Designed for the Job

A Writer and Designer's Style Manual to Effective and Appealing Job Search Materials

Honors Thesis Project Analysis
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A college undergraduate stepping out into the job market after years of education faces the challenges of uncertainty, competition and change. For individuals seeking degrees in writing and design, finding the right profession will involve providing potential employers with samples of work through a medium such as an online portfolio, and including relevant work experience in a resume. In addition to serving as a source of information, the design decisions behind a resume or online portfolio can be used to convey the professionalism, creativity and overall skill of an applicant, and give the student a competitive advantage by making a favorable initial impression on the target audience. Visually appealing and functionally effective job search materials can be a powerful tool for a graduating student seeking work, and as a student approaching graduation in Washington State University (WSU) programs in writing and design, I was curious about the existence of resources that address resumes and web portfolios from the standpoint of design rather than content. While website design is featured in some style manuals, resumes are only treated in terms of content, and neither exist together in a resource that looks at the importance of design in job search materials.

My thesis project attempts to address the question of how students in design and writing at WSU can make a positive impression on potential employers and gain a competitive edge over other applicants by preparing well-designed job search materials. I
approached the question by developing a style manual to prompt readers to consider how their audience will interact with the design of their materials, and encourage them to utilize principles that combine professionalism and appropriate amounts of creativity desirable in the workplace. To explore the need for undergraduate preparation in an increasingly competitive job market, as well as the design expectations of potential employers, I designed and wrote a book called *Designed for the Job*. This manual explores the effective design of resumes and web portfolios while emphasizing the perception of the audience as well as the professional representation of an individual’s talent and experience. The completed manual incorporates general design principles adapted specifically to these job search materials, and includes examples that convey effective application of type, color and layout. Content and organization, including a section on campus resources, was developed for a target audience of WSU students in fields such as Digital Technology and Culture, Communication, and other programs in writing, art and design. The project indicates that a resource of this type — one that encourages design choices that reflect professionalism and personal creativity — would be a useful publication for students.
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Context and Need

This project was inspired by the field of design, a discipline advanced by technology and constantly expanding to include new roles and responsibilities such as writing. Design evolved as a profession as businesses recognized the “value of licensing graphic designers” who understood how to utilize visual and verbal principles to impact the public.¹ Today, individuals who feel their strengths in design prepare them for a career have opportunities in a wide range of fields, as more companies draw on graphic design, advertising, website design and marketing to create a graphic identity. In addition, some design professions involve writing and working with text, as writers encounter design decisions in the workplace such as text layout and placement in a document. While the fields of writing and design emphasize different forms of communication, undergraduates seeking a degree in these areas will find some job opportunities with similar expectations for knowledge of good design and writing.

Working with both text and graphics falls within the realm of document design, a field that design expert Karen Schriver defines as the harmony of “good writing and good visual design”² in documents developed for a specific target audience. The priority of document design is to use text and image elements together in a way that allows the user to achieve their goal³ – for instance, to find information such as work experience in a resume, or to interact successfully with a web portfolio to locate and assess the sample work it contains. While certain graphic designers may work with more creative forms than resumes, manuals and business documents, document design is concerned with legibility

³ Schriver, 10.
and allowing for effortless reading while still maintaining a sense of style or contrast. To achieve this, designers incorporate principles that emphasize readability and visual aesthetics, based on an understanding of spacing and form related to gestalt psychology,\textsuperscript{4} color associations, and typography, the technical skill and art of selecting and using type that is appropriate to the subject.\textsuperscript{5} Despite the wealth of information on principles and techniques, successful design does not follow a formula, and the art is constantly reinventing itself as new technologies, mediums and public attitudes develop.

Knowledge of good design can help an individual stand out from competition in fields of design and writing, but there is a need for resources that specifically address how these principles should be incorporated into the materials presented to potential employers. An increasing number of skilled undergraduates are competing for job opportunities, as the Occupational Outlook Handbook provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics warns that graphic designers and writers will face “keen competition” with few openings in relation to individuals seeking jobs.\textsuperscript{6} Nationally, around 17,000 undergraduates in 2008-2009 received a bachelor’s in a writing or design-related field,\textsuperscript{7} and at Washington State University, 96 individuals graduated with a bachelor’s degree in a field related to digital communication and multimedia in the 2010-2011 school year.\textsuperscript{8} Making an impression with employers is becoming increasingly more important, especially with well-designed materials that represent an individual’s talent and experience. Existing

\textsuperscript{4} Schriver, 62.
\textsuperscript{5} David Whitbread, \textit{The Design Manual} (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001), 165.
manuals on style and design prompt readers to consider the audience and introduce basic design principles, but a resource tailored specifically to applications of these concepts to job search materials does not exist. In addition, while I intend for this guide to be useful for any undergraduate student in design and writing, my primary focus is on an audience of WSU students in these fields. WSU campus resources include resume workshops that focus on the content of job search materials, but do not provide information on effective design. My project fills this need by addressing the design of resumes and web portfolios in addition to emphasizing how design decisions are perceived by employers in an increasingly competitive job market.

