

Improving Instructor Ethos through Document Design

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Despite much attention given to visual rhetoric in Composition, there is evidence that most first-year writing instructors overlook document design, both in their instruction and in the documents they produce for their students. These instructors may be underestimating the role that visually informative prose (that uses document design features such as chunking and visual hierarchy) can play both in helping students understand assignment objectives and in establishing a student-centered ethos in their classrooms. To illustrate how visually informative prose helps shape student perceptions of instructors, 166 first-year undergraduates responded to two assignment prompts: a visually informative and a minimally designed prompt. Students perceived the instructor who wrote the visually informative prompt as more experienced, enthusiastic, and caring than the instructor who wrote the minimally designed prompt, and they found the task more interesting when it was presented in the visually informative prompt. These findings suggest that creating visually informative classroom materials is a relatively low-cost/high-payoff strategy that can positively shape students' perceptions of the instructor and assignments.

Introduction

In 1986, Stephen Bernhardt issued one of the first major calls for composition classrooms to pay attention to “visually informative prose” (68). Visually informative prose structures texts into highly visible divisions through the use of design features such as headings, whitespace, and bulleted lists. When implemented well, such design features attract readers and enable them to access information selectively. Since Bernhardt’s call to attend to visual rhetoric, we have seen many developments in the ways that visual communication can play a role in the first-year writing (FYW) classroom. Scholars such as Diana George, Dennis Lynch and Anne Wysocki, and Jody Shipka argue for the importance of teaching students to analyze and compose a range of visual texts, and our field now has several textbooks that foreground visual communication, including Donald & Christine McQuade’s *Seeing Writing* and Lester Faigley et al.’s *Picturing Texts*. In fact, visual rhetoric has been encoded into the WPA Outcomes Statements, which advocates that students demonstrate an ability to attend to “the interplay verbal and nonverbal elements” in texts

and learn common “design features for different kinds of texts” among other visual competencies.

If recent scholarship is any guide, many first-year writing (FYW) instructors tend to interpret the WPA guidelines for visual competencies as calling for the analysis or production of visual artifacts such as photo essays or videos, but perhaps pay less attention to using document design principles to produce the “visually informative prose” that Bernhardt describes. For instance, in a 2005 article on visual design in FYW, Margaret Graham and colleagues state in a footnote that they do not address document design in their essay because it has “received robust consideration in advanced composition and professional communication courses” (38). Similarly, in a 2010 article titled “Teaching Visual Rhetoric in the First-Year Composition Course,” Kristen Welch and colleagues mention document design in a historical overview of the topic of visual rhetoric and then move on to discuss two assignments focused on analyzing visual artifacts. Lending further evidence to the interpretation that document design is of little interest to most FYW instructors, a 2007 study found that over half of the composition instructors at one major university “never” or “rarely” addressed document design in their classrooms (Nelms and Dively 220).

One exception to this trend can be found in Rebekka Andersen’s recent call to teach document design as a close reading strategy. Andersen encourages her students to consider how the design of a text affects their interpretations and argues that such close reading can make students more adept readers of a range of texts. She first became attuned to the importance of document design when she noted her students struggled to follow “prose-heavy assignment prompts that rely on verbal rather than visual cues to guide reading” (15). When Andersen reformatted her assignment to use visual cues, such as a numbered list calling attention to the three main parts of the assignment, her students were much more successful in completing all parts of the assignment.

Although this visually informative prompt appears to be successful, Andersen worries both that a visually informative design could position her FYW students as passive readers and that her visual redesign might counterproductively inhibit the range of student responses to the assignment. She writes:

When we design visually informative assignment prompts, we are guiding students to read the prompts in particular ways. We may be persuading them to value some tasks and expectations over others and, through imposing levels of subordination, limiting what might otherwise be creative readings and interpretations of the prompt—interpretations that may lead to more interesting or even appropriate responses to the prompt. (25)

At the end of her essay, Andersen reiterates these concerns. After noting that visually informative prompts have the benefits of reducing student intimidation and increasing motivation, she asks:

But what kinds of readers are we asking students to be when we design prompts that do the work of comprehension for them? What kinds of responses can we expect when visual cues make assertions as to which aspects of a text students should value? (34)

Andersen advocates for visual rhetoric instruction for students so that they can learn to interpret texts that are both visually informative and non-visually informative. Her goal is to help students become more active and creative readers of a prompt's visual cues by teaching FYW students the core principles of visual rhetoric, and she proposes several activities that engage students in close readings of assignment prompts with differing levels of design.

