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Guide to design and layout

This is only a basic guide. If you have any suggestions, corrections or improvements, please contact us. You can contact us at:

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Type shape

Most fonts can be divided into two groups:

- **serif**, which have pointed bits (serifs) like this line; and
- **sans serif**, which are plain like this line.

If serifs are too pronounced, they can be distracting. It is usually best to stick to sans serif fonts, like Arial or Helvetica.

Computer software offers a wide choice of fonts. This tempts novice designers to use many different fonts in the same document. **Don't!**

Font size

Font size is measured in units called 'points'. Try to aim for a font size of 12 point. If you are pushed for space, you can go down to 10 point, but don't go below that.

The Royal National Institute for the Blind recommends a minimum font size of 14 point for readers who are likely to be blind or partially sighted. For headings, use a font size at least two points bigger than the body text.

Avoid using block capital letters for emphasis – it makes words difficult to read, and looks as though YOU ARE SHOUTING. Stick to bold print for emphasis. Don't underline.

Avoid using italics as they can be difficult to read.

Line length

Line length can affect the ease and speed of your reading. Very long and very short lines force you to read more slowly.

It is helpful to think of line length in terms of the number of characters in the line (including spaces).

A line of body text should normally contain 60 to 72 characters, or about 10 to 12 words

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Line spacing (leading)

The technical term for line spacing is 'leading' (pronounced 'ledding'). It is measured in the same units as the font size.

For body text, the space between lines should always be greater than the space between words. Otherwise, your eye will tend to jump to the next line down.

Normally, for 10- to 12-point body text, you would use leading of about 120% of the font size.

This means that for 10-point body text your leading will be 12 points. This is the usual default setting for software.

Alignment

You have four basic options when aligning text:

- justified, where a column of text is aligned on both the left and the right;
- ranged left, also known as ragged right, where text is only aligned on the left;
- ranged right, also known as ragged left, where text is only aligned on the right; and
- centred.

When text is **justified**, as in this paragraph, each line is the same length, so the spacing between words varies from line to line. To avoid excessively wide word spacing, software may also split words over two lines.

When text is **ranged left**, such as in this paragraph, the text is aligned only at the left-hand margin and the spacing between words is the same throughout the document. When text is **ranged right**, it is only aligned at the right-hand margin.

Range body text to the left for smoother and easier reading. Justified text may look neater, but it is more difficult to read. Avoid splitting a word or hyphenated term over two lines.

Graphic elements

Page layouts consist of text, illustrations and white space. It is important that you know how these different elements relate to each other.

Many people work hard on their writing style yet pay little attention to how their words appear on the page. They don't realise, for example, that pages dense with body text are very off-putting.

Use design to attract your readers and to help them find their way around your documents.

Think about margin and column widths. Try to aim for a margin of about 25mm at the top, bottom and sides of each page.

Use a clear hierarchy of headings and subheadings using different font sizes.

Make sure there is a good contrast between the colour of text and the background. For example, use black or dark blue type on a white background.

To link a subheading with the text that follows it you should have more space above it than below it.

Headlines and headings need breathing space. Let white space frame your headlines or headings. They will look better and they will attract more attention than if you filled the available space with large type.

White space comes in handy

In this example, the headline is framed in white space and is much more effective. There is no need to fill all the space just for the sake of it.

White space is sorely needed

But in this example, the headline is cramped because the designer is trying to fill all the space. This makes it harder to read.

‘You should keep it short and choose a pithy or dramatic extract.’

Professional touches

Pull quotes

A pull quote takes an extract from your text and displays it prominently, usually in a side margin. You should keep it short and choose a pithy or dramatic extract. You want to encourage your reader’s curiosity. There is an example of a pull quote on the left.

Eight tips to remember

- Use a sans serif font.
- Use only one or two fonts when you design your document.
- Use bold print for emphasis.
- Avoid using all block capitals and underlining.
- Don’t use italics.
- Always use captions for any illustrations.
- Use white space.
- Make sure you use a good contrast between the type and the background.

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