

CONVENTION

General agreement on or acceptance of certain practices or attitudes: *by convention, north is at the top of most maps.*

A practice, custom or procedure widely observed in a group, to facilitate social interaction: *the convention of shaking hands.*

A widely used and accepted device or technique, as in drama, literature, or painting: *the theatrical convention of the aside.*

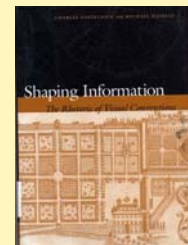
Shaping Information: The Rhetoric of Visual Conventions

Conventions prompt invention: they rarely stand still.
They respond to technology, cultural values and knowledge.

Conventions pervade all forms of design (headers, company logo),
even when readers expectations are not met because of missing
conventions.

Conventions operate in social contexts where users control them and
rely on shared knowledge.

Conventional practice is intrinsically rhetorical, designers must select
conventions based on their interpretation of the potential readers and
the situational context in which those readers will use them.



Charles Kostelnick and Michael Hassett. (2003) *Shaping Information:
The Rhetoric of Visual Conventions*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press

Shaping Information: The Rhetoric of Visual Conventions

Existing conventions have a powerful hold, even when users may prefer other forms of visual language. Telephone books, bus and commuter train timetables, newspapers, Web sites - we might not particularly admire their designs, but we accept them and implicitly perpetuate them because we learn to interpret them facilely. A Web site that we access daily may not be particularly pleasing or usable - it may in fact be cluttered, inconsistent, and unprofessional - but the day the redesigned site appears online, it will probably unsettle us initially.

HOW GRIP SERVES READERS

“Conventional grip serves readers by forming well-worn paths that they can amble along with minimal cognitive and rhetorical stress. Interpretation would be extremely demanding if we had to deal constantly with design novelties.

HOW COLOR CAN PROMPT MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS

Depending on the reader’s prior knowledge and experience, many interpretations of color are possible, and therefore, readers often need contextual clues to guide them. To Western readers who receive a green brochure about environmental issues, its color may aptly suggest its theme; however, if the same readers get the document around Christmas or Saint Patrick’s Day, which some of them also conventionally associate with green, their initial interpretations may be ambiguous, prompting them to juggle competing meanings and decide which one applies to this situation. The readers’ cultural backgrounds may also lead to other (and perhaps to the designer, totally unexpected) interpretations of the color green. Muslim readers may associate green with the Prophet Mohammed.

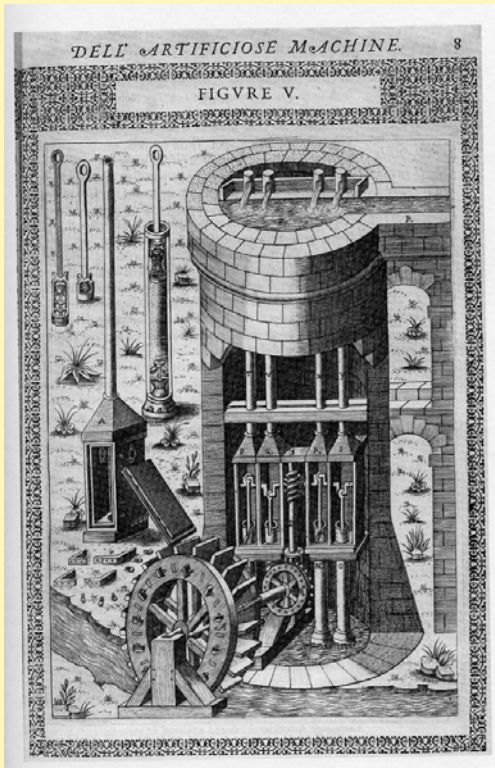
HOW STRUCTURE ORGANIZES INFORMATION

Headings, bulleted lists, rules and icons empower us to structure information with minimal cognitive stress. Specialized settings use tabs and dividers in training manuals to help employees locate information; toolbars, palettes, and tear-off menus in drawing software enable designers to access key functions.

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Currently accepted conventions were once new.

Introduction of
Cross-Sectional
drawing



Cross-sectional drawing of a water pump, from Agostino Ramelli's *Le Diverse et Artificiose Machine*, 1588

