1 Rhetorical Background

Introduction to Visual Rhetoric

In the dozens of communications you engage in every day, you exercise your faculty of vision, gathering and recording information, sorting it, analyzing it, and synthesizing it—all in order to make sense of the world and help others do the same. You perform these and many other tasks through a miraculous, complex, and powerful instrument—your eye.

Sometimes your faculty of vision performs its work almost entirely alone—for example, if you're using pictorial instructions to assemble a bike, or taking a photograph of your friends. Most of the time, however, in the communication tasks you perform at school or work, vision often combines with speaking, listening, writing, and reading.

- If you attend a presentation, you may listen to the speaker and also read the handouts or the slides on a screen and jot down notes for future reference.

- If you write a short report for your boss, you'll see your document take shape on your computer screen, print a draft of it, and perhaps discuss it with a colleague to get feedback.

- If you receive an inquiry by e-mail, you'll probably scan it quickly, gather information by phone or on the web, then type out your e-mail response.

Amid all the speaking and listening, reading and writing, we can easily take vision for granted. Seeing comes so naturally to most of us that amid the busyness of our lives, we often overlook its importance—and its power.

This book is about using visual design as a practical communication tool in a variety of forms—from paragraphs and columns of text to tables, pictures, charts, and icons. We'll focus primarily on paper documents, though you'll find that the principles you learn in this book can readily apply to other forms of professional communication such as computer screens, including web sites and hypertext.

We'll explore not only a variety of visual forms but also a variety of everyday situations you may encounter in your career, whether you're designing documents in the workplace, as a consultant, or as a volunteer; whether you're designing for managers, clients, senior citizens, or children; or whether your readers are technical or nontechnical in their understanding of your subject. Throughout this book we'll explore how you can adapt your design to a variety of audiences and situations.

At this point you might be saying to yourself, "Hold on a minute! I'm not a designer or an artist, and I certainly can't draw!" You're not alone, so don't feel inept or intimidated. Like writing, design is something you learn, a skill and an art that you acquire, one increment at a time. Of course there's an aesthetic component to design—a page can be transformed into an elegant composition—and there's no denying that visual language is an extraordinarily creative medium. But that doesn't make it mysterious and hopelessly subjective. In fact, practical design is fairly rational—in the sense that each step of the way you can understand *why* you're making design decisions, which will enable you to assert control over the process.

The good news is that you've already learned quite a bit about the *why* of effective design, though you may not realize it yet. We want to help you build on that knowledge. Let's begin with some principles you're probably already familiar with and translate them into the language of design.

It Depends: The Importance of the Rhetorical Situation

You've probably taken a writing course or two, or perhaps you've done some writing on the job or for an organization you're active in. Given that experience, when someone asks you how you compose a document, you probably begin by thinking something like:

"Well, it depends. . . ."

Depends on what? Well, it depends on who your readers are. If you're writing to a friend, you might write your document one way, but if you're writing to a professor or a co-worker you might write it another way altogether. What else does it depend on? Well, it depends on what you're trying to accomplish—persuade your readers to sponsor your softball team, help your readers send e-mail, whatever. Anything else? Well, it depends on the context in which your

readers use your document—at a meeting with the big bosses, sitting by a computer, or talking on the phone.

The act of creating any workplace communication, then, is driven by the writer's understanding of three basic elements:

- *Audience*—those who are going to use your document: who they are, what they know about the subject, their previous experience with documents like the one you're designing, even their cultural background.

- *Purpose*—what you want your document to accomplish: persuade your readers to think or act a certain way, enable them to perform a task, help them understand something, change their attitude, and so on.

- *Context*—the circumstances in which readers will use your document: at their office desk, in a manufacturing plant while they're completing a task, while they're sitting around a conference table, and so on.

These three elements—audience, purpose, and context—make up the *rhetorical situation*. As a writer, you may consciously employ heuristics to define these elements, or you may approach them more intuitively. When the communication is simple or routine—say, responding to e-mail—you may start writing with hardly a moment's hesitation. When the communication is more complex—say, a proposal—you may have to expend significant time and effort coming to grips with audience, purpose, and context. In either case, the rhetorical situation drives the decisions you make during the entire communication process.

You know these things about the rhetorical nature of written, and oral, communication. By now they may even be second nature to you. We'll help you to continue thinking along those rhetorical lines as you progress through this book by learning to translate concepts you use in written and oral communication to visual design. To begin, then, when others ask how you solve any sort of visual communication problem or ask you whether a visual design they're developing is likely to be effective, you'll start by thinking, "Well, it depends. . . ."

In each document you design, you'll try to shape its visual language so that it fits the rhetorical situation—audience, purpose, and context.[1] The diagram in Figure 1.1 shows these variables.

Just as in writing, you'll continue defining the rhetorical situation throughout the design process. To illustrate how the rhetorical situation drives the communication process and applies specifically to visual design, let's examine the following scenario and its accompanying documents.

A Scenario for Applying Visual Rhetoric

Fred Noonan works as a part-time staff member of the Mapleton Community Center. Located in part of the old train depot on Front Street, the community center is

FIGURE 1.1   The rhetorical situation

Rhetorical Situation

Audience   Purpose   Context

Visual Language
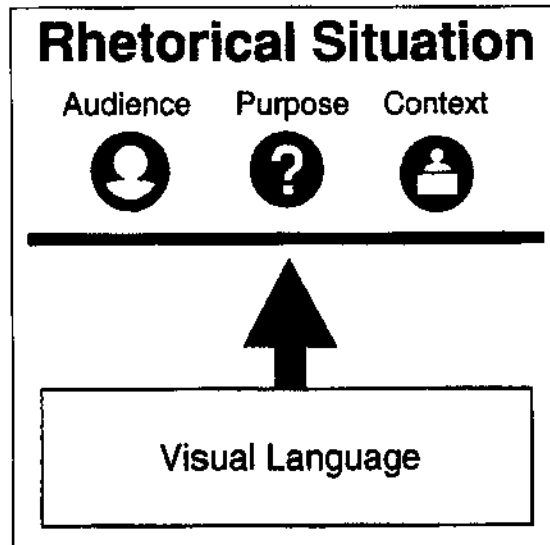
a nonprofit facility that offers recreational, informational, and various other support services to people in the greater Mapleton area. The center has two full-time and five part-time staff members.

After lurching along for many years on a precarious budget—cobbled together by fund-raising efforts and a small grant from the Community Chest—the Mapleton Community Center staff was recently surprised to receive a letter from Edna Jamison, indicating her intent to give the community center three million dollars. Mrs. Jamison, one of the founders of the center, has decided that her considerable estate will do more good if she dispenses some of its resources now rather than after she passes on.

Edna Jamison's gift comes with one major stipulation: The Mapleton Board, after consulting with all members of the center, has 30 days to develop a detailed plan for spending it. As a result, Jamison's remarkable offer has caused a flurry of activity at the community center, both among staff and the all-volunteer board of directors.

In response to this amazing turn of circumstances, the community center board held an emergency meeting at which they discussed how to fulfill the terms of the Jamison grant. The board developed two basic options for spending the money, one featuring a renovation and expansion of the current facilities in the old train depot, and the other calling for a new building to be erected on a small parcel of land a few blocks away. The board, however, remains open to other possibilities.

As a result of the board's decision, Fred Noonan finds himself charged with notifying all members of the Mapleton Community Center—people who have used the center, donated goods or money, or served as volunteers—about a special meeting to discuss the options for using the Jamison money. Specifically, the board has asked Fred to explain objectively the renovation and new-building options and to provide some data on membership, daily use, and expenditures to help guide the discussion.

Figures 1.2 through 1.5 show Fred's communication, an 11″ × 17″ foldout printed on 24-pound birch paper. (Figures 1.2–1.5 are reduced to about 70 percent of their actual size; see Figure 1.6 for a photo of the whole document.) Fred's document will be mailed to all members; copies will also be available at the door before the meeting.

How Fred's Document Responds Visually to the Rhetorical Situation

Because the rhetorical situation for any professional communication can be complex, accounting for everything that Fred has to consider as he creates his document would be impossible. But a synopsis of the rhetorical situation would look something like this:

- **Audience.** Fred's main readers will be Mapleton Community Center members, contributors, and volunteers—mostly parents and senior citizens. Because they support the center, Fred's readers will have a strong interest in choosing the right option. Younger members are also part of the audience even though they may not be decision makers.

- **Purpose.** The primary purpose of Fred's informational package is to help readers become part of the decision-making process—by presenting relevant information as clearly and objectively as possible. Although his main purpose is to enable rather than to persuade, Fred must also convince his audience to participate in the process.

- **Context.** Most readers will receive Fred's communication in their homes, where they will review it before the meeting and perhaps discuss the options informally with other members. They will then bring the document to the meeting. Some people may see Fred's communication for the first time at the meeting, where they will review it so they can contribute to the discussion.

The visual language that Fred uses in his information package responds to this rhetorical situation in a variety of ways, some of which we'll classify as global and large-scale, others as specific and local.

FIGURE 1.2 Fred's Mapleton letter

Mapleton Community Center

324 Main Street, Mapleton, Indiana 41600-1234   (434) 522-3333

April 23, 1998

Dear Friend of the Community Center:

We have some wonderful news! Through the generosity of Edna Jamison, a distinguished member of the Center's founding board, we have been offered a $3 million grant!

To the many of you who know and love Ms. Jamison, the nature of this gesture will be no surprise. The magnitude of her thoughtfulness, however, has overwhelmed all of us, and we know you will echo our profound thanks.

Ms. Jamison's benevolence brings with it some important work for us to do, and therefore the purpose of this letter is to ask that you attend a meeting, to be held at

Mapleton Community Center
Monday, May 11
7:00 p.m.

According to the terms of Ms. Jamison's grant, the Mapleton Community Center must submit within 30 days a comprehensive plan showing how we intend to use the money. More importantly, the grant stipulates that whatever plan we put forth must have the support of the Community Center's organization, including not only the Board of Directors and the staff, but also the membership as a whole.

The goals for the May 11 meeting are to:

◆ reach general consensus about use of the Jamison grant funds

◆ create a committee to help the Board write a detailed plan

◆ schedule a second (and final) meeting for ratification of the plan

To facilitate discussion, on the following pages we've outlined two general plans for improving and expanding of the Center with funds from Mrs. Jamison's gift. We look forward to hearing your responses to these two plans as well as any alternative ideas you have for using the funds. On the back page of this document we've also included some information about the operation, membership, and use of the Center.

