

Improving the visual appeal of classroom handouts

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Most teachers give students handouts. Whether syllabi, activities or homework, handout content is only half the document. The other half is its layout or visual appeal. While lots of thought and energy go into the creation of content, often visual elements are ignored. This article urges teachers to think about these visual elements and offers some simple, concrete suggestions for improving the visual appeal of classroom handouts.

大抵の教師はクラスルームで様々な種類のプリント類を配布している。それらはシラバスかもしれないし、クラスルーム・アクティビティ、あるいは宿題かもしれないが、いずれにせよその中身が占めているのは紙面の半分ほどである。残りの半分はというとレイアウトであったり、印刷物に視覚的アピールを加えるものであったりする。大半のものは長時間に渡る熟考や多大なるエネルギーを注いで作られているにも関わらず、視覚効果は発揮されていないことがしばしばである。この論説は、教師たちにそれらの要素について考えることを促し、教室で配布する印刷物の視覚的効果を高めるための簡潔で明確なアイデアを提案している。

Why should you be concerned with the visual appeal of classroom handouts? Because the content of the handout: the exercises, the activities, the rules, and so forth is only half of it. The other half is the presentation of the content. This is true of any document. In fact, this is true of everything in life. If presentation didn't matter, we might all be living in concrete boxes and wearing burlap sacks. The truth is that presentation, which is all about visual appeal, is important, very important. Here is what Curtis Kelly has to say about it:

Unfortunately, most of the materials made at home, no matter how good in content, are atrocious in terms of layout. In my experiences with both publishers and students, I have come to the conclusion that layout is just as important as...no, even more important than...content (1998).

Does that mean we should all hire professional graphic designers to work on our handouts? Should we all spend ¥100,000 or more on professional desktop publishing (DTP) software? Well, even if you've got that kind of money the good news is that you don't need to spend it. The most ubiquitous word processing software in the world, Microsoft Word, has a host of desktop publishing features. But before discussing some specifics, here is some general advice for creating classroom handouts.

Some dos and don'ts with fonts

Without a doubt, one of the easiest ways to improve the visual appeal of a document is to change the font, but it is not that simple. Not all fonts are equally interchangeable.

In the world of fonts there are many different styles and innumerable ways to classify them. For our discussion, let's focus on the distinction between just two types of font: serif and sans serif fonts. Serif fonts have little *feet* and sans serif fonts don't. The font you are reading now is a serif font. The distinction is very simple, but which font to use can be a challenging decision.

The conventional thinking is that serif fonts are easier to read (readability) because the serifs create an invisible horizontal line that the eyes can follow. There are many studies that confirm this; however, in recent years there have also been studies that show with extra leading (line spacing), or more white space between lines, sans serif fonts are just as readable, at least for experienced readers (White 2002).

However, there are other considerations for language teachers beyond readability. A larger concern is legibility,

or the ability of readers to distinguish between individual character shapes. Walker and Reynolds (2003) noted that teachers prefer to use sans serif fonts in the classroom because they felt that the simplified letter forms have higher legibility and are therefore easier to read. Yet, Romney (2005) discussed how Japanese students in his classroom had difficulty distinguishing between individual letters with *Arial*, a sans serif font. Specifically, they had trouble with the lower case "l" and the uppercase "I" which are nearly identical vertical lines.

There are other letter combinations that because of their similarity can be troublesome in sans serif fonts: "c & o" are two circles, one complete the other not; "j & i" are vertical lines with a dot above, one longer than the other; and "f & t" are vertical lines with short crossbars, one with a slight tick on the top. These differences are illustrated below. Serif fonts naturally have higher legibility because the serifs give each letter a unique and different shape. It is easy to tell the letters apart (Felici 2003).

Sans serif problem characters

l	I
j	i
c	o
f	t

But not all serif fonts are the same. The default font for Microsoft Word is *Times New Roman* (a serif font). This font is the workhorse of the Microsoft world, and many, many documents are created using it. Because this font is so widely used, its appearance is viewed by some as unexciting and it does not always bring attention to itself. This, of course, is not a consideration when dealing with long texts. Line after line, paragraph after paragraph, the font should not bring attention to itself. On the other hand, short bursts of text, say for a communicative language lesson, can benefit from a more creative, more invigorating typeface like *Souvenir*.

Times New Roman was designed for the Times of London, a newspaper. It is a font that is all about squeezing as much information as possible into a small space, which this font does well. However, as great as this font is, it often looks inappropriate outside the narrow columns of a newspaper. Furthermore, because it was designed for newspaper use, short articles published in narrow columns, the line length of the text must also be short. There is considerable debate among researchers regarding how to calculate appropriate line length, but they agree that the longer the line, the more character spacing (the space between the individual letters), the font needs to have (Felici 2003). *Times New Roman* appears cramped, relative to other fonts, because of its limited character spacing. Most classroom handouts take advantage of the long lines afforded by a single column on the page and therefore need a larger, more spacious font. At the very least, *Times New Roman* should be used at larger sizes, say 14 points.

