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Practicing safe visual rhetoric on the World Wide Web

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Abstract

I examine when and why a "safe" approach to visual design for Web pages is attractive to writers and writing teachers. I consider typical reasons for choosing a "safe" approach to designing the visual dimensions of Web pages, traditional sources in print graphics and writing for safe advice about visual design, and design challenges posed by issues of a Web design's stability and navigation. I then turn to the fact that the additional media included in a Web site bring more design traditions into consideration. I discuss the differing concerns and aims that arise from visual design traditions that focus on prose graphics versus those that focus on theatrical graphics. Keeping these differences in mind, I end with a consideration of the forces shaping visual rhetoric on the Web. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Authors often garb discussions of change in the most innocuous of claims. Elsewhere I have argued that early proponents of computers and writing accomplished such a clothing when they portrayed the computers used in writing classrooms as "facilitators" or "assistants" or "tools" (Sullivan, 1991). Did any of us really believe that composing at the screen did not qualitatively alter writers' composing processes? Even though I too used facilitator language at that time, and genuinely wanted to believe in it, deep down I also understood at the very least that changes in the writing process introduced by these new technologies were profound. A student of Walter Ong, I could hardly be his intellectual offspring and not hold that media transformations inhabit the ways in which we work.

Today is not much different from then. We are confronted with writing technologies that

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reorganize the possible connections our texts can make with pictures, animations, video, and audio. This panoply of multimedia options tempts us to claim that these technologies offer additions rather than teleological shifts and thus to teach (and take) the safe route. Indeed, if we examine much of the practical discussion of writing on the Web, we find the safe route presented as rule or guideline. The design how-to advice that shows layout and design principles can be used to discipline the Web page into the more familiar layout designs that shape books. The focus on information as the key commodity delivered online also prioritizes the shaping of information on Web sites, making digitally written text and the literacy needed to produce and interpret it a valued currency on the Web. We even try our best to believe that the visual conventions of the book culture we have been raised in will hold sway in the online frames provided by the Web, particularly for sites that deliver large amounts of information. Yes, we can and do practice what we believe to be safe visual rhetoric on the Web. But we should not really believe that what we are doing is safe or particularly innocent. This discussion of some "safe" practices for visual rhetoric on the Web, therefore, asks what it means to practice safe visual rhetoric on the Web, why safe practices might not be so safe as we might hope, and what it might mean if we challenge the safe practices of visual rhetoric on the Web. Ultimately, I argue that issues raised by problems with control displaying a Web page, by differing opinions about what safe practice entails, and by uncertainty about Web visitor needs and desires, give us the opportunity to analyze the received wisdom about how to practice visual rhetoric on the Web. First, some stories that suggest an interrogation of safe visual design is warranted.

2. Practice #1. Design training wheels to make visual rhetoric safer

When asked to place synopses for course readings on the Web, two class members had responses: "Ok, at what address?" and "How do I make an entry that will look presentable?" I expected the first response, and (because I thought the assignment a clerical one), I had a template for the synopses premade in order to make the site look professional. But the second response alerted me (a) to the need that at least some of the students had for work with basic page design and (b) to the fear in their voices. These disparate responses—from business-as-usual to terror management—are fairly typical in introductory classes, but because this particular class was an advanced one focused on design technology, I expected to focus our design work on more complex projects rather than on format for synopsis entries. But I could not ignore either type of response, so I regrouped. To slow down the class work and offer the basic design space needed for inexperienced Web designers, I put my template aside and instead announced a design contest for the template we would use. A contest had the advantage of keeping the advanced students busy while those needing basic work received that practice in the framework of an assignment that mattered.

To make the contest a "safe" one for those who had less design experience, I gave the project two stages: the first one had safe visual rhetoric specifications on the design (i.e., design training wheels), and the second one was open. The training wheels were two colors, two fonts, text in a table, page width no greater than 535 pixels, a heading that identified the reading, bibliographic information, and a back button (or link) for navigation. I had devised

a short Macromedia DREAMWEAVER (HTML-editing software) tutorial to help students new to that product and I also referred them to Patrick J. Lynch and Sarah Horton (1999) for page-design guidelines. At the end of round one, the class critiqued everyone's initial designs, and stage two was initiated (i.e., sans specifications). Almost everyone changed the second round's design substantively, and the contest was deemed "fun." But, the second-stage projects rarely moved into territory that I would consider "unsafe" or "risky" design. I had shaped (or controlled) the design, and the design training wheels introduced in stage one dominated stage two.

Interestingly enough, several students commented on how pleased they were with the design specifications I imposed on their work. They may have seen the specifications as saving them time and potential embarrassment: "I had more confidence because I knew that the guidelines kept me from making too many mistakes," one student remarked. They may also have seen the specifications as a form of experiment: "It was a test of my discipline to do something within the constraints you set," said another more advanced designer. I, on the other hand, became increasingly troubled by the dark side of the contest—namely, that I had manipulated even the advanced designers into a simple, safe page design. Of course, such a design might be seen as maintaining the project goal, as rhetorically sound because the synopses are intended to be sources for researchers. But, to what extent did my offering of a training-wheels approach suggest to the class that expediency might be a primary goal? To what extent did it suggest that those specifications were really standards for good design practice? Did I remove more than the design risk from the situation? The more I consider the situation, the more culpable I become as a preserver of safe practices.

