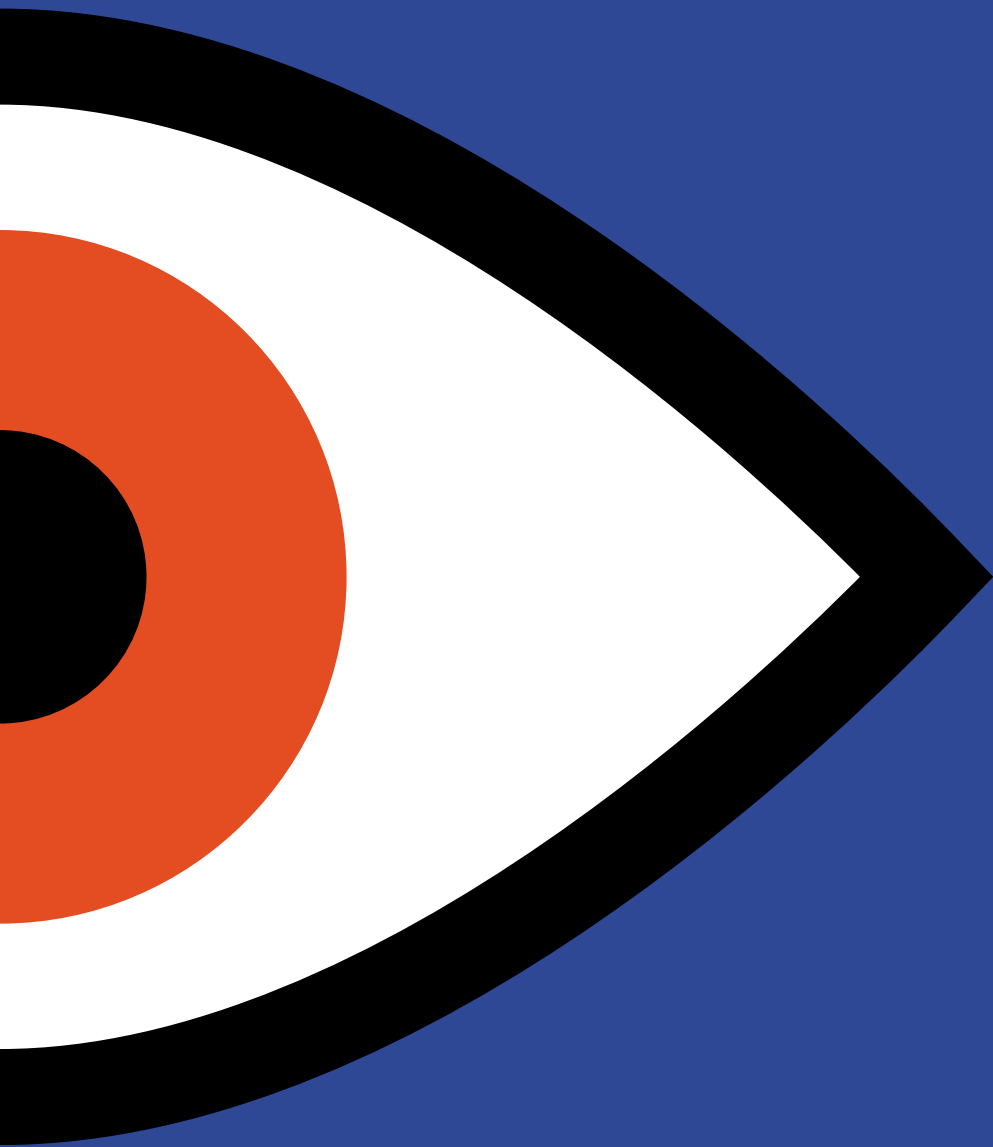


UXPin

# Web UI Design for the Human Eye

Content Patterns & Typography



UXPin

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Content Patterns & Typography

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# Introduction

*A quick note from the authors*

Should you use Lorem Ipsum, or real content in your designs? And what are some effective patterns for laying your content for users?

These are the questions we seek to answer in our exploration of content as an interface. Because vision is the user's strongest sense, and users seek out sites for their content, it's safe to assume that content must be the priority of any visual interface.

Design treatments like colors, contrast, position and alignment are really just methods of presenting content in the most visually digestible format. We aren't advocating that designers shouldn't create a single wireframe before all the content is finalized. We're simply advising that clients, designers, and stakeholders treat the design and content with equal importance — one cannot exist without the other.

In this book, we'll cover topics including content-first design, designing for scanning, and the power of typography as a visual language. While we discuss design fundamentals such as visual hierarchy

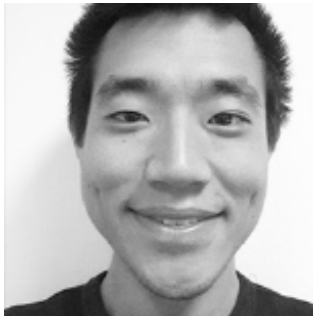
and the anatomy of typography, this is not a book of speculation or theorizing. We explain the theory, but we teach through example.

You'll find best practices from 27 companies including **Design Milk**, **Amazon**, **TED**, **Dropbox**, **Hulu**, **Abduzeedo**, **CreativeBloq**, and **AirBnB**. Design is a hands-on field, so we want to show how theory translates into real-world applications.

For the love of UI design,

Jerry Cao

co-written by Kamil Zieba, Krzysztof Stryjewski, and Matt Ellis



Jerry Cao is a content strategist at UXPin where he gets to put his overly active imagination to paper every day. In a past life, he developed content strategies for clients at Braffton and worked in traditional advertising at DDB San Francisco. In his spare time he enjoys playing electric guitar, watching foreign horror films, and expanding his knowledge of random facts.

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Co-founder and head of product, Kamil previously worked as a UX/UI Designer at Grupa Nokaut. He studied software engineering in university, but design and psychology have always been his greatest passions. [Follow me on Twitter @ziebak](#)



Krzysztof is a graphic designer at UXPin. He is also a typography enthusiast and a founder of the global [Typeseeing Project](#). Since 2014, he has been an instructor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk, where he teaches his students about design theory and design software. In his free time, he enjoys playing and inventing board games. [Follow me on Behance](#)



With a passion for writing and an interest in everything anything related to design or technology, Matt Ellis found freelance writing best suited his skills and allowed him to be paid for his curiosity. Having worked with various design and tech companies in the past, he feels quite at home at UXPin as the go-to writer, researcher, and editor. When he's not writing, Matt loves to travel, another byproduct of curiosity.



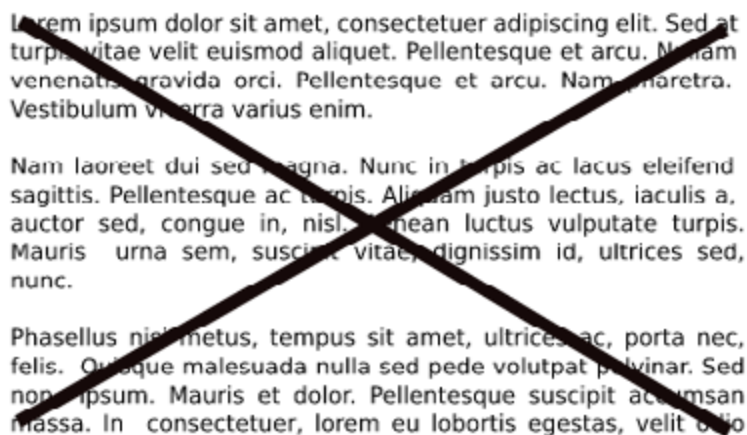
# Real Content vs. Lorem Ipsum

*Design in the absence of content is not design, it's decoration.*

[Jeffrey Zeldman](#)

We've said it before and we'll say it again: content is king.

That means content should not be the last stage in design, something to be filled in right before the launch. Content is the backbone of your site, and must be developed together with the visual design.



>Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Sed at turpis vitae velit euismod aliquet. Pellentesque et arcu. Nam venenatis gravida orci. Pellentesque et arcu. Nam pharetra. Vestibulum viverra varius enim.

Nam laoreet dui sed magna. Nunc in turpis ac lacus eleifend sagittis. Pellentesque ac turpis. Aliquam justo lectus, iaculis a, auctor sed, congue in, nisl. Donec luctus vulputate turpis. Mauris urna sem, suscipit vitae, dignissim id, ultrices sed, nunc.

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Photo credits: "[Lorem ipsum flush justified.](#)"

[Wikimedia](#). [Creative Commons](#). Edited from original.

Sure, using a placeholder like lorem ipsum is tempting with its convenience – but ultimately it will hold you back. For starters, using a placeholder perpetuates the idea that content is secondary. But more importantly, using lorem ipsum means passing up the opportunity to further improve your site's most important asset: the content.

In this piece, we'll discuss why real content matters, then review how you can take a more content-first approach to your site design.

## **The Real Pitfalls of Fake Text**

It may seem like an insignificant point, but avoiding filler content actually does make a difference.

In our experience, the only time filler content is acceptable is during very early stages of design when you're trying to brainstorm as many usable layouts as possible. In that case, lorem ipsum can help as a quick and dirty way of getting something to fill the space so you can get a rough idea of the full aesthetics of a layout.

Approach lorem ipsum the same way you would an early sketch. Play around with it, use it to arrive at better design ideas, and then move on.



Photo credit: “[Lorem Bokeh 1](#)”. Blake Burhart. [Creative Commons 2.0](#).

As we discussed in the [Guide to Usability Testing](#), a webpage with a simple structure but quality content performs much better on usability tests than a nice layout with subpar text. That at least proves its worth – but the importance of content in design goes even farther beyond that.

[Once you progress beyond low fidelity, ditch the lorem ipsum.]

Words are the foundation of all interaction. They are the language used for primary communication with your user, regardless of how engaging the other interface elements are. Content Strategist Ahava Leibtag [said it best](#):

*We need to start urging our clients to think about their content not just as a commodity, but as the starting point, the building blocks of a website. It's time to stop building the house without knowing*

*how many bedrooms it may need. Because you know what they call things that are beautiful, but have no function? Useless.*

This seems like an obvious argument, and yet some designers might still attempt content shortcuts until the zero hour. But why?

In an interview with [Adaptive Path](#), Kristina Halvorson, founder of Brain Traffic, explains that the clients (and sometimes stakeholders) are partly at fault. According to her, clients and internal teams might urge designers to deliver designs and structure as quickly as possible – spending time on content then slows down the completion of the deliverables that the clients want to see.

Halvorson goes on to explain that designers use lorem ipsum as a way to focus on the layout, but this is counter-intuitive. The layout should be built around the content, not the other way around. The structure and flow of a page should be heighten the effect of the words, but that's impossible if it's built with nonsense words that will eventually be replaced.

In her opinion, content strategists, web writers, editors, or any other kind of representatives of content should be present at the drawing board with designers and the product team from day one. This not only gives a head start to the writing, it also holds someone accountable for the content throughout the process.

And what's the alternative, when you *don't* design for content?

Rian van der Merwe, [in an article for Elezea](#), describes with visual aids the all-to-common approach when content is a secondary concern to design. A typical wireframe with lorem ipsum placeholders would look like this:



Source: [UXPin](#)

It looks fine, doesn't it? After all, the layout and structure were all designed to perfectly fit the lorem ipsum text, so everything is in order. But what happens when it's time to add the actual content?



Source: [UXPin](#)

The chances that your actual content will fill the same space as your placeholder are very slim, almost inconceivable. In most cases at least some redesigning and restructuring must be done, which is a waste of time and resources.

As Merwe describes it, the design is the packaging for the content. If you design the packaging first, you're doing so without knowing what's going into it. When, inevitably, the content doesn't fit the packaging, you must either start over with a new design, or alter the content to make it fit by sacrificing some parts or adding filler.

Developing content early ensures its place at the top of your priorities. It's better to modify a design around the content than the content around design.

Words are the foundation of all interaction.



Additionally, avoiding lorem ipsum placeholders can also safeguard against embarrassing mistakes. You don't want your site to accidentally end up like this:



Photo credit: [UXPin](#)

To learn more about how words, language, and content affect the user experience, check out the free ebook [Interaction Design Best Practices: Mastering the Tangibles](#).

## Applying the Content-First Approach

Don't get us wrong – no one's expecting your content to be perfect before the rest of the design commences. In fact, it's usually a gradual process, as with the other areas. The content doesn't need to be *finished* early. We're saying it should be *started* early.

