

10 Ways to Create Professional-Looking Documents that Get Better Results

1. Use plenty of white space.

Give your readers' eyes a break by using dead space. Yes, folks, that's space with absolutely nothing in it. A page uncluttered with heavy text and/or graphics is less intimidating for your reader, seems like less of a chore to read, and consequently, is more likely to get your communication read.

2. Don't use ALL CAPS for large amounts of text.

ALL CAPS are extremely hard to read and slow down the natural flow of reading. Isn't "DON'T USE ALL CAPS FOR LARGE AMOUNTS OF TEXT" harder to read than "Don't use all caps for large amounts of text?" That's because we use the shapes of letters to help the flow of reading. When ALL CAPS are used, the letters lose their shape (all of the letters have the same height), thereby slowing the reader's flow—making it a more laborious task.

3. Don't underline for emphasis.

Want to look like a true novice? Underline your text and you'll succeed. Back in the typewriter days, there was no way to emphasize a word, so we were taught to underline. Today, underlining text simply makes the text look too heavy, the line is often too close to the text, and it bumps into the "descenders" of the letters (those parts that hang below the invisible line on which type sits, as in the letters g, j, p, q, and y).

I don't know about you but since the web has become so prominent in our lives, when I see a printed document which has words that are underlined, I'm reminded of hyperlinks.

4. Stop spacing out.

Don't use two spaces after a sentence; use only one. This hard-to-break habit is another leftover from the typewriter days.

Typewriters used monospaced characters (nearly all characters were the same width and used the same amount of space). For example, a thin "i" would have the same width as a fat "w." To offset this, two spaces at the end of a sentence enabled the eye to pick up the end of one sentence and the beginning of another. Today, two spaces simply look too wide and create rivers of empty blocks of space. The only exception to this rule is when you're using a monospaced font, i.e. Courier.

In this new age of computers, most of the fonts on our systems are proportional; they are designed to use the appropriate amount of space required by each character. Therefore, one space after a sentence is sufficient to provide a visual cue for the transition from one sentence to the next.

5. Avoid justified text.

Justified text is when right and left margins line up perfectly—creating neat blocks of text. Newspapers and magazines use this format a lot to make things look more orderly on a page. Justified text creates uneven space between your words—often making it difficult to read and sometimes rendering incorrect spacing after sentences and punctuation. Because successfully doing justification requires in-depth layout skills and experience, it's a format that should be done by the pros.

6. Don't center large amounts of text.

It's super hard to read because it's hard for your eye to find where the next line begins. Stay in the safe zone and keep large amounts of text flush left.

7. Don't use more than 3 fonts in one document.

I'd have to say this one bothers me most. Don't get happy with your fonts. Use up to three fonts in your document and stick with them! It's okay, however, to use many styles of one font, i.e. **bold**, *italics*, or **bold and italics**. Get my drift? Numerous fonts in one document are simply too hard to follow, clutter up a page, and disrupt your reader. I'm a real stickler for this and always try to limit my use to 2 fonts per document.

8. Differentiate the dash.

Use these incorrectly and your pages will smell like an "amateur." The hyphen (-) is used to hyphenate words and to separate characters in a phone number. The en dash (–) is used to show duration or range as in 9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m., or 100–120. The em dash (—) shows a pause or a change in thought, and is used in place of double hyphens. Similar to a parenthetical phrase (like this), the em dash sets apart clauses in a sentence.

The dashes are distinguishable by their width—the em dash being the longest.

If you use Microsoft Word (depending on your version #), it makes the appropriate character substitutions for you. Just type using the normal hyphen and Word is smart enough to know which one you want to use. Just in case you're using a program that doesn't offer "smart punctuation," here's how you manually create the different dashes:

- En dash: (Windows) ALT-0150. Hold down the ALT key and type 0150 on the numeric keypad; (Mac) Use Option-hyphen.

Full Justification Done by a Novice

As a novice, there's no way you should be using full justification because it creates wide rivers of space. This technique should only be used by true professionals. To avoid this foolish mistake, just stick with text that is flush left. Full justification looks even worse when there is a large amount of text. Keep your eye out for documents using full justification, and you'll soon be able to spot right away whether or not the document was done by a professional.

Note how full justification creates incorrect spacing after sentences and punctuation.

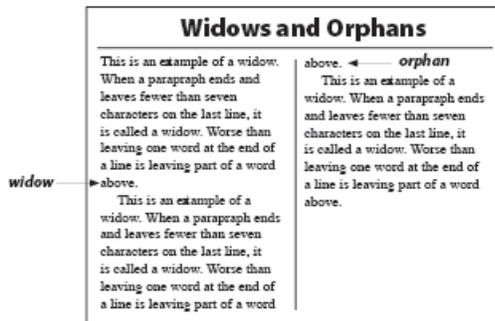
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- Em dash: (Windows) ALT-0151. Hold down the ALT key and type 0151 on the numeric keypad; (Mac) Use Shift-Option-hyphen.

9. Care for those orphans and widows.

A widow is the result of paragraph ending and leaving fewer than seven characters (that's characters, not words!) on the last line. Translation: you don't want this.

When the last line of a paragraph (no matter how long it is) won't fit at the bottom of a column and ends up as a lone ranger at the top of the next column, that's an orphan. Translation: the equivalent of sin.

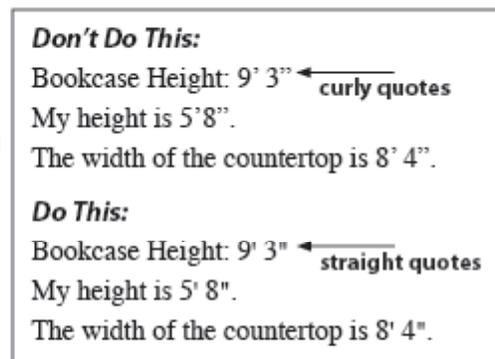


Widows and orphans are very distracting to the reader and just look bad. They should be avoided at all costs. Do these and go to design jail! characters in a phone numexpenses, you're sure to save money immediately if you apply these tips. Challenge yourself and/or your graphic designer to explore various options to create quality communications. Never let a budget—or lack thereof—keep you from creating effective business communications and marketing materials. Too much is riding on them.

10. Use real apostrophes and quotation marks.

Most software programs, including word processing programs, have an option of using "straight quotes" or "curly quotes." A single "straight quote" is used to indicate measurements, i.e. feet. The double "straight quotes" denote inches. "Curly quotes"

are used for apostrophes and quotation marks. The single "curly quote" is used for a true apostrophe, and the double "curly quote" is obviously used for true quotation marks.



And I thought I had a difficult time deciding whether or not I should wear my hair curly or straight! That was nothing in comparison to this!

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