3. Practice #2. The urge for the safe route may be strongest during job searches

> "Pat, could you take a look at my Web page? I've been working on it because I'm thinking of testing the job market in tech comm, and I don't think I can be successful without a first-class site. Let me know what you think." [email from an alum]
>
> "What do you think of the coffee cup? I learned how to do it from an Adobe tutorial. I know I should be working on my dissertation but I thought I should have more sophisticated technology on my Web page." [comment of Ph.D. candidate preparing for a job search]
>
> "A footnote to your workshop might be a comment on how hard it is to get other people to read your Web page correctly. I had one school [combatively] ask me why I had a picture of John Rocker on my Website, when it was a picture of Greg Maddux. I just wanted to comment in my personal section that I was a Braves fan." [comment of Ph.D. candidate after the job search]

A Web page offers today's job candidates a new space to compete for employment. Job seekers can configure that space as one where they can exert some control over their self-representations as professionals, and I agree that the space can often function in that way. We also should be aware that Web pages can be spaces that may tell prospective employers more about their job candidates than the job candidates intend, that may make claims about the job candidates' Web skills that are not accurate, and that may distinguish

the wealth of their university. Their Web spaces perform esthetic and rhetorical portrayals of themselves contained within the structures of the institutional wealth of their hosting institution.

Some job seekers I have worked with approach the task of representing themselves on the Web with reluctance, some embrace the task with enthusiasm, and some never develop Web pages. Because we have been able to provide evidence that prospective employers visit their Web pages, most have seen the value of using that space to project an image of themselves. But the issues surrounding their control of their representations are not totally straightforward. Consider time, technical skill, interest, amount of material needed for the Web site, and the psychological pressures of the job market as key complicating factors. The rigors of the job search process limit the time that job seekers have to design their Web pages because they must prepare résumé, letter, materials for recommenders, writing sample, teaching philosophy statement, and teaching portfolio in addition to locating openings, researching schools that are hiring, sending application packets, writing their dissertations, and teaching. In addition to thousands of dollars on the whole search, they must spend hundreds of hours to successfully develop professional materials. Given the time needed for the other aspects of the job search (and I haven't even mentioned the time researching paper and design choices for the printed materials as I might given the topic of this piece), candidates who do not have a Web site or who have a very simple (or disorganized) one clearly do not have the time to devote to (re)designing a first-rate Web site.

Of course, the task is much easier if they already have a Web site or substantial material prepared for one, and, at Purdue University many of them have taught in computer classrooms and taken a class that requires a Web project. This means that most can assemble an online teaching portfolio and resume. So, we gather materials they may have at hand: online syllabi, Web pages, Web projects in classes, participation in online conferences, online essays, work with a MOO, and so on. Then, we hold a Web page workshop that covers:

- An analysis[1] of professional Web pages (the ones of last year's job seekers and of the faculty)—We seek to determine the content, design choices, stated purposes, and potential functions for those pages. The job seekers examine these sites and match up their findings with the content they have been considering for their own sites. We quickly identify the strengths of their own content (and how they might maximize the strength of that content).
- A segment on design tips—We then turn to guidelines for "quick and dirty" Web site design such as those found in the Web design section of James E. Porter, Patricia Sullivan, and Johndan Johnson-Eilola's (2001) *Professional Writing Online* or in Lynch and Horton's (1999) *Web Style Guide*.
- A critique of their own work in progress (may be part of the workshop or be given afterwards)—We respond to each of the Web pages brought to the workshop. We look for how they match up with guidelines but also consider what kind of person we think would produce this Web site.

This workshop practices safe rhetoric in several ways. First, and most obviously, it points those job seekers with a lack of knowledge about visual design to Lynch and Horton (1999) and to others who give conservative advice about designing a Web page. Second, although

I admit that this advice is very conservative and text-oriented and I invite the job seekers to ignore or amend it as they gain know-how, advice labeled "safe" has been dispensed by a person in a position of power (namely their advisor for the job search). Given the importance of the job search, few are likely to experiment (i.e., stray from the "safe" path) without good cause. Third, even if the advice I give them is not the best advice, there is a kind of safety in numbers. If enough job candidates adopt this conservative kind of Web page as their approach, then employers may consider it a "normal" interpretation of what a professional Web page for a job seeker might include.

Suppose I were to become obsessed with Web pages and develop a template for Web pages that job seekers could use to develop a professional (and might I add safe) Web page or to supply the job group with a technical assistant who molds their information into Web pages. One potential problem in this configuration of "safe" is an ethical one. Such increased involvement in the construction of their pages might lead either to a suspicious sameness among our job seekers' Web pages or to design that exceeds an individual's Web-production abilities. If an employer were using that Web page to judge Web skills for a job that involved the teaching of Web design, the Web pages might not reflect the applicants' skills. Of course, an interrogation of the candidate would quickly uncover the move and probably disqualify the applicant for that job. Ultimately, it would become an unsafe practice. Therefore, in job-seeking situations we also need to examine "safe" practices in light of credentialling: a workshop and critique seem reasonable assistance to a job candidate while more comprehensive help risks the credentialling component of the product. I realize candidates can copy ideas and even code from other sites, but that has to be their decision.

