

Visual Design Basics: Creating Effective Handouts, Flyers and Brochures

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There was a time when professional commercial artists and print specialists took care of designing and producing all of the print materials we used in our professional practice. Now, more often than not, we make many of our own print materials using a computer, a printer and a copy machine. The final product may not be as good as it would be if it were produced by a commercial artist, but do-it-yourself print materials have the advantage of being faster and cheaper to make. Computers and desktop publishing software give us the freedom to use different typestyles, type sizes and graphics in a way that can look truly professional. However, sometimes the freedom to do anything with type and graphics leads to some truly, “unusual” results (to put it politely). While you may not become a skilled commercial artist or designer without dedicated study and practice, you can produce better print materials by following the essential rules of visual design. Ideally, any handout, flyer or brochure should be easy to read, and following a few visual design basics will help to meet this goal.

Understanding and applying basic principles of visual design can make your print materials easier for others to understand and use. In the parlance of instructional designers, the ease with which something can be understood is referred to as its *readability*, while the ease with which the text and graphics can be deciphered is referred to as its *legibility*. In other words, readability refers to one’s ability to receive the intended message of the whole document; legibility refers to one’s ability to determine what the letters and pictures are supposed to be. For example, this article would be much more difficult to read if it were written out in longhand because the *legibility* of my handwriting is very, very low; however, the *readability* of the article might not change very much because the words themselves would be the same. To a large extent legibility is a sub-topic of readability (see Figure 1). However, readability and legibility are both



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particularly important considerations when creating print materials for individuals with vision problems, limited literacy or cognitive disabilities.

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who everyone called Little Red Riding Hood. She was a lovely little girl who lived with her mother at the edge of a forest.

Figure 1. Here is an example of a typeface causing problems. The type is so different from the standard typefaces like Times (the typeface used for the text of this article) that it is hard to decipher – this is a legibility issue. The problem with legibility causes a readability problem.

Legibility

Let us start with a look at what is and is not legible. In visual design, the typefaces that we use to present text are considered to be in one of three categories, *serif*, *sans serif* and *decorative*. Serif text is generally considered the easiest text to read. Serifs are the little tails and squiggles (not exactly the technical terms) that embellish certain typefaces. The text of this article is serif text (it is Times). Serif text is particularly easy to read because the serifs are designed to help the reader identify and discriminate between specific letters. Most newspapers, books and magazines use serif text for their body copy (body copy is the bulk of the text, as opposed to headlines or call-out sections). Sans serif text is literally “without serifs” (sans is French for “without”). Sans serif text is the second most readable type of text and is often used for section headings and captions. Arial and Helvetica are examples of sans serif typefaces. Decorative typefaces are exactly what their name implies. These are the fancy typefaces that are most often used to give print materials a specific style or personality (see Figure 2).

Serif Typefaces

Times Times New Roman American Typewriter Courier

Sans Serif Typefaces

Arial Helvetica Geneva



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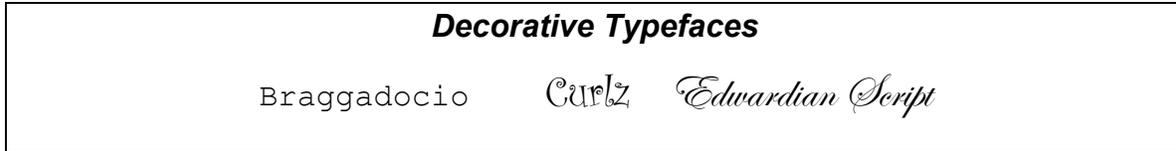


Figure 2. Examples of various serif, sans serif and decorative typefaces

All too often, people with no training in visual design fall victim to the temptations of overusing decorative fonts. Imagine if you had to read this entire article using the Edwardian Script typeface! It might be lots of fun for me to see my poor and ill-chosen words set in such a fancy type, but it would make the entire article considerably less legible. The trick is to recognize that “less is more” when it comes to selecting typefaces for a handout or brochure. The general rule of thumb that most commercial artists use is this:

1. Use a common, easily recognized, serif typeface for the body of the work (I always choose Times or Times New Roman).
2. Break up the body text with headings and captions in sans serif typeface (I prefer Arial).
3. Use decorative typefaces sparingly. Only use decorative typefaces for a short title or sub-heading.

To keep things as legible as possible, always follow the classic rule of KISS (*Keep It Simple, Silly*). When in doubt, go with the simplest possible typeface choices, and avoid the beginner’s mistake of creating a one-page handout using every single typeface available on your computer!

Readability

Just as legibility should guide your choice of typeface for body text and headings, readability should guide your decisions about where to place your text and graphics on the page.

The basic principles of visual design are well articulated in a brief book that is a particular favorite of mine. *The Non-Designer’s Design Book*, by Robin Williams (*not* the actor) is a must-read for anyone who has to create just about anything printed that another person will see. Ms. Williams covers four basic principles of visual design: *contrast*,



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repetition, alignment and proximity (referring to the acronym they create as “unfortunate”). Following these four basic principles almost always leads to a document that is easy to read and understand.

- Use **Contrast** to distinguish disparate elements of a design. For example, make headings stand out from body text by using very different typefaces for each.
- Use **Repetition** to convey a sense of deliberate and carefully planned design. Simple elements used over again give the design a unified feeling (for example, a large graphic used on top of a page might be used again at the bottom of the page as a small repeating graphic forming a line).
- Use **Alignment** to lead the reader through the design (this is sometimes called “flow”). Nothing should be incorporated into the design without careful consideration of its placement. One common alignment strategy is to have all the headings line up with each other, with indented sub-headings and/or body text beneath each heading.
- Use **Proximity** to place together elements that relate to each other, creating one or more “visual units” within the larger design that help organize the information (for example, a picture of a person standing on a scale and text describing weight-loss strategies might be placed very near each other to create one visual unit).