While we agree that knowledge about visual rhetoric can be a helpful aid for close reading visual elements of assignment prompts, we are more interested in the effects that visually informative prompts might have on students' perceptions and attitudes related to the writing task and the instructor. We ask: how does an instructor's use of document design on an assignment prompt affect how students relate to the task and the instructor?

When we originally embarked on the research described below, we were motivated by the minimally designed assignment prompts that we perceived as common in our discipline. These minimally designed prompts—such as that in figure 1—run counter to the visual design we find in most textbooks and other professionally produced educational materials. Because there is substantial evidence suggesting that visual design can improve reader comprehension (Lorch and Lorch; McCabe et al.; Schriver), we assumed that the major obstacles to producing visually informative assignment prompts centered around effort: instructors lacked the time and the knowledge needed to produce well-designed documents. We thought, then, that we merely needed to provide evidence that document design is worth the investment in time and effort and they would be persuaded.

However, we suspect that Karen Schriver's 1989 characterization of non-academic writing as the "ugly stepsister of academic discourse" (323) might still hold sway today, making instructors inculcated in the rhetoric and values of academic writing reluctant to use strategies associated with non-academic texts. This ideological stance may help explain why even instructors asking students to produce or analyze visual and multimodal texts often use little document design in their assignment prompts. These instructors may associate visually

informative text with the rhetoric of bureaucracies and institutions—an association that is at odds with the freedom and creativity they want to prioritize.

In what follows, we first make a case for why assignment prompts could benefit from increased document design. We then present data from a small study that shows increased document design can not only help writers communicate their message (logos) but can also foster a caring relationship with the audience.¹ Instructors may have good reasons for minimal design in their course materials, although they should be able to articulate why they are not using a rhetorical device that, as Charles Kostelnick suggests, “can radically transform the [text’s] message” (112). We conclude by suggesting ways that writing program administrators can encourage increased attention to document design while not noticeably increasing the demands made upon already overburdened FYW instructors.

Why Assignment Prompts Can Benefit from Thoughtful Document Design

To illustrate what we mean by visually informative document design, consider figures 1 and 2. The two prompts in these figures have nearly identical content; the only content differences lie in minor changes to the wording (the visually informative design of figure 2 allows us to cut some words because it visually communicates relationships that figure 1 has to explicitly articulate in words). What is different is that figure 2 uses multiple document design features—including bold headings, indentation, different fonts, and shaded boxes—to call attention to the different types of information it contains.

Argument Synthesis Essay

Instructor: Anne Anonymous

In the Argument Analysis, you explained how an individual argument “hangs together” to create agreement between a writer and a reader. For this next major writing assignment you will need to analyze how a field of arguments might “hang together” along particular lines of argument or sets of assumptions. In some fields this kind of task is called a Research Summary, while in other fields, this task is called a Synthesis of Research or a Literature Review. Researchers use a synthesis to create “exigency” for their own research and to interpret a series of arguments that have been made about the issue they are researching.

Your task is to synthesize a field of arguments around an issue from our readings. In the past, some students have thought of this assignment in different analogies: Proposing new research to a group of researchers with a common interest; Telling a story of how prior research has responded to a problem; Constructing a “conversation” among researchers concerned with a common problem

All of these analogies suggest a need for particular rhetorical moves. The next section describes some of the rhetorical moves that will help you get started.

1) Pose a Research Question A **research question** will allow you to explore an issue raised by the essays we have been reading. One good way to generate ideas is to think of a question that one author would want to ask another author. For example, if you are focusing on the role of amateurs in participatory media, your first priority might be to work out what issues are at stake in this topic, and what questions come up around it that your essay will attempt to work out, and answer. A good research question might ask, “how do economic pressures relate to the rise of citizen journalism?” A poor research question might ask “What role does the Internet play in society?”

2) Incorporate a Paradigm Case—a case that, for you, sums up or epitomizes the issue. A case can be an effective way to begin integrating perspectives that answer your question and to grab your reader’s attention. Referring to it throughout your paper can strengthen your evaluation of positions on the issue. For example, A specific political event such as Occupy Wall Street, or a specific public incident (such as the Boston Bombings) might help you talk about problems or questions that arise when we think about the role social media plays for journalism.