There are other considerations as well. Some fonts are darker or heavier than others. This can be a concern for teachers depending on how the handout will be copied. Many schools require that teachers mimeograph handouts when they need more than 20 or 30 copies. Mimeographing, while fast, efficient and cheap, is also fairly low quality. Some fonts appear washed out and are hard to read when mimeographed. The example below is of *Times New Roman* size 10.5 and was printed on a laser printer, mimeographed, scanned and then enlarged. It is clear to see that it is hard to read.

This is an example of Times New Roman mimeographed

In general, a good font to use for classroom handouts is *Century Schoolbook*, sometimes called *Century New Schoolbook*. This font was designed for elementary school student textbooks in the United States (Bringhurst 2004) by Morris Fuller Benton, one of the leading typeface designers of the 20th Century. Its characters are based on research into how novice readers distinguish between letters (legibility) and how they ascertain meaning (readability). It has distinct letter shapes to facilitate legibility. Although it was created more than 70 years ago, *Century Schoolbook* has remained a mainstay of the publishing world (Bringhurst 2004). In fact, this font is often used by ESL publishing companies (Romney 2005). Additionally, in my experience, it holds up well when mimeographed.

But text isn't the only thing on the page; pictures can be added as well.

Some do's and don'ts with clipart

With the advent of CD ROM drives and large hard drives clipart has become economical and easy to use. As such, many software manufacturers promote the use of clipart as a way to spice up documents. However, using clipart does not always add to the visual appeal and often distracts the reader. Readers often ignore the image or struggle to find the connection to the content.

Most clipart is designed to be generic in scope and therefore widely applicable. It is difficult to find clipart that exactly matches the content of the handout and unless the clipart is somehow integral to that content, it might be better to not use it. For example, if you intend to ask students to do something with the image, such as describe or write about it, then clipart or other graphics are clearly needed. Microsoft, a leading publisher of clipart, suggests “includ[ing] only those images that convey key pieces of information or serve a specific purpose” (2006). They also note on their website that it can be difficult for readers to know what the purpose of the image is and therefore often don't know what meaning they are supposed to take away from the clipart. Their advice is “include a piece of clip art or an image if it illustrates a point, supports the message you're trying to convey, and will be readily understood by readers” (Microsoft 2006). If the clipart doesn't do at least one of those things, it is best left out.

For example, please look at the sample handout below. The handout includes clipart (a group of books) which adds some visual appeal to the document, but not much. Furthermore, the books do not strongly relate to the theme of the handout; nor do they illustrate a point. This clipart supports the

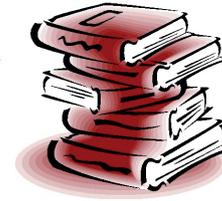
message of the handout, but only on the most basic of levels. This handout is about learning language and books help with that—a weak connection at best. This handout could be improved by removing the clipart, changing the font, realigning the text with more white space and adding an accent line. Specific suggestions to improve this handout will be discussed at length in the next section, Using the DTP features of Microsoft Word.

Instead of clipart consider using white space, or negative space. This is one of the strongest ways to improve the visual appeal of a document. It creates a feeling of accessibility and keeps the handout from becoming too dense—a turn off for readers (White 2002). White explains that many people look at the negative space in a document and think that they need to fill it up with clipart or other images. However, he believes that negative space on the page is not wasted space. He feels that it should not be filled in with images that don't fit the theme and/or style of the handout. Page layout is not improved by adding images; it's usually made worse.

A final note, if you do choose to use clipart, then it is best to surround it with generous white space so it doesn't conflict with the text (Felici 2003). If there isn't enough room to put adequate white space around the clipart, then perhaps it would be best to leave it out altogether. Also, if you are going to use more than one piece of clipart, especially on the same page, it is a good idea to use clipart that is stylistically the same. The conflict between two different pieces of art could detract from the message you are trying to convey.

The secret to learning a language

The best way to improve your English is to use English a little bit everyday. It is far more effective to use English 15 minutes a day, six days a week, than to use English for 90 minutes one day a week. Of course, the more time you spend, the better you will become. Think of learning English like playing a sport. Ichiro is good at hitting a baseball because he hits them everyday. Tiger Woods is good at golf because he practices everyday. You are good at Japanese, because you use it everyday. This is the secret to learning a language. You need to use English, in a meaningful and comprehensible way, everyday. Below is a list of ten easy things you can do to use English everyday in Japan.



Using the DTP features of Microsoft Word

In the presentation it was demonstrated how adding a few simple lines and shapes as well as reorganizing text into text boxes can have a dramatic effect on the visual appeal of a handout. Below are examples of a handout with basic formatting and a handout with improved formatting. The basic format document used *Times New Roman* as the font, size 10.5 for the text (the Microsoft Word default) and size 14 for the title. The first change made to the document was to change the font for both the text and the title to *Souvenir* and the size to 11. The font and size can be changed by highlighting the text with the mouse and selecting the appropriate font and size from the pull down choices on the formatting tool bar.

