

VISUAL DESIGN RESOURCES: POSTER DESIGN NOTES

Developed by the Center for Global Communication and Design
Revised 06/27/2018

General Guidelines

- Be clear about what the most important elements are. Everything may seem important, but emphasizing everything leads to chaos and confusion.
- Clarity is king. All choices made should serve the your communication goals.
- This guide is designed to provide useful suggestions. It is not an exclusive or complete set of “rules”.

Use font size to signify importance

- The title should be the largest text, clearly readable from a distance. Use a large font, 60+ pts.
- Subtitles, headers and/or key information should be next largest, approximately 36-48 pts.
- Body type is smallest, but should still be readable from a few feet away. Approximately 18-24 pts.
- Pick a font size for each category, and use it consistently. Sometimes you may have more than three size categories, but usually three is plenty.
- Selectively use **bold** and *italics* for emphasis. Overuse reduces effectiveness.
- **Don't** switch font size for every piece of text.
- **Don't** include text that can only be read up close.

Use color to draw attention and make connections

- Select a limited color palette and use it to connect related information and draw attention to important elements.
- The brightest, most colorful thing on the page will almost always draw attention.
- Elements which are the same color will read as connected. You can use this to suggest similar importance, or to connect topic-related segments.
- [Be considerate of color blind readers.](#)
- Be sure to use contrasting values as well as contrasting colors (to check this, try turning your poster greyscale, and see if it's still easy to follow).
- White text on a dark background or black text on a light background is easiest to read. Using a change in font color for emphasis can be very effective.
 - Light texts tend to feel thinner. Font size or boldness may need to be adjusted for readability (as always, keep it consistent).
 - For placing text over an image, consider using white text with a black outline for contrast and clarity.
- **Don't** overwhelm the reader with a large number of different colors.
- **Don't** put text over a similarly colored background.

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Placement

- Western audiences tend to read top to bottom, left to right.
 - Placing information toward the top or on the left may help readers see it first.
 - If you want to put vital information in some other location (like placing the title at the bottom of the poster) it will need extra visual emphasis.
 - Consider the flow of images and information, and your intended reading order. Objects which are close together may lead into one another and appear to be more closely related.
 - Lines can be used to direct flow. Use rows or columns to arrange information and create a layout which is easy to follow. Lines within a block, data visualization or image may point a reader toward another piece of information.
 - Be predictable in your layouts. If the header is usually at the top of a section, don't mix things up by putting it along the side or across the bottom of another section.
 - Organize information so that key elements are easy to find and reference.
- Things which are placed on their own will be read as separate. Use empty space to divide sections, or to separate key ideas from larger, more detailed blocks of text.

Create a clean layout

- **Use a small number of complementary fonts**
 - Body type should be very a simple, sans serif font for easy reading (try Arial, Helvetica, Verdana or Montserrat).
 - Title text can be more embellished but should still be professional and easily readable at a distance (avoid cursive fonts and goofy typefaces).
 - If you can, use a font that speaks to your project.
 - Take a look at what kinds of fonts are being used in your field for inspiration.
 - **Don't** use this as an excuse to break the rule on clarity and professionalism.
 - While a unique font choice can make a poster stand out, it is often better to be make a safe choice on a font that is easy to read than to take an unnecessary risk with typography.
- **Utilize a grid**
 - Align blocks of text and images
 - Rows and columns are helpful for arranging information and creating clear lines.
 - If using columns, all segments within that column should be a consistent width. Body text should usually be left aligned. If using rows, segments should have a consistent height.
 - Create regular margins
 - Full bleed can be used effectively, but generally you want to leave space around the edge of the poster and between elements. Give each element breathing room.
 - Overlapping images should be used selectively and intentionally.
 - Provide consistent spacing between segments, unless you are intentionally setting something apart and choosing to provide additional space.

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- **Divide information into logical sections**
 - Keep information as brief as it can reasonably be, but no shorter
 - Too much text can be overwhelming.
 - Look at the poster writing guide for more tips on content!
 - Arrange sections so that connected information appears together.
 - Visually similar segments as well as segments which have close proximity to one another may be read as related.

Use strong visual aids

- **Data visualizations and images speak more than words.**
 - [One guide suggests using 20% text, 40% figures and 40% space](#)
 - Your figures and charts should be clearly labeled, use the same fonts and sizes as the rest of the poster, and utilize a color palette that works with the rest of your poster (consider choosing colors inspired by images you intend to use).
 - If possible, take your own photographs. If not, try a free stock photo resource like [Unsplash](#) or [Pixabay](#) before defaulting to Google.

Examples and Additional Reading

- ugs.utexas.edu/our/poster/samples
 - Provides 16 poster examples, noting strengths and areas for improvement on each.
- www.makesigns.com/tutorials/poster-design-layout.aspx
 - Discusses font and color choices before providing three examples of posters before and after edits addressing specific clarity issues.
- www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/visual-hierarchy
 - Further reading on visual hierarchy.