3) Analyze Major Approaches to Your Question An approach is “a belief, goal, or method that a large group of authors adopts for handling similar problems” (Charney & Neuwirth, 349). You’ll need to analyze the 2-3 major approaches to handling the problem, using a minimum of 5 sources from the syllabus. For example, one approach to understanding the role of participatory media in political change is to focus on causes of political change, and such complex events can have multiple significant factors that affect them.

Figure 1. The original assignment document (attributed to “Anne Anonymous”)

Argument Synthesis Essay

Instructor: Debra Doe

Background

In the Argument Analysis, you explained how an individual argument “hangs together” to create agreement between a writer and a reader. For this next major writing assignment you will need to analyze how a field of arguments might “hang together” along particular lines of argument or sets of assumptions. In some fields this kind of task is called a Research Summary, while in other fields this task is called a Synthesis of Research or a Literature Review. Researchers use a synthesis to create “exigency” for their own research and to interpret a series of arguments that have been made about the issue they are researching.

Overview of Goals

Your task is to synthesize a field of arguments around an issue from our readings. In the past, some students have thought of this assignment in terms of:

- Proposing new research to a group of researchers with a common interest
- Telling a story of how prior research has responded to a problem
- Constructing a “conversation” among researchers concerned with a common problem

All of these analogies suggest a need for particular rhetorical moves. The next section describes some of the rhetorical moves that will help you get started.

Rhetorical Moves to help you get started:

- 1) **Pose a research question:** A research question will allow you to explore an issue raised by the essays we have been reading. One good way to generate ideas is to think of a question that one author would want to ask another author.

EXAMPLE: If you are focusing on the role of amateurs in participatory media, your first priority might be to work out what issues are at stake in this topic, and what questions come up around it that your essay will attempt to work out, and answer.

Good

“How do economic pressures relate to the rise of citizen journalism?”

Poor

“What role does the Internet play in society?”

- 2) **Incorporate a paradigm case:** This is a case that, for you, sums up or epitomizes the issue. A case can be an effective way to begin integrating perspectives that answer your question and to grab your reader’s attention. Referring to it throughout your paper can strengthen your evaluation of positions on the issue.

EXAMPLE: A specific political event such as Occupy Wall Street, or a specific public incident (such as the Boston Bombings) might help you talk about problems or questions that arise when we think about the role social media plays for journalism.

Figure 2. A more visually informative version that calls attention to the different types of information (attributed to “Debra Doe”).²

Scholars investigating assignment prompts—including Irene Clark, Anis Bawarshi, and Melanie Burdick—have found these documents to contain a wealth of implicit and explicit information. This information includes the skills teachers want students to acquire; the values and assumptions of the academic discourse community students are invited to join; and the steps and procedures students are encouraged to take. Clark describes writing prompts as invitations

for students to play a particular role that leads to the production of a new genre—the college essay (8-10). To help students understand their roles, Clark advocates that instructors make their expectations and assumptions explicit.

Both versions of the assignment in figure 1 attempt to follow Clark's advice to make explicit the roles students are invited to play. However, we argue that the visual design of figure 2 does a better job of calling attention to the multi-faceted nature of the assignment context by foregrounding the different kinds of cues the instructor has embedded in the prompt. In particular, the visual design of figure 2 encourages students to read the document at different levels and for different purposes. The design frees the reader from the linear reading strategies that are most common when we process text-heavy documents.

Figure 2 uses multiple document design strategies to facilitate different reading strategies. First, the headings encourage readers to first form a mental structure—or “skeleton” (Kumpf)—of the text that identifies its main working parts. Such a skeletal view helps with comprehension and recall by providing a structure for readers to encode and retrieve information in memory (Hyönä and Lorch; Lorch and Lorch; Sanchez, Lorch, and Lorch). Research indicates that such skeletal views are particularly beneficial when readers are unsophisticated or documents are complex (Hyönä and Lorch; McCabe et al.). Likewise, the fine-grained chunking—or breaking of information into short, meaningful units—aids with comprehension by allowing readers to process the document in parts rather than as a continuous flow of text (Murphy; Redish). This chunking invites readers to pause frequently and absorb what they have read. Thus, both chunking and headings encourage students to take in the complex, multi-faceted nature of the writing prompt.

