

# Ten Tips for Visual Thinking for Writers and Editors

HOW TO MAKE YOUR NEWSPAPER MORE VISUALLY INVITING -  
AND MORE COMPREHENSIVE FOR THE READER

By Ron Reason

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## 1. Put yourself in the place of the reader.

Step away from your reporting and research, before you undertake the writing or editing (this is important), and ask: "If I were a reader, what about this story would I like to be shown, rather than told in text?" Sometimes it will be a photo or illustration, but often it will be a more simple, text-only pullout, with at-a-glance information that may draw the reader into your subject the way the inverted pyramid might not.

## 2. Plan early, plan often.

Almost every story has some kind of graphic potential. But many stories defy visual presentation on deadline: Either a photo needs to be taken early in the process, a graphic needs to be researched and rendered (drawn), or an illustration needs to be requested, conceptualized and executed. The key is bringing your colleagues who perform all three of those functions into the process as early as you can. Ask for their ideas, even if your story isn't fully baked. They might want to hold off on executing the visual until you give them an official green light, but at least they can start thinking about it.

## 3. Create a team.

If your story is important enough, consider inviting a photographer or graphic artist on board, early on, of course. The idea is not to send them out to visually record the things you have already written about, which have already happened. No. The goal in many instances will be to allow them to do their own visual reporting and research, in a way that complements and strengthens, but doesn't necessarily repeat, the information you have gathered for the text.

## 4. Think graphics.

Where did the news happen? What was the process? What is the timeline of events leading up to the news you are covering? Who are the key players? For every story you write and edit, consider whether a bar chart, pie chart, fever line, locator map, or other explanatory graphic would be helpful. And set your request in motion as early as possible. (At the same time, be realistic of the limitations of your staff. Not every story will be able to carry a graphic, or photo, even if it deserves one. Make friends with your art editor, negotiate in a civil manner, and follow some of the next items listed below, and you'll increase your chances of getting a great graphic to run with your text.)

## 5. Bring back lots of STUFF to your artists and designers.

You can't give them too much raw material to work with. They don't have to use it all, but they'll appreciate you greatly. Names and phone numbers of sources. A sketch (by yourself or by a source) showing where or how something happened. Resource photos (either loaned or permanently given) from sources that might be used in the design, in a graphic, as a resource for a drawing, or simply as a reference you may use later to add color to your writing. Even things like annual reports and operations manuals will be of interest to your art and design staff.

## 6. Learn how others have covered the story visually.

As you are doing your research, take note if you see that another newspaper or wire service has covered the story, and if they mention whether any visuals are available. Share this information with your art editor or picture desk; suggest that they call the news organization for a copy of the visual. (The best newsrooms will have many friends around the country who will swap visuals in exchange for good will at a later time.)

## 7. Don't waste the photographers' or artists' time.

If all your story needs is a head shot of an aspiring politician, please ask his press agent for a handout photo of the guy. You might buy back an hour for your staff photographer, which will be better used to cover breaking news that has a truly interesting visual angle to it. Similarly, if you are writing a story about a local artist who does sketches or watercolors, ask if you can borrow her art work, or if she can drop by the newsroom with some of the art. It can be scanned and digitized quickly and she can be on her way in no time. You'll save lots of time, film, and the logistical hassles of sending a photographer out for another "copy job" (which, along with mug shots, is not considered professionally rewarding at all).

## 8. Take an interest in "your" photographer or artist's work ...

It's important that you know early on whether the visuals and words are going to match up. This is not a deadline surprise you want to inflict on the copy desk. Check in and see how things are going as the visual story is coming together; support them if things are moving in the right direction, and if not, point out where you think revisions should occur.

## 9. ... but don't meddle too much.

It's one thing to ask, "can I look over the proof sheets for our big week-end profile of the mayor?" and quite another to ask "please take a photo of the mayor on the northwest corner of the roof of his office building with his hair blowing in the breeze, and riding a unicycle, to show that he's a carefree guy." A good photographer is a visual journalist who should be given sufficient time to interpret the story visually. Don't treat her like a production slave.

## 10. Last, but not least, don't forget to clue in the designer or copy editor.

It's one thing to develop good relations with the photo and art staffs. But all the great planning and collaborating in the world won't amount to beans if you don't raise a flag for the people who lay out the paper about what's coming down the pike. The earlier they can be brought in to the process, the better.

