

## 5 DESIGN RULES FOR CREATING BEAUTIFUL ONLINE TRAINING COURSES

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## Introduction

In today's business world it's not enough to have information — knowledge is power; what matters most is how many people know that information and what they do with it — sharing is power. Being able to get the right piece of information at the right time to the right people in an organization is the best way for that organization to be more successful: increase revenue and profits, get closer to their mission, and positively impact more people.

If information is what gets an organization from point A (the current situation) to point B (a future improved situation) then getting new knowledge — or learning — is the fuel that makes everything possible. That's why people in L&D departments shouldn't be worried that their jobs could disappear any time soon. On the contrary, they'll have even more work to do.



Creating and delivering great training programs has never been more complex. Face-to-face instructor-led courses, which used to be synonymous with business training, are now just a small part of what training has become. The online learning environment took over and when it's not the only medium for sharing and getting new knowledge, it greatly supports face-to-face courses.

With such a great demand for online training materials, it's easy to think L&D professionals should just make sure, while creating these materials, that each of them helps people learn the right piece of information at the right time and call it a day. This is indeed the core part of any training program.

But there's one aspect of training courses — online or otherwise — that can deeply affect how people receive them and learn from them: the visual aspect.

Today's learner is a busy adult who has to navigate through many challenges in a working day. No matter the industry they work in, the only constant is change. And no matter their work setting (an office, a shared place, the field) they won't escape interruptions — in their work and in their learning as well.

When these people are bombarded with deadlines to meet, tasks to complete, other people to communicate to and thoughts of other personal issues, the last thing they need from a training material is for it to be cluttered, unorganized or lacking any visual cues on what's the most important thing to learn on a page.

**We people are visual creatures. We pay more attention to beautiful things. We can't help it, that's how we're wired.**

So it's not enough to build the most valuable online training courses. Anyone involved in creating any type of online learning material should aim for making it beautiful as well. Because no matter how valuable the course content is, it will be more successful — learners will show higher engagement rates, higher retention rates and they'll be able to better apply what they learn from it — if it's wrapped in a visually appealing form.

The online environment is fundamentally visual, built on images, videos, interaction, exploration, and so on. When an online course designer wants to communicate effectively with the course learners, they need to understand the rules of that environment. Online is different to face-to-face. All online courses should therefore be designed for the web.

There are many aspects to great visual online design, and like with many other things, there are many ways to achieve it. The good news is, it can be enough to master just the basics. Here are a few aspects of online design which — when used right — will support the transfer of knowledge from a training course:

Fonts

Colors

Layout

Contrast

Whitespace



By harnessing the power of each of these aspects, instructional designers could double the value of online training course content.

## On the font front

The online environment may be ruled by visual elements, but there's one part of creating training courses that will forever be the base of knowledge transfer: the written words. Unless a course is 100% in video format (and even then it would be a good idea to add transcripts to each video) the written words will rule any course.

That's why mastering fonts is the first step in creating visually pleasing online training courses. Here are a few tips on how to use fonts right:

**Sense the mood of the font.** Yes, fonts have moods, just like people do. They can be playful, elegant, serious, modern, vintage, casual, cheerful, eccentric, you name it. Depending on what the training course is about, some of these moods could be better suited than others. For example, it would be better to use a font like Helvetica, which is clean and not distracting at all, in a course about compliance, instead of Comic Sans (the font the Internet loves to hate) which is often associated with kindergarten prints. Whatever fonts you choose, they should be complementary to the learning materials you have to create.



**Use a limited number of fonts throughout the course.** Two or three fonts should be more than enough. When in doubt, go for less. Too many types of fonts can be distracting for the reader and have the potential to prevent a message from getting across. Learners should be able to focus on that message, not stumble upon visual aspects of the text. Any training course should look professional and tidy, but too many fonts can balance the course design on the amateur's side.

**Learn to pair fonts.** In order to master this, one needs to know the basic types of fonts first:



**Serif fonts** — Think about Times New Roman. Serifs are those fine strokes on each letter. These type of fonts are considered to help the eyes move easily on a page full of text and are usually favored for print. With the latest advancements in screen resolution though, these fonts can be used online as well.



**Sans-serif fonts** — Think about Arial or Helvetica. Just as the name implies, these fonts don't have those fine strokes on each letter. They were favored for the online medium and they continue to be favored for official documents of all sorts. For a professional L&D online course, you can't go wrong with a sans-serif font.



