12 Rules of Desktop Publishing

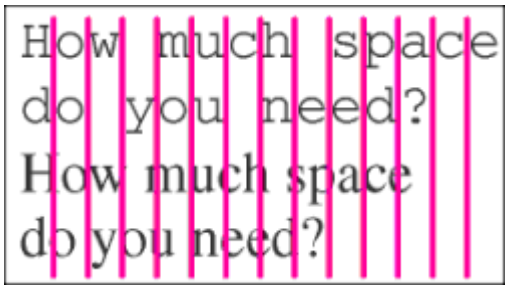
From Jacci Bear, http://desktoppub.about.com

"Right and wrong do not exist in graphic design. There is only effective and non-effective communication."

— Peter Bilak - *Illegibility*

1. Use Only One Space After Punctuation

Should you put one space or two spaces after a period? The debate over how much space to put between sentences (whether they end with a period or other punctuation) may seem petty, but often it's the little details that make or break a design.



It is generally accepted that the practice of putting two spaces at the end of a sentence is a carryover from the days of typewriters with monospaced typefaces. Two spaces, it was believed, made it easier to see where one sentence ended and the next began. Most typeset text, both before and after the typewriter, used a single space.

Today, with the prevalence of proportionally spaced fonts, some believe that the practice is no longer necessary and even detrimental to the appearance of text.

With monospaced typefaces every character takes up the same amount of space on the page. **M** uses the same amount of space as **i**. With proportionally spaced fonts, the characters take up an amount of space relative to their actual width - the **i** needs less space than the **M**. (as illustrated by the graphic in the sidebar)

The use of proportionally spaced type makes two spaces at the end of a sentence unnecessary (if they ever were). The extra spacing is often distracting and unattractive. It creates 'holes' in the middle of a block of text — trapped white space on a smaller scale.

The Bottom line: Professional typesetters, designers, and desktop publishers should use one space only. Save the double spaces for typewriting, email, term papers, or personal correspondence. For everyone else, do whatever makes you feel good.

2. Don't Use Double-Hard Returns After Paragraphs

With today's word processors and page layout applications it is possible to precisely control the amount of space between paragraphs. There is no longer a need for the old typewriter style of putting *double hard returns* to separate paragraphs (in computer terms that would be the equivalent of using the enter key to add space between lines).

With typewriters the only way to increase the space between lines of type was to put two or more *hard returns* at the end of a line. Typically, *double hard returns* were used at the end of paragraphs to set one paragraph apart from the next. It put a blank space, the equivalent of one line of type, between each paragraph.

Desktop publishing software and modern word processors use paragraph formatting to more precisely control spacing between paragraphs. But old habits die hard. One sign of a beginner in desktop publishing is the use of hard returns between paragraphs.

Paragraph formatting allows the user to specify an amount of space to be placed before or after a paragraph. With paragraph formatting, spacing can be controlled in smaller increments in order to achieve the best appearance based on the font, leading, and other elements of the design.

In the example at the top of the sidebar both columns use the same font size and leading (line spacing). However, the text on the right uses spacing after each paragraph that is slightly less than double hard returns would allow. Additionally, the subheading has a small amount of space added before it, to set that section apart from the preceding text without leaving the excessive empty space found on the left where triple hard returns are used.

TIP: Although readability and appearance should be your overriding concerns, using paragraph formatting instead of hard returns can help you fit more text on the page. It's one way to cheat at copyfitting, if applied consistently throughout a document.

The Bottom line: Professional typesetters, designers, and desktop publishers should use paragraph formatting to put space between paragraphs. Save the hard returns for typewriting, email, term papers, personal correspondence, or manuscript submissions that specify typewriter-style formatting. For everyone else, do whatever makes you feel good.

3. Use Fewer Fonts

How many fonts are too many for one project and how do you know where to draw the line? A generally accepted practice is to limit the number of different typefaces to three or four. That doesn't mean you can't use more but be sure you have a good reason to do so.

Be consistent in the use of fonts. A different font for every headline, for instance, is confusing and can give your design a cluttered look. You can usually get away with more fonts in longer documents with many different design elements where only two to three different fonts appear on any one page spread.