Take this tip from someone who designed pages, requested photos and helped edit graphics for 10 years at the St. Petersburg Times: The star reporters were almost always those who respected their visual colleagues. And those who invited the graphics, photo and design staffs in to the process early on almost always got the best display for their pages. A happy copy editor will do his or her best to showcase your writing; a cranky designer probably won't give a hoot (and the presentation of your story will show it).

# Design Fundamentals

By Stan Ketterer

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**To design sound pages, you must follow some basic principles. You must apply these principles every time you design a page. If you follow them, your pages will have consistently sound designs. Violate them frequently, and you will be looking for another line of work. Follow these principles:**

1. Before you touch pencil to paper or hand to mouse, rank your stories. You must know what the stories are about and evaluate their news value. Don't be lazy; read them. Once you have ranked them, generally place them in descending order on the page according to their importance. Story placement is a nonverbal cue that indicates their importance to readers.
2. When you design, start with the art and build your page around it. Pages are built around photographs and graphics. Your design options often will become clear once you place photographs and graphics, especially if they go with stories.
3. Have one dominant element, usually a photo with a story. You must give the reader a reason to stop and look at the page. Often the dominant element is a story with a photo, but it can have more photos, quotes and graphics to provide the reader with more points of entry onto the page. Your central package must dominate the page so that the reader's eye is drawn to it.
4. If you only have one photo, play it BIG. Eye-Trac research shows most readers enter a page by looking at photos. If you have only one photo, make it big enough to catch the reader's attention. Photos can be smaller if you have more of them.

If you have an open page, the dominant photo generally should be:

- At least 3 columns if it is vertical.
  - At least 4 columns if it is horizontal.
5. Vary the sizes and shapes of the photos and graphics to add variety and visual appeal to the page. Photos that have similar shapes and sizes are dull, giving the reader little reason to sample them. If they are nearly the same, none stands out. Avoid square photographs.
  6. Use a mixture of vertical and horizontal elements to add variety to the page and to move the reader's eyes around it. Cross the page at least once with type. Don't leave vertical gutters that run all the way down the page and divide it visually. Avoid stacking, or pancaking, stories on top of one other. None of them will stand out.

7. Use photos and other graphic elements to break up the gray and to avoid tombstoning headlines. Secondary photos and graphics are wonderful ways to break up headlines and to add life to the bottom of your pages. This is especially true with jumps. Make your art work for you.
8. Honor the hierarchy of type. Generally, headlines should decrease in size as you go down the page because the stories are less important. Use three-line headlines above two-line headlines. The main exception to type hierarchy is the headline at the bottom of an open page on an anchor story, which gives the reader a reason to look at the story. You need a bigger headline to attract a reader to the bottom of the page. In most cases, use a 48-point headline for an anchor.

On the front page, use the following main headlines:

- A one line, 60-point headline for banners. Use a one line, 72-point headline for more important stories and big packages.
- A three line, 54-point headline for 2-column main headlines with a six-column grid. With a 5-column grid, you can use 60-point or 54-point for a 2-column headline.
- Three-column main heads are normally 60 or 54 points.
- On open pages, normally use the following headlines:
  - A one-line, 60- or 54-point headline for banners.
  - Use the same as the front for main 2-column or 3-column headlines.
- On most inside pages, normally use the following main headlines:
  - A one-line, 48-point or 54-point banner, depending on the story. If the page is nearly open, you can use a 60-point banner.
  - A two-line 48- or 54-point headline for 2 columns; a two-line 48-point headline for 3 columns.
  - In all types of pages, most 1-column headlines should be three lines. Some publications allow 4-line, 1-column headlines on long stories. In all cases, the second largest headline should be two types sizes smaller than the main headline. This sizing will allow the main headline to stand out.
- 9. Use screens and color to add variety to your pages. Use screens more when you have only one piece of art, especially on the bottom part of the back page. Keep screens small to increase their legibility. Color is more effective when used sparingly.

# How to Create and Apply Quark Style Sheets

## Using Quark Style Sheets

If you've ever had to format large amounts of text in Quark XPress and then had to change the font, color, character size or leading of all of the headings or body text, you'll know how time consuming it can be. It takes ages to trawl through large documents changing the attributes for each bit of text. And it's also an unreliable way to work - things can be easily missed or overlooked.

