



CURRENT COMMENTS

To Indent Or Not To Indent? How To Improve Journal Contents Page Formats



Number 43, October 24, 1977

Current Contents[®] readers scan thousands of contents pages each year. Most are aware of variations in the format of these pages. But how many realize that small changes in format can significantly increase browsing efficiency? The optimum format can save hours of scanning time and much wear and tear on the eyes.

You might assume that certain axioms of readability would be known to editors, who presumably have some expertise in communication. But most editors of scholarly journals have not had formal training in journalism—and few know much about typographic design. Even typographers leave much to be desired when it comes to arranging something as commonplace as a contents page.

One of the most important aspects of a well-designed contents page, or index for that matter, is the proper use of indentation. The failure of so many journals to use

proper indentation costs you a lot of time. But if I asked readers to mention what improvements should be made in *Current Contents*, most would not even mention indentation. When is it necessary to indent? Let's say that the law of indentation for contents pages is simply as follows: when an article title is more than one line long, each remaining line should be indented. Examine any issue of *Current Contents* and you will see how often this law is violated.

Many journals put the author's name immediately after the article title. But if both the title and the author's name are printed on the same line and in the same size and style, they "blend" together. Ideally, the author's name should be placed in a column opposite the title. If this arrangement is not used, the name should be indented on a following line or printed in a style of type different from that used in the title. The article title

should appear in boldface and the author's name in a lighter style.

Printing authors' names immediately after the title, instead of on a separate line, leads to another headache. The author's name is often hyphenated and continued on the next line. This should not be done, but if it is done the carryover syllable should be indented. It certainly should not appear under the first word of the title. Hyphenation should be avoided because splitting the author's name is a violation of the commandment against "widowhood."

Typographers define "widows" as very short lines at the top of a column or page. I go a step further and define widowhood to include placing last syllables where complete words or names ought to be. So, if there is not enough space to print the author's full name, print it on the next line. Do this even if you refuse to indent the second line, because the commandment against widowhood takes precedence over the law of indentation!

Many journals give authors' names the highest priority. They are printed in bold capital letters while titles are relegated to a light style. The editors of such journals might argue that within a given scientific specialty the author's name is more important than the title. Also, authors like to see their own names in boldface block letters.

But any author should be satisfied with the judicious use of both upper and lower case and the creative use of bold and light face to help the reader distinguish titles from author's names.

From the viewpoint of the average reader of *Current Contents*, I believe it is wise to put titles before authors' names. But recently the editor of one Soviet journal told me that he caters to the reader who is looking for an article by a colleague. In scientific circles it is not unusual for one to hear, "Have you read the latest article by Boggs?" But it would seem to me that this argument would lead to contents pages being arranged alphabetically by author, which creates a new set of problems. In any case, *Current Contents* readers can use the Author Address Directory to locate authors' names alphabetically.

A group of researchers at the Chaim Sheba Medical Center in Israel have determined that an ideal contents page format should satisfy three criteria: speed of scanning, ease and efficiency in finding keywords, and appeal to the reader.¹ In their study, 54 medical scientists who regularly scan *Current Contents* were instructed to scan sample contents pages for article titles. The researchers discovered that scanning for titles was easier when the titles and authors' names were typographically distinguished

by type size, boldness, or order of appearance. Interestingly, although the subjects claimed to prefer that the titles precede authors' names, their scanning speed increased when the authors' names preceded the titles. In spite of this, I believe that the title should be listed first. It should be distinguished from the author's name by the use of both bold- and lightface type, by indentation, or by columnar arrangement.

In general, the best format for contents pages uses two columns, one for titles and the other for authors' names. This allows the reader to scan down either narrow column separately, or across both together. In the Chaim Sheba study, this format allowed the fastest scanning speed of the fourteen formats tested. It is now used by such journals as *Nature*, *American Scientist*, *Tetrahedron*, *Journal of Organic Chemistry*, *Harvard Business Review*, *British Journal of Psychology*, and others.

As I've stated before, our near-exact reproduction of tables of contents allows for interesting typographical variety in *Current Contents*. But some standardization of formats could help to eliminate confusion. Adjacent contents pages in *Current Contents* often have author, article title, or page number in reverse order.²

Another problem with some journals' formats is the placement of

"degrees" next to authors' names. Besides wasting space, this has more than once led an indexer to list an author's name as "D.Phil." Within the context of a contents page, abbreviations for authors' degrees add clutter. The implicit snobbery in such a practice is particularly transparent in medical journals, and rampant in the U.K., where it is not uncommon to find four or five degrees attached to an author's name.

There are some curious practices that defy classification. The *Journal of African History*, like the *American Historical Review*, prints the word "by" in front of every author's name. I find this redundancy amusingly annoying. The word "by" occupies the normal indent spaces, cluttering up the page and adding unnecessary typesetting expense. Other journals spell out "and" between the author's names in every multiauthored article, though a comma or ampersand would suffice.

Columns which are too wide, especially when the leading (space between lines) is small, are impossible to scan rapidly. Also, when contents pages with very wide columns are reproduced for *Current Contents*, we must use reduction ratios that result in very small type. I can't understand why journals as reputable as those published by leading professional societies do not appreciate that it is very difficult to

rapidly scan a column six inches wide, even if it is in large type.

For twenty years I have been waging a battle against these and other editorial monstrosities.³ Unfortunately, editors come and go, and each new generation must be taught the axioms of the past. And so even in this issue of *Current Contents* you may find a dozen or so infractions of the recommendations set down here.

But journal editors do not have a monopoly on graphic illiteracy. I've known commercial artists who could design a beautiful ad layout but were hopelessly impractical in laying out a cost-effective contents page. White space might look good, but a tighter page can contain twice as much information and cost half as much to print.

Given unlimited space in *Current Contents*, we could design beautiful contents pages with all sorts of graphic embellishments—even photographs of authors. But the use

of too much space for such non-essential elements can be self-defeating. It might increase your pleasure, but could you afford the extra time required to scan those lovely diagrams, pictures, or whatever?

One might say that the different typographic policies of various journals illustrate the Matthew effect.⁴ The wealthiest journals can afford the services of professional designers, but the poorest don't have the financial means to create attractive and efficient page layouts. However, I believe that there is room for improvement in most journal contents pages. Only a few achieve the ideal. Improvement must start by dealing with the "trivial" problems of indentation and widowhood, as well as typography and use of white space. If your favorite journal is guilty of unreadable contents pages, then write and tell the editor!

REFERENCES

1. Kallner H, Modan M, Modan B & Wolman M. Contents page format in scientific journals effect on efficiency and ease of scanning. *Methods of Information in Medicine* 16(2):106-10, 1977.
2. Garfield E. ISI® cares do you? What can you do about improving scientific journals as a communications medium? *Current Contents* No. 49, 5 December 1973, p. 5-6. (Reprinted in: Garfield E. *Essays of an information scientist*. Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1977, Vol. 1. p. 5-14).
3. -----, Reducing the noise level in scientific communication: how services from ISI aid journal editors and publishers. *Current Contents* No. 30, 25 July 1977, p. 5-14.
4. Merton R K. The Matthew effect in science. *Science* 199:55-63, 5 January 1968.