We hope to see you on May 11.

Sincerely,

Fred Noonan
Program Assistant

Mapleton option 1 page

Option 1. Renovate the Old Depot

The existing depot, one of Mapleton's landmark buildings from the late nineteenth century, would be completely gutted and renovated. All of the depot's interior walls would be stripped bare and some would be removed. All of the heating and cooling systems would also be replaced. The renovation and remodeling would include:

♦ A new roof, all new energy-efficient windows, a new heating/cooling system, and refinishing of the exterior brick.

♦ Completely remodeled interior spaces, including the card/game, craft, exercise, meeting, and reading rooms.

♦ A new indoor water spa, with a capacity of ten.

♦ Additional office space for the staff and volunteers.

Total usable space. The renovation would result in 12,000 square feet of usable space, an increase of 4,000 square feet.

Cost. Approximately $1,700,000.

Schedule. Work would be done in stages so the Center could remain open during construction. Completion would take approximately 12 months.

Other use of funds. The remaining funds would be placed in a trust, interest on which would go toward meeting operating expenses as well as purchasing furniture, equipment, and books.
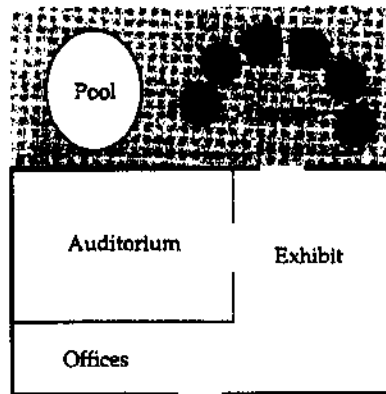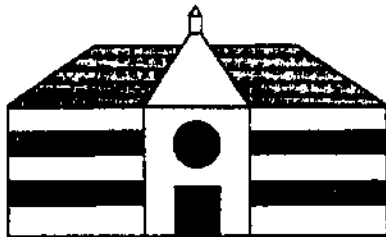
Exercise & Spa	Game & card	Reading
Crafts		Offices
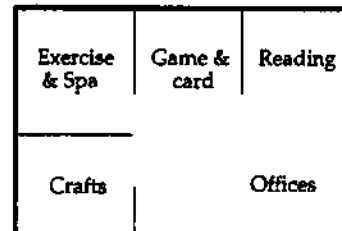
Tentative Floor Plan

Key Benefits of Option One

♦ Maintains the Center's current location in a historically significant building.

♦ Provides a stream of money that will significantly reduce annual operating expenses.

♦ Increases the usable space in the existing location from 8,000 to 12,000 square feet.

♦ Adds some new facilities such as the indoor water spa.

Mapleton option 2 page

Option 2. Relocate on a New Site

The relocation would include a three-acre site in town with total usable space of 30,000 square feet. The new building would be built in the same historical style of the depot, blending in with Mapleton's historic district. The new building would have two floors and a basement and would include:

◆ A card/game, craft, exercise, meeting, and reading room. Each of these rooms would be approximately twice as large as the existing rooms.

◆ An auditorium for concerts, plays, and other special events. The auditorium would seat approximately 400.

◆ An indoor shuffleboard arena in the basement.

◆ An outdoor wading pool, a fountain, and a walking garden.

Total usable space. The new building would have 30,000 square feet of usable space, an increase of 22,000 square feet.
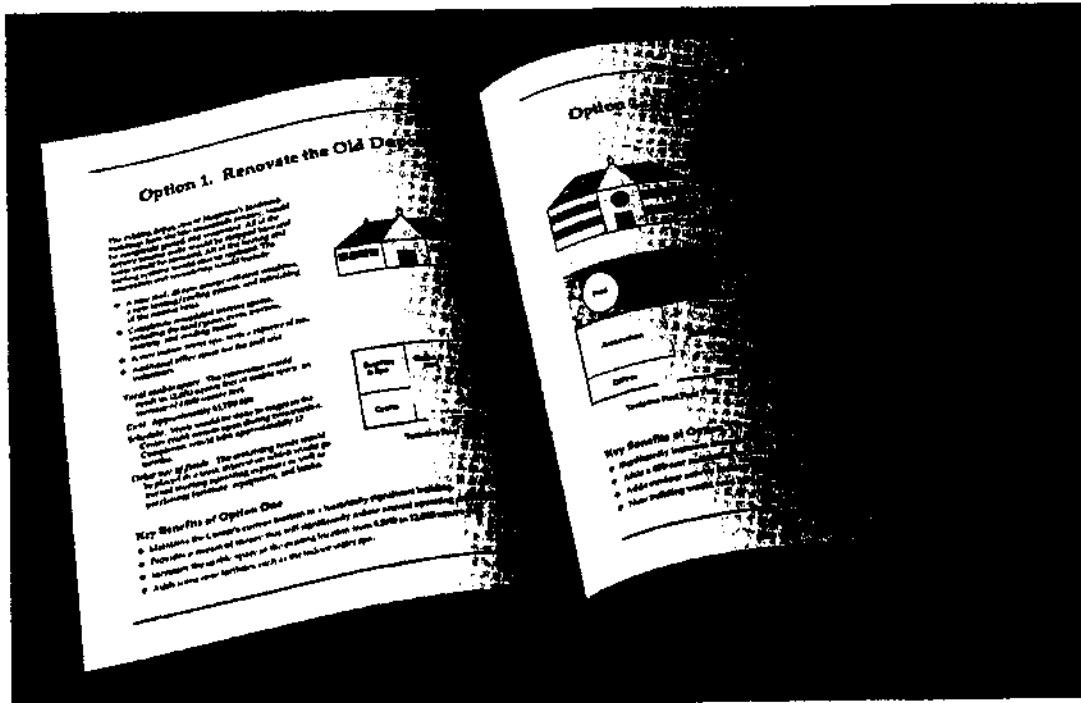
Cost. Approximately $2,500,000.

Schedule. The major work would take about nine months, and the Center could begin moving in shortly thereafter.

Other use of funds. All of the remaining funds would go toward furnishing and equipping the new building. No trust funds would meet operating expenses.

Tentative First Floor Plan

Key Benefits of Option Two

◆ Significantly increases the space available to the Center.

◆ Adds a 400-seat auditorium for performances, events, and meetings.

◆ Adds outdoor activity spaces with a wading pool and a walking garden.

◆ New building would need little maintenance and virtually no annual repairs.

FIGURE 1.5. Mapleton data sheet

Data about Mapleton Community Center

Expenses. Below is a breakdown of expenditures in several key areas over the past six years.

Legend: □ Other □ Utilities ■ Maintenance ■ Staff

(Chart y-axis: 250000, 200000, 150000, 100000, 50000, 0; x-axis: 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996 1997)

Memberships. Below is a breakdown of increases in memberships, both individual and family.

Legend: □ Individual ■ Family

(Chart y-axis: 800 700 600 500 400 300 200 100 0; x-axis: 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996 1997)

Daily Use. Below is data about the daily use of spaces in the Center during selected months.

Rooms	January		April		July		October		Ave. Monthly	
	1996	1997	1996	1997	1996	1997	1996	1997	1996	1997
Card/Game	67	138	54	145	21	47	62	174	51	126
Crafts	110	178	90	123	27	58	123	195	88	139
Exercise	233	321	114	173	84	121	211	391	161	252
Meeting	37	59	22	72	11	32	41	98	28	65
Reading	53	77	49	65	13	38	54	83	42	66

FIGURE 1.6 Perspective view of the Mapleton information package

Large-Scale Responses to Audience, Purpose, and Context

On the large scale, the 11" x 17" four-panel format responds to the needs of readers who will prefer to have all the information together in a single package as they discuss issues before and during the meeting. The heavier paper also increases the usability of the document as it's folded, unfolded, refolded, and stuck into coat pockets and purses.

Another large-scale design element, which responds to both purpose and context, is the order of the document's major elements. First, the cover letter provides necessary background as well as information about the logistics of the meeting and its goals. The interior of the document includes the options pages (placed side-by-side for easy comparison) describing and discussing the two alternatives—the renovation and the new building. Finally, the back page displays some key data about the center in recent years.

Additional responses to the rhetorical situation can be seen in the document's overall appearance. The brochure-like format gives readers something more professional looking than four pages merely stapled together, something out of the ordinary—a cause for celebration. The visual demeanor responds to purpose by

giving the message a level of dignity, which reflects positively on the donor, Edna Jamison, and shows the center's appreciation for her generosity.

Local-Level Responses to Audience, Purpose, and Context

The cover letter's typography responds to audience needs because it is a very readable choice for young and old members alike. The letter responds to the context by listing the time, date, and place of the meeting in large, bold type that's centered on the page. The bulleted list that outlines the goals of the meeting helps the document achieve its purpose of involving members in the decision-making process. The single-page letter also responds to context because a lengthier letter would make the whole package less usable, if not unwieldy, by jeopardizing the four-page design.

The parallel layout of the renovate and build-new options pages helps fulfill the purpose of the document by presenting these two plans objectively. Each option description contains the same number of bullets in its lists, and each also uses the same headers and visual markers to emphasize parallel pieces of information. The parallel arrangement responds to context by placing the drawings of the buildings and the floor plans in the center of the two-page spread, enabling readers to compare them side-by-side. The narrow text columns on the options pages make these pages inviting and readable.

The last page also responds to audience needs by displaying the data in two bar charts and a table that enable readers to compare information quickly and accurately. In this way, the displays fulfill the purpose of the document by encouraging informed discussion about expenses, membership, and building use. The labels on the charts, the nearby legends, and the use of lines and gray shading in the table clarify the data by enabling readers to locate specific values more easily.

Summing Up Fred's Design Decisions

Most, if not all, of the design decisions Fred makes, then, are driven by the rhetorical situation—audience, purpose, and context. And as Fred tailors his design to the rhetorical situation, he's thinking about many of the same things he thinks about when he writes: Will readers understand how I'm arranging the information? Am I adequately emphasizing key points? Are the design elements clear to my readers? Am I getting the most mileage out of my design? What kind of tone does my design project? Will readers find my design credible, building their trust in me, the center staff, and the information itself?

