How to Make an Attention-Grabbing eLearning Course

20+ Ideas for Grabbing Learners' Attention

An eBook that will help you win the battle for grabbing your learners' attention.

Content

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Introduction

Every learner wants to believe that their teacher is an expert who can give them knowledge they did not know. Realistically, that isn't enough to keep the learner on task. The world today is full of stimuli that get our attention. Our brains want that same kind of stimulation in a learning setting. This is even truer in eLearning environments.

However, even if the human brain is highly adept at processing information, it has a limited capacity meaning it is unable to attend to everything received from stimuli and memories at once. **"Attention"** refers to the capability of the brain to choose one aspect on which to concentrate while ignoring everything else in the environment.

The current era is often referred to as the Age of Information; however, it could just as easily be called the Age of Distraction, although humanity has never in its history been entirely distraction free, distractions have never been more rampant as they are today. Different forms of information are constantly battling for the attention of your learners.

Instructional designers are just one of many types of professionals who need to learn to adapt to this new situation, as it is essential to hold the attention of students if they are to absorb and remember information. For this reason, it is crucial that you understand proven methods to grab learners' attention. Attention, after all, directs the outcome of learning.

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Helping students to pay attention is extremely difficult when you lack a basic understanding of how the attention system works. Moreover, the challenge goes far beyond only capturing attention but also on keeping it. Understanding and applying the knowledge in this eBook can be a good place to start building solid foundations on the topic.

You must constantly implement new ways to engage learners within that short period or else face them leaving towards the next big thing. You need to carefully craft your courses to retain the attention of you students. A course is useless if it does not interact with a high proportion of brain cells.

Research suggests that some forms of information are better at grabbing learner's attention than others: particularly personalized, concise, emotionally evocative information from a trustworthy source. It is important to remember that you are competing for the learners' attention **and you need to bear the following in mind:**

1) People do not pay attention when information is boring or presented in an uninteresting way.
//John Medina. Brain Rules

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2) Attention begins to wander after 10 minutes if the brain is not engaged

//John Medina. Winning the Attention Battle 10 Minutes at a Time

3) People are unable to multitask, it is only possible to focus on one thing at a time.

4) The brain pays attention to people better than things.

5) Most people have similar rhythmic patterns

Around 6 AM, they experience a sharp rise in the availability of attentional molecules, causing them to wake up. The average level of molecules remains relatively high during the morning but begins to decline during the afternoon, reaching the lowest levels after midnight.

//Robert Sylwester and Joo-Yun Chon. What Brain Research Says About Paying Attention.

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Chapter 1

Trends and Facts

Sustained Attention
is Decreasing

You've probably heard about this before. Readers prefer shorter texts because they cannot sustain attention for more than a minute. A study, in fact, revealed that the average attention span online is about 8 seconds. This has a lot to do with the arrival of hypertext, which encourages a non-linear way of reading. People can simply point to or click on a link without even finishing a paragraph. That's why learners hardly stay on a page and jump around instead.

> Tip: Assume that learners can spend no more than 15 minutes on each module or on every session"
> //SHIFT

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Most Common Cause of Forgetting:
Encoding Failure
(Learner Didn't Pay Attention)

This is the most common cause of forgetting. Basically, the information never actually made it to the person's memory bank. This happens when a student fails to focus on what is being taught. Maybe they had other things on their mind that day or the material simply wasn't engaging enough to capture their attention. Another reason for not paying attention is that the student didn't see a reason for learning this information; it didn't seem to have a purpose related to the subject at hand. This encoding failure can also occur when someone is being presented with too much information all at once, causing them to have to pick and choose what the brain will retain.

Better Attention = Better Memory

Start with the premise that people have to pay attention to information before they can remember it. The first obstacle to memorable content is getting it people to pay attention. You can't remember something if you haven't read and understood it, and the more attention you pay, the more likely it is you will remember. Getting eLearners to pay full attention to material isn't easy in a culture immersed in information overload. Read further to find out how you can help your learners focus.

