Times New Roman vs. Arial:
Choosing a Typeface for Online Documentation
by Ryan Walters

Picture this: a computer, monitor, keyboard, mouse, and you, scanning what seems to be endless text that may as well go on forever. As you are reading you find yourself squinting to see some words that are difficult to read. About the time you reach the middle of the text you realize that you are not reading as quickly as you could. You decide that you need to increase the text size, but now there is a constant click of your mouse as you have to scroll twice as quickly to keep up with your reading.

Could all of this have been avoided? Yes, and the answer is a simple solution that can be done quickly and easily during or after the document has been created.

This answer lies in the typeface the author uses. Although there are hundreds of typefaces available, there are only a select few that are used for reading on a computer. Choosing the right typeface for reading on a computer is important, because it will affect the way your readers perceive your page; as serious and formal, or friendly and casual. But most important is whether or not the reader can read the information.

A quick history lesson shows that Verdana was the typeface shipped with Internet Explorer 3, which was released in August of 1996. At this time online help for various software programs was becoming readily available.

Verdana is a san serif typeface (sans serif typefaces do not have the small lines at the ends of each character and because of this each letter may have a different width) and was the Internet typeface of choice for several years because of its exceptional on-screen readability. Even though, Verdana is a common Internet typeface eventually the two most commonly used paper-based typefaces, Times New Roman and Arial, began taking over online documentation (Bernard et al. 2003).

In their study, Bernard et al. focused on the readability and legibility of varying 10- and 12-point sizes of both Times and Arial on computer monitors. Interestingly, results included that there were no legibility issues with either of the typefaces at the two sizes. Also, both sizes of the Arial typeface were read slower in all conditions, but the 12-point Arial typeface was the preferred typeface in all conditions. Finally, all participants stated that the 12-point size was more legible, for both typefaces, in all conditions. Conclusions from post-trial interviews found that sans serif typefaces as a whole have better perceived readability, and readers would like to see all websites convert over.

Another study, done by Kingery and Furuta (1997), had participants skim online newspaper headlines comparing four typefaces, which included Times New Roman, Arial, Book Antiqua, and Century Gothic. Of the four, the two that were most often preferred were Times and Arial.

When a comparison between the two was made, Arial edged out

Notes from the Editor's Desk

This issue marks the return of Techniques as a printed newsletter. Over the past few semesters, publication switched to a solely online format. Most of the content in this issue (*Times New Roman vs. Arial: Choosing a Typeface for Online Documentation* by Ryan Walters, *What's the Difference? Paper vs. Online Documentation* by Gretchen Herrick, *Where are the Pictures?* by Ann Sweeney, and *Browse Sequencing in Online Help Systems* by Kevin Sanderfoot) came from the Spring 2005 online edition. To read other articles from that edition or previous ones, visit Techniques online at http://www.english.mnsu.edu/stc/web/newsletter.htm

We welcome letters from our readers. Send comments, questions or concerns to our faculty advisors.

Times as the favorite with regards to readability and legibility.

Participants were noted as saying that the serifs caused the reader to focus more on separate words of the headline instead of the title as a whole.

Both of these studies support the claim that Times and Arial are the most commonly used Internet typefaces, but that is where the similarities end. Based on these studies, Arial is more readable and legible while doing on-screen reading, even though readers were not able to read as quickly. As reading on a computer is becoming more and more common, the choice of typeface has become crucial, and Arial seems to be the user's preferred typeface. When designing any online documentation, typeface should be the least of your concerns, but as it is seen here there are aspects that make some typefaces better than others. **T**

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NEWS / ANNOUNCEMENTS

New Faculty

MSU's technical communication program recently welcomed a new member to the faculty this semester. Gretchen Haas comes to the program from the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities, where she spent the last six years working at the Office of Information technology and teaching as a graduate instructor in the Department of Rhetoric while studying for her doctorate in Rhetoric and Scientific and Technical Communication.

Website Updates

The MSU STC website has been updated and now features a jobs and internship page. Any employers that have potential openings for MSU students are encouraged to contact us with information.

