Designing a Document

Creating Focus

If the message is the most significant part of a communication (“The most important goal in desktop publishing is to get the message across.”), **why bother with design?** A well-planned and relevant design sets your work apart from others, and it gets people to read your message. Just as people may be judge by their appearance, a publication may be judged by its design. Design also helps organize ideas so the reader can find information quickly and easily. Anything you create will look more attractive, more professional and more convincing if you take a little extra time to design it.

Consider the following factors:

* What is the feeling the document is meant to elicit?
* What is the most important information and how can it be emphasized so that the reader can easily identify the purpose of the document?
* What different types of information are to be presented and how can these elements be distinguished, yet kept internally consistent?
* How much space is available?

The first step in planning your design and layout is to prepare a thumbnail sketch. A ***thumbnail sketch*** is a miniature draft of the document you are attempting to create. Thumbnail sketches let you experiment with alternative locations for such elements as graphic images, ruled lines, columns, and borders.

A good designer continually asks questions, pays attention to details, and makes well-thought-out decisions.

Overdesigning is one of the most common tendencies of beginning desktop publishers. The temptation to use as many of the desktop publishing features as possible in one document is often difficult to resist. However, design elements should be used to communicate, not decorate. To create a visually attractive and appealing publication, start with the same classic design concepts professional designers use a guidelines. These concepts include focus, balance, proportion, contrast, directional flow, consistency, and color.

**Creating Focus**

The ***focus*** or focal point on a page is an element that draws the reader’s eyes. Focus is created by using elements that are large, dense, unusual, and/or surrounded by white space. Two basic design elements used to create focus in a document are:

* Titles, headlines, and subheads created in larger, bolder, and often contrasting, typefaces
* Graphic elements such as rule lines, clip art, photographs, illustrations, logos, or images

**Creating Focus with Titles, Headlines, and Subheads**

In business or in home use, you will find titles, headlines, and subheads in reports, procedure manuals, newsletters, term papers, and more. Untrained desktop publishers often create publications that are essentially typewritten documents that happen to be set in proportional type. However, the choice of typeface, type size, and positioning are highly flexible. Used correctly, these features can create focus on the page even in a text-intensive document.

In a text-only document, primary focus is usually created by using large or bold type for titles and headings, surrounded by enough white space to contrast with the main text. ***White space*** is the background where no text or graphics are located. The amount of white space around a focal element can enhance its appearance and help to balance other design elements on the page.

When creating titles/headlines, keep the following points in mind:

* State your title or headline in a precise, yet easily understood manner.
* Select typefaces that are readable. ***Legibility*** is of utmost importance. Readers must be able to clearly see and read the individual letters in the headline/title.
* Size your title or headline in proportion to its importance relative to the surrounding text.
* Set your title or headline in a larger type size so the reader immediately knows the nature of the publication.

The selection of an appropriate font (typeface, type size, and type style), the alignment of the text, and the horizontal and vertical white space surrounding the text affect the impact of your headline as a focal element in your document. A well-designed headline attracts the reader’s attention. It can play a big part in whether a reader continues reading your publication.

In any type of communication (reports, newsletters, flyers, brochures), subheads can be used to provide a secondary focal element. While headlines are designed to attract the reader’s attention, the subheads may be the key to luring the reader in. Subheads provide order to your text and give the reader further clues about the content of your publication. Subheads also allow the reader to zero in on a specific area of interest. Content divided by subheads visually breaks up large blocks of text and appears more manageable to the reader’s eye. Like titles and headlines, subheads need to be concise, legible, easy to understand, and consistently formatted throughout the entire document. Appropriate font selection, spacing above and below the subhead, length, and alignment must be taken into consideration.

**Creating Focus with Graphic Elements**

Graphic elements provide focus on a page and can enhance the overall appearance of a publication. Various graphic elements that can be effectively used to establish focus in your document include the following:

* Fonts (typefaces in varying sizes, styles, and colors)
* Reverse text (traditionally defined as a black background with white text)
* Drop caps (the first letter of the first word in a paragraph, set into the paragraph, often set in a larger type size and contrasting typeface)
* Ruled lines (horizontal or vertical lines of varying sizes and thickness)
* Clip art
* Watermarks (a lightened version of an image)
* Illustrations, photographs
* Charts, graphs, diagrams
* Tables
* Pull quotes (used in newsletters, newspapers, and magazines . . . defined as a direct phrase, summarizing statement, or important point associated with the body text)
* Sidebars (used in newsletters, newspapers, and magazines . . . defined as a block of information or a related story that is set off from the body text in some type of a graphics box)

When considering using a graphic element as a focal point, remember the following three points:

1. **Legibility** is just as important with graphic elements as it is with titles and subheads. Graphic elements should support the message in your text and not interfere with its readability in any way.
2. **Communicate; done decorate!** Let your message dictate the use of graphic elements. Does the graphic element enhance your message or does it overshadow your message? Is it relevant, meaningful, and appropriate? Do not use it just for the sake of using it.
3. **Less is best!** Simplicity rules. Owing a CD-ROM with 10,000 clip art images does not mean that you should find as many pictures as you can to insert into your document,. One simple, large, and effective graphic image provides more impact than using sever smaller images. Your goal is to provide focus. Too many images create visual confusion for the reader.

If all other factors are equal, publications containing graphic elements will be noticed and read before text-only publications.