In addition, the visual design of figure 2 invites rereading. As any experienced instructor knows, many students choose not to reread the prompts we give them, simply working off their first impressions of the assignment. A major benefit of visual design is that it enables the reader to scan a document for specific information they have already encountered (Ganier). By designing prompts that facilitate rereading, we send students a message that they should revisit these documents as they compose.

So far, the benefits we have discussed are mainly cognitive: visual design can help readers make sense of the complex requirements and cues embedded in assignment prompts and can assist in rereading. But, as we hope to show in the study discussed below, the benefits of well-designed assignment prompts can also be social. Our classroom documents establish a relationship between us and our students. Increasingly, as many universities require instructors to post syllabi and other materials online in advance of class start dates, our classroom documents are the first encounter students have with us as instructors. Students use these documents not only to determine our policies and requirements, but

also to figure out who we might be as people and who we are as writers. For instance, researchers have found that minor changes in the wording of a syllabus can influence how likely students are to approach an instructor or how effective or caring students perceive an instructor to be (Ishyama and Hartlaub; Perrine, Lisle, and Tucker). Likewise, changes to a document's design have the potential to affect how students perceive their instructor.

Positive instructor perceptions are correlated with higher levels of student learning and in-class participation. Teven and McCroskey's survey of 273 undergraduate students showed that students who perceived an instructor to be more caring also believed that they would achieve higher levels of learning and engagement with the course. Other studies reinforce this finding by showing that students who perceive instructors to be more credible are more willing to talk in class (Myers) and more likely to engage in out of class communication with an instructor (Nadler and Nadler). Furthermore, positive instructor ethos is constructed through classroom communication. Some studies have shown how this positive ethos emerges from an instructor's verbal and nonverbal communication style. In one study, an instructor's tendency to use humor in the classroom was correlated with an increase in the amount of content students felt they learned (Wanzer and Frymeir). A separate study showed an instructors' verbal argumentativeness—a communication style characterized by attacking issues and advocating for a position—correlates with students' perceptions of instructor credibility (Schrodt).

However, the verbal and interactive communication styles discussed above are not the only areas where instructors construct their ethos. Instructor-authored documents (e.g assignment prompts, syllabi, course schedules) also factor into students' perception of instructors. Yet, to our knowledge, there is little research investigating how the visual design of assignment prompts influences student perceptions of their instructor.

Our Study

This study began as a class project in which we asked students to think aloud as they read classroom documents with and without visual design. We expected to find differences in what information students attended to and comprehended. However, what took us by surprise was how often students made inferences about the personality of the instructor based on the design. Students found instructors of visually informative documents to be younger, more enthusiastic, and all-around someone from whom they would be more likely to want to take a class. This seemed to us to be an important finding. If a change as seemingly small as using visual design in our classroom materials could not only help students understand our assignments but also mo-

tivate them and pave the way for more productive student-teacher rapport, wouldn't instructors want to know about it?

While research on teaching evaluations has called student perceptions into question—finding, for instance, that such evaluations are biased against female instructors (MacNeill, Driscoll, and Hunt)—it is still the case that perceptions matter in some substantive ways. Researchers have consistently found that perceptions of instructor enthusiasm are strongly correlated with student interest and motivation in a course (Frenzel et al.; Patrick et al.; Scott; Stronge, Ward, and Grant; Zhang), which in turn can lead to higher student achievement (Stronge, Ward, and Grant). Other teacher-related factors strongly linked to student motivation include knowledge of subject (Patrick et al.; Scott), clarity of presentation or expectations (Patrick et al.; Stronge, Ward, and Grant), and having a caring attitude towards students (Scott; Stronge, Ward, and Grant). Thus, there is strong evidence that perceptions of an instructor can affect student motivation and performance.

Only one study we found has systematically looked at the effect of visual rhetoric on student impressions of their instructor. Harrington and Gabert-Quillan found that adding images to a syllabus had no effect on student perceptions. These authors note that both syllabi that they examined were already visually informative, making effective use of white space, headings, and tables. They conclude that the addition of images and graphs may not have added value and that the overall design and layout of a classroom document are more important than more graphic images. These results are consistent with Moys' finding that there is a happy medium when it comes to document design: too little variation suggests a writer who is distant and unengaged while too much variation can suggest a writer who is clamoring for attention (7-13).