The website also features archived issues of Techniques, as well as resources and links to technical communication related information. Visit http://www.english.mnsu.edu/stc/web

Mlady Receives STC Scholarship

Grace Mlady won the STC-Twin Cities undergraduate scholarship for the 2005-2006 academic year. Grace became the first MSU student to receive an STC scholarship from the Twin Cities chapter after winning the competition with her submission of a multimedia presentation titled *Using Yahoo! Maps – an Online Help System.* For information about scholarship opportunities, check out the bulletin board on page 6.

New STC Officers

Nominations for chapter officers took place during the September 22 meeting. The officers include: Kevin Sanderfoot – President, Andrew Robertson – Vice President, Gretchen Herrick – Secretary, Arlandis Jones – Treasurer, and Denise Ware – Event Coordinator. All five are graduate students in the technical communication program at MSU.

BY THE NUMBERS
Enrollment in Technical Communication at MSU

Graduate
47%
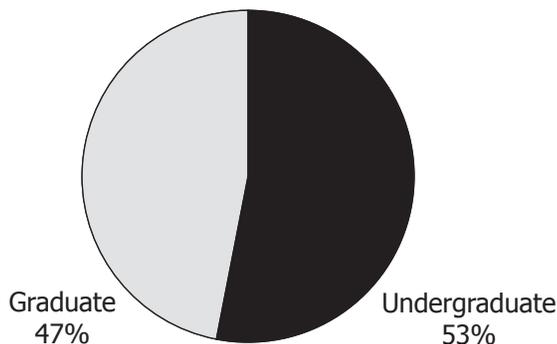
Undergraduate
53%

Enrollment in the technical communication program at MSU is fairly even between undergraduate and graduate students. Department numbers for Fall 2005 show 42 students enrolled in undergraduate major, minor, and certificate programs and 37 students enrolled in the graduate degree and certificate programs.

What's the Difference?
Paper vs. Online Documentation
by Gretchen Herrick

Documentation can appear in a variety of forms. When you buy a computer product, hardware or software, it almost always comes with one or more manuals. In addition to the paper manual many times products will come with an online version of the documentation. With two forms of documentation one might ask what the difference between the two is, and which one is better.

First, one of the most common forms of paper documentation is a manual. Manuals describe how to install and operate the product. Online documentation is usually displayed on the screen instead on a piece of paper. One of the most common forms of online documentation is a help system. Most online help systems have the documentation embedded into the product. One example of an online help system is Microsoft's Office Word. While typing a document in Word if a user wanted to figure out how to set a style to the first paragraph of their document, the user would click on Help, and type *setting style* in the assistance column.

Another popular form of online documentation is online tutorials. Online tutorial documentation teaches a user how to use the product. Online documentation is not perfect and some complaints computer users have is that the documentation is hard to make out, but with advances in online documentation it is becoming easier for users to access specific information.

Which of the forms of documentation is better? Both forms of documentation sound really similar because they describe how to operate a product, and provide help to the user. However one seems to be easier to use and is more popular than the other. Current trends point toward online documentation. In fact many products that you buy today come with a quick start guide and the manual can be found online. Reasons why online documentation has become more popular include: online documentation is more convenient. It does not require the user to store a manual, and look for it every time they need help. Also, Collier (1998) states, "online documentation is more usable, you don't have to flip any pages, or even worse flip back and forth to a table of contents" (1).

Paper and online documentation are not the only two forms of documentation. One form that is fairly new and growing is multimedia documentation. Baldasare (1994) defines multimedia documentation by stating, "Multimedia documentation is user information that includes text, graphic art, and any combination of time based media of sound, animation, and video delivered by computer and providing users with opportunities for interaction" (107). Multimedia documentation sounds similar to online documentation but one thing that distinguishes it from online is that it includes various forms of media, not just text or graphics on a screen. They also are typically livelier than online documents.

With so many forms of documentation writers must decide what form to use when analyzing the product's audience. There are advantages and disadvantages to each form. It might be said that paper documentation is dated and online and multimedia documentation are slowly gaining popularity because they are more lively and easier to use. **T**

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Where are the Pictures?

