What Does a Graphic Designer Do?

You can see the work of graphic designers everywhere you look. But what do graphic designers actually *do*?

Graphic designers use a combination of shapes and forms, words and images, to communicate visually to a specific audience. Think about something that caught your eye recently—a sign, magazine ad, or billboard. What made you stop and look? The words or the image? The message? The colors or size? Whatever it was, it fulfilled the graphic designer's purpose: to communicate with you in a way that clarifies an idea, stirs your interest, or catches your eye. The graphic designer's goal is to get a message across that you'll remember and act upon.

All graphic design has a purpose or a function. Often its purpose is to promote a service or product. Always its intention is to say something, inform, inspire, and influence your choices and your actions.
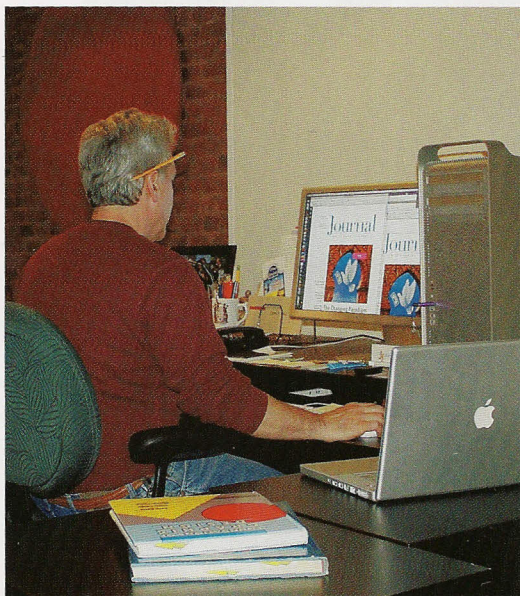
Graphic design, like any of the design professions, is based on human needs, or "problems," and their solutions. As a graphic designer, you might be given problems like these to solve:

- Design a poster advertising a play at a local theater.
- Develop a brochure or web page promoting a travel destination.
- Make a logo or sign for a new organization or business.

To come up with a design solution, graphic designers define an overall theme or direction, combine various visual and verbal elements through sketching and visualization, submit ideas to a client, listen to client responses and address them, and eventually prepare a final solution for printing or broadcast.

The success of any design depends on how well the designer researches, thinks about, and chooses the elements that help communicate the desired message.

Fig. 1–43. Author Kevin Gatta in his design studio.

Fig. 1–44. This logo, developed for the Brooklyn Children's Museum's 90th birthday, was used on many promotional items. Gatta Design & Co, 1987.

Why Is Graphic Design Important?

You've probably seen examples of unsuccessful graphic design. Maybe someone chose the wrong colors for a sign, and you had a hard time reading it. Or maybe you noticed an ad but couldn't understand what it was advertising. When communication fails, the consequences can cause inconvenience, irritation, perhaps even danger.

Today, the number of visual messages you receive every day is probably in the thousands. How many of those messages are clear and effective? How many baffle or annoy you? You may just skip over the ones that you don't understand, but what might you be missing because of an inferior design? If you consider that, you will begin to understand why graphic design is important. Like the design of buildings, products, and landscapes, graphic design has a daily impact on the substance and quality of our lives.

Try It Take a walk through a supermarket, pharmacy, or convenience store. Notice the different sections and the products on the shelves. What products catch your attention first? Which ones do you recognize from a television ad, website pop-up, or magazine? Make a note of the colors you see. Which ones are used most often? Which ones are rarely used? Why do you think designers make the choices they do? Jot down some reasons you can think of.

Fig. 1–45. Under what conditions would a sign like this be especially helpful?

Fig. 1–47. What makes this series of signs confusing?

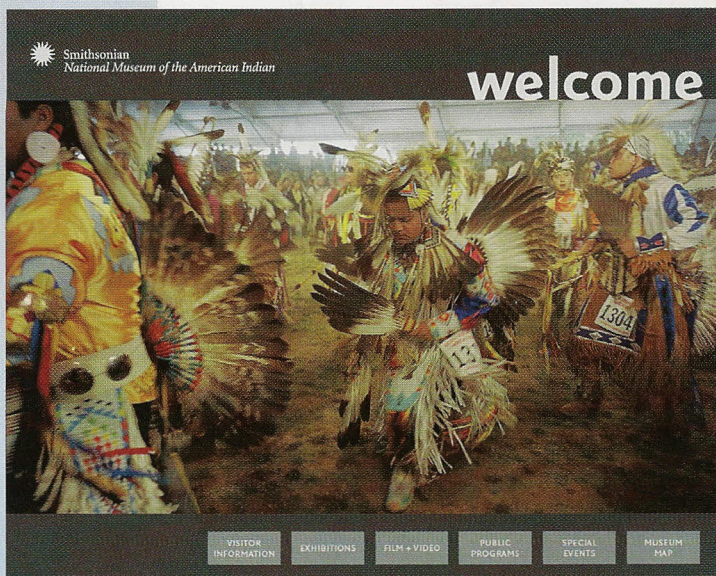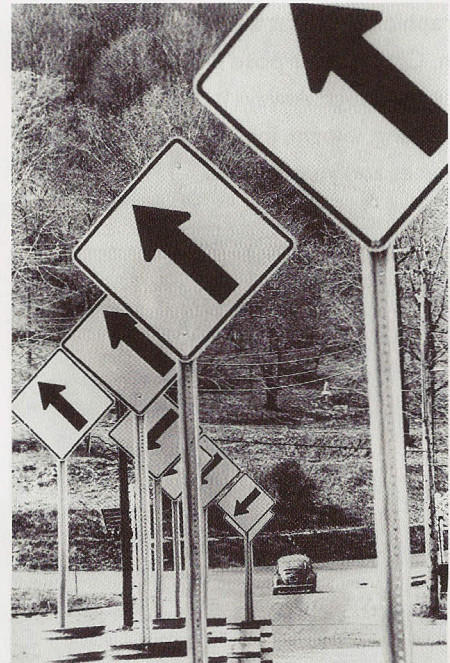

Fig. 1–46. How can a museum website make it easier to plan a visit? Deborah Alden, National Museum of the American Indian website.

The Nuts and Bolts of Graphic Design