Williams’ book is well-worth reading. Along with the principles Williams describes, I would add two tips that always seem to make my print materials more attractive and memorable:

- Do not be timid about “**negative space**” – that is the empty or “unused” space within a visual design. It is important to make good use of negative space by resisting the urge to fill it with text or graphics: a page that is completely filled with text and graphics is difficult to read.
- Make use of **faces**. Human beings are naturally drawn to faces (think of the billboards and magazine advertisements that attract your attention most quickly, how many have large faces as part of the design? How many cereal boxes designed to attract shoppers’ attention have faces on the front?). Make use of this



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by incorporating some type of face graphic as one of the largest elements of your design.

- Use bulleted lists (like this one!) to separate discrete bits of information while simultaneously grouping them together (think of Williams’ proximity principle).

Testing for Legibility and Readability

How do you know if your print materials are legible and readable? There are two simple tests you can apply to any piece of work to see if it does what it is intended to do. First, decide what the most important thing is on any single page of your work, then, perform the *squint test* to determine if that most important thing is the most noticeable aspect of the visual design. The squint test is just what it sounds like, look at the page while squinting hard; whatever you can make out through your blurred vision is the thing that is most noticeable on the page (it sounds silly, but it really works!).

A second and equally important test to perform on your work is to hand it to someone who has not been involved in its creation and ask them to read it through and tell you what they think. Try giving it to at least two different types of people, one person who is very similar to the intended audience and one person who is a professional peer. Gaining feedback from peers and people similar to those for whom the work is intended can be a difficult process (it can be hard to hear that work you think is perfect may have problems that need to be addressed), but gathering and using this kind of critical feedback is very often immeasurably helpful in creating a truly useful document.

An Example

Figure 3 is a fictitious example of a handout that follows the rules of readability and legibility. If you perform the squint test on this handout, you should see first and foremost a caricature of a person holding a suitcase and the words “Travel Tips.”

There is contrast in the size of the decorative typeface used for the words Travel Tips, the size of the typefaces used for the list of things to remember, and the size of the type used for the body text and the address information below the body text. The graphic image of the person with the suitcase is much larger than the text; this is another form of



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contrast (the graphic does not “compete” for attention with the text because the two are such different sizes).

Repetition is employed in the bulleted list. The bullets themselves are a form of repetition, as is the use of bold, italicized, sans serif type that is used to highlight the important words in each bullet point.

Almost all the elements that make up the handout are aligned to the left side of the page (a particularly safe and effective alignment strategy). The exceptions are the image of the person holding the suitcase (this graphic is aligned with the title at its top and to some extent with the body text below it). Notice that the graphic itself aligns with the bulleted list: the nose and the extended arm point to the bulleted list.



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Figure 3. An example of a handout that follows the rules of readability and legibility.

Information in the handout is divided into separate areas (using the proximity principle). The bulleted list, the body text and the contact information are all separated by negative space.

The use of the graphic element is deliberate. The picture is of a person, even if it is a highly stylized caricature, it still conveys “human-ness” and takes advantage of the



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fact that people are drawn to images of faces. The person is carrying a suitcase – an easily recognized symbol for traveling.

NOTE: I created the example handout in Microsoft *Word* using the clipart available with the program, but I changed the clipart a bit by turning it into a black and white image and “flipping” it on its vertical axis. Manipulating the clipart in *Word* makes it far more useful for your own designs, but it takes some practice. I recommend keeping a reference book around like Maria Langer’s, *Word 2003 for Windows (Visual Quickstart Guide)* or *Word 2001 for Macintosh (Visual Quickstart Guide)*. It is important to keep in mind that the graphic elements of word processing software like *Word* can be changed to better suit your needs. If you need artwork more specific than what is available with any word-processing or desktop publishing program, it may be worthwhile to invest in a *clipart collection*. Clipart collections are bundles of CD-ROMs that contain thousands (if not millions) of royalty-free images. These collections range in price from twenty to two hundred dollars, depending on the size and quality of the collection, and are available where computer software is sold.

Final Thoughts

One last piece of advice is to do what most visual design professionals do; look at examples of other designers’ work. Visual design is both an art and a science, and there are trends and fashions in the world of visual design that are worth looking at. When I teach visual design, I have my students take a field trip to a local supermarket to study the packaging. Companies spend a great deal of money on the packaging of their products, the next time you find yourself in the supermarket, take a few moments to study the signs and packaging used to draw your attention and give you information about the products.

Another group that spends a great deal of time and money on visual design is magazine publishers. The next time you are looking at a magazine, take a moment to look at the page layouts; see if you can identify the design elements of contrast, repetition, alignment and proximity. Looking at what the pros do with a more sophisticated eye may inspire your work.



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Producing your own handouts, flyers and brochures may sometimes seem a daunting task. However, by applying the basic principles of visual design, it should be possible to create truly professional, legible and readable print media. Remember to avoid the pitfalls of getting fancy for the sake of fanciness (keep is simple, silly!); make use of Williams' principles of contrast, repetition, alignment and proximity (an unfortunate acronym indeed), take advantage of negative space, use faces to gain attention and bulleted lists to organize information. Perhaps most important of all is to bear in mind that knowing the rules also gives you license to break the rules – look at what professional designers are doing and learn from their examples; experiment with designs you think are particularly effective, and confirm whether your designs work by getting feedback from other people. The most important thing to keep in mind is that it is only a good design if it is legible and readable by the audience for whom it is intended.

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