

ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO VISUAL DESIGN

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Introduction

You've heard the old adage, "Don't judge a book by its cover." While the most tattered, sorry-looking book can hold delightful, exciting stories inside, we often overlook it in favor of a gorgeously designed hardcover. The same is true about e-learning. Even if your content is Pulitzer worthy, your learners will find it difficult to be engaged if your course doesn't appeal to their visual senses.

You wouldn't believe how many learners tell us that a majority of their organization's courses look unappealing and uninviting. They also admit that when courses look bad, they seem like a waste of time. In short, they judge the content by the design.

The good news is that you don't have to be a visual designer to build beautiful courses. There are five simple ingredients to good visual design—color, contrast, repetition, alignment, and balance. In this e-book, we'll look at each of these key ingredients and show you how to use them. In no time, you'll be ready to design visually appealing courses that compel your learners to go deeper and learn more.

Color

Colors can evoke feelings, sometimes quite powerfully. As the famous artist Paul Klee noted, “Color is the place where our brain and the universe meet.” It’s one of the first things we notice when we encounter something new, even if only subconsciously. A cerulean sea can slow your heartbeat. A red light can speed it up, yelling at our brains: “Pay attention to me!”

We also associate different things with different colors, and this can change by cultural context or personal experience. While you don’t need to be a color scientist or psychologist to wield color effectively, you’ll want to consider the importance of color in your course design, asking yourself what emotions or images your color choices may conjure for your learners.

To choose your course color scheme, consult a color wheel or tool like [Kuler](#). These make it really easy to select a palette that works well together. For example, you can create a sense of balance and harmony by choosing analogous colors, which are colors that sit next to each other on a color wheel. Or, you can use colors opposite one another on the wheel for a contrasting (yet still complementary) color scheme.

If you like the minimalist look, try building a monochromatic color scheme, which is composed of one base color and its shades.

Monochromatic schemes are easy on the eyes, simple to create, and will never clash.



Complementary colors

On opposite sides
of the color wheel



Analogous colors

Next to each other
on the color wheel

While a color wheel or a tool like Kuler is really all you need to build a coordinated color scheme, if you'd like to learn more about color theory, check out worqx.com or read [Understanding Color: An Introduction for Designers](#).

Contrast

One of the hallmarks of good design is well-executed contrast. Using contrast can help you separate disparate parts, aid navigation, and direct a viewer's eye to what's most important. Without contrast, it's hard to know where to look, and that's both disorienting and unpleasant to viewers.

The most important rule to follow when using contrasting elements is to make them *really* different. The contrast should be immediately obvious. If elements are *almost* the same, but not *exactly* the same, it'll look like a mistake.

There are some really fun ways you can use contrast. Some are obvious, such as small shapes versus large shapes. But you can also contrast other elements of your design.

For example, try contrasting fonts. Perhaps use a sans-serif font for the text on navigation, and a serif font for text on your slide. The characters in serif fonts have small lines called serifs at their ends. Times Roman and Courier are well-known serif fonts. Sans-serif fonts don't have serifs, and include popular fonts like Arial and Helvetica.

You can also contrast patterns and colors. Try adding a pattern to some elements, while leaving other elements "smooth." To contrast color, you can use complementary colors, or contrast things such as dark, middle,

Whitney Medium (47px)

A sans-serif font is perfect for clear headlines

Archer Book (26px)

A serif font is easier to read, making it suitable for longer paragraphs

Agreeing on an Agenda

It's not always easy to agree on an agenda. Sometimes everyone will want to have his/her say in a limited period of time.

As the meeting organizer, it's important that you prioritize the agenda items to make sure the most important things get discussed.

Using different font styles together creates contrast.

and light color values. You can even contrast intensity by choosing some pure colors and other muted colors. And, some colors are warm and some are cool. Play around with having one of each in your course color palette.



Repetition

We've all seen courses that look like they were assembled from spare parts of 10 different PowerPoint presentations. Our e-learning guru, Tom Kuhlmann, calls them "Frankencourses." Each slide uses different fonts. Colors and images vary widely. Backgrounds are all over the map. You get the idea. It makes for a pretty chaotic learning experience. In fact, it can be so distracting that learners have a hard time engaging with the material. Not to mention that it breaks a fundamental design principle: repetition.

It's important to repeat design elements throughout your course. Repetition creates a sense of order and unity. A course with repeated elements will look and feel cohesive, while one with new elements on each slide will look and feel disorganized and chaotic.

Imagine a slide that has six different fonts, some similar, some widely different. Yikes! Now pare that back to two contrasting fonts. Perhaps one serif and one sans-serif. Much better.

So, before you start building out your course, define your key design elements—then make sure you consistently apply them. Choose your fonts, sticking to just two or three max. Use them in the same way throughout your course. So, for example, make all headlines the same font of the same size and weight. Then make sure every single headline in your course follows this style.



