



WRITING, CLEAR AND SIMPLE

THE  
SHAPE  
OF  
INFORMATION

BY ROY JACOBSEN

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beyond  
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immediate wants  
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*A basic structural design underlies every kind of writing. . . .  
In some cases the best design is no design, as with a love letter,  
which is simply an outpouring, or with a casual essay, which  
is a ramble. But in most cases planning must be a deliberate  
prelude to writing. The first principle of composition,  
therefore, is to foresee or determine the shape of what is to  
come and pursue that shape. — William Strunk Jr. and  
E.B. White, *The Elements of Style**

**A**s Strunk and White pointed out long before the discipline of information design became trendy, all the written content we create must have some sort of structure. Whether it's straightforward data like population or crop production statistics, or more semantically rich information such as a corporate handbook or a biography, selecting an appropriate framework increases the odds that people will find it useful—which, after all, is the point.

The structure selected for any given writing project—the skeleton mentioned in *The Elements of Style*—should reflect the goals of the intended audience for using the information conveyed. But we can go beyond responding to immediate wants and help readers (called

users in this context) gain insights they didn't even know that they wanted—giving them a favorable perception that content is usable.

It's not merely a matter of organizing information so people can efficiently do what we intend them to. What will they want to be able to do with it?

When the potential for adding value to the reading (information access) experience is honored, users repay communicators with attention.

### **LATCH**ING ON TO TOOLS

There are really only a handful of useful structures that we use to organize almost all the factual and statistics-based information we publish in print and online. Richard Saul Wurman lists them in his book *Information Anxiety 2* (2001, Pearson Education) using the mnemonic LATCH: Location, Alphabet, Time, Category, Hierarchy.

**Location** can refer to geographic placement, such as you might find described in a tourism guide or geography text. But it's also a structure used in explaining such things as the layers of the

atmosphere, the spatial characteristics of a building, and the layout of a Web page.

**Alphabet** structure is most familiarly seen in the conventional way dictionaries, encyclopedias, and indexes are organized.

**Time** is a natural organizational choice for narrating or listing a chronological sequence of events. It is seen in biographies and histories, programs of event activities, and descriptions of biological or administrative processes.

**Categories** are a very versatile structure because they allow us to sort and group items or ideas by the characteristics we choose to highlight. For example, information about automobiles can be structured by manufacturer, weight class, number of passengers, price range, and so forth. Categories can be nested as well, as subcategories within larger categories. The taxonomy used to classify living things—kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species—is a well-known example of such a nested structure.

**Hierarchy** is the structure most useful for rank-ordering or comparing items according to set criteria or on a scale. Cars can be ranked or compared according to their mileage, horsepower, or crash-test ratings. While at first glance this might seem the same as a

category structure, the difference is that the information is given a rank or weight on some sort of scale—biggest to smallest, richest to poorest, fastest to slowest.

## **MULTILATCHED** CONTENT

The basic LATCH structures can be used alone as an organizing aid and, in many cases, content seems to lend itself obviously and naturally more to only one structure rather than another. But overreliance on simple defaults can be deceptive—and counterproductive for users. LATCH structures can and often are best used in combination.

For example, a state's tourism guide can be broken into regions, with information for the communities within each region alphabetized. An economic report can be organized by year, then by industry, or vice versa. A printed telephone directory seems destined for an alphabetic structure—though online, looking for a phone number and a name by entering an address has broken that mold. Reverse dictionaries and thesauruses are not exclusively or strictly alphabetical; more significantly, entries are categorically arranged.

A comparative review of baseball teams seems to naturally fit into a hierarchical structure, with teams and players ranked by their

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statistics—but reviewing the performance of one team’s players might be best aided by an alphabetical listing, so people can spot their favorites quickly. Biographies fit into a time-based chronological structure—or do they? More recently, award-winning biographers have used fiction-writing techniques such as vignette and flashbacks to enrich the subject’s achievements and personal qualities.

Why mix techniques? Not only so content can be quickly searched but also to signal readers that it has literally been designed with their satisfaction in mind.

### **STRUCTURING FOR NEW VIEWPOINTS**

So the basic organizational structures may fit certain situations well alone and better in tandem. But each, by definition, imposes limits on how information can be used—and ease of access is relative, as different users will have different viewpoints.

