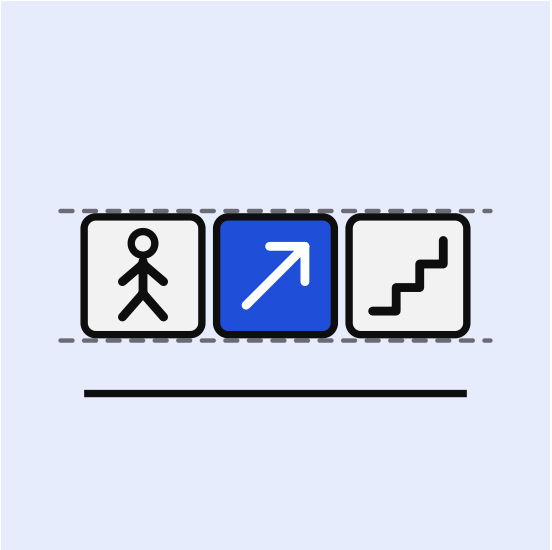
Specialty

Pictograms and iconography

Designs simple graphic signs (pictograms and icons) that stand for an object, an action or an idea, and that are understood without reading or knowing the language.



In Spanish

Pictogramas e iconografía

Origin

Otto Neurath and his team's Isotype (Vienna, from the 1920s); Aicher (Munich, 1972); AIGA (1974)

What problem it addresses

In an airport, a hospital or on a screen, many people don't read the local language or don't have time to read. A poorly drawn sign gets confused or isn't understood.

Principles

Reduce

Only the features needed to recognize the thing.

One family

The same stroke weight, angles and grid in every sign of the system.

Measure whether it's understood

It is tested with people who have never seen the sign before.

Applications in design

✓ Use it like this

Draw every sign with the same rules for stroke weight, angle and grid, and test each one with people who don't know it.

✗ Avoid

Relying on a sign alone for abstract or unusual messages; add text.

Don't fall for it

What's obvious to the team isn't obvious to everyone: if fewer than half of people understand a sign, redesign it or add a word.

Connections

Builds on

- Semiotics

Related to

- Information design
- Environmental graphic design
- Wayfinding design

Authors and works

1936	**Otto Neurath**	With his team in Vienna, created a system of figures to explain social data to any audience; first called the Vienna method, it later became Isotype.
2009	**Marie Neurath and Robin Kinross**	Explained the work of the "transformer", who turns information into a clear image. Marie Neurath was Isotype's principal transformer.
1972	**Otl Aicher and Gerhard Joksch**	Designed the pictograms for the Munich Olympic Games with geometric shapes on a grid of 45- and 90-degree angles.
1974	**AIGA**	With the U.S. Department of Transportation, reviewed the symbols used around the world and published 34 signs for stations and airports, now free to use.
1980	**Neil D. Lerner and Belinda L. Collins**	Asked 91 adults to write what 25 fire-safety symbols meant: correct answers ranged from 97.8% for the best to 2.2% for the worst.

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Last reviewed: October 30, 2026

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