Chapter 2

The Science of Attention

So, how do you encourage attention?

Start by learning how it occurs in the brain...

How the Brain
Pays Attention

Paying attention is a task people take for granted; they rarely stop to think about the complex neurocognitive processes involved. However, it is an important topic for eLearning developers who are often so concerned about the superficial elements of their courses and neglect to learn how the brain works. After all**, paying attention is the first step in the learning process, so ensuring learners pay attention is fundamental.**
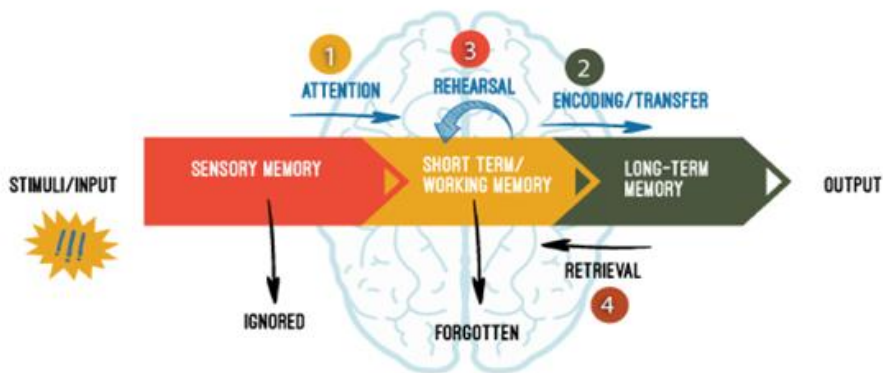
In order to efficiently process the huge amounts of information absorbed every second, the brain must impose several control measures. This starts with the prioritization of different types of stimuli, a process that controls what information to ignore and what to recognize and how much concentration to give to particular elements. This kind of selective attention determines what information is going to be moved into the brain's short-term memory.
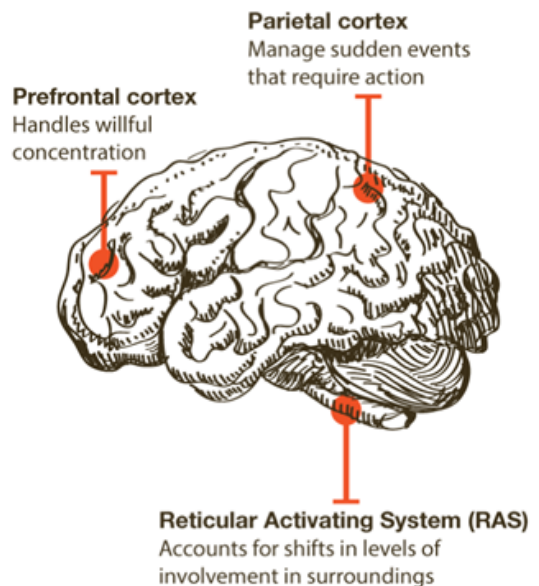
The brain also connects new information to prior knowledge to aid the understanding of a new piece as well as to develop a clearer idea about broader concepts. Finally, it helps a person to focus attention on important aspects for an appropriate amount of time. This latter can be a difficult task when a subject is not inherently interesting.

Regions of the Brain that Play a Role in **Attention**

It lies in two areas of the brain:

> The prefrontal cortex, located behind the forehead and spanning to the left and right sides of the brain, handles willful concentration. Part of the motivational system, it helps a person focus attention on a goal.

> The parietal cortex, behind the ear, is for sudden events that require action.

Parietal cortex
Manage sudden events that require action

Prefrontal cortex
Handles willful concentration

Reticular Activating System (RAS)
Accounts for shifts in levels of involvement in surroundings

What **Other Regions** of the Brain Play a Role in Attention?