Table of Contents

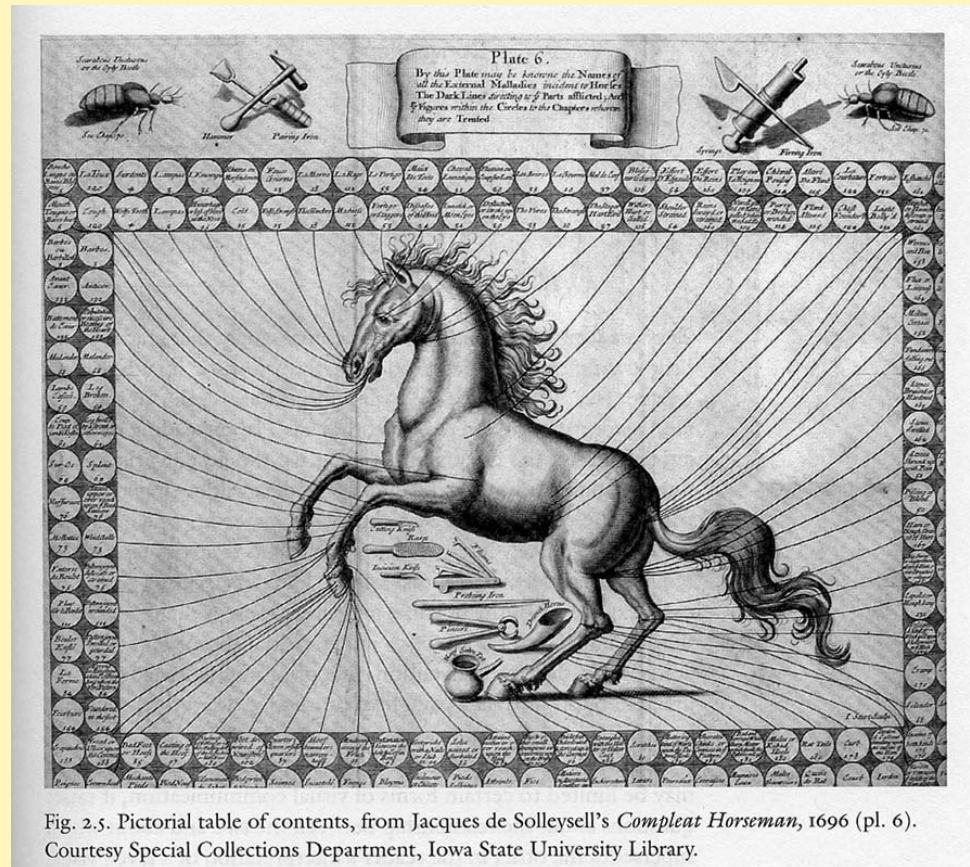
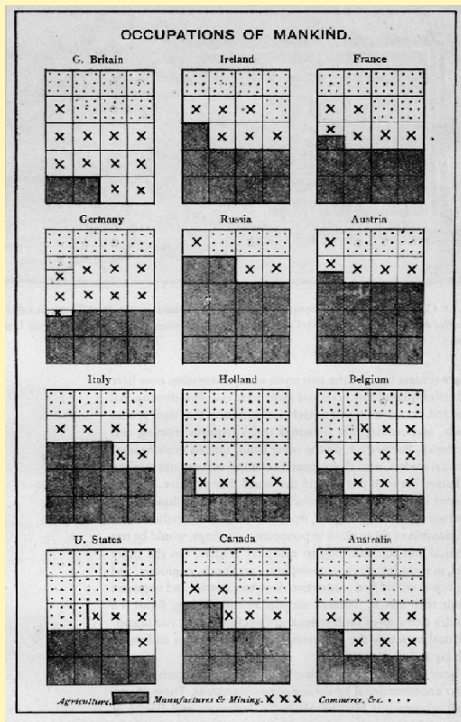


Fig. 2.5. Pictorial table of contents, from Jacques de Solleysell's *Compleat Horseman*, 1696 (pl. 6).
Courtesy Special Collections Department, Iowa State University Library.

Pie charts were originally square or oval charts.



Michael Mulhall's *Industries and Wealth of Nations*, 1896

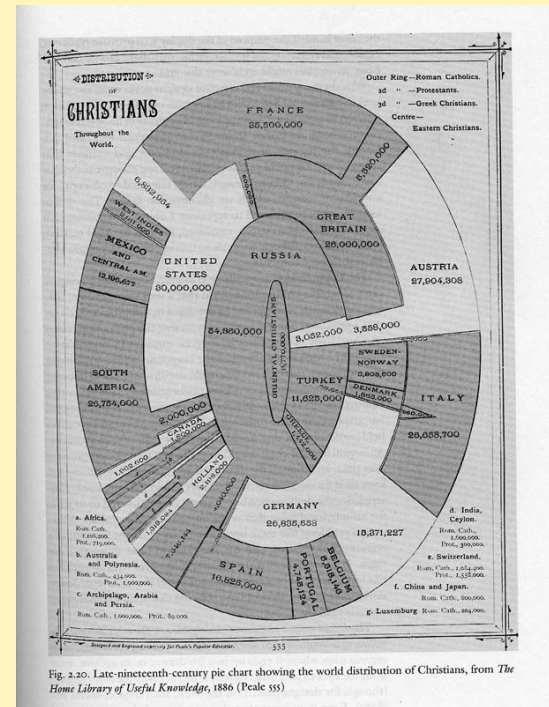
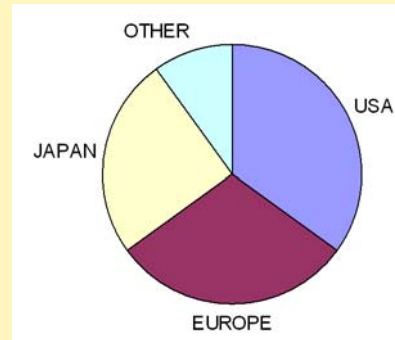
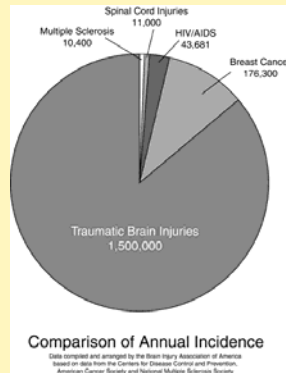


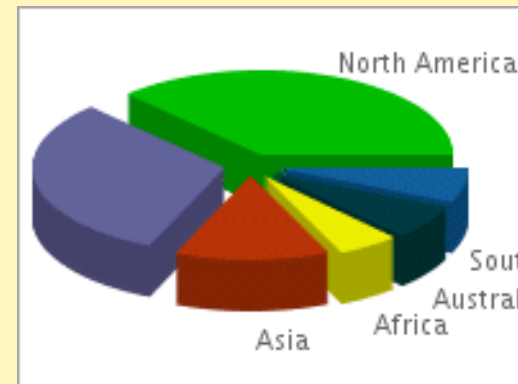
Fig. 220. Late-nineteenth-century pie chart showing the world distribution of Christians, from *The Home Library of Useful Knowledge*, 1886 (Peale 555)