Many of these questions may sound familiar to you because you probably ask yourself the same things as you write. These are precisely the same kinds of questions that you'll start asking yourself as you *design* documents. So let's talk about some of the communication terms you already know and how they apply to design. We'll call these terms *cognates* because they cross over from writing to design, as we'll show in the next section.

Visual/Verbal Cognates

Even in the short Mapleton Community Center document, the range of visual responses to the rhetorical situation may seem quite large and complex if you consider all of the design elements Fred includes in the document. Still, in terms of their rhetorical impact, many of these design elements can be categorized according to the following six strategies:

- Arrangement
- Emphasis

- Clarity
- Conciseness

- Tone
- Ethos

In the list above, we placed the six cognates in pairs because of their natural affinities. *Arrangement* and *emphasis* strategies pertain primarily to the visual structure and organization of the document. *Clarity* and *conciseness* strategies pertain primarily to functional matters of style, of making the design readable and efficient. *Tone* and *ethos* strategies relate primarily to readers' subjective responses to the visual language, its voice and credibility. In this section we'll define each of these terms and translate them into the visual language of document design. Along the way, we'll use examples from Fred Noonan's document to demonstrate each strategy. Beyond this initial explanation, you'll have plenty of time to familiarize yourself with these strategies throughout the book: Parts Two, Three, and Four will cover them in more depth.

As in written communication, these six cognate strategies interrelate and overlap. Just as it's not always possible to pinpoint whether an aspect of a document—say, the technicality of its language—adds to the clarity of the writing or to its conciseness, neither can you always say that a certain design choice—say, the placement of headings or drawings on a page—is entirely a matter of arrangement rather than ethos, of clarity rather than emphasis. Chances are that many design choices, from the most large-scale to the most local and specific, fall into several categories.

Arrangement

Arrangement means order, the organization of visual elements so that readers can see their structure—how they cohere in groups, how they differ from one another, how they create layers and hierarchies. In Figure 1.7a, the placement of the numbers on

the left margin creates visual cohesion among items in the sequence. In Figure 1.7b, the numbering and indentation create hierarchical relationships among the items.

FIGURE 1.7 Arrangement through numbering

1.	1.0
	1.1
2.	1.2
3	
	2.0
4.	2.1
5.	2.2

a   b
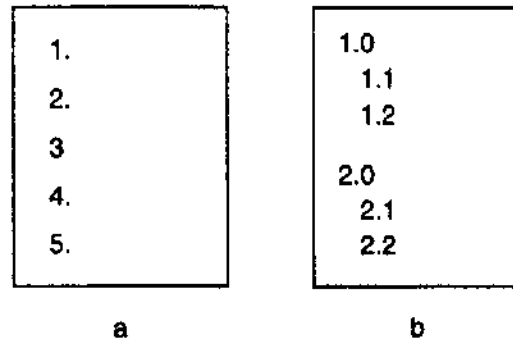
In some electronic communications, such as web pages, the arrangement is *dynamic.* That is, when the viewer looks at a screen, the information on that screen might be sequential (paragraphs of text) or hierarchical (text with levels of headings). But the arrangement of the screens themselves is virtually random, depending on what links the reader activates.

Visual arrangement also involves spatial orientation within a field, as in left and right, up and down. For example, in the Mapleton Community Center package, Fred places the drawings of the buildings and the floor plans in the center of the two-page layout. Alternative placements could have been both outside, both to the right, or both to the left (Figure 1.8). But Fred chooses to center the drawings because that arrangement best enables readers to compare them—a direct response, as we've seen, to the rhetorical situation.

FIGURE 1.8 Spatial alternatives for the options pages

a   b   c
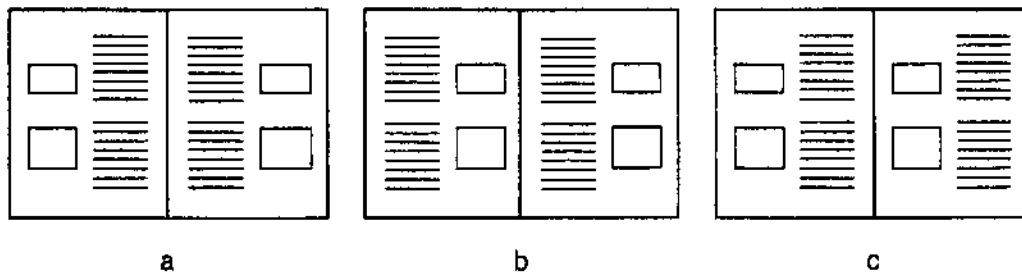
Arrangement also governs the organization of the text itself. In that same two-page options layout, recall the way Fred places the column headings (e.g., "Total usable space") on the margin, then indents the text. Doing so makes the headings

more visible, again helping readers compare options as well as maintaining objectivity through visual parallelism.

On Fred's data sheet, an arrangement strategy appears in the divided bar graphs—they're vertical rather than horizontal. The configuration of data in the table—months and years at the top, categories on the left—is also an arrangement strategy that gives readers easy access as well as fits the available space on the page (Figure 1.9).

**FIGURE 1.9   Arrangement strategies for the data sheet**
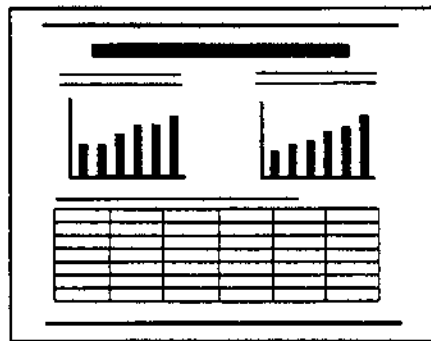
Beyond pictures, text, and data displays, arrangement also governs page orientation, as we've seen in Fred's decision to put the data sheet in landscape format, even though the document's other pages were in portrait format. That decision also is rhetorically driven—it gives him more flexibility in presenting the data on a single page and in making that data accessible to his readers.

Emphasis

In any communication, even a single paragraph, the rhetorical situation demands that some parts are more important than others and should therefore receive more attention. This prominence or intensity of expression is what we mean by *emphasis*.

Whether on a page or a computer screen, some elements in a visual field will invariably stand out—because the type is bigger or bolder, the image is darker, and so on. Emphasis strategies are about *controlling* what stands out. For example, in Fred's cover letter he emphasizes the time and place for the meeting by centering this text, increasing its type size, and boldfacing it. This emphasis strategy is driven by the rhetorical situation: Above all else, readers need the facts about the meeting time and place, and they need to locate that information easily if they return to the letter to retrieve those facts (see Figure 1.10). Similarly, Fred emphasizes the goals of the meeting by accenting these items with bullets as well as indenting them and adding space around them, all of which give them greater visual presence on the page. On

FIGURE 1.10 Emphasis strategies for the letter
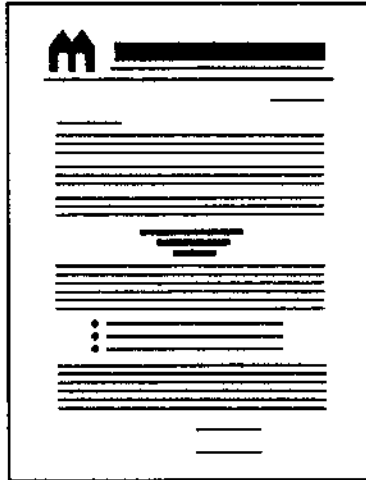
the options pages, Fred emphasizes the drawings by arranging them in the center of the two-page spread and by placing plenty of space around them. Emphasis on the data page results primarily from Fred's decision to use graphs instead of tables for some of the data and to use shading within the bars.

Emphasis at a higher level can be seen in the headers used at the top of every page in Fred's document, including the MCC letterhead on the cover letter. The headers serve as markers in the arrangement scheme, of course, but their large size is an emphasis strategy driven by the rhetorical situation: Fred's readers need a quick map that highlights the document's basic features as well as draws readers in.

Emphasis occurs on screen as well as in print. Examples of emphasis strategies on screen include buttons, words, or other items that flash or blink; white/gray contrast to indicate operative ruler choices; or the placement of pull-down menus at the top of the screen.

Clarity

Clarity strategies help the receiver to decode the message, to understand it quickly and completely, and, when necessary, to react without ambivalence. Within the verbal domain, clarity issues occur at every level—from word to phrase, from sentence to paragraph, from section to whole communication. In the visual domain, clarity strategies span the whole gamut of visual language, everything from typefaces to charts to illustrations.

For example, in Fred Noonan's document, a concern for clarity motivates his choice of 11-point Palatino with two points of leading—a very readable typographical choice for young and old readers alike (see Figure 1.11).

FIGURE 1.11. Fred's readable text

> According to the terms of Ms. Jamison's grant, the Mapleton
> Community Center must submit within 30 days a comprehensive
> plan showing how we intend to use the money. More impor-
> tantly, the grant stipulates that whatever plan we put forth must
> have the support of the Community Center's organization,
> including not only the Board of Directors and the staff but also
> the membership as a whole.

Compare the clarity of Fred's text with the same text in Avant Garde with no lead-
ing, seen in Figure 1.12.

FIGURE 1.12. A less readable version of Fred's text

> According to the terms of Ms. Jamison's grant, the Maple-
> ton Community Center must submit within 30 days a
> comprehensive plan showing how we intend to use the
> money. More importantly, the grant stipulates that whatever
> plan we put forth must have the support of the Community
> Center's organization, including not only the Board of Direc-
> tors and the staff but also the membership as a whole.

Does the text look dense and jumbled? If it does, the Avant Garde creates a clarity
problem, and Fred's choice of Palatino was a wise one. Similarly, Fred's use of nar-
row text columns on the options pages facilitates reading, and thus clarity. Printing
the document on birch-colored paper also enhances clarity because it contrasts
sharply with the text. Printing the document on a dark blue paper, however, would
have seriously reduced clarity.

Visual clarity also plays an important role in other elements of Fred's informa-
tion package. For example, Fred achieves clarity in the table by shading two of the
rows, enabling readers to follow the horizontal flow of information. The multiple
shades in the divided bar charts enable readers to compare data at a glance. In the
drawings on the options pages, details showing the roofs and windows and the gen-
eral layout of the buildings enhance the clarity of these drawings without making
them too technical.

