

Review

Doumont, J-L., (2009). *Trees, maps, and theorems: Effective Communication for rational minds*. Principiae: Belgium. [ISBN 978 90 813677 07]

Trees, maps and theorems: Effective communication for rational minds is the first practical book reviewed by the Journal of Writing Research (JOWR). The author Jean-Luc Doumont has a degree in engineering (Louvain) and holds a doctorate in applied physics (Stanford). He is one of the few trainers in the field to combine a technical background with acclaimed communication and teaching skills. Doumont's unusual background has led to a new approach in document design--an innovative, engineering-like approach that contrasts sharply with the traditional humanities-based approaches found in the field.

In search for material for his training sessions, Doumont explains that he did not find suitable material to incorporate into his lectures. He thus created his own book on effective communication. He writes that the book is about first principles: strategy and structure. The book is about constructing communication deliberately and methodically. It is about reaching a given purpose with a given audience, in virtually any professional situation and in any language.

Of course, you need to practice what you preach, so Doumont has structured each page of his book in a concise manner that is based on the book's principles. The main discussion is always located on the right-side of the page in black letters. The illustrations are placed next to the main discussion in lighter gray. On the left-side of the page he answers frequently asked questions in a gray column (see Figure 1).



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The book is organized in five parts: fundamentals (the core ideas behind all advices), written documents, oral presentations, graphical displays and application of types of documents.

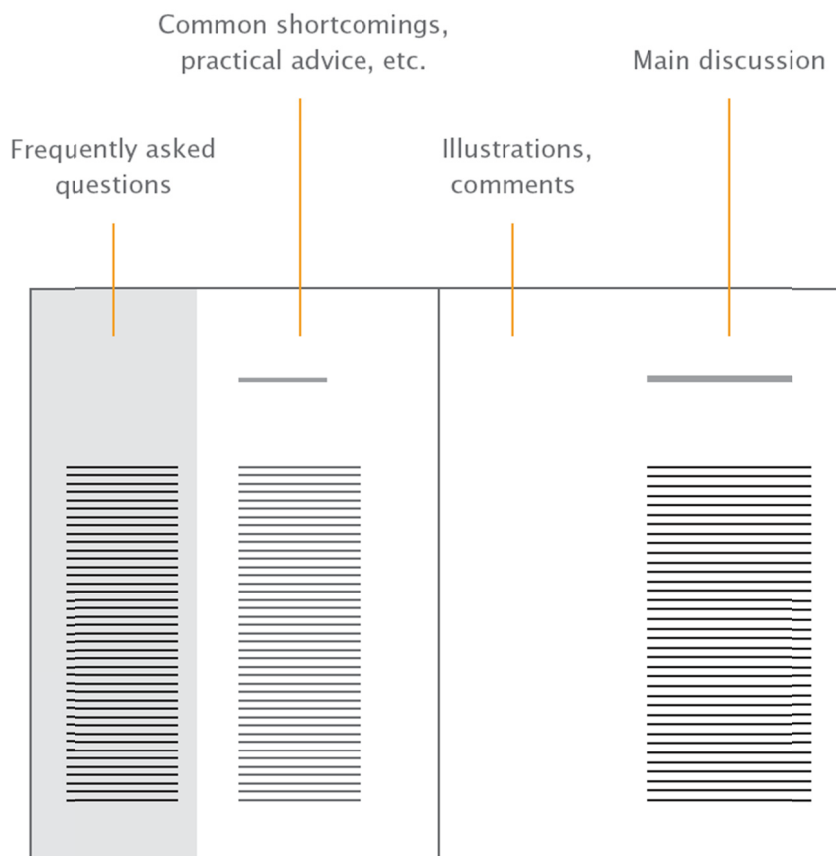


Figure 1: Structure of book (allowing 1 to 4 perspectives to reading the text).

The first section of the book, fundamentals, introduces the concepts that inform the four subsequent sections. This section explains why certain recommendations are given. Doumont's advice is based on psychological principles (e.g., short-term memory, visual coding). Three laws of communication are described: adapt to your audience, maximize the signal-to-noise ratio, and use effective redundancy. The first section of the book ends with rules for effective structure (both in navigation as in documents/messages).

The second section of the book, written documents, describes five steps to writing effective documents: plan the document, design the document, draft the document, format the document and revise the document. In this section readers find advice on how to identify and reach an audience, including specialists and non-specialists, primary and secondary readers. Doumont explains how the structure of a text can help to convey a message to a mixed public, for example, the structure should not necessarily follow a chronological order and including global components to a text can enhance understanding.

In the third section of the book, effective presentations, includes general guidelines for preparing and conducting a talk, including guidance on the structure of the slides. Detailed examples show, again, the difference between a speaker- and audience-oriented presentation. The examples are easy to understand as Doumont shows how to avoid common pitfalls. Finally this section describes how to be in control of your presentation by optimizing verbal, vocal and visual delivery, getting ready for your presentation, managing stage fright and how to answer questions.

The fourth section of the book, graphical displays, is – no-doubt – the section that is mostly based on Doumont's scientific engineering experience. He provides insight into designing graphs for multiple purposes. He explains that the optimal graph depends on several factors: the message to the audience, the research question to be answered and the structure of the dataset. Four types of questions are elaborated: comparison among data, distribution of variables, correlation among variables and evolution of a variable. Drawing again on the fundamentals from the first chapter, Doumont explains how we should design pictures: adapt to your audience, avoid noise and use redundancy. This advice results in minimalistic figures that still convey the message. Doumont's advice makes readers aware of the 'flooded' graphs often found in presentations and scientific articles.

In the fifth section of the book, application, Doumont's guidelines are applied to five common types of documents. Unfortunately, because this information is described very briefly, this part of the book is the least interesting. I would have preferred a whole book about 'how to design a good poster,' for example, based on the principles. In his preface Doumont states that others have described his book both as a minimalist guide and as a children's book, because of its exposition of one topic per double page. I found this book suitable for writers who already have knowledge about the various topics, because it is not structured as a 'for dummies' book. You need to have prior knowledge to understand and apply the ideas presented. In my opinion therefore this book is suitable as a supplement to other textbooks on text structure or document design.

Let me be clear. You will not find 'hard-core' research in this book, but rather interesting ideas about how to treat your audience with respect. Kellogg states in his article in the first issue of the Journal of Writing Research (Kellogg, 2008) that

‘knowledge crafters’ such as Doumont are able to fully integrate the perspective of the audience. Read this book to see how a knowledge crafter creates texts.

Aesthetically, the book is beautifully designed according to the principles described by Jean-Luc Doumont. You can just glance at it for inspiration while designing a new presentation. You can read it page-by-page, drawing from the theoretical advice, examples, practical advice and frequently asked questions. Or you can opt to read it in four passes.

Take a look at the Principiae website for further documents, templates and examples belonging to the book: www.principiae.be

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Reference

Kellogg, R.T. (2008). Training writing skills: A cognitive developmental perspective. *Journal of writing research*, 1(1), 1-26.