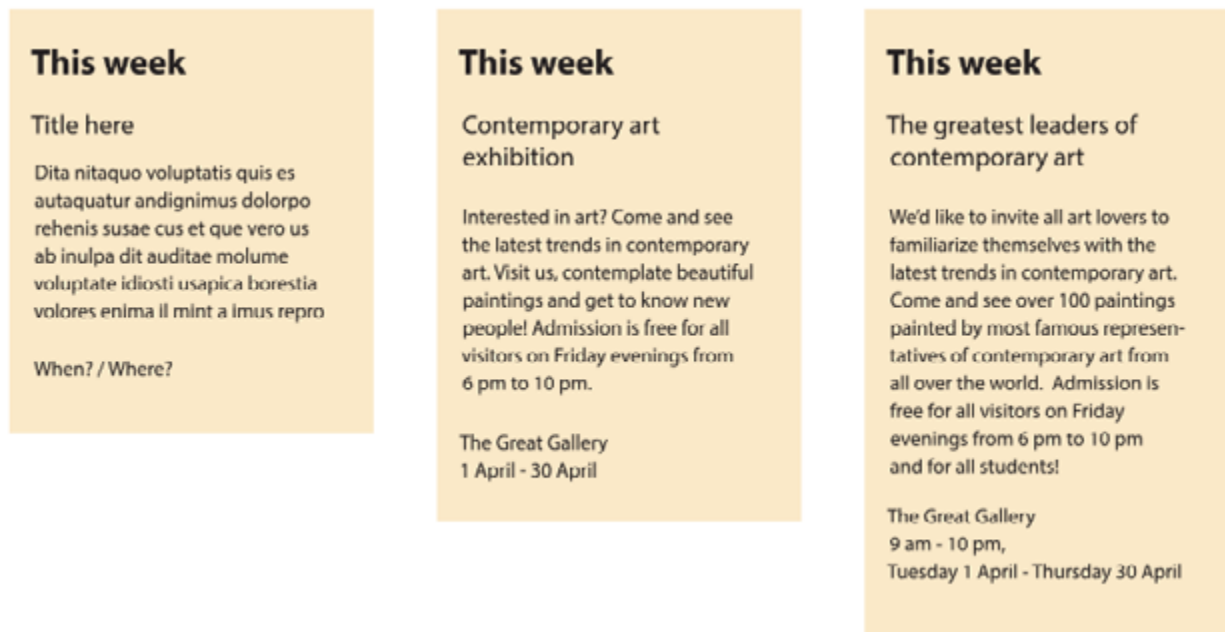
Let's look at a [few tips from Liam King](#), who we think has provided some of the most practical advice on the matter.

### 1. Write the Content Yourself

UX designers aren't copywriters, but this isn't the final version. With your experience in web design, you know enough about written text to create valid proto-content – content that will be later improved and perfected by a professional copywriter. For the time being, though, your text will be close enough to a working copy to be able to design around. We don't just recommend this method – we practice it ourselves here at [UXPin](#).

The downside to this method is, yes, it is more time and effort on your part, especially in comparison to copying-and-pasting the content from a lorem ipsum generator. However, it's worth

the extra effort: the end product can only benefit from content being generated as early as possible.



*Photo credits: [UXPin](#) inspired by [GatherContent](#)*

The first example on the left is the notorious lorem ipsum, the second example is content fit for print, and the third example is a rough but adequate content for design purposes.

As you can see in these examples, even the rough third example still gives the designer more valuable insight than the lorem ipsum. While not perfect, the third “proto-content” still draws attention to a lot of important design issues that should be addressed, such as:

- the name of exhibition is too long
- multi-day events could cause problems
- promo panels must support long titles



- the time and date format isn't very readable

No, the third example is not perfect. But the important point to remember is that all of the above issues would have gone ignored until the final stages (where they would be rushed to complete) if the lorem ipsum content was preserved through the process.

## 2. Design with Existing Content

While this method is not applicable if you're building a brand new site, it's quite helpful if you're redesigning an existing site. The old site's content will be a much more helpful placeholder than the meaningless lorem ipsum. Granted, it won't be a perfect match for your new content after the rewrites, but chances are it will be similar enough to work.

[Like King says](#), content like staff profiles and about pages will probably not be changed radically, and previously written articles and posts won't be changed at all. Try copying and pasting your pre-existing text into a wireframe/prototype to see how it looks.

## 3. Pull Content from Competitors

While we don't necessarily recommend this method as a first choice, it's still better than a generic placeholder (think of it like a "smart lorem ipsum").

The procedure is pretty self explanatory: simply copy and paste some relevant example text from your competitor (or competi-

tors), then change the names, places, etc. accordingly. It will be a lot more suitable than lorem ipsum, plus you can take an in-depth look at how they designed for the same issues.

If you're like further details into the processes of designing your site around content, the Web Standards Sherpa has an excellent post about [the methodology behind what they call “messaging hierarchy.”](#)

Before you create your content, plan it out using a [Page Table template](#). Once you've created your content, you can help structure it in your design with [Content Slice Diagrams](#).

## Takeaway

It's a fact that can't be overstated: content is king.

Any extra time and effort spent on developing content, no matter how superfluous it seems, will improve the end product. You'll want to start on your content as early as possible, and avoid the corner-cutting use of generic placeholders like lorem ipsum.

By the time your content audit comes around, you'll notice drastic difference between content that was originally planned since the beginning, and content that was written at the end and jammed into the already-made design.

# Designing for Scanning: F-Pattern

Don't be fooled: chances are, your users scan your content for the best parts. Don't take it personally, it's nothing against your content (and doesn't undermine its value), it's just [standard user behavior](#).



*Photo credit: "Tired eye". Quinn Dombrowski. Creative Commons 2.0.*

The F-pattern is the go-to layout for text-heavy websites like news sites, blogs, or in-depth landing pages. Once we explain how and why it works, you'll start to notice its use on popular sites all over the web.

Don't be fooled: chances are, your users scan your content for the best parts.



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The F-Pattern describes the most common user eye-scanning patterns when it comes to blocks of content.

The *F* refers to the reader first scanning a horizontal line across the top of the screen, as is understandable for cultures that read left-to-right. Next, the user scans a vertical line down the left side of the screen, looking for keywords or points of interest in the paragraph's initial sentences or subsection titles. When the reader finds something they like, they begin reading normally, forming horizontal lines.

The end result is something that looks like the letters *F* or *E*. As shown in [Web UI Patterns 2014](#), **CNN** and **NYTimes** both use the F-Pattern.

Jakob Nielsen of the **Nielsen Norman Group** conducted a readability study based on 232 users scanning thousands of websites and [elaborates on the practical implications of the F-Pattern](#):

- Users will rarely read every word of your text (in fact, only 20%).
- The first two sections are the most important and should contain your hook.
- Cover only one idea per paragraph, using bullets as much as possible
- Start paragraphs and new sections with enticing keywords.

How could this impact the interface design of your website? Take a look below.

## How to Use the F-Pattern

The below example, from [Brandon Jones's piece on the subject](#), visualizes the F-Pattern.

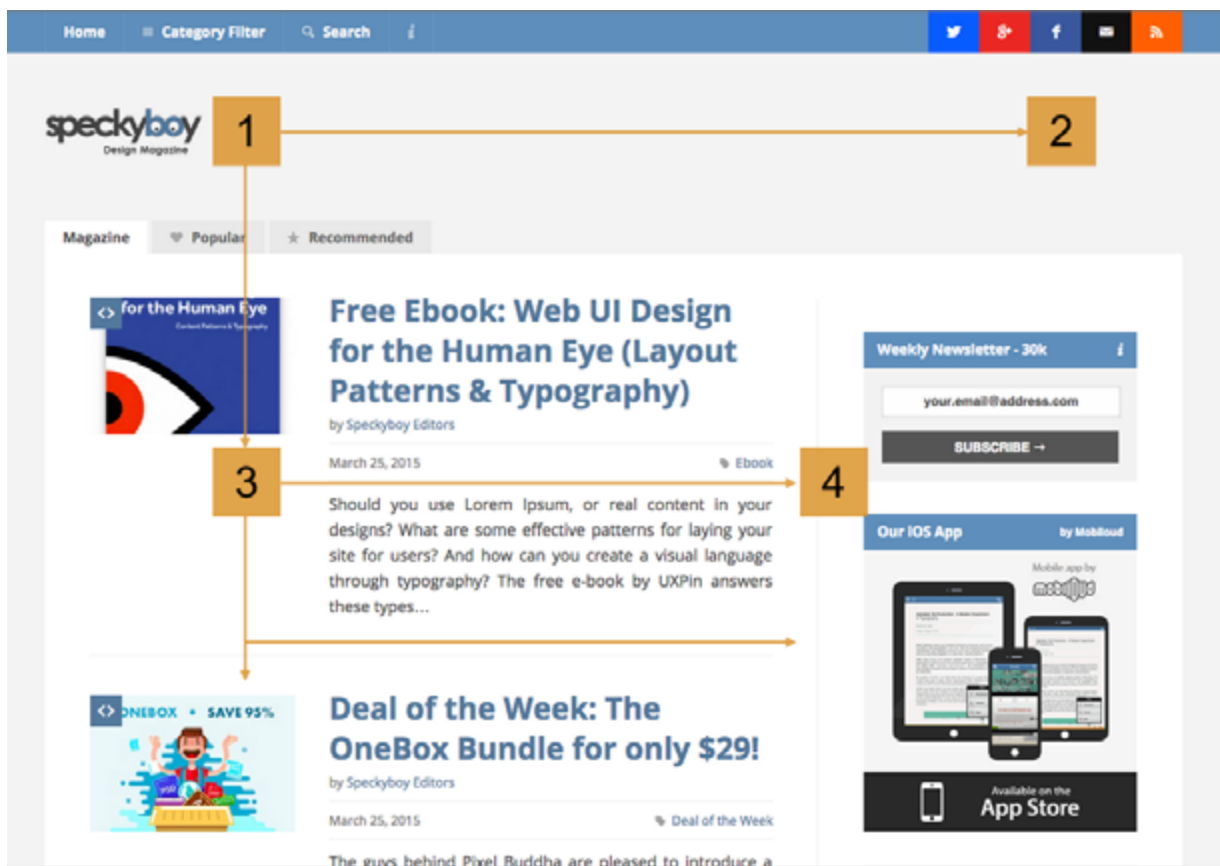


Photo credit: [Speckyboy.com](#)

Clearly, you'll want to place your best content across the top, with a solid anchor in the upper-left corner (**Point 1**), the only spot practically guaranteed to get noticed. That's why you commonly see a company's logo here.

Commonly, designers will put the navigation bar across the top leading to the upper-right corner (**Point 2**). This makes it convenient to users who are searching for a keyword that is the title of its own section, for example, “Help.” Designers vary on how thick or catchy they make the top bar: a thin, subtle top line will encourage further scanning immediately, while a bigger one will take advantage more of its dominant position, promoting the content therein at the cost of the content below it.

After the top row, the user will drop down to the next noticeable section (**Point 3**) and repeat the process (**Point 4**). In theory, users will continue going down the page until they find something of interest, but in reality they will likely leave after a few seconds – unless you can hold their attention.

For this reason, [experts recommend](#) breaking up the monotony with an “awkward” element after the first 2 or 3 rows – anything that disrupts the routine. This can be any variation of the earlier rows, just to keep the page visually stimulating. Standard practice is to break the convention every 1,000 pixels beneath the fold.

The visual aid below is a nice reminder of how the F-pattern works.

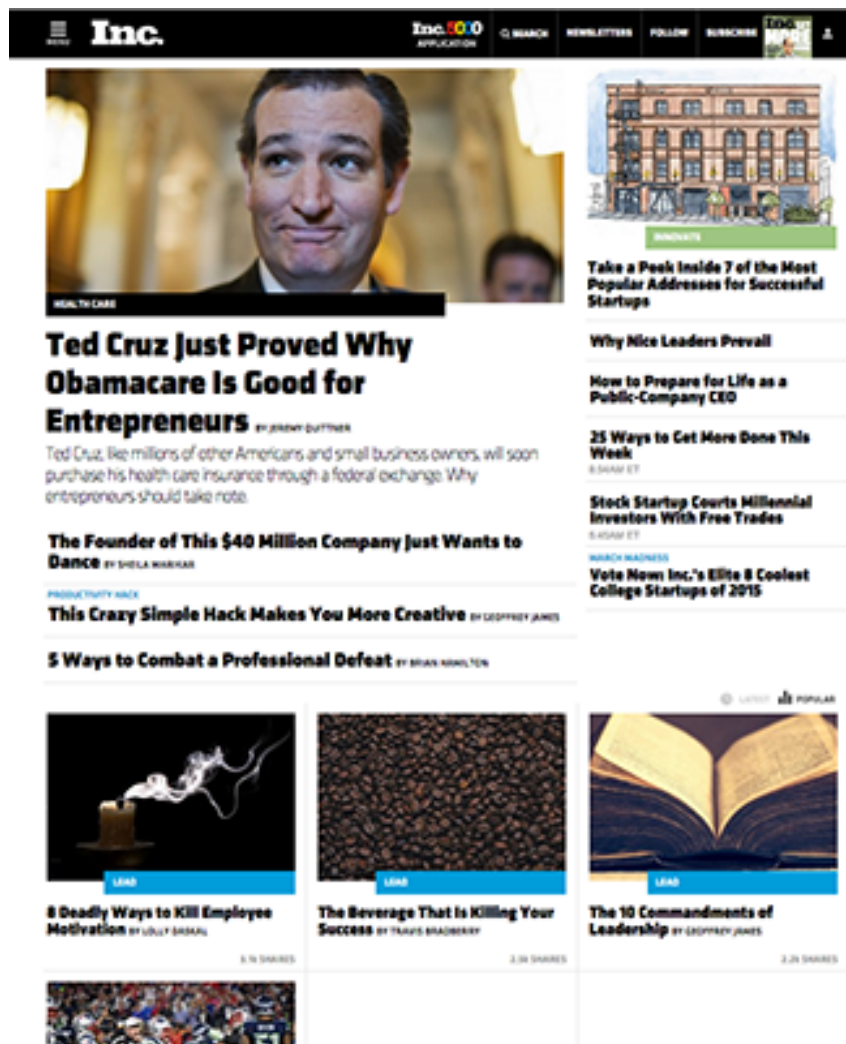


Photo credit: [Inc.com](http://Inc.com)

It's worth noting that the end of each row (where Points 2 and 4, etc. are located), are the best places for advertisements and calls-to-action due to the momentary pause before moving to the next row. That's why you see the "New eBook Out Now!" call to action placed at the end of the first row of content.

