Aesthetic and Tone

The aesthetic look and feel or "tone of voice" of a design is perhaps its most significant quality. Shaped by the sum of design elements, aesthetic is not just a matter of taste and style; it's determined by the purpose and audience for your communication. As you begin your design process, ask yourself: What are my communication goals? Who am I speaking to? What is the desired outcome from the audience interacting with the content? As you answer these questions, make a list of simple aesthetic adjectives that complement your responses — delicate, classic, modern, quiet, or loud, for example. Then let these adjectives guide your decisions about type and typography, grid, images, color, and other design elements.

Purpose

For most communication design in an academic setting, your main purpose will be to communicate your content clearly and professionally. You may also want to **persuade, promote, inform, instigate, please, delight,** or otherwise **impress** the audience **on formal and experiential levels.** At the start of a project, take a moment to list its particular communication goals. Make this list freely, without pressure to edit down. Next, rank your goals in order of importance. Communication design is often about strategically choosing a few goals and pursuing them relentlessly. Our work cannot do all things at once, so ranking helps focus decision-making.

Audience

Write your intended audiences down on paper. You can brainstorm at first, but ultimately the list should be short and precise. Next, **rank the audiences in order of importance**. Complicated communication vehicles — like a website designed to promote your work to gallery owners, cultivate prospective collectors, and keep your family and friends informed of your art practice — often can't be all things to all people in equal parts. Keeping your primary audience in mind will help you make clear distinctions and decisions about appropriate aesthetic or tone.

Now, take some time to **list what your audience (or audiences) might want to learn** from your content. Some projects will also require research into your particular audience's needs. Ideally communication goals and audience needs overlap, but not always. For example, you may want to impress visitors to your website with the quality of your past work, while they may be more focused on what you can do to solve their problems. Brainstorming, researching, and articulating audience needs again helps you prioritize and balance your design decisions.

Visual Research

Whether you are preparing for a specific project or more generally studying how graphic design sets a mood, visual research is fun and inspiring. Gathering samples from print publications and online, you might create a **"mood board"**— a collection of visual design elements, such as pictures, typefaces, and color swatches — that **suggests the tone** your work aspires to. Alternatively, you might collect **"visual precedents,"** total works that **embody the tone** you're seeking. In surveying precedents, ask why the designer made his or her decisions. How do the typography, the images, and the use of color contribute to the aesthetic, serve a purpose, or speak to an audience? How do smaller moves connect to larger ones to form a whole? It goes without saying that precedents should not be copied, but should feed into your own integrated design thinking.

Consistency and Variety

The human condition can be messy, ambiguous, and multi-vocal. While such complexity is often the stuff of art, paradoxically, the graphic design decisions that best articulate complexity are often clear, concise, and consistent. All graphic design decisions should relate clearly to the content, unify into a cohesive whole, and be consistent to the point that an audience can read and predict the communication's structure. That said, occasional and selective variety engages the audience. It keeps us interested and motivated to learn more. Doug Scott, senior critic at RISD, uses the terms **constants** and **variables** to create a framework for understanding, evaluating, and ultimately creating a design. Constants are the parts of the design that stay the same, while variables change. The ratio of constants to variables affects the overall tone of the work—ranging from quietly constant to energetically varied. Too much variety can overwhelm the message or clutter the visual plane.

Stories Matter

Amid all this advice about communication goals, audience, consistency, and tone creating useful, appropriate content, we can't lose sight of a simple fact of how we digest information and make meaning: through stories. **Visual communication relies on storytelling**, or, put more simply, reading sequence. Imagine your communication as a **narrative arc** with a **beginning, middle, and end**. Even a simple website might begin with a login screen and arrangement of tabs that quickly illustrate the site's architecture and function. In a PowerPoint presentation, the speaker's voice tells the story, but the slides themselves should tell the same story, even independently. Thinking about storytelling genres might also help you shape your story. A graduate written thesis, for example, might be cast as a mystery, a play, or a botanist's field journal, with corresponding graphic elements that foreshadow, denote dialogue, or annotate samples. Designing with a narrative in mind can give your communication a natural hook into your audience's preexisting understanding and make it all the more effective.

Resources

Erin Kissane, *The Elements of Content Strategy* (New York: A Book Apart, 2011).

Robert Klanten, *Visual Storytelling: Inspiring a New Visual Language* (Berlin: Gestalten, 2011).

Jessica Moon, *30 Compelling Examples of Visual Storytelling on the Web* (Betterment, http://www.dtelepathy.com/blog/inspiration/30-compelling-examples-of-visual-storytelling-on-the-web).