To take a familiar example, teachers frequently tell students who ask how a word is spelled to “look it up in the dictionary.” This is good advice much of the time, but what about those cases in which the student doesn’t even know how to begin to spell the word? With a word that is pronounced “kyoo,” do you begin in the Cs or Ks, or

would you take a wild guess and begin in the Qs? And what letter comes next? Assuming that you find anything at all, you'll find at least three different spellings—cue, Kew, and queue—depending on where you begin.

Publishers have long recognized the information access problems inherent in these default structures and have tried to come up with different user access schemes—primarily indexes and concordances. But all they really do is attempt to graft an alphabetic structure onto the existing structure. Yes, they can be helpful, but they aren't a cure-all for information usability and accessibility ills.

Besides limiting how users find information, each structure also constrains them to a certain view of the information. The very familiarity of LATCH structures means content using them can seem tiresome—perhaps why so many people avoid “looking it up” when it comes to spelling, assembly instructions, recipes, terms of use, and so on.

But Wurman points out that, when people look at information structured in an unexpected way, they can gain new insights unavailable from the “natural,” predictable structures: “Each vantage point, each mode of organization will create a new structure. And each new structure will enable you to see a different meaning, acting

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as a new method of classification from which the whole can be grasped and understood.”

Marketers and population researchers have long known that much of the value in directory information is gained by looking at it in different structures. They put the raw information into databases and slice and dice it according to different organizing principles, such as location, age, income or other demographic categories. Each different structure allows for different insights, types of knowledge not available from the alphabetic list.

This concept can be applied in many different ways. For example, my wife owns a set of gardening books divided into volumes according to the major categories of plants such as annuals, perennials, trees and shrubs, bulbs, herbs and spices, vegetables. But the information in these volumes encompasses all the climate zones in North America, which makes finding advice relevant to her garden alone a slow job of research. We find ourselves at times having to discard some information we just read because it just doesn't apply to our zone. The information in the gardening library might have been more useful organized by climate-zone locations, giving focused information in each book for only the gardeners in each zone.

This thought has evidently occurred to some authors and publishers; gardening books written for different climate zones, as well as for wet or dry conditions, gardening in cities or in the country, and so on, are now available from publishers such as Rodale Press, Sunset Books, and Oxmoor House, as well as regional publishers and university presses.

Publishers have also created visual dictionaries, designed to help people who know what a thing looks like but not what it's called. These dictionaries frequently use a category structure, rather than an alphabetic one (and many are restricted to one particular field), so if we want to find out the name of that double-reed instrument that's bigger than an oboe, we'd begin by looking in the music category.

In addition, these innovative dictionaries help put otherwise isolated terms into context. Thus, we not learn not only that the large double-reed is called a bassoon but also what the relative numbers of each type of instrument in a symphony orchestra are, as well as how they are arranged around that stand the conductor stands in front of—and in case we didn't know that, we'd learn that's called a podium.

Perhaps these alternative structures aren't the most strictly economical in terms of getting the reader straight to the answer sought, but they do lend themselves to the process of discovery.

These alternative structures can help readers find out the thing they didn't know and guide them to things they didn't know that they didn't know. Some users welcome that sort of educational serendipity

### **ONE ONLINE DOCUMENT, MANY STRUCTURES**

Online publishing opens up dramatic new ways to structure the same content for different users. Consider the collaborative online encyclopedia, Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)). We can begin by searching for a keyword or phrase, or by browsing one of their many subject area portals (a type of category structure). Because the reference is a hypertext, we can click a hyperlink to read related information, which can lead you down a trail of related topics. For someone reading an article that includes an historical reference, a list of events that occurred on that same date or during the same

year is no more than a mouse click away. That makes it easy to see the historical context (a time structure).

The Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)) is another good example of giving users multiple avenues for sorting through information. Looking for detailed information about a single movie or a comprehensive list of the movies that an actor has performed in? Or a particular quote or information about a movie production company? Users don't have to try to sift such information from a structure designed as a static repository. The IMDB begins and ends with anticipating the needs of many users with widely differing viewpoints.

Whether publishing on paper or online, we do our audiences (and therefore ourselves) a favor by spending time planning the basic structure of our documents and ways to make data-based searches quick, specific, and fruitful. Think about the possible advantages to be gained by providing alternate viewpoints to jumpstart an audience's attention, engagement, and comprehension. The way we organize information is both the means and the end to making it accessible.

Good information design is more than a concept; like good design in any medium, it serves the people whose favor it woos.

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