The F-pattern works great for these motives, as they present these options in a noticeable way, but without distracting from the primary content. Just remember that content is always king, and the sidebar exists only to get users involved in a deeper level.

With the F-pattern, the righthand sidebar may serve 2 main purposes:

1. **Featuring relevant but unrelated content** – Anything you want your user to see, but that doesn't fit in organically with the primary content. These could be advertisements, links to other posts, a social media widget, etc.
2. **As a search tool** – This place could obviously host a search bar, but could also have category listings, tag clouds, a “popular posts” widget, etc.

This is a lot to take in at once, so we'll show you what we mean with some examples below.

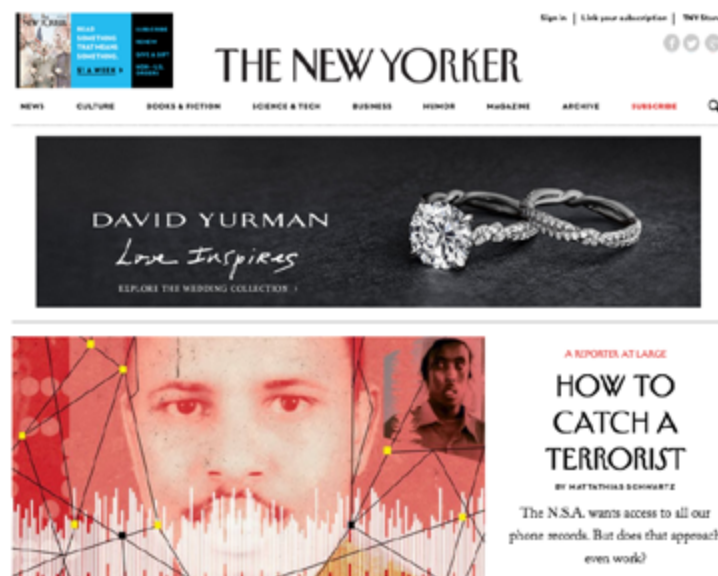


Photo credits: [thenewyorker.com](http://thenewyorker.com)

**The New Yorker** shows that the F-Pattern works especially well for sites that naturally feature advertisements. The first David Yurman advertisement is noticeable, but not distracting thanks to the use of



red in the primary photo. As we described before, this advertisement is again shown at the end of the second row of content, where the eye naturally pauses.

You can see this pattern adapted for sites with sparse copy as well.

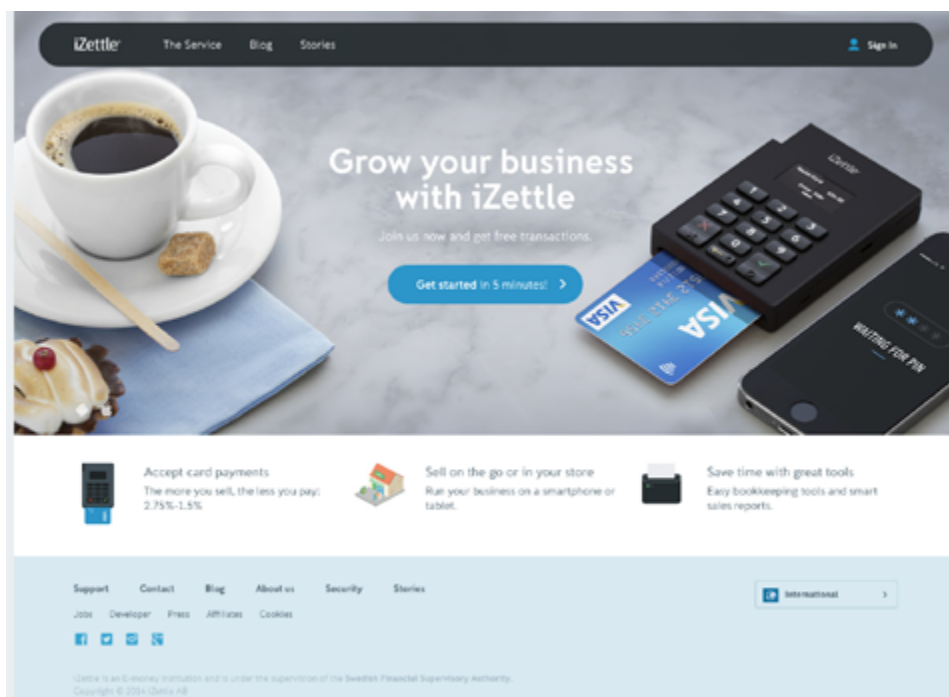


Photo credits: [izettle.com](http://izettle.com)

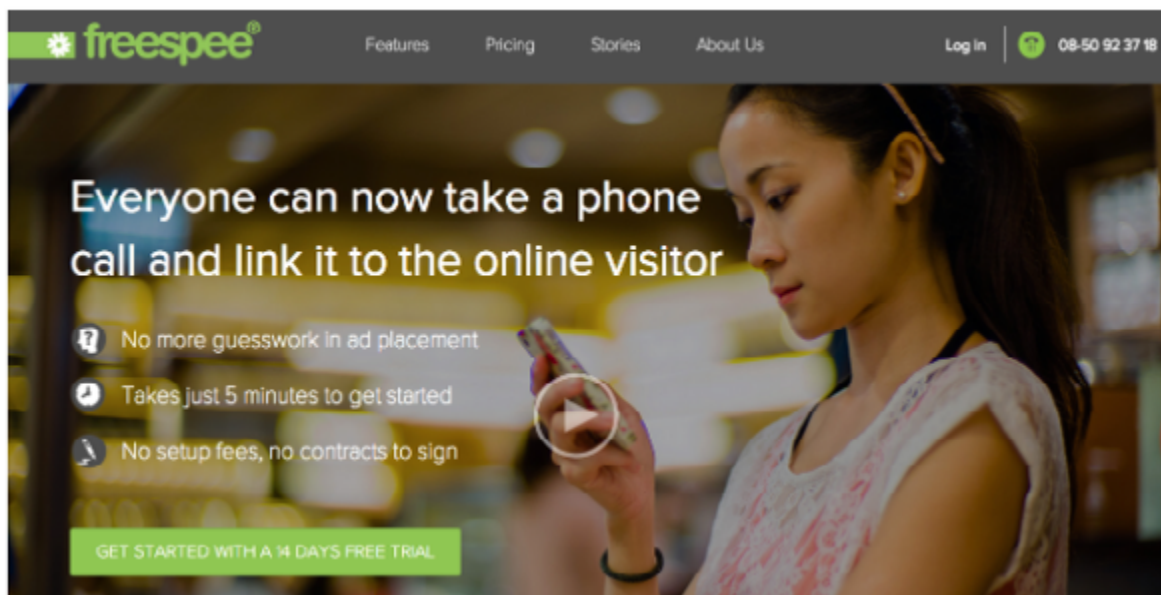
**iZettle** takes a less conventional approach to the F-pattern on their homepage. In fact, it's layout represents a hybrid of the F-pattern mixed with the Z-pattern (which we discuss later).

They manage to avoid a templated look by overlaying the primary copy ("Grow your business with iZettle") and the call-to-action on a large background image. We'd consider this the bare minimum for adapting this reading pattern to your interface layout – no doubt there's visually sexier examples out there, but this still gets the job done.

## Why Is This Pattern Effective?

Designers use the F-pattern repeatedly because it mimics users' natural sight patterns. Most people have been reading top to bottom, left to right their entire lives.

Designing a site layout with the F-pattern flows with the current, encouraging the user's sight to follow naturally. Conversely, content-heavy sites that ignore the F-pattern are creating unnecessary strife by forcing the readers to readjust their natural eye movement.



*Photo credits: [www.freespee.com](http://www.freespee.com)*

Site layout affects conversions, so it's important to know the value of your on-screen real estate. Take **Freespee** as an example; after redesigning their site into the above version, subsequent A/B testing revealed that they could increase their phone conversation rate by 30% for the same ad spend, simply by putting their phone number in a more prime location in the upper right.

Now, the above example is by no means a perfect design. They could make the bullet copy more prominent, and replace the background stock image with a visual that supports the described values. But that perhaps speaks even more about the power of layout: even if your typography and graphics aren't the best, adapting your layout for human reading can still improve site performance.

That being said, let's dissect what they've done right:

- The top-left logo attracts attention at point 1, where users naturally scan the navigation, perform searches, or any other top-level actions
- The top-right phone number shown at point 2 is the first call to action. Since it's highlighted in green, this further attracts the right attention.
- In the body of the page, concise bullets are featured at point 3. This text is structured like a “mini F-pattern” so that the eye naturally moves down to the call-to-action

But the F-Pattern is not infallible. The main drawback to this layout is its predisposition to monotony – it's easy to bore your users with repetitive and similar content in your rows. This is precisely why it's advised to throw in an “awkward” row every and then; the variation helps hold the users' attention.

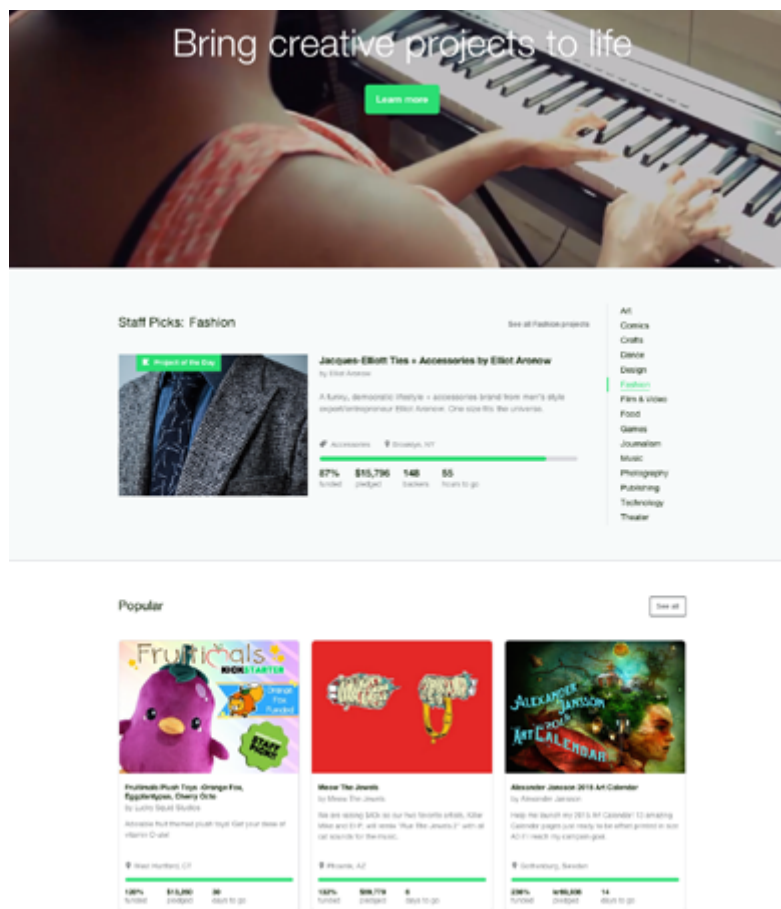


Photo credits: [www.kickstarter.com](http://www.kickstarter.com)

As you can see above, **Kickstarter** breaks its page into 3 distinct rows. The third row demonstrates the “awkward” row, varying from the pre-established pattern by laying out some widgets vertically (as it were, around the 1000-pixel mark).

Understand that people generally scan large chunks of content in an F-pattern, then alter it as needed to suit your site’s brand and personality. As you modify the pattern, make sure you follow these [rules described by A List Apart for ratios and grids](#).

## Takeaway

The F-pattern doesn't just apply to text.

Any time you show a variety of content, you'll need to organize it somehow. The F-pattern simply follows the common trends of the human eye so that you can optimize the structure of your layout. You don't need to follow it rigidly – it's a guideline, not a template. Even if all you take from this is to punctuate your top navigation bar with a call-to-action in the corner, that minor tweak could make all the difference.

