

Designing for Clarity

Graphic Design Tips for Non-Graphic Designers

Welcome to Designing for Clarity: Graphic design tips for non-designers.

This session is an overview of practical, “use on Monday”, design advice and tips for people without a graphic design background. Obviously, the intended audience is people who are graphic design beginners, but there’s also value for people who have experience with graphic design and are looking for ways to explain these concepts to beginners.

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A story about hats....

I'd like to start with a story about why design and clarity matter. It's a story about hats.

Last fall I took a hat making class, not for anything vital, just for fun. I had some sewing experience, but no hat making experience in the slightest. The course description didn't indicate I needed anything other than that, so I thought I'd be fine. Unfortunately, the class instructor wasn't used to teaching beginners, and it was her first time teaching the class. So wouldn't you know it, the instruction handout we received for our first assignment looked something like this:

Instructions

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Now, I'm using placeholder text instead of the actual instructions I received to avoid copyright issues. This is Lorem Ipsum text. It's gibberish that sort of looks like Latin that's used to block out where you'll eventually put your real text. It gives you a sense of how a layout with text will look, but it's all nonsense words.

I'll be honest though, the instructions were pretty much as incomprehensible as this fake Latin. It was just blocks and blocks of text. No categories, no numbering of steps, no diagrams: just text. You might hope that each paragraph was it's own step, but you'd be disappointed. Each paragraph was made of a number of steps which, to a classroom of beginners, just made it all the more easy to accidentally skip or misread steps. I'll admit, this was deeply intimidating and not easy to follow.

So, as a class, we begged for more clarity. The instructor finally agreed and made one small design change that made it substantially easier to follow:

Instructions

1. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Etiam et est nulla. Cras eu ipsum metus. In euismod pulvinar fringilla. Phasellus porta egestas enim, a adipiscing lacus sodales vel. Integer odio ligula, vehicula in scelerisque in, facilisis ac nibh.
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4. Sed ultricies, eros sit amet rutrum luctus, nibh orci rutrum leo, non vestibulum nisi ipsum at libero. Nulla commodo arcu id mi eleifend semper.
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6. Etiam eu metus nibh. Morbi vestibulum, purus eu pellentesque vestibulum, arcu sem dignissim dui, quis gravida lacus eros et libero.
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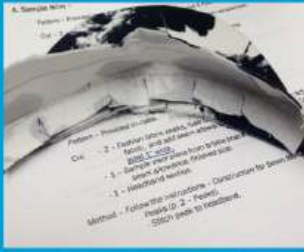
She numbered the steps.

That was it, just one simple design change and the assignment was substantially clearer and easier to complete.

But what if she had made a few more basic changes?

Instructions

1



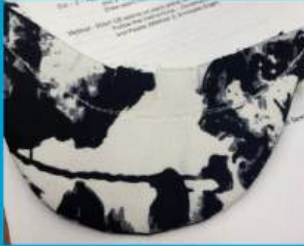
Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Etiam et est nulla. Cras eu ipsum metus. In euismod pulvinar fringilla. Phasellus porta egestas enim, a adipiscing lacus sodales vel. Integer odio ligula, vehicula in scelerisque in, facilisis ac nibh.

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3



Maecenas pellentesque, ligula eu ultricies luctus, magna elit pretium augue, ut placerat erat tortor in nisi. Phasellus sollicitudin neque ac felis vulputate vestibulum vel at sem. Morbi adipiscing vestibulum lacus, eu dictum nulla laoreet et.

Add a few more design elements and you have a substantially clearer set of instructions.

The reason I'm sharing this story is to show just how big a difference using a few simple design rules can make. Careful design and layout is incredibly effective at simplifying your message and making it understood easily.

This is valuable in any field, but particularly so in ours. If there are design rules that can help to better understand content, and even feel less intimidated, frustrated, or just plain bored by the experience, then we should absolutely take advantage of them.

“But I’m not a **designer**”

“But I’m not a designer,” you say.

That’s okay. Basic design is a skill that anyone can learn with a bit of practice. And that’s what we’re going to begin in this session.

Today I’m going to walk you through some basic, “use on Monday” design advice. That’s right, we’re skipping theory and diving right into things you can use immediately. These practical tips can be used to take any project, from a simple handout to a smartphone app, and make it easier for others to understand and interact with. Consider this your design training wheels.

