

## **Introduction:**

### ***How did he get so cranky?***

**T**he sincere and upbeat aim of this book is to help motivated do-it-yourself graphic designers improve the look, effectiveness, and communicative function of their work. But with two books in print that self-identify me as cranky, it's only fair to give readers an explanation for the crankiness.

First, as a youth in the 1950s, I bought into the values of my family, teachers, and coaches that one should always give their best effort in every endeavor. Through the years I have been either idealistic or naive enough to hang onto those values. In my early education and experience as a journalist and editor in the 1960s, I was fortunate to have mentors who instilled in me a reverence for the journalist's mission of service to reader understanding. For professional journalists, this commitment is willingly borne as a kind of public trust.

Early in a career that has spanned journalism, publication design, print production, and more, crankiness first surfaced when it became clear that not everyone shared those "best effort" values. An optimist by nature, I shrugged it off, and chalked it up to differences in people that make life interesting.

Later in this career, as the graphics field moved into the "desktop publishing" era and everybody with a computer became a designer, the crankiness resurfaced. For all the wonderful advances we enjoy in the graphics field thanks to the desktop computer, in the last 30 years I have witnessed a "Great Forgetting" of the craft of typography and design, as untrained "designers-by-default" – and even newly-minted professionals – repeat blunders that decades ago were known to impede communicative function. For *some* do-it-yourselfers, lack of

motivation to learn is the issue. For *many*, however, the problem is inadequate instruction or no access to *properly-targeted* instructional materials. As one who has embraced the craft as part of a lifelong mission in service to reader understanding, this state of affairs makes me cranky. So instead of just grumping, this book, along with continuing client services and seminars, is my best-effort attempt to do something about it.

Mentors were important to me in so many areas, and this introduction is a fine place to recognize one of mine – and then explain what his influence wrought. This book channels his brilliance, filtered through my experience, straight to you.

As a journalism student in the 1960s I came under the spell of a charismatic professor at Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications, Edmund C. Arnold (1913-2007). Ed Arnold was the chairman of the graphic arts department, and in keeping with the school's insistence that all students build a broad foundation of knowledge, every student, regardless of individual area of concentration, was required to take Professor Arnold's introductory graphics, typography, and print production course. I was hooked from the first day.

Although I had been immersed in journalism as a future life's work since I was 15-years-old, Ed Arnold introduced me to the world of publication design: the functional marriage of type, image, and space to facilitate reading and reinforce content. Even by the 1960s Ed Arnold was regarded as a pioneer in his field, and as "the father of modern newspaper design." Aside from academic responsibilities, Ed Arnold was in demand to redesign publications around the world. His work encompassed the craft of typography, the science of cognitive psychology, studies in readability, and the old-school news sense from his years as a reporter and editor. His lively manner, humor, and passion attracted people to him like a magnet. I became first a disciple, then a protégé of Ed Arnold, taking every course he taught, and working as an assistant at the Frederic W. Goudy Typographic Laboratory (... with another typography mentor, Professor David Norton). From these beginnings, the study of the integration of text and image has been a lifelong fascination.

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Through the next several years, even while I was working as a newspaper journalist covering the gamut of local, state, and national news, my interest turned more toward publication design and the role of liaison between editorial and production departments. My aim was to extend the path blazed by Ed, and be the kind of editor that not only embraced the mission of journalism, but one that was design-conscious and capable of managing editorial and graphic production from start to finish.

The newspapers where I worked encouraged my interest, and one appointed me as editor and designer of its weekly magazine. These newspapers were only a few years removed from hot-metal Linotype composition, and they were still feeling their way along with phototypesetting, pasted-up pages, platemaking cameras, and offset printing. The design freedom afforded by manually pasted-up layouts enabled publications to put Ed Arnold's design principles more easily into practice, and I was the young "answer man" about the changing technology.

