

Less is more

by Bill Janke

Conversations on Writing (COW)

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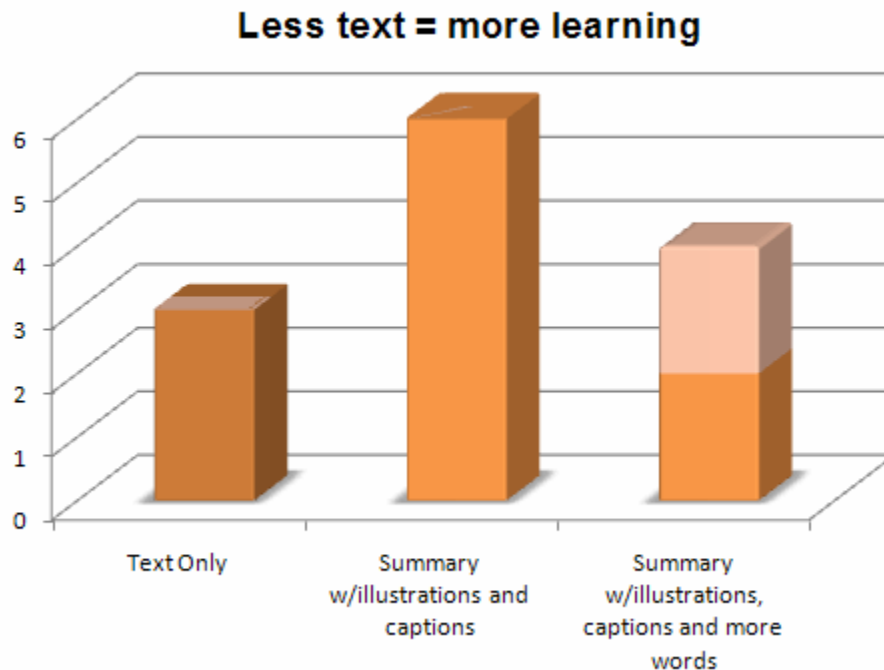
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The next time you want to write a lengthy e-mail message, a letter to the editor, a complaint to a manufacturer, or explain a complex subject – you may want to apply the results from a [study](#) (PDF) published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*.

Writers are inclined to believe that providing lengthy verbal explanations alone are sufficient to satisfy the needs of readers who expect to understand and apply newly-acquired information. After all, the assumption goes, every bit of information needed to perform a task or carry out an assignment is carefully worded down to the last detail in a lengthy passage. All the reader has to do is understand and apply the verbal explanation.

The study showed that learners (college students in this experiment) readily grasp complex subjects and apply the knowledge to solve problems if they are given verbal summaries that are accompanied by annotated illustrations instead of lengthy text-only documents alone. The study also concluded that adding text to the verbal summaries and illustrations actually hurt the learners' abilities to retain and apply the knowledge. Too much information, the authors of the study concluded, resulted in information overload to the learner's ability to pick out the important nuggets of information and use it to solve new problems.

The following illustration shows the relationship between text-only documents and verbal summaries with illustrations.



The study's researchers said writers must include the following elements in their instructional materials:

Conciseness – A few simple illustrations and limited number of words in the verbal explanation. By paying attention to relevant material learners are able to select the relevant words and

images. They are able to build verbal and visual mental representations of the major states of the system.

- Coherence – The visual and verbal explanations are sequenced in a cause-and-effects series of related events. The learner can organize the relevant words and images into respective cause-and-effect chains.
- Coordination – Each step has a visual element accompanied by corresponding explanatory words. The learner can build connections between the visual and verbal representation of the process.

From the study, you may conclude that providing text alone to learners is a bad idea. Actually, having text documents can provide extra value to your learning materials. There are usually some individuals who need the additional detail and will take the time to read it. These individuals include those who need to train or inform others. For the majority of individuals, the verbal summaries and illustrations are sufficient.

About the author

Bill Janke has extensive experience in writing for print and electronic media. His work has appeared in materials for training, documentation, marketing, advertising, and public relations. He works as a technical writer and instructional designer for WAUSAU Financial Systems, Inc. in Omaha, Nebraska. He also enjoys photography and sells his work at art fairs.