4. Sources of safe advice on the visual rhetoric of printed documents

It is helpful to begin a discussion of safe visual rhetoric for the Web with a consideration of the sources of advice for visual rhetoric in print. This is true in large part because that advice is the basis of much of the visual rhetoric advice issued to and by writers. Visual rhetoric is discussed in current writing texts (in writing pedagogy circles "visual rhetoric" might cover visual thinking during composing, page layout, document design, illustrations, charts, graphs, and/or the use of computers to produce documents; see Blythe, 2000), with the advice advanced by these texts participating in what Ellen Lupton and Abbott Miller (1996) called the "modernist design pedagogy" (p. 62; see also, Kinross, 1989; Lay, 1989). When there is explanation of the visual beyond offering guidelines, the explanation calls upon visual literacy that uses esthetic principles and psychological research to ground a pedagogy that trains the good eye (Dondis, 1973). This modernist pedagogical tradition usually sees the task of understanding visual meaning as a task of perception more than one of interpretation, a distinction that makes the production of guidelines more reasonable (after all, if visual literacy were mere hermeneutics, it would hardly be possible to construct stable guidelines).

Most texts operate from an argument that starts with a saying similar to "we live in a visual world." But that visual world is not only visual. If we resonate with Marshall McLuhan (1962), our world has been dominated by the success of the print revolution and is

experiencing an electronic revolution that allows other parts of our sensorium to reemerge out of the tyranny of the visual. Regardless of sound's reemergence (and in 1962, McLuhan was focused on sound because of radio and television), most would still assert a primacy of the visual (see Foucault, 1986). Because print is absorbed visually, we can hardly avoid the fact that even when the text is the focus, as it is in print literacy, visual conventions carry meaning—and print designers argue that those conventions are forged through tactics such as grouping, emphasizing, and employing or breaking esthetic rules. This is the attitude of visual rhetoric in the print world. Thus, if we operate online by translating the guidelines for the use of visuals in print, we might expect to focus on parameters such as:

- The first analytic language of the visual is esthetic (Dondis, 1973).
- A visual rhetoric of the page is founded on the grid of a page (Berryman, 1984; Williamson, 1989) as it is traditionally built for each print genre. The guidance for layout, typography, images, color, and so on, are predicated on audiences experiencing visual genres in predictable if culturally influenced ways (Segall, 1976).
- "Visual" is ambiguous because it refers to the general look of a page, to visual devices aimed at directing readers' attention, and also to the development and use of visual representations for information (e.g., tables, figures, or pictures). Because the visual is more powerful than words for some readers, visual rhetoric focuses on coordinating the visual and the verbal arguments in a print document (Barton & Barton, 1987; Bernhardt, 1986; Kostelnick, 1989; Porter & Sullivan, 1994).
- Visual rhetoric is not so thoroughly developed that it offers detailed advice for specific genres, although there is considerable layout information for document types such as newsletters and brochures.
- An organization develops a "look" for its documents that makes them recognizable as originating from that organization. This look or image can be limited to a particular fund-raising campaign, or it may come to be codified into a style sheet and associated with all documents originating from the organization. Certainly these efforts to standardize the look or image emanating from an organization becomes a force in the visual culture shaping a particular document. Other cultural factors that visually shape a document include the samples distributed by a funding agency, the requirements for a proposal, and the look of prize-winning fund-raising materials, just to name a few obvious choices (see Xerox for an example of corporate standards, 1988).
- Functional approaches to graphic principles of page design, however, may offer insufficient guidance if they focus somewhat dispassionately on composition and not on how audiences receive and respond to the visual. As a response to audience, writers have built a kind of rhetorical and functional approach that places the user (or reader) at the center of the writer's decisions (Johnson, 1998).

Visual rhetoric for print, then, has as a strategic goal a blending of an awareness of visual esthetics with a concern for the needs and wishes of the audience and operates within one or more cultures. Such a position is complicated by the fact that there is no one visual esthetic that page designers can apply as a rule or template. Carl Dair (1967) suggested a simple approach to type design when he said that "design. . . is the art of assembling diverse elements into an organized unit" (p. 48), but he then undercut his simple formula by insisting

that the relationships among elements cannot be determined more strictly than by making sure they use and balance the principles of concord and contrast. Hanno Ehses and Ellen Lupton (1988) framed complex design principles in rhetorical terms in their *Rhetorical Handbook*. Recognizing that there are schools of thought about design, Donis A. Dondis (1973), in her *Primer of Visual Literacy*, clarified the multiple visual esthetics by organizing them into a continuum of five styles: primitive, expressionistic, classical, embellished, and functional. Dondis argued that these five approaches to the visual emphasize vastly different design esthetics, with *primitive* involving exaggeration, spontaneity, activeness, simplicity, distortion, flatness, irregularity, roundness, and colorfulness, while the *functional* involves simplicity, symmetry, angularity, predictability, consistency, sequentiality, unity, repetition, economy, subtlety, flatness, regularity, sharpness, monochromaticity, and mechanicalness.

Although the visual rhetorics prized by professional writing research have focused on Dondis' (1973) category of functional esthetics, they have added reader (or user) response as critical to making visual design decisions, and in doing so, they have made it reasonable to bend the esthetic to one judged more appropriate for the audience and situation (see Sullivan, 1998, for an application of this to philanthropic texts). That melding of visual esthetics and concern with rhetorical effectiveness for an audience produces visual rhetoric. It also makes visual rhetoric a flexible enough tool to make it attractive to Web writers, who must be more cognizant of visual design than writers who are not also publishers.