It would be much better to be able change all instances of a heading, caption or other text style, all at the single click of a mouse. This is where Quark style sheets come in handy.

## So how do you set up Quark Style Sheets? First, format some text.

It's very simple to set up text styles in Quark XPress. So, beginning with Quark style sheets, create a new document and flow some text into it.

Create a couple of paragraphs and a heading or two and flow it into a Quark text box. Then format the text in any way you like. Don't worry about how good or bad it looks for now - just create two or three distinctly different text styles. You should be able to apply most attributes using the Measurements Palette, the Formats dialogue box (Style/Formats...) and the Color Palette.

## For example, create a heading (an A-Heading) with the following attributes:

Font: Arial Black  
Size: 24pt  
Leading: 32pt  
Horizontal: 90%  
Space After: p8 (find this in Formats - Style/Formats...)  
Color: Black

## Next, format a block of text beneath it (this will be 'body copy') with the following attributes:

Font: Times New Roman  
Size: 10pt  
Leading: 12pt  
Horizontal: 90%  
Indent: First line p8 (find this in Formats - Style/Formats...)  
Color: Black

## Now format a second heading - a 'Summary Heading':

Font: Times New Roman Italic (don't use 'faux' bold)  
Size: 18pt  
Leading: 32pt  
Space Before: 1p

Space After: 1p  
Color: Black

## Finally, create a byline, title and photo caption style sheet.

*Quick tip - never use the 'faux' bold or italic options in the Measurements Palette. Always use the font's own built-in style. If it doesn't have the one you want you may be forced to fake it with Quark's native styles, but if you do, check and double check that it comes out OK in the press-ready document and printed proofs.*

## Now to set up the Paragraph Styles

Click anywhere within the A-Heading. Open the Quark style sheets editing dialogue box by selecting Edit/Style Sheets... You should see two default styles listed: Normal (paragraph style) and Normal (character style). The first has a little 'paragraph break' symbol on its left. The second has a 'character' symbol next to it that's an underlined upper case 'A'.

Paragraph styles affect entire paragraphs of text, while character styles affect individual characters or selected areas of text. For example, you may want to apply a paragraph style to a block of text and make it Times New Roman, but within it there needs to be a couple of bold words. These would have a 'bold' character style applied to them. We'll look at character styles in more detail in a moment. Just make sure you always set up the paragraph styles before the character styles.

Now click the New button at the bottom of the dialogue box window. It will expand to reveal 'Paragraph...' and 'Character...'.

Select 'Paragraph...' and give it the name 'A-Head' or similar. You need to give it a name that will make sense to you, so that once the style sheets palette is bursting at the seams with styles you can easily find the one you want.

In the Quark style sheets palette, if you click the General, Formats, Tabs, Rules buttons you'll see that the style has automatically inherited the attributes of the text where you placed the cursor. You don't need to make any other changes. To double check that the attributes are correct, look at the Description under the General tab - this details all the attributes.

Happy? Click OK and you've just made your first style. Now repeat the process with the other five styles.

## How to apply the Paragraph Styles to the text

Open the Style Sheets Palette (Window/Show Style Sheets). You'll see the paragraph styles appear at the top of the window. The character styles appear at the bottom (we haven't created any of those yet). If you click the cursor anywhere within the first block of body text you'll see the paragraph style 'Normal' selected, with a little '+' next to it. This means that the text has attributes other than those of the style applied to it.

As a test, click on the 'A-Head' style - and you'll see that some of the new attributes are applied to the text, but not all.

### Applying a clean paragraph style: method 1

In order to apply a completely clean paragraph style to a block of text, there are two methods. The first is to press the ALT key and click on a style of your choice. This will clear the entire paragraph of all other styles (including character styles) and apply the style you click on. For example, select the first block of body text and apply the A-Head style to it while pressing the ALT key:

Now the whole paragraph changes to the A-Head style and the '+' disappears from the style sheet palette. This works fine, but you'll have to do the same thing to every other block of text, unless you select all copy and then ALT/Click a style.

### Applying a clean paragraph style: method 2a

When I'm applying paragraph styles to text for the first time, select all text and then apply the "No Style" option to everything (this is found at the top of the style sheet palette window). This clears all Normal and other paragraph styles.