The Home Library of Useful Knowledge, 1886

Now they are round



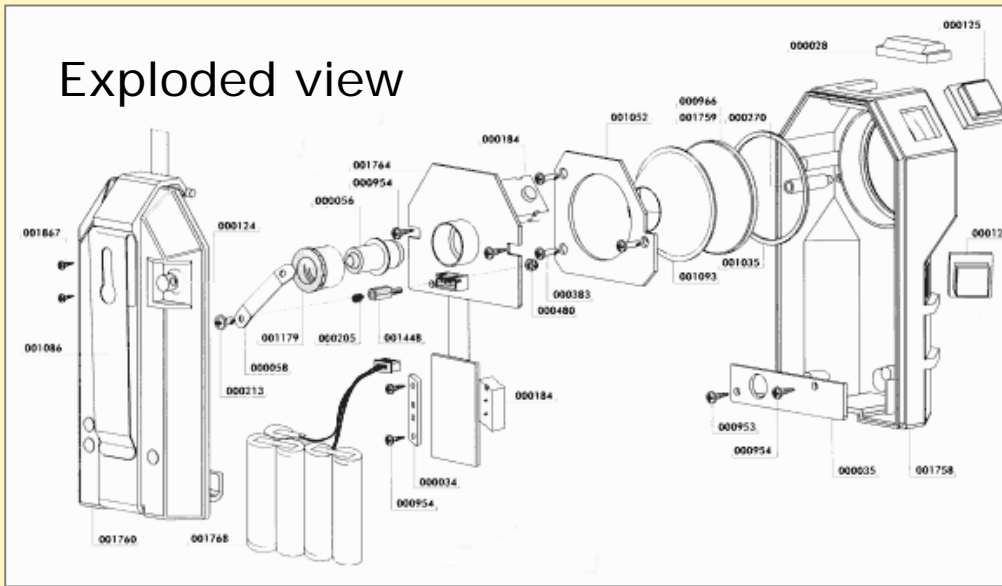
and sometimes three-dimensional.



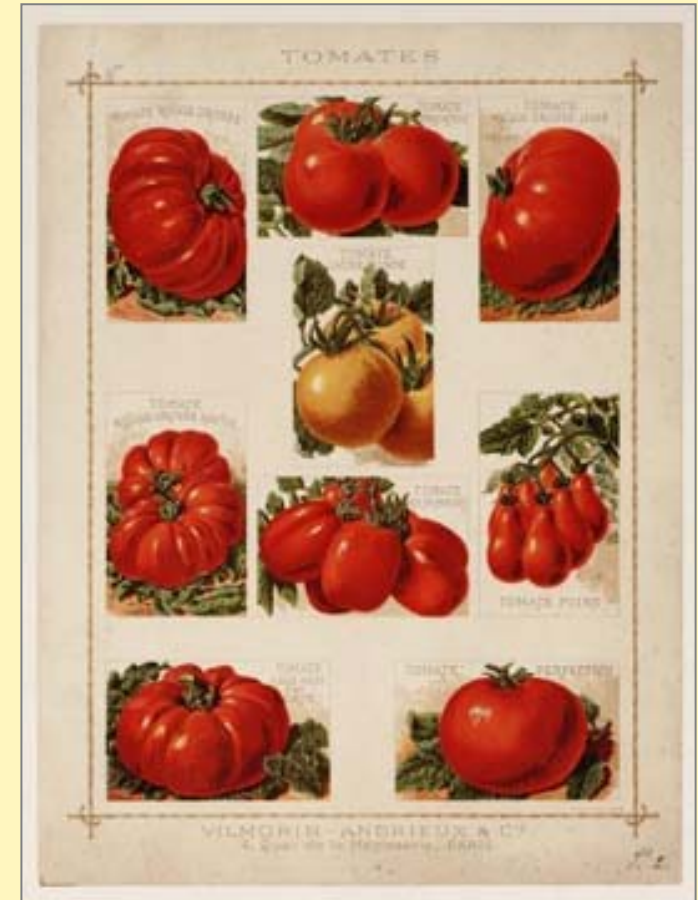


We understand this is a representation of the **life cycle** of a plant, not a **snapshot** of a bunch of plants together.

Exploded view



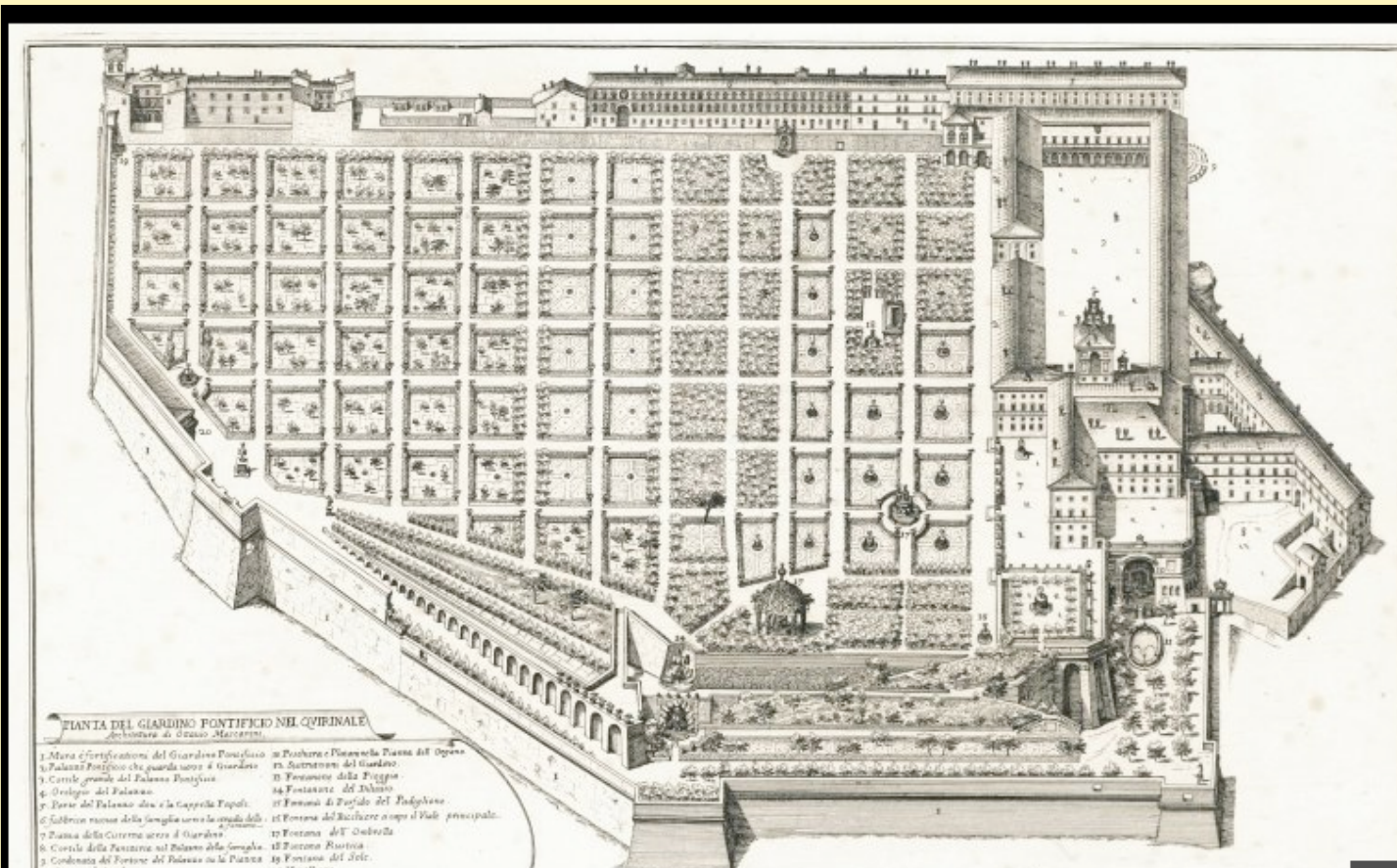
We recognize what an exploded view is, and that it is used to show all the parts in linear order and depicted size (scale) relation to each other. We use exploded views to show how something is put together (machines, electrical devices).



Comparison, Identification

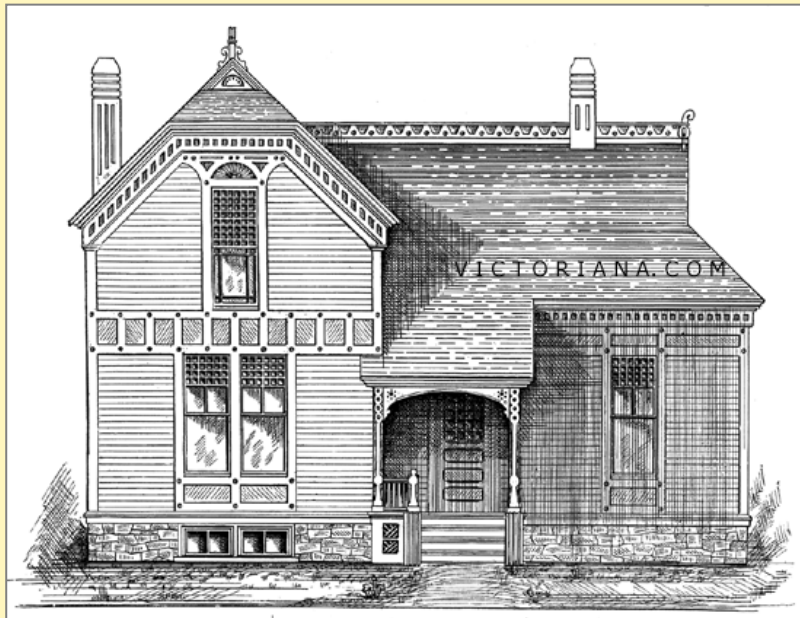
This convention also eliminates extraneous details so that we focus on tomato shape, size, color, whether they grow in clusters and can easily make comparisons without the use of words.

Plan and elevation used to be depicted within the same document.

