Teaching Document Design, Not Formatting Requirements

[This is a guest post by Eva Grouling Snider, a doctoral fellow in Rhetoric and Writing at Virginia Tech. Her research interests include visual communication, digital writing, and professional writing pedagogy. --@jbj]

Any academic practice that rests largely on inertia is one that’s ripe for hacking. One such opportunity is hiding in plain sight: Even as word processing software has highlighted design elements, even as design programs have become more accessible and user-friendly, even as my home discipline, rhetoric and composition, has dedicated much more attention to visual literacy, many faculty members continue to specify detailed formatting requirements for student writing.

You know what I’m talking about. I’m talking about sentences like this:

   Your paper must be double-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman, with one-inch margins.

Such draconian formatting requirements stifle students’ creativity and cut off any critical thinking about what should be a crucial part of any writing-intensive classroom, namely visual design. In what follows, I hope to spark a conversation about why these formatting requirements persist, as well as pedagogical strategies for teaching design instead of rules. I hope this post can function as both a collection of arguments against a fairly common policy and (with its followup) a beginner’s guide to teaching design in writing.
Students in all disciplines are more than capable of producing and analyzing visual work in amazingly rich and complex ways. Learning about document design has become a critical component of many college composition courses, and students are better off for it, better prepared for the highly visual demands of the contemporary world. Still, a sizable chunk of well-meaning and thoughtful teachers establish hard and fast formatting rules that may make their lives easier, but do a disservice to their students.

After painstakingly careful research—i.e., talking to people I know who have these requirements in their syllabi and assignment prompts—I have distilled the most common reasons why people choose to force their students to write in a particular font or with particular margins or spacing or with particular headers or footers.

1. **I spend twenty hours a week responding to student papers and my eyes hurt enough as is. I want the papers to be readable!**
   This sentiment—all too understandable at this time of year!—downplays the complexity of readability (or legibility). Instead of giving formatting requirements for readability reasons, try teaching your students about readability: what it means, why it is important, how to achieve it, and so on. In the process, your students can learn a significant amount about typographic elements, including spacing, kerning, letterforms, serifs, and more. Reducing something as complex as readability to “12-point Times New Roman” doesn’t help anyone. After all, there are literally countless readable fonts out there, many even more readable than Times.

2. **How can I tell if they’ve met the page requirement unless they’re all using the same formatting guidelines?**
   Another perfectly practical reason to institute formatting requirements! They put every student literally on the same page and allow teachers to visually compare paper length with ease. But this approach doesn’t really level the playing field, since savvy and/or determined students can easily stretch out a paper with slight changes to kerning and spacing. Given the capabilities of modern word processors, the only way to get an accurate length is through word count. (Why we care so much about paper length is a topic for another day!) Word processors make it incredibly simple to have a word count for all
papers, and all teachers need to do in this case is accept digital copies of student papers.

3. *I want my students to turn in papers that look professional and academic.* In many ways, this is related to the first point about readability. We’ve all likely received a student paper with atrocious visual ethos: perhaps the ink is faded or off-color, or the spacing is peculiar, or the fonts shift in the middle of a paragraph. Formatting requirements would seem to prevent some of these issues, since they call students’ attention to things that they would likely otherwise ignore and leave on default settings, things like fonts, margins, and spacing. But, there is a real difference between paying attention to something and actually knowingly (and rhetorically) manipulating that thing. And, as we’ll see in the next point, when we institute these requirements, we’re setting students up to fail without ever giving them an opportunity to succeed.

4. *I don’t want to be influenced, positively or negatively, by students’ design choices; I want to focus on the content of the writing.* Comments like this imply a binary—word/image, content/form, etc.—that doesn’t necessarily hold up under scrutiny. In rhetoric and composition, Anne Wysocki has *argued persuasively* against these binaries, exposing the inability in complex visual work to distinguish between visual and textual content. Moreover, like it or not, we are all influenced by visual design every day, sometimes subtly, sometimes less so. So, while we may be standardizing that influence, it is still there. We’re also making it so that any deviation from the expected norm is considered negative, evidence of an inability to follow directions.

   In other words, if we require a certain format, we will in fact be influenced by design, but never positively: we will only think worse of students who for whatever reasons do not follow our rules. I absolutely understand the impetus to control the scope of writing courses, which have grown exponentially over the past couple of decades. But, visual design is always there, is always a part of writing, whether we want to acknowledge it or not.

