

Eye for Design: Achieving Visual Hierarchy: A Step-By-Step Guide

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Visual hierarchy assists in guiding users to information and helping them make sense of text and graphics. Given the massive amounts of information our patrons have to wade through on a daily basis, we're lucky if our handouts and other informational materials receive the most cursory skim, much less survive the bottom of their backpacks. By utilizing visual hierarchy techniques, we enable users to be able to look quickly at a handout and understand the purpose by identifying key topics. There are many design techniques you can utilize when creating materials to effectively convey information. Many design techniques can be used in a variety of ways to improve existing designs. We will concentrate on a few key techniques: chunking, highlighting, alignment and white space. Each technique may seem simple in isolation, but the strength comes when combined with other techniques.

For the purposes of demonstration, we will use a flyer as an example but the principles described here can be applied to any type of informational material (handouts, signs, posters, and even presentations). Here is a typical, average looking flyer created to communicate a variety of resources offered to help patrons with citation management tools:

This sample flyer is well organized and clearly laid out but key pieces of information don't stand out as being more important than anything else. Using four simple principles we can redesign this document.

Principle 1: Chunking/Grouping

One way to make content easier to parse is by grouping like items into chunks. It can be easy to forget how much this helps the brain process and remember the information presented (see Figure 1).

In this case, the content of the flyer is effectively grouped into sections: title, workshops, online tutorials, and contact information. However, the content within the workshop section could also benefit from grouping. If we simply increase the space between the different workshops, the content is immediately more readable. The individual workshops no longer blur into one another visually and are therefore more likely to make a distinct set of impressions.

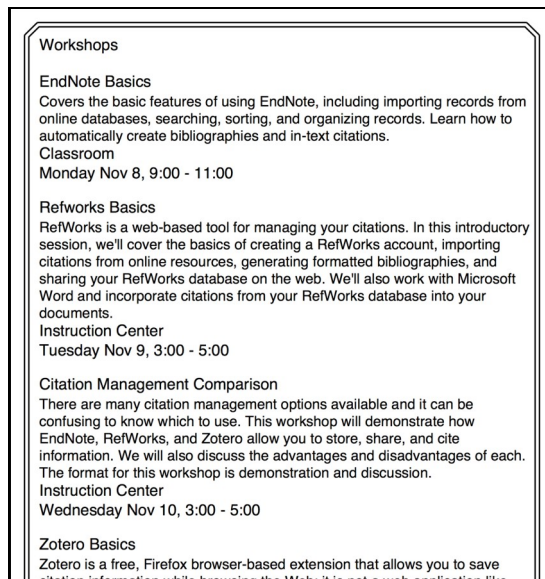
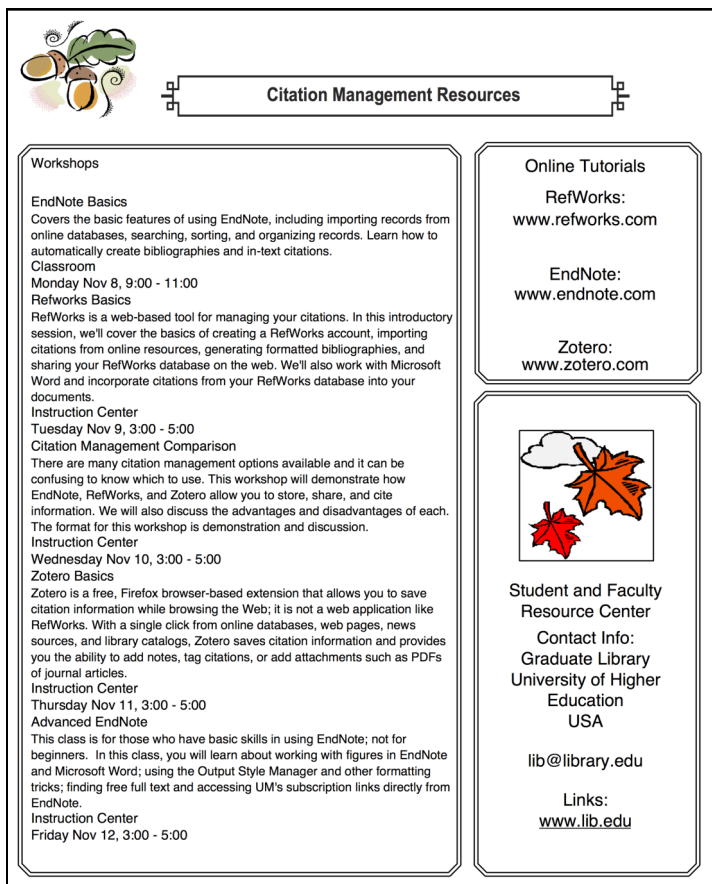


Figure 1: Chunking/Grouping
(only top of figure shown for space reasons)

Principle 2: Highlighting

Another way to give focus to important information (as well as take focus away from less important information) is to change the visual weight of the text. This can be done in a variety of ways:

- color:** some colors carry more weight (red is perceived as having more weight than yellow)
- value:** dark text has more weight than light text
- size:** the larger the type, the more weight it has
- style:** different typefaces or effects on type can alter weight