Select a font for body copy and another for headlines. Use bold, italics, and different sizes of those fonts for captions, subheadings, decks, and other design elements. Depending on the design you might use a third font for initial caps, pull-quotes, or other selected items. You might add a fourth font for page numbers or as a secondary body font for sidebars, but usually two or three are sufficient.

> **Don't use more than four fonts in any one publication.**
> As a general rule, when designing a publication I never use more than four fonts. Realistically, how many do you need? For a newsletter layout, you could use one font for headings, one for body text (which could also be used in italics or bold for captions) and one for subheadings. You may not even need that fourth one.
>
> *— Stuart Gardoll's Desktop Publishing Do's and Don'ts*

It is also wise to not make sudden typeface changes within a paragraph. Use the same typeface for body copy, using only bold or italics to add small amounts of emphasis, if necessary. If greater emphasis is required

— create a pull-quote, set that copy in the margin, or create a sidebar using a different font to really set the information apart.

The Bottom line: No hard and fast rule says you can't use five, six, or even twenty different fonts in one document. However, consistency and readability are important to good design and too many font changes can distract and confuse the reader. Make your font choices carefully and consider how many typefaces will be seen together — longer, multi-page publications, such as magazines, can often tolerate a greater variety of typefaces. For brochures, ads, and other short documents, limit typefaces to one, two, or three.

4. Use Ragged-Right or Fully Justified Text Appropriately

If someone insists that fully justified text is better than left-aligned text, tell them they are wrong. If someone else tells you that left-aligned text is better than justified text, tell them they are wrong.

If they are both wrong, then what's right? Alignment is only a small piece of the puzzle. What works for one design might be totally inappropriate for another layout. As with all layouts, it depends on the purpose of the piece, the audience and its expectations, the fonts, the margins and white space, and other elements on the page. The most appropriate choice is the alignment that works for that particular design.

About Fully-Justified Text

- Often considered more formal, less friendly than left-aligned text.
- Usually allows for more characters per line, packing more into the same amount of space (than the same text set left-aligned).
- May require extra attention to word and character spacing and hyphenation to avoid unsightly rivers of white space running through the text.
- May be more familiar to readers in some types of publications, such as books and newspapers.
- Some people are naturally drawn to the "neatness" of text that lines up perfectly on the left and right.

Traditionally many books, newsletters, and newspapers use full-justification as a means of packing as much information onto the page as possible to cut down on the number of pages needed. While the alignment was chosen out of necessity, it has become so familiar to us that those same types of publications set in left-aligned text would look odd, even unpleasant.

You may find that fully-justified text is a necessity either due to space constraints or expectations of the audience. If possible though, try to break up dense blocks of texts with ample subheadings, margins, or graphics.

About Left-Aligned Text

- Often considered more informal, friendlier that justified text.
- The ragged right edge adds an element of white space.
- May require extra attention to hyphenation to keep right margin from being too ragged.
- Generally type set left-aligned is easier to work with (i.e. requires less time, attention, and tweaking from the designer to make it look good).

No matter what alignment you use, remember to pay close attention to hyphenation and word/character spacing as well to insure that your text is as readable as possible.

There will undoubtedly be well-meaning friends, business associates, clients, and others who will question your choices. Be prepared to explain why you chose the alignment you did and be prepared to change it (and make necessary adjustments to keep it looking good) if the person with final approval still insists on something different.

The Bottom line: There is no right or wrong way to align text. Use the alignment that makes the most sense for the design and that effectively communicates your message.

5. Use Centered Text Sparingly

There is nothing inherently wrong with centered text. As with ragged right or fully-justified text alignment, what works for one design might be totally inappropriate for another layout. There are simply fewer situations where centered text *is* appropriate. When in doubt, don't center it.

As with all layouts, alignment depends on the purpose of the piece, the audience and its expectations, the fonts, the margins and white space, and other elements on the page. The most appropriate choice is the alignment that works for that particular design.

About Centered Text

- Lends a formal appearance to text, which is why it is often used in formal wedding invitations, certificates, and on plaques.
- Generally harder to read long lines and multiple paragraphs of centered text.
- Works best with fairly short lines and extra leading (space between lines of text).
- Centered headlines work best over body text that is fully-justified.