## More Examples of the F Pattern

Below, you'll see the F-pattern at work with some familiar names across the Internet. Some follow a traditional F-pattern, while others insert the “awkward break” and other creative twists.


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This post is part of our daily series of posts showing the most inspiring images selected by some of the Abduzeedo's writers and users. If you want to participate and share your graphic design inspiration, You can submit your images and...



**SNOWY PHOTOGRAPHY**

There's a big blizzard going through the East Coast of the US today and as I'm snowed in myself I decided to select some really cool snowy photographs to share. I love the snow and the beautiful photos that come from it. Enjoy!



**DOG PHOTOGRAPHY: WHIPPETS**


I've always been a dog lover. I had one when I was a teenager and more recently I've got a whippet. Whippets are very sensible dogs, with deep, emotive eyes which come out to be amazing photography subjects. I've search for some great...




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# Designing for Scanning: Z-pattern

In the last chapter we explained how the F-pattern is the natural eyesight trend when users encounter text-heavy pages. But what about pages that are less content-heavy?



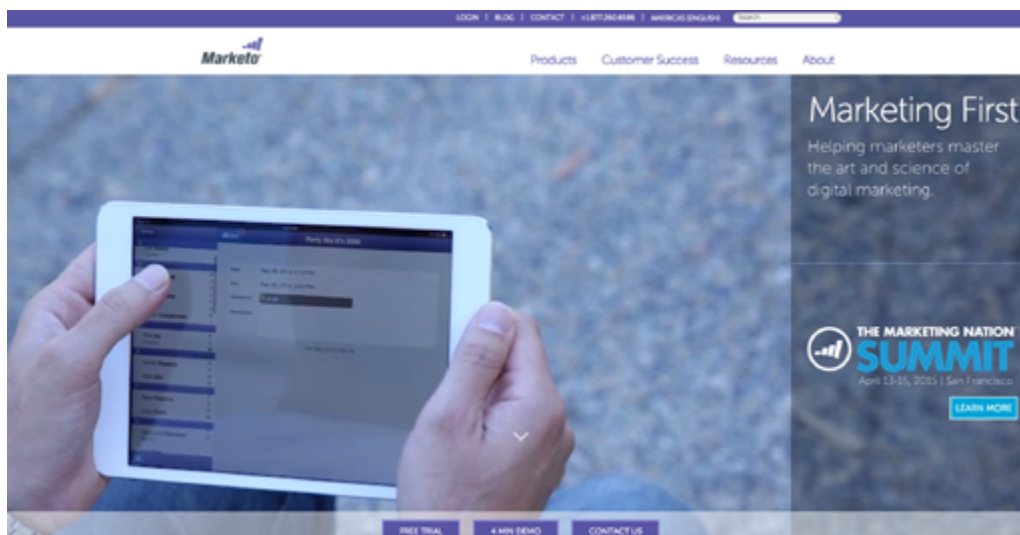
Source: [UXPin](#)

Think of the Z-pattern as the sister to the F-pattern. Both are naturally occurring eye patterns, as validated by eyetracking studies. The difference is in the type of content the user encounters. Usually, content-rich pages will trigger the F-pattern while pages with strong primary content are more suitable for the Z-pattern.

## What is the Z-Pattern?

Where content is more spacious – or at least organized looser – a user's sight will typically follow a pattern like the letter Z.

Like the F-pattern, the reader first scans a horizontal line across the top of the page, whether because of the menu bar, or simply out of a habit of reading left-to-right from the top. When the eye reaches the end, it shoots down and left (again based on the reading habit), and repeats a horizontal search on the lower part of the page.



*Photo credits: [www.marketo.com](http://www.marketo.com)*

The Z-pattern is perfect for interfaces (like **Marketo** above) where simplicity is a priority and the call-to-action is the main takeaway. In short, the F-pattern organizes content, the Z-pattern emphasizes calls-to-action.

It's easy to confuse the F- and Z-patterns based on looks alone, as they both are organized into horizontal rows. The key difference is

in how the eye moves downwards. Once the F-pattern is triggered, the user will scan a straight vertical line down the left side until it reaches something of interest. The Z-pattern, on the other hand, will more or less cover every line, which is why it mostly applies to pages that feature a small enough amount of content to make this feasible.

## How to Use the Z-Pattern

We'll again use a visual aid from [Brandon Jones's post](#) to explain the Z-pattern.

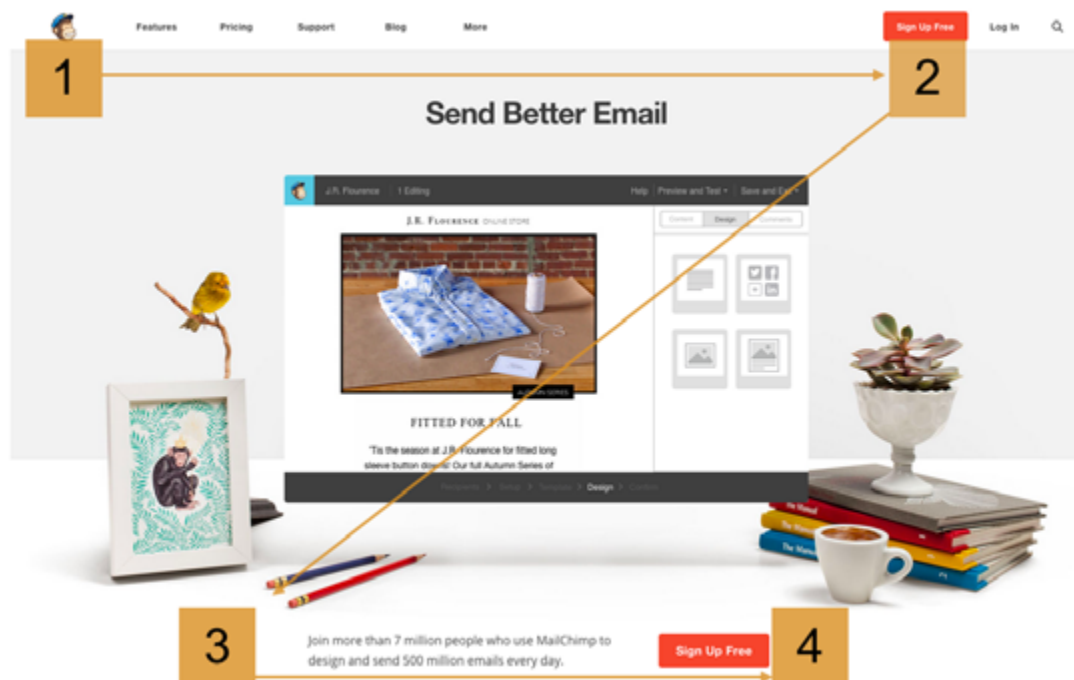


Photo credit: [MailChimp.com](#)

Using the above graphic, we can break down the Z-pattern into its key areas (based on Jones' analysis).

It begins the same as the F-pattern: starting at the upper-left hand corner (**Point 1**) and moving horizontally all the way to the right (**Point 2**). As with the F-pattern, Point 1 is the most valuable spot, which is why it almost always houses a company logo. Again like the F-pattern, Point 2 is a great location for a call-to-action – however, not the *main* call-to-action, as we'll explain below.

The Z-pattern then deviates on its own pathway. The prime area of the Z-pattern is the center of the page, the large expanse where the eye scans on its way down to the second row. The trick to this area is fill it with content that interests the user, while still urging their sight downward to the next line. This space usually hosts an image or an image carousel; something that will maintain user interest, but not enough to stop them from continuing to browse the site.

The user then again scans the next row horizontally, left-to-right (**Point 3** to **Point 4**). Here is the main appeal of the Z-pattern; think of this layout as a minor build-up leading to Point 4. This is the spot where you want to put your most valuable content, usually a call-to-action.

Because **Point 4** is the finish line, the row between it and Point 3 should contain content that pushes the user's sight to the corner. This is an excellent place for a series of smaller gateways to other sections. Basically, the goal for this row is to incite title scanning, drawing the eye ultimately to Point 4.

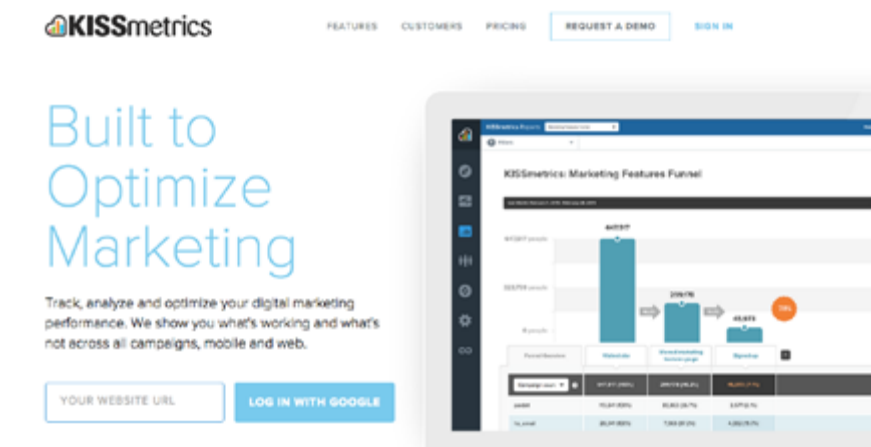


Photo credit: [Kissmetrics.com](http://Kissmetrics.com)

Another important factor of the Z-pattern is the background: you should separate it from the main framework as much as possible. The Z-pattern relies on its structure to achieve results, and a flashy background distracts the user. Keep backgrounds simple and muted.



Photo credits: [www.evernote.com](http://www.evernote.com)

The Z-pattern can even extend throughout the entirety of the page, repeating Points 1-4 if you feel that more value propositions are needed before the call-to-action. As you can see above, this is exactly what **Evernote** does by starting with a “Sign Up Now” call-to-action, guiding users through a few selling points, and finishing their repeated Z-pattern with payment option calls-to-action.



Photo credits: [www.dropbox.com](http://www.dropbox.com)

**DropBox** takes a visually simpler approach to this zig-zag pattern by doing away with any background images altogether. Instead, more functionality is built into the layout since a “Learn More” call-to-action connects each section of the winding pattern as your eye makes its way down the page. This also helps informed readers click to the next relevant page without needing to read all the copy first.

## Why Is This Pattern Effective?

The Z-pattern is popular amongst designers because it adheres to the central tenements of web design.

There is a visual hierarchy and premeditated structure, plus it opens key visual pathways to both a brand and a call-to-action. While the F-pattern follows a route more organic to natural eyesight trends, the Z-pattern is a bit more refined for storytelling purposes (since you lead the user as they zigzag from point to point). .

Another benefit of the Z-pattern is its versatility. The central image can be enlarged or shrunk, the pattern can be repeated any number of times (to accommodate several different calls-to-action), and the content in each row can be anything that follows the unifying structure.

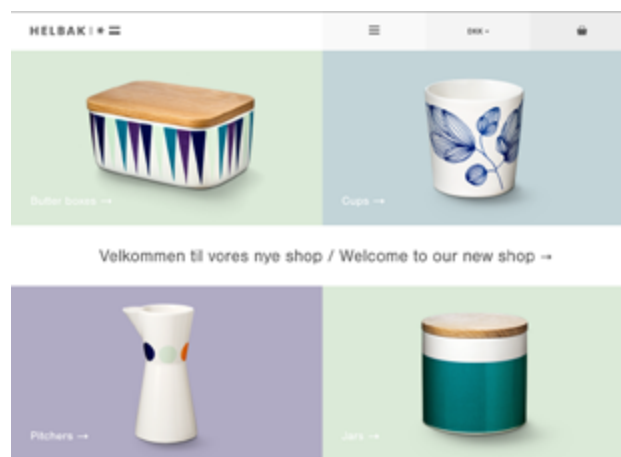


Photo credit: [Helbak.com](http://Helbak.com)

The Z-pattern's fixed structure can also be its drawback. As a layout designed to control a user's sight, it's susceptible to unplanned distractions and anything that knocks the user's vision off course.



Remember that your user's eye will always be attracted to the biggest and brightest elements on a page, so if you're designing for the Z-pattern, make sure your complementary elements are entertaining – but not overpowering.