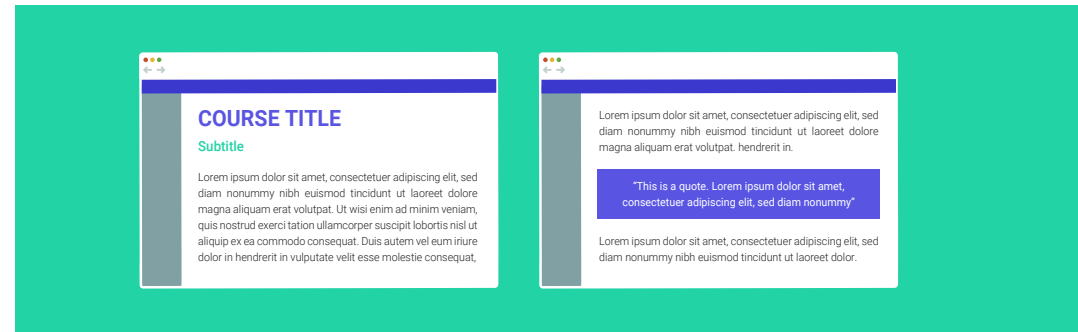
**Display fonts** — Think about Parisienne, or any other Script font. These fonts look like they were written by hand. They can steal the spotlight on an online page, but only when they're used right. There are a very limited number of cases when it's OK to include display fonts in an online training course. Use them sparingly, or if you're not sure about it, don't use them at all.

There are two main rules for pairing fonts to get a nice looking online page:

- 1. Opposites attract.** Pair sans-serif fonts with serif or display fonts. In this case, use the sans-serif for the most text and the other for titles, subtitles, quotes or other emphasis (more on that later). Or, you could pair two fonts from the same category, by one rounder and one taller, or one thinner and the other bolder.
- 2. Look alikes.** You'll notice that some fonts come in families: regular, bold, italics, hairline thin, condensed, and so on. All fonts in a font family are designed to work beautifully together, so no matter which one you choose, you can't really go wrong.

Pairing fonts and getting the perfect combination for each online course is part art, part science, part personal taste, part guessing and a large part of practicing.

thin	<i>italic</i>
regular	regular
bold	bold



**Create a clear hierarchy of the text.** Perhaps modern organizations try to have as few middle managers as possible and shrink the number of steps on a hierarchy ladder continuously, but text in an online course needs its king and all the next in line to the throne.

The **title** of the course — and the titles of each learning module — should obviously be the most eye-catching element on a page. Bigger, bolder, perhaps all caps.

The **subtitles** are next in line, clearly separating main ideas in a module. Still big, still bold, but definitely smaller than the title.

**Quotes** or emphasis paragraphs need to draw attention to themselves as well, but in a different way from titles and subtitles. A different font (maybe a display one), a different font color, a different font size.

**Regular** text should be just that: regular.

**Footnotes** and other resources should be either separated from all other text, or have a smaller font size, or both.

**Stick to one type of alignment.** All text in an online course should be aligned so that it won't distract the eye of the reader:



**Left alignment.** This is your best bet. It's the most familiar type, as it's easy for readers to follow each line of text.

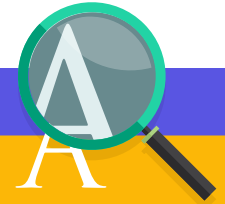
**Right alignment.** Unless the course is in a language that is normally written from right to left (Arabic, Hebrew, Urdu, etc.), use this alignment only for quotes, or don't use it at all.

**Center alignment.** This can also be used for quotes, for poetry and of course, for the title. However, except for the title, no written element should be centered on a page.

**Justified alignment.** This may seem nice at first glance, with both margins neatly aligned, but the problem arises with what's in the middle. Uneven spaces between words do not make the text easier to read; on the contrary. So it's best to avoid justified alignment altogether.

A good rule of thumb regarding text alignment in online courses: when in doubt, stick to the left.

### *BONUS BOX: How to identify fonts*



The best way to master fonts is to practice pairing them. So whenever you find yourself spending more than two minutes on a single web page, make a note of what font the text is that you're reading. If you didn't notice it as tiring, and you like the combination of it with other fonts on the page, then it might deserve a chance to get in your next course.