Centered text is harder to read because the starting position of each line changes, forcing the reader to work harder to find where each line begins to continue reading. For large blocks of text, try to avoid centered text. Numbered and bulleted lists should almost always be left-aligned as well to aid in quickly scanning the list. Save centering for invitations, greeting cards, and certificates.

The Bottom line: There is no right or wrong way to align text. Use the alignment that makes the most sense for the design and that effectively communicates your message. However, for most body copy situations, avoid centered text.

6. Balance Line Length with Type Size

Lines of type that are too long or too short slow down reading and comprehension. Combine the wrong line length with the wrong type size and the problem is magnified. The shorter the line length, the smaller the font should be — allowing more words to the line. The longer the line, the larger the font can be.

There is a four-step process that can help determine the best line length.

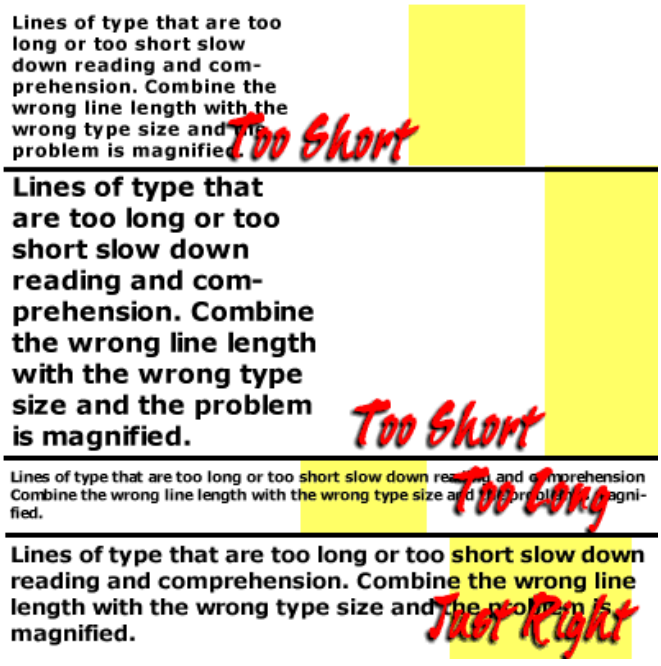
Here's How:

1. Apply the **alphabet-and-a-half** rule to your text. This would place ideal line length at 39 characters regardless of type size.
2. Measure the line length in inches or picas for your chosen body copy font using the alphabet-and-a-half rule. This is one of the measurements you'll use in finding the ideal line length/column width for your publication.
3. Apply the **points-times-two** rule to your text, another formula for finding the ideal line length. Take the type size of your body text and multiply it by two. The result is your ideal line length in picas. That is, 12 point type would have an ideal line length of 12x2 or 24 picas (approx. 4 inches).
4. Compare the line length measurements for your chosen body copy font using each formula. Set a column width in your publication that falls within the range established by each formula. Keeping column widths and line lengths within this range will help insure the most readable text.

Tips:

1. A longer or shorter line length may be justified in some designs; however, using these formulas will give you an idea of what line length range is most reader-friendly for your chosen font.
2. The shape of the font, letter spacing, and word spacing also affect readability and help in determining the best line length.

Keep in mind that these formulas work only when using the selected font. Changing the font and type size alters the results of the line length formulas. Follow through on all four steps when determining the ideal line length to get a range that best works with your layout and font size.



The yellow area in each of the examples represents the range of the ideal line length calculated using the alphabet-and-a-half rule and the points-times-two rule.

The first two text blocks show text in two different point sizes but both column lengths are far too short for comfortable reading (the outer edge of the optimum area of the second text block actually extends beyond the edge of the graphic).

The third example shows a line length that is too long for the selected font size.

In the fourth example the text falls within the ideal line length range based on the two formulas. Enlarging or reducing the font size only slightly would probably still yield acceptable results.

The results of applying the two line length formulas are a suggestion only. A little less or a little more in either direction is probably not going to

adversely affect the appearance or readability of your text. But text that falls too far outside the optimum range can make your text and layout ugly and too difficult to read.

If the desired size of type and the line length used in the page layout are incompatible, one of them needs to change. Typically it is the font size that gets adjusted but don't be afraid to re-evaluate your page layout to accommodate wider or narrower text columns.

