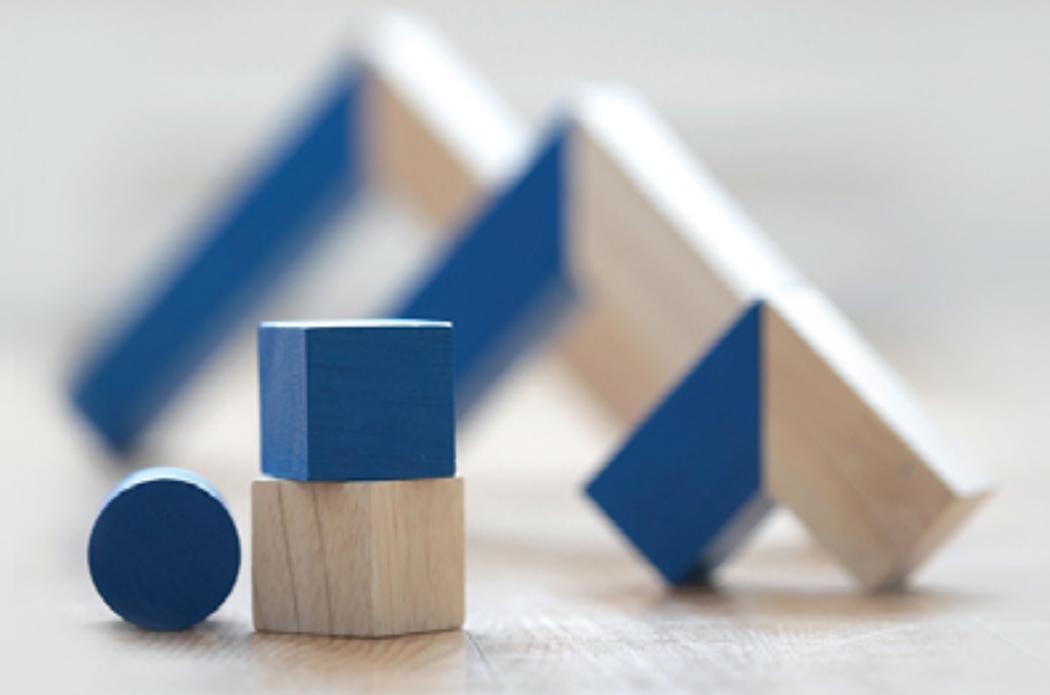


A CRASH COURSE IN

# VISUAL DESIGN

FOR ELEARNING



SHIFT

DISRUPTIVE LEARNING

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# Introduction

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Do you buy clothes online without looking at the photographs? What sounds more exciting—reading about a seaside town or actually walking through the streets of one while smelling the sea in the air? Why is your computer crammed full with photographs and videos of long-gone birthday parties and family picnics? That is because we love images! Images talk to us, move us, make us remember, and inspire us in ways that words hardly can. We also happen to learn better through images than with text. The human brain [\*processes visuals 60,000 times quicker\*](#) than text!

Bullet points and other rehashed text-based screens are not only boring and show a lack of creativity; they also take time to read — during which the learner becomes distracted.

## THE LESSON: YOU NEED TO THINK AND COMMUNICATE VISUALLY!



Being able to think visually will help you take your eLearning courses to the next level. Start with a simple exercise: How can you use visuals to explain the content you'd normally write out as a screen filled with bullet points?

In this Crash Course you'll learn how you can use visual design principles to improve the learning experience. Although content matters a lot, how your learners perceive the instructional content is more often than not dependent on the design element. Learners ignore cluttered and boring design. They gravitate, instead, to one that's aesthetically pleasing.

Whether you are just getting started with eLearning design and looking to get a better understanding of eLearning design best practices, or you've been designing courses for a while and are trying to find ways of making your material more effective, considering the basics of visual design is key. Here you'll learn how to tap into the power of visuals to create eLearning courses that stick.