Attention is largely a function of the **Reticular Activating System (RAS),** which includes a number of nerve fibers such as the thalamus, hypothalamus, brain stem, and cerebral cortex. The RAS accounts for shifts in levels of involvement in surroundings; for instance, when it is operating fully, the person is awake, alert, and attentive, but when it is less active, the person feels tired and inattentive.

The RAS is responsible for sorting sensory stimuli at the spinal cord and sending the only most relevant information to appropriate destinations in the conscious brain. Information that gets this far is carried to the amygdala, the emotional filter, which determines what passes to the prefrontal cortex, the place where the highest cognition and emotional reflection takes place.

The Connection **Between** Attention and Memory for Learning

The brain's goal is to choose the stimulus that is the most immediately relevant and valuable, so it is easiest to pay attention when information is interesting. For effective learning to take place, students must focus their attention on the learning activity. However, voluntarily keeping attention is a challenging task — typically **the mind wanders between 20 to 40 percent of the time when reading.**

Therefore, it all comes down to the following: **the less engaging the course, the more difficult it is for students to hold their attention**. In order to create interesting courses, eLearning developers must include meaningful learning situations and opportunities throughout the course to maintain attention and retain information in the long-term working memory.
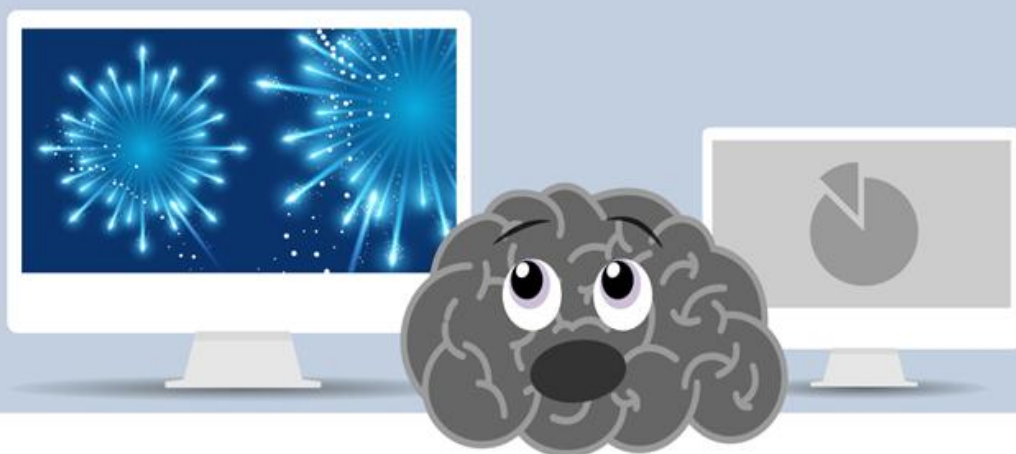
Chapter 3

The Framework

Why do some courses wow learners and grab their attention immediately? They build an emotional connection with their audience through design, considering the following framework.

The Framework: 3 Levels

The best way to influence what attracts your learner's attention and how it moves to their long-term memory is to use emotion. Having content that's interesting and emotional grabs attention and causes a state of cognitive arousal. By nature, emotion attracts us and holds people's attention.

To apply emotional design you need to look at the three cognitive levels in turn, first defined by Donald Norman — **visceral, behavioral, and reflective.** When utilized to create a course, these levels enable learners to form a connection with a course, which subsequently leads to a more appealing, pleasurable, and memorable learning experience. You require the above three elements work together to address the three cognitive levels that occur within the human brain. Cognitive processes on the **visceral level** take place instantly by drawing in learners through the visual appearance of a course. **behavioral level** processes start acting after users begin to interact with the program. Finally, **reflective** processes have a long-term impact.

