

# Visual Design Strategies for Writers

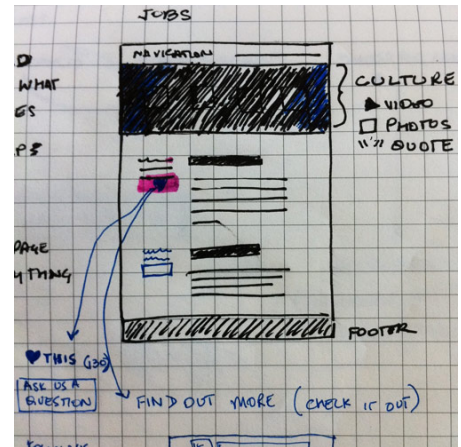
The blank page can feel like it is staring back at you. If you have completed your research, have the tools, and understand your audience, why is it sometimes so difficult to start writing?

You may be thinking too much about the words. Technical writers obsess over grammar and micro-editing. Get out of your word-centric rut and experiment with a new aesthetic. Your audience will see the page first, before they read anything. Put down the style manual and try crafting your written message with a visual strategy.

## Envision the Final Product by Wireframing

Sketch before you write. Wireframing means drawing a layout with spaces for the content and structure of your project. Ask yourself, "What will my audience see when they look at the page? What will keep their attention and communicate the message?"

Get a blank piece of paper and design your information layout: draw spaces for headlines, images, subheadings, charts or bullet points. Wireframing will help you define the hierarchy of information. Clear headlines and placement of graphics will drive your message. Block the largest area for the most important content. This process will help you structure an internal logic and focus.



Sketching your layout will save you time. Have you ever had to slash and burn content or dramatically rewrite to fit the final document? Save time: design first and write second, then you know your content will fit.

## Focus on the Action by Storyboarding



It's easy for writers to over-explain. Task-oriented writing focuses on what the audience needs to get the job done. Keep your project brief, relevant, and action-packed by storyboarding.

Imagine your project topic is a comic strip or graphic novel. Try designing your message as a frame-by-frame storyboard. Make your audience

the hero of the story. Sketch each task in one frame. This strategy will help you establish chronology of information and keep your writing task-oriented.

Beware of too much narration. Do as graphic novelists do and include background information only at the beginning or end of a chapter.

### **Create a theme with *Mise en scène***

Movie and theater directors carefully frame the message of their projects using visual elements. *Mise en scene* is a French term for “placing on the stage.” It is the combination of visual elements and metaphors that create the message. Set the scene for your project by considering the symbols or imagery that might leave a lasting impression on your audience.

You can use *mise en scene* by establishing symbolism in your information design. Use icons to indicate reoccurring tasks. Use graphics with similar themes to send a consistent message. A general overall metaphor will tie your content together, make it memorable, and easier for your audience to understand. Even readers intimidated by science jargon, might read an article that said, “*Replicating DNA is like making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich...*” PB&J is a *mise en scene*.

Use all of the tools at your disposal. Colors create a mood. Varying the white space in a document changes the pace. Even the typeface style you chose has a tone. Let’s say I am writing a blog post and want to set the scene with typeface.

#### **Gadget Envy and the New iPhone**

*I advise against using an iPhone while walking like an Egyptian.  
Papyrus typeface is incongruous with the subject matter.*

#### **Gadget Envy and the New iPhone**

*Close, but no cigar. Times typeface is used for newspapers and serious print media.  
This doesn’t fit the online casual medium of a blog post.*

#### **Gadget Envy and the New iPhone**

*Jackpot. Myriad is a sans-serif font used in Apple’s advertisements.  
Now my visual elements set the scene for my content.*

