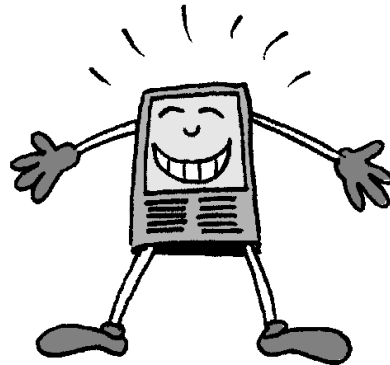# Get read

A guide to making reader-friendly publications

Les Robinson

newcitizen
B O O K S

Want to write and design a brochure,newsletter, booklet or manual?

This simple, illuminating booklet shows you how to make a publication which speaks to your audience in a language they'll really understand.

It contains:

■ An easy guide to planning and writing a 'reader friendly' publication.

■ A simplified guide to graphic design, especially for those starting their own desktop publishing.

■ A 'survivor's guide to dealing with printers' – essential for anyone who has to venture into these tricky waters.

'Fantastic stuff on publishing. I've been doing it "blind" for many months now, but you have enlightened me on the things everyone else seems to know about, except me. Thank you.'

– Indira Narayan, desktop publisher

THINK OF WORDS AS CEMENT ROBINSON.

IN WHICH CASE THIS SHAPELESS MASS REPRESENTS YOUR LATEST BROCHURE

Psst! Get Some tools!

newcitizen
BOOKS
practical tools for citizens

Contents

Being reader friendly

Organisations and groups routinely produce forests of newsletters, brochures, and booklets filled with important information.

But how much of this information is read and understood?

Many publications fail to communicate because they aren't relevant or interesting to their audience, because they are boring, or because they are incomprehensible or illegible.

This booklet is about how to make your publications interesting, relevant and readable.

The idea is to put yourself in the audience's place before you start writing your document and ask the most important question: 'Why should I read this?'

Starting with your audience's perceptions and needs in mind is the essence of being reader friendly.

Your readers are interested in their own lives and jobs. They are often busy, distracted, bored or tired. They have little use for your message unless it fits into their needs and concerns.

Paper is still the most important communication medium in our society, but it has to work harder to get and keep an audience's attention. This is a 'post-literate' generation – most people would rather talk to another human being or watch TV.

In fact, written publications have a lot to learn from television. TV is visual. It knows its audience. It makes few demands on viewers. It presents information in breakfast-cereal sized chunks. It is dramatic. It rewards its audience. Even at its most stupid it is good to look at.

This is the competition facing printed matter, but any publication can improve its effectiveness by understanding its readers and answering their needs in an interesting way.

Designing from the start

Most people think design is something graphic artists do after a publication is written. But for a publication to be effective, the content itself must be 'designed'. This means being crystal clear about the purpose of the publication (see opposite), finding out what the readers' interests, priorities and perceptions are and then structuring the publication to suit them.

For example your community organisation might think the Executive Director's report is the most important part of its newsletter. And yet what do your readers really want to know? Gossip and news, of course! You don't have to cut the EO's report, but the surest way to turn off your readers will be to put it on page one.

People will feel good about using your publication if they feel it is relevant to their needs, can easily grasp its structure and quickly find out what is relevant to them.

Know your purpose

The first and most important question you need to ask before start on your publication is:

'What is the publication supposed to do?'

Simply 'informing people' is rarely a very meaningful purpose.

Ask yourself, 'What do we want people to DO as a result of the information?' or, 'Which audience responses or actions can tell us we have been successful?'

For example, a government department wants to produce a booklet on environmentally-friendly shopping. Assuming a booklet is part of the answer to this problem (for example, as part of a larger campaign), the purpose of the booklet is to encourage shoppers to make different buying choices.

A booklet which simply discusses benefits to the environment will not achieve this purpose. It would be better to focus on the benefits to the shopper – like healthy eating, dollar savings, family safety, and increased leisure time – and to focus on overcoming practical barriers, like the problems of storing foods bought in bulk.

This approach is called 'audience-centred'.

To make your publication effective, you should think carefully about how to make it best fit your audience's wants, needs, and lifestyles.

Five styles of publication

Another way to think about purpose is in terms of WHAT you need to communicate. There are, generally speaking, at least five kinds of things you might want to communicate in a publication –

1) Facts

2) Values

3) Skills

4) Desires

5) Action requests.