# Chapter 1:

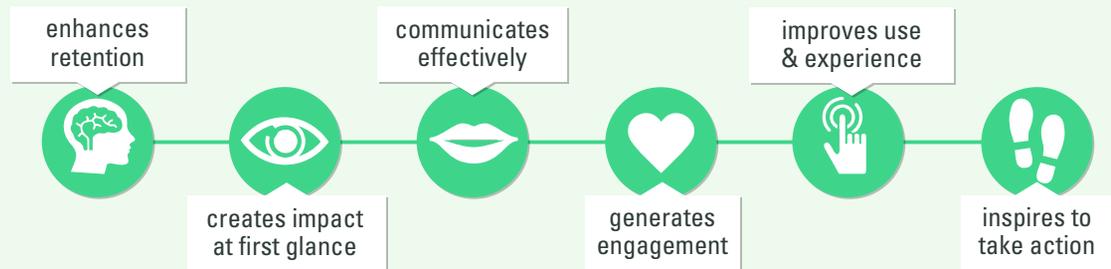
## Why Good Design Is Absolutely Critical for eLearning



Garr Reynolds rightly said that design changes things either in a profound or subtle manner. And good design almost always impacts the lives of people, irrespective of how subtle the changes may be.

Everyone concludes that design makes a great difference and that is quite obvious. But is there any living evidence that actually proves this claim? Yes, there are plenty of them.

Here are the reasons why good design is absolutely critical for eLearning success:



## Reason #1: Good design solves a problem and communicates a message

Vitaly Friedman rightly said, *“Good design is about effective communication, not decoration at the expense of legibility”*.

The basis of good design is communication. Without any design, we could practically have nothing – no books, newspapers, magazines, maps, websites, advertisements, etc.

Again, designs are not accidental, they are based on intentions and choices. It is inevitably great to put your heart into designing something but at the same time, you must ensure that your design has a story behind it. On the other hand, a beautiful design would be of no use if it were not effectively able to communicate any message to the target audience.

Every eLearning design project has a definite purpose. Some designs are intended to educate the learners while others are intended to change a behavior. Yet there are some that are used for marketing purposes.





## Reason #2: First impression is almost always the last impression

You always want your eLearning to create an impact on the learners, customers, vendors and all those who are involved in your learning product. It takes almost a fraction of a second to make a favorable impact on a person and as a matter of fact, eLearning courses are no different.

How your learners perceive the instructional content is more often than not dependent on the design element. We more often than not consider appearances to be the basis of our expectations. And believe me when I say that more than **90% of our** impressions (read 'first impressions') are related to design and appearances. Yes, there is no denying the fact that quality of content matters but imagine having a poorly-designed course layout with the best content. Will it work? No points for guessing it.

## Reason #3: Good design equals engagement

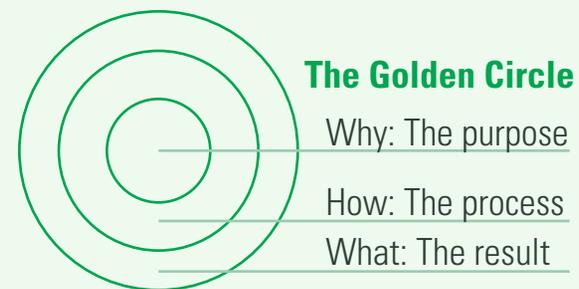
Cheryl Connor of Forbes, rightly claimed, ***“Design optimizes perception and experience”***.

Do you imagine how boring it would be to take a course that displays nothing except black letters, screen after screen and that too, without any formatting, visuals, or color schemes? It will be a pain to stare through the entire duration! Now imagine taking a course with appropriate text formatting, visuals, and color schemes. So you see that an appealing environment engages the audience right from the beginning.

Learners must enjoy while they are learning. If they don't, they will either find an alternative way or leave the course.

## Reason #4: Good design inspires to take action

There are two ways persuading people, either you can manipulate or you can inspire – says Simon Sink of the ***‘Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action’*** fame.



Yes, it is right. If your eLearning design is sensible, it will inspire your learners to achieve a lot more than expected. It will help them to become more creative. Through the design, you can serve as a motivation to your learners and make them do things you thought it was otherwise impossible. When you highlight the purpose of your eLearning, you actually inspire your learners towards an aspirational outcome.

## Reason #5: Good design helps learners recall

Creating a good eLearning design ensures that the learners will be able to recall the material later. The patterns and relationships that are formed between different images in a visual design greatly facilitate the recall of prior knowledge.

Recent research has proved that retention is enhanced when people consolidate data, which could be easily analyzed, into bite-size information and includes visual metaphors and analogies for supporting that data.

