After five months of hard work, you have just finished an online training course. You've spent hours interfacing with subject matter experts, double-checking facts, and working to ensure all the assessment questions are both clear and challenging. You've worked out all the technical bugs, and your coworkers tell you the student activity in the third section really kicks things up a notch. Now you're finally ready to publish the course.

But as you are reviewing everything one last time, you can't help but feel like something is missing. You can't quite put your finger on it. The content is great, but everything looks just a little bit … drab.

The problem? You've overlooked the importance of keeping your e-Learning visually interesting.

When we design courses, we are often so focused on the content that we completely forget to put serious thought and effort into how we package our information. Things like font styles and background colors seem frivolous compared to good, solid facts and substance. However, visuals have a huge impact on how your audience will perceive the course you've worked so hard to assemble.

Let's take a quick glance at the two courses in Figures 1 and 2. Which course would you rather take?
Though both slides present the same information, chances are that the animation and color scheme of the second course piqued your interest much more than the plain white background and small image of the first. Even at a glance, these observations probably had some effect on your perceptions of the professionalism and validity of the two different courses. Because over 80 percent of the information our brains process is visual, there’s no question that the way the designer lays out content makes a significant difference in what initially grabs and maintains our attention.

You may think that incorporating good visual design into your lessons would require hiring a graphic designer or contracting other professional help. Fortunately, in most cases, you can significantly improve your e-Learning by following a few simple tips and tricks shared by some of the industry’s leading instructional designers and graphic designers. Paying attention to text, color, pictures, graphs and diagrams will deliver a tremendous difference in the first impression that your content makes.

**Text**

In most online courses, text makes up a substantial portion of the visual stimuli. It’s important that you do it correctly. Follow these tips to get your text on the right track.

**Tip #1: Rule of Six**

The rule of six is pretty simple – include no more than six bullet points per page, and strive for each bullet point to have fewer than six words. You should have a decent amount of empty space, and pictures, graphs, videos or other material to balance out your words. Josh Barkle, an experienced graphic designer from the digital agency Imageworks, advises, “When it comes to text, less is definitely more.” Text-heavy slides are daunting, and learners will be less likely to read if all they can see is words.

**Tip #2: Make friends with Arial and Calibri**

Avoid cursive fonts and fonts with lots of embellishments. You may think they look nice, but chances are they’ll be difficult for many participants to read. You’ll have the most success with a simple sans serif font.

**Tip #3: Develop a lesson style guide, and stick to it**

Keeping your font sizes and styles consistent throughout the lesson keeps distractions to a minimum for learners. Create a style guide that clearly identifies what size text will be used for titles, text headers, bullet points, etc.
throughout the lesson. Once you identify your “rules,” follow them. If your title on one slide is size 28, bold Arial font, the titles on all of your slides should be size 28, bold Arial font.

Tip #4: Avoid the temptation to make your title huge

“If it’s centered and it’s at the top of the page, your students will know it’s a title,” says Imageworks graphic designer Donald Jorgensen. “Bolding it and making it size 60 [font] won’t help you; it will just overwhelm the slide.” If your title is taking up a significant portion of the screen, it’s probably time to take it down a few notches.

Tip #5: Don’t overdo bolding

The same goes for using italics, shadow, or any other treatments intended to emphasize your text. Remember: if all your text is bold, (or italicized, etc.), none of it stands out. Use these treatments only for the most important words and phrases, and use them consistently.

You may be wondering …

What is a sans serif font and where can I find one?

Sans serif refers to any font without the little embellishments (called “serifs”) at the end of each stroke. Arial is an example of a sans serif font, while Times New Roman is an example of a serif font. Other sans serif fonts in Microsoft Word include Calibri, Century Gothic, and Tahoma.

- Example of a sans serif font: AaBbCc
- Example of a serif font: AaBbCc

Color

Using color can work greatly to your advantage when making your courses visually interesting. Unfortunately, poor use of color can also work against you. The following suggestions can help you choose the right colors for your online course.

Tip #1: A loud background with colorful text is too much

You may think that bright colors will get your audience’s attention. But, while they may grab some people’s interest, most crazy color-on-color combinations will be difficult to read. Just like with text, graphic designers advise you to keep your color scheme toned down and simple. Understated solid colors should make up the meat of your slides, with bolder shades as accents.

Tip #2: A white background with plain black text isn’t enough

Don’t go over the top with color, but don’t forget to use it, either. The 2008 white paper, “Color in an Optimum Learning Environment” by Willard Daggett, Jeffrey Cobble, and Steven Gertel (see the References at the end of this article), shows that color positively impacts learners’ performance when integrated properly into the learning environment. So, spicing up your course with color not only makes it look nicer – it may also help your students learn more effectively!

Tip #3: Go bold, not bright

If you’re looking for a color that will get people’s attention, Jorgensen advises that, “A solid brick red is preferable to a loud neon orange.” Don’t hesitate to use strong colors, but avoid fluorescent shades – they can be perceived as unprofessional, and some of your participants will doubtless find them hard to read.

Tip #4: Keep your backgrounds neutral

Avoid backgrounds composed of pictures, patterns, or heavy colors, unless they’ve been significantly faded. There are two reasons for this. First, you want your text to be readable. Second, you don’t want your background to distract from your content. Experiment with attractive, light shades for best results.

Tip #5: Stick to a consistent color scheme

Just as with font and text size, it’s visually preferable to keep a steady color scheme from slide to slide. For example, if your background is a pale tan on one slide, you should probably keep it the same color for the duration of your lesson. The same goes for your text colors. Need some help creating a color scheme? http://kuler.adobe.com is a great resource.
You may be wondering …

What if my organization requires me to work in a template with an unattractive color scheme?

