My Favorite Assignment

HATS: A Design Procedure for Routine Business Documents

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Improved design in business documents is a need commonly expressed in the literature (Keyes, 1993; Andrews & Dyrud, 1996; Suchan & Colucci, 1989; Jones, 1997). In spite of convincing evidence about this need, however, teaching design effectively to students is an issue less discussed. Andrews and Dyrud (1996) emphasize that instructors of business communication need to alert students to the role of good design in delivering documents effectively. Hart-Davidson (1996) states that the problem most students have in grasping how to design pages effectively is an over reliance on the traditional printed page as their model, a page which is characterized by long uninterrupted passages of text. As a result, students continue to prepare e-mail messages, memos, letters, proposals, and reports that do not incorporate good design features. Further, many of the students who try to enhance the design of their documents do so in clumsy, undisciplined ways. Methodologies are needed to effectively instruct students in designing better documents.

After much reading and experimentation, I have developed a relatively simple procedure to help solve this problem. The procedure is remembered easily with the use of the acronym HATS, which stands for headings, access, typography, and spacing. HATS serves as a basic design process for routine documents like memos, letters, and reports; it is not sophisticated enough for more advanced-design documents like brochures, sales documents, websites, or annual reports, although its principles would also be
applicable in these advanced applications.

The HATS acronym provides a clear path to follow in teaching document design, and it gives students an easy routine to use in polishing their documents. It also provides graders and editors with an easy process for checking a document’s design features. When helping my students learn and apply the HATS procedure, I follow a two-step process:

1. Tell what the acronym initials represent, and teach and illustrate the design principles involved in each of the four areas of HATS.
2. Require the students to complete a before-and-after, or document makeover, assignment. Using a typical poorly designed business document, the students evaluate the design aspects of the original document and then redesign the document, applying the principles of HATS. Students may use a poorly designed document of their choosing, or they may request one from my files.

**Teaching HATS**

The following sections explain HATS and give a brief review of the principles that students need as they apply the procedure to their documents.

**Headings**

First, I teach students to remember two aspects regarding headings: adequacy and hierarchy.

**Adequacy**

All documents, including memos and letters, should have an ample number of headings to serve as navigation signposts, enabling the reader to skim along the surface of the document, dropping in for detailed reading only when desired.

**Hierarchy**

Headings should visually reveal the information structure, or architecture. Organizational hierarchy can be revealed by varia-
tions in typeface, size, style, and alignment so readers can easily discern differences in the levels of headings, such as first- and second-level headings.

**Access**

Second, I teach students about access, which refers to the ease of finding and mentally digesting important information. Information access can be achieved by (1) enhancing text, such as using bullets and numbers; and by (2) using graphics, such as tables, graphs, process charts, and photographs. Too often, student writers rely on text as their default means of communicating all types of information. Instead, they should first consider the nature of the information and then determine what form of display will most efficiently and effectively convey the message. I stress that students should think of themselves as information architects, not simply as wordsmiths. Table 1 aids students in selecting options other than standard text in paragraphs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Type</th>
<th>Effective Ways to Present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Numeric, financial data</td>
<td>Tables, charts (bar, pie, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People, objects</td>
<td>Photographs, line drawings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational hierarchies</td>
<td>Organization charts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>Flow charts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project phases</td>
<td>Gantt and PERT charts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic data</td>
<td>Maps with appropriate graphic enhancements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concepts or theories</td>
<td>Visual metaphors, or simple graphic models (lines, boxes, circles, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonchronological lists</td>
<td>Bulleted lists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronological, prioritized, or reference lists</td>
<td>Numbered lists</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Typography**

Third, I instruct students about typography and how type can be
changed to achieve improved design. Typography improvement for headings has been introduced in the headings and access sections, but this separate typography section covers all other typography concerns. The various attributes of typography are reflected on the tool bar of word processing software, including the face (name), size, style (such as bold, italics, and color), and alignment.

**Typeface**

In the US, serif typefaces (such as Times New Roman) are generally used for body text, and sans serif faces (such as Arial) are usually reserved for headings, although this is not a rigid rule. In addition to serif and sans serif categories, display typefaces can be used for occasions when more typeface personality is needed. However, I always caution students about overusing display, or personality, typefaces. Such overuse can easily make their documents look cluttered and unprofessional. In general, I recommend using only two typefaces per document, one serif and one sans serif. The size and style of these two faces can then be varied for different levels of headings and different effects in body type.

**Type size**

Some design authors suggest that for general audiences, type height should be between 10 and 12 points. Others, however, state that 12-point type is too large and that 11-point type is best for sustained reading. I recommend 11-point type as the most defensible default size, with 10-point type being used for newsletters and other documents where text compaction is needed, and 12-point (or larger) type being reserved where larger size is appropriate. Because type height correlates with type width, a reduction in type height also produces a reduction in type width. Thus, a 10-point character is both shorter and narrower than an 11-point character, both factors working to increase text compaction.

