

Can Information Design Save Your Life? Explore the association of wellbeing and personal growth in design. In your discussion, focus on a maximum of three specific areas.

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Can Information Design Save Your Life?

What if the difference between life or death isn't your awareness, your experience or your preparation; but the way information is presented all around you? *Information Design* has been shaping the world around us since we've been able to scratch onto cave walls, helping us as we develop our understanding of it. "In the context of informatization in today's society, information visualization as a new discipline becomes more closely related to the public's life." (Chen and Zhang, 2018). As we can see, the reason behind the visualisation of information comes from the concerns of ourselves and those around us; we as humans crave simplicity, and visualising information is the way to ensure that. Public Safety, Emergency Situations, and Health Communication are just three examples where information design plays a critical part in keeping the public's lives safe. In this essay I will be discussing how, without us realizing, we are programmed to take in all the visual information that surrounds us, and as a result of that our lives are being taken care of, and ultimately being saved.



Fig 1 (Eye Magazine, 2025, Road Sign)

One form of *Information Design*, that is an integral part of keeping us safe in our day-to-day life, is road signs. Specifically, the road signs here in the United Kingdom. Claimed to be the “most ambitious and effective information design projects ever executed in Britain” (The Design Museum, 2025) the redesign of the road and motorway signage by designers Jock Kinneir and Margaret Calvert from 1957 to 1967. But why was Britain in such need of new road signs? According to Paul Stiff (2010) “Existing signs did not meet standards of salience, conspicuity and discriminability, to support drivers’ planning and execution of often safety-critical decisions – at speed, sometimes under adverse conditions.” (Stiff, 2010, p.42). This paints a picture for us as an example where *information design* is incredibly needed in aid of the public’s safety, in addition to the development of society. The government, as well as Kinneir and Calvert, saw a fault in the system and set it upon themselves to refine the country’s road signs. Before the roads, specifically the motorways, became too busy and began to put people in danger.

But how exactly do these sign systems protect us, and how do the design techniques within the signs strengthen their impact? We as a society are bombarded with an invasion of information everyday. Everywhere we go, we are welcomed with new data. In this instance, on a road going at high speeds, it is expected from us to absorb that knowledge incredibly quickly. This is where Kinneir's and Calvert's technical crafts came into play. Their aim was to develop a system that would be as easy as possible for drivers to understand, given that these signs are delivering very important information. To achieve this, they took quite a scientific approach, and as Calvert mentioned in an article for the Design Museum "Style never came into it. You were driving towards the absolute essence." (Montgomery, 2015). In this article by Montgomery, it is shown to us exactly how much time, effort and thought was put into these signs; to ensure that lives are safe on our roads. When it came to the design itself, they experimented and found out it was more effective for them to mix upper and lower-case letters. According to Calvert "this is to aid word recognition, which is quicker in mixed-case words than in reading individual capital letters." (Montgomery, 2015). Also mentioned in this article is how both Calvert and Kinneir would test their signs by driving past them at 60mph in the rain at night. This shows their dedication as well as their trust into the signs. If they are happy enough to put the safety of their own lives in the hands of the signs; they clearly have the lives of the public at the forefront of their minds when designing this project. Showing us exactly the importance of *information design* when it comes to the safety of the public.

A different form of *information design* within the road safety world are the green and red men on a pedestrian crossing. A more subtle form of *information design*, given that it is

solely reliant on visuals and doesn't include any additional text. "Effective graphic visuals in signs and symbols for transporters and road users rank very high as the basic requirement and concepts needed for the appropriate execution of our daily tasks." (Bankole, 2013). It is effectively semiotically imprinted into our brains from a very young age that a green man walking directs us to cross a road, and a still red man indicates that it isn't safe for us to move; it may seem obvious, but that is because it has been part of society for so long that we instinctively understand it's meaning. All because of the use of 'effective graphic visuals in signs and symbols'. It might seem that it doesn't directly save one's life, however, streets have become increasingly busier; something as simple as two pictograms of green and red men can conduct the actions of the public, and in effect, saving lives.



Fig 2 (FMC Fire, 2022, Fire Exit Sign)

Emergency situations are another major area where *information design* can create a big impact on the public's safety. In moments of crisis, people are stressed and overwhelmed, which makes information harder to process. We're all familiar with the

phrase “in case of emergency”, followed by a plethora of overcomplicated instructions that are supposed to help keep ourselves safe, but only add to the confusion. This is exactly where effective *information design* becomes all important. A strong example of a piece of visual information that is effectively reliable in the event of an emergency; is the Fire Exit sign. A pictogram accessible to everyone, regardless of their language or literacy ability, the fire exit sign has become an integral part of guaranteeing safety in an emergency situation in any public building. “The ability to use signage information to wayfind and determine the location of facilities within buildings is an important component in the successful use of the space” (Kiori, 2019). A direct quote from Ashish Kiori that exactly explains the importance of signs such as the fire exit sign in a building in general, let alone when there is an emergency in action.