Given that a teacher's ethos—which we define here to include an instructor's perceived competence, enthusiasm, and concern for students—affects the learning environment, our research question is: what impact does the increased use of document design in an assignment prompt have on student perceptions of an instructor's ethos?

Methods

To pursue our research question, we designed a survey that asked students to read two assignment prompts that presented similar content in different visual designs. Incoming first-year students received the survey via email. For one prompt, we applied visual cues to present assignment instructions (figure 1), and for the second prompt we relied on verbal cues to present instructions (figure 2). Students read both the original prompt that appears in figure 1 (attributed to Anne Anonymous) and the visually informative prompt in figure 2 (attributed to Debra Doe). Both prompts are two pages long and

are identical aside from some rewording—mostly deletion—to accommodate the visually informative document. The visually informative prompt was slightly shorter than the original (841 words vs. 915) because the visual redesign allowed us to eliminate words introducing different types of information (e.g., the phrases “a good research question might ask...” and “a poor research question might ask...” were replaced with the headings “good” and “poor”).

The prompts ask students to write a synthesis essay of 1250-2100 words that poses a research question, describes a case illustrating this question, and then defines how different authors the class has read respond to this question. We chose this prompt because both students and instructors routinely identify the synthesis essay as the most difficult assignment of the semester, and students generally struggle to understand what the assignment requires. The original and visually informative prompts appear in figures 1 and 2. The students were not told that one of the prompts was original and the other redesigned, nor were they given any information characterizing the prompts.

The order in which students encountered the prompts was randomized: 87 freshmen read the original prompt followed by the visually informative prompt, and 79 read the visually informative prompt first. The only substantial content difference between the two prompts was in the instructor’s name: Anne Anonymous (minimally designed prompts) vs. Debra Doe (visually informative prompt). We chose a female instructor’s name for both prompts both because the majority of first-year writing instructors at our institution are female and because recent research suggests that student perceptions of teacher effectiveness are biased against women (MacNell, Driscoll, and Hunt). Because of this bias, we reasoned that we would see a larger effect size if students believed the instructor was female, and we could also be more confident that any improvements in student perceptions would accrue to our largely female instructor population.

On a 4-point Likert scale, students answered a series of questions addressing their impressions of the assignment, course, and instructor for each prompt. The order of these questions was randomized. We then asked students which prompt they preferred and invited them to provide open-ended comments.

Participants

Participants included a random sample of 500 members of the incoming freshmen class at a private, research I university. Of these original 500, we received responses from 166 students, a response rate of 33%. The students completing the survey were evenly split by gender. In terms of major, their areas of study roughly reflect campus demographics, with 41% of survey respondents from Engineering or Computer Science, 20% from Fine Arts, 19% from Humanities and Social Sciences, and the rest from Business or Sci-

ence. All participants were over 18 years of age. We limited our participants to U.S. citizens to limit cultural differences in how students relate to and talk about an instructor’s character (Maitra and Goswami).

Findings

Students Strongly Preferred the Visually Informative Prompt

Figure 3 indicates that incoming freshman preferred the visually informative prompt. Overall, 65% of our participants indicated that they somewhat or completely preferred the visually informative prompt whereas only 18.7% of participants somewhat or completely preferred the original. This difference is highly statistically significant, $\chi^2(4) = 34.07, p < .0001$. As will be seen below, student comments leave no doubt that their preferences were based on the visual design.

Students’ preference for the visually informative prompt was consistent regardless of their gender, major, or self-proclaimed interest in writing. There was a slight effect for the order in which students saw the prompts: those who saw the original prompt first were even more strongly in favor of the visually informative prompt than those who saw the visually informative prompt first.