Keep in mind that your publication may look, feel and read completely different depending which of these things you are trying to communicate!

1) Communicating facts

You may want to pass on important facts like policies, historic facts, statistics, allegations etc.

To communicate facts it's good to be succinct, with each fact listed as separate a chunk or point. Statistics can be rendered as graphs and tables. Maps and infographics can make facts much easier to digest. Captions should repeat and reinforce the most important facts. If possible, try to humanise your statistics;

for example, 240 football fields instead of 290 hectares.

2) Communicating values

To mobilise an audience you may need to explain why certain facts are important, or 'bring home' a situation so people can empathise with the human dimension.

The Ukraine Chernobyl is an ongoing human tragedy. For Vika Troschuk, the accident is taking everything she has.

Her husband was one of the drivers who responded when the alarm was first raised on 26 April 1986. By 1990 he was registered disabled after being diagnosed with nervous system deterioration caused by radiation. He died from cancers of the liver and spinal column in 1995.

For Vika, the pain continues. Her son, who did part of his military service in an area heavily contaminated by the Chernobyl explosion, is now also seriously ill – just one of the hundreds of thousands of people still suffering from radiation related diseases.[3]
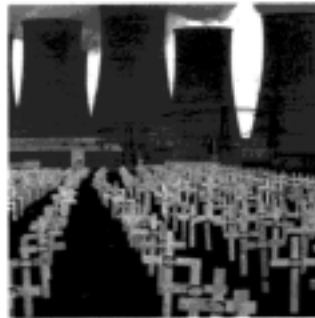
They say it can't hap

Stories, examples and case studies – especially reporting human passions – are the best way to humanise facts and evoke the values you believe are important.

NGOs, like Greenpeace, know the power of a human story – see the excerpt from a Greenpeace anti-nuclear 'action' brochure on the opposite page.

3) Communicating skills

When you want people to perform an action it's valuable to include 'how-to' illustrations or photos – even if the action is just making a phone call, answering a letter or clicking a website.

Illustrations and photos harness our human capacity for mimicry. They are instantly interpreted by the motor parts of the brain, and are much easier to comprehend than written words.

If your action is complex, make sure you include a step-by-step guide. Note that photos tend to be more credible than illustrations.

4) Communicating desires

Ah ... now we are in the business of marketing! To encourage people to want something – whether a product or a different future, you may need to prompt their imaginations.

People do want a just, cleaner, more

natural world, but for people to believe in that future and mobilise their energies, it's valuable to help them see that future a little more clearly.

So use photographs or illustrations to create desirable visions in which your audience can easily place themselves. Advertisers do this all the time – you don't buy a cigarette, you buy the sun dipping on a limpid evening as your Lamborgini sweeps down the Great Ocean Road etc.

Why should we let advertisers have a monopoly on the human imagination?

5) Communicating actions

Often a nice overall formula for an 'action' publication is: problem→ credible alternative→ audience action.

You'll need to use the above four kinds of communication to evoke the problem and the credible alternative.

Then, when you want people to join, march, write, call, give or visit, ask them very clearly, simply and prominently. Don't let the action request get lost in the fine print, and avoid complicated actions (eg, ask people to write to just one politician, not six).

Know your readers

A vital stage in designing a friendly publication is working out what kind of people your readers are and what they are likely to be interested in.

Answer these questions:

❏ What kinds of people are my readers?

❏ How busy are they?

❏ What is important to them?

❏ What are they lo

❏ What are their expectations?

❏ What are their needs?

❏ If it's for sale, why should they buy it?

Then put yourself in the readers' place.

Ask:

❏ What's in it for me?

❏ Why should I keep reading?

Note: It's a good idea to be a little cynical when picturing your reader, for example, a computer manual for a manager who has just been told her job is on the line, who is in a hurry to get results and has six other things to do before going home to feed the kids.

Deciding on a plan of contents

What things might your readers be looking for in your publication?

Once you have thought about your purpose and your audience(s) it's a good idea to brainstorm the things your readers might be looking for in your publication.

Make a list of the audience wants and needs you can reasonably expect to answer in your publication. Then prioritise the list from most to least interesting (from your readers' point of view) and use it when drawing up the contents of the publication. You may not have all the articles to suit the readers' needs, but at least you will be structuring things according to their agenda, not your own.

Remember that the readers' minds are focused on their lives and their jobs. They don't don't see things from your or your organisation's point of view; they just want the information that helps them – and they want to find it easily.

