Poetry and Page Design
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Grade Level: University
Time Frame: 75 minutes
Objective: Students will use images from the Poetry Center’s digital collections to examine the implications, rhetoric, and usability of various types of page design.

Prior Knowledge and Skills: Some prior discussion of document design principles is useful, but not required. Participants should come to this workshop with some completed writing based on prompts provided under “Prior Preparation,” below.

Required Materials: Recording of Amaranth Borsuk’s lecture on Between Page and Screen; “Maps” and “Small Books” (online versions of Poetry Center library exhibitions); computer with Internet access and audio/video playback capability.

Sequence of Activities

Prior Preparation

Demonstrate a few examples of quick reference cards to students:

- Photography Cheat Sheet
- Brewing the Perfect Cup of Coffee
- How to Cut a Garment (1950s style)
- Color Theory Quick Reference Sheet

Then ask students to jot down brief answers to the following questions:

- What’s one skill you have that might surprise your friends?
- Who else might be interested in learning that skill?

Finally, have students respond to the following prompt in writing:

- Write a brief bulleted list or numbered set of instructions explaining this skill to a specific audience.

Students should bring these written responses to the subsequent lesson.
**Introduction:** 5 minutes

Ask students what the purposes of conventions in page presentation might be. What function does space serve? What happens when design interferes with readability? Are there situations in which difficulty of access might be desirable? What is the relationship between usability and accessibility?

**Page Design Sample Demonstration:** 30 minutes

Show students examples of page design in poetry:

- “Topography,” by Sharon Olds, *from The Gold Cell* (Knopf, 1987); image available on The University of Arizona Poetry Center website under the library exhibition “Maps.” This is a free-verse poem scored according to contemporary convention: left-justified margins, medium line lengths, irregular line breaks. How does this scoring affect the way we read the poem? Why do you think this is such a common format for contemporary poetry?
- “The Chaffinch Map of Scotland,” by Edwin Morgan, *from Collected Poems* (Carcanet, 1990); image available on The University of Arizona Poetry Center website under the library exhibition “Maps.” This is a poem that uses regional names for the chaffinch to create a shape that resembles the map of Scotland (it is a *concrete poem*, which uses words to form an image that illustrates the poem’s content). Why might the poet have done this?
- “Map of Domesticity,” Hugh Steinberg, broadside (Tucson, 1993); image available on The University of Arizona Poetry Center website under the library exhibition “Maps.” Given the subject matter, why might the poet have chosen to scatter text over the page in this chaotic way?
- *Matchbox Theater: Issa’s Insects*, by Lea Redmond (Leafcutter Designs, 2009); image available on The University of Arizona Poetry Center website under the library exhibition “Small Books.” How does this book match up with (or challenge) our expectations of an instruction manual?
- “Topographies,” by Nicole Cooley, broadside (Center for Book Arts, 2007); image available on The University of Arizona Poetry Center website under the library exhibition “Maps.” This broadside’s design is intentionally disruptive; it illustrates as well as presents Cooley’s poem (about the inundation of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina). How does this design affect our reading of the poem?
- *Between Page and Screen*, by Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse (Siglio Press, 2012); recording available on *voca*. Play the first track of this recording. Ask students: how is reading on a page different from reading on a screen? How does the experience of reading change with this text’s unusual format? How does Borsuk’s reading challenge what you know about print design and web design? How are the text and graphics working together (or challenging each other) to create new meanings? How does this project’s design affect its usability and accessibility?
**Writing Activity: 30 minutes**

Ask students to take out the text they have already written in response to the prompts they were given before this workshop. They will draft two separate page designs for this text: one designed for maximum accessibility and readability, and one designed to convey extra shades of meaning through an unconventional page layout. Students may design for the page, screen, or both. Suggest margins, justification, concrete poetry/illustration, screen sizes, animations, and font sizes as starting points for unusual design choices. For both layouts, encourage students to think about specific target audiences: how will the purpose of the document change as its audience changes?

**Conclusion: 10 minutes**

Ask for volunteers to share design ideas with the class.