**Methodology and Research**

The concept for my thesis project was formed when I began considering how writers approach the instruction of design principles in guides and manuals for graphic design. I wanted to create my own style manual as a way to incorporate research into a challenging book project where I could apply writing and design experience from my undergraduate coursework and employment. I found, however, that there was no need in the field for another graphic design manual targeted to a general audience. I considered instead an audience of undergraduates like myself preparing for the difficulty of navigating the job market, and what sort of material would be useful and beneficial for their job search. By researching existing guides on design principles, vocational preparation and portfolio creation, I was able to conclude that there was no guide intended specifically for college undergraduates with a focus on effective visual design of materials presented to potential employers. Working with my thesis advisor, I was able to define the materials I
wanted to discuss as resumes and web portfolios, and the target audience as WSU undergraduates in fields of design and writing.

The thesis project was developed to include an application of general design principles to resumes and web portfolios. In order to best introduce and provide examples of these materials, the manual was organized into four chapters: 1) an introduction with general terms and principles for effective design applied to specific job search materials, 2) a chapter on resume design, 3) a chapter on web portfolios, and 4) a conclusion that directs the reader to technical resources to help implement their conceptualized design. The first three chapters focus on the role of type, color and layout in producing documents that are professional (in order to appeal to employers) and creative (to allow the designer to express their personal style).

The structure of the project underwent several revisions to avoid repetition of concepts. Initially, the chapters for resumes and web portfolios included sections that mirrored the type, layout and color sections of the introductory chapter, but these were replaced with a larger focus on professionalism and creativity that included key considerations for design principles defined in the first chapter. The final chapter, which contains suggestions for outside technical resources, was developed to provide readers with information I chose not to include in my project. The intent of this organization was to familiarize readers with design principles and encourage them to begin thinking about these concepts in terms of the materials they will be developing. Additionally, the intent was to allow readers to view examples that incorporate these concepts and inspire them to make their own effective design decisions. The goal of the book design, created in Adobe
InDesign and Illustrator, was to provide a simple, clean and colorful display of text and graphics that exemplifies the design principles introduced in the project.

The chapters of this project contain my summary, analysis and application of outside research to the focus on the well-designed resume or web portfolio, and my methodology involved considering what information was necessary and appropriate for an audience of undergraduate writers and designers. The material in this book was designed for an audience with some knowledge of design principles but no previous introduction to these concepts as they relate to design of job search materials. In the following sections of this essay, I explain the decisions for content and prominent research I consulted for the chapters on design principles, resumes, and web portfolios, as well as audience analysis involved in design.

Design Principles: Type, Layout and Color

The first chapter of the project addresses basic design principles, and involved researching style and design guides for information on concepts of type, layout and color. For an audience of students seeking to portray themselves as professionals, I included concepts of type that related directly to making a document readable. To encourage readers to consider the style of type they use, I incorporated basic definitions of typography from resources like *Thinking with Type* by design instructor Ellen Lupton and *The Design Manual* by publications designer David Whitbread. Lupton’s work contained simple definitions of type classification that I reduced to their relevancy for specific materials like resumes and web portfolios — documents which use typeface to create emphasis and organization of headings and navigation links. Whitbread’s section on typography provided a good explanation of the difference between typeface, families and
fonts, with the “typeface” referring to the family of fonts, or set of capitals, symbols, italicized, compressed or otherwise altered variation of the original “family member.”\textsuperscript{9} I drew on this definition to explain how a designer might work within the same font family to maintain visual consistency, but use different variants such as italics or bold to create contrast. By including typography as a design principle in my project, I intended to encourage readers to experiment with text that can be read easily by employers seeking information in their job search materials.

