The 14 biggest e-book design mistakes

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Design plays an important role in the success of your e-book. Design pre-sells the importance of your words. Long before your words are read, readers will begin judging the value of your publication by its appearance.

Design pays! Design influences reader satisfaction. Returns go down and satisfaction goes up when your e-book is easy to read and its design projects an optimistic, professional image. Quality design differentiates your e-books from the competition and builds equity in your brand, pre-selling future titles.

Mistake 1.　Overuse of color

The overuse of color does a disservice to readers who print e-books on ink-jet printers. Avoid solid colored backgrounds behind the text. Such pages can cost several dollars each in ink jet supplies.

The overuse of Color can send the wrong message. Readers know that color is often used to camouflage a lack of content. In addition, bright colors can create distractions that make adjacent text hard to read. Finally, text set in color is often harder to read than black text against a white background.

When in doubt, play it safe. Use the minimum amount of color needed to brighten, but not dominate, your pages.

Mistake 2.　Missing page numbers

Many e-books lack page numbers. Pages without numbers present several problems. First, readers depend on page numbers to track their progress through a publication. Readers also rely on page numbers to refer back to previously read information.

Worse, if you print an e-book and drop the pages before stapling or placing in a binder, readers have to waste time reassembling them in the proper order.

Mistake 3.　Boring similarity

The front cover is the first thing your readers will notice about your e-book. It's hard to project a unique image if the cover of your e-book resembles the

covers of hundreds of other e-books the reader has encountered. And it's hard to pre-sell readers on the quality of your e-book if you don't include reader testimonials on the front cover, which can reduce returns by reinforcing the buyer's decision to purchase your e-book.

The interior pages of many e-books look the same because they were created using the templates built into Microsoft Word, the most popular word processing software programs. As a result, typeface, type size, line spacing, and text alignment choices are the same, regardless who published the e-book.

This similarity prevents your e-books from projecting a unique image. Layout, type, and color should project a strong "family resemblance" that not only sets your e-books apart, and relates them to your firm's marketing materials— business card, letterhead, newsletter, web site, etc.

Mistake 4.　Long lines of type

Many e-books are hard to read because text extends in an unbroken line across the page from the left-hand margin of the page to the right-hand margin.

Long lines of type present two problems. One is that the resulting left and right margins are very narrow. White space along the edges of pages provides a resting spot for your reader's eyes and emphasizes the adjacent text. Margins also provide space for your reader's fingers to hold each page without obscuring any of the words.

In addition, long lines of type are difficult and tiresome to read. It's very easy for readers to get lost making the transition from the end of one line of text to the beginning of the next. Doubling (rereading the same line) can occur, or readers may inadvertently skip a line of text.

Mistake 5.　Inappropriate typeface

There are three main classifications of type: decorative, serif, and sans serif:

- *Decorative typefaces*—like Papyrus or **Broadway**--are heavily stylized and great for attracting attention or projecting an atmosphere or image. The use of these typefaces should be restricted to logos and packaging, however, where image is more important than readability.

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**Left, sans serif.
Right, serif.**

- *Serif typefaces—like* Times New Roman or Garamond—are ideal for extended reading. The serifs, or finishing strokes at the edges of each character, help define the unique shape of each letter and lead the reader's eyes from letter to letter.

- *Sans serif typefaces,* like Arial or Verdana, are very legible. Their clean, simple design helps readers recognize words from a long distance away,

which is why they are used for highway signage. Sans serif typefaces are often used for headlines and subheads combined with serif body copy.

The historic analogy has been type is similar to a wineglass. You should notice the wine inside the glass, rather than the wineglass holding it.

Mistake 6.   Wrong type size

Type is often set too large—i.e., 12 points—out of habit. (There are approximately 72 points to an inch.)

The details that help readers identify each character become lost when type is set too small and readers have to squint. Type set too small also requires too many left-to-right eye movements on each line.

Type set too large is as hard to read as type set too small. When type is set too large, there is not enough space for enough words on each line for readers to comfortably skim the line.

Remember: in most cases, those who buy your e-book are not scanners: people scanning groups of words and recognizing their shapes, rather than phonetically "sounding out" each word. Skimming works best when each line contains about an alphabet and a half—40 to 45 characters.

Mistake 7.   Improper line and paragraph spacing

Few e-book publishers take the time to carefully adjust line and paragraph spacing. Correct line spacing—called *leading*—depends on typeface, type size and line length. White space between lines acts like "rails" guiding your reader's eyes from word to word along each line.

Very seldom is your software program's default, or "automatic," line spacing measurement right for easy reading. Correct line spacing depends on:

- *Line length*: as the line length increases, you will probably want to add more white space, or leading, between lines.

- *Typeface*. sans serif typefaces, like Verdana require more leading than serif typefaces like Times New Roman.

- *Type size*: line spacing should increase as type size increases.

Correct *paragraph spacing* is equally important. Avoid the temptation to press the Enter (or Return) key twice at the end of each paragraph. This creates far too much space between paragraphs. New paragraphs should be separated by noticeably more space than line spacing within paragraphs, but not so much space that it isolates each paragraph. Paragraph spacing should equal one and one half lines of space.

Mistake 8. **Awkward gaps between sentences**

Never press the space bar twice following the period at the end of a sentence. This is *especially* true when working with paragraphs of justified text—i.e. lines of equal length.

