

The Design Process: The Skill of the Translation

Each of us imposes order by the way we see things, by what we place importance on, or ignore. Authorship can be thought of as a particular order, a selection of words, ideas, and emotions unique to that particular person. The author's goal is to filter and synthesize in order to present a personal view of the world.

By using sequencing, color, scale, and complexity, the designer of a non-fiction book will overlay that order with another one that can greatly enhance it, create a tension between the two, or completely contradict it. Authors tend to view their manuscripts as complete when turned in, not as raw material. To have value, however, streams of words must be organized and presented in a way that makes them accessible and understandable, thereby giving them meaning. In truth, some authors submit a very unified text that needs little enhancement, while others greatly benefit from the designer's talents. Ideally, the design will combine the author's content with a strong presentation so that both work together to create a result greater than the sum of the parts.

In order to learn how this happens, what effect it can have on the resulting product, and how to avoid conflicting ideas, it's useful to understand some of the approaches and processes the designer will use.

To organize and present the author's words and ideas, the designer has three "tools" to use: structure, aesthetics, and context. The balance of these elements is often influenced by the type of publication. For instance, good structure and order are essential to reference publishing, trendy magazines rely heavily on aesthetics and style, and a history narrative requires appropriate context. Regardless of which one is dominant, however, all three must be working in sync for the design to be effective. This can make the difference between a modest seller and a steady seller.

Structure is essential. It is the supporting framework—the studs, walls, and room dividers of the house you are building. It adds functionality to raw materials, shows the reader what kinds of information to expect, and provides accessibility to the content. Without it you have no idea where to begin.

The pages of words that make up the manuscript must be divided before they are useable and available to the reader. Structuring the manuscript involves ordering the information on each page of the layout using visual navigation cues such as color, size, font style, and position to create a hierarchy and sequence that matches the ordering of the content. All of these aspects of structure work to organize and support the author's message.

Consistency is key. Visual cues must be applied uniformly throughout the layout so the reader quickly learns what they stand for. An innovative design that changes

from page-to-page and has all sorts of variables is likely to be viewed as annoying, disorienting, even stressful to read. If it's overly ordered and structured, however, then it loses pacing and flow and ceases to be a narrative. A well-organized book makes us comfortable.

A simple test: Is the layout confusing? Can you easily find what you are looking for? Do you have to search for related materials or are they grouped together? Assuming the manuscript is well written and edited, then the clutter and confusion indicate failure on the designer's part to address organization and structure correctly or adequately.

Aesthetics means style, point of view, and attitude. This is a matter of much more importance than picking colors; it will attract potential buyers and help them decide if a particular book interests them.

When we go book browsing, we *do* judge books by their looks—we have to. We can't read an entire book before we purchase it so we use the available visuals and the flap copy to tell us about the content. From that little bit, we judge what it's about (rightly or wrongly), and whether we want it. Consumer purchases of books are almost entirely discretionary. People are buying objects they desire, not ones they need, and in this situation what really matters is what's personal—what speaks to us, appeals and attracts us—and these emotions spring from the aesthetics of the design. Because of this, aesthetics is the fastest route to targeting the audience you wish to reach. Here's where all those intangible qualities you identified in your design brief—accessible, authoritative, friendly, inspirational—turn into a specific look that attracts a particular audience.

In your zeal to get the message across, however, don't overdo it! That's a fairly common mistake. The *way* in which you do it is critical as well. What fonts, what colors, what graphic forms, what pictures, and how many of each should be used? Different choices need to be made for different ages and audiences so it's essential that the book be designed using the style-language of the intended audience. Once you have a design in hand, I urge you to take the time to ask the correct audience and age group whether the design appeals to them—you really can't judge for others.

It's also important that the aesthetic look chosen by the designer coexists comfortably with the content. Once it becomes ornamentation (design for design's sake) then it becomes divorced from the content and may outright conflict with it. At the very least, it'll be really annoying.

A good test: is the texture, illustration, or graphic element essential to the story, or is it decoration, or debris? The right kind and amount of decoration or illustration delivers the needed emotional tone but surplus clutter is simply noise; it makes for viewer fatigue and misreading of content. However, keep in mind the age and audience: what's surplus clutter to a 50-year-old may look great to a 20-year-old!

Context is the third tool, and this refers to settings or surroundings. In publishing, context has two parts: the one within the covers of the book, that occurs between images or between text and image, and the one that occurs outside of the book—the circumstances surrounding the selling and reading of it. Design can heavily influence the first, and only marginally influence the second.

With digital work, the words are fluid—never definitive or final. For those enamored of everything digital, this flexibility is one of its great strengths. But it also makes it ever-so-easy to remove information from its context. Printed pages give you control over the order of presentation—the way the news is delivered or the story told—which is an important part of a book’s value. A published book maintains the identical interior sequence, hierarchy, and context for each reader.

While the author’s words and ideas remain in the intended sequence, the designer’s layout will influence the context they appear in which can greatly affect your understanding of the content. It can create collisions that make you stop and think, ones that make you laugh or squirm, or enable you to compare content or recognize relationships that you’ve never noticed before.

In many ways the interior context of an illustrated or reference book controls our perception of the information presented. By bringing something to the foreground, or setting it apart, that information has been made more important. The sum total of all the decisions regarding settings or surroundings translates for the reader into relationships, meanings, patterns, and hopefully, communication and understanding. That makes it critical to shape the context to evoke the right interpretation. To my mind, this is one of the most important aspects of the book design process.

It’s not uncommon to be presented with a design for review and feel that it isn’t as strong or cohesive as it could be but you can’t put your finger on just what needs changing, or what is wrong. When you find yourself in this situation, try to determine whether it’s unclear WHAT is being communicated, or if the problem is with HOW it’s being said. If it’s the latter, understanding whether it’s the structure, the aesthetics, or the context that’s not working should enable you and your designer to diagnose the problem and find an effective solution.

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