This design manual project also involved consideration for layout and application of basic visual hierarchy to the functions of websites and resumes. A prominent work I consulted for concepts of layout was Robin Williams’ award-winning manual on design and typography titled \textit{The Non-Designer’s Design Book}, which categorized basic visual principles into contrast, repetition, alignment and proximity. Williams provides her own examples of a variety of documents, from stationary to web pages, and re-envisions each with applications of these four basic principles to improve the overall design. To adapt this information into a format best suited for the purpose of my project, I grouped my terminology related to these principles into a larger section on layout that emphasized contrast, what Williams defines as visual interest to “create an organizational hierarchy among different elements”\textsuperscript{10} on the page, and proximity, the decision to group items to create visual relationships between related information.\textsuperscript{11} In addition, I adapted Williams’ principle of alignment, or placement of elements that makes the document a “cohesive

\begin{footnotes}
\item[9] Whitbread, 179.
\end{footnotes}
unit,"\(^{12}\) into a subsection on balance that prompted readers to consider how placement of images and text creates space and movement on the page.

Another resource I utilized to expand on the ideas of layout was *The Principles of Beautiful Web Design* by Jason Beaird, an exceptional manual that combines the technical process of building a website with basic principles of design. The introduction to layout and composition included concepts of grid theory and the rule of thirds, which I incorporated into my project as a tool for the reader to begin layout of a resume or web portfolio. I also condensed the information on symmetrical and asymmetrical balance provided in this guide into the section on alignment and encouraged readers to envision how these design decisions would work specifically in a resume or web portfolio.

In order to prompt readers to consider how they might use color association and schemes to catch attention in their job search materials, I incorporated color theory from existing resources and provided examples of personal web portfolios to exemplify how color works to achieve a mood or feel. To provide a simplified and relevant approach to color theory, I created color wheels based on the descriptions in *The Non-Designer’s Design Book* and *The Principles of Beautiful Web Design*. In addition to providing information on how schemes such as complementary and analogous are selected from a color wheel, *The Principles of Beautiful Web Design* in particular addresses the visual impact these choices have on design, such as how two complementary colors may not be able to avoid a jarring "stark contrast"\(^{13}\) but can be used together appropriately in some instances.

This resource also provides examples of websites that effectively use color schemes, but does not include any reference to websites in the section on color associations. For my

\(^{12}\) Williams, 33.

own project, I chose to address individual colors and their application to specific job search materials by describing their professional and creative associations – for example, how white, black and grey have modern connections to technology because of how frequently these colors appear in electronic devices, and how this is a likely association that will be made when an audience views a black, white or grey web portfolio. To illustrate my descriptions, I included images of web portfolios and one instance of appropriate color in a resume. While existing resources approach color theory from the standpoint of general web or document design, my project incorporated these ideas to address color use specifically in professional web portfolios and resumes.

**Resumes**

In the second chapter of this design manual, I relate how these principles of type, layout and color are working effectively in resumes by annotating examples collected from online design networking and image sharing sites such as Dribbble and Flickr. Published resources often do not approach resumes from the standpoint of effective design in the same way as my project, although brief reference to the well-designed resume does exist in guides such as *Building Design Portfolios* by Sara Eisenman. This style manual includes a section on resumes that indicates how good design is critical to make an impression with employers, and that often “designers fail to make the most of the opportunity to design their resumes as well as they design their primary work.”

14 Eisenman provides a few examples of sophisticated resumes and discusses how their choices of text alignment and contrast create visual interest while maintaining readability. My project expands on this approach and provides a more comprehensive look at the components of several resumes.

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in categories of professionalism and creativity in order to highlight successful use of color, choice of text, and readable and engaging layout.

**Web Portfolios**

Website design is better represented in resources than resumes, and while there are guides and manuals that prompt readers to utilize good design decisions in building an aesthetically pleasing and functional website, there are fewer sources that specifically address the need for design of professional online portfolios. Beaird’s *The Principles of Beautiful Web Design* stands apart as a valuable resource for designers considering the aesthetics of their website, and when I considered the web portfolio examples in my own project, I incorporated the emphasis in this guide on maximizing both visual aesthetics and effective communication with the website user through functionality and presentation of information.\(^{15}\) However, this book does not address the need for professionalism in online portfolios, or consideration for an audience that is evaluating the design and navigation as a hiring employer. Cynthia L. Baron’s *Designing a Digital Portfolio* addresses the design of a portfolio interface in terms of functionality and provides information on grouping, designing along a grid and maintaining simplicity, affirming that the interface design can be “visually arresting” while being appropriate to the personality of the individual, the audience and the content.\(^ {16}\) While serving as a useful tool to build and maintain digital portfolios such as websites, this guide does not include principles of design and in-depth consideration for elements of text, color and layout. My project was developed as a

\(^{15}\) Beaird, 4.

resource that emphasizes both visual principles and the need for effective and professional design of online portfolios.

