AIA Best Practices:
Measuring writing quality: Raising the bar

Excerpted from Writing for Design Professionals, 2nd Edition, by Stephen A. Kliment, FAIA

Summary

Quality writing is as important as quality design. Just as good design adheres to certain standards, good writing meets certain criteria. To ensure that a firm's communication program meets acceptable standards of quality, Stephen Kliment, FAIA, and New York–based designer Ivan Chermayeff developed a set of criteria to help firms evaluate their printed and online media. A rigorous annual review of communication tools is recommended.

Writing for design professionals

Ernest Hemingway would never have condoned using formulas to measure the quality of writing. But that doesn't reduce the value of monitoring and measuring writing quality. It serves everyone — design firms, public and corporate facility staffs, the professional and general design media, the building product manufacturing and advertising community, design students and faculty, and, above all, the reader.

Managers in each of these groups should commit regularly — once a year at least — to monitoring their communication program. Do this by gathering representative samples of your entire printed and online output. Then subject each item to rigorous evaluation of content and format. Include in the review a marketing principal, a project manager, a cooperative client, and, if possible, an impartial expert. This process alone will help principals and staff realize that quality standards apply as much to communication as to design.

For evaluating text and graphics, consider the set of editorial and graphic judging criteria developed some years ago by New York–based designer Ivan Chermayeff and myself. The criteria are flexible; you should modify them to fit the printed, CD-ROM, or Web product you are judging. Here is an updated, abridged excerpt of these criteria:

Planning, organizational logic

- Are the contents logically organized?
- Is the organization clearly expressed through graphics?

Reader's wayfinding

- Are charts, tables, and matrices easily understood by the layperson?

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- Are titles and headlines clearly worded?

- Are visual devices (pull-quotes, decks, subheads) used as aids to readers?

- Are illustrations clearly captioned?

- Are paragraphs limited to comfortable reading length (12 to 15 lines)?

- On the Web site, is there a logical progression of content from the home or "splash" page?

- Are navigation bars provided?

- Do the links work?

Style

- Are words and sentences short and devoid of jargon?

- Are spelling, punctuation, and abbreviation consistent?

- Is the writing geared to the level of understanding of the audience's least informed reader?

- Is the message intent clear?

Illustrations

- Are photographs of the appropriate quality for the medium (print, online, video)?

- Are floor plans and other line drawings sharp, uncluttered, properly labeled, and equipped with scales and orientation indicators?

Production quality

- Is the paper stock appropriate to the purpose of the item? (Brochures can lose points for a design firm because they may be seen as too lavishly produced for a modestly financed client. Others suffer, by contrast, because they might seem stingily produced for a patron with luxury tastes.)

- Is the printing good, not blurred or smudged?

- Are the four process colors printed in good register, with no individual colors showing at the edges?

- On a promotional CD-ROM or Web site, are images clear?

- Was the content formatted to the typical user's probable bandwidth?

Sparkle

- Is the overall impact one of freshness, imagination, and originality?

We also devised a scoring method for judging editorial and graphic quality. Each item is rated on a scale from -3 to +3. Best is +3. Each of the columns—one for editorial, one for graphic quality—is then added up, and overall averages computed. (In the example below, numbers are imaginary, not based on an actual item.) Clearly, there's much room for improvement.

Measuring written text

Among ways to measure a text without graphics, best known is the Fog Index, devised by the late Robert Gunning. It rewards clarity by penalizing you for using words that run to too many syllables. You are also penalized for overly long sentences. The index is tied to the presumed level of comprehension of the audience; this is measured by years of schooling. Thus a Fog Index of 17 presumes 17 years of schooling. The Fog Index works as follows:

1. Select a 100-word passage.

2. Count the number of words of three syllables or more.

3. Count the average number of words per sentence.

4. Add items 2 and 3, then multiply the result by 0.4.

5. The result is your Fog Index.

Typical Fog Indexes of professional magazines recently scanned are *Metropolis*: 15; *Architecture*: 15; *Architectural Record*: 13. Mass circulation magazines such as *People* and *Reader's Digest* typically clock in at less than 10.

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This article corresponds to:

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