Stop being logical
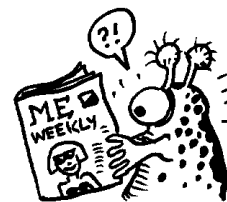
Put yourself in the readers' place.

Ask: 'Why should I read this?'

It's not good enough just to write about your subjects in the order which is logical to you. You know the subject, the readers do not. The readers' logic is the logic of learning. The presentation that makes sense to you may simply overwhelm the reader.

Often the reader's order of information is EXACTLY the opposite of a writer's! It's surprising how many boring articles can be made interesting simply by reversing the order of paragraphs, putting the last one first, and so on. That's because academic and technical writers are trained to start by setting out the evidence and proceeding step-by-step to a conclusion. But in journalism, the conclusion comes first!

Good popular writing always proceeds from the simple to the complex. A good way to match the readers' learning curve is to start in soft focus and gradually phase in more detail. Start by giving an overall word picture or some basic facts. Write interestingly and aim to create motivation. Then discuss your subject in a way that is relevant and interesting to

your readers. Complicated points can be introduced in stages.

Highly detailed information is often best given at the back of your publication, in reference chapters, where it won't be an obstacle to the reader.

One of the best ways to reward readers is with the spark of illumination. If you make points that are clear, simple and arresting you give readers the encouragement to continue.

Remember: People are not interested in you or your organisation – they are interested in their own lives and work. Your job is to understand the reader and highlight the things they will be especially interested in.

Make it chunky

Readers don't like to drown in oceans of information. Consider how you can break up your publication and articles into easily digestible chunks.
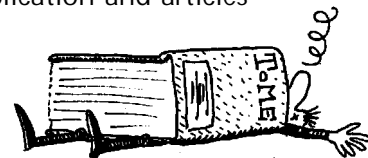
Why are news briefs and letters to the editor often the most read parts of a newspaper? It has to do with attention span.

Attention spans depend on readers' stress levels, available time, and busyness. What is a good article length for an intellectual journal will be completely unsuitable for a business newsletter or practical handbook. Consider how much time your readers have for your publication, then tailor the article or section sizes to suit. Often a range of sizes is appropriate.

Remember that your readership will usually decline in proportion to the length of your articles.

Remember that your readership will usually decline in proportion to the length of your articles. People just don't like to read long pieces unless they are especially interesting.

If you are writing a manual or handbook

for people in a hurry, it's a good idea to break long sections into lots of small modules, preferably with illustrations and plenty of graphic signposts to help people find what they need quickly.

Remember: We are all slow learners and people in a hurry are worse.

Two useful ways to 'chunkify' your publication:

Breakouts or 'pull quotes'

These are interesting quotes extracted from the article and emphasised in larger type in the middle of the text (like on the previous page). They give a 'taste' of the article and make refreshing graphic elements.

Boxed stories

Small articles or sections can be boxed for interest or emphasis, often with a light screen background. Use these to break up a page but try to avoid breaking up an article; that is, avoid interrupting the flow of reading.

Be interesting, be visual

'People don't read a magazine at first. They look at it.'
– Roger Black, designer
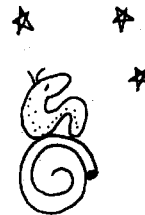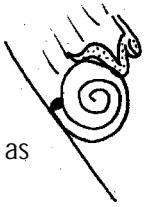
Think of your publication as giving an illuminating performance for the reader. Be a showperson. People don't read things that are boring.

Clarity, simplicity and a sense of humour are important in almost all publications. Just think – what styles of publications do you enjoy reading most?

Cartoons and photos are the best way to add interest to your publication.
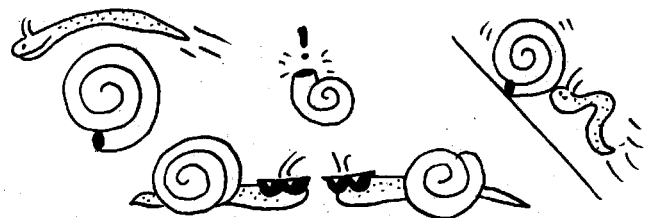
Even purely frivolous illustrations like these can be useful to set a tone and reward readers.

Cartoons and illustrations

Managers and administrators often treat humour like an enemy of the people. But think – what kinds of publication do you most enjoy reading?