Since I was determined to broaden my experience in design and print production, I decided to expand from the editorial track. While working nights as a newspaper copy-editor and page-layout artist, I worked days first as a sign designer, and then as an advertising designer. This was followed by several years in print production for a high-volume commercial printer that produced everything from scholarly books, to exquisite art books, to soft-porn, to glossy advertising materials, to boxcar-loads of Monopoly money. My aim was to be the guy with the big-picture knowledge, like my mentor, who would bring together editorial, creative, and production departments to better understand each other and work for the common goal of excellence. Yes, I would be the intrepid bridge-builder across the social and cultural chasm between the "white collars" and the "blue collars" in the printing and publishing industry. But after a few years of this exercise in futility, I decided that "doing the impossible" would be better appreciated elsewhere. So I ran away and joined the circus.

Of course the story is not that simple, despite the easy-rolling phrase, the cheap laugh, and the drummer's rim-shot. To clarify, after a decade in writing, editing, design, and print production, I

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pursued a long and rewarding career with my talented wife and partner, L.J. Newton, as nationally-touring performing artists – as an acrobatic juggler/unicyclist, comedy tap dancer, and jazz/ragtime musician. The range of venues included the finest theatrical palaces ... and, yes, large arena circuses.

Throughout the showbusiness years, I kept my hand in printed communications during the off-season, pushing hard to maintain a parallel career. I wrote and designed books, did public relations and publicity for conventions, and designed advertisements, promotional materials, and record album covers. For 10 years I was the publications director of a regional YMCA. Along the way I worked with typesetters and printers of every description and level of competence. I noticed my crankiness begin to simmer: The decades in showbusiness working among highly-motivated performers reduced my tolerance for mediocre effort.

Then came the new era of the personal computer and computer-aided design. From the start I embraced the “pasteboard metaphor” of the design software that allowed the user to move type and images around the page just like on the layout table. Also from the start, I recoiled against the oxymoronic – and moronic – term, “desktop publishing.” This marketing department term probably sold software, but in my view, use of the term began the steady devaluation of the craft of typography and design. Starting early in this era, I guided a commercial printer into the world of digital design, then digital pre-press, then digital printing. My work in the digital realm includes identity materials, advertisements, educational materials, books, museum exhibition graphics, and even comprehensible and navigable websites. But in more than 30 years since the inception of “desktop” design, I have seen the good, the bad, and too much of the ugly.

Today, with a computer on every desk, everyone is a designer. I see this development as just another aspect of the great democratization of information facilitated by the personal computer and the Internet. I tend to take the long view, an optimistic view that sees this development as positive for the future of the planet. But when I take the short view of the past 30 years, the “do-it-yourself design” movement has been an abomination. One

generation into this revolution, we are at a point at which even the basic principles of design, typography, and readability are a mystery even to many new graphic design graduates. So, the long view makes me hopeful, but the short view makes me cranky.

Because of the “Great Forgetting” of principles of design and typography, today the average person has no idea that there ever were such crafts in the first place. But rather than stand by and watch as an entire body of knowledge is buried within my lifetime, I decided to write this book for today’s do-it-yourselfer that presents the proven principles of effective graphic communication. The book is aimed at the *motivated* “designer-by-default” who has arrived at the awareness that (1) there has been something missing from their foundation of knowledge, (2) there really is something to know about typography and design, and (3) there is more to all this than turning on the computer and typing.

In the beginning of the “desktop publishing” era, many excellent books were published about design and typography. They were aimed at the new wave of do-it-yourselfers and were almost always written in a light, encouraging, and feel-good tone appropriate to the new age. Apparently those books didn’t work. Hence the cranky persona in this one. It’s worth a try.

There may come a time when the principles set forth in this book will be irrelevant, buried by the avalanche of progress. When that time comes, I will likely be dust, and the direction of civilization will be beyond my puny mortal influence. But for the immediate future, the principles offered herein are still current.

This project has been a wonderful release. In addition to the quiet satisfaction of imparting nuggets of accumulated wisdom, there have been hours of laugh-out-loud pleasure in rendering the most pathetic examples of amateur type and graphics. The motivated souls that embrace *The Cranky Typographer's Book of Major Annoyances* and internalize the masterful mitigations within will give me hope for the future. Happy reading.

– **R.W. Bacon**  
Newburyport, Mass.  
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