

# How to

## ...get your document layout right

Layout matters. If you are expecting someone to read what you have produced, you'll need to get the layout right to suit both your audience and the information you want to put across.

Information → Document → Audience

There is no such thing as *the correct layout*, but that doesn't mean that any layout or no layout at all is OK.

### Try this!

If you want to find out someone's phone number, a phone book organised like the one on the right is not helpful. The facts are all true and the grammar and punctuation are correct. So what's wrong with it?

How would you format the document to make it more helpful?

Most of the phone numbers in this area start with the 737 prefix. If you call anyone in this area, you'll need to dial 737 before the numbers given here. If you want to call Mike Smith, you should dial 145 after the prefix number; on the other hand, Sue Graham's number is 628. The number for Leroy Barrett is 291.

Even the same information may need to be laid out differently for different audiences. For example, a note for yourself about how to do something might need to be presented quite differently if it was a set of instructions for someone else to work from.

## Knowing your audience

Whatever you are writing or formatting, you need to keep your target audience firmly in mind. The clearer you can be about who you are writing or formatting for the better. If possible, imagine that you are laying out the document for someone you know (who is representative of the planned audience). Just imagine that you are putting the document together so that it works brilliantly for them.

This principle applies whether you are creating a document using ICT or doing it by hand. ICT just makes it easier to change layouts around and get it right.

## Aspects of layout

So, layout matters, but what aspects of layout might we need to work with so that our documents look really good?

In the early days of word processing, most text tended to look pretty much the same. Control of most style elements was very limited for example; choices of font were often very limited (often they were limited to this one, based on a standard mechanical type-writer). Bold and italic text had to be turned on and off by inserting codes into the text like `<+b>this<-b>`. Pictures? You must be joking. Most computers couldn't even handle pictures, let alone include them in documents! To cap it all, you really weren't sure of what the page would look like until it was printed – very slowly on a dot matrix printer. (Ask someone old what one of those was and how it sounded – no really, it's great fun to get them making daft noises!)

Then we had desktop publishing (DTP) which allowed a lot more control. Most features of DTP have been incorporated into the usual word-processing applications that we use today, so we can fairly precisely control:

- **text layout** – headings, lines, paragraphs, tables, bullet points, numbering
- **fonts** (lettering designs) and **typefaces** (**bold**, *italic*, underlining, shadows, etc.)
- **graphic elements** – pictures, photos, diagrams, graphs, etc.



This 'How to' worksheet is mostly in Comic Sans, a *sans serif* font which is easy to read.

So that should be the end of our troubles, yes? Well, not really, because unless we know what we are doing with all those controls, they simply make it easier to create a total mess of a document! Our starting point is to think about:

- the information and
- (you guessed it!) the audience.

## Choosing an appropriate layout

Often, the information will give you a really strong hint about how it is best presented.

For instance, the telephone book presents information as a table of entries, in alphabetical order because that's the easiest format for looking up a name to find the number.

On the other hand, if you wanted to present information about a club night, even a nicely designed table might not be suitable.

## Juicebox @ Thirst

Dates	Times	DJs	Prices	Venue
6 <sup>th</sup> November and 1 <sup>st</sup> Thursday of each month	9pm–3am	Matt Masters Scott Giles DJ LuvLee Nosh Project O.J Midnight Biscuit	Free before 9pm	Thirst 53 Greek Street Soho London WC1
			£5.00 before 10pm	
			£6.00 before 11pm	
			£7.00 after 11pm	

The essential information is all there and it's correct but it's not very persuasive.

It's no wonder that promoters design flyers and posters rather than tables to appeal to their target audience!

Any document needs to attract the audience. In the case of a flyer, the audience will probably look at it for less than a second before deciding whether to read the detail or bin it, so the eye-catching information has to get across to the audience very quickly.

This layout makes good use of colour and graphics. The items of information that will catch the attention of the audience are made prominent. Notice that all the other essential information is there but it is less up-front, because it's not the information that will attract immediate attention.



The document layout and style *always* need to be right for the intended audience.

Look at the different sizes of the text on the page - they give clues to the relative importance of the information they carry for the audiences they want to attract.

### Try this!

Take a look at a few magazines, letters, posters, websites and documents at work and see how their layout helps attract and get the information to their audiences.

Once you become aware of how layout affects documents and some of the tricks and techniques that designers use, you'll be able to apply their ideas to your work to make it really attractive to your audiences.

Remember - the organisation that you work for might have a house style for its documents and will want you to follow this style.

Other 'How to' worksheets in this series go into a bit more detail about ways in which you can format letters, reports and leaflets so that they work really well.