Many of these same clarity strategies apply to e-mail, hypertext documents, and
web pages. However, because designers working in a screen medium sometimes
have little or no control over the equipment with which readers access these com-
munications, even the best intended clarity strategies may evaporate into cyber-
space. For example, if the reader of a web site has a small black-and-white screen

with poor resolution, the text may not be nearly as legible as it would be if the reader had a large, full-color monitor with high resolution.
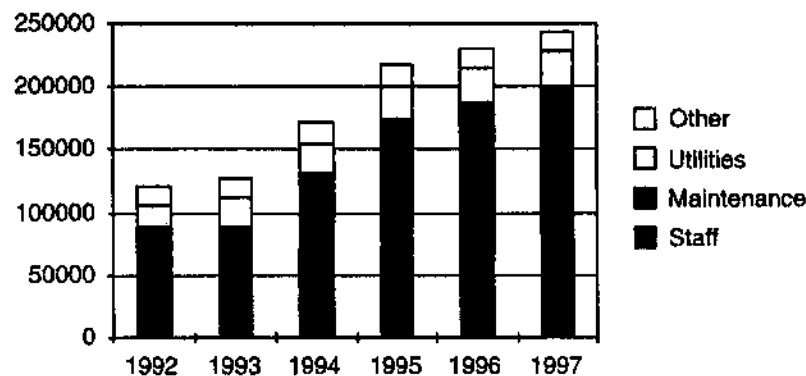
Conciseness

Conciseness refers to the visual bulk and intricacy of the design—for example, the number of headings and lists, lines and boxes, colors and gray scales; the detail of the drawings and data displays; the variations in the size, ornateness, and spacing of the text. While associated with economy, visual conciseness doesn't mean designing every visual element as minimally as possible. Rather, it means generating designs that are *appropriately* succinct within a particular situation. You can test visual conciseness by asking yourself: Does a given design element do some rhetorical work? If it doesn't, that element lacks conciseness.

To take a simple example, Fred's desire to put all the necessary information onto a single, highly portable sheet of paper was driven in part by a concern for conciseness. A piecemeal approach might have allowed him to include more details, but it would have obliged community center members to handle a whole sheaf of documents both before and during the meeting. So overall, conciseness won out for sound rhetorical reasons.

Frequently, conciseness decisions are complicated because they involve trade-offs—or balancing acts—with the other cognate strategies. For example, Fred decides not to use gridlines in his divided bar graphs showing expenses and membership trends. While that decision allows him to show the data without adding visual clutter, it entails a slight trade-off because adding gridlines might have enhanced clarity by enabling readers to compare more accurately the segments within the bars, as shown in Figure 1.13.

FIGURE 1.13 Mapleton data display with gridlines

The sans serif type in the Daily Use table helps conciseness because it's more streamlined than the Palatino typeface and just as readable (if not more) in the open space of the table, resulting in no erosion in clarity (and possibly a slight

gain). The simple line drawings of the building elevations and floor plans are concise, but their emphasis on concept rather than detail might leave some questions unanswered—e.g., room dimensions, location of equipment—a potential clarity issue. As you can see just from these parts of Fred's design, defining an appropriate level of conciseness usually depends on how it affects the other cognates.

This same interdependence also occurs in screen design, but here two related issues arise. First, most readers are used to—and can effectively handle—more visual variety on their screen than they might be comfortable with in print. The visual clutter of hypertext stacked screens, pull-down menus, and on-line help balloons may not be much of a conciseness issue. On the other hand, on-line readers might be particularly sensitive to visual conciseness in web sites because there an elaborate design can reduce usability by slowing down readers who want to scroll quickly through the screens.

Tone

You know well that your word choices reveal your attitude toward your readers and your subject. Through your *tone* of voice, you can sound serious, humorous, excited, sincere, flippant, formal, glum, concerned, technical, and so on. You can also reveal the same range of voices through visual language—by your selection of typefaces, by your use of bold and italics, by your use of space, and by countless other design elements. Just as important, tone plays a crucial role in building ethos because the tone of voice you use to communicate with someone—verbally or visually—tells that person a lot about your character (more on this below).

In Fred's Mapleton document the visual language projects a friendly and accessible yet businesslike and dignified tone. The familiar serif typeface humanizes the message and may provide a measure of sincerity, as does the warm beige paper stock. The simplicity of the drawings and floor plans in the options layout gives those two pages a nontechnical look that makes the information friendlier and more accessible to readers. The brochure-like quality of the document gives it a level of seriousness and formality while also suggesting a festive tone—the Jamison grant is certainly something extraordinary, something worth celebrating.

In screen design the variances in tone can be extreme, ranging from visually frenetic web sites to visually sedate e-mail. Perhaps the most obvious incarnations of visual tone are the fantastic colors and backgrounds that appear in web pages. In some cases it's serious and businesslike, while in others it's playful and boisterous, calculated to draw and hold the viewer's attention. By contrast, the visual tone projected by the typography of most e-mail is decidedly reserved and matter-of-fact.

Ethos

In any communication the speaker or writer tries to establish a trusting relationship with the listener or reader. To do that, the sender of the message needs to cul-

tivate a sense of character or credibility that will appeal to the audience. Visual language also needs to build trust if it's going to respond adequately to the rhetorical situation.

In Fred's informational package, several of his design choices reflect his concern with establishing ethos with his audience. First and most obvious, Fred uses the Mapleton Community Center letterhead and logo, which have built-in credibility with his readers since they're already active members of the organization. Besides giving the document credibility, the logo (Figure 1.14) makes the message compelling and relevant to readers because, as the center's symbol, it speaks to their everyday concerns and hopes and those of others they know in the community.

FIGURE 1.14   Mapleton logo

Fred also builds ethos with his audience by putting everything into a single document that opens like a brochure, giving the whole message a measure of dignity without being overly formal or stodgy. At the same time, the use of linework at the top and bottom of the pages provides a framing device (Figure 1.15).

FIGURE 1.15 · Ethos of the options pages
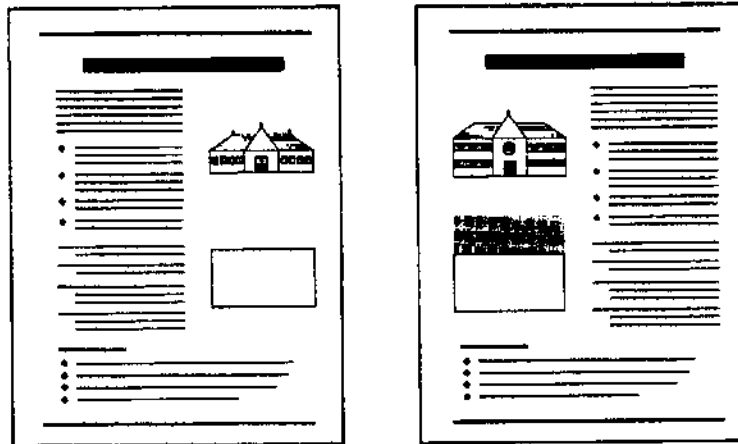
Finally, Fred's care in developing the parallel display of the two options contributes to the ethos of the document by persuading readers that the board isn't trying to sell them one of the options over the other. By giving the options equal visual

treatment, Fred tries to convey to his readers that the plan isn't a "done deal" and that the board genuinely needs and wants their input on using the Jamison gift.

In general, ethos strategies employed in electronic communications function in the same way that they do for paper documents—certain design choices *reassure* readers, or fulfill their expectations. As with clarity strategies, however, some design choices calculated to build ethos for on-screen communications rely on the receiver's equipment for their full impact.

Interdependence of the Cognate Strategies

As you can see from the examples we've provided, the designer can implement the six cognate strategies through a wide range of visual language. However, the six strategies don't work alone. They are closely related to each other, a tight-knit family, *interdependent*. They have to work in concert, not in isolation, balancing and complementing one another. And so when the designer implements one strategy, the impact on other strategies has to be constantly monitored.

For example, Fred's use of the Mapleton building logo achieves strong emphasis because of its dark, bold design. At the same time, this emphasis strategy enhances ethos by giving the Mapleton documents an immediate identity; emphasis also enhances clarity because readers will easily recognize this image. The emphasis strategy strengthens both ethos and clarity. In the document's overall design, conciseness and arrangement help ethos: By limiting his document to four pages and arranging the information in a brochure-like format, Fred gives the document credibility, making it look important and even a bit ceremonial.

We can isolate the six cognate strategies for discussion and analysis—and we will continue to do that throughout this book. However, as working strategies marshaled by the designer to solve a given rhetorical problem, the six cognates *are* thoroughly interdependent.

Process Example—Mapleton Center

Earlier in this chapter you saw Fred's design for the informational package to be distributed to members of the community center. That design had to solve a specific rhetorical problem. However, like most document designs, Fred's represents a good deal of thought and planning, misfires and double-takes—the same kind of messiness that writers experience as they work through a writing problem. Let's go back and narrate Fred's process as he adapted his design to the rhetorical situation.

## Understanding the Rhetorical Situation

As we saw earlier, Fred has to start by analyzing the audience, purpose, and context of his communication. He knows that his primary readers will be Mapleton

residents—both young and old—who use or support the community center and thereby have a vested interest in the place. Fred also wants his document to empower his readers by objectively presenting facts and issues and thereby drawing readers into the decision-making process. The larger context of Fred's communication is the whole business surrounding the Jamison grant, but his most immediate contextual concern is that people will use the document both at home and at the meeting for review and decision making. Fred also realizes at least one important *ethical* concern: He doesn't want to develop a design so expensive that it's out of character with the spirit and tradition of the community center. In other words, given the precarious budget the center has operated on since its beginning, he wouldn't feel right about lavishing money on the document just because of the Jamison grant.

Although a communicator's understanding of the rhetorical situation will continue to evolve during the process of creating a message, a clear understanding of the audience, purpose, and context at the start is extremely important. That understanding of the rhetorical situation will drive the design process, making it not only more effective and productive but more *efficient* as well. That's why Fred pays careful attention to these matters early on.

Just as in writing, Fred's design process includes several kinds of activities, beginning with invention, followed by revision, and ending with editing and fine-tuning. And like writing, the invention and revision phases are not lock-step but fluid and dynamic, with the designer sometimes inventing and revising in more than one cycle before starting to edit and fine-tune (Figure 1.16).