A Chaotic Design

The elements on this slide use lots of different shapes, fonts, colors, and sizes, and are not aligned to each other. The design shares nothing in common with previous slides in the same course.

Do the same thing for color choices. Once you've picked a harmonized color scheme for your course, carry it through your course consistently. And don't use another color unless you've done so from the beginning.

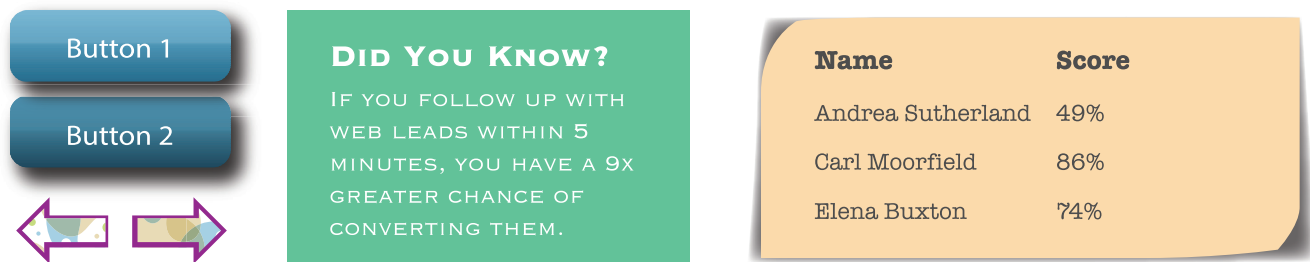
You'll also want to decide on a style for graphics, images, icons, and other design elements. So things such as boxes, buttons, and arrows should share a style. Images and backgrounds should have the same feel.

If you're using clip art, make sure you use the same style to maintain consistency. It'll make your content look like it all belongs together.



Consistent Style

All elements share colors, fonts, and a clean, flat design with subtly rounded corners.



Inconsistent Style

Although some of these elements might look good in isolation, the different styles do not work well when used together.

Another way you can give learners a sense of order is to repeat patterns for organizing or presenting information. It gives learners visual cues

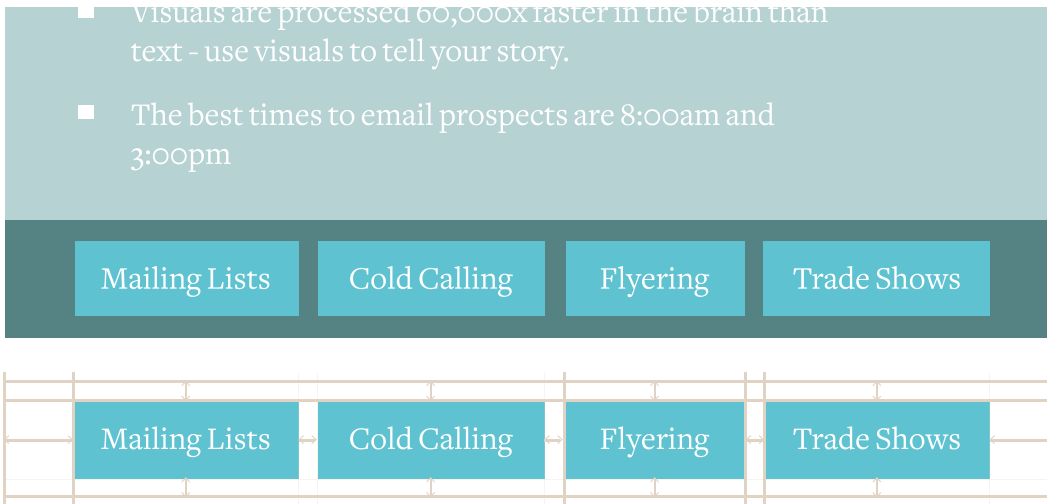
that help them understand how the course content fits together. So, for example, if you always use bold headlines to indicate a section and underlined text to represent lessons within that section, learners will begin to build a mental map of how the course is organized and what topics will be covered. And that gives them context for what they're learning.

Alignment

If you're someone who can't walk by a crooked picture without straightening it, you're a step ahead when it comes to alignment, a critical design principle.

To create alignment, you not only want elements on your slide to line up, they should also be equidistant. That's not to say that every shape or thing on your slide should be placed in one line, but you do want to line elements up with *something*. They shouldn't be randomly spaced on your slide.

For example, say you place five tabs along the bottom of your slide to act as navigable menu items. You'll want to align your tabs horizontally and vertically on the bottom of the slide, with the same amount of space between each. If they're off by even a little bit, your navigation will look all wrong.



