

24 Things Learning Professionals Should Know About Visual Design

by Connie Malamed

INTRODUCTION

Formal learning experiences typically have a visual component. As learning designers, we want to ensure that the visual aspect of our work supports and promotes learning. That's where visual design comes in. Understanding and applying visual design principles is key to achieving clear and accurate communication.

Visual design is the organization of visuals and text in graphic space (two-dimensional space). This checklist presents principles categorized into these three components. Use these principles to design with intention. That means your visual design decisions will enhance rather than detract from learning.

The most efficient way to achieve consistency in your designs is to create a [visual style guide](#). A style guide provides one graphical standard for all of the visual elements. It serves as a valuable reference document for your designs when working with teams or alone.

GRAPHIC SPACE

- ☐ **Visual Hierarchy:** Establish a visual hierarchy to direct the eyes from the most important elements to the least important. Make your focal point prominent using a large size, placement at the top or left, a bright color, or a visual cue like an arrow. See [The Ultimate Guide to Visual Hierarchy](#).
- ☐ **Spatial Properties:** During design, consider the width and height of your medium, its orientation (horizontal or vertical), and the size of the margins.
- ☐ **White Space:** Organize the visuals and text so there is sufficient white space (empty space) around and between elements. White space gives a design breathing room. [Learn more](#) about designing with white space.
- ☐ **Alignment:** Align the visual components with each other for an organized layout. [A grid can help](#). Or intentionally mis-align elements for a casual or informal feeling.
- ☐ **Proximity:** Place related elements near each other so they will be perceived as a group. See other ways to encourage [visual grouping](#).
- ☐ **Declutter:** Keep the layout uncluttered by removing extraneous visuals and text.
- ☐ **Rule of Thirds:** Consider using the rule of thirds for its pleasing aesthetic. Read more about the [rule of thirds](#).

VISUALS

- ☐ **Message Design:** Use images that fit the content, audience, and the emotion you want to communicate.
- ☐ **Design for All:** Select photos and illustrations that are inclusive of diverse groups of people. Consider disability, age, gender, religion, race, and sexual orientation when choosing images. Conform to [WCAG standards](#).
- ☐ **Image Selection:** Select or create relevant and meaningful photos and illustrations.
- ☐ **Modify Images:** Alter images for greater impact—crop for a better focus; brighten if dull; and increase contrast to improve visibility. See [How to Crop Photos for eLearning](#).
- ☐ **Shapes:** Use shapes to communicate your message and to organize information. For example, you can crop photos to a circular shape, use text boxes with the same light color to show related content, or use a bold triangle to direct the eye to the focal point of a slide.
- ☐ **Color:** Choose a simple and harmonious palette with at least one contrasting color. Generally, use neutral colors for the background. See [8 Ways to Choose a Color Palette for eLearning](#).
- ☐ **Visual Bullet Points:** Replace some of your bullet points with a visual approach. See [6 Alternatives to Bullet Lists](#).
- ☐ **Contrast:** Use contrast in size, shape, and color to show emphasis, attract attention, and express emotion.
- ☐ **Unity:** Unify your design with consistency in style, colors, images, and shapes.

TYPOGRAPHY/TEXT

- ☐ **Typeface Selection:** Choose a typeface that is readable and fits the content, audience, and feeling you want to project.
- ☐ **Number of Typefaces:** Limit the number of typefaces. One typeface with several styles (such as black, bold, condensed, and italics) or two typefaces should be sufficient.
- ☐ **Pairing Typefaces:** If using more than one typeface, ensure they are well-paired. See [A Non-Designer's Guide to Pairing Fonts](#).
- ☐ **Consistency:** Use typefaces consistently. Example: One typeface for headings and another for body text.
- ☐ **Contrast:** Ensure there is sufficient color contrast between the background and the text. Use a contrast checker to meet accessibility standards. See the [WebAim Contrast Checker](#).
- ☐ **Text Size:** Select a text size that can be easily read in the medium for which it will be used. Test it on a prototype of the screen or page.
- ☐ **Line Spacing:** Determine the best line spacing for fluent reading. This means the lines of text are not too close together to interfere with each other nor are they too far apart to easily scan.
- ☐ **Justification:** Use left-justification for paragraphs of text. Center justification is readable for short sentences, phrases, and titles.

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