Talk to your stakeholders and see if you can convince them to change their mind. You may consider sharing some of the facts from this article on how effective visual design enhances learning. Then, ask them why they are so attached to their template and work with them to keep what they like, while adjusting the color scheme to be a bit more learner-friendly. For example, if they want to use the colors in their company logo, see if you can work with them to tone down the colors or incorporate them elsewhere in the template.

Pictures

Images are a fantastic way to illustrate what you’re trying to teach. Appropriate choice of pictures will largely determine their effectiveness. Here are some criteria you can use to see if your lesson’s photos are hitting the mark.

Tip #1: Don’t use dated photos to illustrate contemporary points

The point of using pictures is to give students a relatable visual for the concept you’re explaining. But if you’re giving a lesson on fire safety, and you use a picture of a woman with legwarmers and big hair holding a fire extinguisher, most participants will probably be paying more attention to the out-of-date fashion than the concept. Dated photos are distracting and difficult to relate to. Worst of all, they might cause your audience to take your lesson less seriously.

Tip #2: Be careful with illustrations

Avatars, computer-generated graphics, and cartoonish images can have a successful impact on learning if used appropriately. However, it’s important to follow two rules when incorporating illustrations into your course. First, be sure they’re high quality. This means avoiding outdated clip art, poorly done drawings and anything else that doesn’t look 100% polished. Second, only use illustrations when appropriate. For example, if you’re trying to make a very serious point, it’s probably not appropriate to use a smiling cartoon character to do it.

Tip #3: Make sure your photos are relevant to your lesson

Pictures can be a great addition to your online course, but they need to have a purpose. Including a picture that has little or nothing to do with your course won’t benefit your lesson; in fact, it will probably distract from your point.

Tip #4: Make sure the people in the pictures look like your audience and relate to your course objectives

If you’re doing a lesson for nurses, make sure the people in the photos are wearing scrubs and not business suits. Similarly, if the lesson is on diversity and inclusion, make sure your photographs depict diverse groups of people. Your audience needs to be able to relate to the photos you use and that won’t happen if the subjects of the photos look nothing like they do.

Tip #5: Make sure your photos are factually accurate and practice what you preach

For example: if your lesson is about wearing latex gloves properly, make sure that all of your photos show people wearing latex gloves properly. It may seem like a no-brainer, but it’s easy to make mistakes. If the photos you use contradict the content you are teaching in the lesson, they can become distracting and cause confusion.

You may be wondering …

Where can I find photos to use in my online courses?

You’ve got two viable options. First of all, you can take your own photographs. This is an especially good option if you are making a personalized training. You can take the photos yourself, or work with a local photographer. You may even have the opportunity to photograph employees who will actually take the training later, which greatly personalizes the experience.

If you don’t have access to a good camera or the time to devote to a photo shoot, you can purchase pictures from a stock photo site. Stock photo sites contain thousands of pictures that are all available for use for a small fee. If you think you’ll be purchasing large quantities of photos, consider looking into getting a site membership.

Couldn’t I just get pictures through a Google Image search?
No. You need to have the user rights to any pictures you use. This means that you either took them yourself or have permission from the photographer to use them. If you take pictures from other Websites, you’re infringing copyright laws, even if you cite a source for the photograph.

Graphs and diagrams

Graphs and diagrams are a nice way to share information and break up textual monotony. Use these ideas to determine the best ways to integrate them into your courses.

Tip #1: Graphs → Text

As our world has become more and more media-friendly, our preferences on how we receive information have become more and more visually oriented. A 2009 BBC News article called “Information goes Out to Play” by David McCandless (see References) details how data is being published in increasingly creative graphs, diagrams, and other visual formats due to increased audience preference for visual information. It seems that participants are much more likely to be intrigued by a graph or diagram than by a giant block of text. Thus, if you have a choice and if it makes sense, present your information visually.

Tip #2: Give context

Don’t just drop in a graph or diagram and expect your audience to figure out how it relates to the lesson. Without context, participants may be unable to properly decipher the graph or diagram. Write a brief explanation for every diagram or graph you include, and always use a descriptive title.

Tip #3: Keep it simple

The entire point of using a graph or diagram is to simplify information. If your visual makes things more complicated, something needs to change. Participants should be able to figure out the meaning of the graph or diagram in a few seconds. If it’s more complicated than that, consider how you may be able to present it another way. Pie charts, tables, and bar graphs are usually your best bet for clarity, as long as your learners are familiar with reading them.

Tip #4: Make sure the size is right

Just as with text and photos, your graph or diagram should be big enough that everything is easily readable, but not so big that it takes up the entire screen. There should still be room for a title, an explanation, and some white space to keep things balanced.

You may be wondering …

I don’t have any numerical information in my lesson, so it wouldn’t make sense to use graphs or diagrams, right?

Not necessarily. We tend to think of graphs and diagrams as a way to represent statistics, percentages, or other numerical facts, but that’s not their only use. For example, you may have a paragraph of information that could be broken up into a table. Or, you could explain a process or relationship using a diagram.

The bottom line

You may think that great content is enough to make your e-Learning shine, but the content is only one piece of the puzzle if you want to create a course that is truly memorable. The effective use of visuals is essential in taking your online training courses to the next level. By taking care in selecting your colors and text, as well as making an effort to integrate polished pictures, graphs, and diagrams, you’ll make your training more accessible and compelling while simultaneously increasing the credibility of your content.

References


Seeing is Believing: Simple Graphic Design Tips To Improve On...  http://www.learningsolutionsmag.com/articles/445/seeing-is-...