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Guest Editorial



BY WHITNEY QUESENBERRY, *Webmaster, STC Usability SIG, and Senior Member, Philadelphia Metro Chapter*

The Importance of Document Design

One definition of communication is “the transfer of information from one location to another so that meaning is understood.” In other words, communication is what happens when one person connects to another to share information.

It’s easy to get caught up in our work as communicators and forget that the real goal of technical communication is to make these connections. Karen Schriver’s definition of document design as “the field concerned with creating texts (broadly defined) that integrate words and pictures in ways that help people to achieve their specific goals for using texts at home, school or work” (from *Dynamics in Document Design*, Wiley, 1997) puts the user right in the center of the picture. As important as our tools, design, and editorial techniques are, they are only a means to an end: connecting someone who has information with someone who needs it. And sharing information is much easier when you understand and work from the perspective of the reader.

Schriver’s definition also reminds us that readers use our documents to reach specific goals. It echoes many of the definitions of usability. For example, in *A Practical Guide to Usability Testing* (Intellect Books, 1999), Janice C. (Ginny) Redish and Joseph S. Dumas say that “usability means that the people who use the product can do so quickly and easily to accomplish their own tasks.”

The articles in this issue look at different aspects of document design: words, pictures, and people. Two look at specific groups of users and how we

can meet them on their own terms, to be sure that they can use our communication effectively. Lory Hawkes considers how to design Web sites that are more responsive to people with disabilities; Kathryn Summers and Michael Summers focus on how to make the Web a more comfortable place for people with lower literacy.

Patrick Hoffman and co-authors Tom Tullis and Stan Fleischman each consider the visual language of communication. What, for example, makes it easier for someone to read a large table of detailed data? If your documents or Web sites include this sort of information, you know how difficult this task is. Another difficult task is reading complex medical information.

Finally, Ginny Redish challenges some conventional writers’ wisdom about using words. Her article urges us to think about how people read technical communication, not just how we have been taught to write. Letting go of our own notions about what makes good writing may be the real test of our commitment to excellent document design and usability.

Each of the articles focuses on readers in some way, reminding us that they are the reason we create. Computer scientists and software designers talk about the user interface, or the human-computer interface, as they look at how we use computer tools to meet our goals. Communication, especially technical communication, may use computers, Web sites, wireless devices, or even paper, but at the core it is something quite elegant and simple: the human-to-human interface. ❶