No matter how serious your publication is, cartoons are still a great way to make it more approachable, human and interesting. The essence of a good cartoon is irreverence and 'risk'. Cartoons need not follow the editorial line. Once again, your managers may need some educating on this point.

Photos and captions

Photos are another great way to add interest to your publication. If there is one rule for the best use of photos it is 'the bigger the better'.

Keep the following hints in mind.

- Faces, emotion and action are the best subjects. Look for photos which are stories in their own right.

- The subject should be strong, inherently interesting and fill the photograph.

- Technically, photos should be of good contrast.

- Crop carefully, to direct the reader's attention.

- Always use captions. Don't just describe what is obvious. Use captions to enlarge on the content, draw attention to the article, to tease, to set moods, to ask questions. Be creative – address the audience. Readers expect captions. After headings, they are the most read parts of a publication. Skimming readers use captions to tell whether an article is worth reading.

PS. Set captions 'ragged' (see page 41) and in a different type style, for example, italic or smaller size.

Put your 'page furniture' to work

Only a small number of people will read your publication in full.

Most people just 'browse' – often very quickly – to find the bits that interest them. They use the 'page furniture' or signposts – like headings, pull quotes, opening paragraphs, subheadings and captions – to judge whether an article is worth reading more closely.

This means two things:

1) You should carefully write your signposts to be both interesting and suggestive, conveying enough information to suggest what the article is about.

2) It can be a good idea to pack valuable information into those same signposts – so even four-second grazers will get your meaning.

Keep these points in mind:

- Try to make each heading, sub-heading etc into an informative statement, as if it were a micro-summary of your message (study some newspaper headlines to see how to do it).

- Avoid content-free headings like 'introduction' or 'case study'.

- Avoid making your heading a question. For example, 'Why join a union?' is a meaningless and ambiguous statement – it could be replaced with a positive assertion like, 'Unions provide solid job protection for members'.

Editing – be brief, be simple

'Perfection then, is finally achieved, not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.'

– Antoine de St Exupéry

It is vital that your publication be edited by an objective person. Writers are often too close to their work to edit it effectively. They know their subject too closely to see it from the readers' perspective. They often become attached to their writing.

The editor stands between the writer and the reader. A good editor is someone who understands language and the needs and perspectives of the audience first, and the subject second.

If you don't already have an editor or proof reader, you can hire one.

Keep your language clean and succinct.

Remember that people prefer short, simple, easy things to long, complex, difficult things.

Easiness means making the choices seem few.

Shortness means finding the most

concise way of saying something. It also means letting the reader imply many of the qualifications (if's, but's, whereas's), that the writer thinks are really important, but which readers don't actually care about. Sometimes it means making what seem breathtakingly general statements. Sometimes it means wholesale excision. It almost always means replacing generalities with concrete words.

Look at this example, from a manuscript prepared for a children's service:

What is a Mobile Service?

Mobile Services provide programmes for a particular target group on a part-time basis at a number of venues. Most services transport equipment to one or two different locations on a day, weekly or on a fortnightly basis. They operate their programmes in halls, schools, parks, churches, community centres or other available venues.

This could be re-written as:

Bringing child's play to you

Mobile services bring toys, books and expert advice to the places where people live. They set up in halls, schools, parks and churches.

It may not be precisely correct to the

writer but it gets the message to the reader. That's what matters. You want to communicate an overall message first. Detailed information can be placed later when the reader is more ready to absorb it.

Once again, remember that the size of your readership usually declines with the length of your text. People don't have the time or interest to read long technical texts unless they are specially interested in the subject matter.

The hard part when editing is to maintain the overall structure in your head, and bend the text to it. This may mean brutally cutting lines or sections that sound great but don't really help inform the reader.

If you are editing regularly, it is a good idea to use standard proof-correction marks. They are listed in The Style Manual (available from the Ausinfo, the Australian Government publishing service).

Writing hints

- Communicate in specifics and concrete terms, rather than generalities and abstractions. Use word-pictures wherever possible.

- Beware of ambiguities. Your audience doesn't think like you; at least half of them will get the meaning you didn't expect.

- One way to write an idea clearly is to speak it. Everyone gets stuck in a grammatical quagmire from time to time. A good way out is to imagine an audience and to try to explain yourself to them verbally.

- The complexity of the book/article should not be greater than the readers' own needs. Build your writing on the readers' knowledge, not your own.

Avoid sexist language

Don't alienate your readers through thoughtless use of discriminatory language.