5. In print, visual rhetoric guidelines mark a path for readers

In safe practice for print design, though, guidelines for visual rhetoric (provided most often by document designers in professional writing) have focused writers on deploying visual markers in texts that will guide readers to the key points. As many (see Hartley, 1985; Keyes, Sykes, & Lewis, 1988; Redish, 1993; Schriver, 1989) have pointed out, these markers make clear to readers the architecture of the text. Much of the interesting work on visual markers has started with an interest in readability, usability, or comprehension: it views the finished text from the reader's perspective, then works backward. Document design research, for example, presents a range of studies showing that visual redesign improves reader comprehension (Redish; Schriver). Professional writing pedagogy applies this document-design focus on readers when it evaluates the visual requirements from the lens of readers' needs. The emphasis on readers is laudable and a necessary critiquing tool, and as such it forms a part of the needed visual theory. This emphasis is also important to writers and teachers of writing because it provides a vocabulary that writers can use to discuss writerly decisions about visual cueing of ideas. But it risks adopting a writer-centered perspective as it highlights the choices writers make about visual cueing.

Daniel B. Felker (1981), in *Guidelines for Document Designers*, shared a checklist from American Institutes for Research (AIR) typical of page design advice that codifies some of the research funded to support the Plain English movement.[2] These guidelines took the approach of giving writers general rules for making reasonable visual choices and avoiding egregious errors. Writers were told, for instance, the range of typefaces and type sizes they should use in constructing readable text. The guidelines proved to be a good initial step. They

gave writers who knew nothing about visual design a basic vocabulary and a set of rules—for example, use highlighting, use white space, use ragged right margins, avoid all caps, use illustrations to explain, and use color and elaborate layout. AIR has continued to pursue this writer's advice approach to visual design with success, but has not pushed the guidelines to provide rules for genres or even for book-length documents. Their layout advice usually is communicated through before and after pictures of documents they have redesigned. Hence, the guidelines they espouse retain the quality of standards and specifications at the same time as they feature a before-and-after approach that undercuts the rules through its local flavor.

Text design has been studied, too, by educators interested in improving textbooks. In *Designing Instructional Text*, James Hartley (1985) offered visual rhetoric guidelines that pertain more directly to the decisions faced by a textbook designer. Interestingly, he assumed that the writer will make critical design choices (such as page dimensions, basic page design, use of color and type) at the start of a project. Not only will those decisions shape the writing, but they also will reflect the writer/designer's understanding of how a textbook functions for its readers. Hartley offered more comprehensive design guidelines than AIR, as he addressed the placement of textual units on pages and into chapters. Although helpful, visual cueing ultimately does not cover all the decisions a writer must make about visual rhetoric. These guidelines link design decisions with readers and therefore suggest a rhetorical base for page design, but they also evidence a potential weakness because they usually construct a fixed (and inflexible) portrait of how readers read and make that portrait the arbiter of visual decisions. Thus, in addition to guidelines that mark a text for readers, visual rhetoric needs to involve an understanding of the cultural forces shaping the production and reception of a document.

6. Why writers are lured to the practice of safe visual rhetoric

Safe visual rhetoric can be particularly alluring to writers who have not been trained in graphic design. If a writer does not know how to recognize—not to mention how to effect—the elements of concord and contrast in type, and that writer wants to achieve a well-designed page, the promise of guidelines that lead to a safe visual rhetoric is comforting. This is certainly true for print design, and it probably can be even more true for the Web. Think back to the examples of safe practice I described earlier. We rarely want to disrupt the progress of a class in order to learn enough technology to allow a novice to gain enough know-how to probe the rhetorical possibilities of the Web. Nor do we want to risk a job search by making Web pages that might appear amateurish or even unprofessional. In situations such as those we want/need to produce a look that represents the students, even (or especially) those with limited technology and design experience, as professionals.

But more than the uncertainty bolstered by a lack of training, the crux of the allure may be a lack of time (to experiment or learn); indeed, five years ago Gail E. Hawisher and Sullivan (1998) found that women professionals in composition studies were reluctant to move into the then-new technology of Web pages (and sometimes into other new technologies) because of the steep learning curve needed to produce professional Web sites. The crux may also be a belief that we should stay focused on our expertise: writing and its

Table 1
Contrast of stability for print and web documents

Print	Web
Stability of initial view	**Stability of initial view**
Rhetorical decisions related to money can make a document seem expensive or inexpensive (e.g., paper, theme logo, white space, color), but once produced each initial copy is the same	Viewing platform variation means: 1. not everyone sees the graphics, the animation, the fonts, the video 2. text doesn't stay aligned 3. colors don't stay stable 4. not everyone views on similar and appropriate devices
Quality of photocopies degrades (and lose color unless a color photocopier is used)	Quality of digital copies is identical to the original
Stability over time	**Stability over time**
May be difficult to produce, but is stable once printed	A site viewed at different times can be different because of changes made

teaching. In either case, an approach to structuring the predictable, routinized, and safe visual rhetoric of the Web gives us confidence that we can move into publishing on the Web without too much anxiety about amateurism. This interest in avoiding amateurism cannot be easily overlooked when there is so much rampant amateurism present on the Web, and those who are uncertain about their position (be that because they are students, women, minorities, handicapped) may well be the ones most interested in safe practice.

