

Newspaper lay-out and design

Masterton, Murray.

1994

Masterton, M. (1994). Newspaper lay-out and design. In AMIC Workshop on Editorial Management for Senior Women Journalists, Singapore, Apr 20-27, 1994. Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/93045>

Newspaper Lay-Out And Design

By

Murray Masterton

Lay-out and Design 1

Murray Masterton
Journalism/Arts
Deakin University
Geelong 3217
Australia

SINGAPORE EDITORIAL MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP
for Senior Women Journalists, April 1994.

1400-1530 Saturday, April 23: NEWSPAPER LAY-OUT AND DESIGN

Once again, the subject is bigger than the time allocated, so it is possible to deal with only a part of the possible content. Newspaper lay-out is a big and versatile subject. Right from the start it has to be decided by both adviser and advised whether the information is about a broadsheet or a tabloid, whether the newspaper is a "responsible" one or a "popular" one, whether it uses colour or not, in what language is it printed and by what process.

All those things can affect the type of lay-out the newspaper chooses, quite regardless of what the audience thinks it is looking for, and this is the other side of the newspaper lay-out and design equation, and it is an equation.

So what can this session say in 90 minutes? Not a great deal more, perhaps, than to try to make clear that the first thing anyone faced with laying out a newspaper page -- any page for that matter -- has to think about is "what am I trying to do?" Perhaps this could be translated just as appropriately into "who am I building this page for?" meaning the audience, not the employer; or again "what am I planning a page to achieve?"

Planning newspaper pages is like many other design jobs: there is an employer who is paying your salary and there is a customer whom you are trying to attract. Holier-than-thou non-commercial journalists -- usually those who work for government-owned publications or publications which are totally funded independently of their audience -- can afford to scorn this unashamed acceptance of the market place. To be read/heard/watched means to survive, and most real-world journalists know it.

So does the person assigned to design and lay-out a newspaper page -- and it is not only the front page which sells a newspaper. There are circumstances in which today's front page lay-out adds to the day's sales, but that might not do much for tomorrow. What happens tomorrow depends more on the make-up and content of the whole newspaper, or broadcast news if that's the medium you're in.

Lay-out and Design 2

So don't get carried away with the belief that newspaper make-up and design is a matter of planning an effective front page. That's only part of the continuing problem, and continuing it is, since in journalism no two days provide the same news. Perhaps this is a good thing, since journalism survives on the fact that there is always something new and different to report and to show in your newspaper.

For the purpose of this exercise we will assume that the newspaper is in English, or another language which read from left to right and from top to bottom of the page. What is said here does not necessarily apply to Chinese or Arabic, or any other language which moves differently. This exercise also assumes that you know something about the fonts, faces and sizes available in your own paper, but just in case you don't:

Font means the family of type you choose to use. This is printed on a computer printer in **Times New Roman** (the given name) type. **Times New** is the family name.

Face means the section of the family chosen. This is in **Times New Roman**, which is the normal face, though it could be *Italic*, or **Bold face**, or ultra-light, or ultra-bold, or underlined, or shadowed or any one of a dozen other faces (most of which are not available on my computer but are available in a commercial typesetter).

Size means what it says. How big is the type? This is 12-point type (one sixth of an inch high counting in the normal line space above or below, since there are about 72 points to an inch). You might choose to use

6-point, which is about as small as most people can read and is used in classified advertisements, or perhaps

8-point, which is fairly normal newspaper body-type size.

10-point is used for introductions in both single and double column material, though

12-point is more frequent in double column introductions.

14-point and higher type sizes are usually saved for cross-heads, strap-lines and headings but there is usually a set type size, which means you use 14-point

or 18 point

or 24 point

or 30 point (which is not on my computer)

or 36 point

or even bigger, but not a variety of sizes in between.

For purposes of appearance, most newspapers settle on a given range of type fonts, faces and sizes. In the old "hot metal days" -- not really so long ago but before computer typesetting -- this was because type was prepared mechanically and newspapers had only a given range of types, faces and sizes.