So, let's apply some of these techniques to the "Workshops" section.

a.) Emphasize important content

This section has five key pieces of information: section header, workshop title, description, location, date and time. The section header and workshop titles are easily the most important pieces so it's important that they really stand out. A common technique is to change the value by just making important text bold (Fig. 2.1). However, the section header, "Workshops," is still getting a little lost. By making the header text all-caps instead of bold (Fig. 2.2), it stands out quite a bit more from the rest of the content. Next, by adding a little color to the workshop titles and making them a little larger, the eye is now really drawn to the workshop titles. (See images online for true demonstration of color).

b.) De-emphasize less important content

Color can also be used to de-emphasize text. For example, the location and time content is only important *after* one has decided on a workshop to attend so it's not content that needs to immediately jump out. As demonstrated in Figure 2.2, the location and date/time have been changed to a medium gray to de-emphasize them in comparison to the other content.

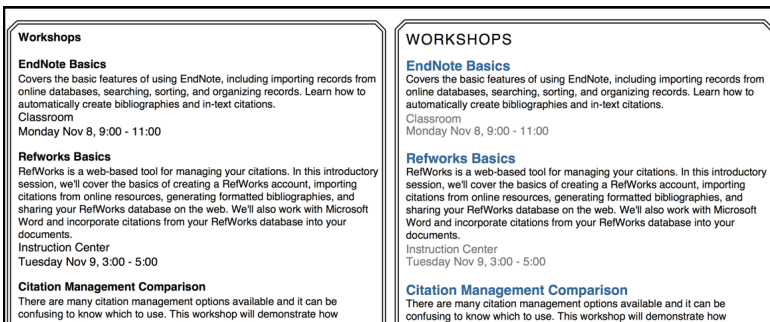


Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2

Principle 3: Alignment/White Space

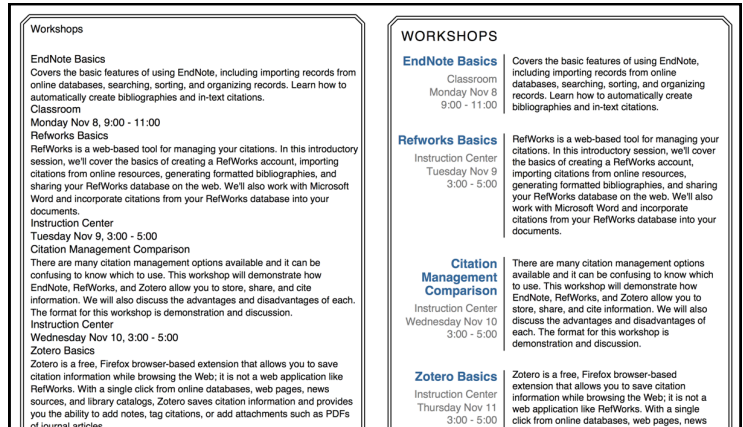
Alignment refers to placing items so that edges line up along common rows or columns. Using alignment effectively can create a cohesive and easily readable design. Alignment can also be used to make important information stand out.

Figure 3 demonstrates one way to align items so the eye can easily jump from one item to another. The information is now in a two column alignment allowing readers to easily scan this flyer for workshop names that sound interesting/applicable and then for dates, times, locations and descriptions. The dense workshop description no longer interferes with skimming the key part of the content like it does in the original version. The flow of information is left to right, making it easy for people to find the information they are seeking.

Changing the alignment has also resulted in additional white space. White space is the absence of text or graphics (but is not necessarily white; technically, it is blank space). When used wisely, it can affect the visual hierarchy of a

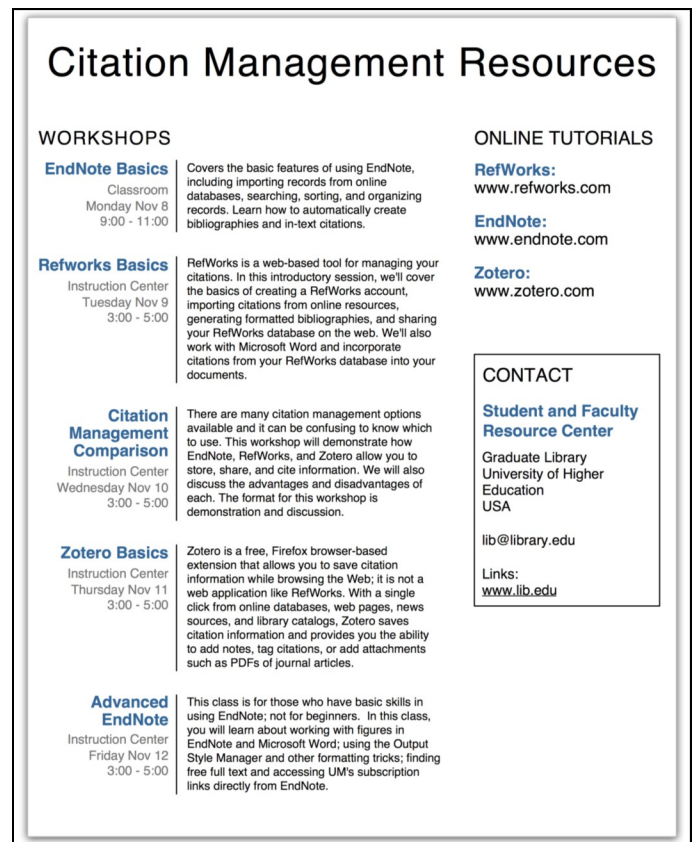
page by making content less cramped or overwhelming. White space is countered by areas of varying density. The example displays the original workshop flyer text next to the revised version. The content remains the same, but feels less overwhelming to the reader because it does not take up the entire space.