7. Control of screen design poses a problem to safe design

In a sense, these lures are mimicked in the popular discussions of Web design. Most of the how-to books (see Flanders & Willis, 1998; Gray, 1999; Lynch & Horton, 1999; Williams & Tollett, 1998; Veen, 1997) focus attention more on coding and on site management than on visual design, and when they turn to design, they often spend considerable energy on ways to control the look of the page rather than on how the page is designed. We are far more likely to find the oft-quoted information that "maximum width for a page that will be printed is 535 pixels and for one that will not be printed is 595 pixels" (I first saw this advice on the Yale C/AIM Web site ⟨http://info.med.yale.edu/caim/manual/contents.html⟩) or extensive discussions of file types for graphics, than we are to read about the rhetorical impact of various visual design choices. For many of the authors, "control," or a lack thereof, is foregrounded in technology use terms, and when they are particularly concerned about design, they tend to begin by foregrounding the differences between print and the Web.

We can depict designers' interest in control of the view in terms of stability of the finished look: how is the stability of the product (or what we see) affected by the move from print to Web? Table 1 suggests that although it may be more expensive to produce a printed document (particularly a four color one), the document stays stable over time once it is printed and each printed version looks the same (unless it is photocopied and then the quality

degrades). By contrast, the initial look of a Web page varies according to the visitor's browser, connection, monitor, Web browser preference settings, and so on (though the quality of digital copies is identical to the original).

The ability of print to control the look of the page seems comforting to designers who must accommodate the myriad possibilities for viewing a Web page enabled by the various platforms and browsers. Considerable planning is necessary for a Web page to look approximately the same (yes, only approximately the same is possible) in most environments and to accommodate users with lesser technology. It is not lost on me that although a Web site's content may not vary, the visual look of the page no doubt will shimmer and shake. These instabilities make the practice of safe visual rhetoric more attractive, a point particularly true if "safe" includes maximizing design for the most impoverished Web users.

8. Control of navigation poses another problem for safe design

Control is also challenged by the new navigational patterns possible[3] in Web spaces. Through centuries of practice, western readers have been disciplined into a system in which information flows into columns on a page that run top to bottom (with each line read left to right) and in which indexes, content lists, summaries, headers, footers, and page numbers serve as markers to aid in navigation. The Web page presents a new document form—where to look for what information is not schooled through centuries of reading and publishing practice. It appears as a box that could contain anything but that visitors expect will have some link to other pages. Thus, it is not clear to designers how visitors will expect to navigate the "page." Take the example of one of Dondis' (1973) maxims, namely, "the eye prefers the lower left" (pp. 28–29). If we tried to use this western esthetic teaching and practice in our screen design we would quickly confront the instability of the screen. For that maxim to work, the drawing (or its reproduction) needs to have a stable frame (for example a $4' \times 6'$ canvas). But in the design of a Web page it cannot be confidently predicted whether the bottom of the screen for visitors matches the bottom designed for the page. Thus, a Web page designed on a high-end platform that has its navigation placed in the lower-left corner will probably not display the navigation on an older, poorer monitor. Control of the experience of a Web page is not as predictable as designers may hope.

9. Clashing design traditions and safe design

The Web mixes words and images in both static and dynamic ways (because it reminds people of several types of media), and thus it makes sense that a variety of graphic traditions meet—and potentially clash—inside its boundaries. So far this discussion has been steeped in print literacy because it has come to visual rhetoric from the positions held by writers who publish, and I ultimately will not abandon that stance. But it is important to recognize that there are other less text-oriented traditions impacting Web design and offering advice about good design.

Lupton and Miller (1996) remind us that design itself is not univocal in its advice about

Table 2
What advocates of prose graphics and advocates of theatrical graphics aim to control in Web design

	Prose graphics	Theatrical graphics
Central concern	Control information and its look	Control experience
Associated disciplines	Professional writing Information architecture Book designers Librarians	Drama Animation Film Television Music
Forms	Book Database Visual display of data	Photo Montage Scene blocking
Connections to audience	Usability	Reviews

visual rhetoric of the page when they contrasted the prose graphics of book culture with the theatrical graphics of film, magazine, and cartoons. They contend that prose graphics—represented by Edward Tufte (1983) and Neurath (the isotype guy)—is opposed by the theatrical graphics promoted by the magazine tradition. The prose graphics tradition takes a content-based approach to visuals, arguing that the amount of ink expended on a visual should match the amount of information conveyed. Design principles such as "avoid chart junk" align this prose graphics approach with the reduced imagery of much modernist design and locate it "within a Modernist-Rationalist lineage that eschews decorative forms and colors in favor of what could be called 'prose graphics'" (Lupton & Miller, p. 149). By contrast, Lupton and Miller argued that the "infotainment" graphics of *U.S.A. Today* connect more with the postmodernist approaches of signist Robert Venturi and others who trace their lineage to Seymour Chwast and the Push Pin Studios, taking an approach that is "pragmatic, antisystematic, populist, deliberately inconsistent, and playful" (p. 149). These theatrical graphics, Lupton and Miller said, "spotlight the illustrative, decorative, and emotive potential of data" (p. 149).