- Avoid 'man'-based words: eg, mankind (= humanity), chairman (= chairperson), ancient man (= ancient people), watchman (= guard), foreman (= supervisor).

- Avoid female diminutives: eg, conductress (= conductor), authoress (= author).

- Don't use 'he' for mixed sex groups: try s/he, she or he, one, you, they.

- Don't use Miss, Mrs, Mr: use full names instead.

- Avoid sexist stereotypes in text and graphics.

- Be aware also of language that discriminates against races, ethnic groups, nationalities, the overweight, the old, the disabled and against people not living in heterosexual nuclear families.

Editing checklist

- ❏ Write strong suggestive headings, subheadings, captions, opening paras and pull quotes.

- ❏ Could any items become boxed or subsidiary stories?

- ❏ Have the facts and phone numbers been checked?

- ❏ Do the figures add up?

- ❏ If the writing is about someone, has a comment been sought?

- ❏ If the article is critical, is there evidence to back it up?

- ❏ Have comments been attributed?

Sub-editing

- ❏ Keep sentences short.

- ❏ Keep paragraphs short.

- ❏ Active instead of passive words.

- ❏ Be concrete, use word-pictures, avoid abstract words.

- ❏ Avoid acronyms.

- ❏ Check for consistency in spelling, punctuation and capitalisation.

Pre-testing – your insurance policy

CAN'T YOU READ OR SOMETHING?
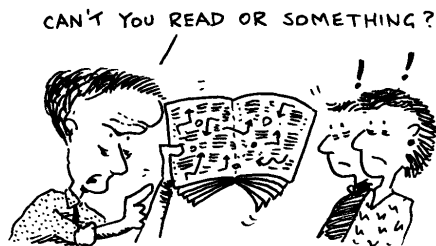
So, your draft publication is ready. You've lavished care and attention on it. But will it really communicate?

If it's a newsletter, you can probably take a risk, publish it, and iron out the bugs in the next edition. But most publications aren't like that. They cost a lot of money and you don't get a second chance.

So you need to do pre-testing. It's a vital part of the cycle of publishing.

Don't be intimidated by pre-testing. It can be simple or elaborate to suit your time, budget and funder's 'risk assurance' needs (although it always means more than showing your publication around the office).

Professionally recruited, facilitated and documented focus groups typically cost $3,500 per group of, say 8-12 randomly selected, carefully screened members of your chosen target audience.

Alternatively, you can organise your own informal group. Typically you'll find between three and 15 members of the audience. Sit down with them in a quiet room while they read the publication. Then ask them careful questions to explore how effectively your messages are communicated. You should always hold at least two focus groups, so that major conclusions can be corroborated.

Pre-testing should be carried out at the draft design stage, so the readers can comment on the typography, arrangement of articles, readability, use of visuals and overall impact.

Typical questions might include:

The front page/cover:

❑ What is this publication about?

❑ Can you tell who it is aimed at?

❑ Does it encourage you to read on?

❑ How do you feel about the imagery?

❑ Is the type legible?

The whole document:

❑ Which parts did you read first?

❑ Which parts did you find most/least interesting?

- ❑ Did you notice information about (subject)?

- ❑ Do you think it has an overall message?

- ❑ What action(s) does it want you to do?

- ❑ Are you any more likely to do the action(s)?

- ❑ Are the headings easy to read?

Individual articles/images:

- ❑ What is this article/image about?

- ❑ Did you read it? If not, why?

- ❑ What attracted you to it?

- ❑ Where did you stop reading it?

- ❑ What message do you think most readers would take away from it?

Hints for focus group facilitators

If your are running your own focus group, here are a few tips on facilitation:

- ❑ Compose a list of the questions you want to cover.

- ❑ Start by thanking the group, describe what will occur, and set out your role.

- ❑ Keep good notes or have a note taker.

- ❑ If you want to use a tape recorder, ask permission and specify that it will only be used for research purposes.

- ❑ Stay neutral.

- ❑ Encourage participants to get involved.

- ❑ Lessen the influence of dominant individuals and encourage the quiet ones.

- ❑ Be firm but not overbearing – don't dismiss any comments out of hand.

- ❑ Offer a reward, even if it's just tea and biscuits.

Graphic design

Graphic design is the process of taking your raw text, ideas, photos, drawings and turning them into finished 'artwork' ready for the printer.

