Web Design I

Designing With Type: Do's and Don'ts

General Guidelines

Do anticipate emphasis on content and visual components you wish to include in each project.

Remember that your objective is communication, not artistic expression. Most of your audience will be visually oriented. Avoid using long blocks of small type, detailed charts and graphs, or multiple photos. These take too much effort to comprehend.

Plan a balance of text and visual elements. Design your publication to please your reader, not just to please yourself.

Don't start a project without a written set of specific objectives.

You must consider not only the action you want your reader to take, but you must also take into account the type of publication you are producing. Objectives should include a time line and budget guidelines.

Don't become a one-person production staff.

Delegate responsibilities. This is made possible through planning and organizing. Have instructions and comprehensive layouts on hand and delegate duties to other skilled people.

Do keep your designs simple and uncluttered.

Design is a tool to facilitate the communication of a message. While ornate designs may attract attention, they often interfere with the audience's understanding of your ideas. Avoid the trap of showing off every computer trick you have learned in a single publication.

Graphical gimmicks do not replace substantive content. If you try to hide weak ideas behind a guise of technology tricks, the reader will soon see your publication as a waste of time. On the other hand, if your content is worthwhile, you do not want to detract from the message.

Project Components

Format

Do use a grid when designing a layout.

Grids consist of non-printing horizontal and vertical lines that organize placement of elements. Even for a single display ad, a grid can help shape elements into an orderly and appealing arrangement.

Grids help determine margins; column placement and spacing; footers/headers; contact infornation; layout options for headlines, copy and artwork; placement of repeating elements; and white space.

Do use multi-column grids to enhance layout flexibility.

Multi-column layouts make it easier to position varied sizes of headlines, photos, captions, graphs, charts, illustrations and pull quotes.

Do use columns of different widths.

A grid that combines a narrow column with a wider column or columns permits easy placement of subheads, art and white space. They also provide a refreshing variety to an otherwise static design.

Copyright © 2010 by Paul Roberts • All rights reserved

Do plan your project based on computer video resolution and window width.

Readers usually encounter a page width that fits horizontally in the window. Avoid making your reader scroll horizontally. Shoot for confining a complete focal point in the window when the page loads. Then offer a reason to scroll to through the entire page. Continuity is essential in encouraging your audience to read the entire message.

Don’t plan so much consistency from page to page that you bore your readers with predictability.

Take advantage of opportunities to add variety in placing headlines, pull-quotes, photos and other accents. Vary sizes and shapes from page to page to encourage reader involvement.

Don’t use too many grid packages in a small Web site.

Be consistent in your grid structure throughout your document, particularly if it is short. You may vary column widths, but the underlying grid structure should remain the same. If you have a three-column format, stick with that as your basis and work within it.

Do combine different grids to signal distinct sections of a large Web site.

Sections of a book may be the title page, table of contents, introduction, chapter pages, body pages, index. Sections of a newspaper may include various feature sections, news sections, sports sections.

Margins

Do use adequate white space to frame your content.

This helps your reader focus attention on the content and sets it apart from nearby content. Use padding within an element to give "breathing room" for the content.

Don’t push type to extend to the edges of the layout.

Type that extends to the edge can look too full and discourage readership. If the type is too wide, it becomes very difficult for eye movement.

White Space

Do make white space part of your format.

White space provides needed contrast, and it separates and draws attention to type and visual. White space makes your message more appealing and easier to read.

Don’t overcrowd a layout with too much content.

Each element in the layout will carry more impact if it is not overcrowded with other elements. Replacing some type and illustrations with white space emphasizes those that remain.

Do provide additional white space at the top and bottom margins of each page or panel.

More white space at the top and bottom decreases the overpowering appearance of text columns and encourages reading. A consistent block of white space at the top of each page can be contrasted against irregular grid endings at the bottom of each page.

Don’t leave holes of white space in the middle of your layout.

White space should be used to frame layout elements, causing the reader to focus attention on the contents. White space that stands in the middle of the design causes the message to break up and discourages reading. It also shows that you have not planned your content well.

Don’t use grid column dividers that are as wide or wider than margins.