VISCERAL   **BEHAVIORAL**   **REFLECTIVE**

1 The Visceral Level [Appearance]

The visceral level, the automatic, prewired layer, the first and most base cognitive process, enables people to make rapid judgments. During this stage, appearance, rather than functionality, makes an initial and immediate emotional impression in the preconscious mind. The instinctive reaction this has depends on the personality and cultural values of the learner. eLearning developers can test the visceral quality of their courses by observing the first impression it has on learners. An effective eLearning design on a visceral level will spark some sort of positive emotion, grabbing learners' attention immediately, and sparking interest in users within those three vital seconds of a first glance. Therefore, any course that is aesthetically pleasing will be successful at this cognitive level.

Tip: Make sure your screens appeal to the Visceral Level to grab learner's attention.

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2 The Behavioral Level [Usability]

The behavioral level, the part that contains the brain processes that control everyday behavior is the mid-level of this framework and relates to functionality and performance. This cognitive process kicks in after learners surpass the first-impressions stage and move on to see how easy it will be to accomplish a task.

At this level, usability is fundamental; design must be intuitive and easy to use to avoid learners experiencing negative emotions such as confusion and frustration. An effective eLearning design at this level requires developers to understand users' needs, achievable by observing how learners interact with the design.

If learners have a bad experience at the behavioral level, they will develop a negative emotion toward the course no matter how good other aspects, such as appearance and content, may be. This increases the likelihood that they will drop the course. **Tip: Reduce feelings of frustration or confusion to keep learners following the path through the course.**

The Reflective Level
[Impact]

3

The final level of cognition occurs after visceral and behavioral processing is complete. The reflective level is the highest level of cognition in humans. It relates to conscious reasoning and deep feelings and allows learners to overrule automated behavior and emotional impact.

In eLearning, the reflective level centers on what a course means to learners and how it affects them; for instance, a positive impression will encourage learners to complete the course, while a negative experience may lead them to seek out another option. Factors that influence this decision include **self-image, memory, meaning, and perceived value**, which is particularly important with learners, who tend to have short attention spans.

In short, effective eLearning design should evoke positive emotions and create a lasting impression on your learners. If learners feel safe, happy, and fulfilled, they will actually pay attention and enjoy learning. By participating in courses that are successful on a reflective level, users form an attachment to the course, are proud to take part in the program, and experience enjoyment.

Win the
Attention Game

Understand the main things that
learners pay attention to
(and how to use them in eLearning)

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Working with Short Attention Spans

You now know that our **average attention span online** is now eight seconds (it's just 1 less than a goldfish!). Therefore you need to consider creating your eLearning courses for the ever-shrinking attention span of your learners. This chapter will provide you with simple tips to help learners absorb content in spite of the distractions.
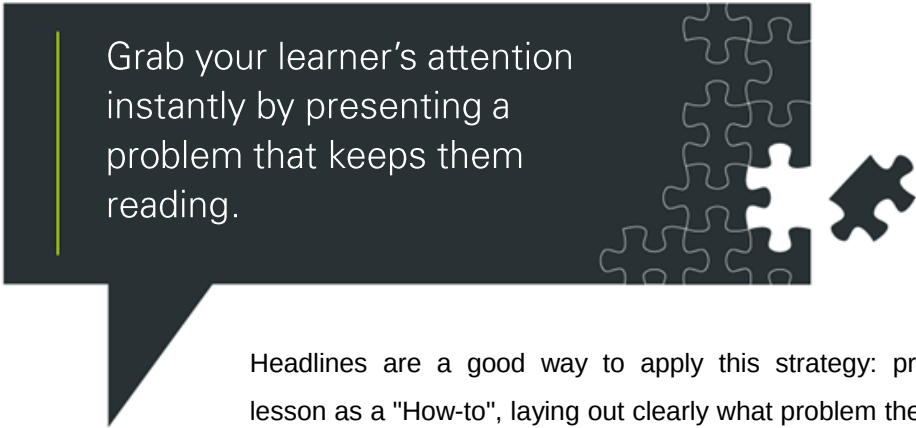
1 Problem Solving

Adult learners are almost always taking an eLearning course for a specific purpose rather than just for fun. **Focus on giving them what they want: answers to their real-world problems.** You should be able to put yourself in the learner's position and answer the question, "What's in it for me?" If you truly want to grab their attention, you're going to need to have answers to this question specially. After all, people will pay much more attention to aspects they consider relevant to their own lives and past experiences.