Cyclic nature of design
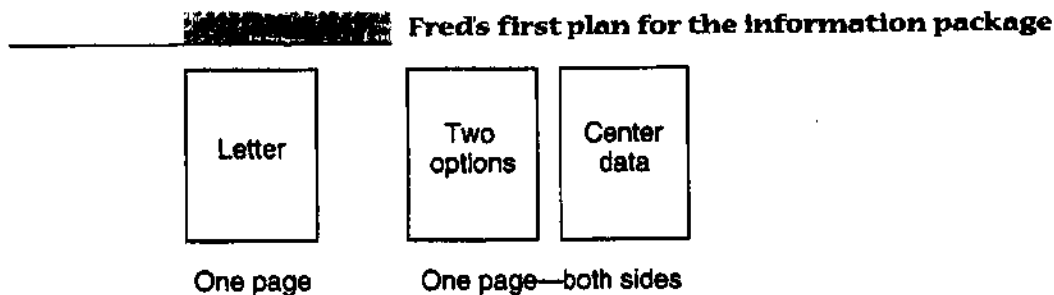
Invention ➡ Revision ➡ Editing
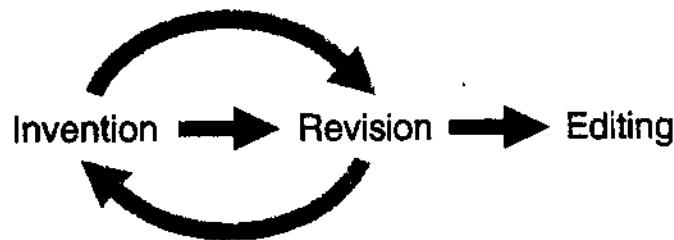
While the design process unfolds, the verbal text continues to evolve as well, though here we'll pay less attention to the writing so that we can concentrate primarily on visual language. So let's walk through Fred's design process and see how it evolves, particularly as it does so in response to his understanding of the rhetorical situation.

Invention

As Fred begins to think about his design problem, he realizes that he has three groups of information to work with:

1. An announcement of the Jamison gift and the meeting
2. The data about the center's membership, operating expenses, and use
3. The information about the two options for using the Jamison gift

Initially, Fred has a simple and direct solution in mind. He envisions a package that contains two documents, the letter and a two-sided information sheet (Figure 1.17). The information sheet, he thinks, can simply serve as an enclosure with the letter.

Fred's first plan for the information package

```
┌───────────┐     ┌───────────┐┌───────────┐
│           │     │           ││           │
│           │     │   Two     ││  Center   │
│  Letter   │     │ options   ││   data    │
│           │     │           ││           │
│           │     │           ││           │
└───────────┘     └───────────┘└───────────┘
  One page         One page—both sides
```

First, Fred drafts his letter. He decides to put the good news right up front, then to state the place, date, and time of the meeting. He next explains the issue of developing a plan, outlines the goals for the meeting, and refers readers to the attached flyer and data sheet, closing with "Hope to see you there." Visually, Fred uses the center's letterhead stationery and follows the page display conventions of a letter—salutation, paragraphs in a single column, and signature. He also chooses a conventional typeface: Palatino in 11 point, the standard for this organization and a typeface that will seem familiar to readers on the mailing list. (Remember, Figures 1.2–1.5 were reduced in size.)

As Fred designs his letter, he also makes some important design choices to create emphasis.

- He centers the time and place of the meeting and enlarges and boldfaces the text.
- He puts the goals of the meeting in a bulleted list.
- He visually isolates the last sentence of the letter (the invitation to the meeting).

And, significantly, Fred decides to keep the letter to a single page, even though that constrains what he can say. For example, while he must explain the news of the grant, he realizes that he must exclude biographical information on Edna Jamison.

He also decides that the letter does not need to discuss the less important terms of the grant. In the end, holding the letter to one page makes it more manageable for his readers—and more emphatic. Now Fred has a pretty good working draft of his page display (Figure 1.18).

Fred's letter design
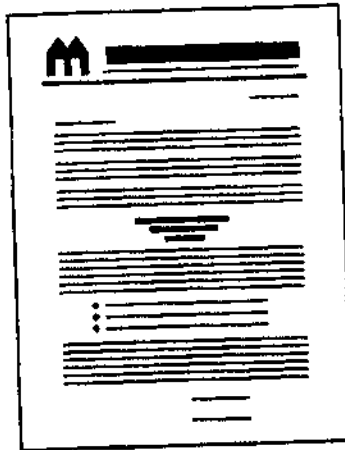
Next, Fred assembles the data about the center. From the file cabinet in the office he retrieves annual reports that contain data about memberships and yearly expenses. The data have never been graphed before, so he's curious about how the trends will look when he displays them visually. To do that, he uses multiple bar graphs because this conventional arrangement enables readers to compare lots of data categories over time. To show expenses, he creates the bar graph shown in Figure 1.19.

Fred's draft of the data display
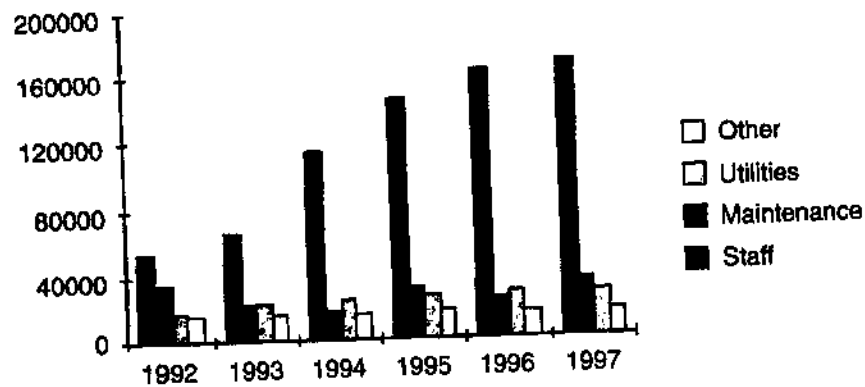
However, this chart looks cluttered and unprofessional, detracting from clarity, conciseness, and ethos. As he looks at his multiple bar graph, Fred becomes less convinced that readers will be able (or even want) to make precise comparisons between the different categories of expenses. So he decides to simplify things by using a divided bar graph instead (see Figure 1.20).

 Fred's final version of the data display
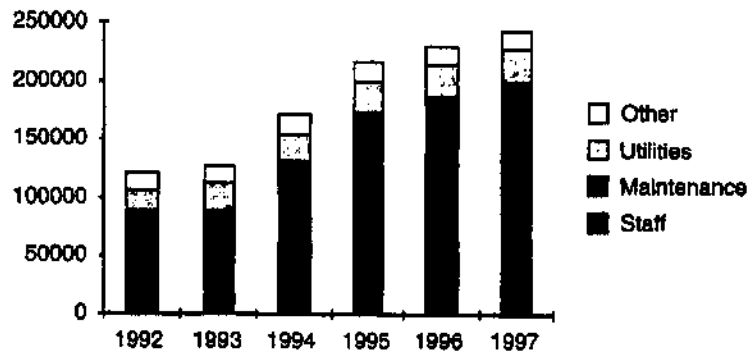
This conventional arrangement enables readers to see the big trends more quickly, while also giving them the option of comparing smaller units of data if they feel the need to examine the numbers more closely. Fred thinks few of them will, though.

Fred then turns to the data about the number of people who daily use the center's various spaces. He doesn't think these data will be very clear if he places them in a chart, so he decides to use a table instead. He creates two levels of column headings to differentiate between 1996 and 1997, an arrangement and clarity decision. For the numerical data, Fred uses a sans serif typeface (Helvetica), partly because sans serifs have a high degree of clarity when they're surrounded with lots of space, partly because the sans serif gives the data a more objective tone (Figure 1.21).

 Fred's draft of the data table

|	January		April		July		October	
Rooms	1996	1997	1996	1997	1996	1997	1996	1997
Card/Game	67	138	54	145	21	47	62	174
Craft	110	178	90	123	27	58	123	195
Exercise	233	321	114	173	84	121	211	391
Meeting	37	59	22	72	11	32	41	98
Reading	53	77	49	65	13	38	54	83

Later, when Fred realizes that he has more space to work with on a landscape (horizontal) page format, he'll add another column of data to cover the average monthly use numbers for 1996 and 1997. But we're getting ahead of ourselves, so let's return to Fred's more immediate task of arranging his displays on a single page. As Fred organizes the displays—the two divided bar graphs and the table—his page begins to takes shape (Figure 1.22).

FIGURE 1.22 Portrait layout of the Mapleton data sheet
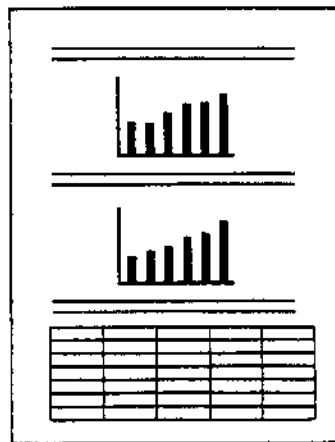
Next, Fred turns to the two options where he's written some text and made drawings of the renovated depot and the new building. Basing his drawings on those of a local architect who created some plans a few years earlier, Fred scales down and simplifies the drawings for this situation (see Figure 1.23).

**FIGURE 1.23** Portrait layout of the options page
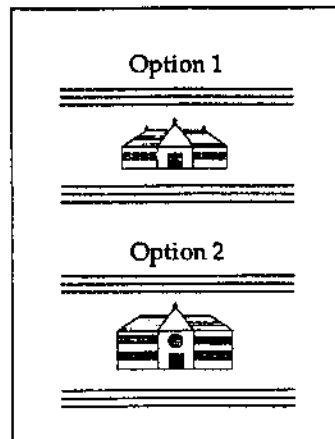
Revision

After putting the document aside for a day, Fred realizes that he has to make some large-scale adjustments in his design. The two options don't fit very well on one page, so to do them justice he'll have to add a page. That presents another problem: Now he has four pages instead of three. What should he do? Place the options on a double-sided page and the data on another sheet?