Check out [this example](#) of media-as-food analogy to offer tips to brands. Chances of forgetting this are low, right?



# Chapter 2:

## Visual Design Basics



Today, eLearning professionals and trainers need a good working knowledge of design principles. This is not to imply that they need to understand code or acquire a design degree, rather they ought to be able to identify what makes a good course and what a bad one. This guide details the fundamental principles every course developer must know including how to utilize techniques to help workflow and produce significant effects in eLearning design.

### Good eLearning Design has C.R.A.P.

The four basic principles present in every eLearning design can be abbreviated to CRAP. Every screen in a course should adhere to these basics to increase readability and understandability.

According to [\*The Non Designers Design Book\*](#) by [\*Robin Williams\*](#), the four basic principles that apply to designing anything (including eLearning) are:



#### **CONTRAST**

Use contrast to direct the learner's attention and create distinction between elements on screen.

## REPETITION



Repeat certain design elements throughout the course to create a consistent design.

## ALIGNMENT



Line up your content to create meaning and connections. Where appropriate organize your content horizontally or vertically, in columns or rows. Keeping your content organized will make it easier for your learners to absorb the material.

## PROXIMITY



Group related graphics and text elements to convey relationships.

[Download this](#) quick reference poster and have it at your desk:



## Gestalt for Coherence

The Gestalt Theory is based around the idea that the eye sees things as entire before distinguishing individual components.

Keeping the ***Principles of Perception or Gestalt Laws*** in mind can help you control how your eLearning designs are perceived. Using these principles correctly will ensure learners form a positive opinion about the design from the first glance. This is because only after learners have noticed the overall design can they begin to focus on the details.

These principles are:

 **Similarity:** Elements that are similar to one another merge into groups almost automatically.

 **Proximity:** The idea that when learners see several objects arranged together, they perceive these objects as belonging to a group.



**Closure:** The mind fills incomplete space with the missing information.



**Simplicity:** The mind will attempt to turn visual chaos into something more simple and understandable.



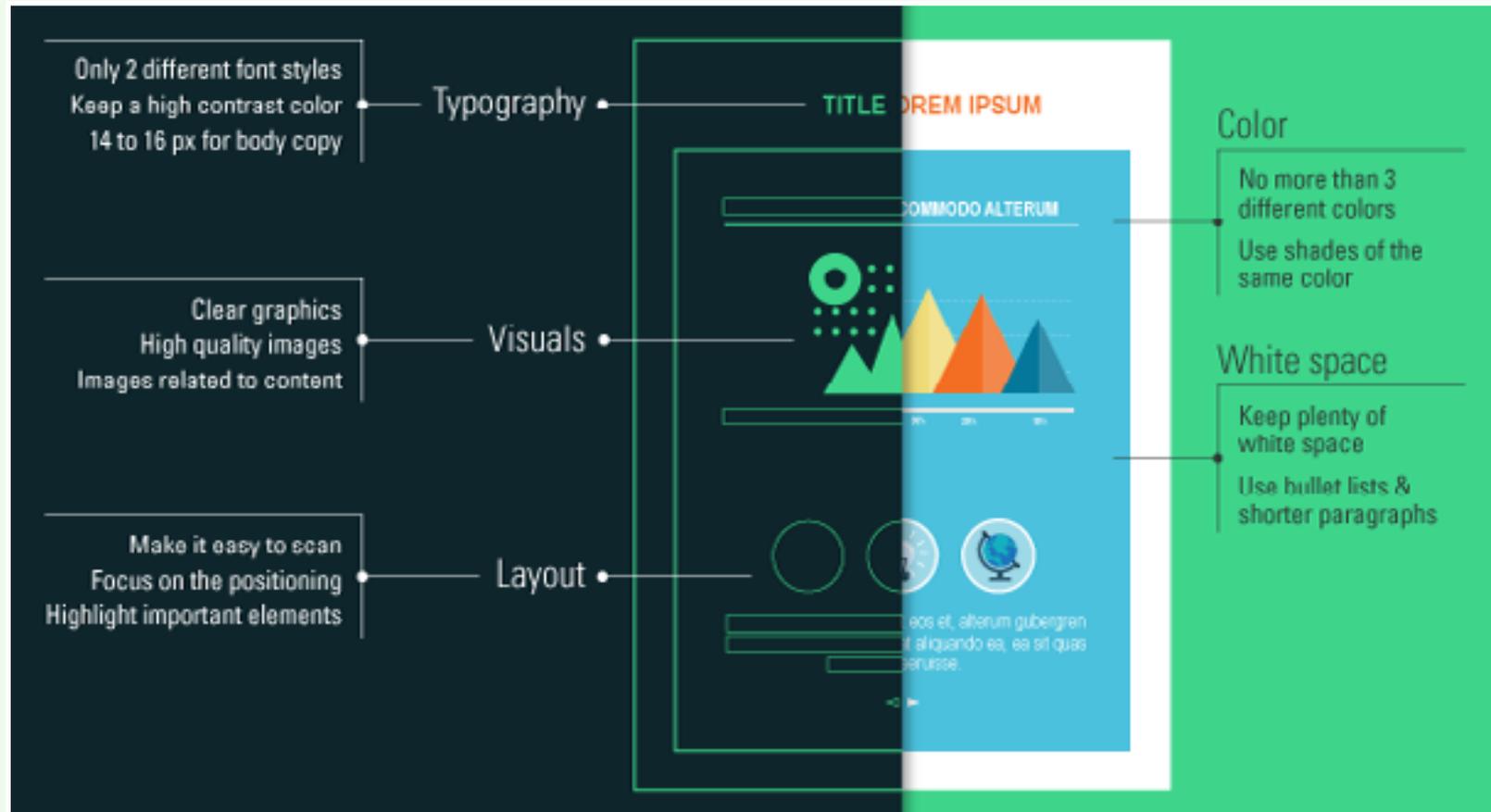
**Continuation:** The human eye naturally wants to move from one object to another.