> Grab your learner's attention instantly by presenting a problem that keeps them reading.

Headlines are a good way to apply this strategy: present your lesson as a "How-to", laying out clearly what problem the rest of the lesson or module will solve.

Dominant headlines, especially when placed in the upper left corner, typically draw the eyes first. In fact, they also tend to capture attention faster than images. Make headlines meaningful to help your learners find the content they need easily. Keep them relevant, simple, concise and irresistible.

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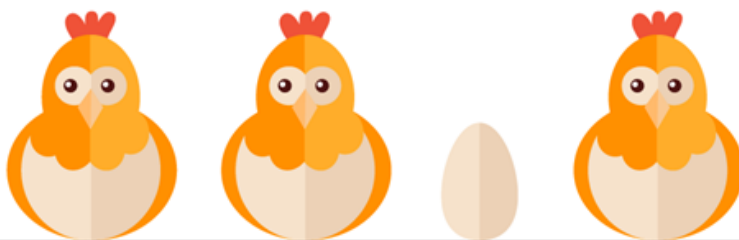
2 Comparisons

It's easy for an eLearner to "zone out" when faced with complex course content, especially with limited existing knowledge of a topic. The instructional design challenge is how to explain complex content easily. The objective is creating content that enhances eLearners' knowledge and ability to use it. Success is their mastery of complex content with a **simple technique: using mental processes focused on identifying how items, concepts or ideas are alike and different.**

That's important because identifying similarities and differences requires comparing information, compartmentalizing ideas into categories and forging a connection to prior knowledge. Research by educators Marzano et al. found that **strategies requiring learners to use comparative thinking upped their achievement by an average percentile gain of 45 points.** Plotting comparisons visually is particularly effective. Since the brain is always looking for connections between new concepts and prior knowledge, making comparisons grabs learner's attention instantly.

Four instructional strategies assist learners in examining two or more items or concepts for similarities and differences. They include:

Comparing:
Identifying any similarities or differences.

Classifying:
Identifying features or characteristics and determining a way to organize objects.

Creating metaphors:
A metaphor links two ideas or things that appear very different but that have something in common.

Creating analogies:
They help forge links to existing knowledge and facilitates organizing new material.

Read more **here**.

3 Questions

Questions invite someone to actively participate in learning rather than just passively absorb data. Asking a question encourages people to think and reflect about what they're learning, which helps them not only retain more information but also learn strategies to use what they've learned. Plus, it feels good to solve a problem on your own. Each time you ask a question, even if it is rhetorical, it conditions their brain to answer. This works because it emotionally appeals to learners.

4 Emotions

Emotions are pivotal to attention, perception, memory, and problem solving. When the **amygdala**, the emotional part in the center of the brain, notices that content has a high emotional value, it considers this material to be more important.

Emotionally-charged stimuli capture people's attention immediately. In eLearning, you can make this work for you by encouraging an emotional response. Many of these tools, such as compelling stories, videos, images, and visually engaging screens can evoke emotion; try to connect emotionally with learners, and they will learn more and better. Create shocking, impressive or surprising moments that grabs your learner's attention right away. If learners feel safe, happy, and fullfilled, they will actually enjoy learning and stay attentive.

5 Stories

Storytelling is a natural human brain pattern: stories are better remembered, better understood, and simply more listened to than other forms of communication. If you craft your lesson into a simple narrative, people will be more likely to listen to the whole thing and much more likely to remember it later.

