

## **New horizons in document design**

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EDITORIAL

## New horizons in document design

### The quest for better documents

World War II is still an important topic of research, not only for historians, but for document designers as well. Studies have shown that many of the serious and fatal accidents that occurred during the war were the result of misunderstanding instructions. The documents proved too difficult for the soldiers to use in emergency situations.

Nowadays, badly designed and poorly written documents usually do not have such lethal consequences, but they can cause inconvenience nonetheless: People are unable to install or even operate their expensive new VCRs, waste many evenings trying to fill out income tax forms, are puzzled by government brochures about new legislation, and are angered by the seventh direct mail letter within one week addressing them as the closest of friends.

Organizations also suffer from badly designed and poorly written documents. They have to repair incorrectly programmed VCRs or spend hours explaining complicated operating instructions to angry customers; they have to send forms again and again because of missing data or irrelevant answers, are astonished by the audience's lack of cooperation regarding new legislation, or don't understand why their direct mailing efforts appear to decrease rather than increase their sales. In each case, they lose face: their image is damaged because, in the eyes of the public, they are incompetent.

There are numerous cases of well-designed documents saving organizations lots of money and their clients lots of grief. A well-designed document, whether written, spoken, or electronic, strikes a balance between the organization's

objectives and the clients' needs. Finding this balance, however, is easier said than done since it requires tapping the knowledge of both researchers and practitioners on what constitutes good design. Researchers know a lot about how people process documents and how document characteristics influence that processing. Practitioners, on the other hand, have lots of experience with what works for which audiences. Combining these two sources of knowledge is the goal of this journal.

### Why another new journal?

Trying to team up researchers and practitioners is not new. To this end, conferences on business communication, professional communication, and document design are frequently held, often with frustrating results. Researchers are not able to descend from their ivory towers and organizations are not able to formulate their problems in a language research groups can understand. There is a gap between theory and practice. Researchers seem to forget that documents have to be used by real people in real situations, whereas practitioners often design documents as if no one knows how people interact with them.

To complicate matters, even within the academic community studies on document design are widely scattered. Studies of interest to document designers are conducted and published in such diverse disciplines as educational psychology, ergonomics, technical communication, social psychology, communication studies, marketing, health communication, business communication, and consumer research. Many of these academics are not even aware of the efforts made by other scholars. If scholars have trouble keeping track of all the relevant research, how can the interested layman or information manager be expected to profit from the results?

This journal aims to tackle both problems: to bridge the

gap between researchers and practitioners in the area of document design and to facilitate the exchange of information between academics in the field.

### Seven sins of document design research

As noted above, academic studies often fail to address the needs of practitioners. In our view, this failure usually involves one or more of the seven sins of document design research. These seven sins are related to seven steps in the research process:

- Formulating the problem
- Making the theoretical framework explicit
- Applying the framework to the present problem
- Operationalizing the theoretical notions
- Choosing a research method
- Testing the hypotheses
- Interpreting the results

We think that all researchers will recognize at least some of the following sins related to these steps.

#### 1. *Neglecting the real problem*

Communication managers often address research groups about ineffective documents (brochures, websites, advertorials, etc.). The research group then formulates a project aimed at improving the document, which is based on the assumption that language use is the root of the problem. However, during the project it turns out that the actual cause of the miscommunication is not the document itself, but rather the choice of document type or the diversity of the target group.

For instance, a car company in the process of reorganizing, issued a letter to its personnel about workload and career opportunities, not realizing that most employees

weren't used to written information and should have been addressed in a video. As another example, a pension fund produced a brochure on early retirement for all its clients; they did not realize, however, that young employees have completely different informational needs than older employees closer to retirement, and that the situation called for different brochures for different target groups.

Many research attempts fail because the researchers do not succeed in identifying the real problem behind the first and often superficial question.