When electronic typesetting arrived there was suddenly a myriad of types and sizes available cheaply for the sub-editor and page designer to call on. Stories could be made to fit by squeezing or enlarging the type size, or changing the font, to get more or less copy into the space available. If a heading was a bit too big or small, the writer could change make the type one or two points larger or smaller to avoid having to write a new head to fitted exactly. It was wonderful for lazy or uninspired headline writers; not so lovely for the appearance of the paper.

Those with some sense of aesthetics quickly decided that those who deliberately restricted the range of fonts, faces and sizes knew what they were talking about. Too many different types on a page makes it look like a cheap advertisement, not like a page of authoritative information. Those who understand typography and printing aesthetics set standards which still apply. In their simplest form they are:

- . the most readable body type for a newspaper is a serif type, not too wide and not too condensed. For legibility this is best set in columns, not so narrow that too many words must be broken, but not so wide that the eye can not read them without sideways movement. When the line is long, as in a book or on this page, it should not exceed 85 characters, which is as many as most readers can take in in one lateral eye movement. These lines total almost 80-85 characters.
- . the body type should be standard throughout the newspaper, or at least throughout separate sections of the newspaper. This means that the chosen body type might be 8-point or 9-point, or something in between. To meet the demands of attractive layout a given range of larger sizes and varying faces of the same body font and face could be used -- 10 or 12 point in introductions, sometimes in body face. Selected paragraphs could be in bold face, perhaps indented (though this has gone out of favour).
- . headlines also had a set range of type sizes, usually 14, 18, 24, 30, 36, 42, 60, 72-pt. The 6-point interval was a convention that survived from the hot metal days when those sizes were standard. Under this system cross-heads were always 12 or 14 point, according to the size of the body type in the column, and so on up the scale. These days there is no reason why a totally different scale should not be used, but it should be a considered scale and that scale must be observed by the headline writers if the newspaper is not to look messy.
- . other types could be used only where specified. Sans-serif was limited to captions or caption stories. Sometimes it was used, even encouraged, for a whole newspaper section where there were many pictures. Even when san-serif was permitted it was usually a very specific sans-serif, so that what was used in the news or feature columns could never appear in the display advertisements, or vice versa.

Lay-out and Design 4

And this doesn't even begin to consider the use of photographs, art work or colour. They are all part of the total problem of design.

Newspaper design is not the same as page design or page make-up, though they are associated. When you consider how to design a newspaper you are considering all 32 or 48 or 156 pages, or even more. Newspaper design embraces not only what the paper will look like, but what goes into it, where, when or how often, and why. In the short run this might not seem as important as making the front page look attractive to readers, but in the long run it may be much more important, since this is what brings about reader confidence, reliability and familiarity.

Where is the weather report in your newspaper, or the train timetables, or the television programs? Are you sure that they are in the same place, so they can be found by the same readers whenever they want to look? In some ways these things are more important than the major news of the day. The headlines will tell you where that is. There are seldom headlines guiding readers to the weather report, but thousands like to check it, every day.

So planning what goes into a newspaper and where is important. And it has become a science. The front page is always news and so are the right hand pages which follow. But why is the right hand page given news preference over the left hand page? Because that is where the eye goes first. And the major story of the page usually appears top right for the same reason. Top left, if there is a top left story, is only second or third best, according to the science of laying out a paper for readability.

Everyone knows news is in front and sport is on the back, but who knows why? Because it is possible to read the major stories in both major segments of the newspaper without turning a page -- perhaps a relic of the time when newspapers were read on trains and buses while readers travelled to and from work.

Modern newspapers are segmented to make them easier to read. Sometimes the segments are separated so that different members of the family can read different parts of the newspaper at the same time. Sometimes, especially when the newspaper is a smaller one, the segments are all in the same fold.