If it was 12 point before, it will remain 12 point. It just becomes more receptive to any new styles that you want to apply. If you want to clear all character styles as well, click the No Style option at the top of the character styles pane, so that when all text has been selected, both the paragraph style pane and the bottom character style pane show No Style.

For example, select all the text and select the top (paragraph) No Style. Also click the lower (character) No Style. Now click the cursor in each block of text as I work down the document and then click on the paragraph style of my choice from the style sheets palette. No '+' symbol will appear next to any style names as you go.

### Applying a clean paragraph style: method 2b

Take this a step further by asking: "What's the most commonly recurring text style in this document?". It's almost always the Body Text style. So why not save yourself a pile of work by applying the Body Text style to the entire text? Once all text has the Body Text paragraph style applied to it, you can skip those blocks of text as you go through the copy applying the other paragraph styles. This means you'll be confident in the consistency of the text styles.

## Now to set up the Character Styles

So you've now gone through your entire document and applied your paragraph styles. Now you need to apply your character styles. This means you'll make individual words and phrases bold, italic, underlined, or whatever they need to be. Remember, character styles only affect the text you have actually selected. Paragraph styles affect entire blocks of text.

To create your character styles, select a word from the first block of Body Text. Change its font to Times New Roman Bold. You'll immediately notice that a '+' has appeared next to the Body Text style in the style sheets palette, meaning that the text now has other attributes other than the applied paragraph style.

With the word still selected, select Edit/Style Sheets... to open the style sheets dialogue box. Select New/Character... This will open the character style sheet attributes window. It inherits the attributes from the selected text, so you just need to give it a name. Let's call it Body Text Bold.

Click OK and then select Save. A new character style will appear in the lower pane of the style sheets palette called Body Text Bold. You'll still need to apply this character style to the selected text - so click on the style, and that's that! You now have a Body Text style applied to the paragraph, and a Body Text Bold character style applied to a word within the same paragraph.

### What's the point of setting up style sheets?

There are lots of great reasons for using Quark style sheets - the two most compelling reasons are:

- So that you can be confident there's consistency of font, text size, leading etc across an entire document.
- Secondly, if a heading font, size or other attribute needs to be changed after a document has been set up, (for example the A-Head we just created), instead of changing every single instance of it throughout the text, you just change the attributes of the style which is applied to it.
  - Just select Edit/Style Sheets... then select the A-Head style.
  - Click Edit, and alter the style in any way you want by clicking through the General, Formats, Tabs & Rules tabs in Edit Paragraph Style Sheet dialogue box.
  - Once you'll made you changes, click OK, then Save. Every instance of the A-Head will change simultaneously.

Editor/Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Designer/Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Copy Ed/Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Section: \_\_\_\_\_

Run Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Page Number: \_\_\_\_\_

# Package Planner Form

FOR USE IN PLANNING CENTERPIECE PACKAGES, FEATURES, SERIES OR PROJECTS. Version 02.04.04, by Ron Reason. For more info on how to adapt or use this form, or for design and editing tips, advice and commentary, visit [www.ronreason.com](http://www.ronreason.com) or [www.garcia-media.com](http://www.garcia-media.com)

## PACKAGING OPTIONS:

(Select all that apply)

### VISUAL ELEMENTS:

- PHOTOS/live
- PHOTOS/archival
- ILLUSTRATION
- INFOGRAPHIC
  - MAP
  - CHART
  - DIAGRAM
  - TABLE
- OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

### STANDING FURNITURE:

- COLUMN LOGO
- SERIES LOGO
- TAGLINE AT END
- PAGE TOPPER
- OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

### TEXT PULLOUTS:

- WHO WINS? WHO LOSES?
- WHAT'S AT STAKE?
- WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?
- KEY PLAYERS
- KEY ISSUES
- FOR MORE INFO
- TIMELINE
- BIO BOX
- EXCERPT
- GLOSSARY
- Q&A
- READER QUIZ
- QUOTE-O-RAMA
- WHERE TO GO
- OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

### PROMO ELEMENTS:

- STORY REFER
- COMING UP
- ON THE WEB
- OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

**MAIN STORY: Slug (story name)** \_\_\_\_\_

**Writer/phone:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Photographer/phone:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Artist/phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**What's new or relevant about this story** (*ask: why should the reader care?*):