**Audience Analysis**

Existing resources approach audience analysis thoroughly and provided my project with sufficient material to prompt readers to think about how the audience will interact with their work. One of the most important factors of good design of a resume or web portfolio is the audience that will interact with these job search materials, and by consulting existing manuals on design principles, document and design and online portfolio construction, I was able to build checklists for my readers that encourage them to recognize the potential audience before they begin designing. Baron in *Designing a Digital Portfolio* includes a chapter dedicated to understanding the target audience and the importance of conducting preliminary research on different markets each approached in a “unique way.”\(^{17}\) David Whitbread introduces the purpose of his design manual in terms of what he defines as “real” communication, or the priority of graphic design to catch attention from the audience. To do this, Whitbread states that “you must break free of all the competing imagery in the marketplace and target the people most likely to respond to the message with images and design that appeal to them.”\(^{18}\) In the specific context of web portfolios, technical communication teacher and writer Miles A. Kimball explains audience analysis in his book *The Web Portfolio Guide* as a way to “speculate on what an employer might want to see in a prospective employee.”\(^{19}\) Combining the need for analysis with

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\(^{17}\) Baron, 43.

\(^{18}\) Whitbread, 6.

Whitbread’s approach to competitive design, I attempted to relate in my project the importance of knowing the audience before you choose design strategies that will stand out to them in a positive way. Throughout my project I emphasized the role of the audience in interacting with effective and visually engaging design of job search materials.

**Scope**

The structure of my thesis project revolved around summarizing, applying and providing examples of relevant principles to specific materials, but intentionally did not include information on technical instruction, guidelines for writing, or additional resources on vocational guidance. My project aimed to fill a specific need for a resource that addressed good design and application of principles to resumes and web portfolios, and as there are already comprehensive guides for using design programs both in print and online, I felt including this information in my project would be unnecessary and detract from the focus on conceptualizing a well-designed document. When I first structured the outline of this style manual, I had also intended to include a section on appropriate text for the web and techniques for writing resumes. In the same way that including technical instruction did not fit the purpose of my project, this information on writing is not appropriate for a manual dedicated to addressing the need for consideration of design principles in documents, especially materials such as resumes that are often only evaluated in existing resources in terms of written content. In addition, my project also originally intended to include a resource list of materials for vocational guidance so readers could find more specific books in their field relating to content to include in resumes and web portfolios. There are several undergraduate areas of writing and design at Washington
State University I attempt to target in my thesis project, and it was not within the limits of my expertise or scope of my project to select and evaluate vocational resources for a variety of fields. By eliminating certain sections of my project that were unnecessary, I was able to develop a manual that was consistent and focused on fulfilling the need for a resource on undergraduate design of job search materials.

**Conclusion**

A limitation of any resource on design is the subjective interpretation of visual material and the difficulty of instructing what makes design “good.” However, the concepts of document design involve not just a consideration for visual aesthetics, but also what Schriver states are the “pragmatic purposes” of documents to “help people learn, use technology, make decisions, and get their jobs done.”

A beautiful and eye-catching document will draw attention, but if the audience is not able to interact successfully with the text and images to locate the information they seek, the document has not served its intended purpose. While this project encourages readers to use color, text and layout in a way that suits their personal style and creativity, it was also developed as a resource that would make readers think critically about what their design choices are saying to others, and how they can persuade and influence an audience with professional and effective design. There are no statistics on the success of a well-designed web portfolio or resume in securing employment for an individual, but for many professions, presenting visually pleasing, readable and eye-catching job search materials is a positive if not critical factor in the decision for an interview or hiring.

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20 Schriver, 11.
By creating a manual that prompts undergraduates in design and writing to utilize good design principles, I attempted to fill a need for a resource that gives job-seeking students a competitive advantage through materials that represent professionalism and personal creativity valuable in fields of writing and design. The result indicates that a manual of this type could be expanded, polished and published to become a useful resource for students. A more comprehensive style manual could include features this project chose to omit, such as technical instruction, consideration for content such as writing, and specific vocational resources for different fields. Ultimately, a tool such as this could become a textbook for undergraduates in courses devoted to preparation for the job market. An expanded knowledge of audience expectation and awareness of design decisions at the level of job search materials will lead to a higher quality of design and writing in the workplace.
References Cited


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