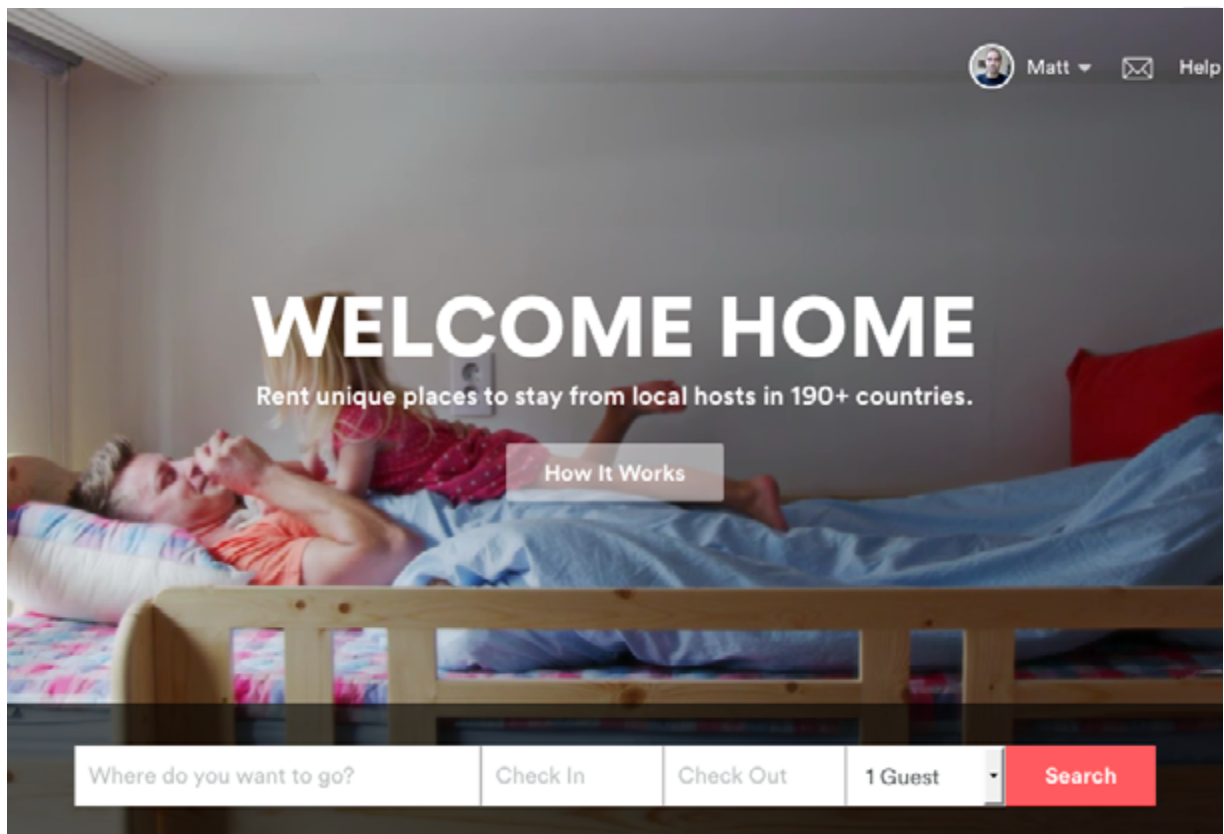
## Takeaway

Both the F-pattern and the Z-pattern are widely recognized web design strategies, but each for different reasons. Determine the main goal of your site first and foremost – if it must organize a large selection of content, choose the F-pattern; if it leans towards eliciting a specific action as a result of visual narrative, choose the Z-pattern.

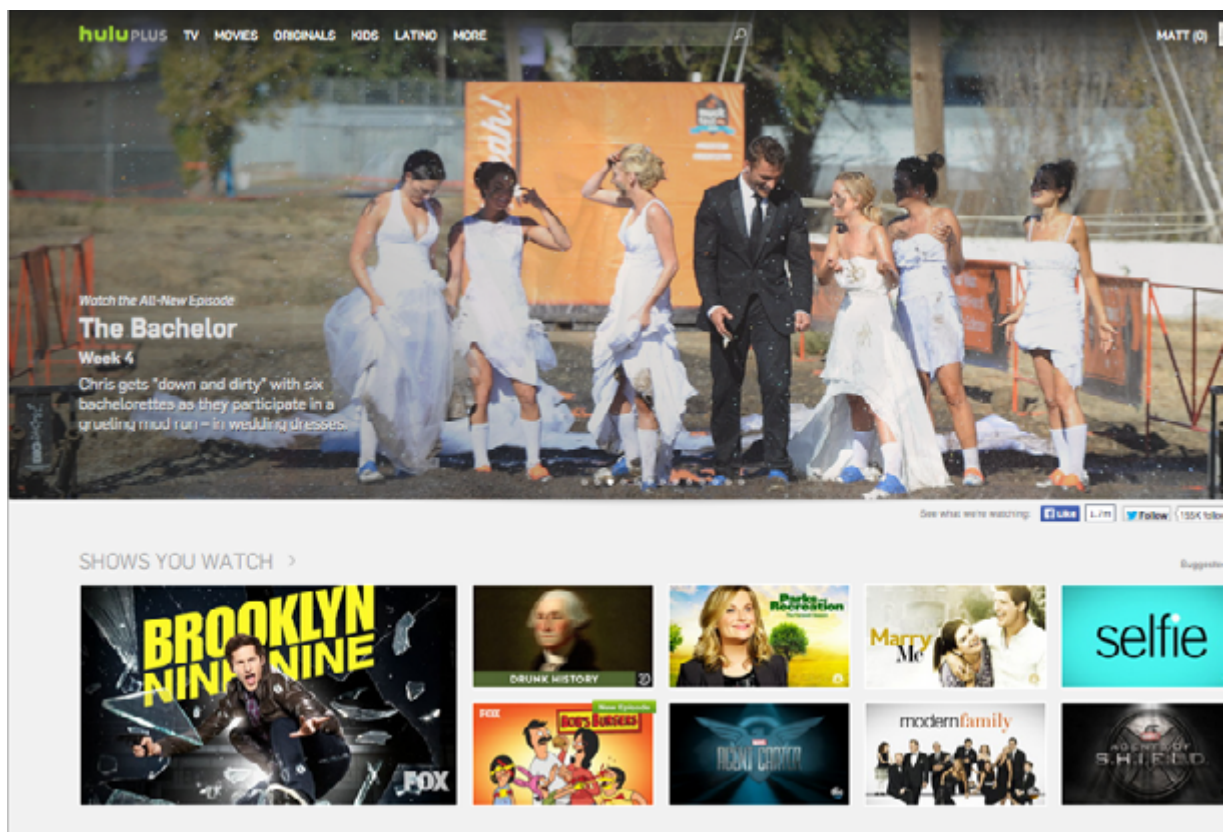
If you're designing for the Z-pattern, don't forget its emphasis on structure. Know where the key points are located, and how they're best used. Remember to keep secondary content subdued so you don't “derail” your user's sight pathway, and don't be afraid to take advantage of the layout's versatility.

## More Examples of the Z Pattern

Here are some examples of the Z-pattern used right. You'll notice the different forms it can take, while still serving the same goals.