But why segment at all? Researchers give us the reason: different readers are interested in different aspects of news or information. Obviously the front page is the most important and the most read, but after that what? Those who are interested in the news will turn to that part they enjoy most -- the local news on pages 3 and 5, the international news of pages 4 and 6, perhaps the editorial and letters page, which may be 8 or 10. People get to know whether to look to find what they enjoy most, so astute editors make sure what the readers are looking for is always in the same easy-to-find place.

A modern editor takes a lot of care to divide the newspaper in the best possible way according to the needs of the community. Just how accustomed readers become to the "form" of their paper is evident when you visit another city and are faced with its newspaper. What is your verdict?

"No news in that," is too often the answer, and for two reasons, neither of which is that there is truly no news in it. First, the news is not what we are accustomed to seeing in our own paper, whether it is a local or national one. News needs and preferences differ and the local town we are visiting has not the same taste as us. Second, the paper may be in different form, which could mean that even if there is news it is not where we look from habit, so we don't see it.

In the business of page make-up, designers can plan to give different segments different types, perhaps even different column widths and page make-up styles, to make them look different from the rest of the paper. Such diversity would have been impossible before the days of electronic publishing. Now that it has become so easy variety is, lamentably, often overdone.

It would be unthinkable today to fill the front page with advertisements, but earlier this century that was the fashion for reputable newspapers like THE TIMES of London, and no one thought it strange. First the popular press filled their front pages with news and even pictures. Then the less conservative of the broadsheet newspapers followed suit. Yet two centuries ago, before advertising was so dominant, THE TIMES and others filled their front pages with news and the ads went elsewhere.

There were still widely varying styles in page make-up. In the United States the newspapers seemed wedded to their long slender columns. Newspapers there were considered reporter driven rather than sub-editor driven, which meant that what the reporter wrote started under its single-column headline and ran down the page without a break. If it was too long for one column it started again at the head of the next, so the next headline appeared where that story ended. Pages looked grey and uninteresting by our standards. Headlines ran to half a dozen decks, sometimes covering six inches in a single column.

Britain was the home of page make-up for the English-speaking press. Sub-editors trimmed down reporters' stories and wrote headlines to attract people to read them. Consequently more of the page seemed to be taken up by headlines which ran across two, or three, or even more columns.

Pictures have been around in newspapers for nearly 200 years. THE TIMES published two engravings on its front page in 1806 to illustrate how a baffling crime had been committed, and it began a fashion. Books had published engraved pictures even earlier, but they had more time to do it. For more than half a century all newspaper pictures were engravings. Photographs could be taken, but they couldn't be used except as engraved copies until the half-tone process was invented.

These days it all seems so easy to put a picture in the paper, even to make adjustments to it first if they are needed, yet are the pictures we use and the pages on which they appear any more attractive to the reader's eye? And in making trying to make the page attractive have you destroyed a picture or a story, usually both, by wrongly associating the two.

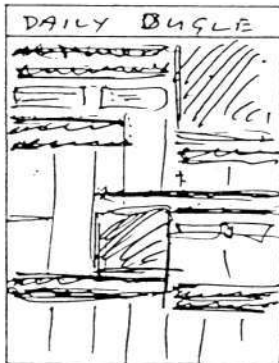
Lay-out and Design 6

Design in newspaper pages is as subject to fashion as many other things, but there are fundamental patterns which survive. As long as newspapers are published in columns -- initially devised to make reading easier -- there will remain an aspect of the vertically structured page, but there are all sorts of ways of concealing this vertical make-up which otherwise would make the page seem deep, narrow and dull. It is not always as easy it sounds to make an attractive page out of unpredictable raw materials.

