

10 TIPS TO DESIGN BETTER ELEARNING PROJECTS





Tip

1

CONTROL THE DESIGN CONVERSATION.

THE EXPERTS SAY:

Good design depends on smart decisions. When you are working with stakeholders, team members, or others to determine the look and feel of your program, it pays to control the design conversation. When you take the lead in offering a selection of specific (and, of course, well-considered) design options that you know you can build with confidence, you've already made progress toward good design. One method that can help get everyone on the same page and in agreement about the design of a project is prototyping. This mini-program shows how various program elements will be handled in the real environment of the authoring tool and allows stakeholders to see and experience the real thing before they sign off and approve development. Controlling the design conversation doesn't mean refusing to listen to constructive criticism, of course! Try out what others suggest until your program is the best it can be.

HOW THIS MAKES DESIGNS BETTER:

There are many ways to solve every design problem and the sheer quantity of choices can feel overwhelming to stakeholders. When you work to control the design conversation by showing well-chosen design options and/or prototyping, you're giving your stakeholders a chance to see and respond to possible solutions that you've vetted as being good ones for the project you're working on. Combining their suggestions with your expertise helps create a program that everyone can be proud of.



Tip

2

THINK FRAMEWORK SOLUTIONS.

THE EXPERTS SAY:

Thinking about how the content in your program is supported by pre-existing design approaches lets you quickly decide on how whole sections of slides will be presented. In effect, a framework provides a set of decisions that offer “fill in the blank” building opportunities. For example, some common frameworks include conversational scenarios, click-and-reveal interactions, and even common knowledge checks questions. The conventions, patterns, and approaches to frameworks like these are mostly set in advance – you add your content and design elements, and the slides are complete. Because there’s less decision-making about basics, you’re free to focus on delivering material at a more confident, bolder level.

HOW THIS MAKES DESIGNS BETTER:

Tried and true frameworks have stood the test of time and now serve as familiar waystations within the more exploratory world of content delivery. For both the viewer and the developer, employing frameworks combines quick-win solutions with variety to deliver projects that offer more than just a “slide-click, slide-click” experience.



Tip

3

AUTOMATE YOUR DESIGN CHOICES.

THE EXPERTS SAY:

There are several ways to employ in-tool features so that you don't have to make the same decisions again and again. For example, when you set your program's theme colors and fonts, you're creating once-and-done design choices, and you can rely on these throughout the process of building your project. Other tool-based quick wins include master slides, default shapes and styles, question slides, and feedback layers can be set one time and used throughout a program.

HOW THIS MAKES DESIGNS BETTER:

Every decision you make when building slides consumes a little (or a lot!) of your time and focus, so setting your tools to automate your choices is a smart move. Automating your design choices also allows you to easily repeat those choices across your program, resulting in a project that looks both cohesive and professional.



Tip

4

USE THE ONE-SLIDE, ONE-JOB RULE.

THE EXPERTS SAY:

Every slide in an elearning program has a job to do, and each slide should do just one job. The three primary slides and their roles are:

- **Guidepost slides** – These point the way into and through the program, letting the viewer know where they are.
- **Transition slides** – These offer a smooth ride for the viewer by providing on-ramps and off-ramps from content sections.
- **Content slides** – These deliver the learning sequentially and engagingly.

As you design your project, consider the single job each slide must do. If two jobs are showing up on the same slide, consider adding a new slide for the second job.

HOW THIS MAKES DESIGNS BETTER:

Knowing a slide's job helps you make quick decisions about the look of that slide. In fact, it's a good idea to use the same layouts for every slide that does the same job. (For example, all transition slides could feature a lightly-shaded background, while all content slides could feature the same color as a sidebar only.) Just like road signs on a highway, this approach allows your viewers to know where they are in your program.



Tip

5

SKETCH YOUR SLIDES.

THE EXPERTS SAY:

Step away from your computer screen with some blank paper and your storyboard or script. Gather up a pencil, eraser, and some markers in (or near) your program's colors, and start sketching what will appear on each slide. Don't worry about how well you draw or how neat and tidy your sketches are. Instead, just get ideas out of your head and on to paper, working quickly enough to capture threads and sequences of ideas that appear across groups of slides.

HOW THIS MAKES DESIGNS BETTER:

When you sketch, you're not trying to work up to a level of "done" or "perfect," so your powers of visualization can come out to play. In fact, sketching is great because it provides a safe-to-fail opportunity to try out ideas – good and bad – well before you begin the time-consuming process of slide-building. It lets you iterate on solutions for difficult-to-convey concepts and begin to organize the visual language you'll employ during the slide-building process. In addition to these benefits, sketching your slides means fewer decisions during slide development. Instead of scratching your head and wondering how to show something, your task is simply to build what you've sketched.