If you want to get the name of a random font you find online, browser extensions come to your rescue. The first one to try is WhatFont. Just like with any other extension, you add it to your browser and activate it, and then you can hover over any piece of text on your screen and let it do its trick.

The only thing WhatFont can't do though is read text within images. If you really want to do this, you can use WhatTheFont!. You upload an image file, select some characters, and see the result. While this is easy to use, it doesn't offer the best results all the time. In fact, the results depend a lot on your source file; but it's better than nothing!

Once you have the name of the font, you can download it for free (if it's free), add it to your software or company LMS, and use it while creating your next courses.

Considering that the largest amount of information in an online training course comes in the form of text, it's worthwhile for any instructional designer to master the basics of typography. Fonts can steal the show of any course, so it's up to you to make sure they do it for the better.

## Colors of the rainbow

Choosing a great color scheme for an online training course requires some specific knowledge as well. Colors have this power to stimulate emotions in people, and instructional designers need to stimulate interest, anticipation and a desire for more in the mind of their learners.

The first step is to look around for success stories. Brands have learned to harness this power of colors over people:

Excitement   Youthful   Bold			
Friendly   Cheerful   Confidence			
Optimism   Clarity   Warmth			
Trust   Dependable   Strength			
Peaceful   Growth   Health			
Creative   Imaginative   Wise			
Balance   Neutral   Calm			

There are definitely more than seven colors in the rainbow. Starting from the basic three colors — red, yellow and blue — things get more and more complex: there are secondary colors and then tertiary colors, each color has numerous tints (mixed with white) and shades (mixed with black), and these all have their own names!

With so many choices, no wonder many instructional designers have a hard time picking a great color theme for their courses. Here are a few helpful tips:

**Remember that less is more.** Just like in the case of fonts, two or three colors are enough for an online course. The main color is used for text and is usually darker, while the background color should blend in seamlessly and is usually lighter. To shake things up a little, another, maybe brighter, color could be used for emphasis (in subtitles, quotes, links, buttons, etc.).

**Recognize the color relationships.** In order to pair up two or three colors that play nicely with each other, one must comprehend the rules of the color wheel: neighbor colors, inline colors and contrasting colors.



**Neighbor colors** — or *analogous* — are located next to each other on the color wheel, which gives them a seamless, low contrast harmony. These colors share strong undertones, which means they're rich and strong to work with.

**Inline colors** — or *monochromatic* — are located on one line from the center to the margin of the color wheel. Such a color palette includes dark, medium and light versions of the same color.

**Contrasting colors** — or *complementary* — are located on opposite sides of the color wheel, allowing for the most dramatic contrast of all color relationships: red with green, yellow with purple, blue with orange.





**Dive deep into the color wheel.** In other words, don't settle for pure colors. There are so many hues of white and other very light colors that you have to find one perfect for the background. Likewise, there are so many grays on the color wheel that you'll definitely find one that is not pure black for the text. And if you look for a bright color for emphasis, there are many reds, many greens and many blues as well. Pure colors are best to be avoided, as they can cause strain to the eyes when used too much on a page.



**Pick a color theme.** After you have decided on the color relationship you want to have in your course, go ahead and pick a theme. There are two main ways for doing this:

**Use a default one.** Whether you're using PowerPoint, or the company LMS, you certainly have some default choices. The good part of this method is that, no matter what you choose, the colors will go along great with each other. But at the same time, you might come across as uninterested in how your course looks and feels by choosing the most comfortable option.

**Spin a color wheel.** There are plenty of those free tools online. You just have to insert one color code and the wheel will pick the other colors for you. Assign each color to use (main text, background, emphasis) and use them constantly in the design of the course.

### **BONUS BOX: How to get the right color code**

A color code is what HTML needs in order to render any color on screen. The most popular are Hex codes, where black is **#000000**, and RGB codes, where black is **rgb(0, 0, 0)**. Both color codes offer insights on the intensity of red, green, and blue in the color respectively.