If we extended this discussion of prose and theatrical graphics to the Web, we might see allegiances that are mapped somewhat as Table 2 suggests. The prose graphics tradition is allied with information, and thus its focus of design is the control of information on the screen. This tradition uses conventions focused on sculpturing information so that the information thought to be most important is the information most likely to be seen first by readers. Thus, the prose graphics tradition is interested in color and text, and may well produce design guidelines that keep designers from using light text on a red background. The guideline may highlight the physiological trouble the eye has keeping the white from bleeding into the red and emphasize the need for good resolution for reading, but the information graphics proponents also know that the color may compete with the information and the structuring of the information is most important. It is likely that a theatrical graphics approach would consider the use of red and white in a different light, asking what experience these colors could support and what experience these colors could disrupt. Because the

Table 3
Contrasting features of transactional and experimental Web sites

Transactional	Experimental
Textual	Visual
Mapped	Guided
Still	Movement
Couple colors	Wild color
Interactive	Immersive
Aim: reveal a logic	Aim: creating an experience

theatrical graphics tradition focuses on experience, it also is more interested in designing the unfolding of action, attempting to control what Brenda Laurel (1993) called the flying wedges that chart when a plot point moves from the possible to the probable. Clearly, these two graphics traditions focus their attention in very different spheres, with the prose graphics more static and the theatrical more dynamic.

Interestingly enough, these graphic traditions match up with the two major types of online environments that have been widely discussed (see Holtzman, 1997)—namely, transactional sites such as the ones built for information exchange or commerce and experiential sites such as the ones built for online games and art galleries (see Table 3). These cyberspace environments, if pasted onto the continuum of esthetics that Dondis (1973) identified, have characteristics that can be contrasted as: the transactional Web site fits better with the functional esthetic Dondis articulated as focused through the Bauhaus into a minimalist and logical form, while the experiential approach to Web site design fits better with the primitive or expressionist esthetic that celebrates movement and wild color while it tries to immerse the viewers in their experiences of the site. This difference urges us to wonder how visual esthetics, too, might ultimately differ in this new media. Certainly, as Steven Holtzman (1997) pointed out, Web sites at the very least imply nonlinearity and have a discontinuity of site parts such that interactivity is required (yes, the visitor chooses the navigation paths). As these structural differences play out in time, designers may fear that everyone who visits a Web site experiences it in a different way. Of course, if those experiences vary to a point of unpredictability, we lose control over the rhetoric of the screen.

10. Policing "good design"

Esthetic judgment is not as safe, as its traditional criteria for "good art" have been under siege by technology at least since the invention of photography. As James Clifford (1988) suggested in *Predicament of Culture,* the value of artistic masterpieces and cultural artifacts have traditionally related to their relationships with originality, singularity, tradition, newness, commonness, mimicry, and commercialness. A masterpiece has been the single, original work; the prized cultural artifact is an old example of traditional ways. By contrast, not-art is reproduced and commercial; not-culture is new and uncommon. Certainly the technologies of late twentieth century blur the art-to-not-art continuum as they may assist artists in violating the singularity criterion and may diminish the need for another feature of

artistic talent—the ability to draw. This blurring of art and not-art is extended using Adobe PHOTOSHOP (graphic-design software), in which a person of nonexistent drafting talent can take digital photos or simple drawings and add elaborate effects. Although the technology cannot imbue taste, it can offer the computer-savvy-but-drafting-challenged person the possibility of achieving Web art. We should expect that this potential assault of the bastions of esthetic expertise may be apt to push the graphic elite to be more insistent about good graphic design on the Web; I certainly expect more diligent policing of what constitutes good graphic design, and I expect that policing to be most sure when speaking to the novice or nondesigners who are designing Web sites.

Certainly, advice to nondesigners about Web site design is indulgently prescriptive. Jeffrey Zeldman (1998), in his tutorial on graphic design called *Dr. Web's Graphic Clinic*, suggested that you can improve your page design in five ways. The first suggestion is to

> use fewer colors. A limited palette is a good palette. Think of Coca Cola—a powerful graphic with very few colors. The most potent colors are red, black and white. Red in particular seems to work as a retinal trigger (2,000 Mexican bulls can't be wrong), while white is a readable background, and black the most readable text color. The Coca Cola logo is red, black and white. Coincidence? Read the Time-Life book.
>
> You will hear from many "experts" that you should limit yourself to these three Coca Cola colors. Perhaps they're right; but how dull the Web would be. Doctor Web thinks you can choose any colors you like; just understand that, the fewer you choose, the more your page will cohere. (online)

He continued this advice about color by referring readers to examples of pages that work with two or three colors and offered sources for browser-safe color palettes. Zeldman's is a classic configuration of such self-help advice: prescription (use fewer colors), justification in terms of esthetics but including a wiggle term "limited" (a limited palette is a good palette), connection with a rich and powerful corporate example (Coca Cola), with some color theory (the most potent colors are red, black, and white), some physiology (red in particular seems to work as a retinal trigger), some humor (2,000 Mexican bulls can't be wrong), some readability research (white is a readable background and black is the most readable text color), and more big-brand name dropping (Coca Cola and Time-Life). Zeldman then positions both himself and the reader in opposition to those experts who would limit everything to the Coca Cola colors, suggesting that those experts may be right, but they are also "dull" and so Dr. Web is allowing the reader to choose colors. The advice delivered, then, displays the weight of several disciplines and yet ultimately tries to empower choice. Although I have pointed to one caveat delivered by Zeldman, most of the design advice aimed at those new to design on the Web and in how-to books shares this approach.

