REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Dynamics in Document Design: Creating Text for Readers

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> *Dynamics in Document Design: Creating Text for Readers,* Karen
> Schriver, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997. 559 pages.

EVERY TEACHER AND PRACTITIONER OF TECHNICAL WRITING will benefit
from reading this authoritative book about document design: "the field
concerned with creating texts...that integrate words and pictures in ways
that help people to achieve their specific goals for using texts at home,
school, or work" (p. 10). What struck me most about this remarkable book
are its very wide scope, its remarkably broad research base, its very rich
analyses of documents that exemplify various aspects of document design,
and its integrity of vision. Most parts of the book converge on Schriver's
thesis of the primacy of the reader in all document design decisions and on
her conviction, based on experimental evidence, that feedback from the
reader will improve document design.

The breadth of subject matter is at first almost forbidding. This book
provides a critical history of document design, a timeline placing key events
in document design in various other contexts, a critical review of several
approaches to audience analysis, an analysis of how readers respond to
poorly designed documents and products, a comprehensive discussion of
typography and space, a critical analysis of the interplay of words and
illustrations, and a demonstration, finally, that good writing and good
graphic design do matter to readers. The book's treatment of this wide
range of subjects is always comprehensive, sometimes perhaps to a fault.

The 800-item bibliography is one indication of the breadth and depth
of the research base, but it does not by itself show that Schriver always
approaches the literature critically and integrates it into a "state of the art"
overview. If she disagrees with researchers, she does not hesitate to be blunt:

"For example, some authors have cautioned document designers to avoid asymmetrical layouts, claiming that symmetrical organizations are intrinsically better. This is nonsense" (p. 325). I was also particularly struck by the thoroughness and audience-friendly tone of Schriver's marginal annotations, as in the following example: "For the readers of this book who are not familiar with these methods for evaluating text, I recommend reading the sources mentioned in footnote 12" (p. 169).

Another important aspect of the research base is Schriver's own empirical research. Nearly one-third of the book is taken up with full accounts of Schriver's studies in document design, usually using think-aloud reading protocols, in which readers report their thinking as they read text or illustrations, as in the following example: "I don't understand from the two lines who are we comparing here" (p. 305). These studies are very interesting and very clearly presented, and their results are well integrated with the argument of the text. Admirers of Schriver's work will be particularly pleased to find it collected in a single volume.

The text is enriched with more than 100 illustrations of documents and parts of documents, which are then analysed in detail. While most of the illustrations are very well placed and perfectly legible, a few are either very difficult to read or even illegible because of the amount of reduction needed to allow the illustrated document to be placed near the text section where it is discussed.

Dynamics in Document Design is a very personal book with a strong sense of the author's vision and voice. Schriver's voice enters in a variety of ways to create a persona that is open, honest, charming, intelligent, — and decisive. Occasionally, her critical commentary is quite vehement, as in the following editorialising sidenote about academic publishing houses that produce texts with rivers and excessive hyphenation: "Such ghastly typographic practices by organizations that should set the standards for publishing erode their own reputations and do their authors a disservice" (p. 271). Such candor is refreshing. What I am less certain about are the shifts to informality that may distract some readers: "Moreover, this process makes editing cumbersome. What a pain!" (p. 271). Readers who object to this will probably also object to Schriver's free use of "hassle" and "stuff."

The book consists of three parts. Part One, "Situating Document Design," consists of a very brief chapter that provides a broad definition of

document design, and a very long chapter, which provides a 100-page critical history of document design and a 40-page table with its own 300 footnotes, "A Timeline of Document Design 1990-1995." This table is an amazing resource displaying concurrent developments over nearly a century in the following five contexts that influenced document design: education and practice in writing and rhetoric; professional development; education and practice in graphic design; science, technology, and environment; and society and consumerism. Here one can discover that 1914 brought not only the First World War, but also the invention of the mechanical pencil, the founding of the Speech Communication Association of America, and the development of a "report writing" course at the University of Michigan. This very rich chapter could very well have been a separate book.