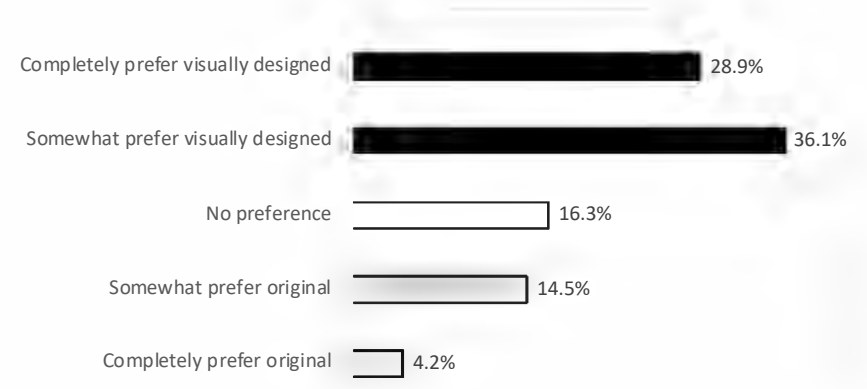


Figure 3. Student preference for the two assignment prompts

In open-ended comments, students noted that the formatting of the visually informative prompt helped them better comprehend the task. They claimed that the distinctions among different types of information helped them “mentally compartmentalize” different aspects of the project, gave them a better idea of the task and where to start, and made for generally “less boring” reading than the original prompt.

Students Made Inferences about Instructor Ethos from the Design

Not only did students prefer the visually designed prompt and find it easier to read, but table 1 below shows these preferences translated into a more favorable impression of the instructor who created the prompt. Students were more likely to indicate that the instructor behind the visually designed prompt was knowledgeable, caring, and enthusiastic—all factors that prior research indicates are strongly associated with student motivation. While the differences between the two versions is not major, students consistently inferred more positive impressions of the instructor from the visually designed prompt.

Table 1.
Student impressions of instructors who wrote the prompts on a 4-point Likert scale (1=not at all; 4=very much). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

<i>Survey questions</i>	<i>Anne (Original)</i>	<i>Debra (Visually informative)</i>
How knowledgeable do you think this instructor is about academic writing?	3.58	3.70*
How experienced do you think this instructor is?	3.45	3.68**
How much do you think this instructor cares about her students?	3.16	3.39**
How enthusiastic do you think this instructor is about the course?	3.13	3.33**
How comfortable would you feel asking this instructor questions about this assignment?	3.17	3.27

Several students elaborated on these perceptions in their comments, noting the additional effort and care the visually designed prompt required. Students wrote that they perceived the instructor of the visually designed prompt as more knowledgeable, more caring, and more attentive to student needs:

Debra Doe seems more likely to be able to answer questions and definitely more willing to, as she spent the time to try and clarify the assignment

—Completely preferred visually informative prompt

Her instructions are clearly and consistently formatted. This makes it seem like she really cares about her students: she seems to have put time and thought into the preparation of this assignment so that her students understand it and learn from it. It lends credibility to the instructor and makes her seem knowledgeable.

—Completely preferred visually informative prompt

It is more engaging and gives me a sense that Debra is more willing to work for her students (which I'm sure both would do but just given that sheet)

—Completely preferred visually informative prompt

Debra Doe's instructions makes her seem more attentive to students' comprehension of the task.

—Somewhat preferred visually informative prompt

She generally seems kind even if demanding of the same expectations as Anne Anonymous.

—Somewhat preferred visually informative prompt

These comments indicate that at least some students perceived the document design as evidence that the instructor was dedicated to her students and concerned about their understanding, evident in students who described Debra Doe with labels like "attentive," "willing to work for her students," and "kind." These students believed that the instructor of the visually informative prompt perceived the assignment from her students' perspective, trying to imagine how students might use the document. They perceived this effort as evidence of pedagogical competence and investment.

The Prompt Design Affected Students' Perceptions of the Task

Table 2 indicates that the visually informative prompt also influenced students' perceptions of the assignment. Students were more confident in their ability to complete—and more interested in completing—the task described in the visually informative prompt. While this effect is not strong, it does resemble other studies that suggest a change in the tone of course documents affects students' beliefs in how difficult the class will be (Babad et al.; Harnish and Bridges).

Table 2.
 Student impressions of the task on a 4-point Likert scale (1=not at all; 4=very much) *p < .05, ** p < .01

<i>Survey questions</i>	<i>Anne (Original)</i>	<i>Debra (Visually informative)</i>
How well do you understand what the instructor is asking you to do?	3.08	3.16
How challenging do you think this assignment will be?	3.18	3.06*
How much do you expect to learn from this assignment?	2.97	3.02
How interesting is this assignment?	2.41	2.57**

In open-ended comments, students elaborated on how the formatting affected their interest, comprehension, and confidence in their ability to complete the assignment:

Debra Doe’s instruction were more structured in their presentation, allowing me to begin addressing the assignment in a more analytic and cohesive manner.