5. *They’ll need to learn to follow conventions if they are going to continue in the academy/workplace.*
   I can’t deny that rhetorical constraints are often placed on writers’ freedom to
design documents as they please. Students, though, will almost certainly have
to follow similar rules in other situations, including in the workplace, and I
hope that our classrooms can offer a safe space in which playing with those
rules is encouraged, and not punished. Moreover, while the ability to follow
conventions of all stripes is certainly important, the ability to understand,
historicize, negotiate, and even resist those conventions is far more important.
Formatting conventions do not exist in a vacuum, and while they are solidified
in style guides and other texts, they are often fluid and change depending on
technologies and rhetorical situations. For instance, the gold standard of
student paper formatting exists for several reasons, not the least of which involves Microsoft’s push to use Times as the default font in word processors
and web browsers. A knowledge of why those conventions exist, how to
negotiate them, and the consequences for following and/or breaking them is
far more useful for students than simply being forced to follow them blindly.

6. *I don't know why I do it. It's just what I've always done.*
And here we come to the heart of the matter. Inertia is particularly strong in
the academy, and this fact is no more evident than in how we design our
papers. Even as Microsoft Word has attempted to shift away from the
standard—by changing the default font and making visual design tools such as
styles much more visible—academics have clung to it desperately. I suspect
that most teachers had a reason for formatting requirements at one time, but
whether or not those reasons still exist is questionable. Over time,
conventions become habits, and habits become rules. What were once fluid
and negotiable guidelines are hardened into a set of practices without any real
reason behind them.

I hope the above discussion is convincing enough on its own. In case it isn’t,
though, I’ll lay my cards out on the table. I teach document design. When I
Teach composition, I spend a significant amount of the semester on visual
design. I’m also a scholar of visual design. Obviously, then, I care about design,
perhaps unhealthily so. And I want everyone else to care, too. But, even if you
can’t bring yourself to care about visual design, then you should *still* care
about formatting requirements on assignment prompts and/or syllabi.
Everything we put on these documents tells our students something about us,
about what we value, and about what they should value. By making these
requirements, we are telling them not to think critically—or even at all—about the visual layout of their documents. We are telling them we value conformity over creativity, practicality over originality, our needs over theirs.

But let’s say you’re right there with me and agree that we should be teaching design instead of rules. What are some ways to begin doing so? Well, teaching design instead of rules can be a tricky process, but it need not consume your entire course. I see three primary steps that need to occur for students to learn to design texts within a writing-intensive course:

- **Students need to see the value of design.** It all starts with students recognizing that design is a part of what they do when they write. For example, Wysocki has suggested low-impact assignments like asking students to write a document, then interrogating in class why they chose to format it as they did.

- **Students need to begin to see the page differently.** One of my colleagues asks her students to sketch their names using a typeface that conveys something about themselves. In doing so, she is able to help students begin to see typefaces as co-constructing visual meaning. Other assignments to help students begin to see the page differently might ask them to experiment with white space or typefaces in their own documents or take a complex textual page, divide the text into segments, and draw the page as segments without any actual text.

- **Students need to begin to see the screen differently.** Word processing programs are some of the most ubiquitous—and invisible—software applications out there. We tend to think of word processing programs as simple, but they are in fact incredibly complex and powerful tools. For students to design texts, they need to know not only how to use the tools available to them, but also how those tools shape their writing. When I begin to talk about document design in my writing classes, I frequently have students bring in a document they wrote earlier in the class (an annotated bibliography works well, since it has a lot going on). Then, we work in groups and begin to use Microsoft Word to re-design their documents. I begin mostly by asking them to play with the software and with their designs, and I ask them to produce multiple different design ideas. After that, we begin to go into design principles and I provide explicit instructions in the capabilities of
word processors, including tabs, styles sheets, and font options, all of which are new to the vast majority of students. My end goal is to help students see the screen, particularly the interface of word processing programs, differently; even making them aware of the interface’s capabilities is a strong step in that direction. This approach also helps mitigate issues of technological access, since it afford students an opportunity to do design work in class, instead of asking them to work with programs on their own that they may not have access to or may not use with enough regularity to be comfortable exploring.

In short: the rules we give our students should be negotiable, and in order for them to be negotiable, we need to talk to our students about those rules, why they exist, what the consequences of breaking or following them are, and so on. It’s not hard to do so. In addition to the assignments above (with more to come next week!), there are countless resources such as Robin Williams’s *The Non-Designer’s Design Book* and Robert Kramer and Stephen Bernhardt’s “Teaching Text Design.” Design does not need to consume your writing courses, but it does need to at least be acknowledged, rather than brushed under the rug in favor of formatting requirements.

So, here’s what I’d like to see that all-too-common sentence about formatting look like:

> You may design your paper however you want, but be aware that you will be graded on the visual ethos of your paper, particularly how well you negotiate the visual conventions of an academic paper in a class like ours. Your paper should be readable and take into consideration the needs of your audience. Most importantly, though, you should have fun and be creative with your design. Just because you need to make your paper look a certain way doesn’t mean you can’t have fun with it!

Do you address document design in your writing assignments? Have helpful strategies for doing so? Let us know in comments!