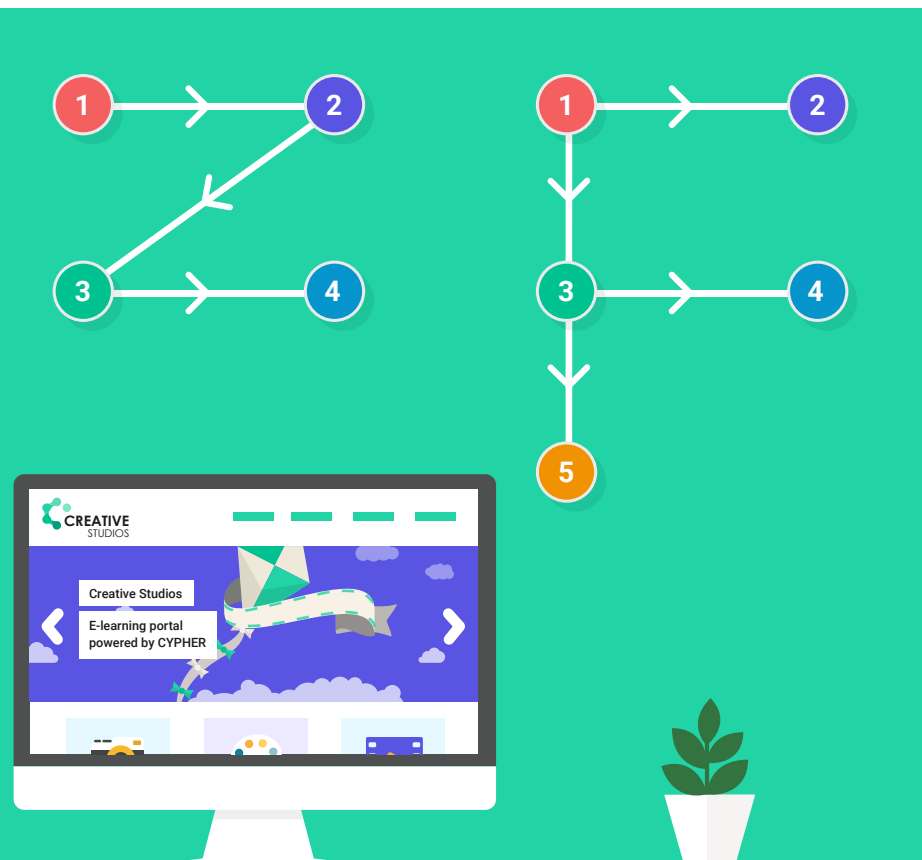
Perhaps it could be a good idea to use the colors of your company logo, for branding purposes. Maybe you have a nice picture you want to use for your course and you'd like to get its exact colors. You could ask someone in charge of creating any marketing materials for your company about the colors in the logo, but this will take some time to find out. And who could you possibly ask about the color codes in any random online picture?

Well, browser extensions come to your rescue once again! One example is **ColorZilla**, but you could pick any, as they all do the same thing: grab the code of any color you find online. Activate it, hover your mouse over anything on your screen, and then copy and paste the color code into your color settings. Your design now has just the right colors in it!

A great color theme must also complement what the course is about. Keep in mind the emotions associated with each rainbow color in order to create not only a visually pleasant online training course, but also make learners eager to go through it all.

## Location, location, location

This phrase rings true in online design like it does in real estate. Each and every element on a webpage needs to have its proper place. The online learner is a sophisticated user, who has the same expectations from an online course as from an entertaining website: a home button and footer accessible from any page, a clear navigation with a main menu on top or on the right hand side, a left sidebar, underlined text that links somewhere, fast loading videos, and so on.



In order to meet these expectations, here are a few guidelines on layout:

**Consider the Z layout.** People usually scan a page starting from the upper left corner, going to the upper right corner, then all the way down diagonally to the lower left corner, and finishing at the lower right corner. For example:

The upper left corner could have the company logo, or the official title of your course. Along the horizontal line to the right corner your learners should find the title of the specific lesson.

The main body, with subtitles, paragraphs, lists, and maybe one or more images should be on the long diagonal line of the Z.

The conclusion subtitle or another relevant image should be approximately placed in the lower right corner.

The last paragraph(s), or a link to more educational resources usually form the lower horizontal line.

