

Improving the Reader Experience with Clear Design Principles

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-- submitted by Naomi Shacter

I Introduction

This feature article is the concluding piece in a three-part series on plain language, focusing on clear design principles. It builds on part I, Health literacy and clear writing go hand in hand--Make the connection between literacy level and plain English, that ran in May 2010 and part II, Plain English Bootcamp--Tips for improving understanding of written materials, that ran in August 2010.

II Clear design

It's not just what you say that's important; how you present your information matters too. Using clear design principles improves the readability of your visual communications, and helps you convey information clearly, especially to a low-literacy audience. This article focuses on two design principles that you can use to help assess your current communications, or to help when you and your team are developing new materials. Either way, understanding clear design principles makes for good design!

III White space

You've probably heard the term white space used many times. On the printed page, it's everywhere—from the small, unused space in and around letters, to those large, glamorous spaces of nothingness. But white space is far from nothing; it welcomes a reader in and provides a relaxing environment to receive information. Use white space to direct your audience and invite them in.

White space is probably the most important and necessary principle of design to understand, because it has a role in another key principle of design, typography (but more on that later.) Think of white space as an open invitation for your audience to come in and hear what you have to say. White space is all the empty space:

- in between and around words
- in between and around letters
- in between lines of text
- in between columns
- in the margins, footers and headers
- around visuals.



How much white space is enough?

A 50/50 ratio of white space to content (content is made up of visuals and text) would make your readers and designer very happy. Think of it this way. If you were to suck out all the white space on a page and pile it in a corner, and then do the same with all the content, you should have two equal piles. But, since that's not a realistic way to measure white space, you'll just have to 'eyeball' it. If it feels right, it probably is. If the page feels heavy and uncomfortable to read, then there's likely not enough white space.

Another formula for creating the illusion of more space, is to use the 30/30/40 ratio. That's 30 per cent text, 30 per cent visuals, and 40 per cent white space. So, while this ratio doesn't give you the ideal ratio of white space, the equal use of visuals (e.g., graphics, illustrations, charts, photographs) to text gives the impression that there is.

What if there isn't enough?

Although your readers may not trip all over themselves trying to get away from your 'cluttered' communications, they probably won't stick around to read your information either. So, how do you make up for the lack of white space? Simple. You cut copy. I know, I know, not what you wanted to hear, but there is almost always a way to say more with less. You could of course add pages or increase the page size, but editing and cutting text is the most effective way to free up space without adding to your production costs.

What you shouldn't do?

In an effort to add more content to a communication piece, text is often reduced and condensed. This 'fix' basically squeezes out what little white space there is; the result is a denser page. The average reader may persist through a text-heavy piece, but a reader who isn't as confident or skilled, will give up before they've acquired the information you wanted them to have.

Why is it important?

Too much information on a page and too little white space, makes information intimidating. If content is not easily defined by the white space around it, readers have difficulty focusing on what they need to. If they are overwhelmed or confused by the appearance of your materials, they can miss important information. For a low-literacy reader, that could mean the difference between giving the correct dose of medication and the wrong one that harms themselves or their child. Filling out applications can also seem impossible if the presentation of information is cluttered and confusing.

IV Type

Tame your type and make your words count

As was explained in the opening paragraph of this article, it's not just what you say that counts; how you present your information matters too—specifically, the manner in which type is used. You can greatly improve the readers' experience by paying attention to the handling of typography (the art of using type). The following addresses a few staples of good typography.

When is it all right to use uppercase?



Setting text in all uppercase is difficult for readers with a low literacy level, and just as uncomfortable for most, but that doesn't mean it's a big no-no in other circles. There are applications where it is the go-to standard for typesetting, like highway signs, street signs, legal documents and single word call-outs to name a few. For that reason, its use should be based on the specifics of each project.

So then why is it often considered taboo, and when should you use it, if at all?

When type is set in all uppercase, words start to look more like building blocks. For sustained reading, uppercase letters make reading a daunting, if not impossible task. This is because the brain is forced to process each letter, character by character, rather than recognize individual words as wholes, which is generally how we read.

The use of upper and lowercase letters allows for faster word identification because the flow of white space surrounding each letter makes processing single letters, and therefore words as wholes, easier. For most printed materials (e.g. manuals, books, annual reports, brochures), and for most audiences, using all uppercase interferes with the reading process.

If you do decide to use uppercase, make sure it doesn't impede reading, unless of course that is your goal. Maybe that's why it's used so often in legal documents. Hmmm.

What are the options for aligning text?

Justified (flush left, flush right) is made up of equal lines of text that align on both the left and right. This provides a predictable look where the reader can focus on the material and easily find the beginning and end of each line. Justified paragraphs are best suited to wide columns so that hyphenation and word spacing can be better controlled.

- **Tip:** Line lengths that are too short can result in uneven word spacing and increase the need for hyphenation, which makes reading uncomfortable as the eye is forced to jump from word to word.

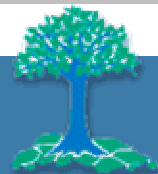
Flush Left (ragged right) text starts from the left, with each line varying in length. This type of alignment tends to run slightly longer than justified text, and is suitable for most materials, especially narrow column widths. The ragged edge creates equal word spacing and reduces the need for hyphenation.

- **Tip:** Avoid long lines of text that follow or precede extremely short lines of text.

Flush Right (ragged left) text demands more of the reader because the eye is forced to find the starting point of each new line, which makes reading difficult. The same is true for centred type, because the eye must travel to different beginning and end points. These alignment styles are best suited for short bits of information like captions, or to add visual interest.

What is better: serif or sans serif fonts?

The difference between serif and sans serif fonts is this: serifs have 'tails' and sans serif fonts do not. Although there exists an ongoing debate as to which is better, both are well suited for printed material that requires sustained reading. Ultimately, the deciding factor when choosing a font should be legibility of the font, readability of the set text and the needs of the audience. Tip: Although the consensus has been that sans serif fonts are easier viewed online than serif fonts, serifs can be a refreshing addition to online material when clarity issues are taken into consideration.



What shouldn't you do?

Sometimes we try to make our information fit by closing up the space between lines (called 'leading' in design terms), shrinking the font size or reducing the horizontal scaling of a font—in the hopes that no one will notice. When we do that, we are in fact decreasing the amount of white space around each letter and between words, and so on, which in turn makes it difficult to read, especially for lower literacy readers. Overall, it makes reading difficult for everyone. Resist the urge and don't squish your information—instead, revisit your clear language principles and cut your content.

V The last word

Don't forget... no matter what your audience's literacy level is, everyone benefits from well-designed spaces. Use clear design principles to ensure your words are read and understood