Infusing stories into eLearning courses will increase the power of content and help the learner pay attention to the information better than other formats. One reason is the way the brain responds to stories. When you hear a story, your brain responds as if it were experiencing the events in the story. So if it's a sad or happy story, the corresponding regions of the brain will light up and engage. You actually **use more of your brain when you listen to stories.**

According to a recent article in **Psychology Today**, stories hold power in this digital age because the human brain hasn't evolved as fast as technology and it's only through stories that we can connect to the various digital platforms and media messages out there today.

Read about how to bring Storytelling into eLearning **here.**

6 Change, Novelty and Surprise

The relationship between surprise and learning is attention. Getting attention means crossing the brain's threshold for a "just noticeable difference". Without surprise, it's difficult to get and keep attention. Why? The brain loves the thrill of the unknown. The brain's love of a surprise makes scientific sense. Throughout time, being alert to out-of-the-ordinary conditions has been important to survival. As a result, the brain is wired to consider unpredictable and unexpected events noteworthy. So, the predictability of a situation is directly related to whether we pay attention to it.

Offer Something New or Different, and People Will Pay Attention

When new information is presented to the brain, it does a "scan" to see if it recognizes that information. If it does, then the brain knows how to respond. If the information is new, the synapses light up like crazy. If the information is boring, the synapses just sit there. No fireworks. Spaced out. No learning. Hardcore traditionalists should also note that when an eLearner is surprised and their attention is won, memory is strengthened. **Things that can be attached to the unusual have a better opportunity to stand out in memory**

There are several ways to add **positive surprise** in eLearning environments:

> Start with a bang.

Don't start a course with the traditional objectives (at least not every time in the same format). Tell a story. Give students a statistic, and then spend the lecture helping them make connections to see if that statistic is possible.

> Set up conflict with a story.

Bill Gates dropped out of school. Boxing promoter Don King was in jail for killing a man. Don't just present information, do it with a story with tension, then "learn" the details and backstory. Learn more about including surprise in your stories **here**..

> Have an interactive conversation with an eLearner.

Try to add humor and ask questions rapid fire. Never let eLearners know when their time will come. Tension can be your friend.

> Break up monotony. Change routines so that formats and techniques are changing, not just day to day, but also during a lesson. A two minute video to prove a point can break up monotony.

> Use stories to explain how things happened.

Explain how Marie Curie didn't just work on radiation, but that it ultimately killed her and her notebooks are still radioactive all these years after she died.

7 Brevity

People, especially adult learners, are busy, and they'll appreciate it if you make your information as easy as possible to skim. With so much information out there, skimming helps decide whether to put in the time to read the whole thing. What's more, learners prefer shorter, bite-sized pieces of information because they cannot sustain attention on a task for an extended period without pause. That's because of the ebb and flow of our energy. Instead of spending 90 or more minutes taking a course, learners will enjoy consuming short, snappy yet meaningful content. Bottom-line: Keep your content brief and to the point.

Organization is also key: headings and subheadings provide a clear outline that easily grabs learners' attention. Also, keeping paragraphs short and simple, with 3 to 4 sentences each and no unnecessary words will help.

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8 Lists

Numbered lists create a sequence of events, offer a mini-table of contents, and set an up-front expectation that adult learners find extremely attractive. Plus, lists help break down information into bite-sized chunks. They do as much to keep you organized as to keep the learner focused. In short:

- Lists make it easier for learners to consume most of your content.

- They discourage distraction and help learners make sense of your content quickly.

- Provide a visual break for your learner.

- **Combine these strategies, and you will quickly see a dramatic increase in your eLearning effectiveness.**

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Chapter 5

Attention- Grabbing Visual Design

The visual design elements you use throughout the eLearning course have a direct impact upon your learners' attention.

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Your course's visual design matters more than you think. How you use the **design elements throughout the eLearning course will define if learners will pay attention or not.** According to design expert Steven Bradeley, "People can be distracted by visual information even when it's not relevant. If it's attractive enough, it'll grab our attention even against our intention. This suggests we can direct where the eye will look and select what will gain the viewer's attention."