The overall arrangement of information is getting complicated, Fred thinks as he stares at his draft. Readers will now have to juggle three documents in the information package: the cover letter, the options sheet, and the data sheet. He envisions people at the meeting trying to sort through them all—losing their place, wondering if they even brought *all those documents*. Fred gets discouraged and starts to wonder if the Jamison grant is more a millstone than a blessing.

Fred puts the project aside for a few hours, then gets an idea—placing the data sheet on the back of the letter. That sounds promising, so he does a quick mock-up. Now his overall design looks like Figure 1.24.

FIGURE 1.24 **Fred's revised plan for the information package**

| Letter	Center data	Option one	Option two

One page—both sides   One page—both sides
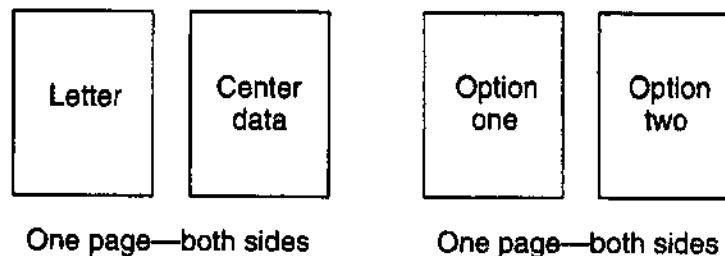
Fred now begins to work more intensively with the options page, distributing the text and pictures across the front and back. Realizing that he doesn't have enough text to fill both sides, he creates a small table summarizing the two options and places it after option two on the back page.

When Fred examines his design, however, he finds several flaws with respect to the rhetorical situation. First, the page design lacks conciseness because the centered picture takes up too much space. This also looks clumsy, diminishing the ethos of the document. More importantly, arranging the options on reverse sides of the same page limits the reader's ability to compare the two. Readers would be better served, Fred thinks, if the options appeared in closer proximity.

He quickly gets another idea: Place the four pages on a single 11″ × 17″ page folded in half. The letter can go on the front, the options in the center pages, and the data on the back. The new design, then, would look like Figure 1.25.

FIGURE 1.25 Fred's final plan for the information package

Letter

Option one | Option two

Center data

Front page   Inside pages   Back page
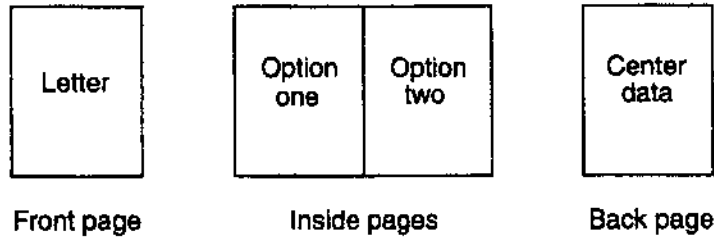
As Fred begins to arrange the option pages, he confronts an ethical issue: The board was adamant that *both* plans be considered—that community center members be given a real voice in the matter, as Edna Jamison stipulated in her gift. The document, therefore, can't give the impression that any course of action had already been chosen. The options pages have to be presented objectively; to do that, they need to be as visually parallel as possible. So Fred drops the comparative table and adds more textual details to fill out the page. He also splits the pages into two columns, one for text and the other for pictures, as shown in Figure 1.26.

FIGURE 1.26 Drafts of options pages
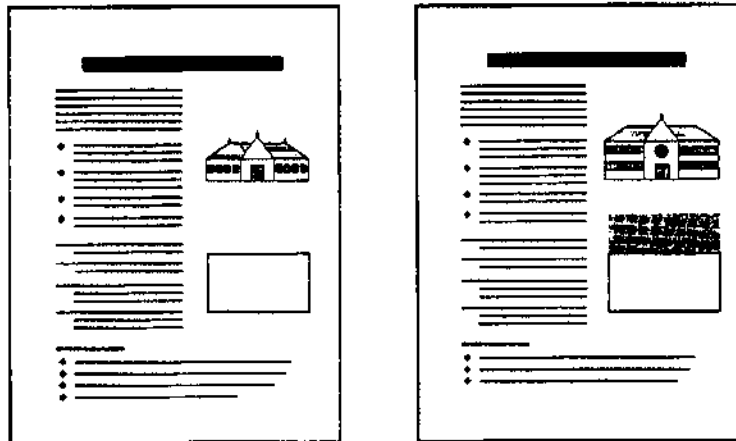
As he studies these page displays, however, Fred isn't satisfied that his design has clarified the information: To compare the pictures, readers have to leap over a column of text. Therefore, he rearranges text and image for the second option page so that pictures appear on the inside, text on the outside, hoping that this arrangement will add clarity as well as enhance the credibility of the display. Readers need to trust that they will have a voice in the decision-making process; to earn their trust, Fred

must be even-handed—i.e., ethical—in his treatment, both visual and verbal, of the two options.

Now Fred goes back to his data page where he struggled to display all the information because he couldn't fit the bar charts side by side. After thinking about it awhile, he decides to arrange the information in landscape format instead of portrait (see Figure 1.27).

FIGURE 1.27 Mapleton data sheet—
portrait versus landscape
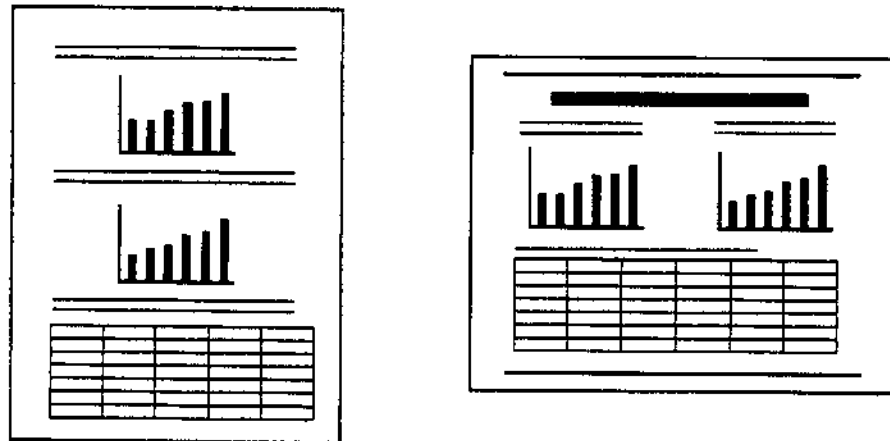
The change in page orientation gives Fred not only enough space for his charts but also more space for his table, so now he can add the "Average Monthly" column on the right.

Fred now has an information package that coheres visually, that is clear, and that projects the ethos that the occasion warrants. He'll run his design by Linda Verrips, the director of the center, then begin some editing and fine-tuning.

Visual Editing

After Linda makes some helpful comments in the margins, Fred makes a list of things he needs to shore up.

1. Although the elements now hang together fairly well, he wants to unify the document into a single package and thereby give it greater cohesion and *ethos*. To create better cohesion, Fred uses an *arrangement* strategy, placing lines at the header and footer of the options pages and the data page. The lines tie these pages together as well as to the letterhead, which also uses the same line weight. Thus they enhance the *ethos* of the document by framing the pages and making them look more serious and professional, showing due respect and appreciation to Edna Jamison for her generous gift.

2. Fred chooses a birch paper stock to give the document a personal yet dignified *tone* appropriate for this occasion.
3. To ensure the parallelism of the options pages, Fred adds another item to the list of benefits for the build-new option so that now both options have four benefits. The parallelism enhances the objective *tone* of the information Fred's presenting.
4. Fred adds *clarity* to the document by the following decisions.

   - He places captions under the floor plans for each of the options.
   - Fred rearranges the textures on the bars, using black for the bottom of the bar and progressively lighter gray scales as they go up.
   - He boldfaces the row and column heads in the data table to make them more emphatic.
   - Fred places a gray scale in two alternating rows in the data table to guide the reader's eye across the long horizontal stretch.

Okay, that'll do it for now. Fred prints the document on the paper stock he's chosen and runs this version by Linda and some of his other co-workers. He'll also show it to some community center members to see if they understand the information and to gauge their reactions.

What Can We Learn from Fred's Process?

As you can tell, Fred's design process takes a number of twists and turns. Even though his document spans only four pages, he orchestrates a variety of design elements—text, pictures, two charts, a table, and so on. Just like writing, design is a process that's unpredictable, that often involves risks and false starts, and that takes on a life of its own. By having observed Fred's design process, then, we can extract three general principles.

1. *Like writing, design is a process of inventing, revising, and editing.* As Fred designs, he makes several discoveries, just as writers do as they draft and revise. Those discoveries redirect the process in ways he couldn't anticipate when the process began. In other words, he can't just make all the design decisions up front because things happen along the way that redefine the design problem.

Take the two options pages. As Fred arranges the text, he discovers that he needs separate pages for each option so that readers can make quick, accurate comparisons. He also discovers that he needs (and that he now has space for) pictures that will spark reader interest, make the discussion more concrete, and clarify the differences between the two options. So he develops pictures and rough floor plans of the two buildings. As he distributes the text on the two option pages, Fred clarifies the structure of the information—the introductory sections, followed by lists of key features, facts, and benefits. To help readers see this structure on both option pages, he uses a variety of visual cues—bullets, indentation, and run-in headings. As his

design process unfolds, Fred continually invents, revises, and edits the visual language, redefining the design problem as he goes.

2. *Rhetorical concerns push the process ahead.* Fred's process isn't arbitrary or subjective but rather is driven by his conscious response to the rhetorical situation. Right or wrong, he intends each design choice to make the document more appropriate for its audience, purpose, and context.

- When Fred ponders which typeface to use for the body text, he chooses one that he thinks will be clear and legible to his readers and that will make the tone of the document friendlier.
- When he decides to place the letter on a single page, the options on separate facing pages, and the data on the back page, he does so because he wants to simplify the reader's job and to reassure the reader that the information is accurate and important. Fred also responds to the context by enabling readers to keep all of the pieces of the document together—as they use it in their homes, share it with friends, and refer to it at the meeting.
- When Fred creates the two bar graphs, he does so to draw readers into the data and give them quick access to the big picture. He realizes that some readers may find the data boring, so he tries to map the data in a way that will make his readers' exploration easy and interesting.