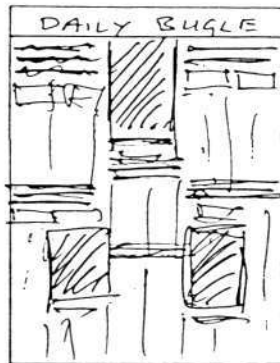
Every sub begins the make-up day with a page dummy, or a whole series of them, on which the advertising department has already drawn in the space to be occupied by advertisements. The sub if left to work with the rest and this make already be an awkward shape. And the news is truly unpredictable. A good chief sub-editor can help prevent content disasters, like putting a tragic plane crash story beside one of a tour party setting off across the world with the same airline. Examples are frequent enough, and caused as often by carelessness as by unavoidability.

No matter what stories you have to work with and whether you plan to have a horizontal, balanced, asymmetric or feature-centred page, there are some guidelines which always apply -- always allowing for common sense exceptions.

To begin with, some simple examples of those design terms:



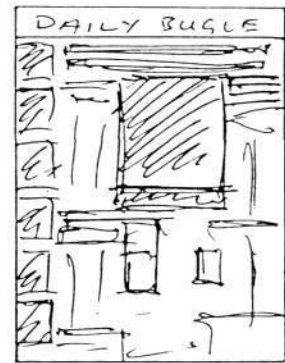
Horizontal



Balanced



Asymmetric



Feature-centred

- Break the vertical column lines so that none runs from the top of the page to the bottom. You can use headlines or illustrations to do this. The worst example of the unbroken column is that in or near the middle of the page. It cuts the page in half.

NOTE: most newspaper designers have chosen an odd number of columns for the news pages, so they can not be cut in half. Enthusiastic make-up subs, enjoying the freedom granted by electronic sizing, still manage to do it, however.

- The major story, with or without picture, fills the most prominent part of the page, which is top right of the front and all right-hand pages. Left-hand pages are less demanding in this respect. The eye habit seems to take it to the top left of the page, but not always. It goes to the most attractive part of the page.

- . Break the vertical column lines so that none runs from the top of the page to the bottom. You can use headlines or illustrations to do this. The worst example of the unbroken column is that in or near the middle of the page. It cuts the page in half.
NOTE: most newspaper designers have chosen an odd number of columns for the news pages, so they can not be cut in half. Enthusiastic make-up subs, enjoying the freedom granted by electronic sizing, still manage to do it, however.
- . The major story, with or without picture, fills the most prominent part of the page, which is top right of the front and all right-hand pages. Left-hand pages are less demanding in this respect. The eye habit seems to take it to the top left of the page, but not always. It goes to the most attractive part of the page.
- . If you are going to use a picture on your page -- or perhaps more than one picture -- the rule is to use good pictures big and to use poor pictures not at all. Pictures, other than head-shots (portraits) used for identification purposes, should always say something more about the story than the words can tell, or they should tell a story for themselves. Good portraits serve the same purpose -- they say something.
- . Try not to break a picture or a headline across the fold of the page. It spoils the effect of both the picture and the headline, since they can't be seen at their best until the paper is opened out. Ideally your second or third headline should fall entirely below the fold, so there is a major story completely on the bottom part of the page, perhaps with a second or third picture.
- . Avoid turning too many items from the front page to inside pages. Every time you ask a reader to "turn to page 17" there are many who don't do it. They read no more of the story. So try to complete as many stories as you can on the page on which they begin. One way to make a turn or break without it seeming so obvious is to turn one story into two. One is on the front page or page 3. The other, under a separate heading, is on page 17, and the "turn" indicator reads "see also **Major spurns Labour jibes**, page 17."
- . Make sure every headline on the page meets three important requirements: it truly represents what the story is about, it has a verb so that it genuinely says something and is not a label, and that it fits the allocated space. You, as the sub, will choose its size -- one column or more, one line or more, flush left or centred, capitals or lower case, and so on, but it must still fit its place on the page and complement the other heads as well as fill its own space effectively.
- . Remember that white space is a valuable part of every page. Nothing compliments black type more than white space, but like most other compliments it is very easily overdone.

There are equally brief and effective guidelines about choosing, cropping and using pictures, but this may have to wait for a later session.