By Ann Sweeney

Open a typical help function integrated into most software programs and notice what is often mysteriously missing: visual content, pictures, illustrations, icons and symbols. This is somewhat surprising because more and more of technical writing production time is dedicated to producing online documents that include visuals (Harrison 2003), especially now that the technology to create and deliver high quality visual material readily exists.

When it appears as though readers of technical communication in general, and readers of online documentation and help systems specifically, are an average cross-culture sample of the reading and technology-using public, then it should stand to reason that they would also be people who are used to combining text and visual content in order to process information (Qiuye 2000). Why are there so few pictures in help documentation?

Just the pictures, please

A reader gravitating toward looking at pictures before reading the text is a common phenomenon. Reinforced by Western reading pedagogy, the "habit" starts with using pictures as storytelling platforms, ultimately graduating to visuals that function as reinforcements to meaning and detail (Search 1993, 629). Although it seems to be most prevalent with American and European readers, this need to look at the pictures is not specifically cultural (Qiuye 2000, 8). Human communication and processing of information is based on visual thinking, in other words, communication started with communicating information symbolically, and in visual terms: gestures, diagrams, signs. Cognitively, people looking at a photograph will interpret a set of symbols, the individual and multiple parts of the picture, to come up with meaning and information that is visually "heavier" than words. The strength of visual communication is in the speed and extent of human interpretation (Harrison 2003, 16), but there too lies its weakness. When meaning is left to interpretation, exactly what is meant to be communicated can be confused, misinterpreted, even completely missed.

Verbal-visual integration

In technical documents, the main purpose for using visuals is to literally help the reader visualize the information that they glean from the written text (Qiuye 2000, 6). Ideally, visuals in technical communication do not take the place of text, but repeat the information given by the text, reinforcing meaning and clarifying any abstractions. Visuals are intended to make the written text more accessible and to "even the playing field" for readers of differing skill levels and learning styles (Harrison 2003, 2).

Just as in other content formats, visuals attract attention first, and are interpreted by readers as a more alluring and immediate informative content, capturing readers' attention even before they begin to process textual information (Search 1993, 631).

Visuals can even make a point with more compelling force than written text (Qiuye 2000, 3). In fact, readers interpret words as symbols, and even more so when the vocabulary is relatively simple and the sentence length is short, as in online help language. By making help language ultra-simplistic and not reinforcing content with visual referents, writers of online help systems are actually making their products less attractive, less functional, and potentially less used by those who need them (Harrison 2003, 16).

Words are also pictures

One way in which technical communicators are adding visual elements to help systems that are presently void of obvious visual tools and content is through the use of graphics which guide and emphasize, and by making text into symbols that carry more meaning than the literal word definition or potential connotation(s).

Browse Sequencing in Online Help Systems
by Kevin Sanderfoot

We have all been lost at one time or another in the maze that sometimes constitutes online help and documentation. Unfortunately, most of us do not know we are lost until it is too late and we are beyond finding our way. It is not uncommon to enter an online help document seeking answers to specific questions, only to leave frustrated and asking even more basic questions (Andrisani et al. 2001).

As paper documentation continues to give way to online equivalents as the primary source for presenting instruction and user assistance, the concept of browse sequencing should be considered in document design. The purpose of a browse sequence is to lead users through help documents in a sequential order arranged by the writer of the document (Farkas and Gibbs 1994).

Browse sequences, much like the orientation of printed documentation—where step A precedes step B and step C follows B—are often omitted from help systems. One survey found that only one-third of help systems contained browse sequences (Elley 1998). While the omission of browse sequencing from online help allows greater freedom on the part of the user, it also presents the potential for confusion if the user accesses help topics in a different order than the help system's author intended.

The navigation from one help topic to the next may cause confusion among some software users because there are multiple ways for accessing information in online documents (e.g., a contents page, index, or full-text search) (Elley 1998).

Despite numerous avenues for retrieving data, three situations contribute to users becoming lost or disoriented: 1) they do not know where to go next, 2) they know where to go but not how to get there, or 3) they do not know where they are in relation to the overall document (Andrisani et al. 2001). One way of helping users navigate successfully through help documents is organizing information in a way that is similar to that of a printed book. Online help authors should consider the book analogy (Andrisani et al. 2001). Browse sequencing works in a similar way. "The role of a browse sequence is to provide the equivalent of sequentially reading a book" (Farkas and Gibbs 1994, 266).

