Trends from UA Europe 2011
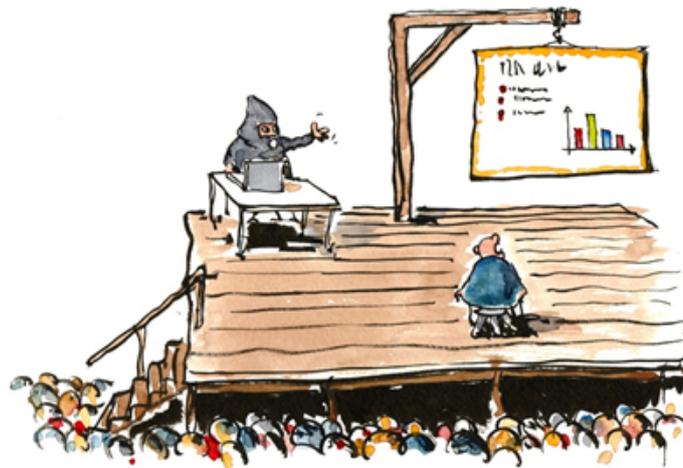
Passive Be Damned! Part 2

Document Layout Tips

Image by Hikingartist.com

10 Tips for Creating Great Presentations

Information, Meaning, and Grammar

The Plain English Movement Just Got Moving

seated at great-aunt Matilda's dinner table. We talk about different topics, of course; but we also use different words and different grammar. The pedant might deny that the playground language is correct, but using formally correct language in the playground (or the pub) is likely to bring scorn on our heads. "Correct" is not always appropriate!

For the professional technical communicator, of course, formal correctness *is* appropriate. But it isn't enough. And formal accuracy of information content is not enough. Rather, we need to develop information structures that are appropriate to the reader's needs.

We need to make allowances for the reader's existing knowledge or ignorance, and we need to help the reader absorb and understand the information we provide.

There are two key principles at work here.

1. In order to take in new information, we need to be able to connect it to something already familiar.

2. We shouldn't ask the reader to take in too much at once. The charm of the short sentence is not in its brevity alone, but in its digestibility.

I will expand on these principles in Part 2 of this article in the next issue of Southern Communicator.

Document Layout Tips

by Rhonda Bracey

A colleague asked me for some tips on document layout. So I thought I'd share those I came up with in just a couple of minutes. Before I start, let me state: If there is an organisation style guide or template that you must follow, USE IT.

However, if you have full control of laying out a document, then take into account some of these tips:

- **Headings.** Make headings clearly stand out from the body text. Use size, color, font, and indent the body text to clearly indicate heading and subheading sections.

- **Styles.** Use styles for consistency and so that the 'look and feel' can be changed in seconds for both headings and body text. Styles will make creating an automatically-generated Table of Contents much easier too.

- **White space.** Don't be afraid of white space – it makes a document more readable.

- **Lists.** For better readability (and depending on the audience), use bullets for lists of items, and use numbers for items in a defined sequence.

- **Fonts.** Use no more than two font families. If the document is for reading on paper, then use a serif font (such as Times New Roman, Garamond) for the body text, and a sans serif font (Arial, Helvetica) for the headings. If it's for reading online only, then use sans serif for both. Use font sizes, colours and weights to vary the look.
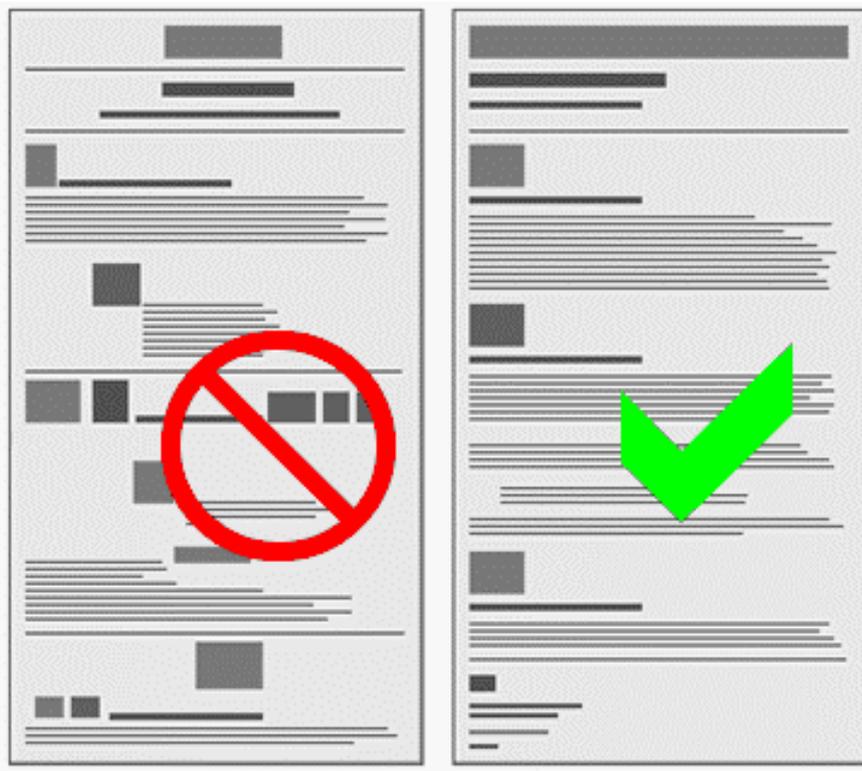
Copy the professionals. Take a look at some of the computer manuals and other instructional guides or non-fiction reference books you have at home. Just flick through them (don't read anything; just glance at the layout) and based on a quick gut reaction separate them into two piles – those you find attractive and would like to look at more closely, and those you wouldn't want to look at again. Now take a closer look at those you'd like to look at more closely. Look at how the book designer used headings, indentation, white space, graphics, graphic positioning and so on. Take your cues from this. Chances are, your gut reaction to the readability and attractiveness of a document will be the same as most other people's.

This article is from Rhonda's CyberText blog: http://cybertext.wordpress.com/2008/12/15/document-layout-hints/ Rhonda's blog has more than 1300 hints and tips (more than 250 on Microsoft Word alone). You can subscribe to her blog by clicking the 'Sign me up!' button on the right sidebar of http://cybertext.wordpress.com.