Words ... Fabric ... It's All About Patterns

By Rhonda Bracey, *Senior Member*

One of Rhonda's hand-crafted quilts.

Me? An artist? I don't think so. I can't draw, paint, sculpt—can't do much of what I consider to be traditional art. School art classes were a mix of enjoyment and hatred. Attempts to draw a portrait ended in tears, but designing a repeating wallpaper pattern or a poster was exciting. Instead of presenting a blank canvas as a starting point, these types of art had very defined structures, giving me a framework within which I could be really creative. I'm comfortable with frameworks; fuzzy edges—not so much.

In those long-ago school days, art didn't explore other mediums. It was all about drawing and painting mediums—oils, watercolors, acrylics, pencils, and inks. Had we delved into fabric, clay, or found objects, I might have been more enthusiastic. Now, some several decades since school, I find myself creating with fabric and trying hard not to call it "art."

For me, working with fabric is a creative pursuit with an end product that has a *practical use*—quilts provide warm cover for cold nights, coasters protect table surfaces, bookmarks eliminate the need to fold over corners of pages. I've worked with fabric and thread since childhood. I learned to sew on a treadle machine, made my first (shapeless) dress when I was about 10, and then made tapestries for several years. I learned some quilting basics after being inspired by Mennonite quilts I saw in Canada in the mid-1980s. My first quilt project was a queen-sized bed quilt—I'd barely learned to sew small pieces of fabric together! In the early 90s, I also made most of my own clothes until work took over my life and the sewing machine was silenced. When I relocated to a rural area two years ago, I made a decision to cut back my work hours and use the rest of my time to pursue other interests. Our little town of under 3,000 people has two quilt fabric stores—it was time to dust off the sewing machine!

And since I started quilting again, I've realized that it shares a basic foundation with technical writing. Surprised? Well, both are like working jigsaw puzzles (which I also love); both are methodical and mechanical in how projects are constructed. They have their own unique vocabularies, building blocks, techniques, tools, and best practices. Both are started with some prep work and completed through a series of step-by-step tasks—you have to do A before B or else it won't work. In quilting, you begin a project with a plan and/or patterns, just as in technical writing you begin a project with an outline. You start with small pieces, and then bring them together to make a bigger piece, fleshing things out little by little until you have a whole. With plans in hand, you have a pretty fair idea of what your finished piece will look like—whether it's a user guide or a quilt.

My brain is forever thinking of different ways to combine fabrics based on color, texture, and prints, carrying on an inner dialogue of "This looks right," and "This doesn't look right." Similarly, when I'm writing, I'm thinking of different ways to combine words in a sentence, to combine paragraphs, to switch around topics in a structure. I'm a big fan of single-sourcing content and automating mundane/routine tasks, and that has carried over into my quilting. I'm not a "traditional" quilter in that I rarely hand stitch—as much as I like sewing and quilting, I'd go crazy if I had to spend several years hand-stitching one project. My sewing machine reduces the tedium of routine and repetitive stitching, just like variables and reusable content reduce some of the routine and repetitive technical writing tasks.

I still tell myself that I'm not an "artist," but lately I've been moving away from quilting patterns and into creating "art pieces," such as picture postcards that use appliquéd and embellished fabric to capture my memories of the Australian landscape. I've also started creating and writing sewing patterns for items like tote bags, bringing together two important facets of my life. Writing patterns is like writing code—you have to test, retest, and test some more. Quilting and technical writing combined—what more could I ask for? ●

Rhonda (rhonda.bracey@cybertext.com.au) runs her own technical communication and consultancy business (www.cybertext.com.au) in the lush southwest corner of Western Australia. She also has an online Etsy store where she sells some of her fabric art pieces: http://RhondaMadeIt.etsy.com.