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**Headline/deck (subhead) options** (*ask: does the head or deck complement the visuals?*):

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**Visual options - photos, graphics, pullouts** (*refer to the list at left*):

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### SECONDARY STORY OR SIDEBARS:

**Slug (story name)** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Headlines:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Visuals:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Anything else to know about this package?**  
**(Special deadlines or other instructions):**

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### SKETCH LAYOUT IDEAS IN TEMPLATE BELOW:

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# 10 Design Mistakes to Avoid

## 1. Don't use all your fonts in one document.

While it's tempting to use all those pretty fonts, it can be distracting to the reader and you probably won't get your message across. Try sticking to different fonts within one typeface, or one font for text and one for headings.

## 2. Don't put in paragraph space by pressing enter twice.

Almost all word processing programs ? and definitely all page layout programs ? allow you to choose how much space you want after a paragraph. Use this instead. You're more likely to get a consistent look (not to mention even paragraph spacing) using this method.

## 3. Don't use two spaces after a period.

Two spaces after a period is a holdover from the days of monospaced fonts, like Courier ? and typewriters. They helped signal a pause. With proportional fonts, it's unnecessary and can make text downright hard to read.

## 4. Don't use straight quote marks.

Page layout programs, and most word processing programs, give you the option to use "curly" quotes. These may also be called smart quotes or typographer's quotes.

## 5. Don't leave large text unkered.

Page layout programs allow you to manually kern you text (increase or decrease space between specific characters). This is a good idea, especially as you use larger fonts (around 24 points and above), since the spaces between characters tend to be more pronounced the larger the font size. In word processing software, you normally can't manually kern text, but you can turn kerning on over a certain point size. Kerning in word processing programs isn't normally on by default; I suggest you find out how to turn and on ? there's no reason not to let the software kern what it can.

## 6. Don't center large amounts of text.

Centering is fine for a few words or a headline. But it makes paragraph after paragraph of text very difficult to read ? it's hard for your eye to find where the next line begins.

## 7. Don't use all capitals ? especially if you're using a calligraphic font.

Nothing screams amateur like a headline set in all caps in a calligraphic font. Upper and lowercase letters help people read faster. All capital letters should be used sparingly.

## 8. Don't leave widows and orphans.

A widow is a paragraph whose last line is at the beginning of a column of text. An orphan is a paragraph whose first line starts at the bottom of a column of text. You can usually set how many lines must be in the beginning of a paragraph of text, or how many lines must be at the top of a column of text.

## 9. Don't use every box and line available in your software.

You look at your document. Looks a little boring. A light bulb goes off! "I'll just throw in some rules and boxes; that'll liven things up". Overuse of rules and boxes only confuse the reader; they don't know which information is the most important, and it makes it hard for readers to skim for the information they're interested in. Use boxes and rules sparingly.

## 10. Don't rely on your software's automatic leading feature.

Leading is the space between lines of text. Many programs default to a straight percentage for leading, often 20 %. So 10 point text would always be set with 12 point leading, 12 point text with 14 point leading, and so on. But all fonts are not created equal: longer lines of text need more leading; sans serif text usually needs more leading; fonts with a large x-height may need more leading; and headlines typically need less.

## Design Tips:

- Keep copy in modular shapes.
- Strive for a Center of Visual Impact on every page.
- Larger headlines and longer stories go at the top of the page with smaller headlines and shorter stories toward the bottom.
- Avoid tombstoned headlines.
- Use different headline formats for variety on the page.
- Use liftout quotes, mug shots, icons or other graphics for visual relief in heavy copy areas.
- Place photos so that the reader knows which story accompanies it. Separate stand-alone photos with a box, overline or other technique.
- Package similar or related stories together. This is especially effective for briefs.
- Vary column widths for variety.
- Coordinate your nameplate and standing heads for unity. Plan your newspaper's image.
- Keep your bylines simple, yet functional.
- Study professional newspapers and magazines for ideas. The design of Sunday papers and Sunday supplements is generally the most creative.

## Sidebar Ideas:

- List
- Map
- Chart
- Diagram
- Timeline/chronology
- Step-by-step guide
- Glossary
- Excerpt
- Quiz
- Checklist
- Fact Box
- Table
- Quote Collection
- Where to go/call/write
- Preview
- Reader Response