The advice in this session isn’t going to make you a graphic designer overnight, but it will give you some basic design rules to use that you can use immediately much trouble and then continue to build on as you become more and more comfortable with design.

A pre-warning: in some cases I’m going to give you rules that you’ve seen designers break over and over again. That’s because the advice you’re getting today is the simplified, un-risky basics. They’re hard to mess up, even as a beginner. It’s not that I’m advocating for never taking any risks, but when you’re getting started it’s more effective to stick to some basic rules you know work every time.

General Advice

Typeface

Graphics

Layout

Let's get started. We're going to break down tips for clear and concise design into 4 areas:

- General advice
- Typeface
- Graphics
- Layout

General Advice

*Let's start at the
very beginning...*

Let's start with some basics that should come at the beginning of any project, no matter what you're designing.



Consider your audience

You need to start by considering your audience.

What makes up “good design” isn’t the same for everyone. That’s why it’s important to begin any design project, honestly any project in general, by thinking of who the final audience is. For instance, if you’re designing an instruction manual for experts, your audience may appreciate having more information on each page to make it easier to search through quickly. If you’re designing that same document for beginners, though, a great deal of information on each page might be intimidating.

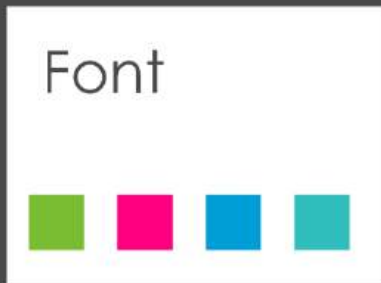
Let the needs and preferences of your audience guide all of the design decisions you make.



Consider the medium

Next, consider the medium (or mediums) your project will be delivered in. Think about it, something that's designed to look good as a large poster isn't going to look great as a PDF on a smartphone.

There are real strengths and limitations to every way we display information, so clear design means taking these into account at the beginning of the process.



Stay consistent!

Finally, stay consistent. When you make a design choice, use that same choice throughout the entire project, and even on related materials if you can. This makes all of your items look like they belong together. It's also easier on your audience.

Think about it. If, say, you use a particular font and colour for a subtopic title on the first page of a textbook, your audience is going to expect that pattern throughout the entire book. We're humans. We like patterns. If you change it half way through, it's incredibly confusing. Keep things simple by being consistent.

Typeface

*Just promise me you
won't use **Comic Sans***

Now that we've got the general advice down, let's get a bit more specific and turn to the actual lettering that you use in your work: typeface.

Century Gothic
Cooper Black
Vivaldi
Georgia
Trebuchet
Broadway
Book Antiqua

So what exactly is a typeface? Simply put, a typeface is a set of characters that share common design features. Right now you're looking at seven different examples of typefaces.

If you're not a graphic designer, you're probably more used to calling typefaces "fonts". Technically, that term is incorrect, but no one here is going to kick you out for using it.

What's important to notice here is that each typeface has its own unique aesthetic, or flavour. The look and feel of a typeface gives a very specific impression, and you can use this in order to influence how people perceive what you've designed. For instance, the thin and simple lines of Century Gothic come across as sophisticated, Cooper Black's rounded ends makes it feel a bit more casual, and Broadway is instantly reminiscent of old plays and musicals.

Make sure the typeface you choose reinforces the image you're trying to convey.

TITLE

Here's some text, but it's way too small for most of you to read. Too bad!

Let's put a bunch of text here with some important directions but put them in a typeface that's too fussy to read for very long. That should be fun.

Am I a heading? A sub-heading? A new topic? Who knows?

- I'm a very important point
- Am I a related point? The list makes it seem like I am, but why am I in a different typeface?
- **I'M ALSO IN A DIFFERENT TYPEFACE. IS THERE A REASON FOR THAT?**
- I'm in the same typeface as the first bullet. Is that significant?

More tiny text. Aren't you excited?

Typeface is unfortunately one of those things that people sometimes go a bit crazy on when they're trying to make something look more "designed". I'm sure you've all seen documents that look like this. It's chaotic, hard to read, and not particularly professional looking. There are some easy rules, though, that can help you avoid a mess like this.

Structure Types

Serif

Typefaces themselves are organized into a few broad groups based on their design features. For the sake of this session I'm keeping it simple by putting everything into 3 larger groups. This is the point where anyone who knows anything about typography will insist that there are more than just 3 categories. They're right. But when you're starting out, sorting typefaces into just these three broad structure categories will help you make better decisions about which to use:

Structure Types



Serif

First we have serif typefaces. What defines a serif typeface?