*Image is by Flickr user (and awesome person) Jo Guldi / Creative Commons licensed*
Document Design: Lessons Learned

[This is another guest post by Eva Grouling Snider, a doctoral fellow in Rhetoric and Writing at Virginia Tech. Her research interests include visual communication, digital writing, and professional writing pedagogy. --@jbj]

First of all, I wanted to thank all the brilliant ProfHacker readers who commented on last week’s post. More than anything else, I meant the post to spark a conversation, and it did that. The wealth of comments and perspectives on the post, both here and on Twitter, is evidence that, despite there being nothing new about it, document design is still an important topic of conversation and debate. In particular, I was struck by the diversity of perspectives on teaching design in conjunction with writing. Even within any given discipline, there are bound to be a variety of different perspectives on design; those differences are only compounded across various disciplines with different genres and views on writing.

I am also reminded that no one approach to teaching document design is perfect. For instance, commenter drnels suggests an approach grounded in real-world professional formatting requirements that, while it accomplishes different things than the approach I suggest, is no less effective. What’s important is that we adopt an approach that is right for our particular situations, for us and our students. The demands of different writing classes—first-year composition, professional writing, history, business,
biology, etc.—some of which treat writing as the primary content of the course, some of which do not, dictate different approaches to design.

But, what I hoped to get across most clearly was that just as different classes demand different pedagogical approaches, so too do different writing *situations*. Flattening design to a universal standard—what I was critiquing—makes it static and, essentially, arhetorical. Design, like writing, is situational, and when two very different assignments both have the same formatting requirements, they eliminate the situational element of design. This argument is precisely why I would be careful in considering assigning formatting based on citation and style guides, since those guides run the risk of flattening design to a universal standard. Moreover, as commenters 22062114 and austinbarry observe, the universal standard we have chosen to adopt is one not particularly well suited for modern technologies.

Now, as some commenters rightly pointed out, eliminating design from the writing situation can help students focus on other considerations, such as sentence structure, citation, and so on. I hesitate, though, to call those considerations more important than design. Just as poor organization or syntax causes problems for an audience, so too can poor design choices (a fact made very obvious in professional writing, when the usability of a piece of writing is interrogated). Moreover, I would argue that just because a student is having difficulty writing does not mean that the same student will not shine when it comes to design. Writing and design require different literacies (or, if you prefer, intelligences), and visual literacy can be taught right alongside alphabetic literacy without taking away from the teaching of writing.

As drnels’ practices indicate, there is a spectrum of possibilities in terms of freedom and constraint on design. In either case, the negotiation of freedom and constraints is crucial, and the ability to design in both open and highly constrained situations will serve students well in future classes and the workplace. Teaching requirements is still teaching design, as long as you talk about those requirements, why they exist, what the consequences are for following or breaking them, and so on. This discussion need not be long or involved—for instance, the conversation about LaTeX in the comments thread has me brainstorming various assignments in which students use LaTeX and
discuss and analyze how the software converts commands into a typeset document. I do not worry about heavily constrained design situations; I worry about requirements that are left unexplored and unexamined by teacher and student alike.

I continue to think, though, that the logic behind LaTeX—that document design is better left to document designers and that we can easily and neatly separate design from content—leaves us and our students with untapped opportunities. It is in no way controversial to argue that writing is inventive, i.e., that writing produces thought as much as the other way around. The same argument, though, applies for design: designing a document can lead to new content and new ways of thinking about the existing content. Are your students having difficulty organizing their papers according their arguments? Have them redesign their document—e.g., create headings and subheadings where there were none—and see if their design work helps lead them to a stronger organizational structure. And, if design is inventive even in highly rigid and deeply linear papers, think of how inventive it can be in less rigid and linear forms of writing like those enabled by digital media. Commenter kimon eloquently articulates this logic by suggesting that teachers ask students to step outside the boundaries of the word processor to look at the design of digital writing more generally, such as the writing that occurs in wikis.

And so we come full circle to my original point: there are many different ways of approaching design, and each of these approaches offers its own benefits and drawbacks. Kimon’s approach makes a lot of sense for an interface design class; drnels’ makes a lot of sense for a professional writing class; the approach I suggested last week perhaps makes the most sense for a first-year writing class. You have an opportunity to critically examine your own approach to teaching design. Your approach, it seems to me, should depend on four primary local factors: (1) your course’s learning objectives, (2) your student population, (3) your institutional constraints, including curricular directives, such as my institution’s ViEWS directive, and technological access, and (4) your discipline’s views on and approaches to design, including disciplinary citation and style guides. In any case, if we value design as an important part of writing—and ask that our students do the same—then half the battle is already over. All that remains is to develop and hone pedagogical
approaches that teach design effectively in addition to our other content, and, really, that’s the fun part.

*Image by Flickr user *mpclemens* / Creative Commons licensed*