

Five Simple Rules for Becoming a Skillful Document Designer

Successful designers have learned to use other sources for inspiration, as well as learn from trial and error. You probably won't hit the mark on your first try, but remember, do your best, be thorough, and when in doubt, error on the side of restraint.

Fellow designer, I don't want to be the one to break the bad news to you, but most of your design ideas will not come from a sudden burst of creative energy. Nor will they be all that innovative. Successful designers have learned to use other samples for inspiration as well as learn from trial and error. Your first draft mostly like will be just that...your first draft. Design is built upon iterations and revisions. Keep working at different solutions to come up with a finished product that meets your client's requirements. The more clearly defined the project specifications, the stronger your design will be. Use these five tips to help you build your skills as a document designer:

Simple Rule #1 – Be Inspired!

There is inspiration for design all around you. Train your eye to look at everything you can as a sample of effective and ineffective design. If something catches your eye, study it for a while and decide on a few key elements that were appealing. Remember to do the same for pieces that aren't as appealing. Make notes about the things that didn't seem to work. Was it cluttered or off balance? Did the piece have inconsistent use of fonts and graphics?

Simple Rule # 2 – Maintain an Idea File.

Most seasoned designers have an idea file—a place where they keep samples of pieces that caught their eye for whatever reason. My idea file is quite large and I've had to revisit it from time to time to see if I can weed out some designs that seemed out of date. Always be on the lookout for new samples, even if it is doesn't seem applicable to any projects you are currently working on.

Simple Rule #3 – Embrace Trial and Error.

As I mentioned previously, much of your design skill and expertise will emerge from trial and error. Don't be afraid to try things you haven't done before. Design is a dynamic discipline and will often require some unsuccessful attempts before finally coming to the right one.

Simple Rule #4 – Show a Little Restraint.

With all of the graphic and font choices available on the market, it is easy to fall into the trap of a cluttered and gimmicky look for your design. When in doubt, it's best to error on the side of restraint. Remember, design should be seamless to the reader. If the reader's eyes continually bump into various graphic and font changes, you have lost them. Limit yourself to a few typefaces, styles and sizes. Emphasis is only effective when you can present information within a stable, consistent backdrop. Strive for simplicity; you can always add more if necessary.

Simple Rule #5 – Pay Attention to the Details.

A sure sign of a mature designer is their attention to detail. One slip or blunder can completely sabotage an entire project. This does not give you permission to spend unnecessary time tweaking something to get it perfect. The goal is to meet the project requirements while being thorough. Your readers' interest should dictate your design.



Don't get discouraged by what appears to be a lot of areas to cover when designing a project. Keep the project requirements in the forefront and you'll be just fine. Make sure that the project leader has an open line of communication with you. And remember, do your best, be thorough and when in doubt, error on the side of restraint.



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Donna M. Murphy is an editorial specialist, a veteran writer and a published author who has written, edited, and designed extensive collateral and key solutions products for print and the web. Training manuals, operating procedures, business documents and content quality assurance encompass a large portion of her assignments. Donna is the creative force behind Summit Publication Design, LLC, and has specialized in content organization, quality assurance and publication design since 1997. Visit Donna's website at <http://www.summitpubdesign.com> for information on her comprehensive services, helpful resources, more articles like this one, and strategies to help you improve the quality and effectiveness of your publications.

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