It has simple-looking letters with these caps on the ends of each character called, you guessed it, serifs. Serif typefaces are typically thought of as the easiest to read when printed, although that fact is up for debate.

Structure Types



Sans Serif

Next up is sans serif. A sans serif typeface is recognizable because..

While it also has simple letter design, each character *doesn't* have serifs. That's easy enough to remember, especially if you know any French. Because sans serif letters have a simpler design, they're typically thought of as the easiest category of typeface to read for digital projects.

Structure Types

Fancy

Script & Decorative

Finally, we have a very broad category that, for the sake of this presentation, we're going to call "Fancy". This category consists of typefaces that are highly stylized or look like script. They typically have a more decorative flair than your serif and sans serif letters, but they're also not nearly as readable. Because of this it's good to use them sparingly, such as for titles or headings.

Using Typefaces Together

Too Different

Typeface 1

Typeface 2

Typeface 3

Typeface 4

Too Similar

Typeface 1

Typeface 2

Typeface 3

Typeface 4

Mixing a large number of wildly different typefaces together just looks chaotic. Mixing very similar typefaces from the same structure type also looks odd.

Using Typefaces Together

1 Serif
1 Sans Serif

That's why when you're starting out an easy rule is to choose just 2 typefaces for your entire project: a serif and a sans serif. Use one for titles or headings, and the other for your body text and you'll have a safe combination nearly every time.

Size

12 pt
18 pt
28 pt
40 pt
54 pt
72 pt
96 pt

Typeface size is typically measured in points. Size will dictate what people look at first. The larger something is, the more people will perceive it as important.

What you want to do is use size to your advantage to organize your content.

Lorem ipsum

Dolor sit amet.

consectetur adipiscing elit. Etiam et est nulla. Cras eu ipsum metus. In euismod pulvinar fringilla. Phasellus porta egestas enim, a adipiscing lacus sodales vel. Integer odio ligula, vehicula in scelerisque in, facilisis ac nibh. Praesent a eros dui, molestie feugiat ipsum. Nam neque tellus, interdum gravida feugiat at, facilisis eu lectus. Vestibulum ante ipsum primis in faucibus orci luctus et ultrices posuere cubilia Curae; Duis lorem felis, euismod id feugiat a, laoreet sit amet nunc.

Maecenas pellentesque

Ligula eu ultricies luctus, magna elit pretium augue, ut placerat erat tortor in nisi. Phasellus sollicitudin neque ac felis vulputate vestibulum vel at sem. Morbi adipiscing vestibulum lacus, eu dictum nulla laoreet et. Sed ultricies, eros sit amet rutrum luctus, nibh orci rutrum leo, non vestibulum nisi ipsum at libero. Nulla commodo arcu id mi eleifend semper. Aliquam dignissim vestibulum justo vel ornare.

In a ligula nec orci fringilla cursus.

Ut accumsan commodo erat

At tempus mi tristique eget. Duis a nisi leo. Mauris scelerisque risus non augue tempus varius. Phasellus id mauris leo, quis tempor sem.

For instance, here's some text that's vaguely organized in layout. You can sort of see what might be headers and titles, but you have to work at it a bit.

Lorem ipsum

Dolor sit amet.

consectetur adipiscing elit. Etiam et est nulla. Cras eu ipsum metus. In euismod pulvinar fringilla. Phasellus porta egestas enim, a adipiscing lacus sodales vel. Integer odio ligula, vehicula in scelerisque in, facilisis ac nibh. Praesent a eros dui, molestie feugiat ipsum. Nam neque tellus, interdum gravida feugiat at, facilisis eu lectus. Vestibulum ante ipsum primis in faucibus orci luctus et ultrices posuere cubilia Curae; Duis lorem felis, euismod id feugiat a, laoreet sit amet nunc.

Maecenas pellentesque

Ligula eu ultricies luctus, magna elit pretium augue, ut placerat erat tortor in nisi. Phasellus sollicitudin neque ac felis vulputate vestibulum vel at sem. Morbi adipiscing vestibulum lacus, eu dictum nulla laoreet et. Sed ultricies, eros sit amet rutrum luctus, nibh orci rutrum leo, non vestibulum nisl ipsum at libero. Nulla commodo arcu id mi eleifend semper. Aliquam dignissim vestibulum justo vel ornare.