*AirBnB*



*Hulu*

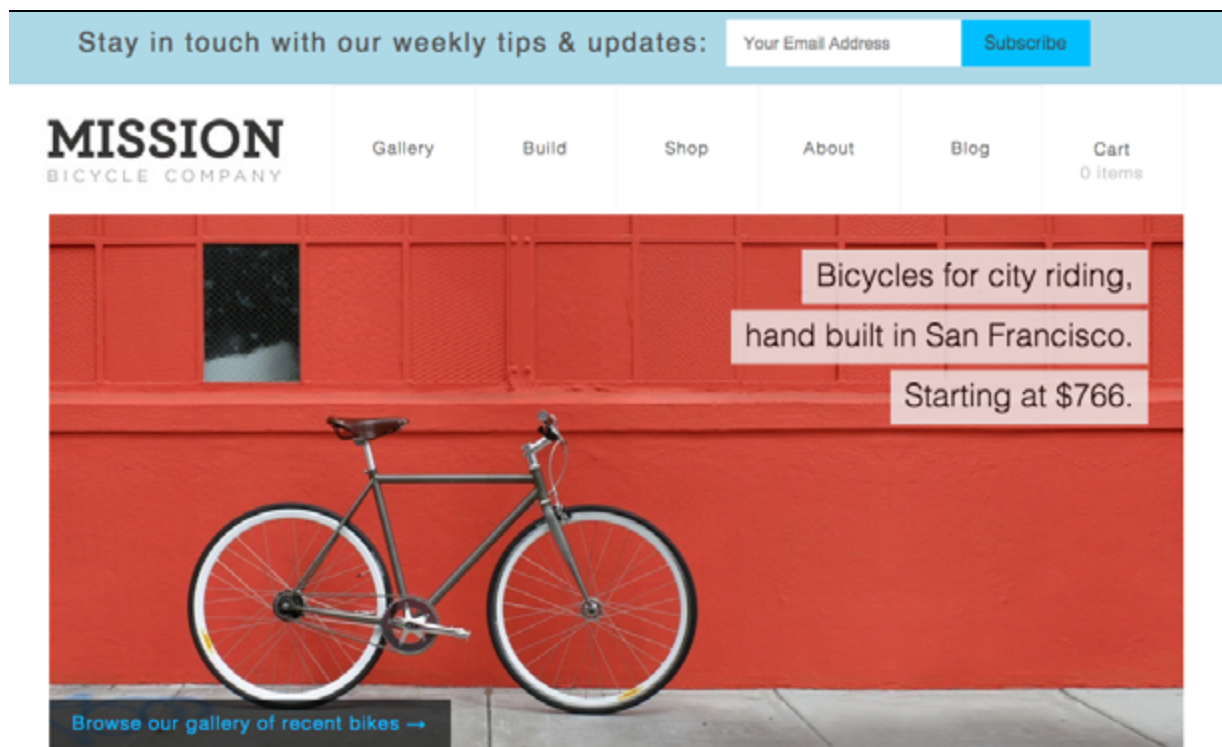


Dunckelfeld



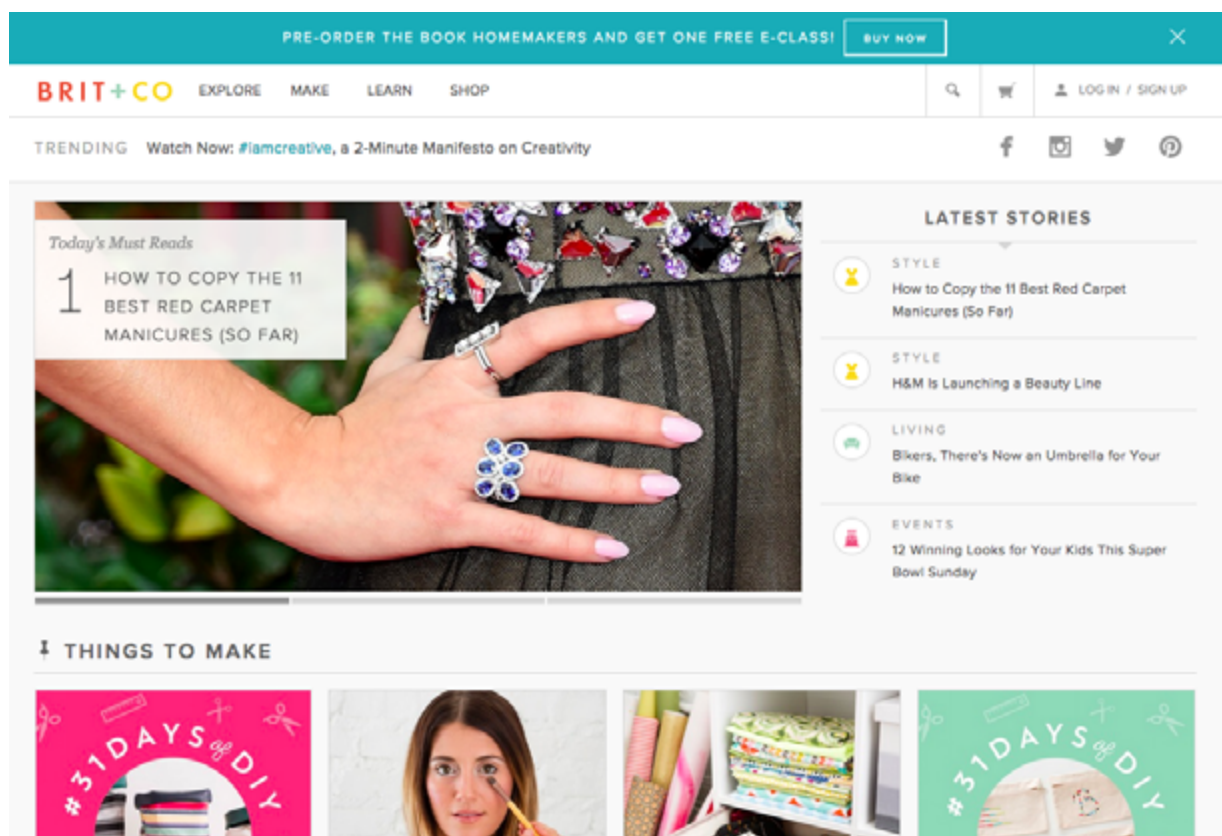
Comedy Central



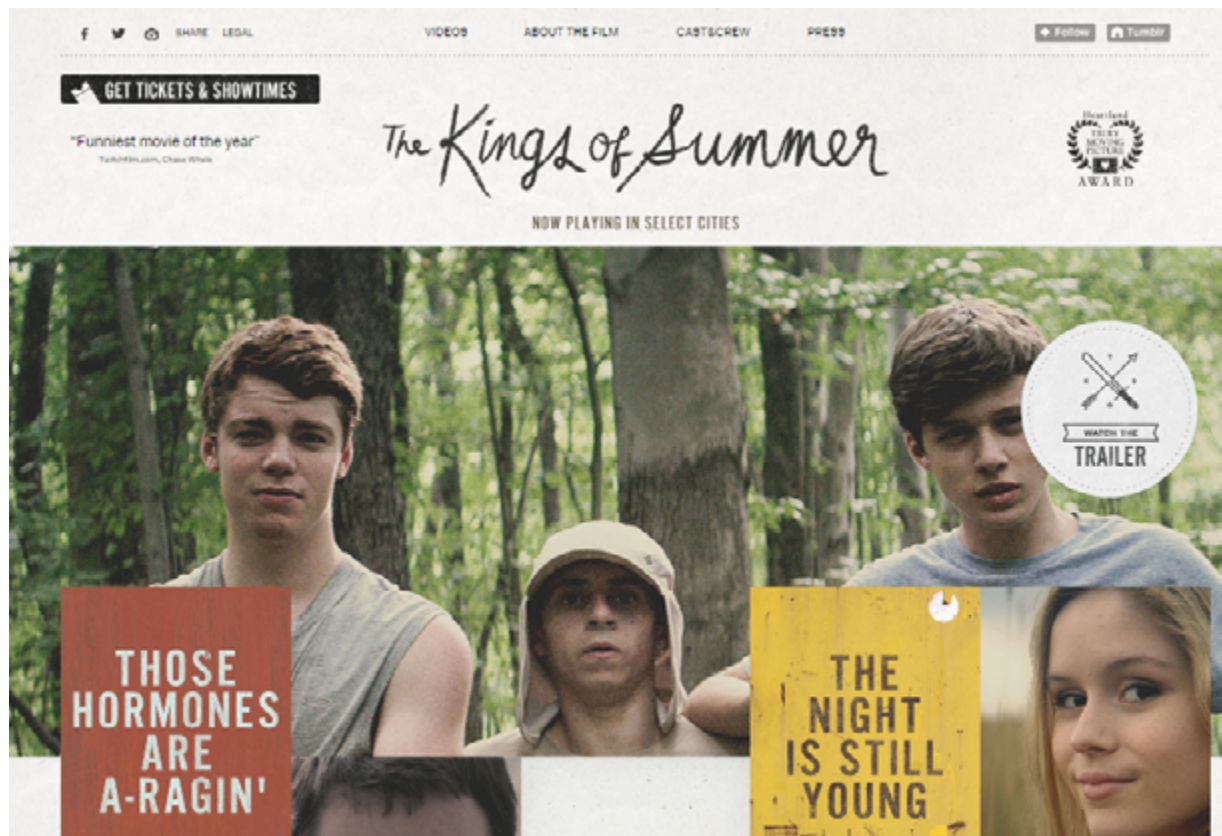


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# Creating Visual Language Through Typography

Form equals function, and that doesn't change just because we're dealing with text.

Typography is the aesthetics behind the written word, the art of making your text serve a purpose based only on its looks. This incorporates many different physical options – font, size, color, position, etc. – and also external factors like what's being said, how it's being said, and the context surrounding it.



Photo credits: [“antique alphabet”](#). [Plaisanter](#). [Creative Commons](#).

First we'll talk about how the content and context of what you're saying should affect the look of the words, then we'll discuss how to utilize the various visual elements, and we'll close by offering some helpful tips.

Typography is the aesthetics behind the written word, the art of making your text serve a purpose based only on its looks.



## Many Languages Within a Single Word

Just like many other areas in design, content is still king in typography. Ultimately, the meaning behind the words you're communicating will affect the look of the text. Knowing the *intention* behind the message is the first step in the process.

A message's emotion or tone is more important than the words themselves. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen summarize it best in their book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* when they say:

*The visual component of text is an independently organized and structured message, connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it and similarly the other way round.*

This signifies that every printed word can communicate two separate meanings: the literal definition and the emotion suggested by

the typography. According to Caroline Knight and Jessica Glaser, [your typographic choices create many layers of meaning](#).

In their [first example](#), the word STOP seems imposing and loud. The impression is one of interruption, and carries a sense of urgency to it. This effect is not an accident.

Let's look at the elements at play here.

For starters, the text is large and all-caps, which is a quick and easy way to add gravity to any word. The subtler choices just support the tone: the font choice is simplistic and no-nonsense; the letters are thick tightly spaced, creating an oppressive block of text. The color scheme of white against black corroborates the directness, while the dominant black “negative space” lends more immediacy to the message. Lastly, the position of the word in the center makes it seem more worthy of attention.

Counterpart in [this image](#).

This version is far less intense.

It seems less like a command, and more of a gentle suggestion to be taken at your leisure. The text is small and lower-cased for starters, and on top of that has a more detailed font, with slight italics – the text here is more whimsical. The script typeface feels like a refreshing break from the monotonous black background, creating



an oasis of elegance. The position at the bottom-right corner, the last seen position on the screen, makes the message seem almost like an afterthought.

Same exact word. Two completely different meanings.

Every printed word communicates two meanings:  
the literal definition and the emotion of the typography.



## The Importance of Context

At its core, typography is just another tool for communication. As such, context will play a large role in its success or failure. Typographic context is determined by two factors:

**The Readers** – Who is reading your words and how are they likely to interpret different visual cues.

**The Type of Message** – Distinctions between blog posts, banner ads, product descriptions, etc. will all affect interpretation, not to mention the different types and styles of each of the above.

Let's explore both below.

### 1. The Readers

The first concern of context in typography is *who* will read your message. Different people interpret the look of the text in different ways, just as they would interpret a painting in different ways.

For this, it's important to reference your user personas. We discussed user personas at length in [Interaction Design Best Practices: Volume 1](#), but to summarize, a user persona is a character made up to represent one of your target users. When making important design decisions, personas act as another person in the

room to think about. “Would Sally Perkins (a seasonal shopper) see this link in the corner?” for example.

Different people interpret typography in different ways,  
just as they interpret a painting in different ways.



tweet this



JONATHAN VIZZIER

*“Design isn’t just how it looks, it’s how it works.”*

Demographics:

- 27 years old
- Masters in Visual Design
- Visual Designer

Key characteristics:

- Obsessive over visual quality
- Hates when product managers use the word “just” before describing last-minute tasks
- Wants to be as involved in the design process as possible
- Loathes jargon, wishes people would get to the point

Description/User story:

Jonathan graduated from one of the top graduate art programs in the United States, but soon found that reality is nothing like school. As a visual designer at a small B2B company, he gets treated as the “go-to” design guy - even if the requirements are more UX design than visual design. He’s overworked, but still passionate, and is looking for flexible design tools that help him easily communicate with his team (some of which work remotely).

Goals:

- To build a strong portfolio, regardless of whatever job I’m at
- To start mastering UX design by the end of this year for a career transition

Source: [UXPin](#)

When crafting your typography, keep your user personas in mind. Will they understand the intentions behind your creative choices, or will it go over their heads? Which kind of typeface would be most effective on them? Just as other areas of design, knowing whom you’re designing for will answer a lot of questions early on.

Glaser and Knight, for example, [explain the use of the Old Gothic font](#), as in the [Juicy Couture](#). To the brand’s loyal followers,

this font denotes youth, a certain edginess, even unapologetic sex-appeal.

However, an older or less fashionable audience would have a completely different association. They tend to interpret the font as more sophisticated, classy, or traditional – not at all applicable on the backside of yoga pants! This audience would make more sense out of the **New York Times** logo below.

The differences aren't always this extreme. Even within your target audience, differences in age, gender, social status, etc. will all have subtle effects on the typography's interpretation.

The image shows the logo for The New York Times, rendered in a classic, bold, black serif typeface. The letters are tightly spaced, and the overall appearance is formal and authoritative.

*Photo credits: [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)*

When it comes to judging the aesthetics of the typography, we recommend writing down (or at least reviewing in your head) the top 5 words that immediately come to mind. Make sure it correlates with your audience and design objective, otherwise keep searching.

## 2. The Type of Message

Are you designing typography for an advertisement or an error message? If it's for an advertisement, what kind – charity, luxury goods, candy? Is the ad funny or serious?

Just like you need to know whom you're writing for before you start, you should also know why you're writing. You'll need to make sure your typography is in sync with your overarching message.

Let's look at **TDBank** and how they create different impressions with the same sans serif font.

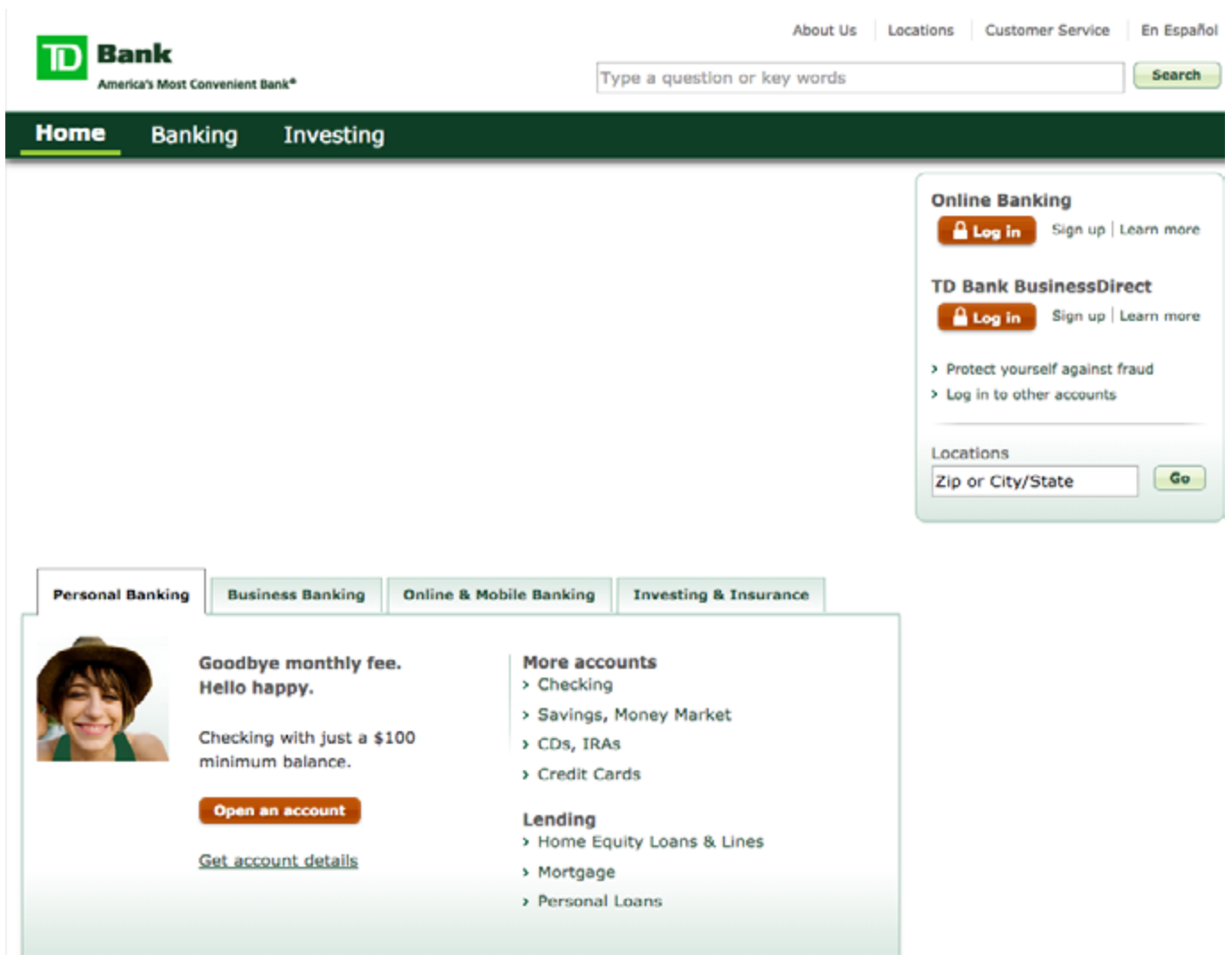
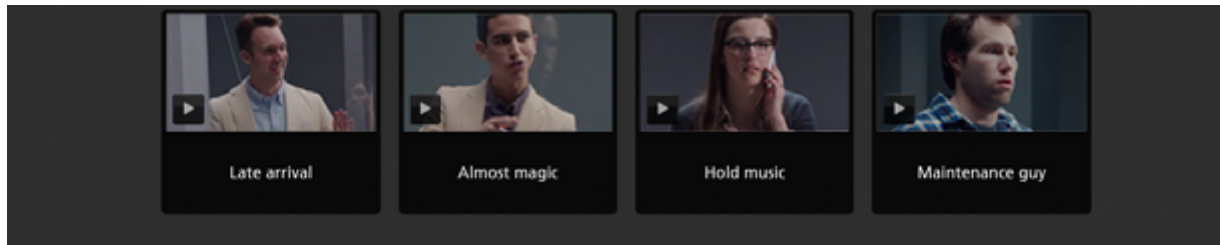


Photo credits: [tdbank.com](http://tdbank.com)

It makes sense to use a straightforward, but approachable sans-serif typeface like this for the bank homepage. The design

isn't particularly innovative, but it certainly creates a basic level of trust since the typeface is crisp and the green colors suggest wealth and serenity.



