

J331 Graphics Design Basics

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Sketch things out before you start work. Know what you're going to do before you try to do it. That may mean doing the same project twice: once as a prototype, then as a final. Use a paper dummy if it helps you.

Have a dominant element on every page. There has to be something to attract the reader's eye, or you'll lose his/her attention. The most important story has the biggest photo or the biggest headline or takes up the most space.

Create an entry point for the reader. Use a big cap to show where a story starts, either a drop cap or a stickup initial. Line up illustrative material so it points at the start of the story. Have a headshot look at the first paragraph. The eyes in photos should be facing toward the headline of the story or looking out at the reader, never away from the headline.

Limit your typeface (font) use. It's very tempting to use too many typefaces when you're trying to differentiate stories. Resist that temptation. The best looking publications restrict themselves to only a handful of type choices; it's what keeps their pages looking like they belong together.

Never run text all the way across a page.

Use widgets, sidebars, infographics, photos, bulleted lists, and so forth. Readers read more and retain more if material is presented in small chunks rather than lots of prose.

Break up the text. Large regions of gray matter are deadly. Use short paragraphs. Use subheads or other devices to add interest to text. These days, you probably shouldn't go more than 3 or 4 inches without a breaker of some sort.

Body text should never be larger than 11 point. The default setting on most layout and word processing programs is 12 point, which looks too big. Most newspapers use 9 point, magazines use 10 point.

Fix widows and orphans (single lines of text left over at the top or bottom of paragraphs). Avoid single words at the end of paragraphs. A text block should always be 2 lines or more.

Use picas and half-picas for spacing between elements. Because most publications in the US use picas and points for spacing, that's what the reader's eye is accustomed to. So, 1 or 1.5 picas between columns. And .5 or 1 pica between a photo and a caption. Using fractions of inches just looks wrong to most people.

Pull focus in. Cluster graphic elements (photos, infographics, etc.) together to draw the reader's attention. Placing visuals at the edges of the page tends to blow things apart and confuse the reader about what to look at.

Group like items. Stuff that belongs together, belongs together. Use boxes, color tints, rules, and headlines to create groupings that make sense.

Don't overdo it. Let the strongest element(s) work. For example: sports and fashion magazines use relatively simple type and headlines in order to let the reader concentrate on the photography. Wedding publications don't use cursive typography for every layout.

Use more white space. Newer designers tend to try to fill every square inch of the page. Leave room! Dense type makes pages claustrophobic. Relax. Open up. Use white space to separate things rather than rules.

Smaller margins make pages looked packed with information; larger margins look elegant.

Move the reader across the page from left to right. Use photo content and element position as well as running headlines to the right.

Watch vertical spacing. Be sure to keep things together. Don't use leading that's too wide.

Unless you're doing a product layout or something similar, **give the reader a hard line at the bottom of the page for stability.** Either have all columns end at the same place, use a rule (draw a line), or put it in a box. Thanks to MS Word, this page looks bad.

Be consistent. Set up layout guidelines and follow them. Readers are very conservative, and become bothered when things aren't where they expect them to be.