

Guidelines for Effective Typography in Graphic Design

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Typography, so often taken for granted by non-designers, may be one of the most important aspects of an advanced society as the printed and/or electronic word it is so closely tied to literacy, education, and many major forms of communication. (Geiger, 2014) Learning to read in elementary school is considered one of the major milestones in a child's educational development (Davis, 2016). Since most modern learning takes place through the printed (or electronic) word in the form of textbooks, journal articles, online news articles and less scholarly sources such as blog posts, the effective use of typography is as important to society as ever. Graphic designers have a wealth of options when it comes to font choice availability and the number of options for laying out text and controlling the precise look and feel of the design. With this weight of importance on typography and virtually unlimited choice of font and layout options, several guidelines have been established for the effective use of typography in graphic design (Ovsyannykov, 2016). In certain circumstances these guidelines can be broken, but knowledge of the guideline is important to have to determine if the rule needs to be followed. Not meant to be an exhaustive list, this paper will focus on 5 practical guidelines including: 1) connecting font choice to audience and key message, 2) limiting the number of fonts in a design, 3) alignment of text for readability, 4) establishing a clear visual hierarchy, and 5) building readability and legibility into design with typography.

Since typography is such an integral part of most modern print and web design, following these guidelines should improve several key aspects of any designed piece including the aesthetic design, readability, legibility, and many of the Gestalt principles of visual design. First, for most visual designs, it is important that the choice of typeface be directly selected to suit the audience and key message of the design (Ovsyannykov, 2016). Typefaces tend to have certain

“voices” or personalities associated with the font (Carson, 2017). The audience and key message of the design should give the designer an idea of an appropriate typeface personality to match. For example, if a local bank would like an informative infographic designed describing the benefits of opening a savings account and regularly depositing money, a possible typeface choice could be a modern serif typeface, which is friendly and inviting. Whereas an Edwardian script-style typeface would possibly look too formal and would be more appropriate on a traditional wedding invitation design.

A second guideline to follow is to limit the number of fonts in any one design piece (Ovsyannykov, 2016). Some new designers make the mistake of incorporating too many different fonts within a single design (Hampton-Smith, 2017). This creates a jumbled mix in the eye of the viewer. If a single font placed in the same size and weight is used for all subheadings, for example, the audience will use the Gestalt principle of Similarity as a mental “hook” to know that all of these pieces of text are in the group called “subheadings”. A general rule of thumb is to limit the font choices to two or three fonts per design. This not only helps the audience establish visual groupings or “chunks” of information but it makes life easier for the designer (Meyer, 2016). In a page layout program, such as Adobe InDesign, character styles and paragraph styles can be created with the limited typeface choices and repeated throughout the design piece (Anton & Cruise, 2015). Another common rule of thumb is to choose two contrasting typefaces such as a bold, serif typeface and a light, sans serif font (Lazier, Unknown Date). The high degree of contrast between these two typefaces becomes pleasing in the mind of the audience (Williams, 1994).

Thirdly, text alignment should be chosen purposefully and specifically to increase readability (Ovsyannykov, 2016). Carefully aligned text will lead the viewers eye through the

design piece establishing the visual design principle of Continuation. However, haphazardly placed text becomes an aimless, jumbled mess increasing the cognitive load on the viewer. Text can either be left justified, center justified, right justified or fully justified. Left justified text tends to be the easiest for a viewer to read since it creates an imaginary straight line for the viewer's eye to follow along when returning to the beginning of a new line of text. Right justified text tends to be difficult to read as the left edge becomes "ragged" making it difficult for the reader to find the beginning of the next line of text (Ovsiyannikov, 2016). The specific needs of the design will dictate which alignment would be appropriate.

The fourth guideline for typography is establishing a clear visual hierarchy using font sizing and weight (Ovsiyannikov, 2016). A hierarchy of importance aids the viewer in mentally figuring out which information is part of the introduction, body copy, or conclusion. This visual hierarchy can be established using typography of varying size, weight and page placement. Using the Gestalt principle of Proximity along with white space this visual hierarchy informs the viewer which pieces of information flow in an order of importance, again lessening the cognitive load on the viewer. Typically, one of the largest elements on a page is the title and information about the key message. Using emphasis as a design element in this way allows the designer to build in the 5-second rule into their work, in which the key message is read and understood by the viewer within a short 5-second window (Krum, 2013).

Lastly, a fifth guideline is a key feature of any design which includes typography for the text to be both readable and legible (Ovsiyannikov, 2016). Any typography added to the design, especially in the case of an infographic, should be both readable and legible. Readability is defined as the ease with which the viewer can read the single words, paragraphs, and headings on a design piece. Legibility, however, is the level of ease with which viewers can discern

individual characters of type within a typeface. Both readability and legibility are extremely important as without them the visual message either won't be communicated well or possibly won't be communicated at all. Readability can be enhanced using many of the guidelines already spoken about in this paper. Appropriate font choice for audience and message, alignment and justification of text, setting up a clear hierarchy all contribute to the overall readability of typography in a design. Additionally, correct line spacing or leading, letter spacing (kerning) and word spacing (tracking) as well as line length all can make or break the readability of type (Farley, 2010, January 24). Legibility has more to do with choosing an appropriate font and weight. Overly bold, large paragraphs of text create what is commonly called a "wall of text" which intimidates readers and should be avoided (Jensen, 2012). Also condensed fonts, due to their compacted nature, are less legible than their non-condensed "siblings" in the same font family. Bold and condensed fonts can be used but should be done sparingly and in the appropriate locations like headings, subheadings, or for very short pieces of text. (Farley, 2010, January 29).

In summary, a heavily visual society relies on clear, readable and legible typography in graphic design to education and communication. Following the typography guidelines of 1) connecting font choice to audience and key message, 2) limiting the number of fonts in a design, 3) choosing a correct alignment of text for readability, 4) establishing a clear visual hierarchy, and 5) building readability and legibility into the typography of a design, the audience will have an easier time reading and comprehending the key message of the design piece.

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