The Bottom line: The line length rule applies primarily to body copy. Headlines, subheadings, and other small bits of text have more flexibility. Almost any reasonable line length will work in a design if combined with the right size font. The longer the line, the larger the font can be. The shorter the line, the smaller the font can be.

7. Use All Caps with the Right Fonts

Stop shouting! Online TYPING IN ALL CAPS is considered shouting and is frowned on in most cases. In print, shouting is never worse than when it is done with decorative or script typefaces. It's ugly. It's hard to read. Just don't do it, PLEASE!

That said, there are times when words set in all capital letters are necessary and acceptable. Just pay close attention to the fonts you use. Acronyms, such as NASA, and abbreviations such as PM or USA generally appear in either all caps or small caps within body text.

Note that acronyms and abbreviations within paragraphs are just a few letters set in all caps and are easy to read. Long headlines and especially paragraphs set with all caps are much more difficult to read and usually don't look as good as mixed case. Decorative fonts draw the eye and provide emphasis. All caps do the same thing. Combining the two techniques can overpower a page and overpower the reader.

- Avoid setting almost any Script typeface in all caps.
- Avoid using fonts with extreme serifs, swashes, or other decorative elements for all caps.
- Short headlines in all caps are better than long headlines in all caps.
- Fonts that are suitable for body text (serif or sans serif) are generally a better choice for all caps headlines than more decorative fonts.
- Nameplates and other text that serves as graphic embellishment can often be successfully set with all capitals that are slightly more decorative than typical body text.
- For an elegant and more readable look than all caps, set headlines or short phrases in small caps or specially drawn all caps Titling fonts designed to be readable in all capitals.
- Pay careful attention to kerning (space between letters) when setting any headlines, including those in all caps, to avoid unsightly gaps between pairs of letters.

The Bottom line: Readability is the guiding factor when using all caps. Use all caps in moderation. Stick primarily with plain sans serif or basic serif typefaces or specially designed Small Caps and all caps Titling fonts for text in all capitals. Short headlines and other large type, such as newsletter nameplates, can take somewhat more decorative fonts in all caps.

8. Use Proper Typographical Punctuation

Curl your quotes; decode your dots and dashes. Proper punctuation marks give your documents professional polish. Straight quotation marks (primes) and three dots in place of an ellipsis may be acceptable for word processing, term papers, and email but not for desktop publishing.

These step-by-step tutorials show how to get proper typographical punctuation marks and offer tips on fine-tuning the characters that are in most fonts.

- How to Type Quotes, Apostrophes, and Primes
  Avoid the look of an amateur by properly using typographer's quotation marks (curly quotes) and apostrophes and primes in your desktop published documents.

- How to Create and Use Dashes and Hyphens
  One mark of professionally set type is the proper use of hyphens, en dashes, and em dashes. Each is a different size and has its own usage. Learn how to create, modify, and typeset en dashes (–), em dashes (—), and hyphens (-) in desktop publishing.

- How to Create an Ellipsis
  Elliptical periods, more commonly called an ellipsis, indicate the omission of text or an interruption or hesitation. While it is quite common to use three periods, the more typographically desirable way to insert an ellipsis is to use the ellipsis character available in most fonts or create a custom ellipsis. In both cases, some fine-tuning is often necessary.

Beyond the grammatically correct use of these common punctuation marks, typography calls for using the appropriate typographical versions of each character and adjusting them for best appearance. Attention to shape, size, and spacing sets professionally typeset material apart from typing and word processing.

The degree of fine-tuning is up to the individual designer and the requirements of the client; but, headlines and other display size text almost always benefit from careful attention to detail.

The Bottom line: For typeset material, use typographer's marks and adjust the spacing for best visual appearance and professional polish. For typing or word processing, such as manuscripts, term papers, email, and for most Web pages, such detailed typographic standards are generally not necessary.

9. Use Frames, Boxes, Borders with a Purpose

Ever felt "all boxed in?" Boxes, borders, or frames are useful design and organizational devices. The problem is that they are just too easy to create.

You have probably seen a flier, brochure, or report that has box after box after box — even boxes within boxes. A frame loses its ability to emphasize blocks of text if every other block on the page is boxed. Frames around text also interrupt the flow of text, and the flow of the reader's eye. Too many boxes of text make the document harder to read. In many cases, simple frames are best.