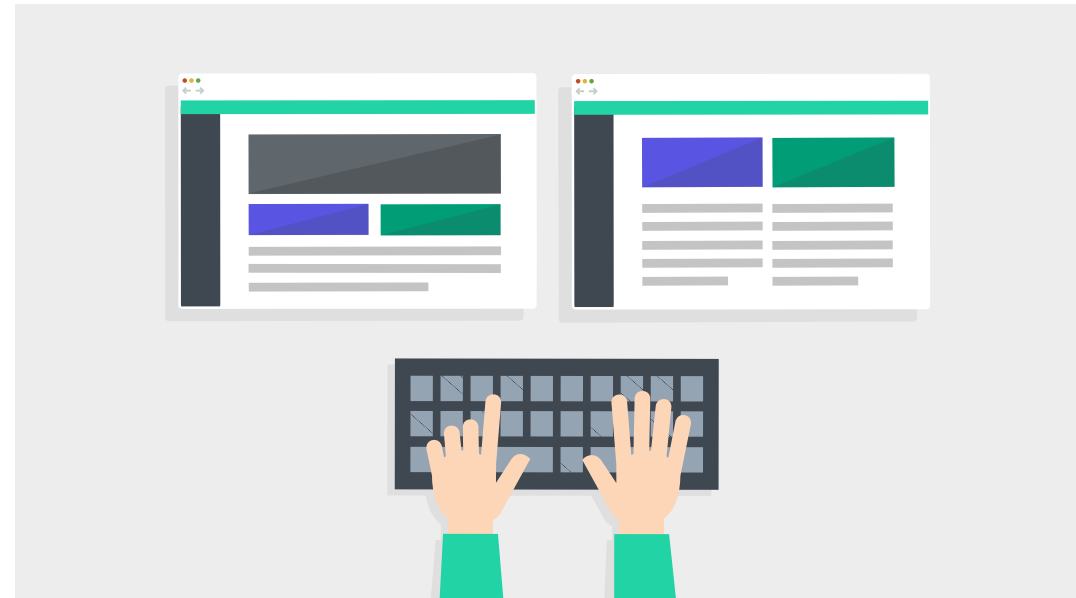
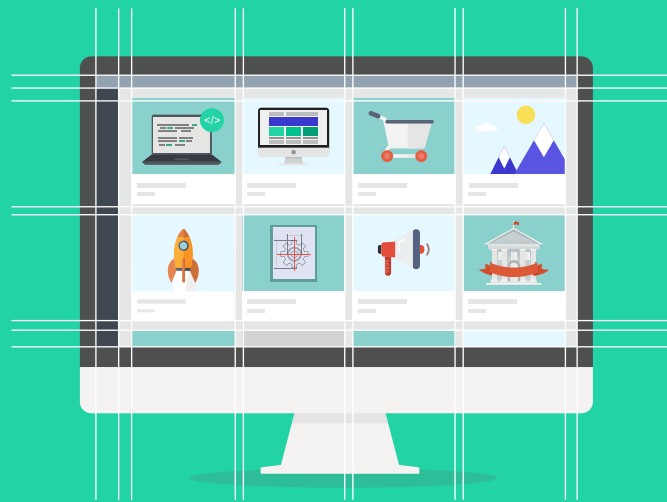
At the end of this line — at the end of the Z — could be a link to an online assessment of the lesson, or a button for the next one.

If all the important information goes along the lines of this Z, learners will focus better in it and will retain it better as well.

**Consider the F layout as well.** This one could be considered a variation of the Z layout but of course, it's not exactly the same. People can also scan a page by reading the first line or few lines in the upper part of a page (that's where the title and the introduction are usually placed), then read a few lines lower on the page but don't go all the way to the end of it (that's why subtitles are eye-catching), then go down until the end of the page or close to it. Just like the F letter.

**Don't forget about always-there information.** Other lesson elements, like a navigation menu for the entire course, along with other easily accessible files, like the personal dashboards of each learner, should remain outside of the educational Z or F. A great place for these would be a vertical bar, on the right or on the left of it.

**Set on or imagine the grids.** This depends on what kind of software you use for designing the online course. Using grids and frames can give your design a professional edge. In case you also sprinkle some images or graphics inside the text, these should be aligned either left or right, or better yet, in the center of the page. However, if you choose to align them on one side, make sure they'd fit in a grid: have the same size so that they meet the text on the same vertical line. This will give a feeling of symmetry to the overall page.



**Save a template for later use.** People like patterns, and an organization usually has more than one training course. When someone recognizes the same layout from a previous course they took they'll associate a familiar feeling with the new course. Save a template of your design and create new training courses based on this first layout.

They say design (online design included) is like a joke; if you have to explain it, it's bad. People are so accustomed to a certain layout of an online page that it simply isn't necessary to try to reinvent the wheel again. Just follow the steps of online design forefathers and slowly develop your course pattern without breaking the basic rules of page layout.

