Beyond Language: The Grammar of Document Design

As teachers of writing, we know that choices matter: the more choices we can give our students, the better their writing will be—and the better writers they’ll become. Many of us design our courses as writing workshops, so that students make choices about the genres they compose in. We structure writing assignments so that students make choices about topics and organization. We teach students to make choices about sentence structure, syntax, dictionary, and style. We resist teaching models such as five-paragraph themes and so-called power writing, which micromanage decisions and deprive students of the opportunity to learn by making authentic choices about their writing. Choices matter for student writers.

In our last column, we emphasized how professional writing instruction can prompt student writers to make genre choices in context. This time, we focus on another set of choices for students learning about professional writing: document design decisions, including choices about page layout, fonts, color, and the like. We can hear some of you objecting already. “Design?” you ask. “What does that have to do with teaching English? I’m a language arts teacher, not an art teacher!” We understand the skepticism, because you raise an issue that we at one time had to work through ourselves. But hear us out as we explain why design matters to your students and why design is within our purview as English teachers.

Design Matters in the English Language Arts Classroom

Design matters to student writers because in reality, student writers already make design decisions all the time. It’s true that for academic writing, most students simply default to the design templates imposed on them by teachers (usually some variation on the theme of one-inch margins; double-spaced text in a plain, black, twelve-point font; name, date, and course in the top corner; centered title; etc.). But we all know students who break teachers’ design rules, whether to express their personality in a curled or daggered font or to give the appearance of having met a length requirement by playing with margins, fonts, and spacing. These choices have consequences, for better or for worse.

Teen writers also experiment with design as they write documents that are important to their lives within and beyond school—in everyday texts such as notes to teachers, work supervisors, and parents, as well as in special occasion writing such as college application essays, flyers promoting concerts and events, materials for clubs and student council, fundraising letters, and more. Some of the design choices students make in these writings are high-stakes decisions. For example, in their everyday writing, teens need to understand that adults might read a note that is written or typed entirely in capital letters and assume, based on that design choice, that the writer was overly hasty or even “shouting” in anger. Design also matters in gatekeeping situations such as applications for college and for jobs. When young people submit résumés to apply for jobs, they want their writing noticed, and in a positive way. A blasé or cluttered design may result in potential employers skimming through the résumé and overlooking important information about the applicant’s qualifications; a design that calls attention to itself rather than the content (perhaps by being too “cute” or unconventional) may be a distraction and convey the mes-
Language must also become expert in every aspect of how words are composed, delivered, and read, including design. As concepts of literacy evolve, and the possibilities for expressing literacy seem to continuously advance, so must our concept of what we teach about writing. We neglect a crucial aspect of educating student writers if we simply consider design a lower order concern, or an issue that can be solved by templates.

The Grammar of Design

Knowing that we need to teach document design is one thing; knowing how to teach it is another. Good instruction in design has an important parallel to good teaching about the textual aspects of writing: it helps writers to attend to the rhetorical scene (genre, audience, purpose, and situation) while also teaching them to make the practical decisions, big and small, that bring their rhetorical view of the writing task to life. We could say that good writing instruction offers writers both a rhetoric and a grammar: a way of seeing the big picture while also working out the details. We wrote at length in our last column about how to help writers think rhetorically about genre, audience, purpose, and situation, so we won’t belabor that point here. Instead, our attention is on expanding the idea of what it means to teach grammar in the writing class.

We often think of grammar in terms of words, sentences, and paragraphs. We understand grammar as the rules and conventions (and explanations thereof) that enable all of these language components to function together systematically and creatively. In addition to teaching the rules and conventions of language, we can also teach rules and conventions for how language is displayed on the page and screen. In short, we can teach the grammar of design.

This idea is not so new-fangled as it might seem; it actually has roots in well-established approaches to grammar. In his classic book for teachers, Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing, Harry Noden argues that grammar contains the “brushstrokes” of writing. Just as an artist uses skills, rules, and the knowledge of when to break or bend rules for effect, so do writers have the ability to do the same with text (Noden 1). And, we would add, the reverse is also true: Just as the text in writing is subject to rules, techniques, and rhetorical decisions, so is page design. The look of a page, the visual grammar, requires the same types of rhetorical, writerly decisions that the writer makes when producing, revising, and polishing writing.

A Visual Grammar Primer for Teachers

Whether we teach the grammar of language or of design, we don’t teach new concepts for their own sake, as knowledge that students can show off in the vacuum of a test. Rather, we teach with practical goals in mind. When we introduce new terms, we do so in order that we and our students can share a common vocabulary that allows us to describe what we notice in the texts we work with as readers and writers.

In teaching design grammar, that common vocabulary can start with a very short list. Students can
quickly understand a great deal about design if they notice that writers’ choices are in large part tied to these four techniques:

- **Contrast**: distinctions in size, shape, color, style, position, etc.
- **Repetition**: recurrences or similarities in size, shape, color, style, position, etc.
- **Alignment**: placement of elements so that their borders or centers create a line on the page
- **Proximity**: placement of elements near to one another

The CRAP acronym, which we borrow from Saul Greenberg (who in turn borrowed the principles from *The Non-Designer’s Design Book* by Robin Williams [13]) never fails to get students’ attention. We could scramble the word order, but this version is memorable for students—not only because it falls outside of what is usually accepted as classroom language, but also because it relies on punning to make a point: “If you don’t want your writing to look awful, you have to learn to manage your contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity.” The goal is for students to understand how these elements can be controlled to draw readers’ attention to particular aspects of the writing.