Explore the great variety of options shown in this article. Use frames and borders to add interest to your documents and to enhance the readability of your ads, brochures, books, and annual reports. *Just don't overdo it*.

Use frames with purpose and in moderation
Frames form a barrier that the reader must cross. Too many boxes may distract your readers until they can no longer give your copy the attention it requires. Know the purpose of every frame, box, or border that you use.

> Use frames to **group** related information or graphics. Unify individual graphics in varying styles by placing them all in one frame or placing each item in separate but matching frames.
>
> Use frames to **set apart** information. For example, set apart the fine print in an ad with a box near the bottom.
>
> Use frames to **emphasize**. In a manual, draw attention to key points or hot tips with a frame. It indicates that this information is important.

There are other ways to group, set apart, and emphasize information including through font choices, color, position on the page, and alignment. Consider using those organizational methods in place of some or all frames, boxes, and borders to avoid that boxed in look.

Convey an idea, add interest
Let your frames or borders set the tone for your document, provide visual interest, or enhance the message of your text.

- *Simply serious*. Simple frames are generally best for serious work such as school reports and manuscripts, as well as for icons.
- *Drop in interest*. Even a simple frame can add information to your text. In the image over the sidebar, the increasing percentages are emphasized by drop shadows that make the frames float above the page.
- *Let's Decorate*. Fancy frames dress up simple fliers. They could also complement the copy, such as a border of sad dog faces on a Lost Dog flier.
- *Double-duty borders*. In the ad for AccuScribe (image over sidebar), the border for the ad also serves as clip art. Unusual shapes can draw attention to the frame contents — especially when competing on a busy page, such as one full of advertisements in a newspaper.
- *Cut on the dotted line*. Coupons in ads increase sales. Even when you aren't offering a coupon, use the familiar dash line frame to give your ad the appearance of a coupon.

Go beyond lines and pictures
Frames don't have to be square boxes with a 2pt black rule frame. Change the shape, the size, the color.

- *"Write on!"* Frames don't have to be made out of lines. Use text or icons to create a frame. Repeat key words or provide additional information.
- *Break out of the box*. Extend text or graphics outside the frame to add interest and draw attention to the contents.
- *Blocks of color*. Dividing a printed page (or even a Web page) into different colored blocks — with or without borders — is another way to **group, set apart, or emphasize** the contents of your page.

The Whole Picture
Consider the concept of the overall design as well as where the piece will appear. On newsprint, avoid very thin lines or intricate designs; they reproduce poorly. If you will be competing with lots of plain frames, use something more unique; or, omit the frame if it will make your ad stand out.

Does the frame complement the text or graphics inside? A border of dancing clowns is obviously inappropriate around an ad for a funeral home. But a thick black border around delicate or script texts might be just as inappropriate.

When using frames to set out information, *be consistent*. Choose a single style or location or size to use throughout your publication to avoid confusing readers.

The Bottom line: Use frames in moderation and with purpose. Before adding that second or third frame, box, or border consider alternative ways to group, set apart, or emphasize that information to avoid cluttered pages.

10. Use Less Clip Art

Cut the clip art clutter. Clip art is wonderful, abundant, and fun to use. It can spice up fliers, newsletters, and posters. Yet too many pictures on a page make it hard for the reader to concentrate on what the document says. Use clip art with moderation and with purpose. Use clip art that supports your text or illustrates a point.

There are no hard and fast rules on how many images on a page is too many. But unless you're dealing with a product catalog or a yearbook, chances are that if there are more than three or four images the page is too graphics-heavy.

Reduce & Resize
Instead of many small images, consider using just one or two large images. Image overload generally comes from using too many bits of scattered clip art, decorative bullets, boxes or borders, and rules (lines) all on the same page. Strip most of that out. It's unnecessary. Choose one or two key images that complement the text and use them to focus attention or provide visual interest.

Unify
Instead of many completely different images scattered all over, unify them. Make them all the same size. Use the same border. Line them up vertically or horizontally. Use a single style of dingbat for bullets throughout the page, throughout the publication. When it is necessary to use many images, provide consistency and order by tying them together visually.

Prioritize
Instead of a barrage of images competing for attention, prioritize them. Give a single image prominence through size and placement. Unify the remaining images elsewhere on the page using the techniques previously described.