But how exactly is this sign so effective? Similarly to the green and red men on the pedestrian crossing, it is all to do with semiotics, a very important element of *information design*. Semiotics; a subject that has been decoded by many key thinkers, with ones such as Roland Barthes stating “... he grasps the meaning of these representations before he is able to analyze the ways in which that meaning is constructed (Leak, 1994, p.4) in context to the subject, which shows us how complex it really is. However, in context to our analysis it really is just “the academic field dedicated to the study of signs” (Herbert, 2019, p.273). In this case, the fire exit sign. Semiotically, we’ve been raised to know that ‘green = go’, a clear sign that it is safe to start moving. In an act of evacuation, that is exactly the message you want everyone to receive, to be up and moving as quickly as possible. The symbol of the running man is also an integral part of the design, using a pictogram to make it instantly recognizable – especially to people

with low literacy skills, whether that be because they speak a different language or they have issues that impede their literacy. “Without a universal design approach, certain groups risk exclusion from crisis communication, which affects both their well-being and overall social resilience”. (Aryana, Osvalder and Stark, 2024, p.74). This really highlights the importance of universally understood *information design*, because not only does it affect their well-being and social resilience to be able to feel included and understand the information around them, but it could also save their lives to have the ability to understand such important and crucial instructions; such as the fire exit sign.

Another example of important *information design* if an emergency occurs is Airplane safety cards. In situations where lives depend on simplicity, every design choice matters. Airplane safety cards are among the most refined examples of information design. Their task is simple yet unforgiving: to convey life-saving procedures instantly, across languages and cultures, especially in moments of panic. In a study done by Wen Zhao from the Civil Aviation University of China on the ‘Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Aircraft Cabin Safety Briefing’, we can find research being done on the importance of visual instructions on Cabin Safety briefing cards. It also highlights their significance when it comes to international understanding, no matter what language you speak. “The underlying assumption is that pictorials and pictograms, unlike text, will be universally understood” (2024). The conclusion reached amplifies how much thought goes behind these cards to make sure they work effectively, so much needs to be considered; this study has researched into how each single element in these cards has an undeniable purpose and job to do.

The interplay between these modalities – through representational, interactive, and compositional meanings – enables safety briefing cards to convey critical information with clarity and precision. The findings underscore the necessity of intersemiotic complementarity, where visual elements, such as pictograms and symbols, alongside textual instructions, are used to ensure accurate communication of safety procedure (2024)

Something that stood out in this study was their focus on the added element of textual instructions added alongside the visuals. Despite focusing on how important it is that people of different language abilities can also understand these instructions, in this research Zhao (2024) proves that textual elements provide essential supplementary clarification, even though visual elements have become increasingly prominent in airplane safety cards, driving their evolution as primary conveyors of meaning.

