

Useful Guidelines for Page Layout & Design

Design is the art of planning and arranging words and images to convey a message.

Whether that message is organized into a brochure, booklet, flyer, newsletter, memo or any other form, ultimately it is intended to be noticed and understood.

Good graphic design assists in achieving this outcome by organizing and ordering the words and images in a pleasing fashion.

Think of design as problem solving, of merging aesthetics with functionality. Good design balances color and shapes (represented as blocks of type, headlines, photographs and images) and uses these elements to guide both the reader's navigation of the page and his comprehension of the message. A good design increases the reader's enjoyment; a bad design may drive the reader away.

Four Basic Page Design Categories

If you analyze a well-designed page, you will discover an underlying organizational structure at work. Four popular page design structures are *symmetry*, *asymmetry*, *flush left* and the *grid system*.

A *symmetrical* page design organizes the page around the centerline. All elements are centered; this achieves an aesthetically pleasing balance.

Until the 20th century, symmetry was considered virtually the only way to organize a page. Though some may consider symmetry an old-fashioned design style, it is still quite prevalent and durable.

An *asymmetrical* page design uses balance as its organizing principle. Elements that appear to be randomly

placed are in fact juxtaposed to balance one another. Another popular asymmetric technique is to use an odd number of elements.

A *flush* page design moves all elements to the left (flush left) or right (flush right), creating a column of white space. The white space may be left without any elements, or may contain one special element of importance.

A *grid system* (sometimes called a *modular design*) is the regular placement of one column alongside another in a rhythmic pattern. Grid systems originated in Switzerland and Germany and are a common way to arrange columns in magazines and newspapers.

Using Type As A Design Element

Type – the individual letters that make up the words – become a design element when attention is paid to three things: the shape of the letters (called the *font*), the size (called the *point size*) and the spacing between letters, words and lines. Different fonts are distinguished by how they render the parts of letters.

To some extent, the shape of letterforms in a font gives it a personality. Type may be called feminine, masculine, delicate, formal, casual and so forth as a way to describe its personality.

When appropriate, the personality of the type can be matched to the subject matter (though most readers will be affected only on an unconscious level).

Type size plays an important role in design by drawing the reader in (as in a headline of large type) or by obscuring (as in rules or restrictions to an offer set in very small type). Size may also be used for dramatic effect.

Good spacing is essential to good typesetting. Spaces can be manipulated between letters (called *Kerning or tracking*), between words (called *word spacing*) and between lines (called *leading*). Interesting design effects can be obtained by varying the letter spacing – reducing it for a “squashed” look and increasing it for a loose look. And you may remember seeing a variation on line spacing that was popular in display advertising a few years ago – introducing so much space between lines that other lines in a different font and point size were fit in between.

Some other characteristics of type that affect design are that

- Large amounts of text set in capital letters take much more time to read than text set in lower case.
- Large blocks of text set in italics slow the reader slightly.
- Reverse type – white type on a black background – slows reading by approximately 10%.
- Very short and very long lines are difficult to read

- Using capitalization, underlining, boldface or fancy fonts in body copy compromises functionality.

A Few Rules For Good Design

Since design relies on underlying organization, it is natural to develop a few rules that promote good design. Like all rules, these are made to be broken – though only occasionally, and only when breaking them will increase the success of the design.

Rule 1: Be spare and simple.

A design cluttered with too many elements will either confuse or overwhelm the reader. If you can, use one large photograph or graphic rather than several smaller ones. Leave lots of white space – studies show that designs with significant white space are more pleasant to read and get attention.

Rule 2: Use color sparingly.

Color is important, but too much color can be counterproductive. In a two-color printed piece, use the second color sparingly so that its impact is increased. By using color judiciously, you will greatly increase its drama and effectiveness.

Rule 3: Limit the use of fonts in a single design.

Select one typeface and size for body copy and one typeface for headlines, then use these throughout your design. Using too many fonts is distracting and spoils the organization of your design.

Rule 4: Write copy that is clear and easy to understand.

Remember that a good design effectively conveys a message.

Write in short rather than long sentences. Avoid jargon and clichés. Use a vocabulary level appropriate for the audience you are trying to reach.

Rule 5: Begin With The End In Mind

Think about what you are trying to accomplish and what you want to communicate. List the most important points, then use the design to enhance the reader's understanding.

A Final Recommendation

Good design requires time – time to plan, be creative and do the work. If your creative juices aren't flowing or if you don't have the time you need, call us!