In a ligula nec orci fringilla cursus.

Ut accumsan commodo erat

At tempus mi tristique eget. Duis a nisi leo. Mauris scelerisque risus non augue tempus varius. Phasellus id mauris leo, quis tempor sem.

Now here's the exact same text and the exact same layout, but I've increased the size of the headings and subheadings.

You'll notice that I'm using a consistent size for the headings, as well as a different, but also consistent size for the subheadings. This consistency helps the brain find patterns.

When you're trying to use typeface size to your advantage, be sure to make the font sizes *noticeably* different. If you use similar font sizes, such as 12 point for the regular text and 14 point for the title, people will have a much harder time noticing the difference, if they even notice it at all. To use size well, you should be able to instantly see the size difference.

Dax - Light
Dax - Regular
Dax - Bold
Dax - ExtraBold
Dax - Black

Weight

Since I'm telling you not to use more than two typefaces, you may worry about things looking sort of boring. Don't worry: you can mix things up a bit with weight. Weight refers to how wide or skinny the lines that make up each letter are. Thankfully many professional typefaces have multiple weights, as shown here in BMO's Dax font. Even if you're just using the default typefaces that come with your software, you can get different weight by using the Bold function.

Because you're essentially using variations on a theme, you can use multiple weights on one document without it looking messy. The only thing you want to keep in mind is, once again, consistency. Much like size, keep how you use each weight consistent. If you decide to use a bold versions of a typeface for one heading, use it for all headings.

Tired

Times New Roman

Arial

Ugly

Comic Sans

Papyrus

Finally, some typefaces come with a lot of emotional baggage, and because of this you'll want to avoid using them. There's two reasons for that. First, there's overexposure. Typefaces like Times New Roman and Arial are so ubiquitous that people are tired of seeing them. They seem tired and old to people.

The other reason is aesthetics. Some typefaces, like Comic Sans and Papyrus, have been deemed just plain ugly by the design community. That judgment is easily passed on to anything you make using them, so it's best to avoid them completely.

Graphics

*Because you can't just slap
Screen Beans on it and call it a day*

Now that we've got the basics of typeface down, let's move to the other thing you immediately see when you look at a project: graphics.



WELCOME TO THE PRESENTATION!

Here's some red text on a green background.
Hooray.

And here's some hard to read yellow text on a white background. It's almost unreadable.



What we're trying to avoid is this sucker here. Tired clip art, random graphics, tiny graphics, text colours that interfere with readability, no noticeable colour scheme. I'd like to pretend I haven't seen things that look this bad, but that would sadly be a lie.

The secret to cleaning this up is to just keep things simple, which actually makes things a lot easier for you in the long run.



Choosing Colours

First we should talk about colour.

Like typefaces, if you use a bunch of different colours haphazardly it ends up looking messy, and sometimes even nauseating. The best way to keep your colours in order is to use a set colour palette. That's a small selection of specific colours that you use consistently throughout your entire document. For example, the rectangles on this screen represent the colour palette I used for this presentation.

Select a few colours that look good together, all used consistently, and you're set. There are going to be some people here that feel very comfortable putting together colour combinations on their own, but for everyone else there are some great shortcuts.

Sources



Physical items

Here are some easy ways to put together a colour palette that just works:

One option is to look at things around you for ideas. For those of you who have company logos or websites, that's a good place to start if you want colours that reinforce your company image. If you want to branch out more though, there are sources for ideas everywhere. For instance, I got my initial idea for the colour scheme in this presentation from one of my favourite skirts. Pick something that seems well designed, be it a photo, book cover, cereal box, or your laptop bag.

Sources



Pre-Created Palettes

Another option is to take advantage of pre-created palettes. These are, as it sounds, colour schemes that other people have put together for you. If you use any Microsoft Office products you'll likely be familiar with the colour scheme sets that come standard with the software. They're actually pretty decent. Another option, though, is websites that curate colour palettes. The image here is from a site called Design Seeds. The designer for this site selects a photo for inspiration and then puts together colour palettes based around the dominant colours in the image. Sites like this can be a great way of finding colour sets put together by experts.

Finally, you can always try a palette generator website. On these sites you choose an image that has colours you think work well with your project, upload it to the site, and the site quickly generates a palette based on predominant colours from the image.