Original vs. Figure 3



Conclusion

By applying these techniques to the rest of the flyer, our average flyer is now much easier to read and aesthetically pleasing too. We don't even need all the boxes around the content to separate them and we definitely don't need the clip art cluttering up our nice new design! If you do have an official library symbol or logo that is regularly used and identifiable, there is space for that, but it should be small and not obtrusive.



(Organizing Instruction...Continued from page 9)

velopment. Library staff later visited other departments at CityU to advise on best practices in SharePoint, such as defining clear document hierarchies and naming conventions. At the same time, librarians noticed the trend towards designing instruction materials within Blackboard learning units, which are more widely adopted and used by faculty than previous document-based instruction materials. This give-and-take between the library and both faculty and staff has encouraged the effective use of two widely-used software programs to create customizable and scalable instruction materials within a centralized curriculum.

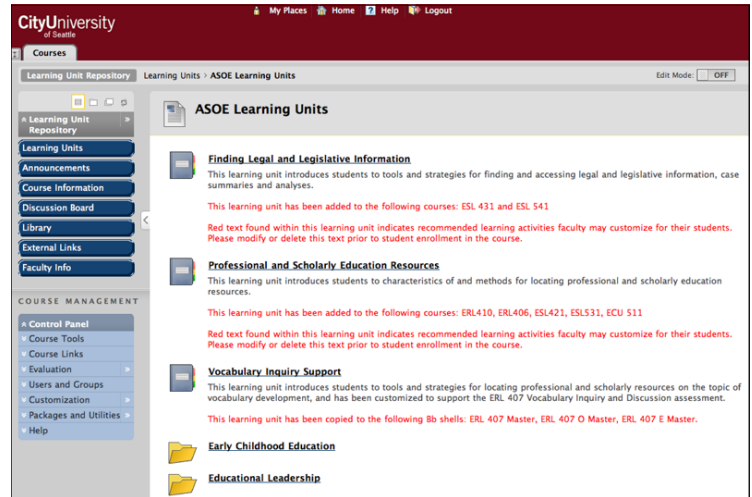


Figure 2: Snapshot of Blackboard Repository

(LOEX 2011...Continued from page 5)

Bordignon and Klages said they choose their topics with their audience in mind, sometimes highlighting new technologies or library resources and services, other times troubleshooting or addressing questions that require more in-depth explanation. They continually assess their “branded-type product” and said SPARK has become popular with faculty because of its accessibility, applicability, as well as their own aggressiveness in promoting the service. While outlining challenges such as maintenance and workload, Bordignon said SPARK was worth the effort because they’ve learned that while serving the faculty, they are ultimately serving the students as well.

Ashlynn Wicke from University of Houston – Clear Lake began her highly valuable interactive session, “Rethinking the Instruction Session Handout,” by noting that handouts can serve many purposes: an outline for instructors, a place for students to take notes, a way to make instruction less passive for students, part of the historical record of a library, and a reference for students after the session. Wicke asked LOEX attendees to discuss what they liked to see on handouts and to critique a “before” and “after” handout from her library. General principles were discussed, such as 1) avoiding a “wall of text”; 2) using headings, bullet points,

and graphics appropriately; 3) making sure the purpose of the handout is readily apparent; 4) leaving room for notes; and 5) always clearly listing learning outcomes and the librarian’s contact information.

Wicke also pointed out a few more useful elements for handouts. One of the best ideas was to replace the boring list of relevant databases with a comparison table that lists databases in the leftmost column and database features as column headers. Cells in the table could be checked off by the librarian when she prepares the handout, or students could figure out which databases have which features as an in-class activity. Handouts could also feature screenshots of database or catalog searches, ice-breaker activities (e.g., library trivia), flow charts, etc. Wicke noted that sometimes librarians try to cram too much onto one handout and suggested that they prioritize by deciding on the top three things they want students to remember and reflecting that in the handout.

For more information about the conference, and the PowerPoints and handouts for many of the sessions, including from all the sessions listed in this article, visit the website at <http://www.loexconference.org/2011/program/sessions.html>

(Eye for Design...Continued from page 3)

One word of warning: everything in moderation! Use these techniques in moderation to avoid watering-down effectiveness. Remember, if you try to make everything stand out, *nothing* will. When in doubt, a quick tip for evaluating

the visual hierarchy of your design is to squint at the design. If you can still make out the important content, you’re on the right track.