#### 2. *Separating theory-bound and problem-driven research*

Communication managers are usually interested in optimizing one specific document. For instance, they want to make it 'better.' But what exactly does that mean? Should the document be more comprehensible, more persuasive, more instructive? Concretizing 'better' makes it possible to integrate problem-driven research with theory-bound research because, for each dimension of quality, theoretical frameworks have been proposed. As a result, a problem-driven study on a specific document in a specific context can further our theoretical knowledge. On the other hand, making the theoretical framework explicit helps communication managers assess whether the results of a particular study on a particular document are helpful or relevant to the kinds of documents they deal with.

In our experience, research that is exclusively problem-driven produces ad hoc answers with no room to generalize the results, and research that is exclusively theory-bound produces answers to questions that communication managers may not have asked. The field of document design therefore urgently needs to integrate theory-bound and problem-driven approaches.

### 3. *Disregarding the document's institutional context*

The advice of communication experts is often rejected by practitioners asking for help, with comments like: "This is not the way our company handles communication" or, "We don't use this kind of document." A nice example is the discussion inspired by the 'Clear language in law' movement. In terms of understandability, there is every reason to do research into clarifying legal language use. However, it is also necessary to consider the even more important function of legal jargon, namely, to provide all participants in a legal exchange with a judicially unambiguous and accurate handling of concepts. This means that, for example, it may be important to differentiate between terms like murder and homicide, or, more subtly, between government and administration.

In a discipline like discourse analysis, it goes without saying that a teacher asking a question is doing something different than a doctor asking a question: The teacher's role is to stimulate and control, the doctor's to diagnose. But for written communication, the institutional factors relevant to document design are not as easily recognized by researchers and communication managers. Nevertheless, they are equally important.

### 4. *Applying discourse concepts in an imprecise way*

In many publications on document design, concepts like coherence, perspectivized language, text representation, and attitude are used without much discussion. Let us consider the example of document quality again. How do we conduct research on the quality of a document without a clear definition of the term?

In our view, difficult concepts like this can be defined operationally. For the concept of quality, the measure of preservation of image may be useful. For example, a company document may be considered good quality if the image of the company is as positive after reading the document as it

was before. It is an even better document if the company's image, after reading it, is improved.

### 5. *Doing research in the laboratory to solve problems in the field*

Many practical problems cannot be resolved by doing desk research or testing documents in a laboratory setting. For instance, the persuasiveness of an advertisement cannot adequately be assessed by having freshmen choose between two versions based on anecdotal versus statistical evidence. What is needed to obtain convincing ecological validity is observation of real-life potential clients in a real-world buying situation. By contrast, field research often suffers from methodological weaknesses which may make it impossible to draw reliable conclusions about which factors explain a document's failure (or success). This indicates the need for complementary research methods to settle the current issues in document design.

Therefore, we expect approaches like experimental research, field testing, desk analysis, and corpus analysis to provide converging evidence for principles of document design.

### 6. *Selective use of material*

A very popular approach in document design research is to compare different versions of one document, e.g., an instructional document in a flow chart layout and the same information in full text. In many cases, the differences are very clear and well defined. In other cases, it is by no means obvious what has been manipulated in the text. For instance, a researcher interested in the effects of using passives may vary the use of active versus passive voice. But it cannot be assumed that nothing else is changed by this manipulation; a document which uses passives excessively is usually longer than its active voice counterpart. In a similar vein, assessing the effect of anecdotal versus statistical evidence on a

reader's attitude prompts questions like: What exactly is anecdotal evidence? How many figures are needed to classify evidence as statistical? Can the two ever overlap?

We therefore consider it a priority that, in this phase, researchers become more aware of their manipulation techniques and discuss the fuzzy edges of their operationalizations.

#### 7. Presenting results without consequences

In an academic setting, research is conducted to solve theoretical problems. In the field of communication, managers are more interested in the implementation of the results. Proving that captions function as advance organizers in flow charts and hence improve processing efficiency and ease of filling out a questionnaire is one thing, but how we transmit this knowledge to the communication manager in a specific institutional setting is another.

