Effective Design and Layout

SIX ELEMENTS OF A WELL-DESIGNED FLYER

(1) Extremely short copy. Limit it to one to three short paragraphs – the amount someone might read before they get to the closest trash can. Reread and delete unnecessary words.

(2) A dominant headline. One large headline grabs attention more than multiple headlines do. The shorter the main headline, the larger the type and the more dramatic it will be.

(3) Subheads to highlight main points. Most flyers also need a secondary headline, usually under the main headline (as further explanation of the main point). If your text is longer than one or two paragraphs, you'll also need to break up the copy with subheads, bold-faced lead-in sentences, or bullet points.

(4) A strong visual. Nothing makes a flyer stronger than a good photo, cartoon, or illustration. Art should reinforce your message and be good enough to be the focal point. Often, this should be a worker or community member's photo, together with a short quote from them about why they are involved in the action the flyer promotes. Don't let dull or meaningless art clutter up the page or confuse your message. If you don't have a good picture, use other ways to add graphic interest and emphasis. A quote in large type with even larger quotation marks? A subhead or meeting notice reversed (in white type) in a black box? A large arrow, dollar sign, or question mark?

(5) White space. White space is not wasted space if it helps draw in the reader and focus attention on your message. It can be effective at the top of a page or down one side. Make sure it doesn't break up the elements so that you no longer have a unified presentation.

(6) Call to action. Use bold and larger type at the end of the flyer to tell the reader what they can do to get involved. Include contact information and the organization or campaign logo.

LAYING OUT THE ELEMENTS

Make the layout have a logical flow. The layout should guide the reader through the piece. Use headlines and art to establish a strong center of interest where the reader will begin, then make sure that it's clear which element leads to which.

Be consistent in spacing between the different elements, column widths, margins, etc.

Use fonts that work together. Don't confuse readers with a jumble of different type styles. Your two best options: (1) Choose one type family for the entire flyer (for example, Futura Extra Black for heads and Futura regular for body copy). (2) Choose one bold sans-serif font for headings (such as Helvetica) and one serif font for text (such as Times). Avoid cursive fonts (they're hard to read) and unusual, gimmicky fonts (which can create visual chaos). Use fonts on a consistent basis so readers will recognize the "look" of your campaign or group.

Make choices about what's most important. If too many words are big and bold, none will stand out. Rank words and messages in importance, and establish a visual hierarchy.

Give everything room to breathe. Related copy and art should be grouped but not crowded together. Leave a generous "gutter" around columns of text. Don't run the text inside or outside a box too close to the box frame.

Keep it simple. If you aren't an artist, don't try to be one. Don't try to be so creative that your flyer is complicated and hard to follow. The best flyers are clean and simple.

MAKING YOUR MESSAGE READABLE

Avoid large blocks of text that most readers won't wade through. In addition to breaking up the text with subheads, break for a new paragraph much more often than you would in other kinds of writing. In fact, you usually can start a new paragraph after every sentence or two.

Don't run text all the way across the page like you normally do when writing a letter. Instead, use columns that are between 2"-4" wide. One 5" column can work well too.

Don't justify text (where the copy in a column lines up on both the right and left margins.) Justified copy creates a block look and often leaves strange spacing between words, making it hard to read. Just align text on the left, and let the right edges of the lines be ragged.

Make sure the text font size is large enough that anyone can read it quickly and easily—at least 12 points and preferably 14.

Make key points and quotes stand out. Use bullets that will catch the reader's eye and pull their attention to your key points. For very short quotes, use a large type size so that the statement jumps out at the reader. For longer quotes that are several sentences, use a normal type size but add a short headline in a larger type size and put single quote marks around it.

Be selective with reverse type. Use reverse type (white words on a color background) to emphasize *short* items such as subheads, short quotes, or short sidebars. Make sure the font is big and bold enough to read when reversed. Avoid using serif type faces for reverse type.

Adjust line spacing. You can enhance the readability of your text by increasing the line spacing or "leading" a bit. To make headlines more readable, on the other hand, you may need to reduce the leading. The automatic leading is often too much for large size type.

BE RUTHLESS: When you think you're done, cut more! Simplify the writing and design.

Common Punctuation Problems

This tip sheet covers some of the most common punctuation questions that come up in advocacy writing. For a complete review of punctuation principles, consult reference books such as the AP Stylebook or Webster's Dictionary or basic books on writing.

It's means it is. The apostrophe takes the place of the missing letter "i." ("It's the first time those workers have belonged to a union.")
Its is the form that indicates possession, as in "the school and its staff"
(<u>not</u> "the school and it's staff.)

Apostrophes are not used to make nouns plural.
No: In the 1920's, workers left union meetings in one's and two's so they wouldn't be seen.
Yes: In the 1920s, workers left union meetings in ones and twos so they wouldn't be seen.

Don't use a comma before "and" when there is no new subject.
No: Head Start workers united for better pay and benefits, and reduced staff turnover to provide more stable relationships for their students. (While there is a new verb -- "reduced" -- there is no new subject.)
Yes: Head Start workers united for better pay and benefits, and staff turnover was reduced to provide more stable relationships for their students. (Now there is a new subject -- "staff turnover" -- and therefore a comma before "and.")
Better: By uniting for better pay and benefits, Head Start workers helped reduce staff turnover. (This makes cause and effect clear in a way that "and," even when punctuated properly, often does not.)