White space between columns should be subtle — just enough to mark a clear separation from one column to the next. Wide gutters alienate related text areas and impose a ribbon effect down the page. Rule of thumb is to allow about one pica (no less) for gutters.

Do keep internal white space consistent.

Column dividers should be the same throughout the Web site. Space between paragraphs, articles or sections should be determined in advance and should be kept consistent.

Columns

Do use narrow columns for easy reading.

Narrow text columns are easy and fast to read because the horizontal eye movement is minimal. Limit column widths to about three inches.

Don’t use single-column layouts unless you desire a documentation or report look.

Single-column formats that approach an average of 65 characters per line risk losing readers. However, such layouts can be effective if you use generous margins, keep paragraphs short and use subhead breaks frequently.

Body Copy

Do choose a type face that is simple and legible.

Some type faces are best suited for display type, others for body copy. As a rule, a simple serif type face such as Times New Roman or a sans serif such as Arial in 10 or 12 point is best for body text. Avoid fonts that are overly ornate. Be sure to use type that is common to computer systems rather than novelty type families.

Don’t use italic or bold type for body text.

These are hard on readers’ eyes. Apply these styles to headlines, subheads or pull quotes. Also use them sparingly for emphasis in body copy.

Don’t use all caps even for adding emphasis.

Studies show that all caps disrupt the reader’s eye flow and discourage reading. Further, use of all caps on the Internet is interpreted as shouting. Do not shout.

Do select a text size to fit your column width.

Large type set in narrow columns causes the reader’s eyes to jump too frequently from one line to the next. It will lead to large gaps at the ends of lines, making the layout appear awkward.

Small type in wide columns slows reading. Too many words on a line requires too much concentration.

Don’t use justified columns if lines of text make noticeable gaps between words.

Justified text works best when lines are long enough with enough words to allow consistent word spacing. Obvious gaps distract readers and hamper comprehension. Unjustified text works better online.

Do use vertical line spacing to accommodate type size and column width.

As a guideline, set the line spacing or leading at 120 percent of the type size. When leading is

inadequate, type appears too crowded and hard to read. Too much leading makes the copy look airy and faded.

Don’t change type size or leading to fill empty space or squeeze copy into an allotted space.

Use copy fitting techniques. Either write the copy to fit the space or design the space to fit the copy. Don’t change in midstream.

Headlines

Do select headline type and size that forms an obvious contrast with body copy.

The easiest way to achieve this is to use a bolder, large type face. You can use either the same type family or one that will contrast. For example, you may choose a simple sans serif type to contrast with the serif type you use in the body.

Don’t select a headline type face that clashes with adjacent display type.

Choose headline types that don’t fight against other type. A good choice is Arial or another clean sans-serif type. This type will stand out clearly without clashing.

Do convert display type to an image when it is an uncommon font family.

If you define the font in the HTML or CSS code, a the font family will shift to the browser's default font if the client computer does not have that font installed. Using an image presentation of this special display type will prevent that substitution.

Do use white space to draw attention to headlines.

Leave plenty of white space around the headlines. This will make heads more legible, but be careful about using too much. You will get a feel for what is right for the job.

Don’t set headlines so large and bold that they overwhelm the surrounding material.

Headlines need not shout for attention. Most Web sites do not need headlines any larger than 36 points, and that should be used sparingly. Other than that, 24 or 30 points would be plenty for the largest headlines on a page.

Do establish a consistent pattern in your use of capital letters.

Use either up-style or down-style of capitalization. Up-style refers to capitalizing the first letter of each word except prepositions and conjunctions of three or fewer letters. Down-style is the capitalization of only the first word and proper nouns. Avoid using all caps.

Don’t use all caps unless you have a compelling reason to do so.

Readers are most comfortable reading content composed of both upper and lower case letters. Because capital letters are a uniform height, there are fewer distinguishing features to help readers recognize the characters quickly. A long series of all-cap text requires added effort on the part of the reader and can disturb comprehension. The contrast of upper and lower case type promotes rapid recognition of content.

Don’t set long headlines in italics.