## How we Bank Human.

### Longer hours, now longer(er).

We're open longer than other banks. Morning, night and even ten minutes before and after the hours on our doors. So if you're a little early or late, you're still right on time.



### Open weekends.

For a lot of people, weekends are the time to get things done. Since one of those things is often banking, our doors stay open. Every Saturday and Sunday. In almost every town we serve.



### Unexpected conveniences.

Ever wanted to make a deposit while enjoying a lollipop, then keep the pen when you're done? At TD Bank, it's an option. You can even bring your dog.



Photo credits: [www.bankhumanagain.com](http://www.bankhumanagain.com)

The typeface becomes much more interesting on [their microsite](#) discussing how to humanize banking. Presented in larger size and bolder weight, the font lives up to the messaging of “banking human”. It’s professional, tastefully modern, and feels like a friendly advisor. The green color is also brighter and livelier than on the homepage, adding to the human feel.

The point here is that the same font serves two different purposes depending on where it’s used. The bottom-line voice from the

main site comes across much happier on the microsite, just as the bottom's hopeful optimism doesn't come across on the top.

You don't want to take this visual correlation to an extreme, however.

For example, let's take a look at **Teen Vogue**. It's safe to say their audience consists mostly of tweens, but their site design feels more aspirational than immature. The typeface strikes the perfect balance between youth and elegance.

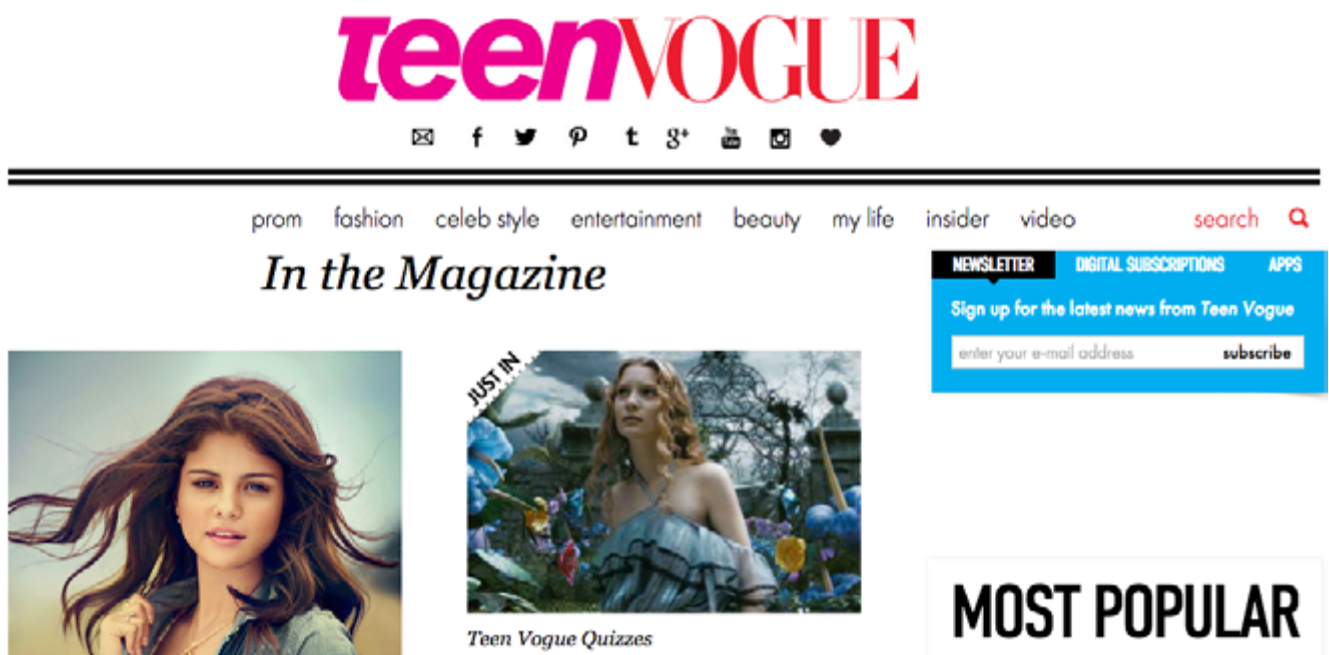


Photo credits: [www.teenvogue.com](http://www.teenvogue.com)

They don't make the mistake of literally matching form and function. For example, the designer could have gone with a more literal appeal with something fun and quirky like the below font, appropriately named “**CK Tween**”. But such a treatment would feel contrived and tacky, leaving a saccharine aftertaste.

Match the typeface to the desired mood, but exercise restraint or it will feel cheesy.

## Combine Copy and Typography

We started this chapter explaining that a word's literal meaning and typographical meaning are two completely different things, but that doesn't mean they can't work together. A word's look and definition can complement each other when done right, heightening the intention beyond what each could accomplish on their own.

But word choice goes beyond mere meaning. When writing, think carefully about the lesser-acknowledged properties of words, such as:

- **Length** – How many letters? How many syllables?
- **Sound** – Rhyming can be an influential tool, so look for opportunities to use it.
- **Shape** – Which letters make up the word? What is the word's outline?

Beyond the audience and design objectives, you also need to balance legibility with readability. Legibility refers to the design elements such as width of strokes, presence of serifs, etc. Readability, on the other hand, is how the content, font color, legibility, leading, tracking, and all other elements combine to create an overall impression.



Graphic Designer Douglas Bonneville provides straightforward and effective [advice on choosing and using typefaces](#). Let's expand on some of these insights for legibility and readability.

## 1. Legibility

Decorative typefaces (like [Calligraffiti](#) below on the left) have poor legibility because they're designed to be glanced, not read. Meanwhile, serif typefaces like [Crimson Text](#) below on the right are much more legible and practical for content.

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**CALLIGRAFFITI**

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**CRIMSON FONT**

Photo credits: [www.uxpin.com](http://www.uxpin.com)

Think about where your typeface should fall between the two extremes above, then keep these tips in mind:

- **Select sleek and crisp typefaces** – The more ornamental and artistic the typeface, the higher the [cognitive load](#) as users will first need to visually process the font instead of digesting the content.
- **Don't draw attention to the typography** – Your typeface treat-

ment should certainly be elegant and aesthetically pleasing. But don't forget its role is accentuating content, not competing with it.

- **Keep it balanced** – Typography is all about the balance of elements. If your font size is small, make sure you select a typeface with a larger x-height. If your background is grey, use white instead of black for the font color. When in doubt, opt for regular or normal weights.

For a quick set of guidelines for font legibility, check out this helpful [excerpt of \*Web Style Guides\*](#).

## 2. Readability

A related concept to the F-pattern and Z-pattern, readability affects how much users actually want to engage with your content. Unless low readability is part of the message you're conveying, make sure to prioritize communication over style.

Let's take a look at an example based on graphic designer Douglas Bonneville's [piece on how to select typefaces](#).

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with our drag-and-drop image importer.

Bring your personal design touch to every  
elements, backgrounds, and more with t

*Photo credits: [www.uxpin.com](http://www.uxpin.com)*

The version on the right features decreased font size, lightened colors, full justification, and some tweaks to the leading and tracking. As a result, it's much less readable.

In order to keep content readable like the example on the right, [keep these tips in mind](#):

- **Match the typeface to its role** – Some typefaces are better for headlines, while others are more flexible and are still readable at smaller sizes. It's not a bad idea to pair a more fun font (like [Knockout](#)) for headlines with a highly readable font (such as [Tisa](#) or [Proxima Nova](#)) for the body copy and microcopy.
- **Keep the measure in mind** – As a general rule, your line length (also known as the measure) should be set to 60 to 70 characters. If your measure is too generous, users may have trouble reading from line to line.

- **Create breathing room with proper line height** – To prevent text lines from crashing together, we recommend setting a line height between 1.3 to 1.5.

To learn more about legibility versus readability, check out this [comprehensive piece from tuts+](#).

Unless you want to be unreadable, prioritize clarity over style.



## Takeaway

It's tempting to think of typography as an extension of the site's writing, but that's not accurate. Nor is it accurate to think that the two are completely unrelated. The truth is that both are separate fields, each with their own best practices; however, they two are always intrinsically linked, and so each should be designed with regards to the other one.

# A Structure for Practical Typography

Typography is a second language communicating on a subtler level beyond your actual words. The actual content is what you say, but typography is the first impression of how you say it.



Photo credit: “Typography”. Taryn. Creative Commons 2.0.

Typography creates an experience before users have even read a single word or clicked a menu button. Typography doesn't just tell a story, it creates an atmosphere and emotional response the same way as a tone of voice.

As we described in *Interaction Design Best Practices*, words are the foundation of all interactions. Great designers understand this distinction and treat text not as content, but as its own interface.

In this chapter we'll talk about how to use typography to its fullest extent. We'll begin by exploring the levels of typographic hierarchy, then dive into individual elements, and finish off with additional tips.

## Levels of Hierarchy in Typography

As we described in *Web UI Best Practices*, typographic hierarchy is a subset within visual hierarchy. Typographic hierarchy arranges lettering so that important words stand out easily to readers who are scanning for information.

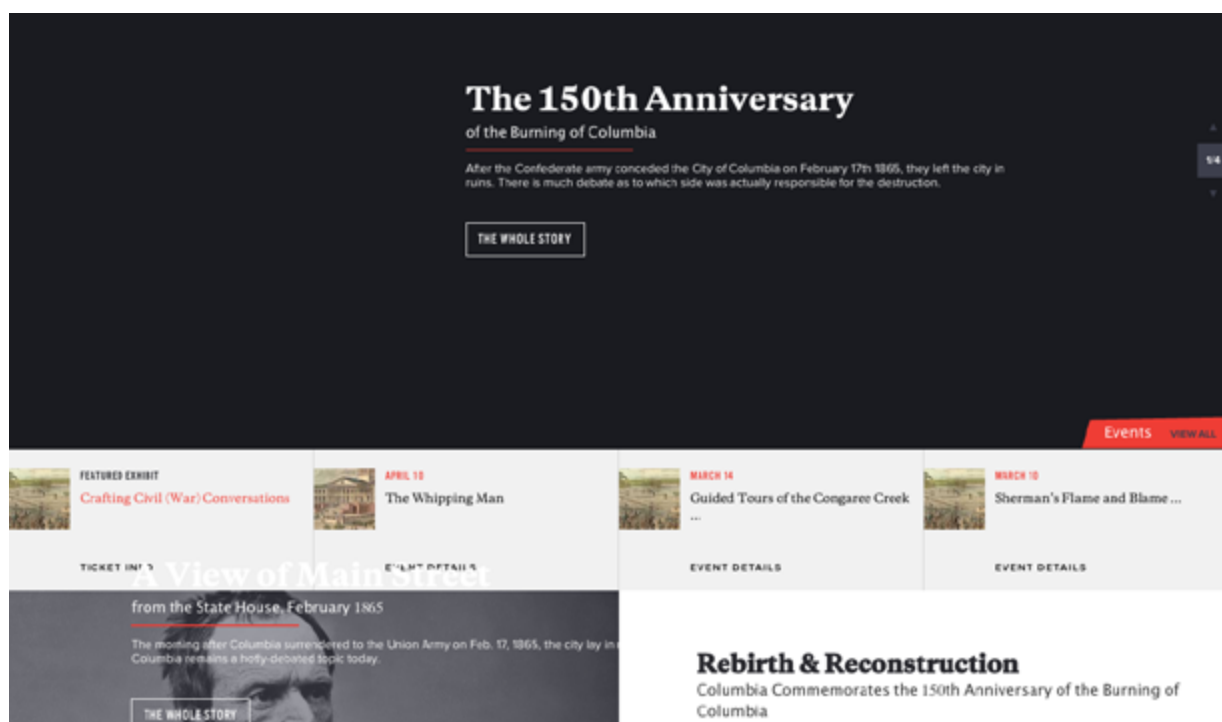


Photo credits: [www.burningofcolumbia.com](http://www.burningofcolumbia.com)

Without this hierarchy, every letter and word in a design would appear identical. Your design would be about as visually appealing as an MS DOS command prompt. As a general rule, Designer Carrie Cousins recommends that your typography supports [at least three levels of hierarchy](#).