Good graphic design makes a publication look interesting and accessible. It grasps and maintains the reader's attention, creates visual signposts and leads the reader through the publication according to the natural direction of reading (see next page).

Graphic design consists of layout (that is, making a rough design) and final artwork.

The easiest way to graphic design your publication is to employ a graphic designer (see page 42). But if you are doing it yourself, there are a few basic rules you'll need to know.

Some basic design rules

■ Be clean, be simple. Use the minimum variation in typefaces, column size, headings etc. necessary to maintain interest. The eye gets used to reading one typeface; using too many just creates work for the reader. (This booklet uses only one typeface.)

■ Think of the flow of reading. Grade the size of headings and articles to establish a natural flow of emphasis on each page, so the reader knows where to look next. There is nothing worse than a page crowded in screaming headlines and bitsy blocks of text all competing for attention.

■ Be interesting. Use cartoons, illustrations, pull quotes, boxes, sub-headings, and 'running headings' to create visual interest and depth. There is no greater turnoff than a page of solid text. Think like the reader; ask, 'Why should I read this page?'

■ Use white space. It's a great tool for controlling the appearance of a publication. Simplicity and white space are the secrets of good design. Generally use white space at the top of a page around headings and pictures.

■ Avoid any graphic elements that present the reader with obstacles to the flow of attention, difficult choices or visual confusion.

What is the natural direction of reading?

Left-to-right and top-to-bottom of course! The reader naturally starts at the top left-hand corner of a page and expects to finish at the bottom right-hand corner. The bottom left and top right corners are hence 'fallow corners' which are natural places for illustrations which won't impede the flow of reading.

A page which follows the natural 'gravity' of reading.

The elements of good design

What makes a good graphic design? Here are a few points to consider.

A good graphic design is:

1) Identifiable

A member of the intended audience should be able to immediately tell whether the publication is for him or her.

This is one of the roles of the cover (the other role is to get attention).

2) Interesting

Use illustrations, colour, graphic elements to create variety and interest, without detracting from readability.

3) Readable

Choose your fonts carefully to be easy on the eye. Avoid using compressed or ornamental fonts. Be careful with reversed or coloured type.

Placing graphics or patterns behind text is the most common cause of illegibility. Play it safe – don't do it unless you are very experienced.

4) Navigable

Ideally, readers should be able to grasp

the overall structure and quickly find what they want.

Headlines are the most important navigation tools – that's one reason to make them meaningful and positive.

Consider having an easy-to-use contents page. Clear 'running heads' (small headings on the top corners of pages) are also helpful.

5) Comprehensible

Think of graphic design as a delivery system for ideas. The design should never obscure or confuse the meaning of a publication.

Graphic design does not exist for its own sake – it's an applied art. No matter how good it looks, if a design fails to communicate, it fails.

How do you know whether your design communicates well? That's the role of pre-testing.

Choosing type

Here are a few general principles to help avoid reader-hostile typography.

■ Lower case is more readable than upper case.

Rapid reading is really pattern recognition. The mind reads quickly by recognising words and phrases by their shape. Lower case is very readable because the ascenders and descenders give each word a distinctive shape that is easy to recognize. UPPER CASE BY COMPARISON GIVES WORDS A PLAIN SQUARE OUTLINE. The mind must therefore read the individual letters to work out the word. This is much slower.

■ WHEN DOES UPPER CASE WORK?

Upper case has one real advantage over lower case. Upper case turns words into neat rectangular blocks. This makes them easy to build into ornamental titles and headlines. They are not as easy to read as lower case, but that doesn't matter, as here the looks count as much as the meaning, and you are not expecting people to read in bulk. Titles and headlines still work best when they can be taken in at a glance. Hence long

headlines or headlines over four lines high should be avoided.

■ Is **serif type** is more readable than sans serif type?

The serifs are the wiggles and caps on the letters you are reading now. Serifs provide a sub-conscious cue to help eye movement. They form linearities which help the eye to slide easily from left to right along each line. Hence they also make it harder for the eye to wander off a line or miss a line.

Sanserif is type without serifs, like the letters in this sentence.

Graphic designers have long debated the merits of sanserif versus serif type. The consensus seems to be that, while large bodies of serif type are easier on the eye, contemporary readers are used to seeing both types, so the decision is very much a matter of taste.

■ Coloured text

Text printed in coloured ink has low readability, especially when colours are bright. But a coloured heading is a good way to make an article attractive and helps grab the reader's attention.