Choosing Images



Moving on from colour, we now need to look at actually *choosing* images.



Image Quality

The first thing you need to consider is quality. There are a number of ways an image can be low quality.

There's quality of the image file itself. A small image stretched large eventually looks blurry. If an image looks blurry at the size you need it to be, you should always replace it with one that's crisp.



Image Quality

Also, taking an image and warping it to fit a space also lowers its quality. You're better off cropping the image to make it the right size or, once again, choosing an image that's already a similar size to the area you're trying to fill.



Image Quality

Next, there's also the quality of the subject matter. An image that doesn't have a strong connection to your subject matter, or any connection at all, just gets in the way of clarity. I have yet to think of a situation in which this particular image, a personal favourite of mine from the Microsoft Office images library, would ever have a strong connection to a topic. I'm open to suggestions though.



Image Quality

Finally, don't forget that an image that's overused loses impact and should be avoided. Things like these Screen Beans guys or pictures of people shaking hands in front of a globe are so overused that they'll appear trite or hokey to your audience. Avoid them at all costs.



You also want to consider the number of images you use.

In most cases, less is more.



It's better to have one fantastic picture than a bunch of okay ones. It also looks more focused and sleek to the viewer. Magazine layouts or advertising posters can be a great example of this.

Size



The size of the images you use is also important. People are often afraid of letting the image take over a large area of a document, so they keep them tiny like this example.

Size



If you've picked a good image, it will make more of an impact if you give it a large amount of space. One again, look to magazines and ads to see this at work.

Sources

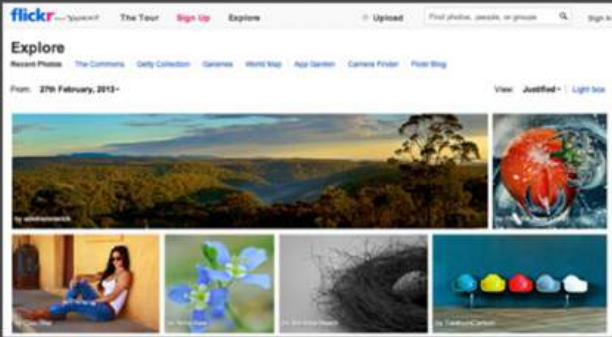


Stock Photo Sites

You know that high quality images are important, but where can you go to find cheap and easy sources for them?

Stock photo sites are a good place to start. They're relatively cheap ways to purchase the rights to professionally created images. They've also got fantastic search engines that allow you to look for specific image types, layouts, and even colour schemes. The trick to using these sites is to be very picky about the images you choose. You want the image you pick to be deeply relevant to your topic and not seem lifeless or phony. It's also important to avoid images that people have seen time and time again. Since many people will just jump on the first image in a search that works for them, completely skipping the first page of search results can be a good way to find stock images that aren't overused.

Sources



Free Photos



Another option, especially if you're on a shoestring budget, is to use free images. This doesn't mean going to Google Image search and taking photos from there. It means finding images that the owner has licensed people to use for free:

- Flickr has a great search function that allows you to search for images that have been made available under a Creative Commons license. If you're not familiar with the term, Creative Commons is a flexible type of license that a content creator can use to share content freely, but with a few established restrictions.
- Stock image sites often have free images of the week.
- Graphic designers and community groups like E-Learning Heroes also commonly give out free design resources.

In all these cases you want to double check what the licensing requirements are before you use them. For instance, many Creative Commons licenses require that you credit the image owner.

Sources



Make Your
Own



If you can't find just the right image elsewhere, don't forget that you have a great deal of tools available to make your own graphics. Anyone with a smartphone and a few apps has the tools to create decent images with a bit of practice. The two I tend to use the most are Instagram and Camera+. Another unsung hero is PowerPoint 2010. There are some amazing hidden functions that allow you to easily put together professional looking vector graphics quickly and then export them as graphics for use anywhere. The iPhone image on this screen was actually created entirely with PowerPoint.

Layout

*A place for everything
& everything in its place*

Finally, there's layout: how exactly you arrange items in your project. This includes text, images, videos, or other visual aspects.


Grouping

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When laying out a project, you want to be aware of how people perceive grouping. Things that are close together are unconsciously linked. The layout on the right here doesn't have any noticeable grouping as it stands now.

I can change that by clustering elements of this design together.


Grouping



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Now each block of text looks linked to the image on its left. Also, the first two blocks of text seem more connected to each other than the last block.

Be purposeful about your grouping and use it to your advantage.

Whitespace

Whitespace is the blank space in a design. Whitespace is vital to a clear design, so it's important to not be afraid of leaving space, or "room to breathe", in between your design elements.

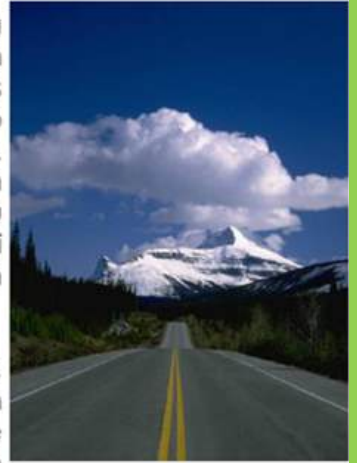


Title Text



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A layout that's all squished together may fit more information on an individual screen or page, but it's much harder to read or interact with the content with when everything is so close together.



Title Text



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It's much clearer to a reader when there's space between design elements.

Now, you'll notice that adding in more whitespace meant I had to move some content off screen. This will make a longer document in the end, but that's okay. In most cases it's better to have a slightly longer document that's well spaced and easy to read than a shorter document that's cramped and hard to read.



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Alignment

You also want to think about how things line up, or alignment. Alignment of images and/or text also helps make your project look polished. The images and text on the left here aren't aligned, so they look a bit off even to an untrained eye.



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Alignment

Aligning design elements, in this case I've lined up the left edge of text and images, makes everything seem connected and organized. Thankfully if you're using a recent version of Office or iWork the software actually has alignment features built in. When you move an object around a page, the software will actually alert you when the edge of an image or text box is aligned with other elements on the page. Take advantage of this to help tidy up your project.

Grid

A 3x4 grid of dark gray squares. The top-left square contains the word "Grid" in a light blue, sans-serif font. The grid is outlined with a thin green border.

If you're unsure of how to start to laying a project out in the first place, try using a grid.

Doing this is quite simple. Start by breaking the space you're using for the project out into an even grid (a 3x4 grid like this is a good place to start).



Title

*Subtitle text
and such*

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Then fit your design elements into one or more cells. As you can see, this builds a clean and sleek layout that keeps you from having too many, or two few, design elements in your project.



Title

*Subtitle text
and such*

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any of you can do this

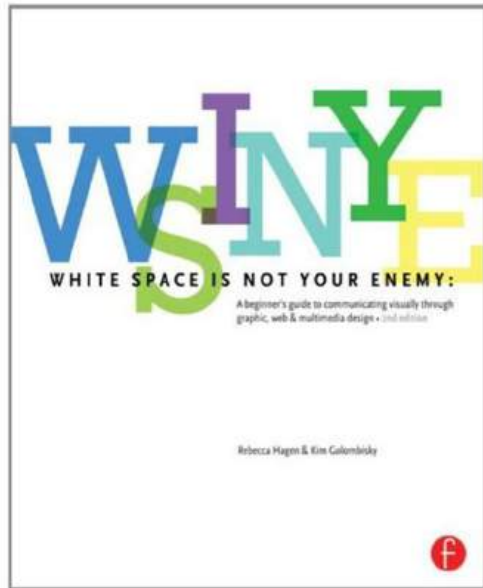
So that's the very basics of clear and concise design. The thing I'm hoping you've gotten out of this experience is that every single one of you is capable of using these tips to make your work look cleaner and communicate more effectively.

What's next?

*Because knowing is
half the battle*

Now, eventually you're all going to have these basic ideas mastered. Because of this, I thought I'd also a few suggestions for resources you can use to build your design skills even further.

Getting Started



White Space is Not Your Enemy

*Kim Golombisky
Rebecca Hagen*

For general advice that's still aimed at beginners, try the book "White space is not your enemy" by Kim Golombisky and Rebecca Hagen. This book goes into even more detail about the topics I talked about today and is a great way to keep learning about the essentials of design without being overwhelmed.

Typeface

I SHOT THE SERIF. M

But I did not shoot the sans-serif.

Shoot only the serif fonts within the available time to move onto the next stage. Finish all five stages to get promoted. Complete all stages at 'Director' level to beat the game. Try not to make too many mistakes!