Try to shape your typography into these levels:

1. **Primary** – The most noticeable text on the page, usually bigger and a brighter color than the other layers of text. Because it's so powerful, this level should be sparse – reserve it only for headlines and decks (known as “furniture”).
2. **Secondary** – Less noticeable than the primary level, but more noticeable than the main content, the secondary level handles everything in between. This level features some minimal but distinct elements in size and color, and typically includes sub-heads, captions, pull quotes, infographics, or supportive blocks of text separate from the main content.
3. **Tertiary** – This is the main content, the most common, and the least noticeable. It should be simple and not flashy – the goal of the other layers is to attract attention; the goal of this layer is to encourage the reader to become immersed in the text, hence less distraction.
4. **Other** – Smaller levels of hierarchy can be created by sparingly



applying italics, color, bolding, underlining, and other effects to tertiary type. These levels might include underlined links, a few bolded words for emphasis within paragraphs, etc. Text that shows up in banners, logos, or other background graphics also fall in this category.

In order to illustrate the separation of layers utilized properly, let's look at the below example from **Jon Tangerine**.

**We, Who Are Web Designers** — *Mon, 19th Sep 2011 {66}*  
 In 2003, my wife Lowri and I went to a christening party. We were  
 friends of the hosts but we knew almost no-one else...

*Photo credits: [www.v1.jontangerine.com](http://www.v1.jontangerine.com)*

The typography here has 3 distinct layers to clearly explain the elements of the piece without explaining a thing. The title is obviously “We, Who Are Web Designers,” but why is it obvious? The text is bigger (size), bolder (weight), and is set at the top-left where the viewers eyes go first (position).

The second level is the publication date, set in a different size and color than the rest of the text, and also italicized to give more distinction.

The third level, the article preview, is devoid of features. Compared to the other layers it may seem plain, but that is so readers aren't distracted when trying to appreciate the actual content.



## Elements of Hierarchy in Typography

Like other design fields, typography follows its own structural hierarchy. Knowing typographic hierarchy is like knowing *how* to use typography, specifically knowing how to give certain words priority over others.

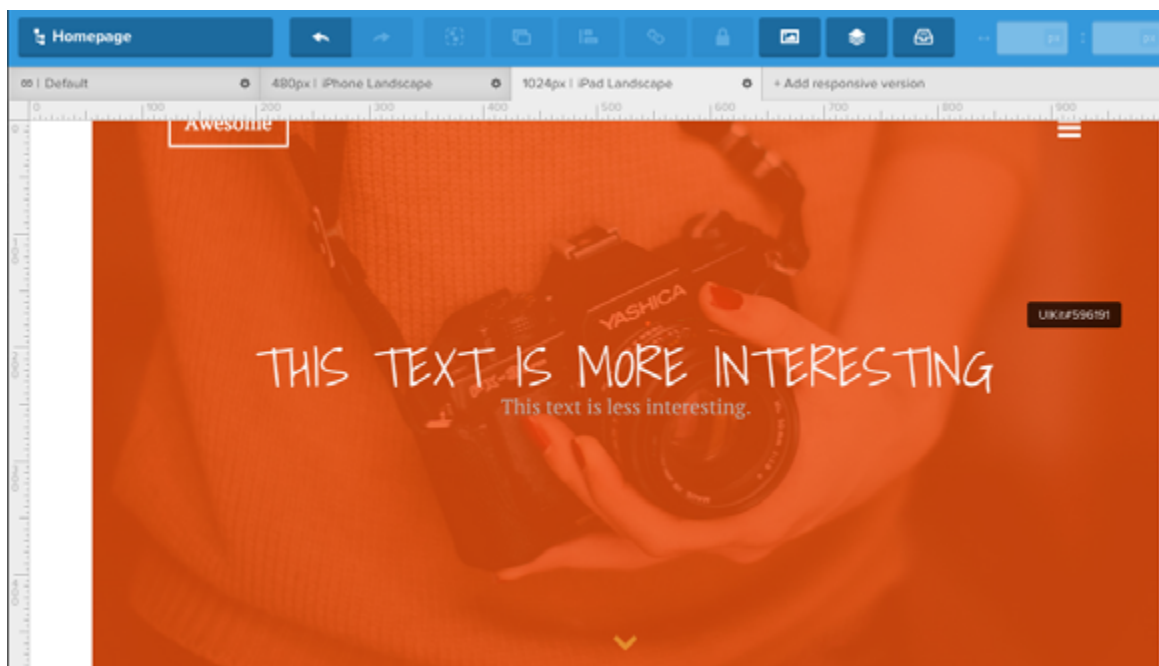


Photo credits: [www.uxpin.com](http://www.uxpin.com)

*UXPin includes hundreds of fonts included from standard libraries and Google Fonts. The styles, colors, and background colors can be modified for any text.*

Before we delve into the levels of typographic hierarchy, Jeremy Lloyd, Creative Director at Sparkbox, [thoroughly deconstructs the dozens of factors at play in your text](#). By manipulating the fields below, you'll better control your typography, and thus better control where your users' eyes go.

- **Size** – The basic unit of typographic hierarchy. Text of different sizes attract different levels of attention.



Photo credits: [www.uxpin.com](http://www.uxpin.com)

- **Weight** – The thickness of the text, most easily increased through bolding. Although subtler than size, it's still a straightforward method of making your text stand out. Bolding is especially effective for adding weight to tertiary type.

**D**ie Orgel, der Flügel, das Forteplano und das Clavicord sind die gebräuchlichsten Clavierinstrumente zum Accompagnement. Es ist Schade, daß die schöne Erfindung des Goltfeldischen Bogenclaviers noch nicht gemeinnützig geworden ist; man kann daher dessen besondere Vorzüge hierinnen noch nicht genau bestimmen. Es ist gewiß zu glauben, daß es sich auch bey der Begleitung gut ausnehmen werde.

Aus: Bach, Carl Philipp Emanuel: Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen.. Zweyter Theil, in welchem die Lehre von dem Accompagnement und der freyen Fantasia abgehandelt wird. G. L. Winter, Berlin 1762.

Photo credits: "Fraktur". [Wikimedia. Creative Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fraktur).

- **Italics** – Italicized letters draw attention is a less dramatic way than bolding. Because it's a subtle touch, this works well for tertiary type.

- **Capitalization** – Just like emails written in Caps lock sound like you're yelling, the same applies to web typography. Always be careful when capitalizing letters, because they appear disproportionately larger and pop into the foreground.
- **Color** – Now we're getting into the complex factors. Warm colors (red, orange, yellow) tend to attract more attention than cool colors (blue, purple), especially if warm-colored text is set against a cool-colored background. Color contrast also matters, since saturated or bright colors jump out more than muted ones.

## TAKE ADVANTAGE OF GOOD TYPOGRAPHY

You can use a ton of beautiful fonts from Google Fonts library. Need something simple and nice looking, or maybe something more fancy? We've got them all. In total, there is 100 most popular Google Fonts to choose.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog  
 The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog  
 The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog  
*The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog*  
 The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog  
**The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog**  
 The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog  
*The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog*  
 The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog  
 The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

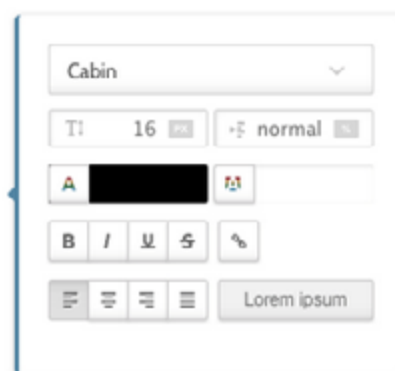


Photo credits: [www.uxpin.com](http://www.uxpin.com)

- **Contrast** – Contrast between any of these factors – size, weight, or color – will attract attention. Contrasting typefaces for headlines versus body copy helps create hierarchy.



Photo credits: [www.talkpr.com](http://www.talkpr.com)

- **Space** – White space can make text appear larger (and therefore more readable). Lack of space makes text feel more cramped and smaller. Every space affects your hierarchy, from simple kerning to the relationship between words and the edge of the screen.
- **Position** – Just like we talked about in both the Gestalt and space chapters, proximity can be a fast and simple way to convey meaning.

Your tools allow people move from theory  
to understanding by experiencing the  
ideas being shared and interacting in real  
time!

Read story

Photo credits: [www.uxpin.com](http://www.uxpin.com)

- **Orientation** – Turning letters and words sideways, diagonal, or upside down adds to visual appeal. The effect creates surprising eye candy for users. This works especially well for adding emphasis to short words/phrases within primary text. Tilting, rotating to vertical, and other methods immediately focus the user on the affected text.



Photo credits: [www.zombies.epicmagazine.com](http://www.zombies.epicmagazine.com)

- **Texture** – As Carrie Cousins describes, [texture is highly subjective](#), making it one of the hardest elements to master. This doesn't refer to the texture of the lettering itself, but of the texture created through the typographic patterns on the page. Each block of text produces its own pattern, so to create texture, break the pattern by changing any of the other elements. Apply sparingly, otherwise it becomes distracting.

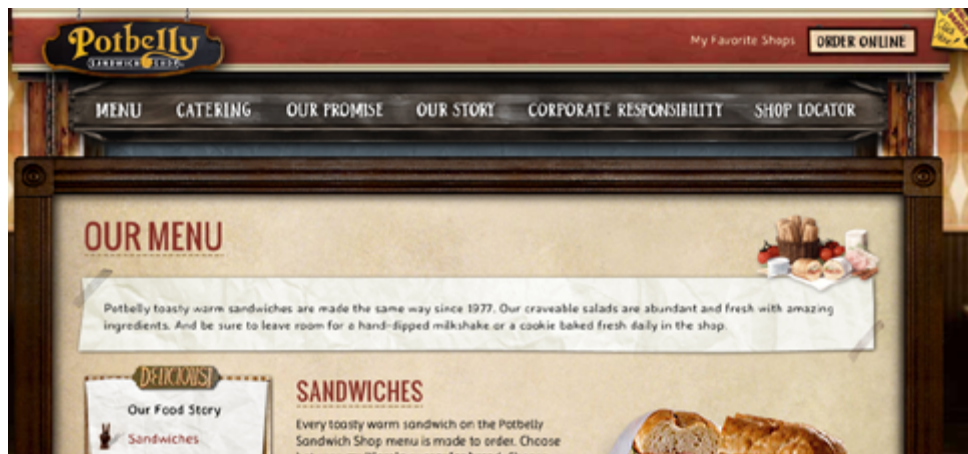


Photo credits: [www.potbelly.com](http://www.potbelly.com)

For more details on the theories that govern typographic best practices, read [Mandy Brown's article on the Adobe Typekit Blog](#). To check out some of the best examples of web typography, take a look at this [gallery from awwwards](#).

## Additional Expert Resources

We couldn't possibly fit all the expert advice on typography in just a single chapter. If you're interesting in learning more, take a look at the sources below:

- **10 Typography Tips Every Designer Should Know** – These tips deal specifically with kerning, the spaces between letters.
- **Size Matters: Balancing Line Length and Font Size in Responsive Web Design** – The title says it all. Check this out if you're curious about typography across different sizes of devices.
- **18 Super Quick Web Typography Tips for Newbies** – If you need to learn a lot about typography in a little bit of time, this piece is for you.

## Takeaway

Designers tend to be visual thinkers, so they embrace typography with open arms. If all visual elements of a web page design factor into the user experience, then of course typography will make a huge impact, especially on content-heavy sites.

It helps to keep in mind the different variations one can put on text, like size, weight, and the others mentioned above. Once you have a

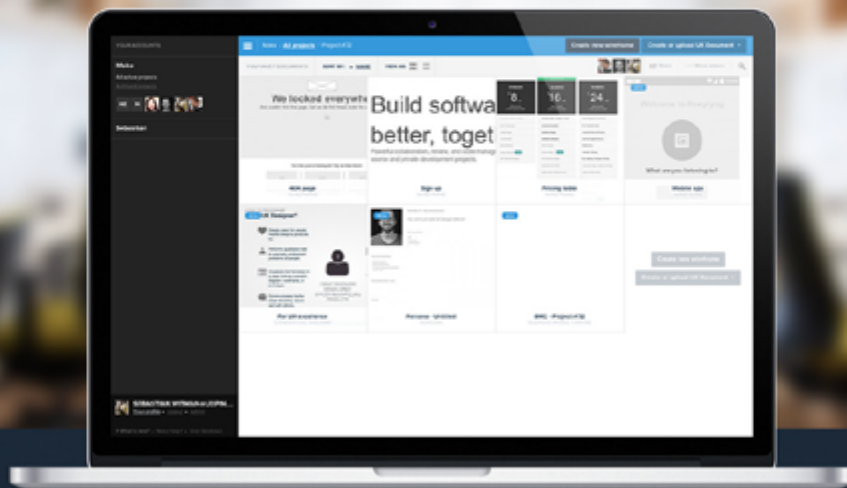
solid understanding of the different ways you can alter your typography, try implementing the experts' tips we compiled here. Don't neglect the language of typography: poor or lacking typography will be just as repulsive to readers as glaring grammar errors.

With typography and with actual writing, the rule is the same: learn how to speak the language. We hope you've found this e-book helpful, and feel free to try out some of the tips in UXPin.

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