

# Designing Documents for People to Use

**Abstract** This article reports on the work of Communication Research Institute (CRI), an international research center specializing in communication and information design. With the support of government, regulators, industry bodies, and business – and with the participation of people and their advocates – CRI has worked on over 200 public document design projects since it began as a small unit in 1985. CRI investigates practical methods and achievable standards for designing digital and paper public documents, including forms; workplace procedural notices; bills, letters, and emails sent by organizations; labels and instructions that accompany products and services; and legal and financial documents and contracts. CRI has written model grammars for the document types it designs, and the cumulative data from CRI projects has led to a set of systematic methods for designing public-use documents to a high standard. Through research, design, publishing, and advocacy, CRI works to measurably improve the ordinary documents we all have to use.

## Keywords

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Design diagnostic testing  
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## Introduction

This article arrives at a timely moment in CRI's history (Figure 1). I have been the Director of the Communication Research Institute (CRI) throughout its thirty-three years. My stewardship is now coming to a close, and I look forward to seeing a new generation of information designers take us forward in new directions.

Figure 1 A brief chronology of CRI. Copyright © 2018 by David Sless.



1 David Sless, "Definition of Design: Originating Useful Systems," *Design Methods and Theories* 12, no. 2 (1978): 123–30; David Sless, *Visual Thinking* (Adelaide: Adelaide University, 1978); David Sless, "Image Design and Modification: An Experimental Project in Transforming," *Information Design Journal* 1, no. 2 (1979): 74–80, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/idj.1.2.01sle>; Peter Cairney and David Sless, "Symbol Design and Testing Methodology Project: A Proposed Testing Methodology for Public Information Symbols" (CASSR Technical Paper No. 3, Centre for Applied Social and Survey Research, School of Social Sciences, Flinders University of South Australia, 1979); David Sless, *Learning and Visual Communication* (New York: Croom Helm, 1981); David Sless, "Informing Information Designers," *Icographic* 2, no. 6 (1985): 2–3; David Sless, *In Search of Semiotics* (Totowa: Barnes & Noble, 1986).

This article illustrates some highlights from the institute's work, including major findings from our research, hallmarks of our thinking, and instances of our practice helping organizations improve their communications.

CRI investigates practical methods and achievable standards for designing digital and paper public documents, including forms; workplace procedural notices; bills, letters, and emails sent by organizations; labels and instructions that accompany products and services; and legal and financial documents and contracts. With the support of government, regulators, industry bodies, and business – and the participation of individual people and human advocacy groups – CRI has worked on upwards of two hundred public document design projects. Each new project is an opportunity to improve design methods and standards and also radically transform the ways that humans design and use information. CRI shares its knowledge of good document design methods, standards, and radical transformation for the common good. Where CRI sees poor public document design, it advocates for change.

Through research, design, publishing, and advocacy, CRI works to measurably improve the ordinary. Its work is at its best when it is invisible and widely copied, as you will see in the examples below.

## How Did We Get Here?

### 1983–1985: A Jobbing Printer?

Between 1970 and 1985 I enjoyed a wonderfully fruitful period of research, discovery, invention, and writing<sup>1</sup> during which I articulated some of the new ways of thinking and research in visual communication design and communication more generally. I began to explore the many ways in which these discoveries and inventions could be put to good, practical, social use. My exploration coincided with an invitation from the Australian Government to help improve the quality of official forms destined for public use.

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