Boxes and Arrows

Paul M. Muchinsky*
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

I suppose I was in undergraduate school the first time I saw one. A professor of a psychology class wrote two words on the blackboard. I don’t recall the exact words, but they were something like “personality” and “behavior.” The words were written about two feet apart on the blackboard. Then the professor did the neatest thing. He drew a box around each word and then drew an arrow from one box to the other. The students were told we were looking at a “model.” Words are words, but when you draw a box around them and connect the boxes with arrows, you have a model. There is something both inclusionary and exclusionary about a model. Whatever is inside a box can’t get out, and whatever is outside a box can’t get in. Like a dog that marks its territory with urine, a box stakes out turf.

As the years went by I saw increasingly more of these models. With each passing year they seemingly got more elaborate. I can tell you one thing for sure: Journal editors just love these things. The more boxes and arrows you’ve got, the more they like it. I saw one the other day that had so many boxes and arrows it looked like a plate of spaghetti. I studied the creative process and discovered it is a lot more complex than the old two-box-one-arrow model I first saw many years ago. Let me articulate the ingredients for this recipe.

We start with the boxes. There are three types.

1. □ This is your basic solid box. It is like a Ford or Chevrolet. Not elegant, but it gets the job done. Solid boxes are like double-A batteries—you can never have too many within reach.

2. □ This is your bold box. Whatever goes in a bold box is really important. Your eye is drawn to the boldness of the box. It says, “Notice me.”

3. [Dashed Box] This is your dashed box. Dashed boxes are not as important as bold boxes or even solid boxes. They have a peek-a-boo quality to them. They are like supporting actors in a play—good enough to get a few scattered lines, but that’s about it.

*Unamused, indifferent, or entertained readers can contact the author at pmmuchin@uncg.edu.
Now come the arrows. There are more types of arrows than boxes.

1. \[\longrightarrow\] This is your basic straight arrow. Nothing fancy here. You know what they say about the shortest distance between two points.

2. \[\rightarrow\] This is your corner arrow. Corner arrows speak with authority and certainty. The corner angle is always 90°. The angle is never acute or oblique. Corner arrows mean business.

3. \[\rightarrow\] This is your hiccup arrow. It looks like someone hiccupped when trying to draw a straight arrow. Hiccup arrows are relatively rare, but they are unmistakable when you see one.

4. \[\rightarrow\] This is your snake arrow. I’m not sure what function it serves, but no self-respecting model is complete without at least one of them. For some reason snake arrows are attracted to dashed boxes.

5. \[\longleftrightarrow\] This is your double-headed arrow. It reminds me of a train that has an engine on both ends. You never know which way the train will go. I always thought double-headed arrows had a duplicitous quality to them.

6. \[\longleftrightarrow\] This is your dashed arrow. Dashed arrows grow up to become straight arrows. We are protective of dashed arrows because we know they cannot fend for themselves. We don’t like dashed arrows to stray too far from solid boxes.

I was never very good at the boxes-and-arrows thing. Oh, I dabbled in them over the years, but I never got the hang of it. It always seemed to me that any moron could splash a bunch of boxes across a page, and then connect the boxes with different types of arrows. But I know there is more, a lot more, to the process than that. The other day I decided I wanted to publish my own model. Recognizing my limitations, I decided to subcontract the whole affair to someone more skilled than I. So I pulled into the drive-up lane of Models ‘R Us to get one. A voice crackled over the intercom, “Can I take your order?” I replied, “Yes, I’d like a six box model. I want three solid, two bold, and one dashed.” I was then asked about my choice of arrows. I said, “I’d like nine arrows—two straight, two corner, one hiccup, one snake, one double-headed, and two dashed.” “You want fries with that?” the voice asked. “No,” I replied. I was then instructed to proceed to the pick-up window. I did so and got the first glimpse of my model. It was a beauty! I’ll give you a sneak peak at my little baby.
Isn’t she something special? I’m one proud poppa! Next I will write some words in the boxes. Then I will test the model, so I can write some little numbers alongside the arrows. I can’t wait! After that, I will try to publish it. I have an idea where I will submit it for publication. I was standing in line at the supermarket the other day where I saw a magazine that had a feature on the top 10 supermodels. I’m not sure if my model is super, but I’ll let the editor be the judge of that.

I was so excited about my model, I called up a colleague who is a real pro at pumping these things out. If there ever was a consummate boxes-and-arrows guy, it is him. I wanted him to tell me what exactly this whole boxes-and-arrows thing really is that he is so good at.

Me: “Is it graphic design?”
Colleague: “No.”
Me: “Is it artistic layout?”
Colleague: “No.”
Me: “Would you call it symbol arrangement?”
Colleague: “No.”
Me: “I give up. So what do you call it?”
Colleague: “Science.”

Recently my hometown newspaper ran an ad about a local hobby shop that is going out of business. It is having a liquidation sale on hobby supplies, including models. I think I’ll swing by the store and pick up a bunch of boxes and arrows. If I really get bit by the model building bug I don’t want to be caught short of supplies.