Because italics are thinner and more compressed than regular type, they slow the reader. Use italics sparingly in headlines as well as body text.

Don’t set headlines in reversed type.

Reversed type should be reserved for section headings or for a few key words in an advertisement. Too many words set in reversed type are hard on the eyes and discourage reading.

Do break the lines of a headline logically and attractively.

Keep related words together on the same line. Take care not to separate verbs and prepositions from their objects. You do not have to fill a line, but you should come reasonably close. Extra white space can be visually appealing.

Don’t change the planned size of your headline type just to make it fit.

This practice can hurt the appearance of your page design. Rather than do this, rewrite the headline to fit. This may require several attempts.

Do be consistent with headline alignment.

The best alignment is flush left. If you use other alignments, be careful that the white space does not create a disoriented appearance.

Do adjust headline letter spacing for a pleasing, easy-to-read appearance.

Letter spacing becomes critical as type size increases. Spacing that is acceptable at small sizes becomes exaggerated and unsightly at large sizes. CSS allows for letter spacing to make adjustments for more readable type.

Don’t assume that default line spacing is correct for your headline.

The default HTML line spacing is usually good, but you may have reasons to expand the spacing to accommodate your design. Be careful not to use too much space, especially in headlines. With large type, this could make an impression that the lines of type are disconnected and unrelated. Removing excess line spacing can improve the looks and readability of the headline.

Subheads

Do use subheads to break up long blocks of body type.

Long text blocks become gray and discourage reading. Subheads add visual variation and provide information to reinforce important points in content. They also show how the content is progressing, and they help readers locate information quickly.

Don’t overuse subheads.

Too many subheads clutter the design and interfere with reading.

Do choose a type face that contrasts from that of the body type.

Subheads should be easily distinguished from body text. You may use the same type face as in the headline – only smaller, or you may vary the size and style of the body type.

Don’t crowd subheads between sections of text without providing white space.

Subheads that are crowded add to the congestion you are trying to break up. They need some emphasis if they are to segment body text effectively. At least one line of white space before the subhead is necessary to accomplish this. If possible, add a little space below the subhead as well.

Don’t use subheads that compete with headlines, or that become lost in body copy.

Subheads need to be large enough and bold enough to stand out from the body copy, yet not so much that the reader confuses them with headlines.

Do consider using subheads to provide transitions between heads and body text.

Often referred to as “decks,” this device helps involve the reader in the following copy while providing additional variations to page design.

Do be consistent in using subheads.

If a subhead appears with a certain type face and size in one place in the publication, it should appear in the same format throughout the document.

Captions

Do use captions (cutlines) with illustrations to involve readers.

The adage states that a picture is worth a thousand words, but without appropriate caption or cutline information, the image could easily convey the wrong message to the reader. A well written cutline can involve readers in the body text.

Do select a type face for cutlines that is distinct from the body text.

Make sure the type is compatible with the body text, but it should stand out. This can be accomplished as simply as using the same font and size as the body text and making it it bold. You might also consider using a sans serif type to contrast with the serif type in the body. Avoid using italics since they can be hard to read in longer captions.

Do keep caption configurations consistent throughout the document.

This includes type face, style, size; also placement in relation to the illustrations.

Don’t place cutlines so close to body copy that the reader can’t distinguish them easily.

Provide a white space break to give captions the room they need to be seen readily.

Pull-Quotes

Do use pull-quotes in a publication to increase reader interest and break up solid blocks of text.

Pull-quotes are display type opportunities that can highlight a quote from the text or restate an important idea. They do not need to be placed consistently, but the text should be of a consistent style.

Do choose a type face that contrasts against text type, headlines, and subheads.

Use a more prominent version of the body text, such as bold or bold italic in a larger size. You could a use a variation of the headline or subhead style.

Do provide a line or two of white space before and after the pull-quote

Use a pleasing frame of white space to set the pull-quote off from the adjacent elements. Set pull quotes off with a graphic accent such as lines above and below.

Don’t make pull-quotes too wordy.

When the reader can identify the pull-quote and read it quickly, it becomes very effective. Avoid needless words.