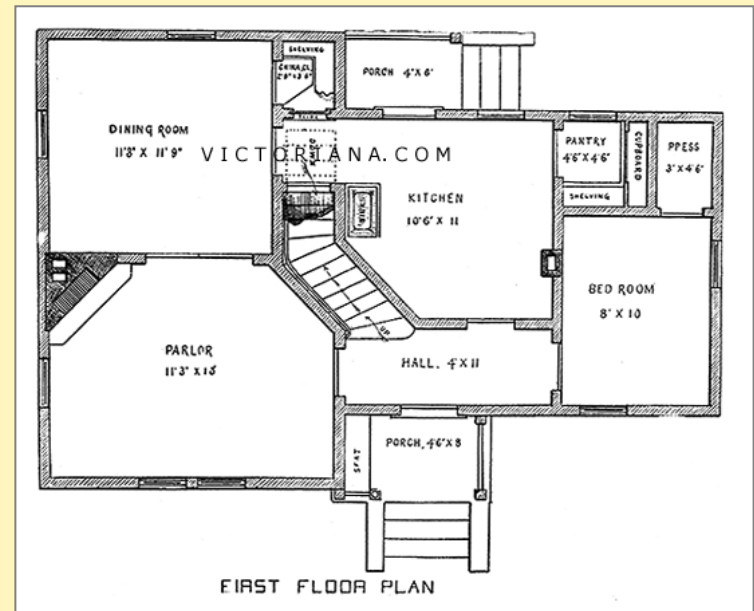


"Plan of the papal garden on the Quirinale. Architecture by Octavio Mascharini" (Plate 6) 1691
http://catena.bgc.bard.edu/rare_books.htm

Now we separate them into two different views.



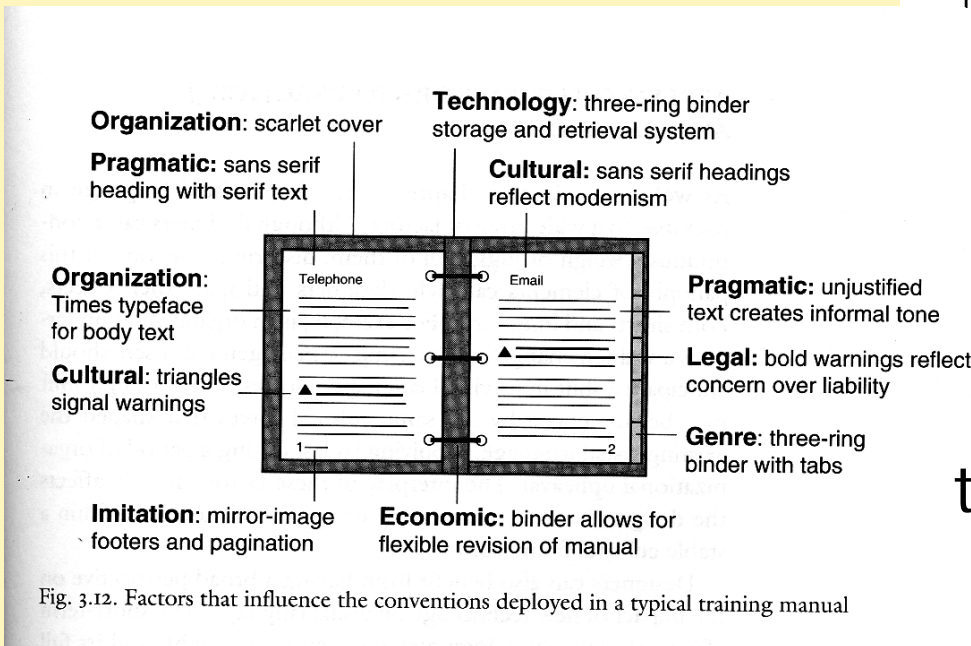
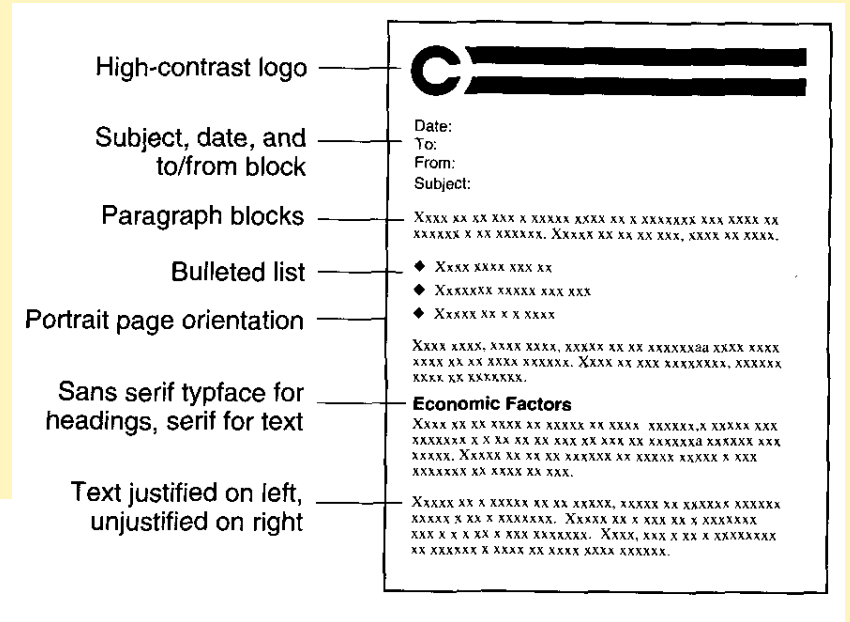
Elevation



Plan

Document Conventions We Recognize:

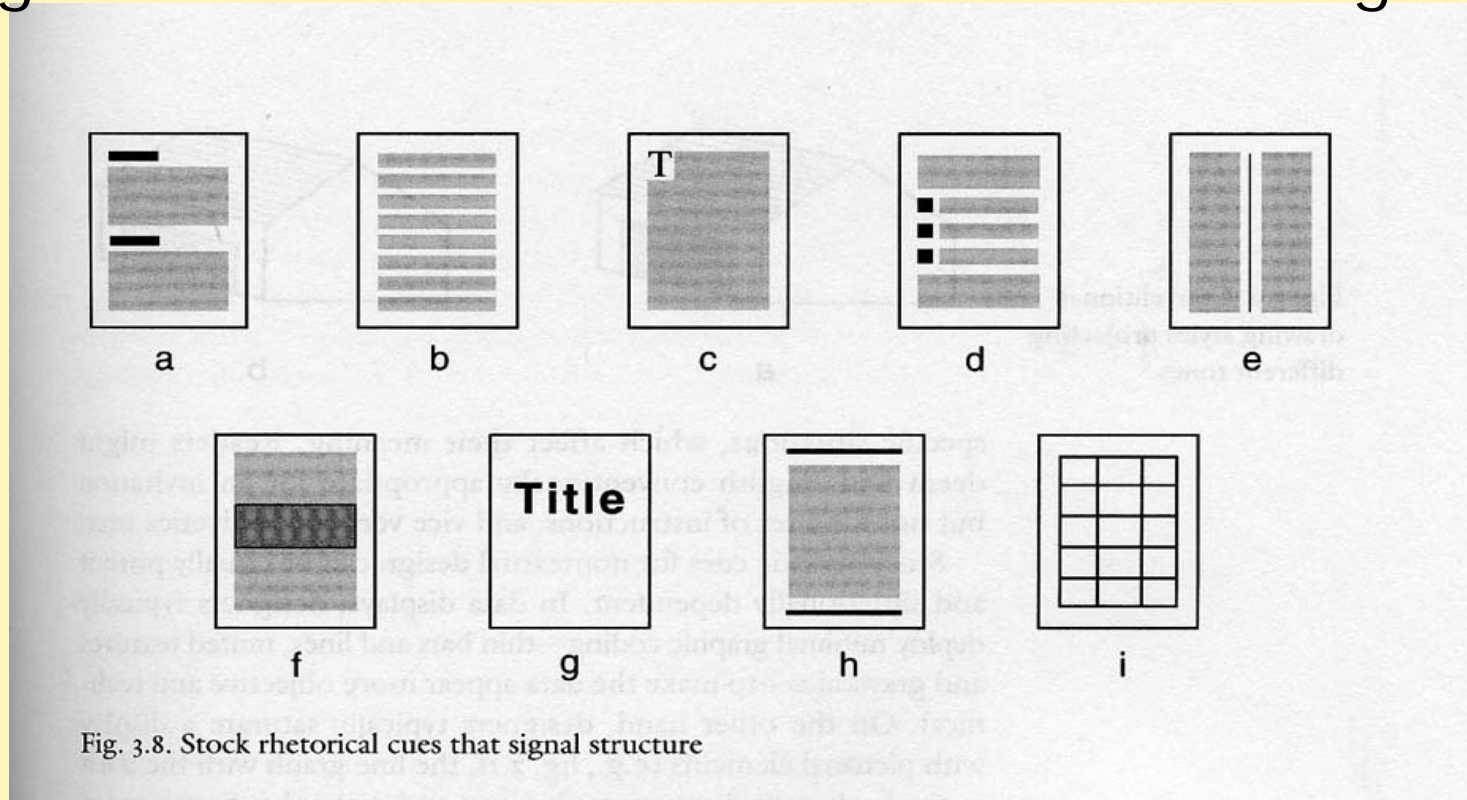
mem
o



training manual

Fig. 3.12. Factors that influence the conventions deployed in a typical training manual

Using familiar conventions in documents strengthens:

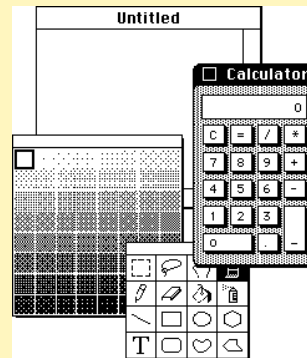
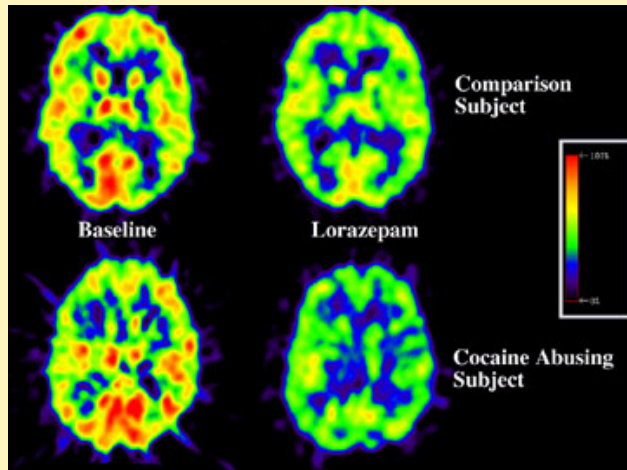


Credibility - engendering the reader's trust and confidence through a familiar type style, logo, page borders, watermarks, and embossing;

Emphasis - directing the reader's attention to selected pieces of information through boldface, large type, boxed text, spot color, high figure-ground contrast, and page or screen location

Tone - projecting a serious, authoritative voice through justified, centered, and all caps text, glossy or heavy paper stock, and precise drawings

Some Recent Conventions in Science and Technology



Color-coding scans of human brain and satellite maps

Software and computer **graphical interfaces**: cursor, rulers, ribbons, pull-down and tear-off menus, scroll bars, help balloons, dialogue boxes, desktop with files, designing “tools”.

