

Layout: an overview

The psychology of perception gives us a considerable insight into the best way to lay out information on the page. The topics covered in this summary document are for the most part dealt with more fully in articles on the website www.theory.bz - this short document aims to pull some of these threads together.

For the sake of simplicity, where a page is mentioned here it means an A4 page. However, the basic rules and guidelines in this overview apply to other sizes as well.

Different types of reader

Different readers will come to your page with different mindsets. If you write to me about Arsenal Football Club, Bob Dylan or the Royal Shakespeare Company I will give my fullest attention to the piece, because I am interested in these topics. You will actually have to work very hard to get me away from the information. Bad layout, poor design, erratic typefaces and poor quality English will hinder my understanding, but the chances are I will stay with you and try to get the gist of what you say, because I am committed.

However, the average reader is not like this - and indeed I am not in this frame of mind most of the time. Write to me on almost any other subject and you have to work hard to get my attention and to keep it.

In other words I start by thinking about something else - my need for caffeine, the urgent work piling up on the desk, the requests from colleagues in other departments for urgent meetings, the ringing of the phone, and of course the ten other letters in my in-tray this morning.

Thus, whereas the committed reader will accept and work with printed material that requires a lot of brain power, the average reader will not. You have to consider whom you are talking to as this will affect the layout.

Grabbing attention from the first moment

The classic approach is simple: place a big headline (Arial 20pt bold is a good size headline) about 30% of the way down the page. You can go over 3 lines, and have up to 25 words, because the brain can take in such a sentence in one go.

The headline needs to be engaging and of interest to the individual reading the piece. If it opens up discussion or raises possibility so much the better. Open questions (those which don't have a yes/no answer) can work, as can items that don't quite make sense and force the reader to read on to work it out.

Benefits can also work, and indeed generally work much better than features. Simple announcements of fact tend not to work.

White space

Space is important – you need a lot of space around the headline – don't try to crowd the headline in with other items. The more space you leave the more people will appreciate the layout and feel that it is easy to read.

If you are writing text, then make sure you have a double return at the end of each paragraph, plus wide margins on all four sides.

Pictures

Do not assume that you must have pictures to grab attention. Grabby image theory shows that pictures used for grabbing attention only work where the reader is committed and where the picture says something very clear to the reader.

Thus, in a holiday brochure you have pictures. But people only read holiday brochures because they are seriously interested in finding a holiday. And the pictures chosen show the tourist resort or other centre – which is what the reader wants to see.

Consider the difference when selling a book. Readers of books want to know what's in the book – and quite often there's not much on the book cover that really conveys what's in the book. Yet publishers mistakenly put pictures of book covers on their advertising literature.

Pictures can add to the feel of quality – but they can just as easily make the reader feel that the whole piece is too confusing to read. This often happens if the pictures have no direct relevance to the issue being advertised and if the reader is not committed.

To show just how important the context is, let me add this one point. I buy “New Scientist” each week, and most weeks there is an article on the latest developments in nuclear physics – which I always read. The articles invariably include illustrations, but because most of the time there is nothing to illustrate (how do you illustrate a black hole or the concept of entanglement?) the magazine uses abstract graphics. This is not a problem for me because I am utterly committed to the article. But if I were not, it could get in the way.

Colour

There are two issues here: ease of reading the page, and the amount of brain power needed.

Reversed out colour (e.g. white print on black background) is much harder to read than black on white. If your reader is nearing the point of throwing the piece away, using reversed out text can achieve this.

Black on white is effective, but of course very overused. It can make the piece look as if it has just been photocopied.

Black on coloured paper, however, is usually conceived by the reader as being “coloured” without reducing readership. Black on yellow can be particularly effective. Yellow print, however, is near impossible to read, no matter what colour it is printed on.

Red text is found by some readers to be particularly hard to read – many people complain that the text appears to jump around as they read it.

Full colour illustrations are necessary in some cases – but they require huge amounts of brain power and thus should only be used where you are writing to committed audiences and where they are necessary.

Skimming

Where the reader is presented with a page of text, as for example in a sales letter or in a brochure covering a number of pages, the reader may well skim through the text. On a page of A4 this can involve starting at the top and reading the opening word of each paragraph. In a brochure it can involve picking up the brochure and flicking through the pages backwards.

To attract the reader’s attention it is necessary to start each paragraph with some words that are instantly interesting. In the brochure start each page with a headline that grabs attention.

Mentioning the company and the product

There is a theory that says that the product and/or company must be mentioned over and over again. Some argue that the name should be in bold each time – maybe also underlined.

There is no evidence that I know of which shows that this works. Indeed the reverse is probably the case since in many ways text such as this is the equivalent of shouting at the reader, and is clearly treating the reader as a being of no intellect. Most people don’t like this approach.

There are many examples of sales letters and brochures which stress benefits and the solving of a problem throughout, and then talk about the product at the end.

The classic letter / brochure approach

In this approach the letter grabs and holds the attention of the reader and stops the reader throwing the promotion away. The brochure then goes in for the sale and will detail the features and include the colour pictures. This works because by the time the reader gets to the brochure the reader has achieved a level of commitment – a commitment gained through the interesting text of the letter.

It isn't the only approach, but it is one that can work well.