NEW APPROACHES TO ADMINISTRATIVE FORMS DESIGN

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Inspector tributari i autor de l'estudi *Forms design: an international perspective*

In this discussion paper I should like to look at some of the reasons why administrative forms cause problems, what can be done to try to improve them and finally to look at what some countries are in fact doing.

First I shall discuss some of the causes of poor communication. Then I shall examine the arguments for writing in plain language and follow this briefly with a look at some ideas for the presentation of text in a meaningful way. Finally I hope to illustrate some of these ideas with a series of slides showing what is being done.

COMMUNICATION: THE NEED, THE AUDIENCE, THE LANGUAGE AND THE VEHICLE

Almost the only way most administrations have of reaching the vast majority of the public —their clients— is through forms or leaflets. The only difference between the two is that most forms request information for the administration to use whereas leaflets usually give advice. But in either case the process of creating the form or leaflet should be the same.

There is a second but relatively minor difference. Forms usually *require* action by the recipient; leaflets are by and large optional —we cannot make people read them.

For the purposes of this discussion, therefore, I propose to treat them both in the same way. To consider them as one and to look at the problems that the public have whenever they receive an official communication.

Forms produce a feeling of fear in the minds of most people. This extract is from a poem, entitled 'Fear is...'

«Fear. What is it?
To me it is someone handing me a form
and saying 'Fill this in'.
Its hard to put into words what happens to me.
Every part of my body stiffens.
I go hot all over.
I feel like I am going to pass out.
I can't move. I can't speak
and there is a little man in my head
bashing my brains with a hammer.»

That is the reaction of many ordinary people. But the administrator feels no such sense of fear. Forms are part of his —or her— way of life. And as a result the fears of the public are generally ignored.

Why do forms cause so many problems: where do we go wrong? Well the simple answer is that we fail to recognise the needs of our audience. The first rule for any forms designer, indeed any communicator, is to know who your readers are, what they are likely to know and what they need to know. The form must not be written in a way that exceeds the abilities of the reader or demands information or information processing techniques that the reader does not have.

If the reader feels intimidated by the form, this will influence his reaction to it. The public feel that forms are designed for the benefit of the government or administration and to it is important so be able to motivate the reader. But with a tax form, for example, how do you motivate?

Some research in Canada in 1978 commented.

«It is well known that the ability to read and comprehend decreases under stress. It is equally well known that it varies inversely with the reader's willingness to approach the material in question.»

Income Tax is hardly likely to encourage 'willingness'. Therefore we can expect a decrease in the ability to read and comprehend. This just makes our task that little bit more difficult.

We *need* to communicate with the public since that is the only way we shall get the information we must have to be able to do our job. The principal medium used for this task is forms. I shall refer to them now as administrative forms.

This is to distinguish them from other forms that people need to complete and are therefore motivated to do so. The application forms they complete when they want a holiday or to buy a car or something of a similar nature. An administrative form is described in many different ways but in 1982 a report to the British Government described an administrative form as

«The means by which the citizen and Government talk to each other over a wide range of topics.»

«Talk to each other»; this suggests a two-way conversation.

When we talk to other people we expect a degree of understanding. We can soon detect whether our listener understands what we are saying. They would otherwise look puzzled. We can modify our speech or language so that they can understand.

With a form however we do not have that facility. The form, when printed, goes to everyone involved and represents the final word. If the reader does not understand he either

- ignores it
- completes it incorrectly
- gets someone to complete it for him
- writes or calls at the office of the administration to find out what it means.

All these represent a failure to communicate. More than that however all of them result in an extra cost.

- We do not get the information —and we therefore have to set in hand some other procedures in order to obtain it.
- We get the wrong information —this can mean either that we act on incorrect information and get the wrong answer or we know the information cannot be right and have to set about correcting it.
- The recipient pays money to an agent to complete the form for him.
- Staff have to stop what they are doing to deal with the enquiry.

All these costs —some to the department and some to the public— are really attributable to the cost of the form. So why don't we spend a little more time and a little more effort getting the form right?

The first problem is that everyone wants to keep the direct costs down —even though the indirect costs may be far greater. In North America research showed that the costs of using badly designed forms were 20 times the actual production costs. So a little more money spent now can be very cost effective.

A second problem is that almost every manager feels that designing a form is a simple matter; anyone —even he— can do it! Let us just look for a moment at what usually happens. We have a 'message' which we must translate into a 'form'. A subject specialist prepares a text. He is an administrator familiar with the law and with the subject matter.

There is usually a forms procurement officer who knows a little bit about layout. Between the two of them they produce a form. It meets their

needs but does it meet the needs of the reader or does it just bewilder and irritate?

The more effective way would be to analyse the process and give the separate functions to specialists so that at the end of the day we have a form that works and communicates. It gets the information we need or it informs the reader of his rights. In analysing the form we need to look at

- facts
- logic
- language
- structure
- specification
- production.

But what normally happens is *Facts* come from the subject specialist, and *Specification* from the procurement officer and then on to *Production*. *Logic, Language* and *Structure* are simply ignored.

What ought to happen is that the subject specialist should provide the text and he should then work with an editor or forms analyst. This is someone who has the writing skills that are necessary to translate the administrative language into plain simple language without losing the precision that the administrator requires. They both then become involved with the designer who takes the material and arranges it on the page so that it works in a logical and smooth way, and hopefully even looks good —this will help to motivate.

Incomprehensible Forms

Another problem we have is that forms usually contain too much information, too much text. Some research done recently in the United Kingdom found that

«The single most important determinant of the incidence of errors was the number of questions.»

Changes in Swiss tax returns were introduced in 1982 to limit the text and questions because it was felt that 80 % of recipients had simple affairs. Anyone in the other 20 % who might need further information would have to ask for it. But at least they felt it worthwhile to make the form suitable for use by 80 % of all recipients.

Our clients will fall into three categories of reader. The expert, the average and the below average.

The expert readers —these are people who because of their education or work experience are familiar with complex structures in language and

unusual words. They can use forms and are not afraid to write letters. They are familiar with bureaucratic procedures. They may not always be familiar with the law however and may struggle with legal phrases.

Then there are average readers. People who can cope with some forms, can write letters but are not familiar with bureaucratic practices and they will not be familiar with the law.

Finally the below average readers. These are people who are afraid of forms, are hesitant about writing letters and are even afraid of approaching or entering government offices.

How do you write material to meet these various differing abilities? Do we need to consider them?

There is a danger that unless we prepare material in a way that the poor readers can understand we shall deprive them of their rights. How can they know what benefits they can claim; how do they know what reliefs are available?

The more able reader, usually familiar with administrative procedures, is also more likely to ask questions in order to find out the answers to that which he does not understand. The poor reader is more likely to remain silent and as a result remain in ignorance.

Doing our best to create good forms

There are two aspects necessary for a good form; language and layout. With language we communicate; we use layout to motivate. If we can convey our message so that the recipient understands and if we can motivate so that the reader replies then we shall have produced a good form.
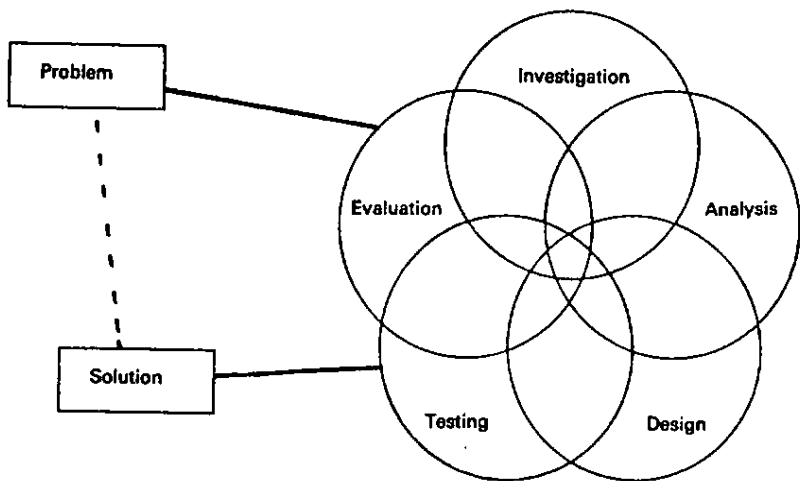
I asked earlier «why do forms cause problems; where do we go wrong». I have tried to identify some of the difficulties.

We have a problem. We must

- investigate
- analyse
- design
- test
- evaluate

and if necessary repeat the process.

The whole process begins to look something like this.

PLAIN LANGUAGE: ELEMENTS OF STYLE
HOW CAN WE HELP OUR READERS TAKE THE MEANING?

Administrative forms have three characteristics. They are usually

- complicated
- incomprehensible
- dull

They frequently contain or require too much information. The style of language used simply leaves people bewildered. And as a result they fail in their primary objectives; they do not communicate.

In addition many forms lack imagination in design and therefore fail to motivate; I will return to this later.

A form must communicate —we must know our audience— it must encourage a response and it should be so designed to get the information we require and to get the correct information.

An organisation's reputation is a worthwhile asset. Research suggests that 7 out of 10 of the general public think that a company that has a good reputation would not sell poor quality products. It is doubtful whether they are right but it is the public's perception. And it is *perception* that we must deal with.

The public by and large consider that administrative forms are designed for the benefit of the administration. That is their perception —and sadly it is all too often correct. The problem has its roots in the fact that we ne-

glect to identify our audience. Administrators are familiar with the law and use the language of the law all too often when writing to the public. The language we use should not be a foreign language to those to whom we write.

Evidence suggests that nearly half the world's population is illiterate. A literate person —as defined by UNESCO— is someone who 'can, with understanding, both read and write a short, simple statement of his every day life'. But does this mean that people who are regarded as literate can function in society? And do we do all we can to help them?

Reading skills are developed so that people may acquire information from what they read. If people are unable to understand the forms or instructions that they are given then they are unable to comply with our requests or to know and to understand their rights.

Many administrators consider language to be precise but the evidence suggests that this is far from being so. Lawyers are particularly fond of writing in a style that makes understanding difficult. They also speak in the same way.

Two short illustrations. In 1983 a successful prosecution was brought in the British courts against a firm of solicitors for bad advice given in a letter. The judge considered that the letter was

> «Badly worded, phrased in obscure English and... it was not surprising that the plaintiff who was not a lawyer misunderstood it.»

Research carried out in the United States found that jurors were unable to understand the instructions they were given and as a result there was a real possibility that innocent people had been convicted —or guilty people had been freed.

Some teachers are now campaigning for the use of simple language. These include many law professors in universities. One —Professor Richard Wydick of the University of California writes

> «We lawyers cannot write plain English. We use eight words to say what could be said in two. We use arcane phrases to express commonplace ideas. Seeking to be precise we become redundant. Seeking to be cautious we become verbose. Our sentences twist on, phrase within clause within clause, glazing the eyes and numbing the minds of aor readers.»

This failure to write in simple language is therefore recognised and the solution has been to adopt ways of making text more attractive; we use

- simple language
- shorter sentences
- familiar words.

One strange aspect of the development of plain language was the almost simultaneous recognition of the problem in countries as far apart as the United States, Sweden and Australia. And other work was being done at the same time in France, the United Kingdom, in Holland, Denmark and Austria.

Not that these developments were entirely new.

A hundred years ago Charles Dickens —an English writer— was commenting on the situation in Victorian Britain.

70 years ago a book was published in the United States entitled 'The Elements of Style'.

40 years ago George Orwell was condemning the deterioration of the English language in 'Politics and the English Language'.

And in more recent times many books have been published on the subject.

They all agree on the guidelines for writing text. These include using

- the active voice
- personal pronouns
- short familiar words not long unusual words
- short sentences
- simple sentences.

Let us look at a few.

The Active Voice: Active sentences maintain the underlying logic of who did what to whom, helping the reader to keep the distinction clear.

Unfortunately most public documents are written in the passive voice which gives them an impersonal dry tone and often causes the reader to focus on the wrong element in the sentence.

Personal pronouns: Personal pronouns in sentences are direct and specific. They make clear to the reader who does what in the sequence of actions or events you describe in a sentence.

Research supports the view that if readers can relate passages to something they are familiar whit or something that is personally meaningful then they are more likely to understand and remember.

Nouns created from verbs: Sentences with heavy, abstract nouns created from verbs are impersonal, bureaucratic, and often hard to understand.

Short sentences: Readers can take in only so much information at one time. At the end of a sentence, readers pause to consider together the words that they have just read. If you write short sentences your readers will be able to do this easily.

Long sentences contain more ideas than readers can remember when they come to the end of the sentence. Long sentences also tend to be grammati-

cally complex, which makes it difficult for readers to relate the ideas to each other. Many manuals say that sentences should be 25 words or less in length. This is a good rule of thumb method but it may not always be an adequate measure by itself. The important thing to remember is to present your readers with only as many ideas as they can handle at one time.

Avoid an excess of information: Sentences become hard to follow when you include too much information. This happens when you insert clauses and phrases between the subject, the verb and the object of the sentence. Research supports this view but it does not say how much information is excessive in particular sentences for particular audiences. The overall results do show that as more information is included, the sentences take longer to understand.

List conditions separately: Conditional sentences are often very complicated and hard for readers to understand. The more conditions a sentence contains and the more different combinations of *ands* and *ors, ifs* and *thens* the more difficult the sentence will be for the reader.

Avoid unnecessary and difficult words: Many documents are full of words that are either unnecessary or unnecessarily difficult. These words make sentences longer and more complicated than they need to be.

In order to make text more meaningful and attractive it is necessary to organise the text. Here are a few pointers to presenting text.

Use a logical sequence: To understand and use a document your readers must be able to relate the information and ideas in it to each other. How you arrange your sentences and paragraphs —what you put first, second, third, etc.— can make it easier or more difficult for readers to figure out the relationships.
The logic of any particular form will however depend on the audience.

Use informative headings: It is not sufficient to organise the content of a document well. You must also show the organisation to the readers. You can do this by using headings and sub-headings.

Headings can help the reader and the user of the document in several ways. For people who are curious about what the document is for, headings show the organisation and scope. For people who need to find specific information in a particular part of the document, headings help them locate it. For people who wonder what a certain section of the document is about, headings will give them clues as to the content.

A table of contents: A table of contents shows readers what is in the document, where particular sections are and how they are organised.

A table of contents is particularly useful when a document is long and readers can use it as a reference to find specific information quickly.

But rewriting in plain language is not just about putting in punctuation and making long sentences into shorter ones. You must analyse the text, and rewrite it following the plain language guidelines.

Following these guidelines will help to improve the message and make it more meaningful. The changes will lead to more comprehensible forms and more readable leaflets. But it is important that we do not confuse readability with reading ability.

Reading involves recognising graphic symbols and the words they represent, and then translating the signs into the message that the writer is trying to convey. Reading skills are developed so that people may acquire information from the material they read. If people are unable to understand the forms or instructions that they are given to read, then the fault probably rests with the author of the document.

Tests have been devised for assessing written material and matching it to childrens needs. These are only very general guidelines and one researcher in America comments

«Concealed within these fairly simple formulas are several assumptions that need to be examined more closely. For example it is assumed... that it is sufficient to measure the factors that reflect reading difficulty rather than directly measure the factors that cause difficulty in reading.»

She argues that the factors that cause difficulty are those that may vary; the background, experience and motivation of the reader. But reading formulae ignore these variables.

For a long time it was considered impossible to write complex legal material in simple language. But in 1974 Citybank in America introduced a plain English credit application form. This showed what could be done. It also so impressed a member of the New York State Legislature that he introduced a Plain English Law into the New York State Assembly. Now in certain circumstances plain language must be used.

Any editor who checks a text for readability needs to have in mind a number of general questions about the text as a whole

- is this what the reader needs to know?
- is the information unfolding logically?

You need to move carefully from sentence to sentence bearing in mind

- is the active voice being used where appropriate?

- does the text use words that the reader will know?

The aim of all this is of course to ensure that the text speaks to the reader as directly as possible. You must try to pretend to be the reader; you must try to adopt the reader's point of view looking carefully at each page, each paragraph and each sentence.
You must ask yourself:

Can I understand the sentences?
Do I understand what I am being told to do?
Who will help me solve my problems? Where do I turn to for help?

During research carried out in Denmark certain characteristics were observed in the choice of reading material. The research was carried out with children but the researchers noted a number of significant points.

- They could identify three groups of reading ability.
- The reading material chosen could be classified into three groups.

The three reading ability groups were much as they had expected with children showing above average, average and below average ability. What the researchers noted was that the above average ability reader was influenced in the choice of reading material by content; the average ability reader was influenced by language and presentation but the under average ability child chose material based on visual appeal.
We can still see these characteristics in the way adults chose their reading material.
This diagram summarises the position (*page 110*).
Forms, traditionally, were written in a language full of jargon, legal language, long difficult words and sentences. The text was written by above average ability people as if it were intended for their contemporaries. As a result it failed to reach most people for whom it was intended.
We have been paying attention to language, changing the style of our writing by using short sentences and simple words and thus our communications have been reaching a different group. We have been reaching down to the people with average ability. The barrier has moved but this still leaves the under average ability reader isolated.
I have already mentioned the two essential ingredients of a good form, language and layout. We use language to communicate with each other as we try convey messages and stimulate responses. If a form is to work effectively it must carry information to the recipient and he must be able to understand it and act on it. But we need also to motivate the reader, so that we get replies that are timely and accurate.

The teaching of reading without really any method
Jansen, Jacobsen, Jensen

Reading ability / Material	Below average (A)	Average (B)	Above average (C)
Content (1)			*
Linguistic style (2)		*	
Visual appearance (3)	*		

The research found that the above average ability child (group C) was influenced by content (1). The average ability child (group B) was influenced primarily by linguistic style (2). But the under average ability child (group A) was influenced mainly by the visual appeal (3).

Many organisations and Government Departments have improved the language of forms, but do we need to improve layout —the visual appeal of the form—and so bring them within the grasp of those people with less than average reading ability?

DESIGNING THE FORM: GRAPHIC STYLE, TYPOGRAPHY AND COLOUR

Perhaps I should start this part of my discussion by saying what I mean by the design in relation to a form. I mean the physical appearance of the product. This includes a number of elements

format
typeface
typesize
colour
paper.

I have already mentioned the problems of language and reading ability. Reading involves recognising graphic symbols and the words they represent.

Recognition can be helped by using an appropriate typeface and type size and the legibility of type can be assisted by adopting the correct font. 'Legibility is the ease, speed and comfort of reading with the focus on visual perception rather than on understanding'.

The first question many people ask when they receive correspondence from an administration is 'who has sent me this form?'.

Can they readily and easily identify the writer?

One of the things done now by many organisations is to establish a corporate identity, a corporate image. And one way of doing this is to have a style to letter headings or forms.

Another aspect of identity is to use one typeface —often known as house style. This is perhaps a more sophisticated method but at least all the forms arriving from one source will begin to look similar —not the same— but as though there was a plan behind the creation of them all.

Format

Format is a very subjective aspect of design and a very wide subject in itself. It reflects the ability of the designer to apply his personality to design in the areas of harmony, balance, proportion, originality, colour etc. But it is also the way in which print is arranged to help the reader use the material.

It is closely allied to typography since the arrangement of text on the page is an important aspect of typesetting and also of *legibility*.

One of the most important aspects of this is the use of 'white space'. This is those parts of the page on which no text is printed. Forms designers plan the spacing of text on the page to leave the maximum amount clear. But authors of government forms believe that these spaces are there to be filled. All too often the author wants to fit in additional text and points to all the space that is available when the designer tries to resist the request for more text.

White space is crucial. Forms with narrow margins, small spaces between paragraphs and little space between lines look crowded and complex. The signposting effect of headings is lost and the readers have difficulty in locating the start of succesive new lines.

All these induce stress and we have already considered the problems of stress.

Typography

The arrangement of text on the page is very important. There are a number of simple rules and guidelines.

Typeface: Typefaces should be chosen for ease of reading. There are two main families of typeface; those called 'serif' and those known as 'sans-serif'. But there are many variations of both. What is the difference between serif and sans-serif typefaces?

- A serif typeface has opening and closing cross-strokes on the letters. These typefaces are sometimes known as 'Roman' faces.
- Sans-serif type does not have these cross-strokes; such typefaces are sometimes called 'Gothic' or Grotesque faces.

Serif faces are more common and as a result are probably more legible for older readers. But now, certainly in Europe and North America, there is a great movement to adopt sans-serif faces and these are being used much more frequently.

There is little difference in the legibility of either serif or sansserif type in the different styles most commonly available. But in some serif faces letters and numbers can look similar.

Type weight: Most typefaces are available in a variety of styles or weights or line thicknesses. These vary from light through medium to bold with semi-bolds and etxra-bolds sometimes available plus, frequently, an italicised face.

Italicised text is usually read more slowly than other styles and in continuous text can be difficult to read. A sans-serif italic is much more appealing than serif italic typeface.

Text in bold can be read at the same speed as normal text and the inexperienced reader more readily understands that special emphasis has been given to words that are highlighted in bold.

A medium weight is usually the best choice from the point of view of legibility. Other styles can be used for emphasis or to differentiate sections of text. But as with any form of emphasis it should be used sparingly to have maximum impact.

Type size: Type size is usually measured in points where one point equals approximately 1/72 of an inch.

The point size is only an approximate guide since it includes a certain amount of space above and below each character. This means that some typefaces in a given type size are actually different from other typefaces of the same nominal size. Some systems of measurement are based on letters measured in millimetres.

Type size is probably the single most significant factor affecting legibility. Commonly used typefaces in sizes varying from 9 through to 12 points are all considered legible and most newspapers use type sizes of 8 or 9 points but books are more frequently printed in 10 point. Smaller sizes

are likely to cause difficulties in discriminating between letters and larger sizes will upset the normal pattern of eye movement.

Inter-line spacing: When type is set there will automatically be a certain amount of space between the lines. For example when set in 9 point the distance between the successive base-lines will be 9 points. If additional space is required the distance between the base-lines might be increased say to 11 points. The space introduced in this way is known as leading (pronounced ledding).

Experiments suggest that a small amount of additional inter-line spacing say 1 or 2 points improves the legibility of all sizes of type. This is part of the 'white space' referred to earlier.

With phototypesetting it is possible to introduce variations of letter spacing within words. Very close spacing is likely to reduce the legibility because letters will apparently or actually fuse together on the page. Very open spacing on the other hand will fragment the word. Letter spacing should be just sufficient to separate the letters clearly from one another.

Word spacing should be just sufficient to separate adjacent words clearly yet not so great that words cease to hold together as a line. Word spacing should always be less than the line spacing or vertical white rivers will appear in the text.

Justified or unjustified setting: In justified text, the lines are all the same length and are aligned both left and right.

A justified text has the advantage of familiarity and predictability. It has the look of a traditional book or magazine and creates a more formal effect. In an unjustified text, ragged right, the lines are of different length. They line up on the left and are ragged on the right.

Justified text is achieved by varying the space between words and letters and sometimes by hyphenating the word that occurs at the end of a line —which sometimes makes word recognition difficult for novice readers. Ragged right text has the advantage of constant spaces between the words and avoids the need for hyphenation. It also gives some white space at the end of the line.

With long lines there is probably little or no difference in the legibility of the two styles. With short lines the unavoidable irregular spacing between words can be distracting and constant word spacing helps the unskilled reader.

Capital letters v. small letters: It is a common misconception that capital letters because of their greater size are more legible than small case letters. But capital letters are more difficult to recognise than their lower case equivalent. Capital letters contain less information because their outlines are less distinct. They also occupy about 40 to 45 % more space and take

S.

longer to read on account of both these reasons (the eye is not able to perceive as many letters at each fixation).

Capital letters do however have their use; they may be more legible for text set in very small type sizes or for captions intended to be read at a great distance but all capital printing markedly reduces the speed with which continuous text can be read.

Lower case letters have more character in terms of variation in shape and the contrast of ascenders and descenders with short letters.

This leads to characteristic word forms that are much easier to recognise than words in all capitals. Additionally a casual examination of print can detect the meaning from the upper half of lower case letters; these furnish more clues to word form than the lower half.

A sparing use of capitals for emphasis can be effective, especially to isolate a single word or a short phrase. However, a lot of single capitalised words on a page begins to look ridiculous.

Line length: Line length is best thought of in terms of letters and spaces. Research suggests 60 letters and spaces or 10 to 12 words.