## Contrasting points

Any online design – and training courses make no exception – needs to have contrast. By creating contrast, instructional designers can suggest or emphasize that some words or other page elements are more important than others. When these elements pop up in front of their eyes, learners scan the page more easily and they automatically pay more attention to those elements.

**Create contrast.** This can be achieved in a number of ways, bringing together multiple concepts to be considered:

**Font style** – Serif fonts go so well with sans-serif fonts because they create contrast with each other, based on the presence (or the lack) of those strokes. The same goes for display fonts (when these complement the entire course) and the more regular fonts. The font that is different from the regular text is the one that draws the attention on itself, so readers will naturally read what's standing out first

**Font size** – Contrast on a page can be created based on hierarchy only, as the title is always the biggest and boldest element on a webpage, subtitles are smaller in size, regular text is significantly smaller than the title, while footnotes and other resources can sometimes even become hard to read. By increasing or decreasing the size of the font, more emphasis is given – or taken away – from one page element or another.

**Font weight** – Some fonts are heavier, others are thinner, others are taller, others are rounder. Text can get contrast by using two of these opposites. Of course, these differences can be combined even more, getting a tall heavy font near one that is rounder but thinner. When only one words needs to be emphasized in a phrase, bold or italics can be enough as well.



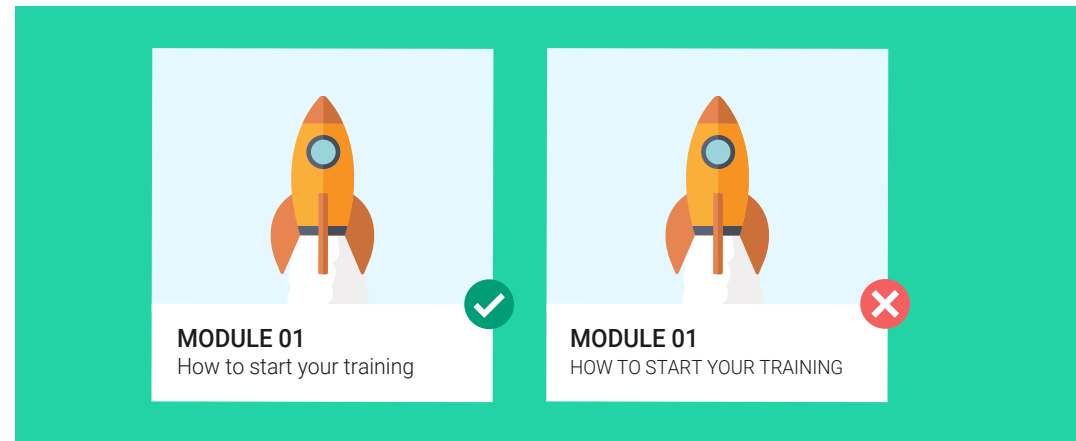
**Spacing** – The text on the web should be different to those in novels. Since a bright screen is involved in reading instead of a yellowish paper page, it's best to avoid writing long paragraphs. These can strain the eye of the reader. One important short sentence can stand in its own paragraph. The space before and after it – and its length – will draw the eye of the reader, and they'll notice and remember it better than all the details in the longer surrounding paragraphs.

**Color** – Remember the contrasting colors? These can totally save a webpage from anonymity. A bright color that is used sparingly throughout a pages draws the eyes to itself instantly. In a normal paragraph with regular text, if the link is marked in this different bright color it'll be clicked more often or at least the reader will get an idea on where the link will go to. Likewise, on a longer page, with plenty of text and other visual elements, one button of a different brighter color will pop out on the screen. That's where the call to action of a page is usually placed, being that a button to the next learning module, an assessing page or the finish page of the course.

**But don't overdo it.** Even though there are many nice ways to create contrast on a web course page, it's better to be subtle about it. Too many forms of emphasis can really hurt the eye and make everything confusing. There needs to be a contrasting hierarchy as well. For example, an important keyword that links to an extra resource could be bold and have another color, but other important keywords that don't link anywhere are fine to be just bold. The occasion should be rare that you even need more than one form of emphasis.