**Type style**

I encourage appropriate use of type-style attributes like boldface, italics, and color. However, because students sometimes overuse and
abuse these attributes, I emphasize judicious use. I teach students a more-means-less principle; that is, the more words they stylize, the less visual impact each stylized word has. In other words, one bolded word on a page will be noticed, but bolding 20 words on a page will reduce the visual impact of each of those words.

Alignment (text justification)
Authors of design articles concur that reading left-aligned text (also called left-justified or ragged-right text) is easier than reading fully justified text. Full justification can be used, however, for giving a more polished appearance to formal documents and for increased text compaction in documents where page space is limited.

Spacing
Fourth, I instruct students about the importance of white space, or the unused space on the page. The more text a page includes, and the more tightly compacted the text, the more dark and uninviting the page will appear. Therefore, I emphasize that students should not force so much information onto a page that it looks crowded and uninviting. Space gives visual relief, preventing reader fatigue, and enhances reader friendliness, encouraging readers to engage the content. Space also divides and frames elements on a page. For example, white space around a graph divides the graph from neighboring elements and provides a white frame. Both external and internal spacing should be considered in document design.

External space
Students should ensure appropriate top, bottom, left, and right margins to frame all the elements on a page. I point out that left- and right-margin width determines the physical length of the text lines, which, in turn, affects readability; and the longer the text line, the more difficult the text is to read. The length of a text line can be expressed either as inches or as the average number of characters or average number of words per line. Many experts suggest an ideal text-line length of 40 or 50 characters, but each situation is unique.
I show students two ways to reduce text-line length. First, they can increase the side margins, perhaps by a half inch or more; second, they can increase the type size by, for example, one point. Either or both of these approaches will decrease the actual number of words per line. If page space is limited, however, they would need to take an opposite approach and increase the amount of text on each line.

Internal space
After deciding on the external space (i.e., page margins), students should consider the internal space, or the space between the text lines. An important readability principle is that the longer a text line, the greater the interline space needs to be. For example, a document with an average of 13 words per line needs greater interline spacing than a document with an average of only 9 words per line. Hence, students can improve readability of documents with long text lines by increasing the space between the lines by .1 or .2 inches, for example. Again, however, each situation is unique and no standard answer can be given to cover all situations. Students must learn to trust their eyes to tell them when text looks too crowded, dark, or uninviting.

Assessing the HATS Approach
After explaining the HATS procedures, I show before-and-after examples, such as those included in Appendixes A and B. These documents show a dramatic difference between a typical memo and one enhanced by following the HATS routine. Concerning the memo in Appendix A, I would explain that it suffers from the following design problems:

- Headings: No headings are used in the body of the memo.
- Access: No access techniques are used to assist the reader in making the information easier to read and understand.
- Typography: All type is 12-point Arial, a sans-serif type. Type style variation is not used to emphasize important text, and the type alignment reflects poor choice, both in the heading lines and in the body of the memo.
Spacing: Internal spacing is too tight, giving the memo a dark, gray appearance which repels rather than attracts the reader.

After walking students through an evaluation of the first memo, I then explain how the redesigned memo has been upgraded to achieve better design:

- Headings: Three headings are added in the body of the memo, clearly showing the text structure and revealing the three main parts of the text.

- Access: The individual agenda items are set off with alphabetic markers (a, b, and c). The financial information is displayed in a bar chart, showing a clear visual comparison between the two sales-to-staff ratios. A bulleted list has been created in the fourth paragraph, making the information much easier to find.

- Typography: The subject line is bolded, as are the headings in the body. The headings are typed in a sans-serif face, achieving good contrast against all other text, which is in Times New Roman. Also, the entire document has been typed in 11-point type, a good size for general audiences. Further, the memo body is left aligned, making the text easier to read than fully justified text. The left-aligned body also gives the memo a more friendly appearance. Finally, the response request is bolded in the last paragraph, helping to ensure that the reader doesn’t miss the return-requested information.

- Spacing: Needed space has been added between the paragraphs, as well as between the various parts of the main headings at the top of the memo. The subject line has been framed in white, quickly revealing the content of the memo. The space between the bullets and their associated text is closer than word processors’ default tabs allow, reflecting a close relationship between the bullets and text.

Assigning a Document Makeover

After teaching the HATS procedure, I ask students to redesign an existing document and to submit both the before and the after ver-
sessions. If they tackle a large project like a 150-page technical report, I require only a few pages to be designed, reflecting what could be used as a template for the rest of the document. An optional part of the makeover assignment is to require a cover memo explaining what was wrong with the original document and what was done to improve the revised version. Such a memo helps the students work through the assignment methodically and usually results in a better learning experience and final product.