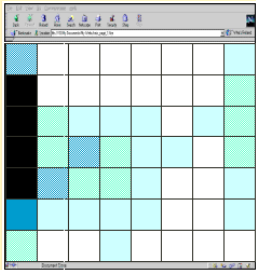
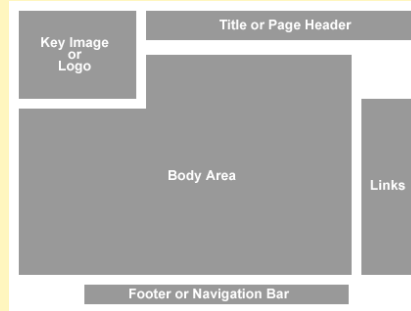
Emotigrams in emails

The Internet changes too frequently to create conventions.

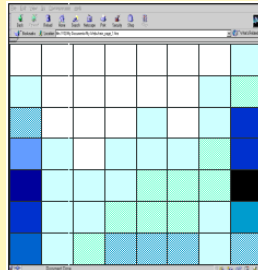
Web sites constantly change their design, sometimes weekly or daily, without notice or warning to users. Web sites have little material “shelf life” because what they visualize is often only as real and as permanent as the reader’s latest visit.

Unlike hard-copy print documents (journals, newsletters, annual reports) that can be stored and later referred to, the Web is wondrously and frustratingly fluid, and readers must rely on memory to connect past and present.

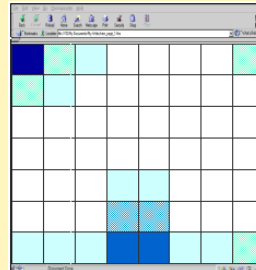
Previously Expected Locations of Web Objects



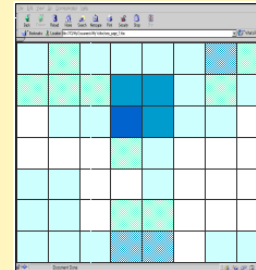
Internal web links



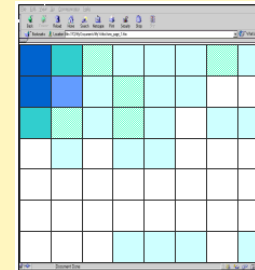
External web links



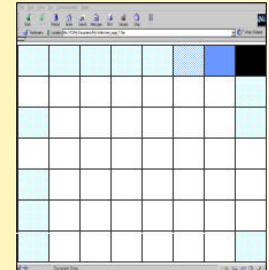
"Back to Home" link



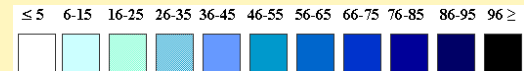
Internal search engine



Login/register button



Help button




optimal web design
Software Usability Research Laboratory

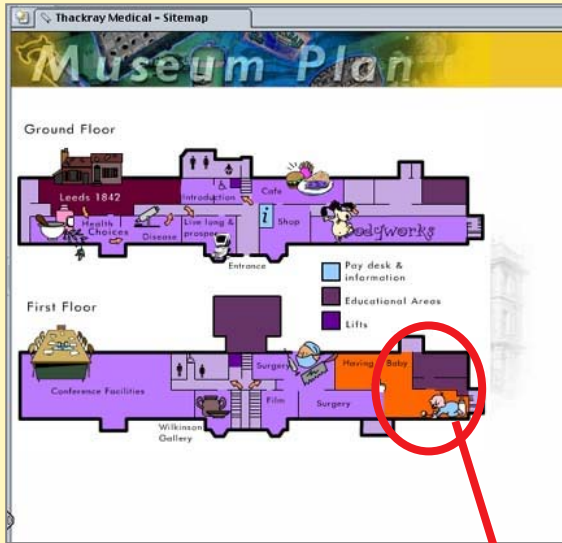
Criteria for optimal web design (designing for usability)
By Michael I. Bernard

But we do have temporary conventions.



And web design influences other forms of visual communication, computer and non-computer. Television commercials, billboards and print advertisements now use Web-based conventions - cursor arrows, selecting buttons, navigation bars at the top and bottom of ads, etc...

