

Taking Up Space

Taking Up Space is an occasional column written on graphic design issues by Brian Grebow, BG Communications.

White space: The initial frontier

In another paper we discussed the “why-to” of learning design basics: competent design increase your document’s chances of both being read and being effective (for example, being understood, acted on, remembered—achieving their intended impact). Here, we present our first “how-to” column.

Books and seminars on design cite numerous elements that combine to make or break your document.

But the most powerful, and perhaps the most often neglected, design principle may be this one:

Use lots of white space

Writers, editors, and fledgling desktop publishers often show a distinct aversion to white space. I’ve had clients, when shown a layout, ask, “Didn’t we provide enough copy? Can’t you plug those ugly holes with cartoons or something?”

Yet readers often avoid “grey” or text-heavy pages. Even when they do struggle through a piece, unbroken text blocks often block comprehension and retention.

In music, we wouldn’t hear the notes without the silences. Similarly, white space on a page allows the eye to rest, and—paradoxically—boosts the power of the words.

Four elements blend to build white space into your documents: margins, paragraphs, heads, and graphics.

Margins

The best margin width depends on page size. An 8.5x11” page generally needs at least 1” all around; consider allowing 1.5”. You can narrow your outer margins if you lay out the text in columns, 1/4 to 1/3 of an inch apart.

Paragraphs

Today’s readers prefer relatively short paragraphs (one to three sentences). Indicate breaks by *either* leaving a blank line between paragraphs *or* (as in this newsletter) indenting the first line of each paragraph. Don’t do both, though: it’s overkill.

Heads

Add at least four heads per page. Besides supplying “breathing space,” heads help busy readers find information fast. Well-written heads can convince skimmers to read more thoroughly, and can even convey the gist of your message to those who merely scan the page. A later column will tackle heads in more detail.

Graphics

Tables, charts, drawings, photos—even lists and “drop caps”—can also support your space quest. Used liberally, they’ll

- make your document more inviting by breaking up text
- help readers access important information quickly and easily
- provide information chunks that help readers grasp and remember points
- make it easier for readers to find information again later

For the greatest impact, allow ample space around graphics.

Too much white space can also cause problems, chiefly by distracting readers. Experiment to find the best balance. Watch how the documents you read employ white space. An approach that works well in annual reports, proposals, and other corporate documents, including many technical manuals, uses two-thirds of the page width for text, leaving a full third blank (or sprinkling that space with heads, graphics, definitions, and other marginalia).

Give your readers some breathing room. They’ll appreciate it.

