

Now it's time for pictures, again

(illustration, picture, figure)

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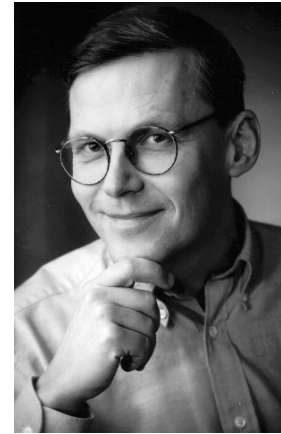
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Hans is an engineer who has worked with technical information and technical training since 1979 as:

- teacher
- manual producer
- technical copywriter
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Amongst the various companies Hans has worked with are international companies such as ABB, Ericsson and Alfa Laval.



First it was pictures, then came the words. Now it's time for pictures again.

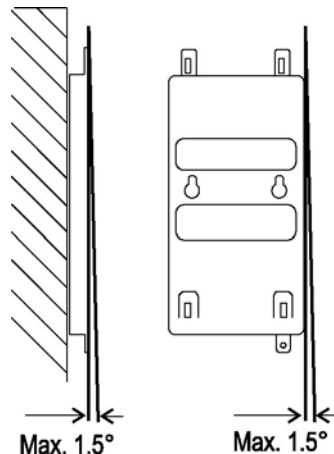
*Human beings are exposed to an increasing amount of instructions. In most cases the person has to **read** these instructions. Unfortunately, reading is both **time consuming** and **intellectually consuming**. We first have to read, then **transform** the instructions to the "graphical environment" – which is our world. A lot of instructions could benefit from replacing the words with pictures.*

Why pictures – test this

One example of how verbal instructions *may be correct* and *well written* but *still fail*, is the following. In an installation instructions it was clearly stated:

2. Check that the mounting plate is mounted exactly vertical. The accuracy must be better than 1.5 degrees to prevent

But because it was *words* disappearing in the rest of the text, only a few installers got the message. Instead, using an illustration, the message was clear and people remembered this installation requirement. This even if they didn't understand the English language.



To remember *words* are difficult. To remember *pictures* are easy.

It was better back in the old days

Back in the stone age, the human being used only illustrations (that is rock carvings) to explain things. Later on, the words became more popular. This because words were easy to produce and easy to print. But from the perceptive point of view, in many cases, the words were inferior to the illustrations.

Why do we prefer writing words?

There are a number of producer-oriented-reasons why people tend to use words when they want to explain something. The environment we work in is very word-oriented and distracts us from seeing what is important.

- It is very easy to type words on a computer. It is more difficult to make an illustration.
- Words are producer neutral. For example the word *carburetor* looks the same regardless of who wrote it. But illustrations are reflecting the producers individual skills. An illustration of a carburetor looks different depending on who made it. This is true at least for today's technology; in the future this might change.
- When we talk about human beings getting instructions from manuals we call them *readers*, not *viewers*. But people are by nature more *viewers* than *readers*. A person watching television or an instruction video is a *viewer*. So why shouldn't he be a *viewer* when he flips through the pages in a manual?
- There are a lot of tools to help formatting texts, like paragraph formats, character formats, SGML, HTML, etc. But there are very few tools for formatting illustrations.
- A person producing technical information is in many languages called a *technical writer*, not a *technical communicator*.

When to use illustrations

- When a task is important, as an alternative to using bold types or NOTE, CAUTION or similar to emphasize.
- When referring to complicated procedures or explaining complex relationships.

A check list of things to consider when making illustrations will be presented together with examples of acceptable and not acceptable illustrations. Some key words: simple, consistent, no gray scale.

Go back to the stone age – don't waste your *viewers* time

Yes, it is easier to write text instead of making pictures. But in order to save time for the receiver – consider illustrations!