Next, the title of the handout “10 ways to improve your English” was changed to a text box. This was done by highlighting the text with the mouse and then clicking on the text box icon on the drawing tool bar. It can also be done by using the insert menu [insert-> text box-> horizontal]. (Note: textboxes can also be inserted first and then have the

text typed into them.) Double clicking on the textbox brings up the format text box dialogue box. The background color was changed under the colors and lines tab. Choosing a dark blue background and changing the font color to white created a striking title. (The font color can be changed by highlighting the text and selecting font from the format menu [format->font] or by clicking on the font color button on the formatting toolbar.)

Next a circle was inserted in the upper-left corner by clicking on the ellipse button on the drawing toolbar. (Ellipses can also be inserted from the insert menu [insert-> picture-> autoshape].) Right clicking on the circle brought up the shortcut menu and using the add text feature the text “10” was inserted inside the circle. The background color was changed using the same steps described above.

Next, the headings, “The secret to learning a language” and “What you can do” were changed to 20 point size and an accent line was added underneath. Lines and other shapes are easily inserted from either the insert menu [insert-> picture-> autoshapes] or from the drawing toolbar. Double clicking

10 Ways to improve your English

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What you can do

1. **Graded Readers:** a graded reader is an English book, usually a novel, which is written using *easy* English. These books are written at different levels, or grades, that increase in difficulty. Try to read a book that is one level above yours.
2. **Daily Diary:** try writing a simple diary of the day's events in English. When starting out, try to write just a few simple sentences. As you write more and more, your writing will become more complex and more sophisticated.
3. **Keypal*:** try to find an e-mail friend or keypal (like a penpal) and exchange regular e-mails with them. They don't need to be from an English speaking country, but they should be interested in using English.
4. **Online Chat*:** meet a friend online and chat using MSN or Yahoo Messenger. It is like having a typed conversation.
5. **NHK radio and T.V. lessons:** NHK has very good English study programs on the radio and T.V. Buy the companion text and study along.
6. **English Websites:** there are literally millions of English websites on the internet. Most of them are *free*. Try reading a website on a topic of interest to you. If you like pop music, then read a website about pop music.
7. **English Magazines:** There is a large selection of English magazines available at most major Japanese book stores, like Maruzen on Shijo. Read a magazine on a topic that interests you.
8. **Volunteer at an International Center:** There are lots of international people in Japan who want to find a Japanese friend. You can often meet them at friendship events sponsored by your local international center or organization.
9. **English Movies and T.V. Programs:** try to watch DVDs in English, without the Japanese subtitles. You might need to watch it a few times and try the English subtitles.
10. **This Class:** come to this class regularly and make sure to preview and review all of the lessons. This will reinforce what you learned in class.

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on the line or shape brings up the format autoshape dialogue box and under the colors and lines tab, the color and style of the object can be changed. For the example handout, a 4½ point, thick and thin double line was used and the color was changed to dark blue.

Finally, the body text, both the introduction paragraph and the numbered list were reorganized into text boxes, using the same highlight method described above and positioned on the right side of the document.

As can be seen from the two examples, using a few of the simple desktop publishing features of Microsoft Word can radically change the appearance of the document and make classroom handouts more visually appealing.

Where to learn more

As language educators we often tell our students to “practice, practice, practice...” and this is good advice for learning how to use MS Word. A great place to start practicing is with the online tutorials available from Microsoft. They can be found on the office website by clicking on the training link (on the left side) at <office.microsoft.com>. These are free, short tutorials that guide users through the steps necessary to utilize the various features of all the Microsoft Office products such as Word, Excel.

Another way to learn about MS Word is to use the help feature. Here you can find detailed instructions, albeit without context, to all of the features of Word. This can be helpful to remember how to do some of the more complex formatting. However, it can be difficult to find what you are looking for if you don't know the exact terminology used by Word.

Also at Microsoft Office Online are a number of free, downloadable templates. These templates vary in quality, some are really good and others are awful, but this can be an easy way to quickly take a simple document and make it more interesting. Also, seeing how professionals used Word to create these templates can be a good way to understand the potential of the program.

Finally, trying to imitate the page layout and design of the textbook used in the classroom can be an interesting and useful way to study visual communication based on the work of a professional designer. Doing this also creates continuity between the text and the other materials used in the classroom. It may not always be possible to re-create the exact design of the text, as Word is not a professional page layout program and has limitations, but in most cases close approximations can be created easily.

Conclusion

The visual appeal of classroom handouts is important and it isn't hard to improve. Changing the font, adding a few lines and shapes, and organizing the text into textboxes are just a few of the things that can be done easily with Microsoft Word. These tools can make your classroom handouts more appealing and easier to use, both for you and your students. Good luck with your next classroom handout.

Cameron Romney first came to Japan in 1998 and has taught in a number of educational environments since then. He briefly returned to the United States for graduate school and received a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics from

the University of Colorado at Denver in 2003. His research interests include visual communications for L2 learners, vocabulary acquisition and dictionary efficiency. He is the author of a number of in-house published textbooks; most recently *English Here and Now at Momoyama 1 & 2* (2005 & 2006 editions) for Momoyama Gakuin University. He is currently a Lecturer for the Foreign Language Education Center at Momoyama Gakuin University.

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