Don't use a comma before "because."
No: Home care workers voted 1,005 to 55 to form a union, because after years of asking for higher pay they wanted more strength in numbers.

Do use commas to separate three or more items in a list. Some people only put a comma after the first of the three items, and many people are inconsistent about which way they handle it. Get in the habit of separating each item with a comma, and you'll never have to worry about inconsistent style or inadvertent confusion on the reader's part.
No: Janitors' biggest concerns are living wages so they don't have to work several jobs to survive, affordable health coverage for themselves and their families and full-time jobs for those who don't want to have to piece together several part-time positions. (The lack of a comma after the word "families" that ends the second item in the list leads to potential confusion.)

Use em-dashes more than you would in other kinds of writing. (An em-dash is the long dash made in Word by typing two dashes in a row.) They often provide more emphasis than colons or commas.

Correct but could be better: Nurses united for reforms to improve patient care: safe staffing ratios, limits on mandatory overtime, and better pay and benefits to attract and retain skilled employees.

Better: Nurses united for reforms to improve patient care -- safe staffing ratios, limits on mandatory overtime, and better pay and benefits to attract and retain skilled employees.

Correct but could be better: Nurses put patient care quality first, and that's why they have united for safe staffing ratios.

Better: Nurses put patient care quality first -- and that's why they have united for safe staffing ratios.

Correct but could be better: Nurses, as well as patient advocacy groups, have endorsed strict staffing ratios.

Better: Nurses -- as well as patient advocacy groups -- have endorsed staffing ratios.

Don't use semi-colons -- ever. Their use leads to sentences that are too long and connections that are not sharply drawn. Finish a thought, put a period, and start a new sentence. Or rewrite the sentence to connect two thoughts more clearly.

No: Social services budgets have been cut by 30 percent in the past year; at the same time, the downturn in the economy has increased the need for those services.

Yes: Social services budgets have been cut by 30 percent in the past year. At the same time, the downturn in the economy has increased the need for those services.

Or: While social services budgets have been cut by 30 percent in the past year, the downturn in the economy has increased the need for those services.

Or: The downturn in the economy has increased the need for social services -- yet budgets have been cut by 30 percent in the past year.

Don't use exclamation points except in very rare cases. They often make headlines or text seem like propaganda and add to clutter in layouts. Good writing generally makes points of emphasis clear without exclamation points. Use this test: does the headline or sentence work without the exclamation point? If so, leave it out.

No: Act Now to Improve Services Our Community Needs!

Yes: Act Now to Improve Services Our Community Needs

No: Home care workers don't even have health coverage for themselves!

Yes: Home care workers don't even have health coverage for themselves.

If a parenthetical phrase is used at the end of a sentence, the period goes outside the parentheses. If the entire sentence is in parentheses, the period goes inside.

Yes: A majority of the Senate supports the bill (although that could change).

Yes: (A majority of the Senate supports the bill, although that could change.)

Endquotes go after a period or comma (although inside a colon or semi-colon).

No: Many security officers do not like to be referred to as "security guards".

No: Security officers generally do not like to be referred to as "security guards", "rent-a-cops", or other names that fail to recognize their professional status.

Short, Compelling Articles That Help Inspire Action

There is no once-size-fits-all outline for writing articles for print publications or online sites. But here are some proven techniques that you may want to consider.

Keep it short. With today's technology, the American attention span has continued to shrink. If you are too wedded to your first draft, ask someone who is not familiar with the subject to suggest what could be cut.

Foreshadow the main points near the beginning. Then you can give some background and come back to the main points in more depth. If you wait until near the end to reveal the punch line, many readers may never get that far.

Put yourself in your audience's shoes. Make clear from the beginning how what you are talking about affects them and why they should care.

Signal near the front that this is about positive action for solutions and not just about problems. Many people are discouraged by the state of the world and not eager to read about one more overwhelming problem. For example, "Oregon communities are organizing to expand rural postal services in the face of new attacks in Congress by FedEx and other corporate interests" instead of "The U.S. Postal Services is under attack again in Congress." You can come back to the solutions in more detail near the end.

Name who is causing the problem. Avoid the passive construction – for example, avoid, "Subsidies for oil and coal companies have increased by X percent since such-and-such year." Instead, "oil and coal companies have won an X percent increase in taxpayer subsidies since…"

Use bold type to make the organization of the main points obvious. This page is an example. Using bold subheads or bulleted bold lead-ins like those on this tip sheet will make the reader more likely to tackle the article at all, get the points you wanted to make, and remember them to repeat to someone else. For example, the text of an article about political attacks on the U.S. Postal Service, "How We Can Save Rural Post Offices," might be broken up with bold subheadings that say…
>   FedEx leads corporate attack on Postal Service
>   Congress creates false USPS deficit
>   Community pressure has stopped some cuts
>   How the Postal Service can be expanded, not slashed

Use memorable facts that dramatize your points. What facts will readers need in order to be persuaded? What facts will they repeat to others after reading your article?

Preempt opponents' arguments. This does not mean doing their work for them by repeating their claims. But keep their arguments in mind as you write so that anyone who reads your article will already know why the opposition's comeback is wrong.

Use a short, compelling human-interest example if there is room. If appropriate, briefly bring alive the human impact of the issue you are discussing.

Tell readers how to get more information and how to get involved. Direct them to organizations and websites if they are interested.

Avoid or translate jargon. If you are too close to the subject, get a few people who are not to circle parts of your draft they don't understand.