By contrast, the Web-design advice aimed at graphic designers rarely gives design advice, focusing instead on structuring Web sites and managing software. Darcy DiNucci, Maria Giudice, and Lynne Stiles (1999), for example, in *Elements of Web Design*, assigned, quite traditionally, the visual tasks in Web-site development (interface and multimedia design) to graphic designers and the information-based tasks (information architecture and information content) to writers. Although the book focuses on Web design, almost nothing is said directly about the look of a Web page; it is assumed, perhaps, that designers already know that Web

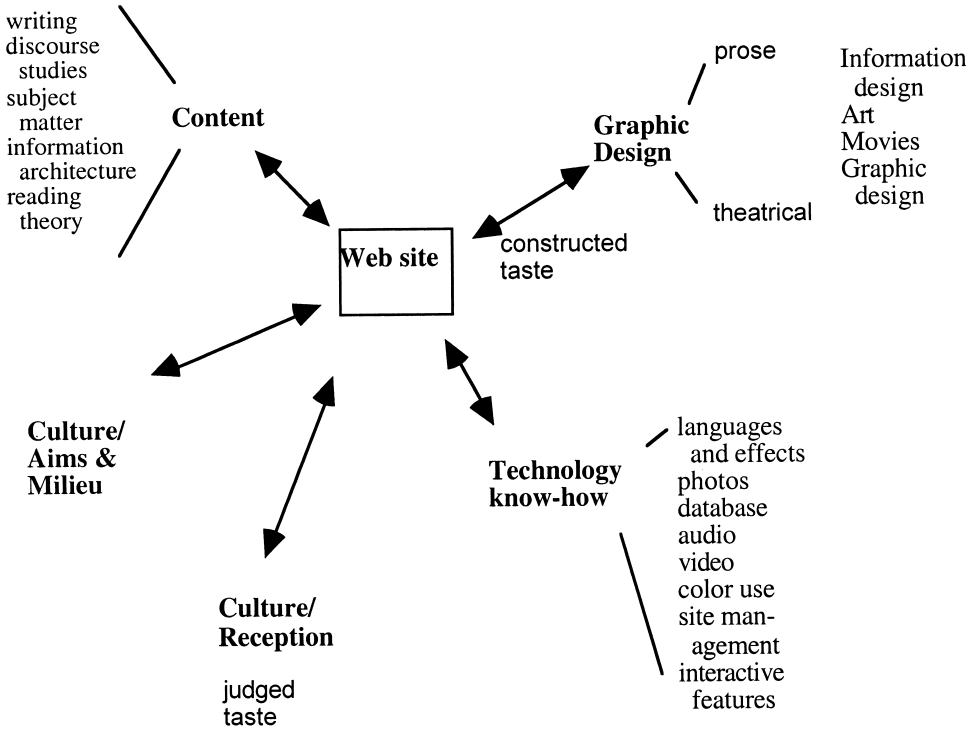

Figure. Forces shaping visual rhetoric of a Web site.

design entails learning site architecture, HTML, graphics control, and multimedia use. Their discussion of page layout covers how to use structural tags, HTML extensions, frames, style sheets, boxes, and cascading style sheets. There is no advice that approximates the lay advice we hear on the Web—for example "avoid weird hyperlink colors" or "avoid scrolling marquees." Of course, it makes sense that such advice is needed for novice Web designers and not for graphic designers. But it also seems that avoiding the discussions of visual design that are not technically oriented partakes of the "safe" approach to Web site production, this time from the vantage point of graphic design. It implies that the esthetic and rhetorical dimensions of graphic design for the Web already exist independently of designing for the Web and that thus the Web designer's main task it to translate good design into the new media. Such implications do not lead to questioning the construction of the visual in ways other than technical ones.

11. Visual rhetoric online: shaping forces

Some of the forces shaping visual rhetoric on the Web (see Figure) derive from the differences between print and online documents (both their production and their esthetics). The Web's conduciveness to interactivity, to animation, and to video all work against the

stable and static visual esthetics that have grown to carry meaning on the page. The more Web cultures evolve, the more they suggest that the production of writing and the production of Web sites are not the same activities and indeed they face different challenges. Jeffrey Veen (1997) made this point very directly:

> Say this out loud: The Web is not print. The Web is not television. The Web is not a CD-ROM. Seem obvious? It's not. Say it again. Although it has words like books, images like TV, and multimedia like CD-ROMs, the Web is singular. It has its own language, esthetics, issues and problems and yet represents a convergence of nearly all other media. Its content must be built to travel across vast networks to unknown devices and browsers (p. 1).

Of course, from a strictly technical perspective, designing for the Web is designing for a moving target. As television monitors become more commonly used for Web access and even phones have limited Web capabilities, some of the design "rules" that may be posed today will be obsolete, at least for some of those who are developing Web sites aimed at home use (via television) or mobile work (for phones). Economically, the Web may be a moving target as well. The U.S. government currently underwrites much of the cost of the infrastructure for the Web, but if it were to withdraw that support, the nature of (and cost of) browsing the Web might quickly change. If all visitors had to pay by connect time, for example, that would force sites to design to minimize loading time and that would cut the use of visuals and multimedia.

But with this uncertainty comes opportunity: There exists no clear arbiter of what constitutes good or safe visual rhetoric on the Web and therefore those of us in writing have the option to make our own decisions about quality visual rhetoric online. As this discussion shows, we do not make this contribution in a vacuum; there are already groups that pronounce various approaches to visual design. Very few of them, though, approach the activity as rhetoric. Though they may classify Web sites according to their general purposes (e.g., Andres [1999] divided sites into those focused on information, marketing, or establishing identity), most authors discussing Web site design do not investigate or theorize what that might mean for design choices. This indicates that the discussion of audience (and its analysis) on the Web is as crude as some of our early discussions about audience, and we have learned that an early consideration of the type of audience and purpose guiding one's work does not help to guide specific writing (or visual design) decisions. If the "rhetoric" for visual rhetoric remains undertheorized, then it makes sense that guidelines compatible with a particular design perspective (say, print graphics vs. theatrical graphics or transactional vs. experiential) will be used to structure the visual design.

