The Innovative Instructor

Best Practice

May 2017

What this is

The Innovative Instructor is an article series (http://cer.jhu.edu/ii) and a blog (http://ii.library.jhu.edu) related to teaching excellence at Johns Hopkins

Article categories

Best Practice
How to use technologies and apply innovative instructional methods
Pedagogy
Hopkins professors share successful strategies for teaching excellence
Technology
Information about emerging technologies, who is using them, and why you should know

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About the CER

The Center for Educational Resources partners with faculty, postdocs, and graduate students to extend instructional impact by connecting innovative teaching strategies and instructional technologies

Center for
Educational Resources

JOHNS HOPKINS
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Visual Clarity
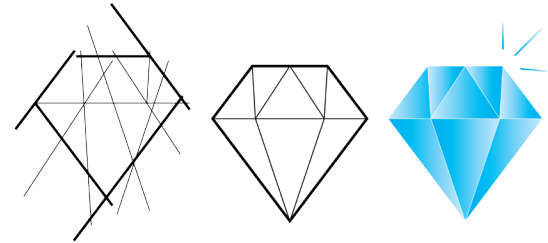*Reid Sczerba, Multimedia Developer, CER, JHU*

What it is

Visual design, in the form of advertisements, entertainment, functional signage, etc., can be seen everywhere. You are constantly processing visual information to make sense of the world and, often unconsciously, you place value judgements on what you see. It is important to consider this when designing or creating visual content for presentation, as there are a number of design strategies that will make that content clear, persuasive, perhaps even beautiful. Visual clarity will help to improve the delivery of the message. This article provides principles that will help you to create clear and concise visual design.

cause you to think the presenter is obscuring information or doesn't have a consistent message. Poorly crafted visual content may also communicate that the presenter is not professional, thus reducing the authority or trustworthiness of the content.

Learning/Memory

The main objective is to ensure that your content is as easy to understand as possible. This is achieved by organizing and arranging ideas so that they can be read with minimal effort. If the viewer can perceive the content without the frustration brought on by poor design, they are more likely to be engaged. Well-designed visual displays are more accessible, easier to comprehend, and more memorable, even if the viewer disagrees with the ideas expressed.

Why does it matter

Truth/Professionalism

Whether you consider what you see as beautiful, ugly, discordant, complex, or otherwise, it will affect your opinion on that subject. When seeing displays of research, data, or ideas, there is tendency to distrust content that is overly complex or difficult to read. These perceptions may

How to use it

The strategies offered in this article apply to all forms of design including PowerPoint presentations, conference posters, brochures, and graphics for products, advertisements, or promotional videos:

I. Visual hierarchy/Emphasis

Visual hierarchy is about controlling the flow of information you want your viewers to see and remember. This is accomplished by emphasizing the design elements (text, graphics, images) to establish the order of importance, guiding the viewer to an understanding of your message. Importance is implied by adjusting the element's characteristics to increase its visual contrast and setting it apart from other elements.
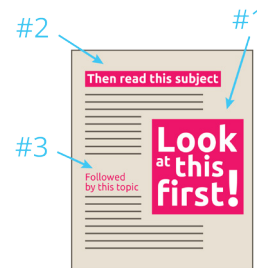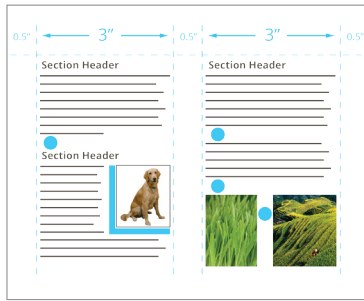
Example showing visual order starting from the center callout, followed by the most emphatic header to the least

There are many ways to emphasize the visual elements in your message. You can make the text font larger, bolder, or choose a color that is brighter or darker than the colors that surround it. To highlight a visual element, such as an image, icon, or chart, consider making it larger or adding more space around it to set it apart. You can also consider placing the most important content prominently, in the center or at the top of the display.

