader has had their interest sufficiently aroused, due to the devices used to support the scanning phase, they will move into the skim stage. This phase again lasts approximately 10 – 30 seconds and the reader is asking themselves whether it is worthwhile to continue. If the skim stage was done well, the reader will be drawn into the scour phase. This is where the reader is committed to the reading the document {whether it is immediate or at some later date} and its at this phase that it is important to use devices that will maintain the reader's interest both visually and in content. Advertisers have long known this and once you are aware of the devices used to support each stage, it is interesting to note that the advertisements found in many of the magazines, and newspapers are not designed by accident. They are constructed in such a way as to first get the reader's attention over competing articles, draw the reader in and then lead them through the ad, and finally leave a lasting impression. Knowing some of the principles of graphic design employed by the design industry, allows the student to produce a document that stands a good chance of being read and of getting that all important message across.

## Graphic Design and Page Layout Principles

A brief summary of these principles should provide you with a starting outline as to what our students should be exposed to. The following is a thumbnail view of the material you should be challenging your students to think of when they are producing the variety of documents asked of them.

1. **What is the message?** The first step in producing the document is to identify the essential message that is to be conveyed and to be sure that everything that is done supports it. Many times the message is unclear because of other things that the designer thought was "neat" but had nothing to do with the message. This is especially true when it comes to the use of graphics.
2. **Who is the audience?** This is a vitally important question if you hope to get the reader's attention. What is their age group, interests, geographic location, what emotion do you wish to illicit and culture are just some of the questions to be answered before you start designing.
3. **What is your media?** Is the document going to be in written form, on paper or as an electronic document, what is the resolution of the output device, paper size, is color an option or will the document be produced in black and white.
4. **Keep it simple!** The temptation here is to fill every bit of real estate that the page has to offer, making it hard to pick out the message.
5. **Utilize the six (6) principles of design:**
  - **Proportions** – the use of the "golden mean" to determine proportions of objects (eg rectangular boxes), using hierarchy of fonts, the planning around a dominant item and using the "visual center" of the page.
  - **Balance** – when to use "formal balance" as using "informal balance".
  - **Contrast** – items on a page have a certain visual weight that can be used to draw importance to that object. Contrast can be used to maintain visual interest to your document as well as consistency and handles to important information.
  - **White space** – to actively plan for white space on your page to give the page an uncluttered open feeling.
  - **Rhythm** – the employment of devices to guide the reader's eyes through a document. These devices include placing items in the natural Z pattern a reader uses in reading a document, the use of lines, eyes {a powerful device; how often do you find yourself looking in the same direction as a person's eyes in an ad are looking?}, use of white space, apparent motion, and usage of the terminal area {lower right hand side of the page where in many ads the company's logo and information is found because that is the last location the reader's eyes will fall on before leaving the page}. A well designed document will move the reader through the document without them even knowing it.
  - **Unity** – all of the above devices should support the message which is the number one concern of the designer. Thus it is important to maintain thematic unity and its subtle side kick, tonal unity. Typographical unity means that the choice of fonts used will also contribute to ambience of the message.
6. **Using a grid.** It is important to set up and use an underlying grid to achieve consistency to the document. The choice of the type of grid {eg. one, two, three, or four column, scholar's margins, asymmetrical columns} will depend on the type of article to be produced. Special attention should be given to line length which effects the readability of the document.
7. **Handles and lead-ins.** In newsletter and technical documents the use of handles and lead-ins are to be considered so interest can be aroused and important information can be found quickly. The hierarchy of headlines, the paragraph spacing of subtitles before and after, how to correctly justify and deal with multi-line headlines. When and where to use decks, kickers, sidebars, drop caps and pull quotes.
8. **The use of graphics.** Today's readers expect to see a highly graphical type of document that

again is used to grab the reader's interest.

This should begin to get you thinking that hey perhaps there is more to producing output than what is currently being taught. The study of good design can and should occur in our classrooms in many areas. A graphic design course is certainly a good consideration but these principles can also be incorporated into our Business courses {eg. Data Management, Keyboarding, etc.}, English courses are a natural place where part of the writing process would incorporate the importance of the appearance of a document, and the classes such as Science and Social Studies where projects are assigned and the presentation of the material to the class is expected lends itself quite naturally to the study of graphic design {eg. the use of PowerPoint presentation to deliver the message}. It is an important area to be addressed if you wish to equip your students with the tools to be a successful contributing member of the work force.

**The following is a list of resources you may find useful:**

- *Designing for Communication* by Ted D. E. McCain, ISTE Publications, ISBN 1-56484-012-3
- *Desktop Publishing, Basics & Applications* by George H. J. Porozny, Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., ISBN 0-7730-5218-6
- *Desktop Publishing by Design* by Ronnie Shushon & Don Wright, Microsoft Press, ISBN 1-55615-566-2
- <http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Classroom/6949/page4.html>
- <http://desktoppub.about.com/>