

Designing Documents for Students

Though we sometimes think of document design as a straightforward or even superficial skill, it profoundly shapes how readers experience a text—and how hard they must work to extract that text’s meaning. We know this from our own academic experiences: as teachers we want clearly formatted assignments from students; as scholars we always appreciate a well-designed article with legible figures.

Students similarly benefit when the many documents we create for a course are designed for ease of reading, clarity of informational hierarchies, and visual reinforcement of content. They’ll be more likely to read a thoughtfully organized, concise syllabus, more likely to document takeaways on a strategically designed handout, and more likely to internalize content from a PowerPoint slide deck that doesn’t overwhelm. In addition to facilitating content acquisition, pedagogical document design also models for students the visual communication skills we expect of them. Whether your students are formatting an essay in Microsoft Word or crafting a more complex, multimodal text like a slide deck, you’ll support their consideration of visual rhetoric while delivering material for the highest impact if you take the time to design your course materials with intention.

Some ways to design student-centered documents:

- Use simple, clear language throughout.
- Use typeface, size, and indentations to communicate informational hierarchies.
- State the document’s purpose, desired action-steps, or subject in the heading.
- Consider using color, boldface, arrows, or text boxes to strategically point students to key pieces of information.
- Ensure that everything on the page has a purpose, removing anything that clutters or distracts.
- Develop a consistent design for use across your portfolio of documents (including handouts, slides, assignments, etc.), so that students are primed to recognize a specific document’s purpose at a glance.
- Consider how students will use the document: should they be afforded a space to write, make check marks, or take notes? If so, provide that space purposefully.
- Whenever possible, model the visual communication skills you’ll ask your students to themselves master, such as clear table, chart, or infographic design, citation style, and captioning.
- Before distributing a document, ask yourself: “Is this as easy to learn from as I can make it?”

References

- Johnson, Anna. “Good Handout Design: How to Make Sure Your Students Are Actually Learning from Your Lecture Notes.” Mt. Hood Community College. Digital.
- Lupton, Ellen. *Thinking with Type: A Critical Guide for Designers, Writers, Editors, and Students*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010.

See also

- Fundamentals of Syllabus Design
- Teaching with PowerPoint
- Teaching with the Whiteboard