Tip

6

APPLY FOUR SIMPLE DESIGN RULES.

THE EXPERTS SAY:

Four important, but simple rules, can be used to guide the graphic design of slides. These are:

- **Proximity** – Treat things that are the same the same way.
- **Alignment** – Ensure that slide elements line up to each other and the slide itself, as though on an invisible grid.
- **Repetition** – Use the same design elements and treatments across your project to create a reliable pattern.
- **Contrast** – Make important things stand out by giving them a treatment that stands out from what's around it.

HOW THIS MAKES DESIGNS BETTER:

These four rules help give your project the trimmed and polished look that conveys confidence along with the information. To see this, look at two different slides – one you think is great and one you think is just so-so. Compare this list to each of the slides, considering whether the rule is followed or broken. You're likely to see more broken rules on the slide that you're less impressed with! Of course, you want your own slides to impress your stakeholders and your viewers. Applying these four rules helps you do just that.



Tip

7

USE PHOTOS DESIGNED FOR SLIDES.

THE EXPERTS SAY:

It's smart to use photos that are specifically designed for slide-based projects, but sadly enough, the photos available on paid and free stock photo sites (and even from within eLearning authoring tools!) are *not* designed for building eLearning. They are shot for editorial and print applications, for web design projects, or, just because a stock photographer thinks they'll sell well. In practice, that means a photo found on a stock site may look OK, but not work on typical slide sizes, be cropped effectively, or allow placement of on-screen text. A given photo might deliver what's needed for a slide or two but fail to offer the kind of depth that's required for a multi-slide project. Then, all too soon, it's back to the stock site to resume the search for the next photo. Sigh.

HOW THIS MAKES DESIGNS BETTER:

Across a program learners are engaged by visuals that vary, that employ different camera angles and zooms, and that convey changes in mood. The time you spend searching for "good-enough" stock graphics is the time you could be using to build great elearning that makes a difference for your viewers. Instead of trying to make stock photos work, commit to using photos such as those found in the eLearningArt library, where everything is specially designed for slide-based projects.



Tip

8

CONVEY CONTENT WITH EMOTION.

THE EXPERTS SAY:

Build slides, scenarios, and programs that bring emotion alive. One way to achieve this by employing cutout photo characters in situations, stories, and scenes that viewers can relate to. In fact, there are lots of ways to make the most of these versatile photo assets. For example, you can resize a character photo so large that their face occupies more of the slide. This creates the same camera zoom-in effect used in every emotional scene in every great movie. In addition, when you are using characters in your program, you can show a story of progress, too, by choosing a variety of poses and facial expressions. To increase the “wow” factor for your elearning programs, start watching movies closely for camera movements and paying attention to the way stories about characters are told, then let cutout photo characters help you engage your viewers.

HOW THIS MAKES DESIGNS BETTER:

Never forget that your viewers are used to excellent film and video experiences that change their moods and minds. You certainly don't want your project to fall short of that mark. Boosting the emotional side of your content presentation encourages your viewers to do more than just watch passively. It lets them engage emotionally, get interested in what will happen next, and, most of all, *care* about the material you're delivering.



Tip

9

GIVE THE SMALL STUFF SOME LOVE.

THE EXPERTS SAY:

Take a few minutes to pay attention to the minor details that appear more than once in your project and you'll save time and produce a more consistent project. Examples of these details include:

- **Micro-instructions** such as "Click Next to continue"
- **Navigation** symbols, arrows, and text
- **Transitions** into knowledge checks or interactions
- **Links** to resources outside the program

Taking some time to determine how details like these will be handled and documenting your decisions means you can repeat the same approach every time it's needed in your program.

HOW THIS MAKES DESIGNS BETTER:

Designing and documenting the small stuff means not relying on memory or having to back through slides to find a previous instance. Just create solid on-design and content-sensitive solutions that can be your go-to every time, and your viewers will be treated to a continuous, reliable, and attractive program.



Tip

10

FAVOR EASY-TO-USE TOOLS.

THE EXPERTS SAY:

When it's possible to create a graphic asset for your program in a simple and user-friendly program like PowerPoint, there's really no good argument for firing up the fancy applications like Photoshop and Illustrator. (If you're already expert at these tools, kudos! Carry on! It's just that for most of us, they offer steep learning curves, frustrating rabbit holes, and so-so results.) Working in a tool that fits your skill set means you have more time to test ideas, try out creative options, and go a little deeper into creating the just-right visuals for your program.

HOW THIS MAKES DESIGNS BETTER:

When the tools you work with work for you, a spark of creativity can ignite into slide solutions that deliver a lot of engagement. Employing assets that are ready to drop onto slides, then making those assets work for you in tools that you feel good about all add up to smoother, simpler slide-builds. Favor easy-to-use tools, and get to "Oh my gosh, I love it!" much sooner.

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