Evolution of Design; Contextual Dynamics
Document Design Fuses Art and Science

- The art of document design involves shaping words and pictures in ways that help people to:
  - recognize the situations in which using documents might be beneficial (thus inviting and motivating readers).
  - discover how documents can be employed in order to carry out particular purposes and goals (thus supporting readers and their uses for texts).
The Science Part

- **The science of document design** involves judging “what works” by assessing documents in the context of their use by the people expected to use them.

- Expert practitioners (designers, technical writers etc.) recognize that even when words and pictures appear to be functional and aesthetically engaging, there can be no substitute for observing what readers actually do, think, or feel as they interact with the document.

- Document design is not characterized by subject matters, but by the way its practitioners envision the reader as an active participant in the design and evaluation of documents.
Interacting Contexts & Evolution of Design

According to Schriver (1997), document design was shaped by five interacting contexts:

- Society & Consumerism
- Science, technology, and environmental awareness
- Education & practice in writing and rhetoric
- Education and practice in graphic design and typography
- Professional developments in writing, graphic design, and typography
Examples

- In some countries, document design emerged partly as a response to consumer and citizen groups who lobbied their governments for more comprehensible documents (e.g., UK and USA).
- Expectation from foreign consumers for better product information (e.g., Korea, Japan, Taiwan, China)
- In some countries, corporate funding was available for certain types of document design projects, such as revision of income-tax form, legal documents etc (Australia, Canada, US).
- Need for effective instructional materials used for distant learning (mail, online documents, television etc (U.K).
International Plain Language Movement

- In the 1960s and 70s, consumer affairs departments and newspapers, radio, TV, sprang up as important resources through which citizens could lodge public complaints against companies, utilities, landlords, and govt. agencies. This was a time for massive growth in federal government and increase in paperwork.

- Roughly during President Nixon's era (1974), proponents of the plain language movement called for an end to “poorly written” documents demanding communication that citizens could understand.

- President Carter issued “Paperwork Reduction Act” (1979) requiring all major regulations be written as simple and clear as possible.
Examples of Worst Document Design Practices

- Incomprehensible and ambiguous prose, especially in the form of “if-the” constructions (e.g., in Internal Revenue Service instructions for filling out tax forms)

- Hard-to-understand forms, charts, and tables (e.g., in Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid documents)

- Important information presented in “fine-print” or buried in appendices (e.g., in credit card information)

- The institutional “gray page” - created by text set in justified right block style” format, small type and, little blank space (e.g., many govt. printing office publications)

- A patronizing tone of voice (e.g., brocures about AIDS)
Three Traditions Shaping Thinking & Beliefs about Writing and Design

- Craft Tradition - This approach to writing and graphic design helps students to (1) understand the elements of visual or verbal style and (2) to identify the conditions in which it is appropriate to use them (pg., 55-56).

- Romantic Tradition - In this tradition, writing and design are successful when they express the inner vision of the writer and designer. Creative acts such as writing and designing are viewed as unanalyzable and unteachable.

- Rhetoric Tradition - Writing and designing can be taught by using heuristics (strategies for systematic probe and effective guessing). You do not have to be born with any gift. Important issues here are invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery.