

# Designing For A Japanese High-context Culture: Culture's Influence On The Technical Writer's Visual Rhetoric

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DESIGNING FOR A JAPANESE HIGH-CONTEXT CULTURE: CULTURE'S INFLUENCE  
ON THE TECHNICAL WRITER'S VISUAL RHETORIC

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2005

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyzes the challenges technical writers face when designing documents for high-context cultures, such as the Japanese. When developing documents intended to cross cultural gulfs, technical writers must take into consideration cultural expectations, preferences, and practices in document design and communication. High-context cultures, such as Japan, design documents using drastically different design strategies than those used in the United States. Japanese communication habits are more ambiguous than communication in the United States. Thus, the Japanese often use visuals for their aesthetic appeal, not for their ability to complement the text that surrounds the visual. The ambiguous nature of high-context culture communication habits often pose problems when Americans try to communicate—whether through written or oral communication—with a high-context audience. Without careful analysis and research into these cultural implications, the technical writer risks developing unsuccessful documents that do not accomplish the goals of the communication. It takes years of research to understand cultural differences, especially in the case of Japanese communication habits. With the research presented in this thesis, technical writers will understand better how to address document design issues when designing for high-context cultures in general and the Japanese culture specifically.

In order to effectively analyze document design strategies across cultures, I have collected documents from two cultures—from the United States and from Japan. These two cultures represent a low-context culture, the United States, and a high-context culture, Japan. The United States and Japan are opposite each other on Edward T. Hall's cultural continuum, providing ideal subjects for a cross-cultural document design analysis. Using previous research

in document design and cultural studies, I have established a grid for analyzing visual elements in the documents I have collected—full color automobile sales booklets. I analyze both high- and low-context documents against this grid. The various document design grids allow for visual representation of document design decisions in both cultures. American international technical communicators can use these grids as a starting point for addressing the cultural implications of document design for high-context audiences.

The research presented in this thesis shows that high- and low-context cultures use visuals much differently. Readers, in both cultures, are persuaded differently by visual elements. By exploring and analyzing the use of visuals such as photos, diagrams, line drawings, and the way both cultures use visuals to approach their audiences, this thesis attempts to present an explanation of visuals in high-context cultures that will aid American technical writers who design documents for international audiences. This thesis uses Japanese cultural analysis and Japanese design theories to explain high-context design decisions applied to Japanese documents.

This work is dedicated to the loving memory of my mother, Tina, who encouraged me to pursue the arts and writing, and to my father, Dale, for teaching me the value of hard work and for taking me fishing.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

SUV Sports Utility Vehicle

## INTRODUCTION

Current researchers in the field have addressed the need for further study in international technical communication, more specifically culture's influence on the technical writer's visual rhetoric. All too often cross-cultural communication fails for one reason or another. In order to understand a culture and its members, we must spend years studying communication habits. This idea holds true in the technical communication field, as effective design in the United States may be ineffective in other countries. Nancy Hoft, in "Global Issues, Local Concerns," asserts that culture is at the heart of international technical communication. In order to effectively address an increasingly global market, the technical writer's consideration of cultural sensitivities, issues, and biases becomes imperative (145). The technical writer, when addressing an international audience, must take time to research current cultural trends and preferences. Without this critical research the technical writer risks creating documentation that is inappropriate and ineffective. Essentially, the technical writer's lack of cultural considerations will almost surely result in failed communication. Therefore, he or she must consider a culture's norms, especially if designing documentation for a high-context culture.

The Japanese culture is high-context and is mirror opposite the American culture in many important ways. The Japanese place significant emphasis on "the group." As Edwin Reischauer writes, "Between various societies there can be great differences in the relative emphasis placed on the individual and the group. Certainly no difference is more significant between Japanese and Americans, or Westerners in general, than the greater Japanese tendency to emphasize the group, somewhat at the expense of the individual" (127). The group emphasis Reischauer refers to is characteristic of a high-context culture. Because members of a high-context culture have

remarkably similar educational and familial experiences, they feel a closer-knit relationship with their family members and coworkers. The Japanese have group-oriented goals where “[m]uch is suggested by indirection or vague implication” (Reischauer 135). In contrast to interpersonal communication in the United States, people in Japan do not feel obligated to be witty or charismatic conversationalists, as David Mura in Turning Japanese notes. In Japan, what the group does together is more important than making an individual impression (Mura 96). Americans do a significant amount of business with the Japanese and understand many important interpersonal communication preferences for their high-context culture. However, there is still much to learn about the way the two cultures compare with regards to visual elements in documentation, as visual elements in the American culture are used in large part to clarify and enhance textual explanation, and in Japan visual elements are used in large part to impress. There may be several reasons that the Japanese value aesthetics.

Much of the Japanese culture revolves around aesthetics, from the presentation of food at a meal to attire at a social gathering. According to Andrew Juniper, much of the Japanese culture’s aesthetic preferences and values are influenced by “wabi sabi.” Wabi sabi through the years has come to mean many different things to the Japanese. One of the clearer understandings of the term wabi sabi, as offered by Leonard Koren, might be, “wabi:” the inward, the subjective and “sabi:” the outward, the objective, or “wabi:” a philosophical construct and “sabi:” an aesthetic ideal (23).

Although not all wabi sabi design characteristics apply directly to the study of document design and visual rhetoric, wabi sabi may help to explain the rationale for many Japanese design decisions, as wabi sabi concepts have been influential in the Japanese culture much like religious and family values. “Wabi sabi’s influence on Japanese aesthetic values has inspired such arts as

the tea ceremony, flower arranging, haiku, garden design, and No theatre,” Juniper writes. “It offers an aesthetic ideal that uses the uncompromising touch of mortality to focus the mind on the exquisite transient beauty to be found in all things impermanent” (2). Wabi sabi design is concerned also with the element of “sobriety.” To the Japanese, purity and honesty are vital. The pure and honest nature that the Japanese hold valuable is reflected in designs that are often modest, or sober, an element of wabi sabi thought. So, in a sense, one flower in an old bamboo vase would provide a sense of inspiration to a Japanese viewer similar to the way a vibrant arrangement of exotic flowers nestled in a new glass vase might move an American viewer. Japanese design expectations run much different than those in America. These concepts and expectations should be explored and analyzed in order to gain a more conclusive theory of cross-cultural document design.

This thesis will provide a document design analysis into what many communicators consider to be the most challenging market—the Japanese, a high-context culture that is opposite the United States on Edward T. Hall’s cultural continuum. High-context cultures present special challenges to American document designers, as these highly homogenous societies’ vague communication tendencies “can be confusing and even maddening [to Americans], just as our style can seem blunt and threatening to them” (Reischauer 136). More specifically, this study will highlight, analyze, and propose a solution to cross-cultural document design for high-context cultures. Edward T. Hall in Beyond Culture writes,

Any transaction can be characterized as high-, low-, or middle context. [High-context] transactions feature preprogrammed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted message. [Low-context] transactions

are the reverse. Most of the information must be in the transmitted message in order to make up for what is missing in the context (both internal and external). (101)

The American culture is diverse and individualistic. We spend little time together; we pride ourselves on independence; and we each live in secluded areas of our homes. It is difficult for the American to consider the implications of high-context communication. “Americans will find it difficult to understand how a man could actively seek dependence on another man. [American] cultural currents (for males) run in the opposite direction—toward *independence*,” Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall write. “The Japanese find it easier to communicate with another human being if they are in a dependency relationship with that person” (Hall and Hall 55). According to Hall and Hall, the communication differences between Americans and the Japanese are significant.

With an increasingly global market, Hall’s theories become even more significant in the technical communication field. It is my intention to apply Hall’s theories directly to the technical communication field by taking into account not only Hall’s cultural continuum (basing cultures from high to low context) but also by taking into account the factors of culture that cause communication efforts to fail.

This study and thesis seek to understand the design conventions applied by technical writers across cultures. Through this study I will determine culture’s effect on the technical writer’s visual rhetoric by looking at the document design decisions such as layout, integration of text and visuals, and the use of graphics in documentation. By understanding more concretely how visual rhetoric must change when designing for a high-context audience, American technical writers will be better prepared for cross-cultural document design, especially in high-

context cultures where communication practices are many times mirror opposites of communication practices within the United States.

As technical writers are able to understand and assess how and why culture influences potential users or readers, they will be better prepared to enter a challenging, and often frustrating, global market. As technical writers continue to enter the global market, or as the world becomes more of a “global marketplace,” this study will become even more relevant and useful for technical writers.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTERNATIONAL TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION**

The communicator has many responsibilities. Technical documentation can take many forms and can serve many purposes. Each document, though, must have one thing in common. Documents should show “an extreme awareness of a specific audience,” as Dan Jones writes in Technical Writing Style. Although understanding an audience sounds like a simple enough task, it is quite a challenge when writing for international audiences, especially when that audience prefers ambiguous and implicit communication styles over more direct and explicit styles, as in Japan. Before attempting to design a document for international use, the technical writer should first make general observations about that culture.

### **General Considerations when Addressing the Japanese**

The international technical writer must pay specific attention to numerous communication preferences. International audiences, in general, will inevitably have different practices and expectations than those of an American audience. Importantly, the technical writer should observe social, religious, educational, and linguistic differences of the culture before attempting to develop a documentation strategy for writing with that audience in mind.

## Social Differences

The technical writer can first begin analyzing international audience members by looking closely at the way they interact both socially and professionally. To begin, the technical writer might perform studies on family perspectives, as Nancy Hoft suggests in International Technical Communication. “The social realm focuses on how target users interact at a formal and informal level and what their expectations and needs are,” Nancy Hoft writes. “*Social* should be viewed from both a business perspective and a family perspective, since in most countries business and family life are separated; different rules and expectations exist in both realms, even within the same country,” Hoft advises in International Technical Communication (69).

By understanding more about the culture’s business practices, the technical writer might gather a better understanding of what writing style will work best for the situation. Americans tend to prefer formal business practices where employees arrive on time to a meeting, address the point of a meeting, arrive at a prompt conclusion, and depart the meeting on schedule. Americans are direct and goal oriented, finding little time to exchange pleasantries. Conversely, other cultures, such as the Japanese, exchange friendly stories at the beginning of a business meeting, incorporating family ties into their business world. Americans typically separate their “business life” from their “family life.”

International cultures may also view proximity and privacy in different ways. Americans, for example, view crowding negatively. However, the Japanese tend to “prefer crowding.” “To the Westerner of a non-contact group,” Edward T. Hall writes in The Hidden Dimension, “‘crowding’ is a word with distasteful connotations” (152). According to Hall, it is considered “Japanese style” to “sleep close together on the floor,” in contrast to “American style.” Further, some cultures tend to prefer more interactive and intimate communication styles,

as they prefer to stand close to the person with whom they are speaking. Americans, though, tend to prefer a certain amount of privacy when they communicate. In the United States, “there is a commonly accepted, invisible boundary around any two or three people in conversation which separates them from others,” Edward T. Hall writes in The Hidden Dimension (132).

It may also be necessary to understand more about how the culture perceives family values. Many cultures emphasize family values and bonds more than Americans do. “The nuclear family in contemporary Japan is somewhat less eroded than its American counterpart,” Reischauer writes. “Parental authority is stronger, and family ties on the whole are closer” (Reischauer 130). The technical writer, thus, may need to consider a reader’s connection to his or her family. The reader’s family bonds may render a communication strategy effective or ineffective.

### **Religious Differences**

There are many countries where religion plays a major role in the everyday lives of its members. Cultures may hold a day or a certain animal sacred. Nancy Hoft, in International Technical Communication, tells us that pork is forbidden in some religions, while lamb and fish are eaten on special occasions in others (72). The technical writer will need to pay close attention to a culture’s religious preferences, as insensitivity to religious beliefs will most surely alienate and offend potential readers.

Nancy Hoft, in International Technical Communication, suggests doing research on fundamental religious beliefs of the target culture as well as becoming familiar with the significance of various colors and icons (72). Many cultures value ancient religions, religions

such as Confucianism. These values are still represented in the culture's belief systems today. The Japanese, for example, are still today permeated with Confucian ethical values, as Reischauer states, such as the moral basis of government, the emphasis on interpersonal relations and loyalties, and the faith in education and hard work (214). Other significant Japanese religious influences include Buddhism, Shinto, Christianity, and various folk traditions. Reischauer cautions communicators that "religion in Japan provides a confused and indistinct picture. Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples are found everywhere. The lives of most Japanese are intertwined with religious observances—shrine festivals, 'god shelves' and Buddhist altars in the homes, and Shinto marriages, Buddhist funerals, and other religious rites of passage" (Reischauer 224). As Reischauer informs us, the lives of most Japanese are intertwined with religious observances. The Japanese culture provides just one example of the importance of observing a culture's religious preferences. In some cases, though, a culture may have many religions. In this case, the international technical communicator may choose to act conservatively. Raymond Archee, in "Online Intercultural Communication," suggests that withholding judgment and sensitively questioning an overseas audience's point of view may yield the best results for international and perhaps any other communication (41). The international technical communicator should approach any unfamiliar religious difference with a great deal of respect and sensitivity.

### **Educational Differences**

In order to effectively gauge an audience's educational experiences, it may be necessary to take a detailed look at the literacy and learning styles in that particular culture. Nancy Hoft, in

International Technical Communication, suggests that a culture's literacy determines whether it is more or less effective to introduce text-intensive information products (72). Thus, a culture with low literacy rates may not react well to a series of information products, especially technical documents. The literacy rate of a culture may differ drastically from that of the United States, typically considered to be highly literate. With lower literacy rates, the international technical communicator will certainly need to consider alternative methods of communication other than the more traditional mediums such as manuals or Web sites.

Different cultures teach and learn using preferred methods. Not all cultures have access to what Americans consider traditional classrooms. Tutorials and courseware may be especially challenging to develop for international audiences. A great deal of research will be necessary to understand just how an international audience prefers to learn. Japan, for example, has a traditional education, one that subjects college graduates to a uniform examination system (Reischauer 169). College graduates in the Japanese culture, thus, have similar educational experiences. The technical writer may draw globalized generalizations based on the educational experiences of a sample population of potential audience members. The Japanese, similar to Americans, take education—whether in the workplace or in the university—seriously. This accounts for the high literacy rate in Japan. However, the international technical communicator must be careful when drawing conclusions about educational experiences, as American colleges and universities may be much different than universities in international cultures.

## Linguistic Differences

Writing style and text orientation often pose challenges to international technical communicators. Writing style, as defined by Dan Jones in Technical Writing Style, is the writer's choices of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences, and how the writer connects these sentences. Style is the "tone" or attitude the writer takes toward a subject or audience (3). American technical writers and technical communicators select their writing style based on their audience. Writers select a style that is appropriate for the intended audience—whether it be an informal style or a formal style. Although there are different styles of writing in the United States, or styles that American writers consider appropriate for a select audience or reader, international cultures may use drastically different styles of writing. They will expect documents to be organized according to their expectations and preferences. Waka Fukuoka and Jan Spyridakis claim, "If readers encounter organizational structures that they do not expect or are unfamiliar with—structures for which they have weak or even no structural schemata—they may have trouble comprehending the text" (355). Fukuoka and Spyradakis' research suggests that Japanese readers prefer inductively organized text, texts that describe supporting ideas first and then end with a general statement resembling a thesis or conclusion statement (355). Americans, conversely, prefer text that is deductively organized, texts that move from general information to specific information. Thus, when translating a document for use in Japan, a native English speaking technical writer may want to organize information inductively (Fukuoka and Spyridakis 365).

According to Joan T. Dennett in "Not to Say is Better Than to Say," Japanese writers tend to be more concerned with evoking feelings or impressions in writing as opposed to explaining ideas that are clear and direct (116). Conversely, Americans tend to write business

prose that is concise, expressing the point early in the correspondence. Native English speakers tend to concern themselves with making a point or argument clearly and explicitly. When writing to an international audience, especially a Japanese or similar high-context audience, the international technical writer may have to alter his or her strategy in order to address the audience most effectively. In order to bridge language barriers in writing, technical communicators often use what is commonly referred to as “plain language.”

Plain language may take many definitions; however, Martin Cutts offers the most appropriate explanation for international communicators. Cutts defines “plain language” as the “writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a cooperative, motivated person a good chance of understanding the document at the first reading, and in the same sense that the writer meant it to be understood” (3). Plain language may provide a helpful tool to those communicators tasked with bridging cultural gulfs. With “plain language,” information is not necessarily “dumbed down,” as Beth Mazur notes (209). Plain language advocates the best interest of the reader or user. Documents that use plain language, Bill Clinton notes in his 1998 memo, use common, everyday words, except for necessary technical terms, “you” and other pronouns, active voice, and short sentences. The movement toward plain language documents may pose a viable option for those communicators who must write, design, and translate for international audiences.

Each international audience will have unique preferences, linguistically and visually. The international technical writer must also make complex design decisions when developing documentation to be used internationally. International cultures also have preferences for text and visual integration, types of visuals, color schemes, images, and drawings. The international

technical communicator should pay close attention to design and layout expectations when designing cross-culturally.

## **General Considerations when Designing Documents for the Japanese**

Designing documents for Japanese, high-context, audiences can be challenging. The international technical writer must take many variables into account before actually beginning the project. Visuals, integration of graphics and text, text directionality, physical environment, color, and translation all affect the document design strategies that the international technical writer chooses.

### **Visuals**

Applying visuals to documentation can be one of the most challenging aspects of cross-cultural document design. In the United States, visuals are traditionally used to complement textual explanation. Native English speaking technical writers use visuals to inform. In the United States, readers expect visuals that are tightly integrated with the text that surrounds them—readers expect that a visual explains further the message that they have just read. Across cultures, readers may not expect that visuals are used to inform or persuade. The Japanese, for example, tend to use visuals for their aesthetic appeal. Maitra and Goswami report that Japanese document design practices place a high value on aesthetics and ambiguity. They report that the purpose of Japanese document design was to present a company's image with a visually

attractive appeal so that the reader would form a good impression of the company (200).

Japanese designers use visuals that “make the document more beautiful” (Maitra and Goswami 200). American readers might consider these visuals ambiguous or deceiving, as the visual does not explain the textual information visually. American readers might also consider Japanese document design decisions confusing, as the Japanese do not use visuals as an orientation device or as visual cues. Cultural experiences and expectations often determine how readers perceive visuals in documents, as Christopher Miller explains (87). In order to address culture in technical documents, the communicator may need to choose a global or culture-focused approach to document design.

Charles Kostelnick, in “Cultural Adaptation and Information Design: Two Contrasting Views,” claims that “[v]isual language seems particularly well suited to bridge cultural gulfs—it is malleable and resilient, it is presumably accessible to anyone with the ability to see, and technology now empowers us to variegate and manipulate it” (182). Visual language might well provide a possible solution to document design issues in international documentation; however, the international technical writer may need to decide what approach to take toward the audience: global or culture focused. The global approach posits that visuals are universal and can be designed for a diverse range of audiences (cultures) by “activating the perceptual capabilities of the eye and brain,” Kostelnick writes in “Cultural Adaptation and Information Design: Two Contrasting Views” (183). A culture-focused approach holds that visual language is a social construct that is learned through experiences and varies across cultural groups. The culture-focused approach requires sensitivity to context, as in the context of the situation for which the communication is designed. Thus, the international technical writer may choose to globalize the visual language used in a document, in which case he or she might apply “flatman” images

similar to the ones Kostelnick offers in “Cultural Adaptation and Information Design: Two Contrasting Views” (184), or culture-focused visuals that might consider regional religious and educational experiences of the intended receiver. In a document intended for a Japanese audience, the international technical writer may decide to research the habits and expectations of people living in a particular region where the document will be used. Alternatively, he or she may realize that flat cartoon drawings may be suitable for that audience and publication.

### **Graphic and Text Integration**

Graphics may serve many purposes in documents. However, one of the main purposes that graphics serve in American documents is to help the reader visualize information, as Tufte explains in his The Visual Display of Quantitative Information. Visuals help readers better understand complex information, instructions, or tasks. Tufte, in Visual Explanations, explains that American technical writers explain a process by making verbs visible. To Americans, visuals help depict a four-dimensional story, one where words explain visuals that help explain what is taking place (Tufte 55). American readers expect text to explain graphics, and visa-versa; they expect a tightly integrated system of text and graphics. Wang Qiuye explains the use of graphics in technical documents. “Graphics repeat the information presented in the text and clarify what might be vague or too abstract to grasp. In other words, they complement verbal presentation of the content, making it more accessible to the reader” (Qiuye 555).

American readers have come to rely on visual cues in documentation. “Visual cueing structures and signals information through the use of typography and color, while page formatting organizes information through the systematic allocation of vertical and horizontal

white space,” William Gribbons writes in “Organization by Design: Some Implications for Structuring Information” (57). Such visual cues include arrows, icons, rules, colors, and underlines. Each of these design elements signals a hierarchy of information, important information, or navigation information. Often, these visual cues work together with text to help the reader navigate a document or access information in the document. Similarly, visuals such as photographs, charts, line drawings, and screen captures signal important information to the reader. Karen Schriver insists that “words and pictures work together” (361). American readers look for a relationship between an image and text on a page. Robert Horn explains this as the principle of proximity. “In a total stimulus situation, human beings have a tendency to group together those elements or units that are closest to each other, all other things being equal” (76). Thus, American readers will tend to associate images and text that are arranged in close proximity on the page. Therefore, an image that is situated near the text enhances the information contained in the text.

In document design intended for American readers, technical writers place a great deal of importance on visual and verbal cognates. When designing a document, arrangement and emphasis strategies pertain to the layout and organization of the visuals in the document. According to Kostelnick and Roberts, in Designing Visual Language, “Arrangement means order, the organization of visual elements so that readers can see their structure—how they cohere in groups, how they differ from one another, how they create layers and hierarchies” (14). A typical page layout might include two columns—the left column featuring graphics and the right column featuring text. The graphics in the left column complement the text in the right column by providing visual representations of the text. Each graphic, for example, complements

the text in proximity to it in the reader's visual field. The reader expects that each visual serves a purpose, and that each visual corresponds with the text within its proximity.

Japanese document design follows much different expectations than American document design. Although American technical writers generally accept the "tight" integration of visual and text as effective document design, cultures such as Japan use visuals to impress. The Japanese culture values ambiguity and Japanese designers do not feel it necessary to explain visuals with text. Therefore, Japanese graphics and text are not as tightly integrated as American graphics and text—Japanese graphics are not as well connected with the text. This "loose" integration of text and graphic is not a problem in their culture because of the fact that the Japanese value ambiguity. Much of the meaning of the message being communicated is held within the context of the situation with which it is being communicated.

The Japanese emphasize aesthetics in their documentation. According to Maitra and Goswami, most texts produced for a Japanese audience use an abundance of visuals, often without the usual visual cues like a caption or visual explanation. In many cases, visuals used are not even connected to the topic of the text (198). Japanese document designers prefer to use many visuals that support the artistic nature of the document, perhaps drawing from the culture's Buddhist heritage which, according to Reischauer, stressed art as a component of the religion (215).

The Japanese culture does not stress highly explicit documentation. The Japanese document designer's preference for aesthetically pleasing visuals over visuals that enhance the text reiterates the fact that Japanese communication habits are highly implicit—much of the message is in the context of the communication. Visuals are used to make documents appealing, as Maitra and Goswami report, not to represent visually the concepts in the text. The Japanese

integrate visuals and text loosely, compared to the more tightly integrated visuals and text used by document designers in the United States.

### **Text Directionality**

Text directionality can change depending on culture and language. Native English speaking Americans read text from left to right on a page, and from top to bottom by line. According to Nancy Hoft, in International Technical Communication, there are three possibilities for text directionality:

1. left to right
2. right to left
3. vertical columns

When creating a page design for a document or a screen design for a Web site, the international technical writer will need to create a design that is flexible. The design will have to have the ability to accommodate the directionality of the language.

English and technical Japanese, Hoft explains in “Writing and Designing for an International Audience,” reads left to right on the page.

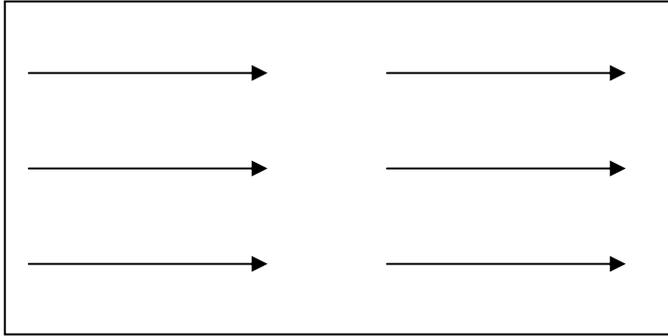


Figure 1 English and Technical Japanese Text Directionality

However, traditional Japanese reads from top to bottom.

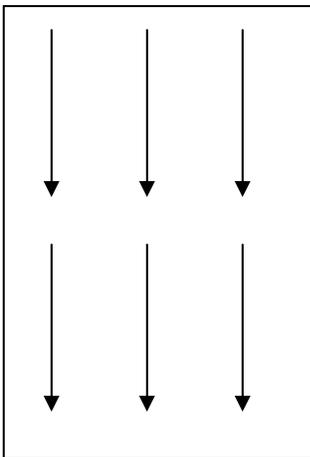


Figure 2 Traditional Japanese Text Directionality

Before translation, the international technical writer will need to address the text directionality of the language. Text directionality can greatly affect the placement of graphics in the document, as a change in directionality will certainly change the placement of a graphic on the page.

## Translation

According to Nancy Hoft in “Writing and Designing for an International Audience,” “Translation is the process of adapting concepts in the source language into equivalent concepts in one or more target languages.” When designing a document cross-culturally, text sizes and shapes will inevitably change upon translation. Text translated from English often expands. “Effective graphic design is the effective management of space. Text translated from English frequently occupies more space—that is, it expands” (Locke 6). With a change in text size, visuals will also shift within the document. When visuals and text shift upon translation, it can often create many challenges for the international technical writer. The English version of the document design will not offer the same layout options as a document translated into Japanese. The expanded Japanese character will cause a major shift in text and visual upon translation. When expansion takes place, one-line headings become two-line headings, paragraphs move down the page pushing important headings further down the page, callouts shift from their intended images, columns cannot contain larger character sizes, and tables and charts lose their captions. Each language, as Locke explains, unique in its capacity to expand, “requires a different ‘fix’” (6).

The international technical writer must also consider translation quality. The translated document must convey the same message as the original, but it must convey the information in a style, layout, and design that is appropriate for the intended audience. The translated document must, according to Leo Lentz and Jacqueline Hulst, be “as accurate as possible” (313). A translated document does not serve one purpose. A translated document has a dual status. It is related to the original source text, yet it has to function as an independent text for a new audience in the target culture (Lentz and Hulst 314).

The international technical writer and translator must work together to create a quality document. Similar to the role of a cultural editor, the translator writes and rewrites the document with the intended audience in mind—the audience that will read the document after translation. It is critical that the writer make clear to the translator the aspects of good translation (Lentz and Hulst 320). The translator must take these aspects into account as he or she revises the document. Kirk St. Amant, in “Expanding Translation Use to Improve the Quality of Technical Communication,” poses that technical communicators who are monolingual English speakers could increasingly find themselves at an “informational disadvantage” because they can only access certain information (information that is in English) while many of their international counterparts might have access to not only the readily available English-language information, but to information in their native language as well (324). The role of translator is becoming increasingly complex. The international technical writer must now write with translation in mind, also considering how and where the user will access the document.

### **Physical Environment**

A reader’s physical environment may also dictate how the international technical writer approaches an audience. Emily Thrush, in “Plain English? A Study of Plain English Vocabulary and International Audiences,” tells a story of a non-native English speaking flight crew flying in zero visibility who crashed an airliner shortly after take-off. According to Thrush, the voice on the airliner’s warning system issues the message “pull-up,” when the official term in “control tower speak” is “climb.” The international technical will need to do considerable research in order to design the most effective document for use in an international setting. Visuals and

language effective in user documentation may be confusing, as shown in the airline accident here, to international audiences. A document translated for a crew of international pilots should avoid potentially confusing phrases or visuals intended for an American high-context audience. When audience members have limited time to react, the international technical communicator must use visuals and language that the user will understand quickly and with minimal effort. In such situations, it is critical that audience members be able to respond in a limited amount of time. The physical environment of the international reader can severely limit his or her understanding or interpretation of the communication.

### **Color**

Similar to the way Americans associate the colors red, white, and blue with pride and American tradition, and the color white with purity, international cultures associate various colors with elements of their own society. Color has the ability to signify, as Roland Barthes posits. The red tomato, the green pepper, and the tri color print of an ad (yellow, red, green) signifies the ad's significance—Italy, or rather “Italianicity”—a sign in “a relation of redundancy with the connoted sign of the linguistic message” based on a knowledge of certain stereotypes (23). The sign described above in Barthes' example may only be visible to those who understand a certain culture. Nevertheless, when designing for a specific culture, the international technical writer must take into account the significance of such signs. Color has the ability to impress feelings on readers; it can impress or depress a reader who understands its cultural undertones.

Readers across cultures interpret colors differently. Cultural experiences, expectations, and preferences all come into account when designing color schemes for use internationally.

Rudolf Arnheim advises that

[t]here is considerable evidence to indicate that the graspability of shapes and colors varies, depending on the species, the cultural group, the amount of training of the observer. What is rational for one group, will be irrational for another, i.e., it cannot be grasped, understood, compared, or remembered. There are differences in this respect between different species of animals, between [hu]man and animal, and between various kinds of people. (31)

Cultures see and apply colors differently. Similar to the way that one culture may not grasp the significance of a color or shape, another culture may find a color sacred or even offensive. One culture will not treat color exactly the same as another culture. Arnheim, here, poses a valid point to the international technical writer: Understand cultural interpretations of color before designing a document using a particular color scheme. Use colors that will evoke positive responses in the audience. Without a great deal of research into cultural perspectives on color and shape, the international technical writer risks alienating readers, thus rendering communication attempts unsuccessful.

The Japanese culture poses specific challenges when it comes to color. Many colors commonly used in celebration in the United States are inappropriate for similar occasions in Japan. Thus, the international technical writer must consider cultural expectations before selecting a color scheme or palette for a document. In order to avoid embarrassing cultural mistakes when it comes to color, the technical writer can observe similar documents written for a

Japanese audience to see what kinds of colors have worked in the past, interview potential audience members, and interview successful designers.

When considering a color palette for a Japanese audience, the international technical writer should not make assumptions. Each color should be selected carefully. Colors in the United States do not necessarily have the same connotations as they have in Japan. The Japanese

- wear white at funerals
- hang black and white striped banners on the wall for funerals
- hang red and white striped banners at weddings
- consider red, gold, silver, and colored flowers inappropriate for sympathy cards
- use red to write the name of the deceased at funerals
- use red to signify the death of a relationship (Lipton 122).

In order to be optimally effective, the international technical writer must pay close attention to the target culture's perception of color and document design. Colors and visuals used in documents must not stereotype. Regardless of the culture, visuals carry tremendous weight in the documents that technical writers produce. "Because pictures often affect a viewer emotionally more than words do," Paul Martin Lester writes, "pictorial stereotypes often become misinformed perceptions that have the weight of established facts" (78). When designing documents for international audiences, the technical writer must be careful not to stereotype a culture. Certain images in Japan can stereotype the culture—kimonos, dragons, chopsticks—and should be used with tact.

## Edward T. Hall's Significance to International Technical Communication

Edward T. Hall offers a significant model for cultural communication. In his cultural continuum, Hall distinguishes among cultures based on context. Hall's model for cultural communication, or "cultural continuum," "offers technical communicators a way of assessing the amount and kind of detail they should include in an information product for maximum effectiveness," Hoft asserts in International Technical Communication (79). Hall pairs two right triangles to form his cultural continuum—the top triangle is on context, the bottom has little context.

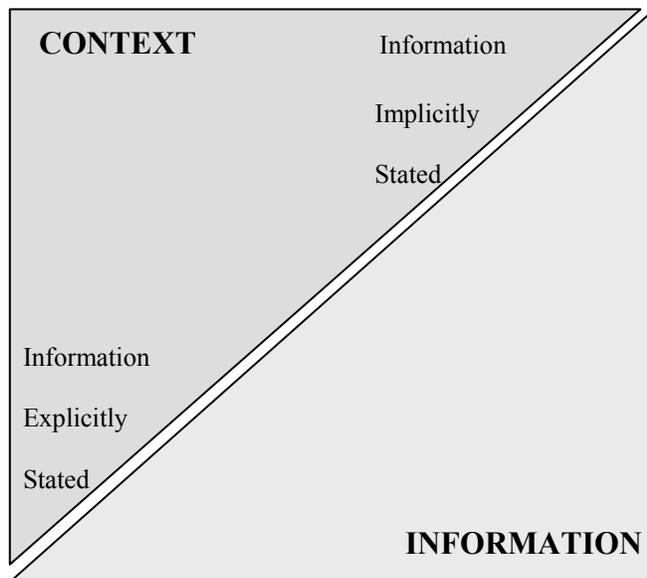


Figure 3 Hall's Cultural Continuum

According to Hall in The Dance of Life, "It appears that all cultures arrange their members and relationships along the context scale, and one of the great communication strategies, whether addressing a single person or an entire group, is to ascertain the correct level of contexting one's

communication” (61). In short, if the international technical writer over explains information in a document, the reader may consider the approach insulting. Audience members may feel that the language is below them, that the writer is talking down to them. Conversely, if the document is too vague, or does not provide an appropriate level of detail, the document will confuse the audience.

Americans are considered a low-context culture, while the Japanese culture is considered high-context on Hall’s cultural continuum. This difference in context presents communication challenges when the native English speaking technical writer attempts to create communication for a Japanese audience. Americans tend to use examples and detail in technical documents, while the Japanese, because of their high-context tradition, do not get to the point quickly. Americans consider Japanese communication efforts ambiguous because of the culture’s high-context nature.

### **High-context Culture**

High-context cultures such as Japan consist of members with similar educational and familial experiences. Members of high-context cultures also share similar religious backgrounds; they share similar religious traditions. Because members of high-context cultures share similar experiences, they do not find it necessary to provide a great deal of background information or explanation. High-context communication styles “feature preprogrammed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted message,” Hall explains in Beyond Culture (101).

In high-context cultures, the purpose of communication is to promote relationships and harmony among “the group.” Communication efforts often enhance the communicator’s sense of “face” to the receiver. The Japanese will do little that jeopardizes their honor, patience, or integrity, qualities that the Japanese culture values. The Japanese, in their communication, provide a rich context and setting for their message; however, the point of the message is left for the receiver to understand on his or her own. The Japanese assume that because of the high-context nature of their culture, the receiver will implicitly understand the point of the message. The Japanese culture fosters tight-knit relationships, as members of the culture share the same values and trends, in their family and business lives.

The Japanese conform to “group” mentality in many ways. They conform not only in respect to language and communication but also in dress and attitude. David Mura notes in his memoir Turning Japanese that there “is no average Japanese” (232), alluding to the fact that males in Japan are expected to conform to group expectations, expectations that support the whole. Mura recalls social events where Japanese males dressed in similar dark suits, each with drinks in their hand (101). Whereas males in the United States strive for diversity and independence, males in the Japanese high-context culture strive for conformity. “Where Westerners may at least put on a show of independence and individuality,” Edwin Reischauer explains, “most Japanese will be quite content to conform in dress, conduct, style of life, and even thought to the norms of their group” (127).

High-context cultures present communication challenges to Americans. The Japanese culture, as well as high-context cultures in general, require years of research to fully understand.

## **Low-context Culture**

Low-context cultures such as the United States contain populations with a diverse range of experiences. Members of a low-context culture may not share similar spiritual, educational, or familial experiences. Because members of low-context cultures rarely share the same experiences or views, they feel more obligated to provide explanations. Often, members of low-context cultures, such as America, begin their communication efforts with a general statement and work to more specific information. The point of the communication is often in the spoken or written word itself, not necessarily in the context of the situation. In low-context communication, “Most of the information must be in the transmitted message in order to make up for what is missing in the context (both internal and external),” Hall writes in Beyond Culture (101).

In low-context cultures, the purpose of communication is to make a point, to persuade the receiver to understand the message. The communicator puts thoughts into words that the reader or receiver can understand. Many times, the diverse nature of the American, or low-context, culture prompts the communicator to explain in great detail. Native English speaking communicators communicate as clearly and logically as possible. Low-context communication expectations rarely allow for ambiguity, unless communicating to a close friend or family member.

Americans pride themselves on diversity and independence. Rarely do children live in the American household past the age of 18. It is typical for an 18-year old to move out of the house and attend a college in another state. Ties to the family and “group” are not as strong as those in the Japanese, high-context, culture. This emphasis on diversity and independence creates a culture where people grow up differently; members have drastically different life

experiences and are held to different life expectations. There is little emphasis put on group orientation.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW IN INTERNATIONAL TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, DOCUMENT DESIGN, AND CULTURE**

I have reviewed numerous sources of related literature in the areas of international technical communication, visual rhetoric, and culture. In this literature review I will first review significant sources in international technical communication. Second, I will address relevant theories in culture and their effects on communication. Third, I will review literature in international visual language and document design. Finally, I will show where current research falls short when addressing culture's influence on the technical writer's visual rhetoric.

As the world becomes more globalized, as the world becomes more integrated, the United States will increasingly conduct business with other countries. Each country has unique people, preferences, and expectations for communication. Thus, understanding effective international technical communication has become increasingly important. Emily Thrush, in "Bridging the Gaps: Technical Communication in an International and Multicultural Society," cites two major changes in business and industry within the United States that make it imperative that we become aware of cultural differences in reading and writing: (1) an increase in international business and (2) an increase in foreign investors in the United States (272).

In order to conduct international business, businesspeople and communicators alike must possess a strong understanding of what international technical communication actually is. Nancy Hoft writes in International Technical Communication, "International technical communication is the development of information that can be exported to any country in the world. International

technical communication can be used by any audience that is culturally, linguistically, and technologically variant from the audience in the source country” (1).

In order to communicate with other cultures and conduct business effectively, American businesspeople must understand the cultural differences of potential international business partners. According to Thrush in “Bridging the Gaps: Technical Communication in an International and Multicultural Society,”

Research in anthropology, cognitive psychology, linguistics, and writing theory has identified several factors that vary within languages and cultures and affect the way readers read and interpret texts. These factors include world experience, the amount of common knowledge shared within cultures, the hierarchal structure of society and workplace, culturally specific rhetorical strategies, and cultural differences in processing graphics. (274)

There are many definitions of culture. Edward T. Hall in The Silent Language defines culture for anthropologists as “the way of life of a people, for the sums of their learned behavior patterns, attitudes, and material things” (20). Culture, defined briefly by Nancy Hoft in “Global Issues, Local Concerns” as “the way we do things around here” and “how people think, feel, and act” (145), is a critical consideration when doing business across national boundaries, especially for the technical communicator. Nancy Hoft tells us that “[c]ulture is exactly what makes international technical communication complex” (145). Understanding cultural differences can be especially challenging when the American technical communicator attempts to communicate to a high-context culture, such as Japan.

Cultural differences fluctuate depending on the country the technical communicator is addressing. Edward T. Hall bases culture on a continuum from high to low context. In a high-

context culture, people tend not only to have the same knowledge of the world but also to share the same attitudes and values. “[High-context] people are apt to become impatient and irritated when [low-context] people insist on giving them information they don’t need. Conversely, low-context people are at a loss when high-context people do not provide *enough* information,” Hall and Hall write (11). The Japanese, people who have extensive information networks among family, friends, colleagues, and clients, and who are involved in close personal relationships, are high-context (Hall and Hall 8). The Japanese high-context culture may present special challenges to the American technical communicator.

The Japanese, a high-context culture, emphasize the group at the expense of the individual, Reischauer explains (127). Reischauer explains that in order

[t]o operate their group system successfully, the Japanese have found it advisable to avoid open confrontations. Varying positions are not sharply outlined and their differences analyzed and clarified. Instead each participant in a discussion feels his way cautiously, only unfolding his own views as he sees how others react to them. Much is suggested by indirection or vague implication. (135).

The Japanese prefer groups; they prefer the harmony that group orientation allows. This is a major aspect of their high-context culture. The Japanese rarely risk losing “face” in the group. Steiner and Haas show that many Japanese designs used for advertisements and marketing, for example, are conservative and reflect the well-being of the group, not the individual company.

The Japanese, according to David Mura, tend to keep personal feelings and thoughts in abeyance and let only certain carefully chosen personal insights be known to the group (137). The concept of “face” is significant in the Japanese high-context culture. Citizens in this high-context culture thus produce communication that is ambiguous. Members of high-context cultures such as Japan

produce communication that is implicitly stated, while members of low-context cultures such as the United States produce communication that is explicitly stated. Kohl et al. write, “The ambiguity of the Japanese language arises partly from a cultural preference for indirectness and partly from the fact that Japanese is typically a ‘situation-focused’ language, in which subjects and even objects of sentences are often omitted” (64). Japanese high-context communication habits are much in opposition to American low-context communication habits. Much different from Japanese implicit communication, American audiences prefer communication that is explicit. American readers need examples and visuals that complement the surrounding text. Americans prefer communication that is direct and concise. Blake and Bly in their The Elements of Technical Writing explain that technical writing should be short and simple, and that obscurity has no place in technical writing (9). The obscure and ambiguous language of high-context cultures presents a major challenge to American technical writers. The high-context nature of Japanese communication can be confusing for technical writers, and for Japanese readers who must attempt to understand the communication the American technical writer develops. The technical writer may have many options when developing written communication for a Japanese high-context audience, one being “plain language.”

Technical writers have explored plain language as a way to clarify writing. Emily Thrush, in “Plain English? A Study of Plain English Vocabulary and International Audiences” explains that international audiences may find phrasal verbs such as “pull up” confusing because they are idiomatic—their meaning cannot be derived by understanding the individual words. Beth Mazur notes the international appeal of the plain language movement, as proponents of plain language claim that its clear, straightforward expressions are more accessible and understandable for American and international readers. Technical writers often look toward plain language as a

possible solution for international communication. However, the technical writer must learn not only to apply language that is concise. The technical writer must understand the implications of communicating to a high-context culture. Edward T. Hall provides insight that is integral to understanding high-context cultures such as Japan.

Hall's theories on culture and communication challenge the technical writer to develop information products that address a high-context audience's needs. According to Hoft, in "Global Issues, Local Concerns," adapting to cultural differences forces us to "reconsider how we communicate and what we communicate" (145). Technical writers must also reconsider how culture and an international audience affect their visual rhetoric. Cultural understanding is considered critical to effective international technical communication (and visual rhetoric) because it fluctuates with each country.

Before discussing the literature reviewed in visual rhetoric and cultural influences, it is necessary to first understand document design and visual rhetoric used in American documents. Felker et al. provide insightful guidelines for document designers. In their guidelines, they explain how visuals such as illustrations, photographs, line drawings, and diagrams are to be incorporated into American documents. Felker et al. claim that in order to use visuals such as illustrations or photographs, the technical writer must have a reason. If the technical writer thinks the illustration will help explain the points in the document, or will help the reader remember a certain topic, the technical writer should apply the appropriate visual (91). In each guideline that Felker et al. present, they claim that the visual, whether photograph, illustration, or diagram, must help to explain the text. The visual must serve a purpose in the document. Photographs, as Felker et al. explain, have a high degree of realism, and they best support text when the technical writer wants to demonstrate the visual reality of the topic being

written about (91). Felker et al. explain the importance of tight text and visual integration in low-context American technical documents.

Kostelnick and Roberts in Designing Visual Language pose a taxonomy for visual vocabulary for document designers. This literature review and research will focus on the extra-level and supra-level design elements presented in Kostelnick and Roberts' taxonomy.

Kostelnick and Roberts define extra-level design elements as pictures, data displays, icons, and symbols. "These elements operate outside the main text (if there is one) as autonomous entities with their own visual vocabulary and conventional forms" (92). As Kostelnick and Roberts explain, text, in extra-level design, plays a supporting role to the visual elements. Kostelnick and Roberts break down extra-level design into three areas: textual, spatial, and graphic. The supra-level involves top-down elements that visually define, structure, and unify the entire document (Kostelnick and Roberts 95). Supra-level design is also separated into the textual, spatial, and graphical areas. Both Felker et al.'s guidelines and Kostelnick and Roberts' taxonomy work as a foundation for analyzing text and visual integration, visuals in technical documentation, and visual rhetorical conventions presented in documentation.

There are many design principles that the American document designer must consider when developing visuals for a document. Robin Williams, in The Non-Designer's Design Book emphasizes the elements of effective visuals in terms of contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity. She makes the claim that these four principles combine to produce effective design elements in American documentation. Aside from the elements American document designers consider effective, it is also necessary to note the impact visual elements have on audience members.

Paul Martin Lester, in Visual Communication: Images with Messages, claims that visual messages are a powerful form of communication because they stimulate both intellectual and emotional responses—they make us think as well as feel. Lester further explains that images can be used to persuade and to perpetuate ideas that words alone cannot (57). Images do in fact carry messages to the viewer or reader, and they also evoke emotion, as Donald Norman has found. Norman explains that “attractiveness produces positive emotions” (60), as he explains the emotional design of everyday items. The attractiveness and appeal of designs can persuade an audience to think a certain way, perform a certain task, or even purchase a product, as is the case in automobile manufacturing documentation. However, what attracts the American eye and satisfies the American mind may be altogether different from those visual rhetorical devices effective in high-context cultures like Japan.

Visual rhetoric has become increasingly important in documents intended for an international audience. Hoft, in International Technical Communication, tells us that international technical communication bridges cultural differences, relying heavily on visual communication (1). A visual element’s effectiveness depends heavily upon the culture in which it is used. A visual element’s effectiveness may also depend on the situation, as Michael Evamy writes in World Without Words. Visual elements bring with them different meanings and associations. However, Michael Evamy raises the point that

[s]ymbols used in specialized branches of engineering and science – usually developed by a process of international technical consultation – are apparently the only kind that have avoided cultural associations and remained ‘neutral.’ Those used in circuit diagrams, for example, transcend all boundaries and are genuinely ‘universal.’ (17)

Although Evamy provides an example of “universal” visual language, the technical writer cannot assume that all visual language will be acceptable for an international audience, especially that of a high-context culture.

Kostelnick, in “Cultural Adaptation and Information Design: Two Contrasting Views,” claims that “although cultural issues in professional communication have recently received increasing attention, and practice has become more international, the role of visual language in these developments remains largely undefined” (182). Kostelnick describes global and culture-focused approaches to designing visuals for international audiences. These two approaches may be paralleled with Hoft’s concepts of globalization and localization, in terms of designing visuals appropriate for a particular culture and audience. The global approach, as Kostelnick describes it, is characterized by attempts to invent an objective, universal visual language or to define such a language through perceptual principles and empirical research. The culture-focused perspective, however, is founded on the principle that visual communication is intimately bound to cultural experience and hence can function only within a given cultural context, to which designers must be sensitive, Kostelnick explains. The technical writer communicating to an international audience faces many design challenges. Ronnie Lipton suggests that American document designers attempting to cross cultural boundaries should base their design on insights into the audience. Then imbue these designs with subtle visual cultural cues (9). Effective design across cultures requires that the document designer adhere to cultural expectations.

The Japanese have preferences for document design, layout, and text and visual integration. These preferences are challenging for the American technical writer to understand because they are often deeply rooted in Japanese design theory and cultural experiences. Japanese design theory is minimally explored (nonexistent) by researchers as a way of

understanding high-context document design and visual language. By researching traditional Japanese design theories such as wabi sabi, American technical writers may better understand the Japanese document designer's visual rhetoric. Japanese design theories such as wabi sabi are ambiguous to the American reader, though, and difficult to interpret much like the high-context culture itself.

In Japanese design, viewers are expected to achieve immediate and ultimate understanding of the artist's intent and purpose (Tierney 50). Thus, even Japanese design is high in context. Much can be understood about Japanese aesthetics and design by observing the Japanese tea party. According to Tierney, the Japanese tea party, one of the most sacred of Japanese events, emphasizes aesthetics and group-orientation. The Japanese tea party is a somber and sacred event, one that is held in high regard in the Japanese culture. The tea party often centers around the garden, which represents a "pure place" symbolic of a pure and undefiled space where one attains composure of the mind (Tierney 67). Much of Japanese design, whether discussing works of art or interior design, is described as "sober." To the Japanese, purity and honesty are vital, as within any Japanese design the "eye is naturally drawn to a feeling of sincerity," Juniper claims (119). This is the apparent sobriety of Japanese design as described in terms of wabi sabi by Tierney and Juniper. Also helping to describe Japanese design is the wabi sabi concept of "space." Juniper explains, "Space and the discipline required to maintain it is a key aspect of the Japanese aesthetic ideals, and when considering wabi sabi designs, the provision of adequate space is an important element that adds so much more than 'nothingness'" (116). Japanese document design is often considered loosely integrated. Japanese document designers, because of the high-context nature of the culture, do not feel the

need to tightly integrate text and visual. Much in Japanese document design is implied and ambiguous. Visuals are not explained through text.

Research has shown that the Japanese, a high-context culture, prefer ambiguity in their communication as opposed to directness. Maitra and Goswami, in their research, claim that the “Japanese document design process models typically emphasize two main points: aesthetics [and] ambiguity” (198). Conversely, American audiences, typical of members of low-context cultures, prefer tightly integrated visuals and text. Cultural differences, as shown here, cause international audience members to have differing expectations for the documents they read. Differing expectations provide design challenges to the international technical writer designing for a high-context culture.

Several researchers address the need for further exploration into culture’s influence on the technical writer’s visual rhetoric. Maitra and Goswami’s research shows that there is a “need to rethink the criteria for evaluating cross-cultural documents to focus on both the verbal and the visual elements of a text” (197). Further, Waka Fukuoka et al. assert that “previous research still does not tell us what combination of text and illustrations users prefer on first impression or believe to be most effective with step-by-step instructions, nor does the research compare the views of Japanese and American users on this topic” (169). I plan to help fill this gap in the current research by integrating Hall’s theories on culture and context with current research on visual rhetoric.

The technical communication field needs more concrete assessment of what high-context documentation does for its readers. We need more than a definition of “high-context” culture; we need an analysis of high-context culture’s influence on the technical writer. Technical communicators need to understand how to address the needs of high-context users. My research

will fill this gap in technical communication (and international technical communication) research. It will pull together theories on culture and design using prior research and theories to help, as Emily Thrush says, “bridge the culture gap.”

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

In order to most effectively analyze the different strategies for document design in high-context versus low-context cultures, I collected documentation from two cultures, from the United States and from Japan. Together, these two cultures represent both a low-context culture, the U.S., and a high-context culture, Japan. Kohl et al. assert that the “Japanese culture is perhaps as different from that of the U.S. as the culture of any other developed nation; hence, it has the potential to provide us with instructive contrasts and insights into the influence of language and culture on communication practices” (63). The two cultures, represented on opposite ends of Hall’s continuum, provide the foundation for a cross-cultural analysis of the technical writer’s rhetorical design strategies in documentation.

### **Significance of Studying Design in Japan and the United States**

America has a strong business relationship with Japan, especially in the automotive and technical industries. Considerable research has been done on the linguistic and interpersonal differences among cultures; however, there exists little research that addresses document design decisions among cultures. American technical writers who aspire to communicate internationally will be expected to understand more about rhetorical strategies across cultures. “As technical documents increasingly become actual sales tools used to convince prospective international clients of the effectiveness of related technical and scientific products, the emphasis on using the ‘correct’ rhetorical patterns with a given cultural audience increase greatly,” St.

Amant writes in “When Culture and Rhetoric Contrast” (298). Many of the materials technical writers produce for international markets may be used as marketing devices to sell a product. As America becomes even more involved in international trade and business, St. Amant reveals in “When Culture and Rhetoric Contrast,” technical writers should “familiarize themselves with some of the key areas related to intercultural rhetorical preferences, especially if these preferences are antithetical to many of the ‘standard’ techniques that English-speaking (in particular American) communicators are taught or advised to use” (298).

Although researchers such as Laura Gurak advocate consistency in visual information and advocate a standard set of icons for designing hierarchies in documentation, the reality is that currently Americans know little about the way that visuals are used internationally. Michael Evamy posits that symbols used in specialized branches of engineering science—usually developed by a process of international technical consultation—are the only kind that have avoided cultural associations and remain ‘neutral’ (17). Assuming that American technical writers know so little about the ways that culture affects the use of visuals and visual rhetoric, and what visuals have the ability to bridge cultural boundaries, more research is certainly warranted in the area.

Japan is a high-context culture, much different than the United States. In this high-context culture, members feel that the meaning behind their messages should be understood implicitly by the receiver. Because Americans perceive Japanese communication habits as ambiguous, technical writers often spend months analyzing the culture and designing a communication strategy that will successfully meet the needs of that culture. The high-context nature of the Japanese culture, keeping in mind that much of the message of the communication is in the context of the larger situation, does not obligate Japanese document designers to use

tightly integrated visuals and text, like American readers are accustomed to. Conversely, successful Japanese visual and text integration is loose—visuals do not necessarily complement the text around them. It is anticipated that the Japanese and American documents will be designed much differently, with different goals in mind. Because there are drastic differences in the design strategies of American and Japanese document designers, this study helps to address the differences in visual rhetoric applied in both cultures. These differences will be represented in greater detail through document design analysis research charts.

Edward T. Hall's research into culture and context will provide the basis for this study. Hall offers several significant anthropological works that provide a foundation for further research in international technical communication. Further, the findings will be compared to the document design strategies of previous technical writing and design researchers.

Kostelnick and Roberts, in their Designing Visual Language, and Felker et al., in their Guidelines for Document Design, help to establish a grid for document design. Each document—from both high- and low-context cultures—will be analyzed against this grid. The completed document design grid allow for visual representation of document design decisions in both cultures. Future international technical communicators may use this grid when designing visual language across cultures, whether high-context or low-context. Also, this grid may help document designers more effectively use their time and allot their budget. Warren warns that budget and time constraints often force technical communicators to produce manuals that are less than affective. Technical writers, according to Warren, rarely evaluate the culture of the user (111). The lack of audience and cultural analyses poses potential issues in a global economy.

The research presented in document design and cultural influences offered in this thesis will help save the international technical writer time and money. Developing a set of document

design analysis grids will also serve as a way for technical writers to consistently analyze their design decisions and the cultural expectations they will have to address.

The following paragraphs present an explanation for each section of the document design analysis grid followed by the document design grid that will be used for analyzing each document.

## **American Document Design Expectations**

Technical writers and document designers can assess a document by looking at its visual vocabulary. The levels of design—ranging from local design decisions that affect a paragraph contained within the document to global design decisions about the page orientation of the document—can serve as a method of examining the visual rhetoric used in the document. Theories of Kostelnick and Roberts' taxonomy for visual vocabulary have been adapted from Designing Visual Language for use in performing this research.

There are four levels represented in Kostelnick and Roberts' taxonomy for visual design: intra, inter, extra, and supra. The first two levels are the intra- and inter-levels. The intra-level pertains to text design—bolded, italic, underlined font, typeface, and type size—linear components. The inter-level pertains to fields and nonlinear components that help readers comprehend the text, such as bullets or shading. Inter-level design elements make documents accessible to readers—they provide navigational cues for the reader. Also, inter-level design elements help the reader read selectively. Extra-level design elements include pictures, icons, and symbols contained within the document. Supra-level design elements affect the document as

a whole. American technical writers and document designers, although possibly unaware of the actual terminology presented in Kostelnick and Roberts' taxonomy for visual language, have come to accept these design concepts, and this taxonomy is visible in the professional documents produced in the United States.

Kostelnick and Roberts' taxonomy for visual vocabulary is explained in greater detail in Table 1.

Table 1

Kostelnick and Roberts' Taxonomy for Visual Vocabulary and Felker et al.'s Guidelines for Document Design

<i>Extra-Level Design: Textual</i>	Addresses labels, call-outs, and captions for pictures and data displays; numerical labels on x- and y-axes of data displays; legends for data displays (Kostelnick and Roberts 86)
<i>Extra-Level Design: Spatial</i>	Addresses data displays: size of plot frame (x- and y- axes), orientation of plot frame (vertical or horizontal); space between bars, lines  pictures: size, viewing, angle, perspective (Kostelnick and Roberts 86)
<i>Extra-Level Design: Graphic</i>	Line weights or shading on pictures or on data displays (bars or lines on graphs, gridlines, tick marks)  details on pictures—line drawing vs. photograph  use of color for pictures or data displays (Kostelnick and Roberts 86)

<p><i>Supra-Level Design: Textual</i></p>	<p>Page headers or footers</p> <p>navigational bars</p> <p>major section or chapter headings or numbers</p> <p>tab labels—internal and external to the page</p> <p>title on the cover or the spine of the document</p> <p>initial letters signaling the start of an article or major text segment (Kostelnick and Roberts 86)</p>
<p><i>Supra-Level Design: Spatial</i></p>	<p>Shape, thickness, and size of the page (8.5 x 11, legal size, scrollable length of the screen)</p> <p>orientation of the field (portrait vs. landscape)</p> <p>section dividers</p> <p>embossing</p> <p>placement of data displays and pictures (Kostelnick and Roberts 86)</p>
<p><i>Supra-Level Design: Graphic</i></p>	<p>Color or texture of paper page borders</p> <p>boxes, lines, or gray scales around pictures or data displays</p> <p>Pictures or icons placed behind the text or spread over the whole document for cohesion</p> <p>Lines in page headers or footers (Kostelnick and Roberts 86)</p>
<p><i>Explanation and Illustration</i></p>	<p>“You must have a reason to use an illustration. If you think the illustration will help explain the points you are writing</p>

	about in the document, or will help the reader to remember a certain topic, or will help the reader keep interest, then you should consider using appropriate illustration” (Felker et al. 91).
<i>Photographs</i>	“You can use photographs when you want to sustain the reader’s interest and motivation in a document, or when you want to show the reader what something ‘looks like.’ Photographs have a high degree of realism, and they best support text when you want to demonstrate the visual reality of the topic being written about” (Felker et al. 91).
<i>Line Drawings</i>	“Line drawings are less realistic than photographs but in many circumstances they are more effective than photographs. You should consider line drawings when you want to explain and emphasize only certain features of a complex topic and not other features. Good line drawings will instruct your readers by showing rather than by telling, they will enhance what you’ve written in the text, and they will save you writing many words” (Felker et al. 91).
<i>Diagrams</i>	“You can use diagrams effectively when you want to explain a complex organization or a detailed procedure consisting of many steps” (Felker et al. 91).
<i>Qualifications</i>	Use illustrations with text in a document only if they visually support written content, if they have a clear purpose in the text (i.e. help readers understand, help readers remember, motivate) (Felker et al. 91).

## The Document Design Grid

For the purposes of this research study and thesis, Kostelnick and Roberts' taxonomy for visual vocabulary was adapted to fit in a document design grid, which was used to analyze each American- and Japanese-produced document. This study, because it is concerned with document design decisions, analyzes extra-level and supra-level design elements (top, horizontal) against Felker et al.'s guidelines for document design (left, vertical). Combined, these theories establish what native English speaking designers consider the elements of effective document design.

Table 2

Document Design Grid

	Extra-level Design: Textual	Extra-Level Design: Spatial	Extra-Level Design: Graphical	Supra- Level Design: Textual	Supra- Level Design: Spatial	Supra- Level Design: Graphic
Explanation/ Illustration						
Photos						
Line Drawings						
Diagrams						
Qualifications						

## **Documents Analyzed**

The design elements in both high- and low-context documents were analyzed. In order to provide the richest analysis, only a representative sampling of documents is discussed in this research. Each booklet designed for a Japanese audience is equivalent to a booklet designed for an American audience. The documents were selected from the automobile manufacturing industry because of the rich detail, vivid images, quality production, and similar rationales for producing the documents for both American and Japanese audiences—both Americans and Japanese want to persuade their readers to buy their cars. The documents range in length from 14-66 pages, providing necessary diversity among the representative sample for a comprehensive analysis. For this study, Honda Motor Company Worldwide was kind enough to send documents intended for Japanese readers. Each document used for the analysis is described in Tables 3 - 10.

### Japanese (high-context) Documents

Table 3

Japanese Honda Inspire

<b>Category (vehicle)</b>	<b>Description</b>
Type of car	Sedan
American equivalent	Honda Accord
<b>Document Features</b>	<b>Description</b>
Full-color	Yes
Page arrangement	Landscape
Production	Glossy paper
Foldout pages	Yes
Number of pages	40

Table 4

Japanese Honda Legend

<b>Category (vehicle)</b>	<b>Description</b>
Type of car	Sedan
American equivalent	Honda RL
<b>Document Features</b>	<b>Description</b>
Full-color	Yes
Page arrangement	Portrait
Production	Glossy
Foldout pages	No
Number of pages	66

Table 5

Japanese Honda MDX

<b>Category (vehicle)</b>	<b>Description</b>
Type of car	SUV
American equivalent	Acura MDX
<b>Document Features</b>	<b>Description</b>
Full-color	Yes
Page arrangement	Landscape
Production	Glossy
Foldout pages	No
Number of pages	46

Table 6

Japanese Honda Element

<b>Category (vehicle)</b>	<b>Description</b>
Type of car	SUV
American equivalent	Element (same as Japan)
<b>Document Features</b>	<b>Description</b>
Full-color	Yes
Page arrangement	Landscape
Production	Glossy
Foldout pages	Yes
Number of pages	14

## American (low-context) Documents

Table 7

American Honda Pilot

<b>Category (vehicle)</b>	<b>Description</b>
Type of car	SUV
Japanese Equivalent	Honda Pilot
<b>Document Features</b>	<b>Description</b>
Full-color	Yes
Page arrangement	Portrait
Production	glossy
Foldout pages	Yes
Number of pages	27

Table 8

American Honda Accord Coupe

<b>Category (vehicle)</b>	<b>Description</b>
Type of car	Coupe / sedan
Japanese equivalent	Honda Inspire
<b>Document Features</b>	<b>Description</b>
Full-color	Yes
Page arrangement	Portrait
Production	Glossy
Foldout pages	No
Number of pages	25

Table 9

American Acura MDX

<b>Category (vehicle)</b>	<b>Description</b>
Type of car	SUV
Japanese equivalent	Honda MDX
<b>Document Features</b>	<b>Description</b>
Full-color	Yes
Page arrangement	Portrait
Production	Coarse textured covers, glossy pages
Foldout pages	No
Number of pages	31

Table 10

American Acura NSX

<b>Category (vehicle)</b>	<b>Description</b>
Type of car	Sports car
Japanese equivalent	Honda NSX
<b>Document Features</b>	<b>Description</b>
Full-color	Yes
Page arrangement	portrait
Production	Coarse textured covers, glossy pages
Foldout pages	No
Number of pages	17

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS FROM CROSS-CULTURAL DOCUMENT DESIGN ANALYSIS**

In this chapter, the findings from the cross-cultural document design analysis are presented. Each document was analyzed using the document design analysis tables, which analyze the use of visuals such as photographs, illustrations, and line drawings against the taxonomy for visuals at the extra and supra levels. The findings from the document design analysis are presented in each table. An analysis is also offered that analyzes the document design decisions made in both the Japanese and American documents by using American and Japanese design theories.

The Japanese high-context document design analysis is presented first followed by the American low-context document design analysis. The documents are described generally before the document design analysis tables are presented. The design elements for each culture are analyzed in separate high- and low-context sections with specific references to the table that analyzes the specific document. A detailed audience analysis is also presented for both the Japanese high-context culture and the American low-context culture. The audience analysis helps to explain why each document met audience expectations in that particular culture and is extended by a section on the appropriateness of document design elements and a look at the implication of cross-cultural design on international technical communicators. This chapter analyzes and explains the document design decisions made in each culture and extends these findings into a discussion on the appropriateness of these decisions based on what Americans know about Japanese cultural expectations.

## **Japanese High-Context Documents**

Overall, four documents were analyzed from the Japanese culture. All documents were designed with Japanese readers in mind, meaning that all documents considered Japanese aesthetics, religions, and tones in their development, production, and design. Each document is intended to sell vehicles through persuasive appeals that attract the Japanese eye, mind, and wallet. It is important to mention the visual rhetoric that is applied in the Japanese documents because the rhetorical appeals used to sell vehicles in Japan are much different than the rhetorical appeals used in the United States. Cultural value systems and expectations account for many of the rhetorical design decisions applied in these persuasive documents.

Each table in this chapter represents a separate document design analysis specific to that particular vehicle and accompanying booklet; however, together these tables represent design decisions of the Japanese high-context culture itself. The tables represent the design decisions applied in each document, but together, the document design tables help to explain the visual rhetoric that the culture as a whole finds valuable and fitting for their readers.

Table 11

Japanese Honda Inspire

	Extra-level Design: Textual	Extra-Level Design: Spatial	Extra-Level Design: Graphical	Supra-Level Design: Textual	Supra-Level Design: Spatial	Supra-Level Design: Graphic
Explanation/ Illustration	No callouts; document uses lines connected to brief textual explanations	Minimal textual explanation with visuals Loose integration		Headings extend main point of page: emphasis on advanced power, advanced comfort, advanced safety, emotional cabin  Headings are in English		Text boxes for technical information
Photos	Uses English headings with full image of vehicle  most large pages with images do not have text	Vehicle alone on page  Eye-level outside view of vehicle/aerial view  Inside of car—emphasis on space, cleanliness	Emphasis on visuals that show beauty of car: clean and proper  no bright colors: photos use black, silver, blue  vehicle color blends with background  Uses violin in trunk of car to show “emotional cabin”	clean/advanced performance  intelligent ability  advanced intelligence  navigation text does not aid in usability of document; it enhances the tone and attractiveness of vehicle	Landscape layout	Full-color images that show beauty of vehicle—curves, space  Every image is perfectly arranged in a respectable business-like layout/situation: going to work
Line Drawings	Lines to technical labels  most line drawings do not have complementary text	Small size/concise  large amount of white space between text and line drawing	Light lines/shades		Conservative size	Technical line drawings used behind text watermark/grayscale  Used to show outlines of vehicle / outline of cabin  Seat belt and driver drawing
Diagrams						
Qualifications	Labels and callouts are used minimally	Introduction features visuals that use two facing pages to showcase the vehicle are the focal point of the document				

Table 12

Japanese Honda Legend

	Extra-level Design: Textual	Extra-Level Design: Spatial	Extra-Level Design: Graphical	Supra-Level Design: Textual	Supra-Level Design: Spatial	Supra-Level Design: Graphic
Explanation/ Illustration	<p>Captions on opposite page of illustration</p> <p>small captions used rarely</p> <p>little emphasis on textual explanation</p>	<p>Explanation and visual are separated by a large amount of white space</p>	<p>Several cartoon drawings w/ little explanation</p>	<p>No navigation text for illustrations</p> <p>Headings are in English</p> <p>The vehicle name “Legend” is conservatively placed on the spine and on the cover—small text size</p>	<p>Textual explanations are often not connected to illustration</p>	
Photos	<p>Preference for visual without text on same page</p> <p>no text-visual connection</p>	<p>Photos take up most space on the page/facing pages—they dominate the page</p> <p>symmetric visual—well balanced</p>	<p>Photos show off beauty of vehicle; no sports</p> <p>no action images/no people</p> <p>blue, black, silver tones/ Vehicles blend with background colors</p> <p>Photos that emphasize “emotional” cabin</p>		<p>Portrait layout</p> <p>images dominantly use landscape layout</p>	<p>Glossy</p> <p>high resolution</p> <p>light rules in headings</p>
Line Drawings	<p>Rare use of textual explanation for photos</p>	<p>Large amount of white space separates line drawing from text</p>	<p>Uses light lines</p> <p>light shades to highlight images: no textual explanation</p> <p>line drawings are conservative in size</p> <p>line drawings look hand drawn (cartoon)</p>		<p>Conservative size</p>	<p>Arrows are common in line drawings, not accompanied by text</p> <p>boxes highlight areas of importance (no text)</p>

Diagrams		Breakaway diagrams are closely spaced and difficult to see	Technical looking			Used to increase aesthetic appeal  technical innovation used
Qualifications	Labels and callouts are used minimally	Introduction visuals that use two facing pages to showcase the vehicle are the focal point of the document				

Table 13

Japanese Honda MDX

	Extra-level Design: Textual	Extra-Level Design: Spatial	Extra-Level Design: Graphical	Supra-Level Design: Textual	Supra-Level Design: Spatial	Supra-Level Design: Graphic
Explanation/ Illustration	Small text, far away from visual	Large white space between text and visual	Several cartoon drawings  illustrations are used for aesthetic purposes	"MDX" is most prominent text on cover  headings in English		Black/white cover
Photos			vehicle is shown on city street/highway—business appeal  vehicle is shown parked in front of an office/store  no action photos of vehicles		Landscape layout  most photos occupy two-page/facing layout	Technical suspension image is aesthetically pleasing to look at
Line Drawings	Minimal textual integration	Conservative line drawings—small size  brief text below line drawing	Thin/light lines		Conservative size makes the line drawing look technical, but it does not show a great deal of useful detail about the part/ area of the car	Emphasis on technical looking line drawings
Diagrams						
Qualifications	Labels and callouts are used minimally  visuals rarely integrate with text—some page have only a visual without textual explanation	Introduction visuals that use two facing pages to showcase the vehicle are the focal point of the document				

Table 14

Japanese Honda Element

	Extra-level Design: Textual	Extra-Level Design: Spatial	Extra-Level Design: Graphical	Supra-Level Design: Textual	Supra-Level Design: Spatial	Supra-Level Design: Graphic
Explanation/ Illustration	No callouts	Large white space between text and visual	Several cartoon drawings	Headings in English		
Photos			Show people vehicle is parked/driving in city	Minimal text vehicle featured alone, without text on page	Landscape layout most photos occupy two-page/facing layout	Emphasis on beauty of vehicle
Line Drawings	Minimal textual integration	Line drawings are located close to each other with minimal white space		Minimal explanation	Large amount of white space separating line drawing and text	
Diagrams	no callouts		Breakaway image with car			
Qualifications	Labels and callouts are used minimally  visuals rarely integrate with text—some page have only a visual without textual explanation	Introduction visuals that use two facing pages to showcase the vehicle are the focal point of the document				

## **American Low-Context Documents**

Four documents were also analyzed from the United States. All documents were designed with an American reader in mind, meaning that all documents considered American aesthetics, religions, and tones in their development, production, and design. Each document is intended to sell the vehicle through persuasive appeals that attract the American eye, mind, and wallet. It is important to mention the visual rhetoric that is applied in the American documents because the rhetorical appeals used to sell vehicles in the United States are much different than the rhetorical appeals used in Japan. Cultural value systems and expectations account for many of the rhetorical design decisions applied in these persuasive documents.

Each table in this chapter represents a separate document design analysis specific to that particular vehicle and accompanying booklet; however, together these tables represent design decisions of the American high-context culture itself. The tables represent the design decisions applied in each document, but together, the document design tables help to explain the visual rhetoric that American document designers find appropriate and persuasive for their readers—people who are interested in purchasing a vehicle.

Table 15

American Honda Pilot

	Extra-level Design: Textual	Extra-Level Design: Spatial	Extra-Level Design: Graphical	Supra-Level Design: Textual	Supra-Level Design: Spatial	Supra-Level Design: Graphic
Explanation/ Illustration	<p>Uses text to elaborate on illustrations</p> <p>uses callouts to explain features of vehicle</p> <p>emphasis on product/fun, not on business</p>		<p>Uses navigational icons such as arrows</p> <p>emphasis on people/pleasure</p>	Text explains how you can use the vehicle on vacation or for extracurricular activities	Landscape	Preference for digital images with explanatory text below the image
Photos	<p>Uses text to elaborate on photos</p> <p>callouts elaborate on photo</p> <p>textual explanation complements each photo</p> <p>numbered callouts correspond with explanation</p>		<p>Photos show exotic vacation spot</p> <p>vehicle in mountains/on cliff</p> <p>vehicle pulling boat</p> <p>vehicle climbing rocks</p>		landscape	
Line Drawings						Large line drawings, allow reader to see detail
Diagrams	Detailed diagram with corresponding numbers		No highly technical diagrams			
Qualifications	Visuals and text integrate, complement each other	Visuals and related text are positioned close to each other	Graphics used complement the textual explanation			

Table 16

American Honda Accord Coupe

	Extra-level Design: Textual	Extra-Level Design: Spatial	Extra-Level Design: Graphical	Supra-Level Design: Textual	Supra-Level Design: Spatial	Supra-Level Design: Graphic
Explanation/ Illustration	Paragraph with explanatory text  emphasis on extracurricular uses of vehicle— vacation  uses callouts and lines that connect visual to explanation	Landscape  text in close proximity to visual	Uses navigational icons such as arrows and callouts  emphasis on people/pleasure	Textual explanations emphasize how you can use the vehicle on vacation or for extracurricular activities	landscape	Preference for digital images with explanatory text below the image
Photos	Textual explanations that complement photos emphasize buyer or reader	landscape	Coupe is pictured on a hill  emphasis on leisure-time activity  bright colors		landscape	Bright color/car variations  shows people/sports/exercise  emphasizes how people use the technology (not the technology itself)
Line Drawings						
Diagrams						
Qualifications	Visuals and text integrate, complement each other	Visuals and related text are positioned close to each other In same visual field	Graphics used complement the textual explanation			

Table 17

American Acura MDX

	Extra-level Design: Textual	Extra-Level Design: Spatial	Extra-Level Design: Graphical	Supra-Level Design: Textual	Supra-Level Design: Spatial	Supra-Level Design: Graphic
Explanation/ Illustration	Lines connecting explanation to image					Textured (durable) covers
Photos			Vehicle pulling a boat Vacation get away tone Exotic location	"Acura MDX" in small font near the vehicle in the photo	Portrait layout Landscape photos	Sports-related cover Ski/ski vacation theme
Line Drawings	Text near line drawing Text surrounds line drawing/ complements line drawing	Text/line drawing close together				
Diagrams						
Qualifications	Visuals and text integrate, complement each other	Visuals and related text are positioned close to each other	Graphics used complement the textual explanation			

Table 18

American Acura NSX

	Extra-level Design: Textual	Extra-Level Design: Spatial	Extra-Level Design: Graphical	Supra-Level Design: Textual	Supra-Level Design: Spatial	Supra-Level Design: Graphic
Explanation/ Illustration	Lines connecting explanation to image				Portrait layout	Textured (durable) covers
Photos			Car on race track (dreamlike)  Bright colors: yellow, orange, red	"Acura NSX" on cover in small font near vehicle in photo	Portrait layout  Landscape photos	Sports-related cover  Blurred action/racing photos—car looks fast  Race track feeling
Line Drawings	Text near line drawing  Text surrounds line drawing/ complements line drawing  Show length and width of vehicle	Text/line drawing close together				
Diagrams						
Qualifications	Visuals and text integrate, complement each other	Visuals and related text are positioned close to each other	Graphics used complement the textual explanation			

## **Analysis of Design Decisions based on Culture**

Both cultures applied design decisions to their documents that they thought would persuade audience members to buy these vehicles. Both cultures applied design decisions that they thought would be appropriate for their particular audience. Each culture designed documents that applied drastically different document design decisions, mostly because the cultures do, in fact, have unique value systems that readers expect to be present in the documentation. Even the slightest misinterpretation of a cultural norm may cause a reader to disregard the document, thus rendering any attempt at effective, persuasive communication ineffective. The communicator must design the document with the intended audience in mind. In order to provide a better understanding of culture's effect on document design decisions, each culture's documentation will be analyzed in detail.

### **High-context Documents**

The Japanese high-context documents feature distinct design decisions. These design decisions are reflective of the Japanese culture and address reader expectations in that high-context culture. The Japanese documents are distinct in the way they integrate text and visuals and the way they address visual preferences such as aesthetics, color, and illustrations. Also, the documents are unique in the choice of photos used to depict the vehicle.

Japanese document designers used minimal textual explanations to complement line drawings, illustrations, diagrams, or photos. Textual explanation is an extra-level: textual design

decision, according to Kostelnick and Roberts' taxonomy, meaning that the Japanese document designers did not rely on callouts or explanations to complement their visuals. For example, the Japanese Honda Inspire booklet (Table 11) included 15 pages of vivid and detailed photographs in a 40-page document. Also, the pages where the photograph of the vehicle dominated were included early in the document. For example, the Japanese Honda Inspire (Table 11), the Japanese Honda Legend (Table 12), and the Japanese Honda MDX (Table 13) use two-page photographs to introduce their vehicles with less than one paragraph of textual explanation in each document. In each of these cases, the first textual explanation in each document is located on the facing page of a dominant photograph with no identifying callouts, numbers, or visual cues that explain to the reader information about the vehicle or the significance of the photograph. Kostelnick and Roberts label this an extra-level: spatial design decision on the part of Japanese document designers. The text, in other words, is not integrated tightly with the visual. Too, it is important to remember that the Japanese do not necessarily feel the need to integrate text and visual tightly, for the Japanese expect viewers to achieve immediate and ultimate understanding of the designer's purpose, as Lennox Tierney explains (50). In the case of the Japanese Honda Inspire booklet (Table 11), the Japanese document designer did not include significant amounts of text until page 18 in the 40-page document, compared to the American Honda Accord Coupe booklet (Table 16), in which the American document designer used a two-page (facing) photo of the vehicle with callouts to indicate significant aspects of the vehicle.

Interestingly, most of the line drawings in the Japanese documents did not feature complementary text, even though line drawings tend to serve more technical and explanatory purposes in American low-context documents. Japanese designers, however, used large amounts

of white space—the space on the page that is not occupied by any text or graphics, also known as blank space (Williams 12)—between line drawings and explanatory text. The Japanese Honda Element booklet (Table 14), for example, used only a brief one-sentence label to describe a technical line drawing of the vehicle’s side-impact safety features.

The Japanese document designer’s preferences for photographs themselves were also unique, when compared to the photographs used in the American documents. The photos in the Japanese booklets featured the vehicle in ways that the Japanese document designer thought that the reader would find it attractive, affective, and persuasive. The vehicle, in each of the Japanese documents, was shown in city settings, appearing as though the driver was on his or her way home from work, going to a fine shop or restaurant, or parked in front of an impressive building or home. For example, the Japanese Honda Inspire booklet (Table 11) featured photos of the vehicle driving on city streets and parked on a perfectly arranged brick driveway. The Honda MDX booklet (Table 13) featured the vehicle parked in front of a dramatically-lit office building and driving away from that building down a city street. The Honda MDX is a luxury SUV. Comparatively, the equivalent American vehicle (the Acura MDX detailed in Table 17), much different than in the Japanese booklet, is featured in the mountains and pulling a boat. Japanese document designers also featured cars sitting in front of homes with impressive lawns and landscapes. In a sense, Japanese document designers presented the vehicles in business or professional settings, ones that might be familiar to executive business people. Thus, it may be concluded that because we know that the Japanese have high standards for work and work ethics, that an appreciation for work ethics is represented in the photographs used to display each vehicle. A Japanese audience may feel disrespected if a booklet featured a person on a weekend getaway. The Japanese, as Reischauer noted, emphasize group orientation and group harmony,

and often this group orientation and harmony is found in the business environment. Honda, in Japan, may improve the ethos of their company by featuring reserved, business-like photos as opposed to stunning vacation-like photos.

The Japanese accentuated the aesthetics of each vehicle. Each vehicle was shown in perfect condition and in dramatic lighting that allowed the curves of the vehicle's interior and exterior to impress the reader. Rarely were people present in the photographs. As Maitra and Goswami note, Japanese document design process models typically emphasize two main points: aesthetics and ambiguity (198). Interestingly, the photographs used in the Japanese documents did not feature people using the vehicle. Documents also included unique uses of technical visuals such as line drawings.

The technical visuals, such as line drawings, seemed to emphasize the technical aspects of the car, as opposed to the benefits to the user or owner of having this technology available. Thomas Warren notes that, in high-context documents, the individual should be discouraged in favor of the group (119). The technical line drawings, in the Japanese documents, serve to provide technical information that can be used for any purpose, not specifically targeting a certain type of person or use of the vehicle for a specific purpose. The technical line drawings appeared to accentuate the advanced features of the car—the technology that the car offered its potential buyer—without providing a clear or complementary textual explanation. The Japanese booklets feature group-targeted information as opposed to individual-targeted information. This may be one reason why the Japanese documents do not use photographs of people in their booklets. They feel it disrespectful to potentially exclude members of the “group.”

The Japanese also used several cartoon drawings in each document. Cartoon drawings—drawings that appeared hand-drawn and did not communicate technical information—often

showed people and a cultural connectedness. For example, all of the high-context Japanese documents analyzed featured a cartoon with Japanese people of all ages, shapes, and sizes, along with their vehicles. The cartoon drawings are inclusive and generalizable, similar to Kostelnick's "flatman" images featured in "Cultural Adaptation and Information Design: Two Contrasting Views." They are not detailed enough to depict one particular type of Japanese person. The cartoon drawings show businesspeople, families, children, and elderly people together in front of a grayscale globe. The cartoon drawings show inclusion and group orientation.

The Japanese documents also included more technical cartoon drawings. Cartoon drawings were also used for communicating safety features such as seatbelts. For example, the Japanese Honda Element booklet (Table 14) shows cartoon-drawing people strapped into a safety belt, while the American Honda Pilot booklet (Table 15) uses a detailed digital image breakaway of the vehicle with corresponding numbered callouts that explain safety features in detail. Safety issues, such as oversteer, in the Japanese documents, were presented in cartoon line drawings, while in American documents designers used digital recreations of the vehicle that had a believable and 3-dimensional appearance on the page. Japanese viewers tend to prefer cartoon drawings, as Mitsuyuki Ichimura's survey reveals (370). The abundance of cartoon line drawings and visuals present in the Japanese booklets analyzed for this thesis reveal that document designers reflect this preference in their visual rhetoric.

The Japanese documents also featured numerous breakaway diagrams. The breakaway diagrams appear to convey technical information; however, they are often conservative in size and are not large enough for the reader to see the specifics of the vehicle area in question. For example, the Japanese Honda MDX booklet (Table 13) featured two small breakaway diagrams

in line with two line drawings (for a total of four horizontally arranged visuals) on one page. The breakaway visuals were not large enough to depict details of the section of the vehicle being discussed. The breakaway diagrams did not feature tightly integrated textual explanations. They often featured light pastel—purple, yellow, blue—shaded areas that highlighted an important feature of the vehicle in the diagram. However, technical visuals rarely included callouts or numbered corresponding lists.

The Japanese documents did not feature bright colors. The document designers preferred black, silver, and blue colored vehicles over brighter more attractive colors. Interestingly, the black, silver, and blue vehicle colors blended with the backgrounds. The color schemes in each Japanese document reflected conservatism, an aspect of the Japanese culture. The color schemes can also be described as sobering, with little figure-ground contrast. The minimal figure-ground contrast applied in Japanese documents, along with the sober color schemes, reflect aspects of “wabi sabi” design characteristics. Wabi sabi, according to Andrew Juniper, demands that Japanese design be approached with humility and sincerity (120). This humility and sincerity is reflected through the dark black, blue, and gray colors which dominate the Japanese booklets.

The Japanese also reflected this sense of humility when applying rules in their booklets. Rules, as explained by Dan Jones and Karen Lane in Technical Communication, provide explicit and visible divisions. Jones and Lane explain that rules can “lend consistency to documents by separating sections or other elements in a predictable way” (250). Rules serve as a visual cue to the reader. Japanese document designers used light, thin rules, often gray, to separate information and headings on the page. Each document featured these light lines, even after level-one headings. Light rules may also indicate the ambiguity prevalent in Japanese documents. Japanese documents tend to be much less explicit than American documents, and

Japanese designers may not feel the need to separate information with strong, bold rules.

Conversely, American document designers used boldly colored rules, sometimes in the shape of thick squares, to separate information on the page. The American Honda Pilot booklet (Table 15), for instance, used multicolored rules with embedded text to separate a photograph of the vehicle pulling a boat and a photograph of the engine.

The conservatism, group-orientation, and work ethic present in the Japanese culture are apparent through Japanese document designers' use of visual rhetoric. The visual rhetoric and visual elements that Japanese document designers applied, as analyzed in this thesis, shows careful attention to the audience's cultural expectations and needs. Japanese cultural expectations and needs, as seen through the use of visual language in this thesis, oppose the design elements that American document designers apply in low-context documents.

### **Low-context Documents**

The American low-context documents featured design decisions that reflect American values and expectations. American readers need tightly integrated visuals and text because our population is so diverse. They expect visuals to complement the text that surrounds them. American document designers apply rhetorical principles of visual language reflective of the American way of life, the American culture. American document designers also reflected distinctly American visual rhetoric in their documents.

American document designers use text to explain the significance of visuals. Numbered callouts on photos and detailed diagrams help to explain the significance of the visual. American documents featured paragraphs of text on each of the first ten pages, along with a highly

attractive photo of the vehicle. For example, the American Honda Accord Coupe booklet (Table 16) features a substantial paragraph with an informative heading, followed by a photograph of the car with callouts. The callouts, this early in the document, serve as visual cues that will help readers read the document selectively and locate important information. Callouts and textual explanation that complement the visual are extra-level textual design decisions made by the American document designer, according to Kostelnick and Roberts. The Japanese documents, however, did not feature callouts, especially on the first page of the booklet. American communication tends to be more explicit than Japanese communication. The first page of the American Honda Accord Coupe booklet uses callouts to explain the important elements of the car and sections where the reader will find that information. Often, lines connect textual explanations to the visual or diagram. Textual explanations—paragraphs, lists, figures—were also located in the same visual field of the diagrams. Textual explanation that explains the visual and is located in close proximity to the visual is considered to be tightly integrated. Americans need tightly integrated text and visual because so many readers have different cultural, educational, and familial experiences. Americans differ significantly in the cultural experiences they have had while growing up. Tightly integrated text and visual and explicit communication help American document designers address a diverse population.

American visuals also differed greatly from Japanese preferences in terms of the photographs that American document designers used. Much different than the photographs used in Japanese documents, American documents featured action-oriented photos of the vehicle. The American documents often featured sport- or hobby-related photos. For example, the American Honda Pilot booklet (Table 15) features several photographs of the SUV pulling a boat. The American Honda Pilot booklet also features several photos of the SUV climbing a rocky

mountain path in order to demonstrate the vehicle's suspension capabilities. Suspension capabilities for the Japanese Honda MDX, though, are delivered to the viewer through face-saving (or face-enhancing) line drawing. The photos used in the American booklets often played upon the ideal American getaway, the dream vacation. The images placed the vehicle in an exotic location such as a hilltop or mountain, a remote trail or stream, or a rugged cliff top or picturesque forest. Even the Honda Accord Coupe (Table 16) is shown on the top of a hill.

The American Acura NSX booklet (Table 18), which featured a sports car, showed the vehicle on a race track. The images were blurred to show the speed of the car as it navigated the course. The car itself was a bright yellow, in some cases, and the color panels showing the exterior and interior color options for the car featured several bright colors such as red and yellow. The Japanese documents, though, did not feature vehicles in action, the way that Americans portrayed vehicles, especially the sports car. A Japanese reader might consider action-oriented visuals, such as the sports car on the race course, to be in conflict with conservative Japanese values. Thus, action-oriented visuals such as these may be ineffective, or even offensive, if used in a Japanese document. Japanese document designers might consider photographs such as these a threat to the face-saving approach to high-context document design.

The covers of the American documents also featured sport- and leisure-related themes. The covers of the SUV document, the Acura MDX (Table 17), featured skis and ski poles near a ski lift. The covers of the Acura NSX, the sports car (Table 18), featured vacation-like water sports. The covers for both documents were also produced in a thick, durable, and weathered cover, ones suitable for use in a rugged outdoor environment. The cover of the American Honda Pilot booklet (Table 15) features the vehicle driving down a snow-filled ski slope with skis attached to the roof. Similarly, the American Honda Accord Coupe (Table 16) is featured on the

cover atop a steep cliff in the mountains. All of the photographs that American document designers used in these booklets to attract the reader's attention and build corporate ethos have a weekend getaway appeal. They convey the thoughts of the businessperson dreaming of the perfect weekend getaway. The leisure time appeal applied in the American documents conflicts directly with the face-saving appeal present in the Japanese documents, a striking example of the different rhetorical appeals used by document designers in the two cultures.

American document designers preferred digital images—computer-generated images—of vehicles as opposed to line drawings. For example, the American Honda Pilot booklet (Table 15) featured digital images of the vehicle at different angles and a digital breakaway of the vehicle's four-wheel drive system. The computer-generated digital images looked strikingly similar to the actual vehicle. Readers looking for specific information can see specific parts of the vehicle in the digital breakaway image much more accurately than in a conservatively sized line drawing. The large breakaway digital images help readers understand information, because American document designers take a more explicit approach to communication than Japanese document designers. The digital breakaway images are much more explicit than the line drawings featured in the Japanese documents. Digital breakaway diagrams highlighted a specific area of the vehicle, and the diagrams were large enough for readers to recognize the area of the vehicle in question (i.e. the engine, car frame, or brakes). Rarely did American document designers use technical looking line drawings to highlight portions of the vehicle, perhaps because digital breakaway images are more explicit and will be better received by the low-context audience.

American document designers also used color differently in the booklets. For example, the American Honda Pilot booklet (Table 15) featured an array of colors ranging from natural

tones to bright tones. The Japanese documents, though, featured dark colors like black, gray, and blue. American documents also featured strong contrast. For example, the American Honda Pilot booklet (Table 15) featured a red vehicle in front of an off-white and tan background. The bright red contrasted strongly with the natural colors in the background. American readers tend to prefer strong visual contrast. Conversely, Japanese readers, according to Ichimura's study, prefer lighter colors. Ichimura's study shows that red, a popular color among Americans who buy SUVs and sports cars, is the color most disliked by Japanese readers (367). A red car in a Japanese document may be less effective than a lighter colored gray car. The red vehicle might also conflict with conservative cultural values held sacred in the Japanese high-context culture.

American document designers also provide visual cues that indicate important information and navigational information to the reader. The American Honda Pilot booklet (Table 15), for example, features arrows that point to level-one headings. Also, the American Honda Pilot booklet includes numbered indicators on visuals that signal to the reader that there is information that corresponds to that number. Low-context readers often depend on visual cues to signal important information, information that the reader should pay close attention to if reading selectively. William Gribbons, in "Visual Literacy in Corporate Communication: Some Implications for Information Design," suggests that design conventions such as linguistic, visual, or spatial cues are affected by cultural experiences (46). Design conventions in high-context cultures where much of the communicated message is in the context of the situation may not rely on visual cues, as readers are expected to implicitly understand the information being communicated.

American and Japanese document designers both present information in such a way that audience members will understand the message. Although high- and low-context audiences have

different expectations, it is critical that the document designer understand these expectations before designing a document or attempting communication with an international audience. Audience analysis is a critical stage in the document design process, and thus deserves a great deal of time and attention. Without a comprehensive understand of the intended audience's preferences and expectations, communication may be rendered ineffective or even offensive.

## **Audience Analysis**

In order to provide a better understanding of the document design decisions made in both cultures, it is necessary to consider the intended audience and rhetorical situation for each culture. "If you want readers to feel what you feel, see what you see, or believe as you believe," Kramer et al. write, "you must establish a relationship with them. To develop such a relationship, search for the common ground you and your audience may share: assumptions, points of view, experiences, knowledge, and background" (16). Both American and Japanese document designers certainly aimed to sell vehicles; however, each had special design considerations to make when addressing their particular audience.

Readers in the United States come from a diverse range of backgrounds; people typically have had different familial and cultural experiences. Gary Blake and Robert W. Bly agree, "One of the most difficult challenges technical writers face is writing to the level of technical proficiency and understanding of the intended audience. This would be easy if all readers were at the same level of education and experience, as is sometimes the case" (13). American audiences typically have unique religious and educational experiences, which makes it difficult

to assess audience expectations. However, Japanese audiences tend to share more similar educational and religious experiences. Their expectations for document design and writing style are not as diverse as those present in the United States.

### **High-context**

The Japanese designers of the documents reviewed in this research make informed decisions about their audience by taking into consideration the similarity among cultural expectations readers experience in Japan. Japanese document designers address an audience that has similar expectations, for the most part, because audience members' lives are so similar. The Japanese place emphasis on group orientation and family togetherness.

Japan is a high-context culture. Therefore, the communicator expects the receiver to understand the message with little explanation or detail. The document designer, therefore, will expect the receiver, the reader or audience member, to have a good understanding of the message being conveyed. The Japanese document designer expects that audience members will have similar backgrounds: educations, religions, experiences.

Also, the Japanese emphasize “the group,” group experiences and accomplishments. Japanese document designers will expect readers to want to conform to group expectations.

The Japanese value hard work. With that, Japanese document designers will expect readers to be motivated by discipline and patience. The Japanese reader should be more motivated by hard work and work-related ethics than by leisure-time and events. This is because the Japanese value the time they spend with business partners and in business relationships—group orientation—more than they value their separate or free time away from the group.

Finally, the Japanese feel more obligated to design pages that are aesthetically pleasing, with less emphasis on explanation and tightly integrated visuals and text. Japanese readers will expect little explanation with the visuals. They will expect visuals that make the page look nice, as opposed to visuals that complement textual elements on the page.

### **Low-context**

American document designers inform their design decisions by first taking into consideration the diversity of the American reader. Document designers who design documents for an American audience often spend several months analyzing a target audience and the document design decisions that will effectively address that audience. The document designer will have expectations for the audience based on the automobile documents collected for this study. For example, the communicator will expect that Americans are highly motivated by individual free time away from the office. Americans tend to appreciate vacation time independent from the office, or “group,” as it is referred to in Japan.

America is considered a low-context culture. American readers will have a diverse range of backgrounds and are not expected to understand the material without details, examples, and explanations. Also, American readers will expect visuals to complement text—they will expect visuals to help explain the text that is in its proximity. American document designers will assume little about their audience’s background and experiences. Many Americans will have unique educational, cultural, and religious experiences. Readers will also have drastically different work ethics and occupations. They will view their occupations and passions for their work differently. American document designers expect their American audiences to value their

leisure time—time away from the office spent vacationing, participating in sports, or performing a favorite pastime.

Americans also feel the need to be independent. Children move from home in their teen years and seek their own financial stability and housing independent from their mother and father. Businesspeople pride themselves on their intellectual ability and individual performance, even if their performance is for the betterment of the company for which they work.

Dependence is seen as a form of weakness among Americans. The American documents will emphasize individuality and independence—freedom from restrictions and group orientation.

The individualism and diversity present in the American culture obligates communicators to use tightly integrated text and visuals. Readers expect visuals to explain the text on the page in the same visual field as the text. American document designers expect that readers will need explanatory visuals to help bridge the cultural and informational gap that accompanies such a diversified audience.

Japanese and American document designers applied visual elements to their documents that they deemed appropriate and persuasive. With the audience analysis in mind, it is now possible to explain how these documents met the needs of their respective audiences.

## **Document Effectiveness in Original Culture**

Japanese and American document designers applied visual elements and design decisions that they felt, given the cultural values present in their particular culture, would be received well by automobile shoppers considering the purchase of a new car. Each American and Japanese

document included visual elements that accommodated reader expectations in that particular culture. Although American and Japanese document designers preferred different design elements and arrangements, readers expect designers to accommodate their expectations and needs. In order to persuade a reader, the document designer must make the document accessible and appealing to that particular audience. Each document must effectively appeal to readers.

### **High-context**

Japanese document designers expect that readers will have an understanding of the subject matter being discussed. The document designers made many decisions that addressed the Japanese culture that might confuse or frustrate American readers.

The high-context culture of Japan involves a community of people with similar experiences and expectations. Document designers expect that they will not have to provide extensive details or explanations in their documents for this reason. The minimal textual explanations and introductions on the first several pages of each document will not catch a Japanese reader off guard. In fact, a visual alone will impress the Japanese reader more than a visual with explanatory textual explanation. For example, Japanese readers may prefer that the first page of the Honda Inspire booklet (Table 11) feature a two-page photograph of the vehicle without any mention of navigational instructions for the 40-page booklet. In fact, the first 17 pages of the 40-page booklet include only a total of nine lines of condensed blocked text, a minimal amount of textual information compared to the American Honda Pilot booklet (Table 15) which features six lines of textual explanation, and eight informational callouts, on the first page. The aesthetics offered in the high-quality photo of the vehicle will capture the reader's

attention. The Japanese culture places a high value on aesthetics. Visuals that “look good” are often preferred over visuals that explain the text and situation but are not as aesthetically pleasing. Loosely integrated text and visual in Japan is expected, as much of the message of the communication is held within the context of the situation. Therefore, line drawings, photos, and diagrams will have little textual explanation to accompany them. The Japanese would not expect thorough textual explanation in their documentation.

The Japanese prefer technical looking visuals; however, these visuals often only look technical. Rarely do these technical visuals actually convey specific information on the vehicle. For example, several of the Japanese documents featured a gray-scaled line drawing behind the text on the page. The gray-scaled line drawing looked technical; however, it was too light to convey information to the reader. It conveyed the impression that this section was a technical section discussing technological aspects of the car, but it did not serve a purpose other than its technical appearance. Furthermore, the Japanese documents often featured relatively small technical breakaway line drawings. The white space between each part of the vehicle was not significant enough to distinguish the separate parts. Again, the visual appeared technical but did not convey specific technical information visually to the reader. There were no callouts, numbers, or paragraphs within the same visual field. Japanese expect an emphasis on visual elements in document because of their aesthetic beauty.

## Low-context

American document designers must design documents for a diverse audience. Thus, technical visuals and textual explanations must work together to convey an explicit message. Readers have come to expect explicit messages, and document designers aim to provide information that is explained well through tightly integrated text and visuals.

To accommodate for a diverse audience in the documents analyzed for this study, American document designers used a variety of strategies that would help make information more explicit. Document designers used tightly integrated text and visuals by using clearly labeled callouts, numbered lists, and detailed diagrams. Each textual element integrated tightly with visuals on the page. Textual explanations were located near diagrams and visuals. For example, the American Acura MDX booklet (Table 17) featured a diagram of the “variable torque management 4-wheel drive system.” In this diagram, American document designers used letters with corresponding explanations to explain the various parts of the 4-wheel drive system. The letters were located in the diagram itself, while the corresponding explanations were located in a paragraph immediately right of the visual. There is little white space separating the visual and explanation. They are located in the same perceptual field. For American readers, visuals that merely “look good” are of limited importance. Visuals must explain the content or serve some significant purpose in the document.

Americans prefer visuals that explain information, visuals that make information easier to comprehend and apply. American document designers did not use small technical visuals. They used technical visuals that were large and easy to see. These technical visuals were in the form of diagrams, as opposed to line drawings, and appeared much clearer on the page. Also, the

larger, clearer visuals made the area of the car being discussed more visible. The American document designer, in the Honda Pilot booklet (Table 15), uses a digital breakaway diagram that spans the entire page with corresponding numerical explanations within the same perceptual field of the area of the car which it describes. With the larger diagram, the reader had a better chance of understanding and applying the information.

Sports and leisure activities often appeal to American readers. The two evoke excitement in the American reader. American document designers used the American's appreciation for free time to show the various uses of these vehicles. The Honda Pilot booklet (Table 15) and the Acura MDX booklet (Table 17), for instance, featured SUVs on ski vacations. The SUVs were pictured driving on ski slopes and in front of mountain landscapes. These images might appeal to the business-class family, intended to inspire them to think of the magnificent vacations they could take with this vehicle. This is appropriate for these documents, as many business people are motivated by "toys."

The American documents are intended to be usable, to answer questions for the inquisitive reader. The leisure time appeal in the documents is intended to motivate and inspire the reader's imagination. Leisure time activities such as skiing evoke positive emotional responses in American viewers because they associate skiing with vacation and relaxation, whether they are actually avid skiers or not.

## **The Implications of Using Low-context Visual Rhetoric in a High-context Culture**

Low-context cultures and high-context cultures use images differently, as was exemplified in this chapter. Although this study has so far sought to describe the way that Americans and Japanese document designers use visuals, it may also be helpful to consider the implications of using low-context visual rhetoric, the visual elements applied in American documents by native English-speaking document designers, in a high-context Japanese culture. The American document designer will need to consider these possible implications before making rhetorical design decisions for high-context cross-cultural documents.

What is low-context visual rhetoric? Low-context visual rhetoric consists of visual elements and design decisions by the document designer that are effective and appropriate for a low-context audience, a diverse audience where much of the message of the communication is stated explicitly, such as Americans. Low-context communication is not ambiguous, for most Americans have had diverse experiences and need information that is detailed and direct.

Low-context visual rhetoric, specifically, will also include visuals, such as photos, that appeal to a wide range of diverse American audiences. Visuals that evoke emotion or passion are often used to persuade American readers. “Beauty, fun, and pleasure all work together to produce enjoyment, a state of positive affect,” Donald Norman proclaims. “Most scientific studies of emotion have focused upon the negative side, upon anxiety, fear, and anger, even though fun, joy and pleasure are the desired attributes of life. The climate is changing, with articles and books on ‘positive psychology’ and ‘well-being’ becoming popular. Positive emotions trigger many benefits: They facilitate coping with stress” (103). Norman makes an important connection here to visuals and their ability to persuade the reader emotionally.

Americans often associate the business world and work with stress. Interestingly, the American automobile manufacturer documents analyzed in this study focused on visuals that highlighted the joys that could be experienced on vacation, during leisure time. Leisure time, such as a weekend getaway in the mountains, evokes a positive feeling in American readers who feel the stresses of a high-pressure job. Work and business, for Americans, remind people of stress and deadlines. This is a major issue to consider. A low-context visual, such as a vehicle parked on a snow-covered mountain, will not arouse the same positive emotions for the Japanese as it does for Americans. The Japanese value hard work and the positive feelings that the camaraderie of a business partnership brings them. So, a Japanese audience would prefer a photo that also demonstrates the value of hard work and perseverance, possibly a photo that shows the vehicle in front of an office or driving possibly to (or from) an office in a large city. The Japanese would also anticipate a design that would be appropriate for the business environment, “the group.” Rarely do the Japanese aim to function outside of this group orientation. Therefore, a photo might be deemed unacceptable if it had an individualistic focus or message.

A discussion of the appropriateness and rhetorical appeal of photos is, at least, a good place to start when discussing the appropriateness of document design elements for high-context cultures. It is also one of the more complex (and scarcely addressed) aspects of Japanese document design, possibly because of the obscure nature of Japanese design theories and practices. There are several more important risks in applying low-context visual rhetoric to high-context documents, although they are more grounded in cultural norms and communication expectations.

Americans expect document designers to use visuals that complement the text on the page. In other words, in American, high-context documents visuals are not arbitrarily placed on

the page. Visuals, such as photos or line drawings, serve a purpose—to explain visually the text or to document visually something that would be confusing to read. Document designers strive to tightly integrate text and visuals so that information is explicit and unambiguous. In a high-context culture, though, where individuals have had similar cultural experiences, a reader might consider tightly integrated text and visuals too explicit or overbearing. Japanese readers may even perceive explicit communication habits as offensive, as if the document designer was talking down to them.

Document designers designing for American audiences use callouts, numbered lists, and detailed diagrams to explain technical or complicated information to the reader. This eliminates ambiguity or room for interpretation. However, in high-context cultures, communicators expect the receiver of the message to understand the context of the situation; therefore, Japanese audiences may not feel that callouts or navigational cues help the readability of the document. Again, extensive callouts and visual explanations may confuse Japanese readers.

American document designers frequently lean toward using visuals for their ability to explain visually what readers might see as complex information. Visuals, for American readers, explain or elaborate on the purpose of the text. A line drawing, for example, would rarely sit by itself on the page for the sake of making the page look technical. Also, a photo of an SUV climbing a mountain would be deemed appropriate if included in a section about traction or suspension. An American reader typically would prefer to learn technical information from a large, easy-to-see, detailed diagram. However, many Japanese readers appreciate the aesthetic value of a cartoon breakaway drawing of a vehicle that makes the page appealing to look at. A Japanese reader may not see the purpose or value in a detailed diagram that serves only to inform the reader of the value of four-wheel-drive. The Japanese reader might not appreciate a large

diagram that does not add aesthetic value to the page. Thus, the document designer must find an appropriate compromise in visual rhetoric for high-context audiences. The American document designer might, then, choose to include a photo breakaway of the vehicle as opposed to a computer generated grayscale image.

Importantly, the document designer must consider the use of colors in the document. This study revealed that Japanese document designers used color schemes with little contrast. Japanese document designers preferred dark vehicle colors on top of dark backgrounds. American document designs use strong figure-ground contrasts, attractive color schemes, and visual cues. A Japanese audience may consider strong contrast and attractive color schemes unacceptable, offensive, or unattractive. Thus, the American document designer will need to select a color scheme that will be appropriate for a Japanese audience, possibly one that is more conservative than color schemes in American documents.

American document designers will have to research their specific audience in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of design expectations in that culture. There are many implications of using low-context visual rhetoric for high-context audiences. The American document designer must understand, though, that effective visuals for American audiences may not be effective for Japanese audiences. A Japanese audience will be persuaded visually much different than an American audience.

There are, inevitably, many explanations of why these two cultures have such drastically different document design expectations. In order to provide the American document designer with a more comprehensive understanding of visual preferences in high-context cultures, Chapter Five will offer a discussion and explanation of visual rhetoric in Japanese and American documents.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND EXPLANATION OF VISUAL RHETORIC IN JAPANESE AND AMERICAN DOCUMENTS**

In order to gain a better understanding of the design decisions made by Japanese, high-context, document designers, Chapter Five seeks to explain the design decisions presented in Chapter Four. Many of the design decisions used in the Japanese documents can be explained by pulling together several abstract Japanese design and cultural theories. Many of the design decisions made by Japanese document designers also reflect cultural norms and religious expectations in that society.

The design differences between American and Japanese documents are complex. Proposed here is a means to an end, in cross-cultural design, not an end in itself. A document design analysis cannot bridge all of the potential gulfs in international technical communication and document design. In order to fully understand culture's effect on document design, document designers will need to spend many more years conducting empirical research in high-context cultures such as Japan. The Japanese culture poses complex design and layout challenges that will take much time and planning for the international communicator to address. There is no compromise for thorough and detailed research before attempting cross-culture communication. Cross-cultural design is not limited to the rhetorical concepts of visual language. Cross-cultural design is also comprised of research in linguistics, translation theory, interpersonal relations, communication, and, most of all, culture. To develop a successful document for use across national boundaries, the communicator must plan to spend time analyzing and documenting the habits of that particular culture. It is at that point that the communicator can make the decision for a global or culture-focused approach to communication. Will a globalized document or localized document more effectively address the audience's needs

and expectations? The communicator can then choose to use forms that have traditionally served to bridge cultural gulfs, such as the “flatman” forms Charles Kostelnick discusses in his “Cultural Adaptation and Information Design: Two Contrasting Views” (183), or visuals that will address a specific community of people, forms that are culture-focused. The communicator must make deliberate decisions based on the culture and the goals of communication.

American and Japanese documents show the world a different “face.” The two sets of documents give different impressions of the company and potential customers. In short, the documents in each country exude a different “ethos,” the Aristotelian form of persuasion that credits the “speaker’s authority” (Bizzell and Herzberg 4) or the appeal to one’s good will or personal sensibilities (Dragga and Gong 16). American and Japanese audiences have drastically different views of what is appropriate and appealing. They have drastically different views on what is visually persuasive and sensible. The differences between Japanese and American visual rhetoric might be best explained using the Japanese terms “honne” and “tatemae.” David Mura writes,

Honne and tatemae are two fundamental concepts of Japanese society. Tatemae is the face you show the world, the social self that gives the expected and appropriate answers. Honne is the private self, the feelings and thoughts you keep in abeyance and let out only on certain carefully chosen occasions. . . . For one thing, an American is likely to view this division as one between telling and not telling the truth. [American] preference[s], at least in comparison to the Japanese, is for bluntness and honesty, for telling it the way it is. . . . In contrast, Japanese society runs more on tatemae than ours, and the concept does not involve the moral judgment we associate with the division between telling or not

telling the truth. *Tatemae* is neither lying nor selling out; it is doing what is appropriate and proper, what everyone expects. (137)

The “face” each set of documents shows the world, or the tone or ethos that each set of documents conveys to audiences, is quite different, as the Japanese view of appropriate corporate image or “face” is much more conservative than that used in the American documents. “Face” as it is described in the Japanese culture relates to the corporate image that the company shows in each set of documents.

The Japanese documents demonstrated the concept of “*tatemae*.” They revealed the face that is appropriate for the Japanese culture, or world, to see. These photos provided the “expected” answers, answers appropriate for a boss or business partner to see and realize. For example, the Japanese Honda MDX booklet (Table 13) features a clean-looking vehicle in front of office buildings, while the American Acura MDX booklet (Table 17) shows a more rugged-looking vehicle climbing a mountain while pulling a boat. The “social self” presented in the Japanese documents was concerned with showing a face to the world that would not alienate members of “the group.” The Japanese culture emphasizes group orientation at the expense of individuality. Japanese logos and designs often reflect images that are appropriate and reflective of group harmony, the “face” that a company shows to the world. Steiner and Haas demonstrate the appropriateness of Japanese designs. “Maeda,” a Japanese construction company, uses a design on their uniforms, hard hats, and publications that reflect respect and concern for the environment. The design features a capital “M” with a round, green, globe and blue sky in the background. “The trademark, which is primarily expressed on the construction site barrier, signals their concern for and sensitivity to environmental issues,” Steiner and Haas articulate (62). The face that Japanese cosmetic brand “Elixir” shows the world is not that of a pretty face

or an unrealistic fountain of youth. The company aims to show the world the product's newness and cleanness (Steiner and Haas 162). The Japanese concept of "face" is an important factor when designing visuals for that culture, for it helps to promote group unity and harmony.

When assessing the findings of this thesis, it is evident that the Japanese and American documents view "face" differently. Japanese documents are designed for readers of a high-context culture. Therefore, less emphasis is placed on visual cues such as callouts and rules, and more emphasis is placed on visuals that are aesthetically pleasing to the reader. The Japanese documents often featured large photographs on the page with no text, or a large photograph with brief text on the facing page. The visuals and text were loosely integrated, and the designer has a preference for visuals that are pleasing to look at but describe little about the subject being discussed in the text. Readers in the Japanese high-context culture prefer ambiguity because much of the message of the communication is in the context of the situation. Based on the findings presented in this study, international technical communicators designing for a Japanese audience may want to use visuals that emphasize group goals and expectations such as the business place, as opposed to visuals that emphasize individual goals such as vacations and leisure activities.

Similar to the Japanese preference toward ambiguity in writing, wabi sabi design theories claim that Japanese design says a lot with very little. For example, the Japanese rarely make explicit use of visuals such as photographs or line drawings. The meaning of the visual is left up for the reader to understand. Color, according to Lennox Tierney, is "felt without being seen" (43). Similarly, images are felt without explanatory or complementary text. Japanese designers do not feel the need to explain visuals because readers are expected to implicitly understand their meaning in the context of the situation. Japanese design, in many ways, represents the "four

Japanese principles of cha-no-yu:” harmony, respect, purity, tranquility. In each of the Japanese booklets analyzed for this thesis, design aspects reflected harmony, the emphasis on group goals and group-orientation and purity, the sobriety of Japanese moments captured through visuals such as the vehicle parked in front of the house and not climbing a rugged trail or racing on a racetrack. Based on these findings, the international technical communicator designing a document for a Japanese audience may want to use visuals that emphasize group-orientation and respect for the environment.

The American low-context culture is much less private than the Japanese high-context culture. American documents, for example, use visuals that are explicit. For example, Americans are more motivated by seeing photos of the Acura NSX (Table 18) sports car on the race course as opposed to seeing a photograph of the car positioned in front of the house. American document designers show the vehicle on the course, its speed and maneuverability, as opposed to implying its speed and maneuverability. Little is left for the imagination in American visuals. Visuals explain the features of the vehicle, often with the help of tightly integrated complementary text. Thus, the private self is explained through visuals, visuals that a Japanese audience might find conflicting with their harmonious group.

American document designers also have the task of addressing a diverse group. Americans include people from a diverse range of educational and religious backgrounds, which explains why our culture is low-context. Visual communication in the United States is explicit. Text and visuals integrate and work together to bridge the contextual gap. The fact that so many of us have different cultural experiences obligates technical writers to use visuals and text together as a cohesive functioning unit.

## **Application of Document Design Analysis to International Technical Communication**

Technical communicators writing for an international audience can apply much of what is discussed in this thesis to the workplace. Before beginning to design communication for an international audience, communicators must conduct a detailed audience analysis. In this audience analysis, the communicator may survey members of a particular culture or observe members of a particular culture. They may also analyze documents using a document design analysis grid, as was presented and used for the document design analysis in this thesis. By analyzing the design and layout of existing technical documents in the intended culture, the communicator can gather a better understanding of the elements of visual rhetoric present or currently in use in that culture. Also, the communicator may find that he or she should avoid certain types of visuals by analyzing, as demonstrated in this study, the types of visuals commonly used in the culture and the cultural beliefs of potential audience members.

Cultural beliefs should be embraced and respected when designing documents. As demonstrated in this thesis, culture influences the way document designers integrate text and visuals as well as the messages the visuals convey to audience members. Analyzing the photographs used in the Japanese culture became an integral part of this study. Photographs, as Paul Martin Lester writes, reflect on the people and the times (224). In short, images such as photographs, convey messages to a culture and about a culture, as Lester reminds us. In order to understand the visual rhetoric of a culture one must analyze how visuals are integrated into the document and the messages visuals convey to readers. Visual communication has the ability to carry a message to the reader, but only if the visual message is accepted by the viewer.

As the United States becomes more internationalized, technical writers will be increasingly faced with international technical communication—communication across cultural boundaries. Companies will expect technical writers to communicate to overseas audiences, and quite possibly to a high-context culture like Japan. As this shift takes place, the technical communicator must be aware of changing expectations. The technical communicator must understand the importance of cultural influences and must adapt quickly to a new, and possibly unfamiliar, environment. Also, the technical communicator must understand the influence of culture on visual rhetoric. The technical communicator must become an expert in visual communication. Gary Olsen claims that the technical writer or communicator must become an “eideteker” (13). The technical communicator must, in other words, have command of the visual. The technical communicator must learn to deal with the demands of an increasingly visual culture, whether designing documents for American or Japanese readers.

## **Extension of Research in Document Design and Cultural Studies**

The research presented in this thesis may serve as a foundation for future studies in visual communication and culture. This research may also serve as a foundation, or motivational factor, to study culture’s influence on visual rhetoric in online environments. An analysis of culture’s influences on the technical writer’s visual rhetoric cannot simply end here. It takes years to truly understand a culture and its practices, especially in an increasingly visual culture dependant upon electronic media for communication.

This thesis sought to understand culture's influence on visual rhetoric in a strictly print medium. The automotive industry, especially manufacturers based in Japan like Honda Motor Company, depend on Web sites, video demonstrations, and multimedia interactions to sell their product. It is proposed that culture will also influence the way that visuals are used in these different modes of communication. Future research can be extended from the print medium to the electronic medium in order to assess cultural influences on visuals in a virtual environment. Assessment of cultural influences on visual rhetoric in an electronic medium may also yield more complex results, as many companies like Honda consider international users in their designs. A following study might also consider user experiences, as Japanese and American users will react differently to visuals in a virtual environment in real time. A study involving Japanese and American user responses might also yield comprehensive recommendations for revising low-context visual design for use in a high-context culture.

This thesis should serve as the basis for future research on culture and visual rhetoric. By using the research methods and strategies presented in this thesis, a comprehensive study may be possible in an online environment. In a following study, the methodology presented in this thesis may be relevant as well as the results that the study revealed.

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