—Completely preferred visually informative prompt

The aesthetic quality made the project seem more interesting.

—Completely preferred visually informative prompt

Her assignment was more interesting to me, so I feel that I would already be more prepared when I started it.

—Completely preferred visually informative prompt

These students felt that the visually informative prompt gave them a clearer entry point into the assignment. Other students noted that the visually informative prompt would help them review the instructions during the writing process:

I felt like it would be easier to refer back to the Doe instructions while writing the paper.

—Somewhat preferred visually informative prompt

Such students indicated that the design of the prompt would help them locate particular information needed at a particular point in time.

However, not all students liked the redesign and some seemed to share Andersen’s concerns that visual rhetoric can limit creativity:

Anne Anonymous' instructions left more open to interpretation...I feel like I would get more out of her assignment because it feels more like actual writing rather than plugging information into a predetermined mold.

—Somewhat preferred original prompt

Other students stated that they preferred the more linear presentation of the original instructions, which they perceived to flow more like a traditional academic essay:

The instructions were written out in a linear, paragraph form. It seemed more conversational...My eyes were also less inclined to wander over the page.

—Somewhat preferred original prompt

The instructions flow more naturally because there are fewer breaks between points

—Completely preferred original prompt

I thought the layout was less disjointed in Anne Anonymous' instructions

—Somewhat preferred original prompt

These students perceived the formatting of the visually informative prompt as restricting freedom and suggesting a “plug-and-chug” model of writing. For these students, the essayistic conventions of the original prompt better adhered to what they expected in a writing classroom.

Discussion

There is a wealth of research about inventing effective assignments that promote a variety of writing, reading, and thinking skills that has resulted in a number of respected guidebooks on assignment construction (e.g. Bean; Gardner). These guidebooks demonstrate careful thinking about what tasks students should perform and how those tasks might be structured to facilitate learning. However, most guidebooks dedicate little or no attention to how the visual design of assignment prompts might affect students' experiences.

Our study suggests that these guidebooks should be updated to discuss the visual design of assignment prompts. We found that visual design positively influences students' impressions of the instructor and assignment. Consistent with research suggesting that well-designed documents can enhance perceptions of the author (Moys; Townsend and Shu) and with research suggesting that small changes to a course syllabus can influence how effective, caring, or

helpful students perceive the instructor to be (Harrington and Gabert-Quillan; Jenkins, Bugeja, and Barber; Perrine, Lisle, and Tucker), our students perceived the ethos of the instructor who wrote the visually informative prompt as more experienced, caring, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic than the instructor who wrote the original version. They also perceived the assignment as more interesting and less daunting when the visually informative design was employed. While these differences were not always major, they were consistent, and the visual redesign seemed to raise student responses across what psychologists agree are two primary dimensions on which we judge others: warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick).

This study also complicates Andersen's concerns that increased document design can encourage passivity (by doing too much work for the reader) and limit creativity (by inhibiting readers from drawing connections across document sections). While Andersen is correct that ineffective use of document design can backfire, our survey results suggest that document design can also increase students' interest in the task and willingness to engage with the instructor. If an instructor feels that students are interpreting an assignment too rigidly, it may be unfair to blame document design in general, just as it may be unfair to blame any rhetorical device for its ineffective use. If we avoid visual rhetoric because it makes an assignment too easy to understand—but continue to use transitions, parallelism, and other forms of verbal rhetoric that can add clarity to a text—we are simply privileging the verbal over the visual.

Although our study focuses on visual rhetoric in traditional print documents, it also has implications for instructors who attempt to push the boundaries of composition with multimodal or non-traditional texts. As we experiment with new modes of delivery, we should evaluate the effects our texts have on our student readers. Our assignments, syllabi, handouts, and other materials serve many functions, including communicating a relationship with our students. As instructors experiment with what is possible, they should attend to how new modes of delivery impact the student-teacher relationship. Does an instructor who designs a prompt as an infographic or a video appear more enthusiastic, competent, or interesting? Do our materials and their design encourage a positive relationship that motivates students or do we convey an ethos that is detached and unconcerned with our readers' needs? Research suggests that there is reason for caution: Moys and colleagues found that visual design can lead to negative impressions if it is seen as cluttered or sensationalistic, and Harrington and Gabert-Quillan found that adding images to a syllabus had no effect on student perceptions. Thus, more may not always be better.