**Symmetry and order:** The mind tries to perceive objects as symmetrical and based around a central point. This is because it makes sense to perceptually divide objects evenly and turn random, unconnected items into something understandable.

# eLearning Design Essentials You Need to Learn and Follow

Keep these design essentials in mind when crafting your eLearning courses, with enough practice; you'll develop outstanding results!



## TYPOGRAPHY

Despite the utility of multimedia in eLearning, images and even videos can only go so far: the core source of information remains text. Accordingly, a basic knowledge of typography is a must for any eLearning designer. Good typography enhances readability, encourages information processing, creates a visual hierarchy, and even engages learners' emotions.

Yes, you may not realize this often but the font style, color, size and the spacing makes a lot of difference in your design.

### While choosing fonts, you should focus on:

- ✓ Setting a **limited font palette** that is clean and fuss-free. The more fonts you use, the more chaotic it gets for the learner to understand. A combination of two font styles will have a great impact on the design.

[Here are 10 awesome resources](#) that address the designer conundrum of mixing fonts effectively.

- ✓ The **font size should be easily legible** for your learners. Usually, it is 14 to 16 pixels for the body copy.

- ✓ Use typography to create **visual hierarchy and contrast**. If your body copy is 14px, then use 24px for the heading and 49px for the title.
- ✓ **Pick easy-to-read fonts:** Even if you are working on something out-of-the-box, don't experiment too much with the fun quotient of your font. Pick an attractive and creative font for your heading, but choose easy to read subtitle and body fonts like Verdana.

*Tip: Avoid fonts such as Comic Sans, or else your design may come off as amateurish.*

Arial	Trebuchet	Comic Sans
Helvetica	Century Gothic	Arial Rounded
Great options for easy reading.	Out of the ordinary and kind to the eye.	Better for more informal topics.



### Never sacrifice legibility to aesthetic appeal.

Get the balance right, and your screen will be clear and appealing, neither boring nor illegible.

## COLOR

The color palette that you choose can be a really tiresome task but at the end of it, you should ensure that the chosen colors enhance and clarify the entire look and feel. Some points on how you can choose the colors for your eLearning course:

- ✓ Try and include **no more than two-three colors** in your design.
- ✓ **Stick to the 60-30-10 rule** - rather than using an equal amount of each color, divide color use into 60 percent, 30 percent, and 10 percent.
- ✓ Never use any **background color** that makes it difficult to read the font.
- ✓ **Combine colors wisely.** Choosing fonts with a high level of contrast will always work on your favor.
- ✓ Select **complimentary colors schemes** by using colors opposite one another or within the same family on the color wheel.

