

## Page Layouts and the Comprehension Process

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: Page layouts fascinate me. My interest in them is, in part, why I became a graphic designer in the first place. I find it amazing that the way content is arranged on a page can have a profound impact on how readers interpret it. Words can be daunting on their own. Lined up in huge unwieldy blocks, text can become difficult to penetrate. However, with a good layout, the text becomes an accessible and enjoyable reading experience. Thus, I consider page layout to be one of the most important genres of information design.*

*This immediately came to mind when my UWP 012 Professor Carl Whithaus assigned our class the task of creating multimodal texts to teach other students about particular genres commonly used in our respective fields. We were to compare examples of the genre in order to broaden the scope of our research and analysis. I applied the aspects of graphic layout that I researched into the aesthetics of my final project.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: The interplay between words and images is a key element in UWP 12 Writing and Visual Rhetoric. Throughout the class, Rebecca worked at the seam between words and visuals. As a genre analysis essay, her "Page Layouts and the Comprehension Process" encourages us to see the relationship between words and images differently. Often text is seen as an explication of an image. At other times, images, particularly figures, are analyzed as support for arguments made in words. Rebecca's essay, however, asks us to see words themselves—pages and pages of words—as images. In succinct prose, Rebecca analyzes articles in the story-based magazine, Local Wolves, and on the photography blog Capture by Lucy. She considers them in terms of their use of visuals and design elements. Rereading "Page Layouts and the Comprehension Process" reminds me of how thoughtful and engaged*

*Rebecca was as a student in UWP 12. Her attention to detail was impressive. I hope that we get to see more of her work—both her writing as well as her design—in the years to come.*

*—Carl Whithaus, University Writing Program*



# PAGE LAYOUTS

## AND THE COMPREHENSION PROCESS

Large blocks of text are notoriously difficult to process. When it comes down to it, it's a matter of maintaining attention and interest when one is presented with a wall of content. Often, dense texts result in viewers reading and rereading the same passage and failing to process anything that they're seeing. So how do those who rely on writing in dense blocks make their message accessible to readers? The answer is the design concept of layout. Page layouts are a crucial bridge between content and comprehension, especially in genres that require extensive writing.

Layouts aren't generally considered to be a genre on their own. However, the facet of design that focuses on the graphic conveyance of text-based information relies heavily on the principles of page arrangement. Thus, text-based communication creates a genre of layout design.

Simply put, a layout is how a page is organized. Making use of space, proximity, figure-to-ground relationships, and other gestalt concepts, layouts make text more accessible, and easier for the brain to process. If a reader is faced with a wall of text, they might find themselves intimidated and less likely to attempt to tackle the reading. However, if the information is broken up into multiple,



easier-to-read segments, then the reader can move across the page at their own pace.

Depending on the topic, a page's layout can be more effective in one format than another. For example, if a journalist is reporting on current events, a magazine article format might work best. Alternatively, if a scientist is attempting to convey a series of data points to a wider audience, an infographic layout might be the most effective format. Layouts can be found in any visual communication medium that needs to convey information, such as flyers, posters, and newspapers. In their study of genre, Bawarshi and Reiff delve further into this. "Does your genre require a certain organization?" they ask. "Most proposals, for instance, first identify a problem and then offer a solution. Some genres leave room for choice. Business letters delivering good news might be organized differently than those making sales pitches" (196).

However, a layout that functions well for one piece of media may not be as effective for another. As explained in Cheryl E. Ball et al.'s *Writer/Designer*, genre conventions dictate the features that an audience expects from a piece of text (2); if the text deviates from its expected format, audiences will have a harder time processing the information. Thus, it's important to match the genre-based conventions of the information in the ultimate display.

One example of effective page layout can be found in *Local Wolves*, a printed and digital independent magazine that focuses on telling stories about artists across multiple fields of work, from music to






fashion and beyond. As a story-based magazine, *Local Wolves* is quite text-heavy. However, with excellent page layout and design skills, the magazine becomes an aesthetically pleasing joy to read, drawing the reader in with beautiful spacing, mood-setting color palettes, and interesting graphics. **Issue 59**, released on March 5th, 2020, shows an excellent breadth of formats for its text, an example of which is pictured above. Note that although the text is still lumped into block format, it stays in justified columns, broken up by eye-catching graphic elements. Hierarchy is created through differing weights of fonts, and lines are used to direct the eye across the page. Color accents the photos used, and creates a consistent palette, so the magazine remains cohesive. For this particular media category, the magazine layout is most effective, and conveys the information in an easily digestible format.

For more examples of effective layouts using these same principles, check out graphic designer Joe Stern's [magazine page layouts](#) on Behance.

Another type of layout involving high text density is the résumé. Résumés are notoriously difficult to balance in terms of text and space. Almost nowhere is it more crucial to maintain a reader's attention than when that reader is a potential employer. Much needs to be said, and key elements must be succinct and eye-catching. These goals can be achieved through appropriate layout. Online tools such as the résumé-building site "Zety" provide templates for individual, customizable résumés. However, it is important to understand what makes those





templates effective. **This article**, presented by Zety itself, provides a more in-depth look at what makes résumés eye-catching. The image of Emma Farran's résumé (shown left) begins to convey some of the tips explained. Résumés shown in the article focus on balance between whitespace and text, readability of font, line spacing, and type hierarchy. Each résumé is broken into distinct sections and kept short and to the point. Graphics are used to condense information that might otherwise take up too much space as text, such as the skill bubble spectrums or icons used for contact information. These layouts are built to cram a lot of essential information into a small amount of space and keep the reader attentive through aesthetic value.

*For another example of an effective résumé layout using these same principles, check out designer Stanley Cheah Yu Xuan's **résumé** on Behance.*

Blogs are also infamous for being difficult to parse. Unwieldy blocks of text without much spacing in between are paired with irritating advertisements, making it painful to scroll through the pages. However, *Capture by Lucy*, a website run by photographer and mother Lucy Heath, provides an especially good example of an effective blog layout. Her posts maintain ample whitespace between and around the text, accented with beautiful supplemental photographs and complementing colors. The blog is clean and information-centric, avoiding distracting advertisements and noise, so readers can stay focused. Her layouts are minimalistic, but powerful in their simplicity.



**This post** from 2018 (shown above) showcases all of these techniques in use.

For more examples of effective blog layouts using these same principles, check out journalist Steve Benjamins' **25 Inspiring Examples of Blogs In 2020** on SiteBuilderReport.

Throughout the examples provided, we see a few consistent elements that make the layouts effective. First, *whitespace is crucial*; give the words room to breathe, and the readers will feel more relaxed and attentive while reading them. Second, *uniformity creates balance*; if the layout is created with a cohesive color scheme and a limited



number of fonts, the text will be easier to process. Third, *hierarchy matters*: effective layouts will create patterns for the eyes and mind to follow, so that they can easily separate body text from headers. Finally, in communication design, *content is paramount*. No layout should overshadow the text that it is organizing. Like most effective designs, layouts are best when the reader barely registers their presence. If a layout has done its job well, the main focus of the reader will be on how interesting the text is, and how easy it is to parse.

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