Creating class handouts that work

Introduction

One of the most commonly used resources in teaching is the class handout. As a teaching resource, handouts can be invaluable. You can use class handouts to:

• summarise work covered in class
• summarise material contained in another form (text book, video, etc)
• help students memorise essential points
• distribute copies of a text that students are not required to purchase (see notes on copyright limitations)

The key to effective handouts is, of course, content. If you are going to the trouble of preparing handouts, make sure they are useful. Handouts should contain information that your students need to refer to while studying. Don’t bombard your students with handouts on everything that you cover in class - try to cultivate their skills in note taking.

You can enhance the effectiveness of handouts by paying attention to the layout and design of your printed material. In this summary, we will examine some simple typographical elements that will improve the readability of the handout materials that you create.

Choice of typeface

There are several categories of typefaces:

• Serif
• Sans Serif
• Script
• DECORATIVE
The most widely used typefaces are serif and sans serif typefaces. A serif is the horizontal and vertical stroke that appear on the ends of letters (see figure 1). Sans serif typefaces do not have these strokes (sans is French for without, thus sans serif literally translates as without serif).

![Serifs and Sans Serif Typefaces](image)

Figure 1: Samples of Serif and Sans Serif typefaces

Script and Decorative typefaces are only used for special purpose printing, or sign writing.

When setting text, serif typefaces are the most readable. There are a number of explanations for this, but the most widely accepted is that the serifs on the individual characters leads the reader’s eye on to the next letter, word, and phrase. Numerous studies conducted over a long period have all lead to the same conclusion: for text setting serif type is easier to read than sans serif (see, for example, Wheildon *Communicating or just making pretty shapes*).

Think about the places where you see serif typefaces - newspapers, magazines, textbooks. These are all publications where the audience is expected to read for extended periods.

There are literally thousands of different typefaces available. Some serif typefaces that you will be familiar with are:

- Times (or Times New Roman)
- Palatino
- New Century Schoolbook

Sans serif typefaces are the most readable when the audience is expected to read quickly at a distance. Think about the places where you see sans serif typefaces - road signs, posters, newspaper banners. In the classroom, sans serif typefaces are suitable for use on the overhead transparencies.

In printed material, sans serif typefaces can be used where contrast with the main text is required, for example, headings or captions. Some serif typefaces are not suitable for text setting. Some of the sans serif typefaces that you may be familiar with are:

- Helvetica
When selecting typefaces to use in your handouts, limit the number of typefaces to two. More than this tends to make the page look cluttered and busy. This doesn’t mean that you should choose two different sans serif faces, but rather create a contrast by using a serif face with a sans serif face.

Alternatively, you can create contrast by using different fonts from within the one type family. A font is a rendition of a face from a particular type family. Times, Palatino, and Helvitica are type families, while bold, italic, and bold italic are fonts of those families.

Try not to use underlining. This typographical treatment is really a throwback to the days of typewriters when a variety of fonts and sizes was not available. To create contrast, the typist was forced to use double strike or underline. Excessive underlining makes a page look cluttered.

**Choosing a type size**

Most adult readers find 11 or 12 point easiest to read. However, this is largely dependant on the x-height of the particular typeface. The x-height is the height of the lowercase characters and varies between typefaces of the same size (see Figure 2).

*Figure 2: Samples of 42 point typefaces demonstrating the variation of x-height in different typefaces of the same size.*
Paragraphs

When you are setting your handouts, you will need to find some way of distinguishing the ending of one paragraph form the beginning of the next. There are two ways of doing this:

- first line indent on each paragraph
- paragraph spacing

Using paragraph spacing is one way of getting more ‘air’ through your document, and this is important when using a large format page such as A4 size. Don’t use a full line space as this will put too much white space between your paragraphs - about half a line is good. Most modern word processing programs allow you to adjust your paragraph spacing.

Page size

The most common page size is A4. The A4 page is designed for business correspondence, not for text setting. Setting text to suit an A4 page size will result in type being set to a measure which is too long. The ideal number of words in a line of type is 10 to 12. If you have more words than this, it becomes harder to read.

Therefore, using A4 paper creates a problem for those of us trying to create good looking and functional class handouts. Unfortunately, there is little alternative since all systems are geared towards an A4 page: photocopiers use A4 paper, students’ ring binders take A4 paper, and so on.

Luckily, there are simple things that we can do to overcome the problem:

- Set the margin wider. This will create an asymmetrical layout (which is visually interesting), but you may think it ‘wastes’ a lot paper.
- Use two columns per page. This will ensure that each line has the right number of words, while still making use of the page area.

If you intend to hole punch your handouts, you need to ensure that there is adequate room on the left hand side for this.

Using illustrations

Illustrations are often an excellent way of communicating a complex idea. You should try to incorporate illustrations in your handouts. Always use captions on your illustrations as many people will read the captions first, or exclusively.
Maintain your style

Try to make sure that your handouts maintain a typographical style. This means using the same type style throughout, making sure that the headings of equal importance have the same typographical treatment, and that your margins are the same.

One easy way that you can do this is by creating a template to use with your word processing package, and making use of the styles.

Other points

Avoid widows at all costs. A widow is one word or line at the top of a new page or column.

Avoid using shaded or tinted boxes behind your text - it makes it too hard to read. This is especially true to your handouts going to be reproduced using photocopy methods. The shading will invariably fill in and look like a black blob on your page.

Always reference direct quotes or material which has come from another source. Plagiarism is a serious matter, both morally and legally. If you are unfamiliar with referencing, the AGPS style manual has an excellent section of referencing. The Institute has a copyright officer who can advise you at to copyright requirements of you want to directly reproduce material by another author.

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