

## What Editors Should Know about Information Design

**Speaker:**

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Philippa Benson opened the session by defining information design as the process of identifying and manipulating features of visible language in a way that is useful for readers. The elements that anchor information design include textual elements, spatial elements, and graphic elements, such as diagrams, drawings, illustrations, bullets, and icons. This session focused on the first two elements exclusively. As a multidisciplinary concern, information design involves several specialized fields of study: human factors, typography, psycholinguistics, cognitive and social psychology, reading comprehension, instructional design, rhetoric, and composition.

The process of designing information should be collaborative, with authors, editors, graphic designers, and Web managers all contributing, Benson said. Colleagues should make a point of meeting regularly to talk about design and should work through varied perspectives.

Editors' role in information design should be to advocate for readers. They should consult people who know the technology and process of designing information but keep readers' needs foremost in mind. "Think like your readers", Benson urged; study your readers and discover how they actually use your text. What do they come to your publication to do? What do they want? Where do they look for the information they need? Assumptions can be off target, she cautioned. A readership study, perhaps by a graduate student in information design, can provide valuable insight.

Effective information design helps readers achieve many of their purposes in reading. These include identifying main points, discerning the overall structure of text, deciding what to read, searching text, recalling information learned previously, and learning new information. Good design also complements readers' behavioral strategies such as annotating text, highlighting text, and cross-referencing material.

Benson provided a packet of examples to support her point that information design has an immediate impact on readers, and she offered the following specific observations:

- A ragged right margin facilitates skimming.
- Too much text on a page can hinder readers' ability to remember and use

information.

- Serif type is easier for poor readers to read.
- White space between columns and around paragraphs increases legibility.
- Line length can affect reading speed.
- Lists, boxed information, and color can be useful tools for helping readers "chunk" information and identify key points.

Among guidebooks on information design, Benson recommends *Technical Communication* by Rebecca Burnett and *Dynamics in Document Design* by Karen Schriver. Other excellent resources on information design can be found through the Web sites of the Society for Technical Communication and the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing. (Note that "technical" communication refers to all kinds of communication about technical topics, including the natural and biomedical sciences.)

In closing, Benson offered the following "meta-guidelines" or working premises for information design: Base designs on your readers' needs, expectations, purposes, and situations; collaborate with designers and others involved in the publication process, whether print or online; and minimize the ratio of ink to information. In other words, provide the most information for the least ink, for example, by reducing the use of boldface, capital letters, and italics. 