When word spacing is adjusted to create lines of equal length, each space will expand, often creating a very noticeable gap between sentences. Sometimes, these gaps will be located in adjacent lines, creating distracting *rivers* of white space running through your text.

Mistake 9. **Hard to read headlines**

Headlines should form a strong contrast with the text they introduce. Readers should have no trouble locating or reading them.

Avoid headlines set exclusively in uppercase type (i.e. upper-case letters). These are harder to read and take up more space than headlines set in the combination of upper and lowercase type.

Never set headlines entirely in uppercase, i.e. capital, letters. Headlines set entirely in upper-case characters are harder to read than headlines set in a combination of upper and lower case type. This is because words set entirely in uppercase characters lack the *distinctive shapes* that words set in lower case characters create.

Headlines set entirely in upper case type also occupy up to a third more space than headlines set in both upper and lower case letters.

Mistake 10. **Failure to chunk content**

Chunking refers to making e-books easier to read by breaking them into manageable, bite-sized pieces. The best way to chunk content is to insert frequent subheads through the text. Subheads convert "skimmers" into readers by "advertising" the text that follows.

Before committing to spend time on each page, readers quickly skim each page for clues indicating whether or not it will be worth reading the page. Subheads attract your reader's eyes and "advertise" the paragraphs that follow. Each subhead thus provides an additional entry point into the text.

Subheads avoid the visual boredom created by page after page of near-identifiable paragraphs.

Mistake 11. **Poor subhead formatting**

To succeed, subheads must form a strong visual contrast with the adjacent paragraphs. It's not enough to simply set subheads in the italicized version of the same typeface used for body copy. Subheads should be noticeably *larger* and/or *bolder* than adjacent text.

A few more subhead formatting tips:

- *Typeface*: one of the safest formulas is to combine sans serif bold sub-heads with serif body copy. To unify your publication, use the same type-face for both headlines and subheads.

- *Underlining*: never underline subheads to "make them more notice-able." Underlining makes them *harder to read.* This is because underlin-ing interferes with the *descenders*—or portions of characters like g, p, and y—that extend below the invisible line the subheads rest on.

- *Length:* limit subheads to one or two keywords. Avoid full sentences. Subheads work best when limited to a single line.

Subheads should also be set off by generous amounts of white space. Avoid "floating" subheads, i.e. subheads equally spaced between the previous paragraph and the next paragraph. Ideally, there should be twice as much space above a subhead than below the subhead and the paragraph it intro-duces.

Mistake 12. Inappropriate hyphenation

There are different hyphenation rules for headlines, subheads, and body copy. *Never* hyphenate headlines or subheads, but always hyphenate text paragraphs.

A failure to hyphenate body copy is very noticeable:

- *Justified text alignment*—i.e. lines of equal length with differing word spacing. Failing to hyphenate justified text awkward word spacing problems. There will be huge gaps between words in lines containing a few long words. Word spacing in lines containing several short words is apt to be noticeably cramped. The differing in word spacing will be very obvious in adjacent lines.

- *Flush-left/ragged-right alignment*—i.e. lines of unequal length with con-sistent word spacing. Here, lines containing a few long words will be very short, while lines containing several short words will be very long. These differing line lengths will be very noticeable.

Be on the lookout for excessive hyphenation. Avoid hyphenating more than two lines in a row. If your text shows excessive hyphenation, the type size you have chosen may be too large for the line length you are working with.

Mistake 13. Distracting headers, footers, and borders

Headers and footers refer to text or graphic accents repeated at the top or bottom of each page.

Often, e-book publishers use the same typeface and type size for both body copy and header and footer information. Page numbers, copyright information, and the publisher's address and copyright information should be smaller and less noticeable than the text on each page.

Compounding the problem: often headers and footers contain web site hyperlinks set in blue. This creates another distraction which pulls the reader's eyes away from the primary message..

Few e-books help readers keep track of their location in the book and their progress through it. Without section and chapter numbers and titles, it is hard for readers to locate, or re-locate, specific chapters, and specific topics.

Often the author or publisher's e-mail address appears in a header or footer as a bright blue, hyperlink—sometimes the only color on each page. The bright blue link attracts attention far out of proportion to its importance.

Large, colored logos on each page can also be very distracting, without adding meaningful information.

Borders; e-books pages are often boxed with lines of equal length and thickness at the top, bottom and sides. Boxed pages project a conservative, old-fashioned look. A more contemporary image can be created using *rules*—or lines—of different thickness at just the tops and bottoms of each page.

Mistake 14. Widows and orphans

Widows and orphans occur when a word, a portion of a word, or part of a line of text is isolated at the bottom of a page (or column) or at the top of the next of the next page or (column).

The worst case scenario occur when a subhead appears by itself at the bottom of a page, isolated from the paragraph it introduces which appears at the top of the next page Although most software programs permit you to automatically "lock" subheads to the text they introduce, this feature is very rarely used.

Conclusion

First impressions count.

When someone downloads an e-book they have just purchased from you, within seconds they will either feel a glow of pleasure, or a feeling of disappointment.

Buyers check out the cover and glance at inside pages, then either say "Aw gee, just another hard-to-read, look-alike e-book" or "Wow! This looks really great!"

Whether your e-book receives the attention it deserve and paves the way for future sales, or—worst case scenario—a refund is requested—depends to a great extent on the design of your e-book.

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