

Techniques & Tools of Visual Communication

As an art or design student, you are a visual thinker. You apply visual thinking every day as you compose your own works in art and design, but you may not apply it (consciously anyway) to written and verbal communication. We live in a visually oriented world, where how content looks can say as much as or more than the content itself — in fact the two are often inextricable. Understanding and applying basic design techniques in your visual communication can radically impact how your work and ideas are received.

This handout provides an overview of some basic design techniques; use it to get a lay of the land or to discover which particular element of design you want to focus on. See our additional handouts on each of the following topics for further details and examples.

Before we get started, a note on medium: As a student, you are often responding to assignments, and your communication medium — whether poster, book, blog, or screen-projected presentation — is often determined by your instructor. If you have a choice in the matter, think deeply about the implications of this decision. A book is intimate, a PowerPoint public and shared. Print dimensions are fixed, screen dimensions flexible. Website or screen presentations require field testing to ensure your design intentions are met in the viewer's browser or physical space. Your final output shapes the design process from the beginning, so take a few moments, even if your medium is predetermined, to consider its inherent and potential qualities.

Aesthetic / 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.

Type & Typography

Type is a catchall term used to refer to a collection of letterforms. Type operates on two levels: first, the words carry the written meaning; second, the type selection, or font, contributes to the feeling or aesthetic tone of the work. Typography is the arrangement of letterforms on a surface, such as a page or a screen. It aids understanding by imparting difference in undifferentiated text. Breaks such as paragraphs and headlines in running text are typography, as are size, treatment, and spacing of text.

Grid

All graphic design work benefits from the use of an underlying grid, which clarifies content by making its presentation more systematic. A grid divides a 2D plane into smaller fields which may or may not be the same size, but which remain consistent across multiple planes in sequential work such as books, websites, and presentations. Your design elements — typography, photography, illustrations, etc. — are fitted to one or more fields of the grid divisions. Typically information about your content — such as running chapter or section heads in books, or navigation, headers, and footers in websites — remains consistently placed on the grid across multiple pages, while images, diagrams, and columns of text may change according to the needs of the information.

Color

Color contributes to the overall tone of a graphic work. It can be used to differentiate elements from each other, can impart specific meanings, and is perceptually subjective as well as culturally conditioned. The art and study of color combinations is long and rigorous. In general, your color selections for graphic elements such as backgrounds, text, text boxes, headlines, and rules should be appropriate to the content, applied consistently, and make a meaningful contribution to the overall work. In the context of a book, website, or presentation, the overall number of colors should generally be limited to just three to six. Every value should be a conscious choice, not decided by default settings.

Images

Images serve many purposes — they establish mood, illustrate or explain a concept, demonstrate a process, serve as documentation, and contribute to the tone of voice of a work overall.

Once you've collected your images, evaluate their purposes, which will help determine size and placement. Uniformity in lighting, color, resolution, and point-of-view are as important as consistency of size and placement. Sequence of images is driven by the narrative you are creating and the information you are trying to deliver. The more you are able to control image qualities — often by creating them yourself — the more your design will speak in the manner you intend.

Information Design

Information design presents information in the form of infographics and data visualizations. Occasionally these two terms are used interchangeably, but there are substantive differences: infographics convey a single point or story, emphasizing stylization, for example by incorporating illustration. Data visualizations, on the other hand, typically engage larger data sets and strive for objectivity. These definitions are flexible and the two models can overlap, but understanding these distinctions can help you decide which mode to choose. For instance, if you are trying to illustrate a social phenomena with just a few numbers, the tactics of infographics may serve you best. If you have a large scientific data set, use data visualization models. Whether presenting quantitative or qualitative, spatial or temporal data, a consistent visual framework creates the conditions for meaningful understanding and comparison.