Clicking "conventions" on the Internet



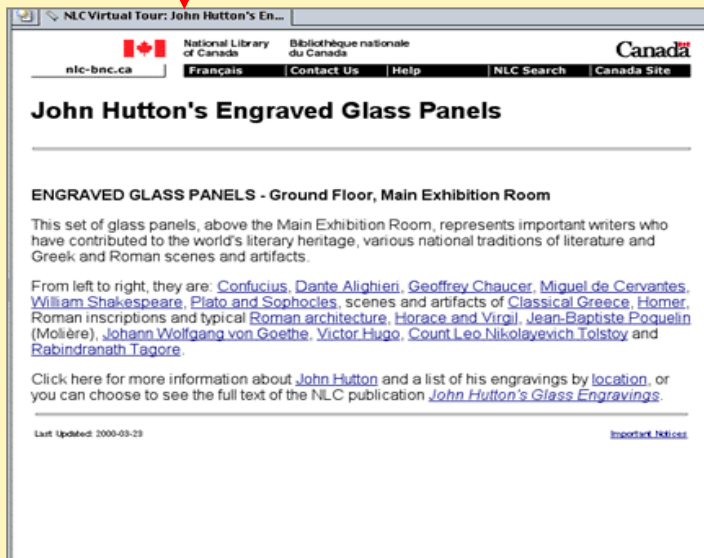
Floor plan



Thumbnail



Click on a blue **word**

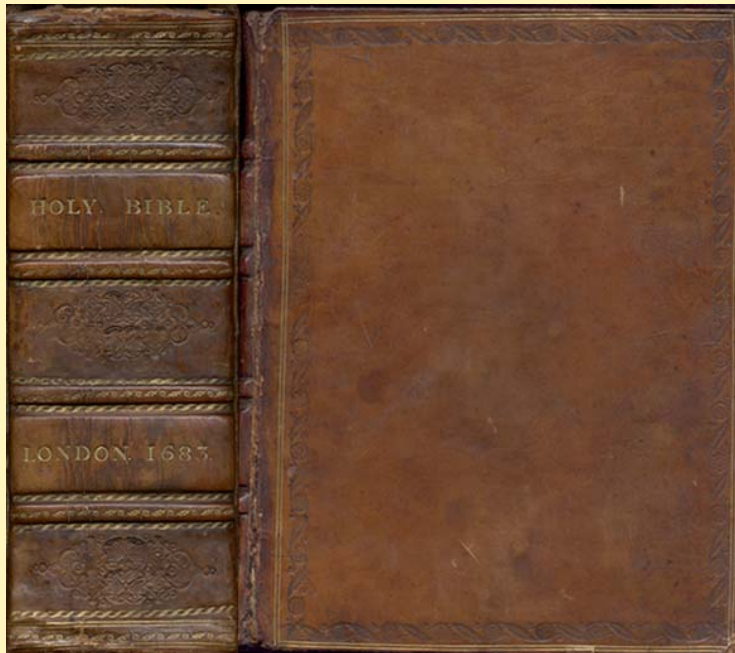


Click on the **object** itself

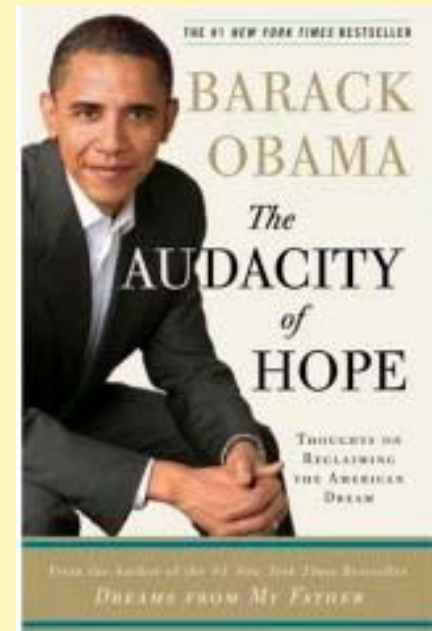


Conventions change slowly. Styles change quickly.
Take book covers for example.

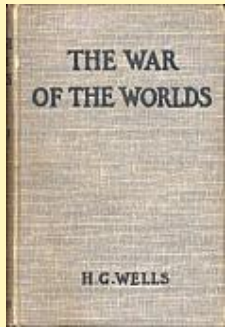
1683
King James Bible



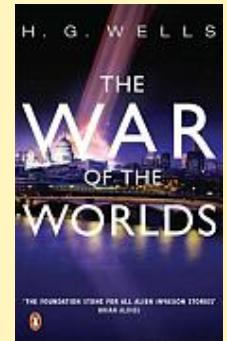
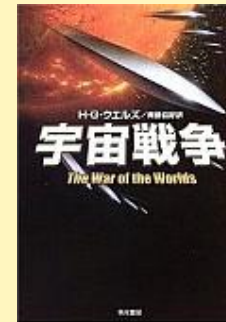
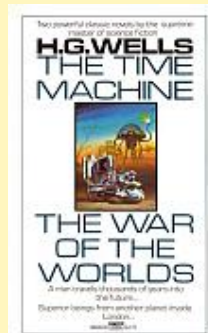
2006
The Audacity of Hope



There's an amazing website The War of the Worlds - Book Cover Collection at <http://drzeus.best.vwh.net/wotw/> that displays book covers for the book "The War of the Worlds" by H. G. Wells.



1898



2006

And just like book covers, car designs, clothing, etc., websites will continue to change. Since Web 2.0, we now have a group of new tools and technologies that have their own style.

Think about the what a blog looks like.
Now, how about a Wiki.

Podcasts

RSS Feeds

Tagging



05 africa amsterdam animal animals architecture art august australia autumn baby
barcelona beach berlin birthday black blackandwhite blue boston building bw
california cameraphone camping canada canon car cat cats chicago
china christmas church city clouds color concert day dc december dog dogs
england europe fall family festival florida flower flowers food france
friends fun garden geotagged germany girl graffiti green halloween hawaii
hiking holiday home honeymoon hongkong house india ireland italy japan july kids
lake landscape light london losangeles macro march me mexico moblog mountains
museum music nature new newyork newyorkcity newzealand night nyc
ocean october paris park party people photo portrait red river roadtrip rock rome
san sanfrancisco school scotland sea seattle sky snow spain spring street
summer sunset sydney taiwan texas thailand thanksgiving tokyo toronto travel
tree trees trip uk urban usa vacation vancouver washington water
wedding white winter xmas yellow york zoo