We think it is essential to the development of document design research that academics be explicit, not only about the theoretical consequences of their findings, but also about the implementation of the results extra muros.

#### Coping with the seven sins

We would like this journal to be a platform for discussing research as it relates to document design. We intend to focus on papers that avoid the seven sins mentioned above. Our review policy is to give special attention to the following criteria:

##### *Theoretical embedding*

We prefer papers that have a thorough theoretical grounding, and do more than name-drop favorite or popular publications. We want authors to reflect on the way they have developed their research questions and, because of the

journal's broad target group, special attention must be given to the accessibility of the information and the conceptual distinctions. Published papers will be preceded by an editorial note sketching their theoretical relevance.

##### *Practical relevance*

We want this journal to be of practical relevance to our audience. We expect our authors to thoroughly discuss the implications of their findings for the real-life functioning of documents. How can the professional in the field put these findings to use? What problems are solved by these results? To emphasize these preferences, each paper will open with an editorial comment on its practical relevance.

##### *Document as a basis*

The field of document design is very broad, spanning the various philosophical approaches to mass communication, to ideologically motivated analyses of institutional interaction. From this broad domain we want to select those contributions that focus on the document itself. We place great value on the explicit analyses of the document phenomena under consideration and the textual manipulations under investigation. We encourage researchers to give a convincing number of real-life examples.

##### *Document design as an interdiscipline*

Interdisciplinarity tops the current list of scientific buzzwords. Document design also requires an interdisciplinary approach. To make this more concrete, we will focus on the many different approaches to research traditions, methodologies, and types of papers. This enables the reader to find, in one issue, a state-of-the-art article grounded in one tradition as well as a programmatic statement about an up-and-coming paradigm. Underlying this selection are the needs of the broader target group.

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## Aims and scope

*Document Design* intends to be a platform for researchers and practitioners in organizational communication. The focus is on the internal and external communication of medium-sized to large, multinational corporations, governmental bodies, non-profit organizations, as well as media, health care, educational, and legal institutions.

*Document Design* features articles in which aspects of (electronic) discourse — written, spoken and visual — are combined with aspects of text quality (function, institutional setting, culture). Contributions should be problem driven, methodologically innovative, and focused on effectiveness of communication.

The journal is designed for information managers, researchers in discourse studies, text analysts, and communication specialists.

## Special sections

To accentuate our goal to bring together different disciplines from different traditions and countries, and to be a platform where theory meets practice, we are very proud to have found a number of Special Interest Editors from all over the world to cover the various needs of our audience.

### *Problems in the field*

This section was chosen to give our journal a fixed base in how documents really function or malfunction. In the first year, it is being handled by a typical representative of a professional communication company, Vergouwen-Overduin (Amsterdam, The Netherlands). The section is being supervised by Joep Jaspers and Daniël Janssen, to whom readers are encouraged to forward their problems.

### *E-mail interviews*

The ideas of leading communication managers have stimulated many research programs in the field of document design. We are very happy to have found Lawrie Hunter from Kochi University of Technology (Japan) to interview opinion leaders in the field.

### *New media*

One of the most confusing but dynamic developments in our field is the rapid growth of electronic communication. It is far from clear what kind of effect this new medium will have on the content and form of documents. Thea van der Geest (Technical University of Twente in the Netherlands) addresses the most important issues in this opaque field.

### *Research watch*

The more journals, the more time we need to select the relevant information. To help prevent a scientific infarct, we are devoting a special section to research published in neighbouring areas: in reading this journal, you will also be kept abreast of key publications in a large number of related publications. Elisabeth Le (University of Alberta in Canada) heads a group of research watchers who will keep you informed each issue through short summaries and sketches: Geert Jacobs and Luuk van Waes (UFSIA, University of Antwerp), Hans Hoeken (University of Nijmegen), and Wilbert Spooren (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam).

Needless to say, the editors welcome feedback and suggestions for improving the journal.

JAN RENKEMA, HANS HOEKEN  
and WILBERT SPOOREN