To start, choose your designer level:

[Junior](#) [Middle-weight](#) [Senior](#) [view high scores](#)

*Serif: Small, finishing strokes on the arms, stems and tails of characters. Serif typefaces are usually used for text since the serifs form a link between letters that leads the eye across a line of type. For more info - Wikipedia: [Serif](#) and [Sans Serif](#)

Web
and iOS

When it comes to typeface, I've got two amusing web games for you.

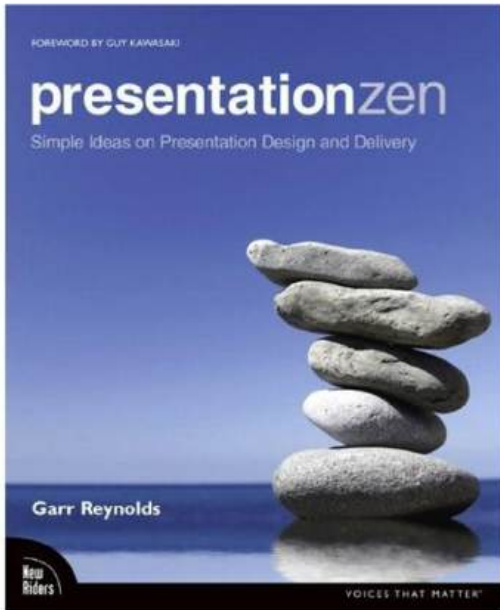
First is "I shot the serif" which is available to play online or through an iOS app. It challenges you to look at a screen full of different letters in different typefaces, and then "shoot" only the letters in a serif typeface. It's great for wrapping your brain around the difference between serif and sans serif.

Typeface



Once you're feeling ready to move beyond the simple "one serif, one sans-serif" typeface pattern, you might want to play with TypeConnection: a "dating game" for matching typefaces together successfully. The site allows you to pick a typeface, learn a bit more about its "personality", and then set it up with another typeface that's compatible with it. The games gives you a lot of guided feedback, so it's perfect for learning more about why certain typefaces work, or don't work, with each other.

Graphics

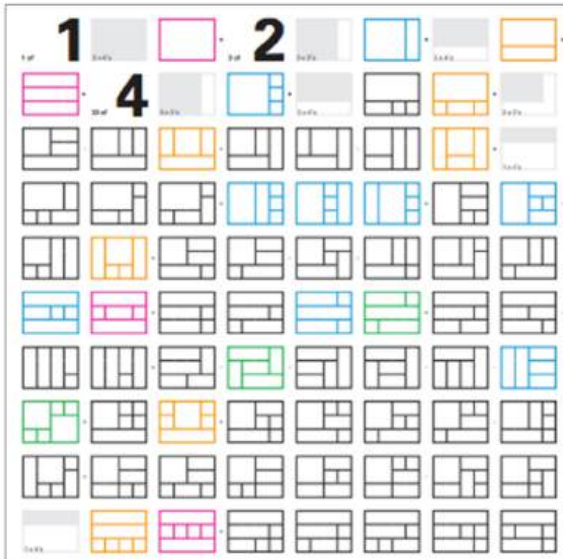


Presentation Zen

Garr Reynolds

For graphics, I'd recommend Presentation Zen by Garr Reynolds. It's not actually a book about graphics specifically, it's actually about presentations, but it has some fantastic insight into simplifying your graphics that can honestly be applied to any design project.

Layout



The 892 unique ways to partition a 3 x 4 grid

Dubberly Design Office

For layout, I suggest checking out a PDF of **The 892 unique ways to partition a 3 x 4 grid**. It literally shows every possible variant of partitioning this type of grid, which is incredibly helpful for when you're stumped at how you want to layout a page or screen. This graphic here is just one tiny corner of the full document.

Additional Resources



<http://biancawoods.weebly.com/ls-2013.html>



<http://e-geeking.blogspot.ca/>



[@eGeeking](https://twitter.com/eGeeking)

Finally, here's the link I promised to the additional resources. It has a copy of this deck, along with the presenters notes, links to all the materials mentioned in this presentation, and more resources I thought you'd find helpful: <http://biancawoods.weebly.com/ls-2013.html>

I'm also constantly blogging and tweeting about learning, design, and technology, so feel free to check me out on Twitter or my blog.

Blog

<http://e-geeking.blogspot.ca/>

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