Various design options are available for help authors who wish to incorporate browse sequencing in their documents. Two examples are single segment and multiple segments. Single segment is the simplest method for establishing a sequence. This long, single sequence contains most, if not all, topics found in the help system. A variation to this is multiple segments. Here the user is presented with multiple segments, each containing similar or grouped topics (Farkas and Gibbs 1994).

Should my help system contain a browse sequence?

Browse sequences can provide a valuable service to users. Sequences present information and help topics in an organized, logical manner that reduces opportunities for the user to become lost in the document. With that said, there are two reasons typically given by help authors for not using a browse sequence: 1) users don't use the browse sequence to its full potential, and 2) browse sequences are difficult to design for large and complex systems (Farkas and Gibbs 1994).

Analyzing potential users and the size and complexity of the help system are the best ways to determine if a browse sequence should be incorporated in a project. Designing and situating a browse sequence within a help system may not always be easy, but it is worth the effort if it increases usability and user performance. **T**

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BULLETIN BOARD

The Twin Cities chapter of the STC meets once a month, September through June. For information about dates, location and programs, visit the STC-Twin Cities website (http://www.stctc.org).

Every year, STC and STC-Twin Cities offer scholarships to undergraduate and graduate students pursuing careers in technical communication.

Interested students may obtain applications, instructions and deadline information on the web at http://www.stc.org and http://www.stctc.org.

ACM SIGDOC (Association for Computer Machinery – Special Interest Group on the Design of Communications) offers a $500 scholarship for undergraduate students studying for careers in communication design. SIGDOC also sponsors a competition for graduate students. For more information, visit http://www.sigdoc.org/awards/

The MSU STC student chapter holds meetings on the second and fourth Thursday each month in Centennial Student Union on the Minnesota State University, Mankato campus. Meetings start at 5:00 P.M. and generally last thirty to forty-five minutes. For exact dates and room location, visit the MSU STC website (http://www.english.mnsu.edu/stc/web)

The MSU student chapter also holds field trips and other technical communication related events throughout the year. Information and dates for upcoming events can be found on the chapter website.

Feel free to contact the MSU student chapter officers or Techniques staff with any questions or comments about the items listed.

PICTURES continued from 5

By boldfacing action-related words, or by recreating how a word will look in the format in which it is or will be used, a writer is asking readers to use the same interpretive skills they use when looking at pictures (Qiuye 2000, 4; Harrison 2003, 16).

A word becomes a symbol. However, excluding textual content over text to be used symbolically is not reliable until there are cross-cultural meaning "norms" for such words, and in terms of technology-related meaning, those "norms" are not yet consistent, or do not yet exist (Qiuye 2000, 4).

The trend right now for incorporating visuals into traditionally text-based content in online technical communication appears to be that of an even placement of words and visuals. Because one of the pitfalls of an information delivery system that is based on visuals is that of subjective interpretation, chances are that text will always carry the primary information, while visuals will act as content and meaning reinforcement (Search 1993, 635). This

makes sense in technical writing and communication where information tends to be specific and exact. While many software systems would greatly benefit from adding and incorporating pictures, screen captures, illustrations and diagrams, help functions based on communicating via symbols will probably not be seen in the near future (Search 1993, 636). **T**

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MEET THE STAFF

Kevin Sanderfoot

Kevin Sanderfoot plans to finish his master's degree in technical communication in Spring 2006. In the meantime, he works as a graduate assistant in the English department at MSU and serves as contributor, copy editor and graphics and layout editor for **TECHNIQUES**.

Before coming to MSU, Kevin attended the University of Minnesota where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in journalism. Although he misses the hustle and bustle, and even the traffic, in Minneapolis, Kevin enjoys living in the Mankato area. When not working or studying, he can often be found biking around the Southern Minnesota countryside.

Upon the completion of his graduate studies, Kevin hopes to find employment as a technical writer in the computer industry. He also hopes to move someplace where it does not snow as much.

The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.

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