Matching documents to user needs

Outline of today’s lecture

1. Thinking about document content
2. Thinking about document format
3. An example: reports
4. The broader question of accessibility

Content/format/medium/context

All of these elements are crucial when designing documents for others to use, in an online environment as much as anywhere else.
Thinking about content

- State your purpose explicitly
- Use headings as ‘signposts, cues’
- ‘Refer to the topic frequently’
- ‘Cater for your readers’ anticipated reading style.’
- Use ‘consistent terminology’
- Use jargon only with specialised readership
- ‘When writing for non-specialists, use familiar concepts to explain unfamiliar ones.’

(Putnis & Petelin 1999: 322)

Nielsen on content

Jakob Nielsen writes a regular online column about the usability of web sites.

useit.com

One of his articles from 2003 has argued that:

‘Saying less often communicates more’

Content checklist

- Who are the intended audiences?
- What writing style and vocabulary is appropriate?
- Should the content be provided in more than one language?
- On the other hand, are we insulting our users’ intelligence?
Bryce Allen (1996) has suggested that we need to think about how others make use of documents in various circumstances.

- For example, some people may choose to scan a document, while others may seek to evaluate it with care.
- The format we choose for our documents can help or hinder how others use them.

‘Scanning’ can carry a variety of connotations, from a hasty glance to a close but quick exploration.

Bryce Allen (1996: 196) argues that when scanning, users depend upon

‘their existing knowledge of a topic and of the index terms describing the topic … [as well as] … their understanding of data formats’

Those who produce documents for other users must take this into account.
Nielsen on writing web documents

‘Web pages have to employ scannable text, using

• highlighted keywords (hypertext links serve as one form of highlighting; typeface variations and color are others)
• meaningful sub-headings (not ‘clever’ ones)
• bulleted lists

(Nielsen 1997)

Evaluating documents

Scanning a document is often not enough. We usually need to look more closely
Evaluating documents

That way, we can determine:

‘Is this information good or bad, useful or useless?’

(Allen 1996: 197)

Those who produce documents for other users must also take this into account.

How dual coding can help

Paivio (cited in Allen 1996) argues that we learn and remember information through:

> propositions set out in text

> images

In certain circumstances, using both of these can greatly aid our use of information.

Which medium?

- More and more today, basic choices are made about presenting documents on paper as against electronic media.

- Each medium has particular
  - advantages and
  - disadvantages
An example: reports

Even within the same organisation, different users may need information presented to them in different report formats.

An example: reports

A report format that is appropriate for one department, may be
– too long
– too detailed
– too irrelevant in its detail
– too late
– no longer needed
for another department

An example: reports

“Our management information system is really good at giving us data. It should be renamed the Management Data System. The people there never seem to have the time to turn the data into information.”

(S. McKinnon & Bruns 1992: 157)
An example: reports

‘I get four to five inches of paper a day ... What I would like is a two- to three-page summary. Even the summary presently prepared is too detailed for my needs.’

(S. McKinnon & Bruns 1992: 127)

An example: reports

‘Information from personal sources can be believed and acted on with confidence by the recipient because of the special relationship he or she has with the sender.’

(S. McKinnon & Bruns 1992: 126)

And if the report was in PDF?

‘Portable Document Format (PDF) is the de facto standard for the secure and reliable distribution and exchange of electronic documents and forms around the world, with a ten-year track record. PDF is a universal file format that preserves the fonts, images, graphics, and layout of any source document, regardless of the application and platform used to create it.’

And if the report was in PDF?

‘PDF is great for one thing and one thing only: printing documents. Paper is superior to computer screens in many ways, and users often prefer to print documents that are too long to easily read online ...

And if the report was in PDF?

‘For online reading, however, PDF is the monster from the Black Lagoon. It puts its clammy hands all over people with a cruel grip that doesn’t let go.’

(Nielsen 2003a)

Accessibility

‘Access to information may be the most critical requirement of all people in their everyday lives’

(Goggin 1982: 4)

Today, more and more such information is available online - and sometimes only online
The digital divide

How many people are online globally?
Here's one educated guess from NUA (at May 2002):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Online Users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td>580.78 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>6.31 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia/Pacific</td>
<td>167.76 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>185.83 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>5.12 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA &amp; Canada</td>
<td>182.67 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>32.99 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adult Internet Access in Australia, 2000 - ABS

- 18-24: 74%
- 55+: 19%
- Employed: 63%
- Not Employed: 25%
- $40,000+: 75%
- $0-$39,999: 41%

Disability in Australia

In 1998, it was estimated that 19.3% of the Australian population had a disability
As a consequence, nearly all (87%) faced problems performing certain tasks associated with daily living

Further reading