In this chapter we'll show you how to use visual design to direct learners attention.

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Color

Color can help reduce boredom and passivity, thus improving attention spans. When learners pay more attention while learning, recall rates and reaction times increases. Numerous studies have found that when developers use colors to emphasize a particular feature or piece of content in the screen for example, the attention level of learners increases. **Warm colors achieve this goal best. Specially red**, when used carefully, stands out and grabs attention immediately, stimulating the visual sense and helping learners remember facts and figures.

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White Space

Why should you develop an eye for white space? Short answer: **It's the #1 way to make your course both readable and attractive to learners**. An abundance of white space in the right locations on a screen is crucial to build eLearning courses that deliver.

White space is key in organizing your screen and maintaining flow. Without it, content takes longer to read and is more frustrating, as learners must first analyze the screen visually to distinguish one element from the next.

Bottom-line: Keep a solid space barrier around your words to prevent the eye from wandering in the wrong direction.

Text

Some words are able to generate both emotional and physiological reactions. Why is this important? **Choose the right word**, and you can both grab an eLearner's attention and nudge him or her into action. To be successful with text, you need to overcome the absence of images or video. Try concentrating on these attributes:

> Emphasis includes font size.

Differentiate to call attention to certain text.

> Tone creates a persona to the reader.

Using second person ("you") focuses attention on your learner.

> Typeface selection can affect not only emotional state of the learners but also their cognitive state. (Read more on Font Psychology)

> Use the right words.

Here are 6 Compelling Words and Phrases to Use

Contrast

Are there any elements here that are in contrast to things that came before? The human brain asks this question on a regular basis. Its hardwired to look for contrast as if its survival depends on it. Truth is, **the brain will always pay more attention to things in contrast to other things.**

Cozy Up to the Von Restorff Effect

Von Restorff Effect is a concept described by German psychologist and pediatrician Hedwig von Restorff. The gist of it is that we pay more attention to items that appear unfamiliar, different or unusual. Things that stand out, such as an orange neon word in a list of black text, are examples.

Von Restorff suggested styling elements in the middle differently from the rest to make them stand out and help people remember. To get a clearer idea of how this works, take a look at this example:

Dr. John Medina, a developmental molecular biologist known for his book Brain Rules, said**: "We pay lots of attention to color. We pay lots of attention to orientation. We pay lots of attention to size."**

Let's say you're writing a shopping list of ten items. Nine items are written in blue and the remaining one is written in red. If you're asked to memorize the list, which item do you think you'll remember best? The red one definitely, that's no-brainer. That's contrast at work.

Sticking to the idea that remarkably different gets more attention and more recall, these are some other things you might want to try include:

> Use large fonts for headlines. Bold or italicize other content
you want to stand out.
> Use a different color for emphasis or content you wish to distinguish.
When telling a story, use a believable but unconventional plot,
character name or place.
> Use audio or video content when images are too common.
> Incorporate emphasis and contrast with color or paragraph
size for important course elements.
> Use bold colors and fonts for your most important text.

Visuals

A picture, as they say, is worth a thousand words. People are naturally inclined to pay attention to images because they are easier to digest and faster to understand than large blocks of text.

Use an image to draw learners in and set the tone of the lesson, then use other visuals to add meaning to your words. Both showing and telling your message doubles its impact.

Also, start replacing long chunks of texts with relevant visuals. For instance, a Nielsen study finds users pay attention to "photos and other images that contain relevant information, but ignore fluffy pictures used to "jazz up" pages."

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Design for How People Read

Learn to exploit peoples' natural tendency to scan content by highlighting the relevancy of your content and encouraging learners to read on.

Users Pay More Attention to the Left Side of the Screen. In an eye-tracking research by Dr. Jakob Nielsen, a leading usability expert and one of the world's most influential designers according to Business Week, users spend most of their attention of the left side of the screen.