Virtually every decision Fred makes about his document—the color and texture of the page, the lines in the headers and footers, the diamond bullets, the page display—are driven by rhetorical concerns. Fred's assumptions about how readers will actually respond to these visual choices may not always be right—testing the document with readers would shed light on this—but he bases his design almost entirely on his understanding of the rhetorical situation.

3. *Visual and verbal design are interdependent.* Fred's design decisions affect the writing of his document, just as the writing affects his design. To take an obvious example, when he decides to limit his cover letter to a single page, he establishes an important boundary for his writing. When he decides to give each option its own page, he creates additional space for text. In this way he goes back and forth between designing and writing so that the two blend together as a single package. This process continues from invention to editing.

But that's not the whole story—far from it. To result in a successful document, the visual and the verbal have to work together rhetorically. The verbal language of Fred's cover letter sets the tone for the document—an occasion to celebrate but one that also requires serious decision making. The visual language of the options and data pages extends this tone. The text and pictures on the options pages are direct and factual without being technical. In these ways the visual and the verbal support and extend one another rhetorically.

The visual and the verbal, however, don't always match each other rhetorically —sometimes the visual language has to carry the rhetorical moment alone. For in-

stance, verbally, the options pages are plain and factual, revealing little of the positive tone or the ethos of the writing in the letter. Here the visual language—the paper stock, the lines, the diamond bullets—pick up the slack, giving the document energy and vitality.

Although the visual and verbal remain interdependent throughout the document design process, in the examples in Chapters 4 through 10 we'll focus almost exclusively on the visual. Keep in mind, though, when you develop a document, the writing and design processes will usually unfold together.

Conventions—What Readers Expect

Long ago in a village by the sea, a young woman and her mother sat in the sunlight outside their house painting vases. The mother glanced over at her daughter's vase.

"Those flowers are too big," she said, frowning. "Wash them off before they dry, and make them smaller. No one in the market will buy a vase with flowers that big. Besides, they are too tall and too red."

The young woman looked up at her mother and replied, "I don't see what's wrong with my flowers. Large or small, tall or short, red or yellow—what difference does it make? They look like flowers, don't they? I've seen such flowers up in the hills."

Her mother moved toward her daughter, put her arm around her, and smiled. "You'll learn how to paint flowers. Just do what I say and we'll sell every vase."

Part of successful communication is learning how to use *conventions*—the customary forms and configurations that members of an audience expect, whether that audience consists of vase buyers, users of a building, or readers of documents. Conventions are accepted ways of giving form to things—the templates, the guides, the well-worn paths. For most communication tasks, we identify relevant conventions (if any exist), find out how rigid or loose these conventions are, and decide how and if they apply to a particular situation. Virtually everything we communicate implicates verbal *and* visual conventions of one sort or another.

You're probably already familiar with many verbal conventions. Let's look briefly at some of those before we explore visual conventions.

Verbal Conventions

When you use verbal language, you usually draw on conventions to get the job done. For example, in creating your résumé, you would probably include sections on your job objective, your education, and your work experience. Using these categories is an example of a relatively rigid conventional practice because prospective employers who review your résumé for entry-level jobs will almost certainly look

for such categories. Flouting this convention on a document as important as your résumé may be risky.

In many other kinds of documents, writers follow looser conventional patterns. For example, reports typically include introductions, methods, findings, discussions, and conclusions; but sometimes the findings and the discussion are rolled into one section, and some reports include recommendations while others don't—it depends on the rhetorical situation. Proposals usually include a problem statement, objectives, methods, qualifications, and costs; but some proposals combine the problem statement with the objectives, and some proposals have a separate section on benefits. Although we don't want to reinvent the wheel every time, when we write complex documents we need some flexibility within the conventional framework.

Using conventions helps you satisfy your readers' expectations and also helps readers understand the message—on a variety of levels. For example, on the sentence level, readers rely on conventional practices for punctuation, grammar, and spelling to follow from one idea to the next. (And in many instances you need to conform to these conventions very carefully unless you want to risk miscommunicating or sounding ignorant.) On a larger scale, including an abstract in a formal report or an article gives readers a glance at the big picture as well as helps them decide whether to read the text.

Visual Conventions

Just as when you write or read a document, when you design a document or you read it "visually," you tap into a variety of conventions that govern its language. Like those in the verbal realm, visual conventions can be described by many different criteria. For example:

- *Scope.* Some visual conventions are small-scale, involving only minute marks on the page (superscript positioning for footnote numbers), while others are large-scale, affecting much larger portions of the document (multiple columns for text in newsletters).

- *Degree of flexibility.* Some visual conventions are rigid and leave you little room for adaptation (italicizing book titles), while others are flexible and allow you some freedom (one-page résumés for entry-level jobs).

- *Size of the user group.* Some visual conventions will be expected and understood by a small group of readers (yellow paper for internal memos within a company), while others include a much larger range of readers (signs with a circle and a slash telling readers what not to do).

This last point about conventions has important implications for both designers and readers of visual language. You *learn* conventions; you acquire them

through your experience in the world—sometimes by observation and osmosis, sometimes through formal training. Many visual conventions you've undoubtedly learned already; others you've probably observed in documents you've received but not yet used in documents you've created; still others you may not yet know about but will gradually acquire as you need them, just as you acquire the conventional codes of any language you learn.

So what do visual conventions look like? Let's look at the résumé again, this time from the perspective of *visual* conventions (Figure 1.28a). Visually, the résumé will probably display headings on the left margin. If the résumé is for an entry-level job, it will probably be confined to just one page—an important design convention that may drive the whole writing and design process.

Other genres you're familiar with have their own conventions as well. Take, for example, the page layout for a business letter—date, inside address, salutation, body, paragraphing, signature block (Figure 1.28b).

FIGURE 1.28 Conventional résumé and letter designs

a   b
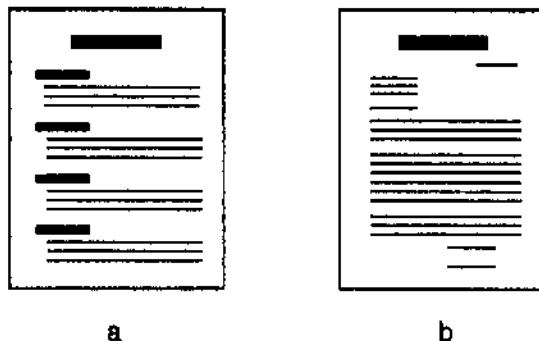
These design conventions are fairly common and vary slightly from one letter style to another. An individual writer may prefer a certain conventional page layout style, or a whole organization may have a uniform style to which all employees adhere. Communicators adapt visual conventions to their own needs and situations, sometimes choosing which ones, if any, to use, while other times having little choice in the matter.

Letter layout is just one of a host of visual conventions you'll encounter as you design. Instructions, brochures, business cards, annual reports, newsletters—all of these communications embody visual conventions that enable readers to make quick judgments about their type and purpose. "That looks like a report," or "That's obviously a brochure," or "That's a legal document," we say to ourselves—and when we do, visual conventions usually provide the clues that allow us to make these judgments. Conventions aren't an end in themselves but a *means* to an end—helping readers understand the document.

Visual Discourse Communities

Because conventions are learned and acquired, they depend entirely on the audience's familiarity with them to communicate the intended meaning. In other words, conventions have value only to the extent that audiences recognize, understand, and imitate them. Depending on the convention, the audience may be large or small, with its members adhering to the convention within a discipline, an organization, or an entire culture. Whatever its size or make-up, an audience that understands certain conventions might be considered a *visual discourse community.*

In a small discourse community, a limited pool of users would readily understand the visual conventions—for example, architects, engineers, and contractors who know how to read a steel framing plan for a building. Often the visual conventions of specialized visual discourse communities are recorded in handbooks or manuals and sanctioned by professional organizations. Visual conventions with small discourse communities don't often give outsiders many clues about their meaning—either we're part of the discourse community or not. Take the image in Figure 1.29.

FIGURE 1.29 Conventions/discourse communities
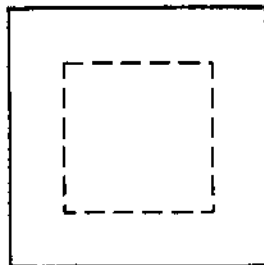
What is it? Let's say it's a plan of a kitchen table and the dotted line represents the stand that supports the table. The dotted line is a visual convention for displaying information behind the surface plane, a convention engineers use all the time. Will all readers understand the convention? Many non-engineers will; some won't. Those in the know (inside the visual discourse community) will get it; others won't.

Not understanding visual conventions can create major roadblocks to meaningful communication. Often this problem occurs when we encounter conventions that have very specialized users—for example, scientific data displays, navigational maps, electrical circuit diagrams, medical charts, and the like. If you're not part of the visual discourse community, these conventions can look very strange and exotic. Like specialized jargon in writing, these conventions are too technical for lay readers. Pick up a technical journal or publication and you'll soon discover a host of design conventions you probably never knew existed.

On the other hand, sometimes the discourse community for a visual convention can be quite large, cutting across disciplines and cultures and virtually assuring

that most readers will understand it. An example of a large visual discourse community would be automobile drivers (in North America, at least) who recognize a triangle as a warning sign. Perhaps an even larger visual discourse community would include readers who understand the image in Figure 1.30, which has a specific meaning but a very wide international audience.

FIGURE 1.30   Familiar design convention

You've probably seen many uses of this visual convention, particularly on roads and in public spaces like airports. Many other visual conventions also have large audiences. Some of these conventions have been formally adopted by discourse communities (e.g., italics or underlining for book titles). Other conventions, however, circulate informally and are imitated by document designers. Some of these more informal conventions include:

- Sans serif typefaces for headings
- Script typefaces for formal invitations
- Navigational bars for web pages
- Initial letters to start articles in newsletters or annual reports

The discourse communities for these conventions are large and amorphous and probably determined as much by culture and geographic location as by professional discipline.

Fred Noonan's Use of Conventions

As Fred creates his document, he integrates a variety of conventions to shape his design. In the cover letter, for example, he uses some conventions that are genre-related (the basic visual structure of the letter) and others that derive from the organization he works for (Palatino typeface for text, the Mapleton letterhead). Fred also taps into several conventions on the options and data pages.

- *Options pages.* The lines in header and footer, the diamonds for bullets, the italicized run-in headings, the drawings for the floor plans—all of these are conventional ways of displaying information.