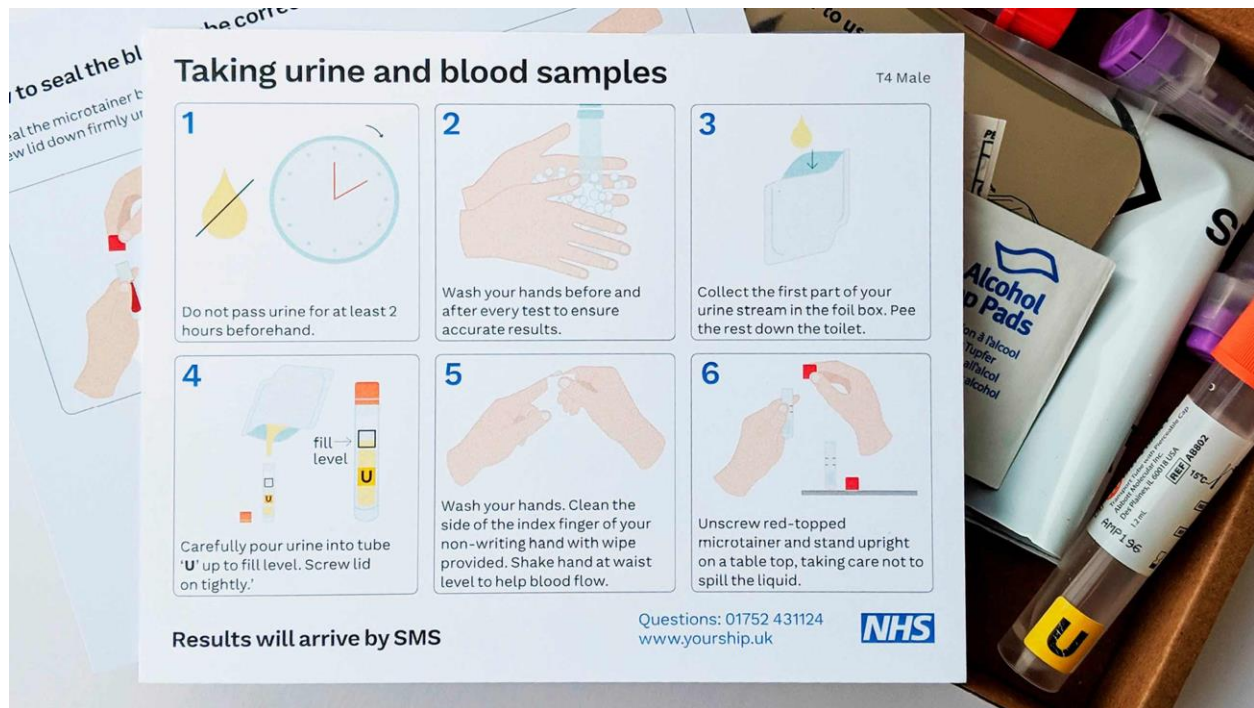


Fig 3 (Design Science, 2025, NHS Sexual Health Centre STI home testing kits)

Health Communication is another significant field where *information design* plays a very important role in saving people's lives. This could refer to many different aspects of the

health industry; however, I'm going to be specifically focusing on the influence of visuals being included in the instructions that come with different medical products. Whether that is on prescribed medication or on the back of self-conducted testing kits, when providing medical assistance to oneself, it is important that everyone - regardless of medical experience - can understand exactly what they are doing. Especially since they are simply trying to save their lives by doing so. "The presentation of content can affect how users access and process it ... Design should support how humans naturally perceive, comprehend and learn information." (Misra R et al., 2010).

The most commonly thought of form of *information design* within health communication is the instructions of self-conducted testing kits, given that most of these kits use a step-by-step system that includes very detailed commands. But how do they achieve this all-important communication? Let's take a look at STI testing kits specifically as an example: a way to help people detect infections early, allowing them to receive timely treatment and prevent serious long-term health complications, ultimately saving lives. In the book '*Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?*', one design project focused on is the SH:24 STI testing kit, a product derived from an online sexual health service that works in partnership with the NHS. As an organization, they understand the strain that comes with having to take an STI test, whether that is because of embarrassment or struggling to understand how to use it. They have their ways to tackle all these types of problems, but with the use of design thinking, they are able to make the instructions as simple as possible to understand. "Our instructions, influenced by observation and user tips, have enabled a 76-84% return rate, with over 90% completing the blood test." (SH:24, 2017, p.121). This is a very significant statistic because it proves the effect design has on life

saving products, such as STI testing kits. With an increased number of people understanding and feeling comfortable following the instructions on the kits – all because of the designed diagrams provided for them to follow – more cases can be cured, which leads to enhanced well-being and life expectancy, therefore saving lives.

However, there are many other examples where *information design* impacts health communication to a great extent. Epinephrine Auto-Injectors (EpiPens) are one of many other cases where *information design* gets involved in saving lives. Arguably a far more obvious lifesaving product that requires quick action during life-threatening allergic reactions; a high-stake situation where people's senses and ability to take in important information may become less effective. Another prime example where the role of *information design* hugely affects the effectiveness of a medical product used in an important situation. In a study done by Sam Mehr, Marnie Robinson, and Mimi Tang on the incapability of parents and children when it comes to using an EpiPen, we are shown exactly the importance of clear and direct instructions on products such as the EpiPen. "If parents/children receive no or incorrect information regarding the pen's administration and there is no opportunity for repeated review of their technique, then they will continue to be inadequately prepared to manage any subsequent anaphylactic reactions" (2007). In the study we see an alarming number of participants unable to correctly use the EpiPen, "Despite 95% of doctors reading the instruction on the EpiPen trainer, only 41% proceeded to demonstrate the remaining steps required for proper administration" (2007), this could possibly be because they had to 'read the instructions' rather than seeing them visually in a clear diagram. Given that this study was released in 2007, the development of the instructions on EpiPens has only improved. As

described on the EpiPen official website, they include “Illustrations of 3 steps and associated image for ease of administration” (2025). This supports the idea that *information design* has incredible effect on the ease of understanding given directions, especially in high stake situations where every second counts but also every instruction needs to be entirely computed for it to work effectively.

Overall, it is evident that *information design*, as well as influencing the development of civilization, is also a critical factor in life-saving outcomes. Without the public realizing, carefully thought-out designs are all around us and are crucial parts of our lives, existing for the sole purpose of saving lives and improving the quality of life. Whether that is on a carefully curated sheet of instructions or as big informational signs dotted around us as we go about our lives. *Information Design* can inform, educate, promote and persuade; in this instance, all in aid of saving lives.

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