### Explore different color combinations with these tools:

- ✓ [Adobe Kuler](#): Create an entirely new color scheme or search for others based on your preferences and keywords.
- ✓ [Coolors](#): This app lets you lock one or several colors by playing around with HSB, RGB, CMYK and PMS values or typing your hex#. The app will create as many matching combinations as you want while respecting your locked values.

One of the best thing here is you can download a .png file with your desired color scheme.

- ✓ [Design Seeds](#): Browse through huge lots of color codes then simply copy and paste to create your own palette. These sites work amazingly if what you just need is inspiration.
- ✓ [Pictaculous](#) and [Color Palette FX](#): Generate a color theme based on any photo you choose. These are excellent for identifying commonly used colors and matching themes to images you want to use.

## WHITE SPACE

*Golden Rule: Don't be afraid of white space!*

When you began to plan your course, you probably never thought of one aspect of eLearning design: white space. In fact, it's one of the most overlooked (and most important) elements in the screen layout.

### What Exactly is White Space?

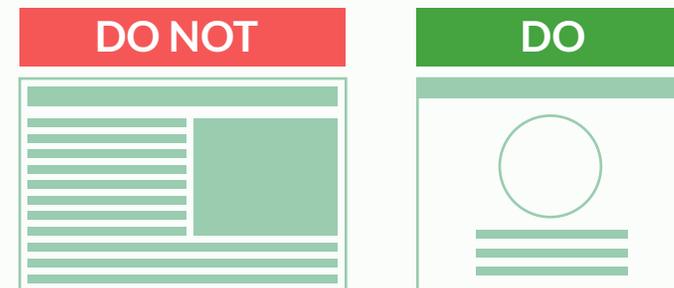
It's sometimes called [negative or blank space](#) too. Most of us refer to it as a part of the page or screen that remains blank. White space is area intentionally left untouched.

Some points on how you can make the white space work in your favor:

- ✓ Use more bullet lists and shorter paragraphs to increase the white space.
- ✓ Allow for ample white space between paragraphs and graphics to enhance attention.

- ✓ Emphasize the important elements on the screen by surrounding it with white space. (This will ensure that the most important element is highlighted).
- ✓ The body of a text should occupy 25-40% of the screen.

Having whitespace makes a world of difference! Just see this example:



 **Remember:** The more white space around an element, the more it will attract attention. Less space means less attention.

## LAYOUT

One of the common mistake first-time eLearning designers make is stuffing large blocks of text into a screen. What they often don't realize is that how content is organized greatly affects learner comprehension.

Layout forms the base against which we visually convey the content or information we want to share with our learners. It's critical to make your layout consistent: make sure your headings are always in the same place on the page, and use the same typeface and font size throughout. This is easily achieved in eLearning design by creating a style guide.

Here are some pointers on how you can structure your layout and organize your content:

- ✓ Make the screens and layout easy to scan in order to retain the learners (use bulleted lists, headings and subheadings to create a visual hierarchy).

- ✓ Focus on the positioning techniques like proximity and grouping.
- ✓ Create a strong focal point, which is the most important visual element in your design.
- ✓ Keep sentences short (they are easier to read).
- ✓ Use white space around the text.



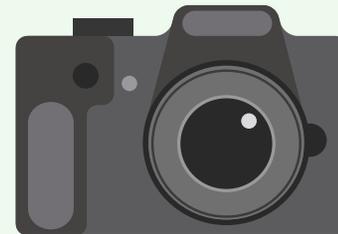
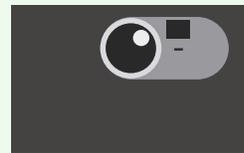
# Chapter 3:

## The Most Essential Weapons for Your Visual Design Toolkit



You have a vast visual eLearning toolkit to pack a punch in your courses. Make sure that you use the tools appropriately and with restraint and empathy to impress your audience. But don't let your creativity be stifled either. We all want to have fun, and your corporate adult learner, bored with dull presentations and mountains of statistics, craves it.