Pick a Central Idea
Many times the creator of a piece will feel the necessity to use a piece of clip art to illustrate or point out every idea or concept on the page.

For example, a party announcement might have a phone icon by the phone number, a house or envelope next to the address, a clock beside the time, and several pieces of clip art for cakes, streamers, party hats, presents, or whatever and a confetti border around the whole page. While the idea may be to emphasize each of those key pieces of information, it's overkill.

Instead, use font size, placement, alignment, or color to group, set apart, or emphasize the secondary information and cut that clip art. Pick one or two images to signify the party theme and use them.

The Bottom line: Make sure each image used in a piece serves a necessary purpose and is appropriate to the tone and style of the piece. When the image count rises above three on a single page, consider other ways to achieve the same effect without adding more visual stimulation.

11. Use More White Space

One of the hardest concepts to teach is white space in design. Perhaps it is because the terms used to describe white space sound negative. White space is nothing. It's the absence of text; the absence of images. White space is emptiness. It is negative space. But it's *not* wasted space.

White space provides visual breathing room for the eye. It breaks up text and graphics. Add white space to make a page less cramped, confusing, or overwhelming.

Is there such a thing as too much white space? Yes, there is. However, it's rarely the case in the work done by non-designers and those new to desktop publishing. Usually we try to cram too much onto the page, afraid that we'll leave out something important. But without adequate white space, the important information gets lost. If all the text and images you want in a document are truly important and there is nothing you can cut out, use a bigger piece of paper.

White space can also be used to set a mood, convey a specific image. If you want a design to say "wealth, upscale, prestigious, or elegant" then use lots of white space. If you want a more down-to-earth, ordinary folks appeal, bring it down a notch or two. If you want to look cheap, mass-produced, or amateurish then fill the page to overflowing.

There are instances when trimming white space to the bare bones can and does work. However, in most cases, more of nothing is better.

Achieve a balance of ink and white space using a mix of techniques described in How To Add White Space, as appropriate to your design.

1. Use a line of space or a deep indent (but not both) to put white space between paragraphs.
2. Gutters that are too narrow cause the eye to skip over to the next column. Put white space between columns with adequate gutters.
3. Use ragged-right alignment to add white space between columns and at the end of lines of text.
4. If space is necessarily cramped within the body of the publication, add white space with generous margins on one or more sides.
5. When wrapping text around graphics or wherever text and graphics meet, provide plenty of standoff white space. Don't run text right up to the edge of graphics.

6. Add white space between headlines or subheads and the preceding copy and a bit below as well.
7. Add typographic white space by increasing the leading of body text, using lighter type, avoiding letterspacing that is too tight, and avoiding unending condensed or heavy type.

Tips:

1. Achieve a balance of ink and white space using a mix of techniques described above, as appropriate to your design.
2. Avoid 'bad' white space caused by trapping space within text, rivers of white (often found with unadjusted justified type), overuse of expanded type, too wide gutters, excessive leading, and poorly kerned headlines.

The Bottom line: There is no proper percentage of white space. If a page looks or feels crowded, it probably needs more white space. In general, more white space lends an upscale feel to a piece. More utilitarian documents use less white space.

12. Reset Software Document Defaults

Default settings in desktop publishing software are timesavers. Unfortunately, the default settings for margins, paragraph spacing, grids, and other document setup features are usually not the best ones for well-designed documents.

While the default settings for documents are designed to help you get started faster, relying on them for the final look of your document is usually not a good idea. Unfortunately many people accept the defaults simply because:

it's easier;
they don't know how to change the defaults, or;
they mistakenly believe that because it's the default it represents the best choice.

While there certainly may be times when the defaults work, don't rely on them.

Some common default settings that probably need to be changed or fine-tuned for each document:

- Margins , Grids/Columns, Gutters/Column spacing, Fonts, Leading, Tabs/Paragraph indents, Paragraph spacing, Drop cap settings, Text wrap offsets

Other default settings you'll want to adjust may apply to all your work, not just specific documents. Placement of guides, measurements used on the rulers, and how graphics display are all adjustable.

The Bottom line: Default settings are not inherently right or wrong. They are great for getting you started faster but don't forget to fine-tune those settings to meet the needs of the particular type of document you are creating.