The four chapters (three to six) in Part Two, "Observing Readers in Action," are clearly the core of the book. The first chapter begins with a critical discussion of three kinds of audience analysis: what Schriver calls classification-driven audience analysis (for example Houp and Pearsall), intuition-driven analysis (for example Ede and Lunsford), and feedback-driven audience analysis. Clearly, Schriver advocates the feedback-driven audience analysis, for, as she so eloquently puts it: "document designers can classify or imagine their audience and never once think of someone tripping over sentences" (p. 162). The bulk of the chapter is a detailed report of Schriver's study of the design of drug literature. The next chapter presents two more of Schriver's studies: (1) the "blame" study, which shows that readers tend to blame themselves when instruction guides mislead them, and (2) a very detailed study of Schriver and Hayes trying to put together a VCR.

Chapter Five, at a little over 100 pages, could also have been a separate book on how to use typography and space to meet the reader's needs. This chapter includes an extremely thorough discussion of the details of typefaces and leading and how these are related to legibility, a critique of the research on typography, a report of a study investigating how a document's genre (manual, letter, tax form, story) affects which typeface readers prefer, a discussion of how Gestalt principles can be used to understand readers' interpretations of spatial cues, and suggestions on how to use the dynamic interaction of vertical and horizontal space in text. There is also a 10-page heuristic for constructing grids, as well as a full discussion of the design

decisions made for *Dynamics in Document Design.* An outstanding characteristic of this chapter is the more than 40 illustrations of documents, many of which are discussed fully.

Chapter Six discusses how to integrate words and pictures so as to meet readers' needs. It includes reports of three studies: (1) a study of how people search for answers to computing problems, (2) a student's study of reading on the Web, and (3) a study of how a poster was interpreted.

Part Three, "Responding to Readers' Needs,"a single chapter, advocates "protocol-aided audience modeling (PAM)," and protocol-aided revision, whose purpose is to "enable writers to employ direct feedback from readers to guide revision activity" (p. 474). PAM is a teaching method Schriver has developed in which designers first identify the problems they think the prose or graphics of a document will create for the intended audience, then they read a transcript of a think-aloud protocol for that document from a member of the intended audience, and finally with the help of this protocol, they again identify the problems. The chapter includes a study which showed that "Students taught by this method significantly increased their ability to diagnose readers' problems as compared to students taught by traditional methods" (p. 474). Readers are finally told that many of the sample documents discussed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six were part of a larger study "to assess whether good writing and good graphic design actually matter to readers" (p. 444).

There are also three appendices. Appendix A lists over 40 journals of interest to document designers, including *Technostyle*. Appendix B explains the uses of some common symbols that document designers may use in formatting body text, itemized lists, and quoted material. Appendix C provides guidelines for designing online documents.

It is very difficult to criticize such a dauntingly comprehensive and in almost every way wonderful book. Ironically, the only reservation I have is that perhaps this book does not do quite as much as it might to meet its audience's needs. At the page level the design is outstanding, and as we see from the analysis of the book's design in Chapter Five, the variables have been very carefully and expertly considered. But can the same be said about the larger components of design, those that extend beyond the page? One obstacle for the reader (and yet also a feature that gives the book its special flavour) is the fact that ultimately this book is a mosaic of genres: some parts are like research articles, some like encyclopedia entries, some like guidebooks or textbooks, and some like histories. How, then, is the book

to be read and used? What kinds of think-aloud protocols might the readers of this book produce?

Other possible obstacles are some very long chapters (two, five, and six) and some problems with headings. In Chapters Five and Six there is a troublesome system of "sections" and other headings. Although the introduction to each chapter does indicate what is found in each of the sections, this only helps on the first reading; when one returns to look for a particular bit of information, "Section Two," without any other title, does not help me anticipate what I will find in that section. The other linked problem is that since "Section Two" as well as the headings it dominates are set in the same size of type, the hierarchy of headings is obscured. Finally, I found some extremely long second-order headings very difficult to process. Consider, for example, "A Challenge for the Rhetorical Approach: Making an Impact on Workplace Thinking about Writing and Design" (p. 75), or "Exploring Document Designers' Feelings about Writing and Visualizing Drug Education Literature: The Dynamics of Action and Constraint" (p. 193).

These very minor reservations aside, though, *Dynamics in Document Design* is certainly an outstanding contribution to the literature of document design. As I suggested earlier, I think this book is actually at least three books about document design in one cover—a history of document design, a guide to the use of typography and space, a compendium of Schriver's protocol-based research—and any one of them is certainly worth the price of the volume. There is no doubt it will enrich our understanding of document design and many of us will be citing it in our research and in our classes for many years to come.