11 Powerful Graphic Design Tips

Photo by Sarah Pflug from Burst

If you’re a beginner, chances are you’re looking for some high-impact graphic design tips to help you quickly improve your skills and understand the industry. Perhaps for years, you didn’t fully grasp what a graphic designer does. Or maybe you hadn’t realized that it’s an extensive field that covers everything from the morning coffee cup in your hand through to the mobile app you use to track your sleep habits and nearly everything in between.

Designers create brands and experiences, advertisements and publications, physical spaces, digital spaces, animations and an endless list of other things. Design directly impacts our lives and has the potential to influence the world for the better. There's never been a more exciting time to study graphic design.

Now you might be thinking to yourself, what makes a good design? And how can I achieve it for myself, a beginner? Graphic design cannot be simplified down to a straightforward equation. There is no '1+1 = award-winning design. If there was, we wouldn't be inspired by the creative brilliance of Paula Scher and we wouldn't have Josef Muller-Brockmann to think of every time we see the clean, Swiss-style use of an underlying grid.

However, the good news is that there are very easy to understand principles in graphic design that when applied can mean even the earliest of beginners or even non-designers, can achieve a successful design. Read on for 11 powerful graphic design tips to make more of an impact in your work, no matter how experienced you are.

1. Moodboard it out

Create a moodboard of inspirational designs that convey a similar look and feel to what you would like to create in your design. This might include elements like fonts, color palettes, imagery or illustration styles and importantly, layout references that deal with a similar design context.

> *By collecting a variety of references, you will begin to see similarities amongst them that will help spark those creative ideas of your own.*

There's no set number, but aim for enough references to give you a variety of inspiration to draw upon. If you only choose

one, you’re in danger of unintentionally copying it too closely.

Browser-based platforms like Pinterest are great for creating digital moodboards and finding inspiration and the algorithms will aid you in finding similar styles but ensure you check out the best design blogs to see what the industry leaders are creating. These great graphic design examples are also a good place to start.

2. Have a plan

> *The worst way to design is to simply hop into a program and start “pixel pushing”.*

Before even touching a computer, it’s important to think about the objective of the design, what you want the viewer to see and take away. Start with a few quick, rough sketches to plan out your page and where all your content will be placed and keep that aforementioned moodboard in tow to stay inspired.

Have a look at this example of a sketchbook from Shillington’s Sonny Cancio and remember, even the world’s most influential designers such as Lance Wyman first planned their designs on paper. Taking a few minutes to map out your design might save you hours on the computer and maybe even a headache or two later.

3. Simplify your type

One of the most important aspects of design is clarity, so it’s important that we don’t sacrifice legibility for visual appeal. When in doubt, simplify it out and typography is the perfect place to start.

> *When starting with a new design, it’s a good idea to experiment a bit and find the perfect style font for the*

> *particular project you're working on.*

Check out an inspiring blog like Type Wolf or Type in Use to see how other designers have chosen and applied fonts. There are also over 900 free fonts to snag from Google Fonts which can sometimes make choosing one no easy feat!

However when it comes time to apply them, limit yourself to pairing two fonts in your design. Better yet, choose a single font family with a large variation in weights and styles so you can be sure that the fonts you pair up will be complementary to one another. For example, the Futura font family not only comes in a range of weights from Light through to Extra Black but also has a variety of styles such as Oblique and Condensed.

4. Make sure color is on point

> *Colour is one of the most impactful elements of design in communicating a certain tone or message.*

Therefore, it's important to think about the psychology of color as well as a color theory when choosing your palette. An easy starting place is beginning with a color palette of 1-3 main colors that complement one another and then using different tones of the same color for consistency by adjusting the relative brightness or saturation. This is important in achieving enough contrast in your palette. Think of each color as having a 'volume' and adjust your tones so that they are not all shouting (or whispering) at the same volume.

It is also important to play around with the proportions of your color palette and how much of each color is applied to the design. Remember smaller type will need a stronger distinction against a colored background. Here are a few great resources for creating color palettes:

5. Don’t be afraid of white space

Integrating space between the elements of your design is called ‘white’ or ‘negative’ space. White space can aid in achieving a certain look or feel to your design. It can feel clean, minimal, contemporary and even fashion-forward.

If clean and minimal are not necessarily what you’re aiming to communicate, you still shouldn’t discount the impact of creating some space. It can be tempting to fill up any empty spaces in your design, however, space can also be one of your greatest assets when used strategically and can help in creating a focal point.

> *Space in design isn’t simply the absence of content but a design choice in itself and can be used to aid in achieving important design principles such as contrast and hierarchy.*

Try creating space around an element that you want the viewer to focus on. For example, if it’s an important headline, keep it a distance away from the rest of the copy to help your viewer know to read it first.