Slightly longer or shorter lines are unlikely to affect legibility, but extremes will undoubtedly do so. Very short lines prevent us from making efficient use of our peripheral vision thus reducing reading speed while very long lines make it difficult for the eyes to accomplish an accurate and unhesitating backsweep from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. When planning the layout of a form it is very important to take account of the line length of instructions and questions.

Single or double column layout: The area of the page can either be treated as a single wide column or it can be divided into two or more narrower columns. With European A4 paper size a single column of typeset text creates lines of too great a length. The alternative could be to use two-thirds of the page for the main text and the remaining third for headings or notes, or to divide the main text into two colums of equal width.

This is something to be taken into account when planning the overall layout of the form. A factor in deciding will be the width of margins. They are unlikely to affect legibility but they will affect line length. But a well proportioned margin is desirable since it would help the type to sit comfortably on the page. And wide margins help with the question of white space.

Paper and ink: Coloured paper can be useful to distinguish between forms but strong colours should be avoided.

Screen tinted panels using a fine screen and of only sufficient density to make a distinction can be a useful addition.

Black print on white paper is standard but there is no loss of legibility

when black ink is printed on tinted paper, as long as the contrast between the ink and the paper is at least 70 %. The darker the paper colour the less legible the text.

Avoid thin papers if they are to be printed on both sides, since print shows through.

The surface texture of the paper affects the quality of the type. A rough or textured paper generally requires a greater impression which makes the type bolder and thicker. You may need to use extra leading to offset this effect but paper always makes a potent comment on content with the audience.

Colour in print: It is worth remembering that with present day print technology the cost of printing in colour is now only marginally more expensive. But the effect that this can have on the design of the form and on the enhanced communications impact that the form has with the reader are dramatic. It may well be worth the trouble of using a second colour. But interesting effects can be achieved by using just one colour —and this does not necessarily have to be black.

Sadly most Government Departments do not have staff who have any graphic training, knowledge of design or design ability. Such a lack of resources does not make improving forms impossible —but it does make things difficult. There is

- a lack of knowledge and practical experience in forms writing and design
- limited intuitive knowledge and ability.

Ideally the programme of events should be something like this when we are faced with the request for a redesigned form.

- We get details of the requirement.
- We obtain information.
- We conceptualise the document.

To do this we must be capable of generating ideas.

- We select the material and produce a draft to see how the document is developing.
- We finally set out a specification and bring to life our idea.

The three decisive stages are

- ideas
- drafting
- communication

and these are the three aspects where the lack of knowledge, imagination and ability are likely to have the greatest impact.

WHAT ARE OTHER COUNTRIES DOING TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS?

So far we have looked at

- the need to communicate —that is to use forms that the public can understand
- writing in plain language
- those aspects we need to consider when designing our forms.

And now, a brief look —with the aid of some slides — at what other countries are doing to try to improve administrative forms. I shall be trying to suggest ideas that may help you or your colleagues or your forms designers. Nothing I say will in fact represent a solution in itself, but it may stimulate an idea which will lead to a solution.

CONCLUSIONS

I think it is now generally accepted in most countries that administrative forms are too complicated for the vast majority of the population to understand. The causes of the problems may be varied but I believe there are principally two main difficulties. The first is the use of bureaucratic and legal language which makes the content of the message too complex. The second is a lack of care for the needs of the user.

The past decade has seen lots of activity in the search for better forms and experiences in various countries show what can be done with a little bit of imagination.

The benefits to the public are clear but less apparent are the benefits that will arise to the administration itself. Often these benefits are hidden and it may be many years before they can in fact be measured. But a study carried out in the United States looked at one of the Internal Revenue Service tax forms. The report commented

> «The adoption by the Internal Revenue Service of a radically different form, so obviously intended to meet taxpayer needs, should make a substantial contribution towards decreasing public hostility and towards greater acceptance of the Internal Revenue Service as a reasonable Government agency.»

I mentioned earlier the public's perception of administrative forms. If we can work at producing forms that are, to quote from the US experience, «so obviously intended to meet taxpayer needs» then we shall have made major strides towards improving perception.

In order to ensure that simple effective forms are produced we must first recognise the public's problems. We must then engage skilled people to design and write forms but above all we must be motivated and committed to simplification.