Proper Alignment

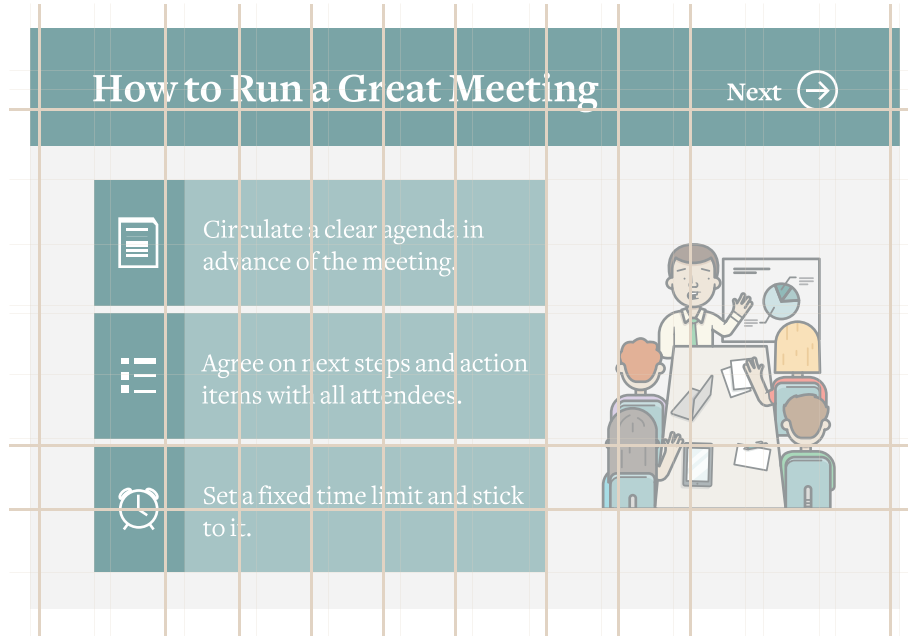
The tabbed navigation looks right because everything is consistently aligned and spaced.



Misalignment

Even though the second tab is just a little taller, lower, and further to the right than it should be, it instantly looks wrong.

And don't trust your eyes to line things up. Use drawing guides or a grid to check the alignment and spacing of all of the elements on your slide.



The layout is based on a 12-column 960px grid.

Note how the items also have consistent vertical alignment and spacing.

Balance

Another critical principle you'll want to consider when building a slide layout is balance, which is the equal distribution of visual weight.

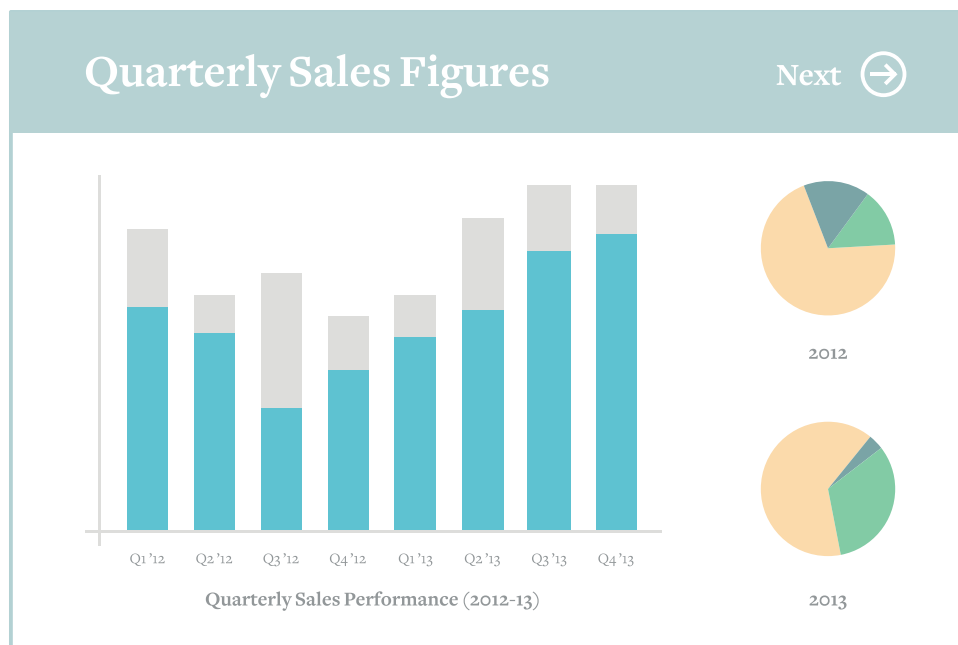
A lot of things can determine an object's visual weight. Some are obvious, such as size. A large object feels heavier than a smaller object. It can get tricky, though. A small object can actually balance out a larger object, depending on their relative positions. You can balance a large object near the center of your slide with a smaller object placed near the edge of it.