**A B C D E F G H I J**  
**K L M N O P Q R**  
**S T U V W X Y Z**

**Avoid special effects.** Remember Word Art? It's gone now, and it's better for it to be gone from all professional online training courses. Effects like drop shadows, bevelling, textures, gradients or wrappings should be used sparingly or not at all. Perhaps in the case of graphics one of these could be used to draw more attention to them, but usually, these special effects unnecessarily clutter the page and give the entire design an unprofessional feel.



**Use capital letters wisely.** Capital letters deserve their own entry here. While, again, this isn't a complete no-no every time, it's best to not overdo the use of all caps. The title and the subtitles are the only elements on a page that could use capital letters. However, using them for any length of text makes it difficult for people to read it. Not only that, but all caps unofficially means yelling online. So it won't tell readers that information is important, it will make them feel attacked. And nobody wants that negative feeling to be associated with professional learning.

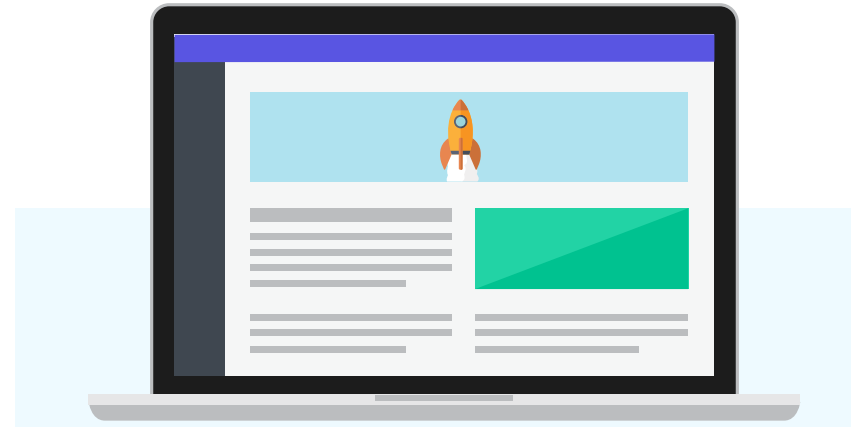
So the general rule of thumb regarding contrast on a web page of an online course is: you need to have it, but don't over do it. Subtleness is your best friend in the creating contrast case.

## Watch this white space

White space is one of those diverse and effective tools that can add something special to your online course design. When used right, it can actually add meaning to a web page without adding in another physical element.

The most important thing to know about it is that the white space is not empty space. It does not need to be filled with more text, an image, a graphic or a texture or some type. A web page needs white space just like it needs other design elements.

Well used white space can have many beneficial effects for your course page design.



It supports the contrast on the page. White space can help put more focus on a specific aspect of your composition. By surrounding an important element with white space you make it stand out and add some degree of sophistication to your design.

It can help balance out your elements. Moreover, when there are many important elements on a page, making them all stand out too much will cause confusion. But when these are surrounded by white space and a clear and symmetrical distance from each other, the page will get the balance it needs.

It lets your design 'breathe'. A cluttered page is not a good idea, no matter how much useful information can fit into it. White space can solve this problem, as it creates balance between what needs to be learned and some calm pauses between these elements. It feels like the page is breathing when there is enough white space on it.

Clutter is the enemy of attention. A web page with too much on it will make users lose interest in whatever message it tries to tell. That's why it's a good idea for instructional designers to not be afraid to use white space in their designs.

## Conclusion

Learning and the transfer of knowledge in the workplace – any workplace – is the base of success for any organization. There are many things that can hinder the learning process, from physical factors of each learner (for example a headache) to external factors that can't be controlled (like a blackout). But there are some other such aspects that can be controlled.

A great online course design is a beautiful design. When it's done right, nobody will notice. But when one visual issue gets in the way, it can ruin the entire learning experience. It's a wonderful thing that L&D departments are getting busy creating more personalized training courses for the workforce, but they shouldn't overlook one aspect that can hinder the successful reception of any online training course: the visual design.

By mastering the basics regarding the use of fonts, combining colors, respecting the general layout, creating contrast or using white space, instructional designers will create wonderful courses that users will love to go through.

If you're looking for a tool to design great training courses, try out CYPHER, a learning platform that will help you easily build beautiful online courses. **CYPHER Learning** is the perfect solution for companies that want to create attractive content and deliver engaging courses, without any technical or design skills.

[www.cypherlearning.com](http://www.cypherlearning.com)