Learn about the 10 most widely used and effective visual tools that you can incorporate in your courses:



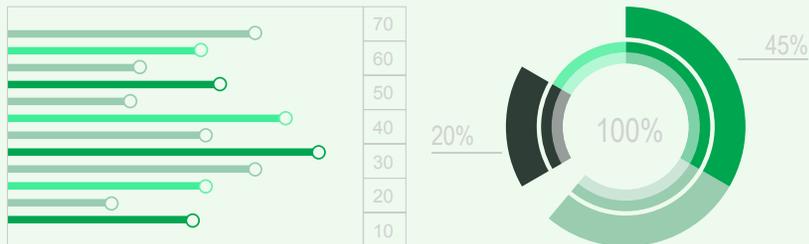
### 1. Photographs

Meaningful and relevant photographs stir audience emotions and compel them to pay attention to the content. Photographs can also simplify complex learning matter and make your course stick in the learner's mind. But beware of abusing this powerful visual tool; you can easily go wrong.



## 2. Illustrations and Icons

We create eLearning courses on almost anything under the sun and sometimes, on obscure topics as well. Stock photography sites may not always have photographs that suit our purposes. Using illustrations and icons in such cases to help learners make sense of complex learning matter is fundamental.

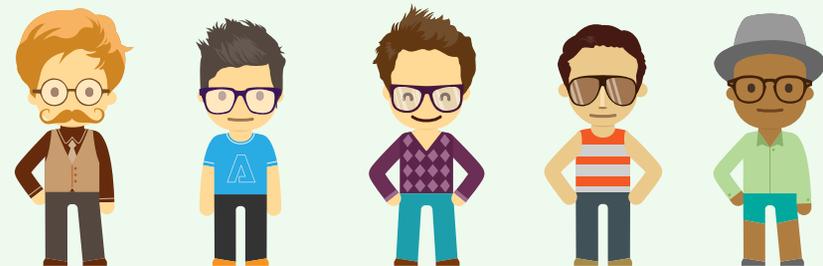


## 3. Charts and graphs

Visuals maps like charts and graphs are excellent learning tools to explain complex relationships, reveal hidden patterns and trends, and associate seemingly unrelated concepts and ideas.

## 4. Screen Captures and Screencasts

These are the best visual tools to explain computer processes. Courses that teach how to navigate a new program or how to use an application use screencasts extensively. It makes perfect sense because the learners actually get to see and work in a simulated version of the real environment that they would perform in when they go back to their desks.



## 5. Characters

We are social animals. We relate to other human beings and are influenced by their opinions and suggestions. In fact, we relate more to “faces” than to “voices” that we consider impersonal and unfriendly. That is why, using characters in your eLearning courses can create more impact than a chunk of text that seems

to be broadcasted at all and sundry by just another brand eager to thrusts its goods down your throat. What is more, using avatars or characters in your eLearning courses gives learners that familiar sense of being instructed by a teacher or a mentor, as they had been back in school.

## 6. Animated GIFs

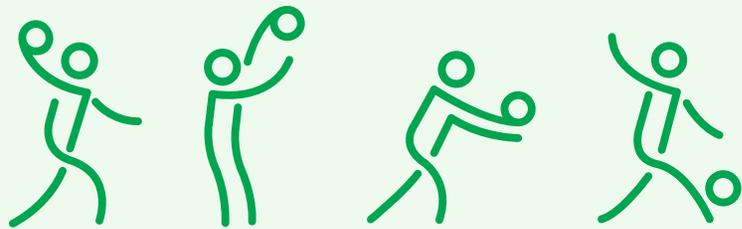
Animated GIFs are not just for websites or to send funny cat videos in emails. They have an important place in your eLearning visual toolkit as well. In fact, they usually create more impact than photographs because they contain action. We love action! And what is more, animated GIFs can be as effective in conveying meaning, eliciting emotions, and explaining processes as videos without gobbling up bandwidth like the latter. Besides, you can use animated GIFs within a myriad of settings—from explaining the steps of making organic soaps to creating a mood.



## 7. Infographics

If you are a regular on the Internet, then you know infographics are everywhere. From explaining complex analytical reports to listing processes and from representing statistics to telling a story, infographics come in handy and are effective in communicating many different scenarios. Infographics are not only quintessentially cool but they also provide a visually attractive way to present complex information and keep learners hooked.

We know creating infographics is a lot of work. So, if you don't have enough information for an infographic, you can do something as simple as a table or chart, with impacting colors and big numbers.



