

# What is Information Design?

Information design is the process of making information more usable through a variety of design methodologies, including:

- Graphic design
- Instructional design
- Typography, page layout, and book and print publication design
- Illustration
- Interface design
- Interactivity design
- Programming
- User experience design
- Information architecture
- Written and oral communication

## What's the difference between technical writing and information design?

The profession of technical writing has changed enormously. 50 years ago, technical writers were typically experts in their subject matter. The author of a book on mining technology was normally a mining engineer, and the author of a how-to book on growing garlic was most likely a farmer. It's much more common today to turn such a project over to a professional writer, who gathers technical information from several subject matter experts. The true subject matter expertise of today's technical writer is technical communication itself.

Not so long ago, technical writers typed out their product manually, or even wrote it out in longhand. From there it was typically sent to a professional typesetter, who set the type in columns and passed it on paper blocks to a layout artist, who laid it out on the page. Illustrations, tables, or graphs accompanying the text were created by a graphic artist. Along the way, editors, publishers, researchers, subject matter experts and other stakeholders added their input.

Since the invention of the personal computer, however, most technical writers are often expected to perform all these tasks and more by themselves.

Furthermore, technical writing is no longer restricted to the printed book, but can be found in a variety of information delivery systems, from the Web to online help, training materials, EPSS, even cell phones! Today, technical writers are expected not only to create text, but to design the medium on which those words are transmitted. Furthermore, once they have finished designing the medium, they often must go back and redesign the words to fit the medium.

In recognition of this cycle of design and redesign, technical communicators have increasingly employed the term "information design" as a better description of their expanding role.

# Definitions of Information Design

## Some Definitions of Information Design...

- Information design is concerned with making information accessible and usable to people. (David Sless, 1990)
- Information design is the intentional process in which information related to a domain is transformed in order to obtain an understandable representation of that domain. (Peter J. Bogaards, 1994)
- Information design is the defining, planning, and shaping of the contents of a message and the environments it is presented in with the intention of achieving particular objectives in relation to the needs of users. (ID News, 1999)
- Information design helps explain things and uses language, typography, graphic design, systems and business process improvement as its key tools. Information design is focused on users and is committed to using usability and other research and testing to find out whether its products actually achieve their objectives.(Text Matters, 1996)
- Information design is the art and science of preparing information so that it can be used by human beings with efficiency and effectiveness.
- Information design is the defining, planning, and shaping of the contents of a message and the environments it is presented in with the intention of achieving particular objectives in relation to the needs of users.

Most of these definitions were found on the website for the Society for Technical Communication's Information Design Special Interest Group at <http://www.stcsig.org/id/whatis.html>

# More Definitions of Information Design

## Saul Carliner's Definition

"Therefore, information design is defined as:

Preparing communication products so that they achieve performance objectives established for them.

This involves:

1. Analyzing communication problems
2. Establishing performance objectives that, when achieved, address these objectives
3. Developing a blueprint for a communication effort to address those objectives
4. Developing the components of the planned communication effort solution
5. Evaluating the ultimate effectiveness of the effort."

Saul Carliner, Bentley College

<http://saulcarliner.home.att.net/id/newmodel.htm>

The strength of the last definition is that it recognizes that most of information design is task-oriented – that is, involves designing information so that it can be used, usually in the performance of a task.

But it's not really communication products as such that have performance objectives – it's people, real people who have a task to perform, and need information to help them do it.

Therefore I would rephrase the definition as follows:

"Information design is the design of information to make it easier for people to use to achieve their performance objectives," or more concisely, "Information design is the process of making information usable through design".

# Taking information to knowledge

## What is the relationship between Data, Information, Knowledge, and Wisdom?

The paragraph below explains pretty clearly what we mean by “data”.

### “The Evolution from Data to Knowledge and Beyond

The basic building block of knowledge is data. **Data** is a fact represented as an item or event out of context and with no relation to other things. Examples of data are 27, 010110, and JAN. Without additional details we know nothing about any of these three pieces of data. Consider:

Is 27 a number in base ten, or is it in octal (which would translate to 23 in base ten)?

If 27 is a number in base ten what does it represent? Is it an age, a dollar amount, an IQ, a shoe size, or something else entirely?

What about 010110? Is it a binary number? Or is it a representation of a date, perhaps January 1, 1910? January 1, 2010? Or something else entirely?

Finally, what does JAN represent? Is it a woman’s name (or a man’s name)? Or does it represent the first month of the year?

All of these are examples of data because of the lack of context.”

- Reprinted from an article by Craig Mullins (<http://www.tdan.com/1008fe03.htm>).

**Data** is facts out of context.

**Information**, on the other hand, is data in context, “in formation”, as it were. Information includes sales figures, dates, quantities, distances, names, and the like.

**Knowledge** is information we can use. The concept of knowledge implies not only having information, but also the ability to use it, ability acquired through a thorough theoretical understanding or practical experience.

**Wisdom** can be thought of as knowledge applied. You may “know” that saving is a good thing, but you are only considered wise if you actually apply that knowledge and regularly put money in a safe place. In the training industry, this type of wisdom is often referred to as “**Mastery**”.

The Information Designer lives mainly in the spaces between information and knowledge.

## The Hierarchy of Intelligence

Intelligence is the product of the gathering and analysis of information.

	Data	Information	Knowledge	Wisdom
Definition from the Oxford Dictionary:	Known facts	Items of knowledge	A theoretical or practical understanding of a subject	Knowledge and experience together with the ability to apply them practically
Definition from the perspective of the technical communicator or information designer:	Undifferentiated, unstructured facts out of context.	Data “in formation” – that is defined, ordered, structured, and in context (i.e. “in relation”).	Information that is usable for practical application, i.e. “applicable information”.	The capacity to apply knowledge.
Example	010101	January 1, 2001	January 1, 2001, is my wedding day	January 1 is my anniversary, and I’ve already bought a thoughtful gift I know my spouse will love!