Many web users spend as much as 69% of their time on the left side; people spend only 30% of their time viewing the right half. This is especially true for people who are culturally trained to read and write from left to right.

Big Headlines Draw the Eye First. Dominant headlines, especially when placed in the upper left corner, typically draw the eyes first. In fact, they are also tend to capture attention faster than images.

Make the most out of your headlines. Make them meaningful to help your learners find the content they need easily. Keep them relevant, simple, concise and irresistible.

Tip: You should place key information in the first two paragraphs, use clear subheadings that explain what is to follow, and split content up with bullet points.

Chapter 6

Important
Attention-Getting Tips

The visual design elements you use throughout the eLearning course have a direct impact upon your learners' attention.

1 Stop thinking that learners have unlimited time and attention spans

Even more than other types of education, eLearning must struggle to attract learners' attention: the Internet is full of distractions, and adult learners are both busier and more free to indulge in distractions. Helping students to pay attention is a primary concern of training professionals, so here are some optimal methods to win the attention game in eLearning.

Manage to focus learners attention

Optimize every moment in your course for grabbing students' attention and enable learners to transfer information to their working memory. **At each moment of your course, your slides should only contain information that is necessary.** Remove anything that tries to win your audience's attention. For instance, the placement of text, color contrast, graphics, font size, pace, and mode of delivery (whether audio, video, or animation) all have an impact on attention. As people are instantly drawn to novelty, patterns, and motion, utilize these aspects to create focal points.

2 Don't over do it

According to Cognitive Load Theory, the brain can only process so much new data at a time. Too much, and learners' minds are too busy sorting through the new information to actually absorb any of it. Provide multiple avenues of learning, but don't force learners to parallel process. Make sure all your graphics are adding new and critical information, and don't read off the slides.

Little information is just as bad as too much, sending learners' minds wandering so they lose track of what you're trying to convey. Look for a happy medium.

Don't give learners two conflicting things to attend to at the same time. An effective eLearning design will never include formats that require learners to split their attention over multiple sources of information at the same time. The working memory has a limited capacity and duration, meaning that trying to focus on too many things can lead to cognitive overload. The result is that learning is reduced.

3 Use catchy headlines

A headline or an introductory sentence **is the most crucial part of your text**. It is, unfortunately, one of the most overlooked element in an eLearning course.

And it's easy to understand why. For one, headlines are a bit difficult to write. This is partly because of the volume of data people get through various channels. They are too many articles on their newsfeed, too many tweets and social updates, and too many inboxes to sort and tackle. Also, it takes time to acquire the skill of grabbing attention through the headline. Even professional copywriters consider this multidisciplinary task challenging. On the Copyblogger blog, it was revealed that "on average, 8 out of 10 people will read headline copy, but only 2 out of 10 will read the rest."

Now let's go back to your headline. Is it catchy enough to hold your learners' attention? Will it make them read your work? Take some time to rewrite and review your headings. Learners will use the headline to determine the relevance of your course, so it needs to communicate the main message in a way that will spark initial interest.

4 Consider the Brain's Time Clock

The human brain runs on 90 to 120 cycles called ultradian rhythms, which influence attention, interest, cognition, memory, visual perception, arousal, performance, moods, and behavior. To accommodate these cycles, it is important to vary instructional activities and spend no more than 12 to 15 minutes of focused attention on passive learning.

4 Eliminate Jargon

If you want to grab people's attention, use words that your target audience feels comfortable with. **Use plain English, clear-cut wording and terminology to translate jargon into a language every learner can understand.** People will just ignore those words they don't readily understand.

> Write in the second person. Call the learner "you" to personalize "your" writing.

> Write in a conversational tone using fairly short sentences.

> Don't waste words. Whether spoken aloud or in writing, wordiness loses the audience.

> Use contractions. It makes you sound less robotic.

> Ensure that what you write is clear. No one wants to read something that they have to decipher, and that is especially true when trying to reach a learner on a personal level.

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