One of the interesting things in teaching and learning about design grammar is realizing just how endemic it is in all communication. Students have told us that, because they learned design grammar, they can never again look at another billboard (or flyer, bumper sticker, book cover, sign, menu, or advertisement) without thinking about the authors’ design choices and what they mean for readers.

Document design is an important element even in genres we wouldn’t normally consider to be visually oriented. Take, for example, how *English Journal* uses these principles—all conscious rhetorical decisions by editor Ken Lindblom and the *EJ* staff to use visual grammar to reach readers:

- **Contrast**: The body of the article is printed in an unenhanced serif font, but pull-out quotes use a boldfaced sans-serif font and are set off with a vertical line. This contrast for the pull-outs emphasizes key ideas and creates eye-catching visual elements that grab the attention of casual readers.

- **Repetition**: The same sans-serif font used for the pull-out quotes is also used (though in a variety of contrasting sizes) for the author’s name and affiliation, subtitles, and page titles.

- **Alignment**: The articles use a standard two- or three-column design that is full-justified, with text filling the entire column. This creates a tidiness in the text that mirrors that of a newspaper.

- **Proximity**: The title is separated from other elements and creates emphasis and internal unity—focusing attention solely on the title.

Writers also need to know to break the rules for effect. Much as we teach our students to rhetorically employ the use of fragments, run-ons, or other nonstandard textual elements to add effect to their writing, so can they create effect with visual grammar. Even in *English Journal*, which employs a relatively conservative design, we can see some visual principles broken for effect. Most notable of these is how the pull-out quotes in feature articles break the alignment and jut into the margins. Another is how the author’s name, the article title, and the summary are indented to the left and then left justified. Both of these choices add effect through contrast and give the journal a slight avant-garde look. Taken all together, the design choices for *EJ* give the journal a sense of unity—a professional design that shows it is a journal by professionals, for professionals. At the same time, in contrast to a medical journal, it has a visual accessibility and friendliness to it that correspond to the values of our profession.

Yes, visual grammar does matter and can have a great effect not only on what our text says but also how the messages are perceived.

### Teaching Visual Grammar to Students

These design choices are not unlike the types of choices we make when we decide to use a semicolon, or a comma, or any other textual element in our writing that adds effect. The teaching of page design and visual grammar—as a rhetorical skill—isn’t much different from any other skill we typically teach our students. We still teach
students to guide their writing to a specific audience, within specific genres and purposes. We are just introducing a new tool—a visual “brush stroke” for our students to add to their writing repertoire.

When teaching visual grammar, we follow the same types of processes we use with other writing skills. For example:

- **Modeling:** We examine multiple examples of visual designs—both within and across genres. In Jonathan’s college developmental writing classes, his students begin the semester with a flyer analysis project. Their first task is to collect both good and bad examples of organizational recruitment flyers from around campus. Without yet knowing the elements of CRAP, students analyze what traits make them effective or ineffective, particularly in relation to the audiences and purposes of the flyers. This becomes an entryway not only into design but also into learning about the rhetorical nature of all writing.

- **Guided Practice:** In her ugly syllabus project, Leah’s students begin with an unformatted set of information for a course syllabus. Using their knowledge as experienced readers and consumers of syllabi, they design and create a version of how the syllabus should look. In doing so, they make rhetorical decisions about design and consider how that design affects the ability of the reader to access information appropriately—while also becoming familiar with the contents of the syllabus.

- **Reflection:** We have students create reflective pieces on how their design decisions reflect their rhetorical understanding. In Jonathan’s classes, students write a fictional memo or email back to the flyer’s creators, with an improved version attached, describing how the new version is more appropriate for the purpose and context of the flyer. Leah has a contest where students argue for and vote on the best design for the new syllabus and has students use rhetorical principles as criteria. Both make the rhetorical nature of the design grammar visible and meaningful.

In this column, we’ve offered an introduction to the ideas of page design—a visual grammar. We hope this inspires you to continue to use models, guided practice, and reflection to expand the opportunities for writing and analysis for you and your students. If you already use elements of visual grammar in your classrooms, or find yourself inspired to try something new, focusing on page design, we’d love to hear from you. Please drop us a line at lzuidema@dordt.edu or jbush@wmich.edu.

**Works Cited**


This is one of our favorite books on page design. Not only is it easy to read and well organized, but, just as its title suggests, it is written as a guide for non-designers. Teachers will find it extremely useful as a resource, not only for themselves but for their students, too. Williams also has an accompanying Web-design book.

This college first-year writing text is an excellent resource for teachers at all levels. The assignments in it can be translated into effective high school projects. The focus on advocacy gives a purpose for design writing.

**RESOURCES ON TEACHING VISUAL GRAMMAR**


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