## 8. Pictographs and Comics

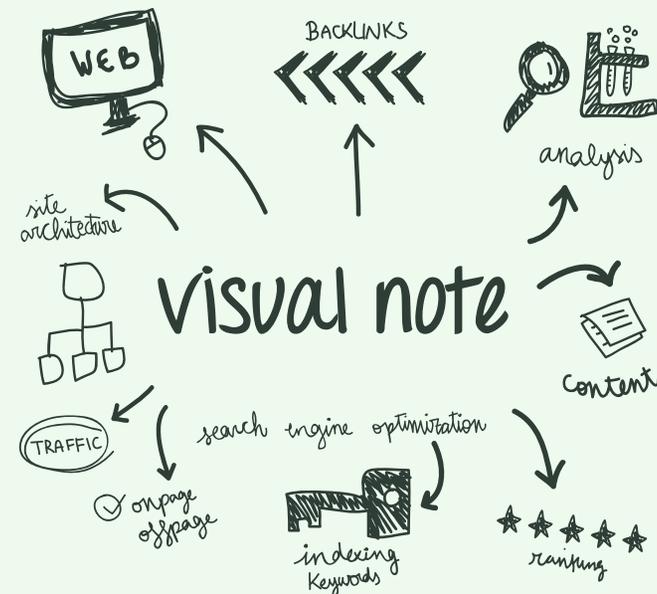
Pictographs or simple line drawings have an instant appeal. Not hung up on appearances, these simple drawings are excellent tools for explaining complex steps and procedures and are easily understood even by people with limited literacy or comprehension skills. In fact, pictographs are so effective that they are often [used in medical settings](#) as well.

## 9. Visual Notes

Sketchnotes or visual notes are effective ideation tools. These let you structure your disparate ideas, make connections between them, and translate them into visual forms with the help of a few simple lines and a little text.

You can sketchnote even if you don't have a degree in fine art! Sketchnoting does not aim to create an artistic masterpiece; it is just a technique to translate what you have in your mind into a concrete visible form that you can share with others in your team. So you can sketchnote even as you mull over deep thoughts—how to create an instructional strategy or how would a story develop across the course.

Sketchnoting is doodling but with a purpose. Here are the other [basics of sketchnoting](#). And here's how [sketchnotes look like](#).



## 10. Short Videos

Pictures are nice but moving images are nicer. A lot of demos, tutorials and even landing pages make use of short videos to easily capture a viewer's attention. Videos combine texts, images and sounds in order to create an immersive learning environment, or one that hooks your students while helping them learn more effectively:



Avoid a complicated text explanation, and instead consider creating a **how-to video** to describe it.



**Include an interview.** One of the most authentic ways to tell a learning story is to let the experts tell it themselves.



**Demonstrate how a product works:** Make it more compelling with video!

# Chapter 4:

## Good eLearning Design Habits



Every eLearning project is different, and comes with a different set of demands. However, when it comes to screen design, there are some best practices that fit all or nearly all situations.

Following these basic tips ensures clear and effective eLearning courses, while still leaving room to customize and add your own personal touch.

### Structure First, Design Second

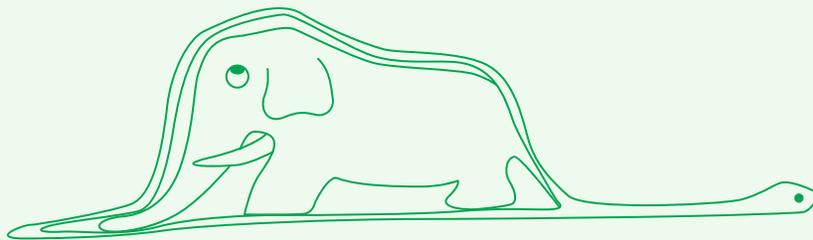
Have a detailed plan before opening your authoring tool so you stay on-track. Try storyboarding, so that you start the design process with a clear understanding of how each slides fits into the whole.

Above all, keep track of your ultimate goal. Check back every slide: does this support the overall goal? If not, get rid of it.



## Think subtract, not add

***“Perfection,”*** says the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery, ***“is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.”***



Like any other master artist, Saint-Exupery advocates subtraction—not addition. So in perfecting your screens focus on removing unnecessary elements. Always resist the urge to fill every part of the screen. That’s the mark of a good designing in the making.