■ **Bold** and Italic

Blocks of italic and bold text are a good way to create interest and emphasis in your text. Italic has slightly better readability than bold in large blocks of

text.

■ Maximum line length

There are three useful rules to help decide your column widths:

1 Lines should not exceed 12 words.

2 Lines should not have less than 20 characters or more than 60 characters (these lines have about 26 characters).

3 The maximum line length in ems should be no greater than three times the point size, that is, 11pt = max 33 ems.

These lines are about 16 ems long. n Justified is easier to read than ragged (see diagrams below)

■ Justified is easier to read than ragged

Ragged left

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Centred

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Ragged right

Rapid reading is really pattern recognition. The mind reads quickly by recognising words and phrases by their shape. Lower case is very readable because the ascenders and descenders give each word a distinctive shape that is easy to recognize. UPPER CASE BY COMPARISON GIVES WORDS A PLAIN SQUARE OUTLINE. The mind must therefore read the individual letters to work out the word. This is much slower.

Justified

Rapid reading is really pattern recognition. The mind reads quickly by recognising words and phrases by their shape. Lower case is very readable because the ascenders and descenders give each word a distinctive shape that is easy to recognize. UPPER CASE BY COMPARISON GIVES WORD A PLAIN SQUARE OUTLINE. The mind must therefore read the individual letters to work out the word. This is much slower.

Ragged left or centred text is very hard to read because the start of the lines is hard to pick up. Ragged right text is good to create a sense of informality. Justified text is the most read able form for large bodies of text.

■ Tinted backgrounds

Black text on a light tint is effective for emphasis.

■ Blocks of reversed text have low readability
But reversal works well for page furniture (running heads, page numbers) and major headings.

A survivor's guide to hiring graphic artists

A graphic artist is someone who takes your raw text, ideas, photos, drawings and turns them into finished 'artwork' ready for the printer. They may also be able to create or source illustrations or photographs for you.

Where to find one? Try asking similar publications or printers. When you meet one ask to see examples of his or her work. Make sure it suits your needs.

It's a good idea to get your own ideas about the 'look' you want by browsing through magazines and other publications.

Brief the graphic artist thoroughly, describe your audience, the type of 'look' you imagine, your constraints of time and money. Since they know more about graphic design and printing than you do, it's important to listen to their advice.

Get an estimate of the number of hours, and hence the cost, for your publication. Remember that this will usually be an under-estimate, especially since you are sure to be making last-minute corrections or changes. A private or 'freelance' graphic artist (charging $40-$80 per

hour) is much cheaper than an agency designer ($100-$200 per hour). It's important to agree about how extra time will be charged.

Graphic design has several stages. You will want to see roughs of what the artist intends. When you are satisfied with these the designer will go away and produce a draft design. When you give the OK the designer will make final art. It is essential to check this thoroughly. Then you 'sign off' and the job is sent to the printer, usually on a disc.

The more times you see the designer, the more control you will have over the publication, although you may drive up costs. Just remember to be tactful when discussing changes – they are, after all, artists.

A survivor's guide to printers

The first thing to remember about printers is that they are tradespeople. They know a lot about their kind of printing.

Discuss your needs. They can be very helpful and great sources of advice. Tap into their expertise, establish a working relationship, and learn what you can about the printing process. Be assertive, but not pushy.

The second thing is that printers aren't artists or editors. They are busy and over-worked and you can't expect them to exercise any discrimination or think for themselves about the subtleties of your publication. They've got enough to think about with the printing. They'll do what you tell them to, no more. That's why your instructions should be in writing.

Your instructions should be super-clear; write whatever is needed on each piece of artwork and again on a separate covering letter. Don't be ambiguous. If you are not sure, discuss it in detail with the printer. Don't be ashamed to show your ignorance – keep asking questions until you understand.

The third thing to remember about printers is that you are in a contractual relationship with them. Your instructions to them are part of your contract. That's another reason

why all instructions should be in writing. And keep a copy.

Choosing the right kind of printer

Always get three or more quotes from different printers. Prices can vary widely. Generally instant printers are cheaper for short print-runs and general printers cheaper for long print-runs. Screen-printers are only for very short print-runs.

Never send work to a printer without a quote in advance. Make sure it includes GST.

Different sorts of printers suit different types of jobs.

■ A print-run of over 2,000 or where photos or full-colour is required or where size is larger than A3 = use a general printer.