A key to highlighting rhetoric may lie with the cultural class markers that mark Web sites as "in" or "out" in their understanding of visual design. Certainly those carrying the banner of modernist design into Web spaces are suggesting the guidelines should be functional and Bauhaus (as the above discussion of print graphics suggest). Taste[4] for these designers, as I have discussed above, lies with clean, calm, and spare surfaces. As Michael Benedikt (2000) argued, taste and class inside this perspective is intimately connected to the "conscious suppression of any show of neediness" (p. 8). However, those who connect the strength of the Web more with experiential design may well be allying themselves with theatrical guidelines—emphasizing playfulness, surprise, emotion, wild color, and movement. Taste

for these designers involves disrupting the harmony of the modern, reveling in excess, and injecting action into screen. While we, as writers, are focused on text and thereby are almost always going to gravitate toward the print graphics paradigm, because it stresses the visual marking of textual highlights, we need to realize that the Web in many ways is more inviting to the theatrical graphics. The medium's conduciveness to a variety of communication strategies (of which words are one) requires us to focus on the rhetoric of/in the visual and to begin to forge rhetorical strategies of construction and interpretation[5] that help us understand literacy on the Web. One way to state our task is that we need to connect taste about visual design on the Web with good rhetoric.

At this point readers may be waiting for an unveiling: "behold the 'real' guidelines for safe visual rhetoric on the Web," or, even worse, "therefore, safe visual rhetoric is not desirable (or possible)." I can say that there is no easy answer to what makes good or even safe visual rhetoric. Because the Web as a medium has some characteristics of print, some of television, and some of film, various traditions of graphic design have a claim on directing the esthetics of the Web. Because the development and delivery systems for the Web are not uniform enough to make control of the screen or control of the interaction stable, guidelines can hardly be phrased in a way that carries much force for a new Web writer/designer. That much is sure. But that puts the message in a negative frame. The stories I started with point to a need for guidance in visual rhetoric, and I think we have the opportunity to suggest some of the parameters of visual rhetoric for the Web. Why? Because there truly is no, one, clear, and holy arbiter for taste on the Web. To take the role of active constructors of visual rhetoric on the Web we need to be aware of the control and disciplinary perspective issues that I have sketched in this discussion, but, more importantly, we need to bring our rhetorical understandings to bear on this new space for writing.

In general, if we teach writing for the Web without an awareness of the visual dimensions of the meaning we risk a great deal. Visual meaning is even more important in Web space than it is in print because animation and video are added more easily to a Web site than to other writing. Thus, ignoring the visual dimensions of rhetoric is avoiding an understanding of a major component of the power of writing on the Web. I mean this in very concrete and simple ways. If, for example, a student submits an essay formatted in two columns, uses different typefaces in some pattern, and uses different colors for different parts of the text or has music that plays when we click on a picture, we cannot ignore the student's attempts to use visual cues without risking the student's rejection of our response as "[the teacher] just didn't get it." In broader, sweeping ways, and in simple, concrete ways, visual rhetoric is already operating in the writing on the Web. Our task as rhetoricians is to develop an understanding of when and how we should practice safe visual rhetoric for Web writing and when we should abandon the safety of our print graphic traditions in order to grow as writers, designers, communicators, and teachers of Web writing.

Notes

1. A rhetorical analysis, this examination poses and answers questions about:
   - purpose: how do professional Web pages present their purpose?

- content: what do these Web pages contain? (e.g., vita, dissertation information, teaching, research projects, "presentable" hobbies)
- design: what design features are common (and uncommon) in professional Web pages?
- function: who seeks them out and why?

2. The Plain English Movement derives from pragmatic and democratic impulses. The pragmatic source is a need for straightforward and highly visual documents born in the military as a response to troop training problems in World War II. The democratic impulse was born in the conviction that the public should be able to understand public documents, and that it was not always the burden of the public to become more literate—sometimes the documents had to change. In writing research, AIR and Carnegie-Mellon University received support from the Jimmy Carter Administration to found a Document Design Center that did practical research making documents more understandable.
3. Navigation points to the ways in which design, even visual design, is an interface issue as well as a construction of a look. Laurel's (1993) *Computers as Theater* offers an Aristotelian approach to software design that focuses on enactment of the experience as the source of guidelines for software design. She claimed that the computer's "interesting potential lay not with its abilities to perform calculations but in its capacity to represent actions in which humans could participate" (p. 1). Thus, the design of performance is the key. Such a position connects with the theatrical design I discuss later.
4. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) connected the display of culture-approved class with taste. In Bourdieu's study, the cultural capital imbued by education and upbringing was more closely allied to class (and taste) than was economic capital. This taste is cultural power; as Bourdieu said: "Nothing is more distinctive than the capacity to confer esthetic status on objects that are banal" (p. 5).
5. Carlos Salinas (2000) is producing some promising work on the construction and interpretation of image in Webbed environments in his dissertation, *Toward a Critical Rhetoric of Configured Images*, which includes a lengthy analysis of the Nike Web site.

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