The point is to make your screen clutter-free. Clutter is the failure of design. The more visual element you add, the less effective the overall design becomes. Every occupied inch of space—no matter how pretty your images—decreases clarity and impact.

## Practice Design, Not Decoration

Don’t include visuals for decoration only. Always bear this in mind. Effective design, after all, enables users to focus on the essentials; mere decoration distracts them.

“Practice design, Not Decoration: Don’t just make pretty talking point. Instead, display information in a way that makes complex information clear.” — Nancy Duarte



## Steer clear of photo clichés

When you look at a photograph of a woman wearing a headset and smiling at you, can you immediately fathom a course is about to teach accent to customer service executives? The image of a folded dollar bill stuck in a potted plant gives a symbolic touch to a course on building your cash reserves. But the image is so jaded, it will make your eyes roll.

Why do you expect these clichéd images will keep your learners hooked to your course?



Make the effort to add photographs that show real people in real-life situations exhibiting believable emotions.



Make sure that your images are relevant to your content – otherwise, you're just wasting your time.



Choose images that are fun and engaging, and move the content along.



Personalize and make your stock photos unique.

[Here's how.](#)



## Always Look for High Quality

Great looking pictures are those that have a good resolution. Period. Whenever you are downloading an image, make sure you choose the optimum resolution. And you need not worry if the image becomes too heavy, you can always compress the files.

High-resolution images always work best no matter what the situation is. They look professional and build an immediate connect with the learners when they view it.

## Tell Stories

Every picture should have a story behind it. Images aren't just meant to be pretty little things filling in white space on a course. They should be able you tell the story behind your content. Often, a well-selected image can tell people more in a second than a full-text screen can in five minutes.

While selecting images to convey a story, you must always plot the story and then choose the relevant images. Doing the other way round often leads to the images or the plot being misinterpreted. Also try and explore different kinds of angles that work in favor when you are trying to tell a story.

Presenting content from the same viewpoint can sometimes become boring. But when you have images with different point of view, it brings about a fresh feel to your eLearning courses.





## Always Design for Your Audience

You have to know your target audience before selecting images for your courses. The middle-aged corporate executive with his conservative tastes may not identify with a photograph showing a bunch of teenagers partying away. An image of a family seated at a Thanksgiving dinner will fail to resonate with most of your South-East Asian audience members who may not be familiar with Christian traditions.

Using appropriate images also means being culturally sensitive. Do not offend your learners in the Middle East by showing a woman without her customary headdress. An image of a bubbling bottle of champagne does not symbolize celebration in all cultures. Also be respectful when using images that depict national symbols of the countries your learners may belong to.

## Quiet Design is Your BFF

In *quiet design*, everything on a screen has a purpose. This reduces the time learners spend away from learning when processing unnecessary visuals or trying to work out an interface.

To properly utilize quiet design, keep information to a minimum, favor graphics over text, and place an explanatory text near visuals, to emphasize that the two are related.

Even color can send a strong message, and the overuse of color can decrease learners' performance. Once again, it is important to be minimal when it comes to using color, utilizing it deliberately to direct attention at the most important elements at the right times.



## Design, iterate, design

Even the greatest creative geniuses of our times don't get it right the first time! Apple didn't perfect the design of their notebooks till they had experimented with several prototypes. Result-centric creative people design, iterate, experiment, and design more.

Iterations help you perfect your design skills and sharpen your intuition. The more you flex your creativity muscles, the stronger they become. You get to experiment at every round of the iterative process till you reach excellence. Iterations also help you create innovative and harmonious designs.



## Be fearless!

Never fear to fail. Be courageous. Do not be afraid to experiment with your ideas. Flesh them out to see where they lead you. If you fail, get up, pick up the pieces, find out the lessons, and keep moving. You do not have to go wild with every eLearning course you create, but do not also fall back on tried-and-tested solutions every time you are stuck. Be bold, and take that risk. Else you will never know what magic you could have weaved.

## Finally...Research, Research, Research!

These are only basic guidelines; in order to make the best possible use of your slide space, here are some books to help you learn more:

- ✓ [Slide:ology](#) by Nancy Duarte;
- ✓ [Presentation Zen](#) by Garr Reynolds;
- ✓ [Resonate](#) by Nancy Duarte;
- ✓ [Brain Rules](#) by John Medina.



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