

by Jacqui Howard Bear

A rule of thumb is an easy-to-remember guideline that isn't necessarily a hard-and-fast rule or scientific formula but it's more than just a dumb guess. While these rules won't always work for you, nine times out of ten (another rule of thumb) they'll give you the results you want with the least amount of trial and error.

When you read each one you can mentally insert the phrase "In general" before each rule. In general, these are the guidelines to follow. But as you've no doubt heard before, "rules are made to be broken" and sometimes you will need to do just that. But for new designers, or when you just need to "get it done" these rules of thumb can help you quickly put together an attractive document.

Part 1: Design and Page Layout

Design

If a document is well-designed, it will look just as good upside down.

Alignment

Everything on the page should align with something else. A grid is an effective tool in insuring that text and images align. Break alignment only for emphasis and sparingly within a piece.

Margins

Avoid using the same margins on all sides of a publication.

Rule of Thirds

Visually divide your page into thirds. Place elements on the page within these thirds for a more interesting and visually appealing layout.

Size

One measure of importance is size. Use larger graphics to communicate the most important goals of the piece. Smaller graphics are of lesser importance. When space is at a premium, drop the smaller elements first — they are less important.

Z Layout

Mentally impose the letter Z or a backwards S on the page. Place important items or those you want the reader to see first along the top of the Z. The eye normally follows the path of the Z, so place your "call to action" at the end of the Z.

Part 2: Typography

Choosing Fonts

- When in doubt, pair a serif font for body text and a sans serif font for headlines.
- Avoid mixing two very similar typefaces, such as two scripts or two sans serifs. There is not enough contrast and the small differences will cause a visual clash.
- Limit the number of different typefaces used in a single document to no more than three or four.
- Avoid monospaced typefaces for body copy. They draw too much attention to the individual letters distracting the reader from the message.

Setting Type

- Avoid setting type in lines of more than sixty-five characters. Longer lines cause the reader to "double," or read the same line twice.
- Avoid setting type in lines of less than thirty-five characters. Shorter lines cause sentences to be broken and hard to understand.
- Apply the alphabet-and-a-half rule to your text. This would place ideal line length at 39 characters regardless of type size.
- Apply the points-times-two rule to your text. Take the type size and multiply it by two. The result is your ideal line length in picas. That is, 12 point type would have an ideal line length of 12x2 or 24 picas (approx. 4 inches).
- Avoid setting type in all capital letters. Capital letters slow reading speed and take 30 percent more space than lowercase letters.

Type Size

- For a predominantly older readership of 65 and over or for audiences with known visual handicaps, set body text in sizes from 14 to 18 points.
- Use 11 to 12 point type for readers in the 40-65 age range.
- For most general audiences, body copy set at 10 or 11 points is good.
- For beginning readers of any age, a larger type size around 14 points is good.
- Keep headlines between 14 and 30 points in most cases, keeping in mind that the closer in size to the body text, the harder it is to distinguish headlines from other text.

Part 3: Printing & Production

Proofreading

Two rounds of proofreading catch 98 percent of the errors in a publication.

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When in doubt, don't use it.