One clear drawback of our study is that it only looks at how design affects students' first impressions of instructors and has little to tell us about how these perceptions might take shape within the extended interaction of a classroom

setting. Yet, research suggests that first impressions—particularly impressions of teaching style and personality—are lasting (Ambady and Rosenthal; Babad et al.). Moreover, there is logic behind these first impressions: it is reasonable to assume that an instructor who invests time and effort to visually design classroom documents for her students might also be willing to invest time and effort in other aspects of her instruction. As Ambady and Rosenthal suggest, it may be possible to predict factors such as enthusiasm, likeability, and competence from small samples of behavior (438).

Our study did not address how different groups of students might respond differently to the redesigned prompt. Most particularly, we did not specifically examine whether neurological differences (such as ADHD) or cultural differences might influence student perceptions. Prior research indicates that culture influences readers' reactions to visual rhetoric (Maitra and Goswami), so it is highly possible that a class of international students would respond differently to our redesigned prompt. Additional research could tease out some of these group differences.

Implications for Teaching and Instructor Training

We recognize that designing texts takes time and effort and many instructors may not have the background knowledge needed to design documents effectively. Yet preparing instructors to design classroom documents need not be time-consuming. Program administrators can provide their new instructors with examples of syllabi and assignments that are effectively designed and encourage new instructors to use these sample documents as templates. In addition, in forums for training new instructors, program administrators might follow Andersen's suggestion and show instructors multiple versions of an assignment, syllabus, or handout that uses different levels of visual rhetoric and ask instructors to hypothesize how students might respond to these variations. Such an activity might be followed by sharing the results of the study reported here, providing instructors with evidence illustrating how document design can influence student impressions of their teachers. Such activities should raise instructors' appreciation of document design as a valuable rhetorical tool. This appreciation could then be reinforced in myriad small ways. For instance, when administrators give instructors feedback on assignments, they might also mention how redesigning the document might help students unpack the expectations, requirements, helpful hints, and other types of information contained in the prompt.

Finally, guidebooks that provide advice on assignment design—such as John Bean's well-regarded *Engaging Ideas* or Traci Gardner's *Designing Writing Assignments*—should be updated to provide advice on visual rhetoric and assignment design. Such advice should not only discuss how document design

can facilitate comprehension of an assignment's goals and requirements, but also how it can help foster a positive teacher-student relationship. By giving time to document design, instructors can show that they care about their audience and that they value multiple manifestations of rhetoric in their own writing: the visual and the verbal.

Notes

1. IRB approval was obtained. Protocol #: HS15-363

2. To transform the prompt in figure 1 to the one in figure 2, we applied two main design concepts: chunking and visual hierarchy. Chunking involves breaking information into short, meaningful pieces that readers can digest without overtaxing their working memory (Murphy; Redish). Effective chunking provides readers with “visual relief” (Kumpf) by allowing them to process the document in parts rather than as a continuous flow of text. In figure 2, the text has been chunked into information units averaging 40 words per text block whereas figure 1 averages 95 words per text block. Visual hierarchy adds order to chunking by presenting information on the page in a way that implies importance and signals the relationships of various elements to one another. Where chunking identifies basic units of information, visual hierarchy provides organization to those units, grouping them into larger blocks of similar content. Figure 2 uses visual hierarchy to help readers see that there are three main blocks of information: Background, Goals, and “Rhetorical Moves to Help you get Started” and that the last of these has several steps, each of which has an associated example. This visual hierarchy is achieved through the following elements:

- *Contrast and size* in the form of headings and subheadings that are visually distinct from the main text
- *Spacing and proximity*, in the form of indentation, to distinguish the hierarchical relationships of the headings, subheadings and examples
- *Contrast* in the form of text boxes that visually distinguish different types of information.

These various elements work together to help readers quickly visualize the different types of information and how these types are related to one another.

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