When the makeover assignment is submitted, I evaluate it using the HATS routine. For example, I can quickly check the document design as follows:

- **Headings**: Are there enough headings? Do they reflect a clear hierarchy?
- **Access**: Is important information easy to find? Is the information easy to digest? Does the method of presentation enhance readability and clarity?
- **Typography**: Does the document use the most appropriate typefaces, sizes, styles, and alignment for both body text and headings?
- **Space**: Does the document have appropriate white space to make it inviting and easy to read?

Following this four-step grading procedure produces good grading consistency, reduces student ambiguity, and results in more professional documents.

The document makeover assignment is one of the more enjoyable assignments the students complete during the semester, and it seems to raise their level of expectation for documents they complete throughout the remainder of the semester. As students complete the makeover assignment, they are amazed at the amount of improvement they can make in a document, and the assignment seems to give them a great sense of satisfaction and confidence. Because of the visual nature of the assignment, I often take a few minutes in class to allow the students to exhibit their work to their peers—a college version of elementary school show-and-tell experiences.
Conclusion

The HATS design process offers at least five benefits to students and teachers:

- It gives teachers a clear methodology for use in teaching document design.
- It gives students a specific procedure to follow in producing professional-looking documents.
- HATS can be easily remembered because of the obvious acronym.
- It provides a general standard for grading and editing the design of business documents.
- It improves the audience's reading experience, enhancing both efficiency and effectiveness.

Without a clear teaching methodology, many principles of design will be forgotten by our students and will, therefore, not be used. HATS provides an easy solution to this problem. Granted, implementing HATS during document preparation takes a bit of additional time, but the results, I believe, are worth it. Certainly the credibility of the writer is enhanced with documents that reflect extra care and polish.

References


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Appendix A: Original Memo

To: Western Region Store Managers
From: Sara Howard, FastFood Operations Manager
Date: June 10, 2000
Re: Recruiting, Hiring, Scheduling, and Retaining Employees

On a recent visit to Las Vegas, I found a FastFood store that is getting and keeping a quality work force, a goal which, as you know, is an ongoing problem for our industry. The manager, Carl Wallace, shared the success strategy with me, and I recommend it to you for implementation. Carl’s strategy includes determining appropriate staff levels, finding qualified staff, and retaining employees.

Carl has determined that the standard FastFood staff figure of one employee for every $2,500 of monthly sales is not optimal. After experimenting, he found the best figure to be $1,800. At this level, more employee flexibility is achievable.

Maintaining adequate staffing levels is an industry-wide challenge. To solve this problem, Carl has organized his workforce into three teams. Each team is given a $100 monthly budget to use in recruiting, interviewing, and training new employees. If the team’s staff level is maintained at 10 throughout a quarter, each member of the team receives a $100 bonus.

Another industry problem is employee retention. Annual turnover at Carl’s store has decreased 151 percent since implementing his program. Four incentives have helped improve employee retention: Monthly free-food days, 30-day wage evaluations for new employees, quarterly for all employees; monthly performance reviews for all employees; and “Buddies” and other programs to ensure employee satisfaction.

Because of Carl’s success, I strongly recommend that you consider implementing one or more of these approaches as appropriate in your store. Please send me an email response to this memo by the first of next month to let me know your specific plans.
Appendix B: Redesigned Memo

To: Western Region Store Managers
From: Sara Howard, FastFood Operations Manager
Date: June 10, 2000
Re: Recruiting, Hiring, Scheduling, and Retaining Employees

On a recent visit to Las Vegas, I found a FastFood store that is getting and keeping a quality work force, a goal which, as you know, is an ongoing problem for our industry. The manager, Carl Wallace, shared the success strategy with me, and I recommend it to you for implementation. Carl’s strategy includes (a) determining appropriate staff levels, (b) finding qualified staff, and (c) retaining employees.

Determining Appropriate Staffing Levels. Carl has determined that the standard FastFood staff figure of one employee for every $2,500 of monthly sales is not optimal. After experimenting, he found the best figure to be $1,800. At this level, more employee flexibility is achievable (see accompanying chart).

![Comparison of Sales-to-Staff Ratios](chart.png)
Finding Qualified Staff. Maintaining adequate staffing levels is an industry-wide challenge. To solve this problem, Carl has organized his workforce into three teams. Each team is given a $100 monthly budget to use in recruiting, interviewing, and training new employees. If the team’s staff level is maintained at 10 throughout a quarter, each member of the team receives a $100 bonus.

Retaining Employees. Another industry problem is employee retention. Annual turnover at Carl’s store has decreased 151 percent since implementing his program. Four incentives have helped improve employee retention:

- Monthly free-food days
- 30-day wage evaluations for new employees, quarterly for all employees
- Monthly performance reviews for all employees
- “Buddies” and other programs to ensure employee satisfaction

Because of Carl’s success, I strongly recommend that you consider implementing one or more of these approaches as appropriate in your store. Please send me an email response to this memo by the first of next month to let me know your specific plans.