Best Practice

II. Spacing/Alignment

White space is a design concept that refers to the empty space found in a document, illustration, or other visual display. When laying out content, consider how the elements fit together. Being aware of the empty space can help you to align your content consistently and comfortably and clarify

Gridlines and other guides can help you visualize empty space

the information relationships in the visual hierarchy you have established. Use consistent units of measure to separate title headers, blocks of text, and graphic elements so that the content isn't randomly placed within the layout.

III. Contrast/Color

Attract attention to your most important messages by using color and contrast. The best approach is to create a color scheme with one bold shade to be used selectively to maintain its impact. Colors that stand out are more vibrant in hue and either brighter in value against dark colors or darker in value against light colors. Use color to codify and categorize information (be mindful of the color blind). Color can direct a viewer to specific data relationships in maps, diagrams, and charts.

Corporate and sophisticated

Earthy and relaxed

Aquatic and calming

Bold and playful
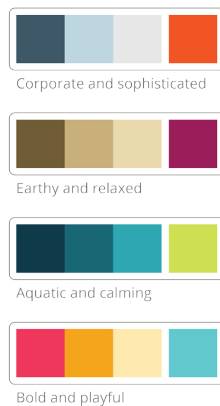
Colors can be suggestive of mood, positive and negative feelings, and levels of energy. Consider using the connotative meaning of colors to communicate ideas quickly and set a tone. For example, neon-bright colors suggest energy and excitement, a muted, neutral palette can convey sophistication.

IV. Repetition/Branding

An important aspect of design is the repetition of visual elements in headers, outlines and footers. Develop a unique style that will be your visual voice. Your color scheme, font, bullets, borders, and other graphic elements, including icons and symbols, should be used consistently throughout your design to give it a unique and memorable appearance or brand. Using conflicting elements, such as multiple color schemes or changing the way you outline images, reduces the impact of your visual voice. The distinctiveness of your style—your brand—helps people remember your message.
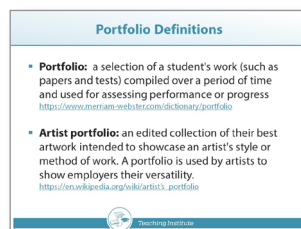
Example of two PowerPoint slides with a consistent appearance to express a uniquely "branded" presentation

V. Fonts

There are thousands of fonts to choose from and it can seem overwhelming to find the right one. A well-selected font can help set a tone but the best choice is a font that is easy to read. There are two main types of fonts each with their own advantages.

A serif font has graphic characteristics adorning each letter, called serifs, that are reminiscent of a chiseled edge or a calligraphic brush stroke. These give the serif font a classic appearance. Serif fonts are best for large sections of body text because your eyes are able to identify the unique shape of each word quickly. This is why most print publications use serif fonts.

Serif font
Times New Roman

serifs

San-serif font
Myriad

The san-serif font does away with the serifs leaving the basic letterform, which is more modern looking. San-serif fonts are easier to read from a distance because the letters don't have the graphic complexity of a serif font. San-serif fonts are used in street and directional signs because they need to be read from a distance. Consider using san-serif fonts for titling and headers to make them easy to read.

Other thoughts

One of the most difficult tasks when preparing content for presentation is constructing a concise and engaging narrative. Start by choosing a narrative structure (e.g., narrative arc, process analysis, compare and contrast) that will assist your viewers in understanding your content. With a clear focus on your intended message, you will be able to cut out extraneous information. Then you can make the best design decisions to support your narrative.

Additional Resources

- Reynolds, Garr. *Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery*. New Riders, Berkeley, CA. 2012
- Dabner, David. Stewart, Sandra. Vickress, Abbie. Zempol, Eric. *Graphic Design School*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Hoboken, NJ. 2017
- Malamed, Connie. *How Visual Clarity Affects Learning*. http://theelearningcoach.com/learning/visual-clarity-and-learning

Author's Background

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A staff member at the Center for Educational Resources, Reid provides training on a variety of programs, aids in educational resources development, and shares expertise on information and graphic design with faculty at the Homewood campus. He holds a BFA in Illustration and a MA in Digital Arts from Maryland Institute College of Art.