Color, value, and texture also play a role in visual weight. Brighter, more intense colors feel heavier, as do elements with complex texture. Dark objects are heavier than light objects, and a bunch of small objects can balance out one larger object.

You can balance elements on your slide in a couple of different ways. Balance items symmetrically by dividing your slide in half and then repeating the same exact compositional elements on each side, like a mirror image. Or, you can achieve radial symmetry by placing elements equally around a central axis (clocks and sunbursts are radially balanced). While easy to build out, symmetrically balanced designs can feel a bit boring. If every slide in your course were symmetrically balanced, you'd start to lose your learners' attention a few slides in.

You'll build a much more visually engaging course if you include plenty of asymmetrically balanced slides, too. Asymmetrical balance is much more interesting and gives you lots of creative freedom.

Instead of doing carbon copies of each element (like you do with symmetrical balance), you achieve asymmetrical balance by balancing different elements that have the same visual weight. So, for example, if you have one large shape on one side of your slide, you might place several smaller shapes on the other.



Asymmetrical Balance

The large chart on the left is balanced by the smaller pie charts to the right.

Play around with how differently sized, shaped, colored, textured, or spaced objects impact visual weight. You'll want to build layouts that not only are balanced, but that direct a learner's attention to what's most important.

Style

We've covered the basic principles of good design, but how do you build an engaging design that fits your course's topic or industry? Chances are, you probably already have an idea of what it should look like.

Imagine that you're hired to develop a western movie poster. By the time you finish reading this sentence, you'll probably have a picture in your mind of what that poster should look like. And everyone who reads this e-book probably conjures a pretty similar mental picture. Western font. Lots of brown. Cowboys and horses. Cactus and tumbleweeds. Not far off, right?

Now what if you saw a poster for a western movie that completely defied this mental picture? Say it used a modern-looking font, made ample use of pinks and yellows, and featured children wearing leotards. Your mind would rebel: "That's not a western movie!"

The trick is finding a look for your course that fits your learners' expectations. You want to set the stage appropriately for what they're about to learn.

Your course will look like *something*. It's your job to figure out what that something is. Tap into your own ideas of what a particular topic or industry "looks like." Ask yourself, What colors do I associate with this topic? What types of fonts come to mind? What do the characters look

like and what are they wearing? What kind of environment makes sense? Are there certain props, scenes, or images that are common to this topic or industry?

You can test yourself by pretending that you're building a workplace safety course. What design elements do you think of as being safety-related? Now imagine that you're building a course on IT security. How would those design elements differ?

If you're still not quite sure what look you want, look for inspiration. The web puts amazing design right at your fingertips. Visit ad agency and graphic design sites, and peruse the portfolios of leading designers on [Dribbble](#). Check out e-learning courses developed by firms known for their design excellence, or look at templates designed for specific industries or topics. You also might want to visit [E-Learning Heroes](#) regularly, as e-learning pros in every industry regularly post inspirational examples there.

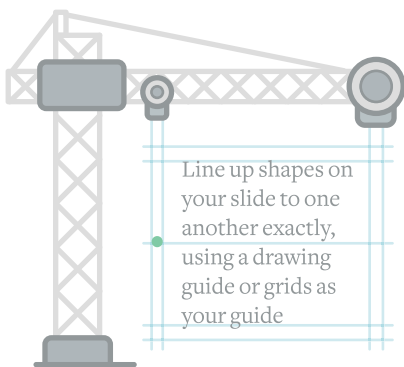
In your quest to build beautiful courses that delight your learners, beware the temptation to throw in images just because they look pretty. Everything on your slide should support course objectives. Decorative graphics that don't reinforce the concepts you want to convey can actually impede the learning process—and potentially confuse learners.

VISUAL DESIGN TIPS

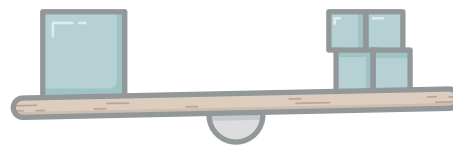


- Use a color wheel to choose your course color palette
- Colors next to each other on the wheel create balance and harmony
- Choose colors opposite one another for a contrasting color scheme
- Use a monochromatic color scheme for a clean minimalist feel

- Contrast shapes, fonts, and color values to separate disparate parts, aid navigation, or direct a learner's eye in a particular direction
- Make sure contrasting elements are really different; contrast should be really obvious
- Repeat design elements—fonts, colors, graphic styles—all the way through your course



- Create balance by repeating elements in a mirror image on both sides of a slide
- Achieve asymmetric balance by balancing different elements with the same visual weight; for example, balancing one large shape on one side with several small shapes on the other



- Check out the course examples on E-Learning Heroes to get inspired

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