■ *Data page.* The divided bar graphs are conventional forms of displaying data over time. The table has the conventional features of a matrix—row and column headings that direct readers vertically and horizontally to specific pieces of data.

Conventions don't back Fred into a corner, however; they help him to respond to the rhetorical situation that Mapleton's Board of Directors has given him. Based on the circumstances, Fred has to decide which conventions to use—and which ones to flout—and how to adjust them to meet his readers' needs. Let's look at some of the ways Fred uses and adjusts conventions to solve his design problem.

1. Fred's letter conforms to the typical Mapleton letter format—letterhead, Palatino font, and so on—which readers can quickly identify. On the other hand, he deviates from the convention by using birch paper stock and by attaching the letter to the other three pages in a brochure format. In the end, Fred adapts the Mapleton letter conventions to his design package.
2. On the options pages, Fred shows conventional floor plans of the two buildings, with the exterior walls represented by thick lines and the interior walls by thin lines. Most readers understand the convention of looking at a building from the top-down—even though they've probably never seen one from this angle in real life. Fred adapts this convention to his needs by showing the plan at a high level of abstraction, hiding the windows, doors, closets, bathrooms, and other details that he believes would distract his readers in this situation.
3. Fred displays the information about expenses and memberships in conventional divided bar graphs; however, he decides against using horizontal gridlines because he fears that they would make the charts look too technical, even though gridlines would help readers interpret the data more precisely.

During his design process, Fred draws on many conventions to push the process ahead efficiently and to meet the needs and expectations of his readers. Most of the conventions he uses are fairly flexible, and as he refines his design he adapts them to his needs.

Some Basic Principles of Conventions

Using conventions effectively, then, means gauging them to particular rhetorical situations—knowing when they are appropriate for a given audience, purpose, and context, and when they are adaptable or irrelevant. Below are some specific guidelines to help you use conventions.

1. *Identify relevant conventions for any design problem you're trying to solve.* Knowing the range of relevant conventions for a given design problem can save you

time and make your solution more reader-sensitive. Virtually any area of visual design—from text design to data displays to pictures and symbols—conforms to some conventional codes, both in print and on computer screens. Though they just scratch the surface, the examples below illustrate the breadth of visual conventions.

- *Text design:* script typefaces for invitations and awards, superscripts for footnote numbers, double or triple columns for newsletters, sans serif typefaces for headings, bullets next to parallel items in a list
- *Data displays:* the x–y axes on bar charts and line graphs, gridlines and tick marks to clarify data points, slices in pie charts to show parts of the whole, lines to show trends, legends to code the data
- *Pictures:* cross hatching to show a cut through a surface, dotted lines to reveal planes beneath the surface, arrows to show motion, blow-ups to show details, exploded views to show the relationship of parts

As a document designer, you'll continually need to identify the range of available conventions and decide how useful they are for a given design problem. Depending on the rhetorical situation, they may be irrelevant or they may save you lots of time.

2. *Realize that some conventions are more rigid than others.* Sometimes you can choose to use a convention or ignore it; sometimes you have little choice in the matter; and other times you can adapt conventions to your own needs, as Fred does. How much choice you have in the matter depends on the nature of the convention and the rhetorical situation. You might imagine a continuum where rigid conventions stand on one end, flexible ones on the other, and all of the others somewhere in between.

Rigid ⟵⟶ Flexible

The rigid side of the spectrum would include the convention of italicizing titles of books or using an x and a y axis for a line graph; in either case, you have little choice in the matter. Also on the rigid side of the spectrum we could put the circle with a slash, which tells readers not to do something: "Don't drive here" or "Don't walk your dog." You could convey the same "Don't do" command by putting an "X" through the picture of a car or a dog on a leash, but that sign would be risky since it doesn't have the same conventional status as the circle with the slash.

Although these conventions—italicizing titles of books, plotting a line graph on x–y axes, and using the slash through the circle—are relatively universal conventions, rigidity has little to do with universality. Imagine that you work for the ABC Corporation, which always uses pale blue paper for internal memos. Doing this may be a convention confined only to you and your colleagues within ABC, but none of you has a choice in the matter. Pale blue is what the boss and your colleagues expect—every time.

Other conventions lean toward the flexible end of the spectrum, giving the designer more room for decision or variation. Using tabs for training materials in three-ring binders, boxing off warnings in instructions, or using a tear-off return card in a brochure—all of these are common conventions, but the designer can choose to follow them or not depending on the situation.

On the Internet, conventions are still evolving as web sites multiply and as the technology continues to develop. Often, designers of web sites elect to use paper-based conventions—headings, initial letters, and the like. Although some web-specific conventions have emerged, such as the use of navigational bars, or of highlighted text to signal links, compared to paper-based conventions these are relatively new and unregulated. It remains to be seen whether web conventions become more codified and standardized.

3. *Think of conventions in terms of your readers, who give them meaning and significance.* If your readers understand and expect certain conventions, then using them will likely enhance the clarity and ethos of your document. You've probably received documents that don't meet your expectations because they violated conventional design practices, leading to confusion and prompting you to question the writer's ethos: "Do these people know what they're doing? They really look like they're incompetent!" Conventions are powerful templates, and when visual language doesn't conform, we usually notice.

However, not meeting the reader's expectations doesn't *always* have negative results. Flouting conventions can sometimes attract the reader's attention in a more positive way. If you get an annual report printed horizontally on an odd-sized page, you'll notice immediately that it violates the conventions for annual reports. However, you might think "This is interesting. I've never seen a report that looks like this one! I wonder what's inside." Flouting conventions may entail some risks, but designers have to measure those risks in relation to rhetorical situations; the potential gains may outweigh the losses. If one of the designers' main objectives was getting you to open and explore their annual report, the risk of an unconventional design was worth it.

The most important principle to remember? Conventions are reader-oriented strategies. Use them or flout them where the rhetorical situation calls for it.

Acquiring the Language of Visual Conventions

Learning visual language conventions and integrating them in your own work will take time. But that's true of any language you learn. You have an advantage in learning visual conventions, however, because every day you're probably inundated with documents, both print and electronic. If you want to become familiar with the conventions, train yourself to study them.

One of the best ways to learn about visual conventions is to collect documents, store them in a file or a box, and circulate them with friends or co-workers. Observ-

ing and analyzing documents can go a long way toward helping you acquire visual language skills. Fluency in any language—visual or verbal—takes total immersion and practice!

Throughout this book we'll help you identify design conventions in many different forms of visual language, from text design to pictures to data displays. In the exercises and assignments, we'll also ask you to identify, analyze, or use conventions. Because conventions derive from many different disciplines, organizations, and cultures, we'll just scratch the surface in this book. Still, we hope our examples will serve as a springboard for you to discover many more conventions on your own.
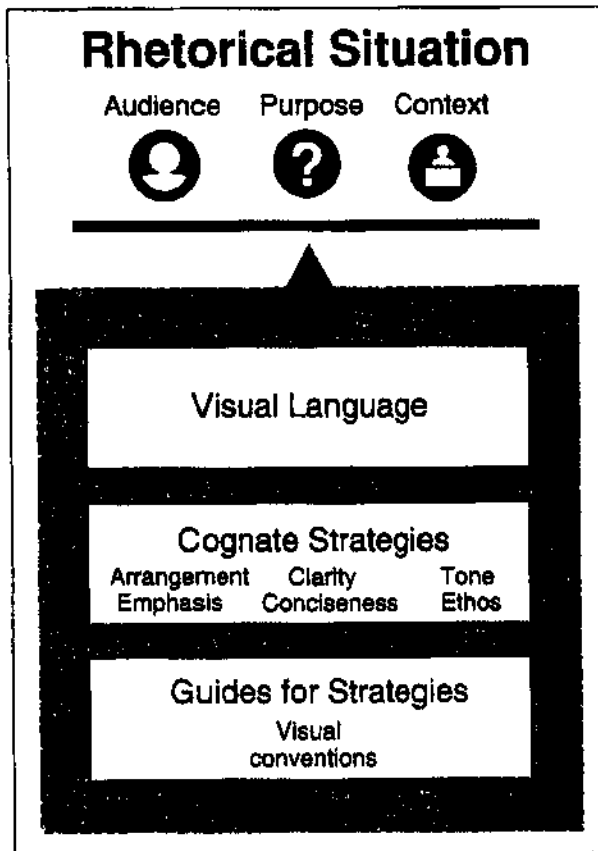
Conclusion

We began this chapter with the notion that visual design, like writing, *depends on* the rhetorical situation—audience, purpose, and context. To be successful, then, your document's visual language must be tailored to its audience, enable the document to fulfill its purpose, and be suitable for the context in which users actually interact with the document. To meet the demands of the rhetorical situation, you can employ six strategies: arrangement, emphasis, clarity, conciseness, tone, and ethos. To help you implement these strategies, you have many ready-made guides in the form of visual conventions. Figure 1.31 represents the relationships among all of these elements. The actual design process, of course, isn't as neat, controlled, or static as this model may suggest. Rather, as we've shown in Fred's development of the Mapleton document, visual design is a dynamic process that entails invention, revision, and editing.

In the next two chapters, we'll continue to define elements of this model. In Chapter 2 we'll introduce two additional guides for implementing the cognate strategies: principles of perception and empirical research. Then in Chapter 3 we'll outline a system for describing the vocabulary of visual language itself.

Notes

1. Visual rhetoric has become the focus of much scholarly work, both in the fields of writing and design. Studies of visual rhetoric have encompassed written communication (Bernhardt, "Seeing"; Tebeaux), historical and cultural analysis (Ong), screens (Bernhardt, "Shape"), data displays (Barton and Barton, "Modes"; "Toward a Rhetoric"; Tufte), semiotics (Ashwin; Barthes; Bertin; Killingsworth and Gilbertson), graphic and typographic design (Bonsiepe; Ehses; Kinross; Twyman; Waller), and product design (Buchanan). Together these works—and others, some of them by these same authors—have laid a foundation for studying visual rhetoric and have helped us develop the rhetorical approach outlined in this book for teaching visual design in professional communication.

Figure 1.1 Design process diagram

Rhetorical Situation

Audience   Purpose   Context

Visual Language

Cognate Strategies

Arrangement   Clarity   Tone
Emphasis   Conciseness   Ethos

Guides for Strategies

Visual
conventions

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