■ A print-run of 200 to 2,000, without photos, without full colour, with sizes A3 or less = use an instant printer (instant printers really come into their own when you have plain text documents with no tinted areas, with only line drawings and no link 'bleeding' off the edges of the page – then they can avoid metal plates, using cheaper paper plates instead).

■ A few hundred sheets of A4 = use a photocopier.

Instructing your printer

1. Discuss options with the printer (often a print rep will visit you).

2. Get a written quote.

3. Send the disc + instructions + printout of the artwork.

4. Receive a proof for checking. This is vital ... check it carefully. Usually film costs will have been incurred at this point, but making film changes is cheaper than reprinting a whole job!

5. Sign off the proof.

6. Receive the job.

Things to think about

❏ Dead-line for delivery

Make sure the printer knows your required delivery date. If things are on a tight schedule ring up the printer every couple of days just to keep them on their toes, so if an urgent job comes in they don't give your job a lower priority.

❏ Print-run, that is, how many you want

This is a complex question that depends on your distribution network and the time period you expect to distribute.

Hint: it's easy to over-estimate the numbers needed for short shelf-life publications and easy to under-estimate your needs for long shelf-life publications.

❏ Colours

Remember each colour requires an additional film, plate, ink change and run through the press. Make sure the number of colours is included in the quote. Does the artwork have large areas of black or colour? If so the printer will charge a little more for the extra ink.

❏ 'Stock', that is, type of paper

Let your printer show you samples of the types of paper you can choose from. Coated papers are more expensive but because the ink doesn't 'bleed' they are better for photographs. Uncoated or matt papers are suitable for newsletters. Ask your printer for advice.

Note: Paper is specified by weight as grams per square metre (gsm). Photocopy paper is usually 75-80 gsm, the cover of a paperback is often about 230 gsm.

❏ Folding, stapling, trimming

Make sure these are included in the quote and instructions, preferably with a sketch.

• Number of pages

Plan your publication size from the start. Because books and booklets are folded and trimmed out of large sheets of paper, the number of pages is almost always limited to muliples of 8, that is, eight, 16, 24, 32, ... It is possible to have an odd number but it might be more expensive to do so. Where the covers are on the same stock as the inside pages the publication is said to

be 'self-covering'. This is more economical. Where the cover stock is different it is printed separately and folded in at a later stage.

Leave enough time

To be safe, give printers advance warning of your job so they can book it into their printing schedule. Printing times vary according to the type of job.

Note: It can be impossible to get urgent printing in the six weeks before Christmas.

Instant printers: 3-4 days

General printers: 5-10 days

Book printers: up to 8 weeks

Checklist:

Printer instructions

- ❏ deadline
- ❏ delivery address
- ❏ print-run
- ❏ page size (often called the 'format' or 'trim')
- ❏ paper type and weight ('stock')
- ❏ folding, stapling, or perforating
- ❏ colours
- ❏ number of pages
- ❏ are the covers on a different paper or with extra inks?
- ❏ keep a copy of the print instructions – you'll need them in case of a dispute!

Green printing

Printing is far from an environmentally friendly activity.

Inks and solvents release huge amounts of volatile organic compounds (VOCs). These are toxic and form major ingredients in urban air pollution.

Plus there's all that paper!

A Melbourne graphic design company, Earth Design, has an informative and fascinating web site with succinct info on the environmental costs of printing, and alternatives, like soy-based inks.

http://www.earthdesign.com.au/enviro

Always ask your printer about recycled paper. There are plenty of varieties available. Recycled papers only slightly more expensive and most printers are happy to order them in. There is very little excuse these days for printing with non-recycled papers.

Useful books

The Style Manual - A Guide for Authors, Editors and Printers, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 4th edition, 1988. This is the publisher's 'bible' and essential for editors and designers. Available from the Australian Government Publishing Service bookshop in your capital city.

The Complete Plain Words, by Sir Ernest Gowers, Pelican, London, 2nd edition, 1973. This is the classic guide to words and how to use them. It has been reprinted 25 times since 1945.

The Elements of Style, by William S. Strunk and E. B. White, Macmillan, New York, 3rd edition, 1979. A famous tract full of rules and admonitions for good writing.

Communicating or Just Making Pretty Shapes, Colin Wheildon, Newspaper Advertising Bureau of Australia, 1984. This is a short but important study of the elements of good graphic design. A very important book for desktop publishers.