This packaging design for small-batch coffee roastery Little Wolf uses lots of space to help create a focus on their logo and the colored variant tab creates contrast to the illustration-filled reverse. Speaking of…

6. Don’t play it safe

> *Contrast is without a doubt one of the most effective design principles to consider.*

It can be achieved through the use of size and scale, relative lightness or darkness, color and the use of space. Ensure you have contrast in the size of elements on the page and make

sure your colors are contrasting tones or shades. You can play with the size of type on the page and it can also be a useful rule of thumb to consider the contrast in pairing the typefaces you choose. Some designers adopt a ‘go big or go home’ mentality in this area and choose fonts to pair that are very different from one another.

7. Pay attention to the hierarchy

When sitting down to design something, ask yourself ‘what’s the most important element of my design?’ More simply stated, what is someone supposed to look at first?

Hierarchy is an extremely important aspect of graphic design. As a designer, it is your job to guide a viewer through the design, therefore, you need to prioritize elements according to their importance.

Luckily hierarchy goes hand in hand with contrast and you can achieve that priority easily through scale, the application of color, the size of type and your font choices as well as the use of space.

> *The most important message of the design should remain dominant no matter the style of the design or how many other elements you use.*

These posters for an annual organic wine festival in three cities is a great example of a strong hierarchy. In each poster, the city *within* the headline text is clearly the most important information, followed by the festival name and logo.

8. Align align align

> *Alignment helps give structure and order to design. Without it, your design is at risk of looking like a bad game of*

> *Tetris.*

Keeping your elements like type, images and illustrations aligned to one another will ensure a presentable design. Bonus—there are alignment options and guides right in your Adobe software you can use to help out. Always make sure you have margins around your page and use them to line up your elements.

9. Icons go a long way

Symbolism isn't a new concept. Humans have been living with symbols for thousands of years from early markings on cave walls through to today's ability to have an entire conversation through emojis.

> *An icon is a small graphic representation of something and can be used to represent things, places, people, emotions and actions.*

Icons can convey meaning often more quickly and in less time than actual words. They can surpass language barriers, can help draw attention to a particular part of a design and can take up much less space whilst providing the same meaning as written instruction.

For example, if you're trying to get people to follow a social media account, add the instantly recognizable icons for each platform so that the viewer can immediately identify your desired action.

Icons can be a great element to spice things up without adding too much if your design is on the simpler side. When using icons, ensure they work as a set and feel consistent in style. Check out The Noun Project for a large library of free icons sets to use.

10. Get in line

> *Simple lines are an effective way to help anchor items in a design and create the sense that there is an overall order and structure.*

You can use a line to separate a piece of content from the rest of the design and also to call attention to it. For example, you can use a thin line above, or a box around, your ‘call-to-action’ information such as a logo and a URL to visit. Check out this example of a poster design to see how the footer information was used with a line to help visually distinguish it from the rest of the page.

You can also use vertical and horizontal lines as “separators” between various elements in the image. In this case, the sense of elements being separated furthers the feeling of planning and coordination in the design and helps the design to feel more structured. See how the designer for All Call Travel used lines to help structure the content on their website.

11. Consistency is king

Now that you’ve done all this work and considered all these important principles in design, make sure you follow the rules you set for yourself and be consistent in your design.

Set rules for the sizing and spacing of type elements such as headings, subtitles and body copy and make use of the paragraph and character stylings in Adobe to easily apply these rules wherever those text elements appear.

Ensure your imagery has the same look and feel. Search for images that have the same tones of color or levels of saturation, as well as similarities in how detailed/busy or abstracted/simple they are.

Be consistent with your color palettes and application and repeat elements where you can.

Consistency is particularly important in multi-page designs or in the case of branding where a business will have more than one touch-point with its audience. The design of the brand should be recognizable anywhere the audience might interact with a business; on their website, their business card, their social media channels and in their physical environments.

Have a peek at this branding done by Shillington graduate Jessica Di Scipio to see how she brilliantly used her typography rules, color application and image treatment all consistently across various pieces of collateral for a museum.

So as you can see, while we can uphold our respect for the industry giants, we can also achieve successful designs of our own by following straightforward principles of graphic design.

Like anything else, skills take time to hone and sharpen. However, by practicing these 11 graphic design tips, even the most novice of designers can grow, develop and maybe one day give Paula Scher a run for her money.

For more creative resources, guest author Mark Ellis, Creative Director and branding expert talks about what you need in your creative toolkit to succeed as a designer.

https://www.shillingtoneducation.com/blog/graphic-design-tips/