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FOR DEVELOPING TALENT

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# Bring Design Mastery to L&D

Brittany Harris



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INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

## BRING DESIGN MASTERY TO L&D

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Brittany Harris is an instructional designer for Databricks and a lifelong learner whose mission is to make others passionate about learning. She is a talent development professional with more than a decade of experience as a facilitator, content developer, and instructional designer. By balancing customer needs, andragogy, and visual design, Harris creates learning experiences that deliver results and delight audiences.

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**Every day, talent development professionals must advocate for their learning deliverables—from videos and interactive courses to slide decks and job aids—to learners. Like any other product, you must convince learners that they need your learning deliverables and that their lives or careers will be better because of them.**

Visual design is often a distant afterthought in the process of creating deliverables. After countless hours of needs analysis, content development, activity design, and partnering with stakeholders, you may be hesitant to spend time on visual design. Maybe it seems superficial because you believe learners are sophisticated enough to focus only on content. As the saying goes, “substance over style.”

But here’s an uncomfortable truth: Learners silently (if you’re lucky) evaluate the credibility of your work based on how it looks. Perhaps even more surprising is the staggering speed with which learners evaluate credibility. According to Gitte Lindgaard, a psychologist working in human computer interaction, people tend to judge the quality of a product—including your learning deliverables—within 50 milliseconds of looking at it.

Of course, a slick PowerPoint deck alone isn’t enough to achieve learning objectives; principles of instructional design are the foundation of your work. However, quality visual design helps learners appreciate and understand your content. Most important, it increases learners’

willingness to engage with your work from the beginning. If learners want to learn what you are trying to teach, you have accomplished one of the most difficult tasks as a TD professional. Form must meet function for the most effective learning outcomes.

In this issue of *TD at Work*, I will:

- Detail visual design stakeholders.
- Review six principles of design to help you create and critique visual design for virtually any kind of learning deliverable.
- Examine how masters throughout art history have applied a specific principle and then show you how to apply that same principle in your work.
- Relay best practices for applying the six principles in an efficient, timely, and effective way.

## Understanding Visual Design

Comprehending the basic principles of visual design is critical for anyone involved in creating or reviewing learning deliverables. As it relates to visual design, people generally fall into two categories: creators and collaborators.

**Creators** actively produce learning deliverables after content is finalized. They select or manipulate visual assets such as pictures, charts, and colors to use in slides, job aids, and other materials. In most cases, they are individual contributors such as instructional designers, learning developers, or TD specialists. In smaller organizations, these may be managers who do not have dedicated designers reporting to them. Regardless of job title, creators actively implement visual design.

**Collaborators** give feedback on the visual design. Their roles are not limited to TD; they are anyone involved in development or oversight, such as department stakeholders, functional leaders, cross-functional peers, and subject matter experts.

When both creators and collaborators are familiar with the basic principles of visual design, they can speak the same language. And when creators and collaborators speak the same language, everyone works more effectively as they create, critique, and correct the visual design.

Consider this metaphor: You take your car to a mechanic, and the mechanic asks you to describe the issue. Because you are not a mechanic, you use

layperson's terms to describe how the issue feels and sounds. However, a mechanic uses highly specific jargon based on their years of experience. You may have accidentally used words that signal something other than what you actually mean. That may lead the mechanic to search for and correct the wrong issue. Although it is wonderful that the mechanic fixed any issue, they did not fix the issue you wanted to address.

It is the same when we attempt to fix problems with visual design. When creators and collaborators speak the same language, it is easier for them to express and understand why part—or all—of a visual design does or does not meet expectations. Note: As with giving feedback for performance, both reinforcing and constructive feedback are necessary to consistently drive better visual design.

## Six Design Principles

Often, individuals—whether collaborators or learners—subconsciously decide whether visual design is interesting or appealing. When asked why they are receptive to a specific design, their explanation may be, “It just works.”

So, how can you understand or describe what makes some design compelling, especially if you don't have a background in art? Start with these six principles of design: balance, pattern, rhythm, emphasis, contrast, and unity.

Similar to how instructional design models and methodologies shape your L&D strategy, the design principles should inform your basic visual strategy. By applying them, you can create high-impact visuals that engage your audience. In addition, the principles provide you with more precise language to critique visual design when it's presented to you as a collaborator.

It's worth noting that some design experts teach that there are as many as 20 distinct principles of design. In this issue, I focus on the most basic six for the sake of simplicity and ease of use.

To understand how to apply those principles with maximum impact, look to the masters. Throughout history, the world's greatest artists have captivated viewers with grand paintings, sculptures, frescoes, and more. For these six principles, I offer a selection of art across time periods and styles to demonstrate how masters

used the principles to create high-impact art. Then, I provide a practical example of how each design principle can translate to TD learning deliverables. Keep in mind that this is not a comprehensive guide to graphic design; however, you can use it to quickly, easily, and incrementally improve the overall quality of your work.

## Balance

Balance describes how visual elements are distributed across one or more axes. Subconsciously, people tend to look for a sense of structure and stability in images, and balance enables you to give your deliverables that structure and stability.

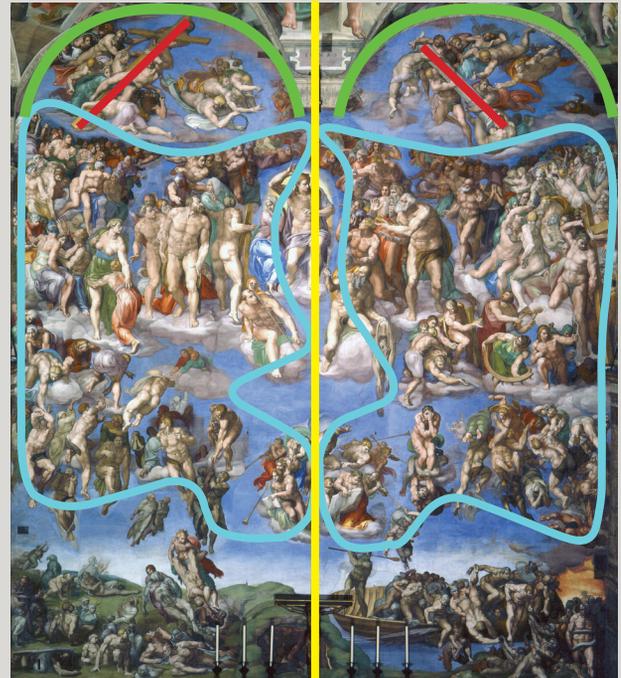
A great example of balance is the *Last Judgment* by Michelangelo. Despite this image not being perfectly symmetrical, all the elements are arranged so that neither the left nor the right side of the work has dominance over the other; that is the essence of balance. We see that when highlighting the major elements in relation to a vertical axis (see Figure 1).

On either side of the vertical axis (yellow line), there are mirror images (green arches), objects of roughly the same size are equidistant (red lines), and large groups of human figures occupy approximately the same amount and shape of space (blue sections). Using balance, Michelangelo includes a massive number of elements with a wide variety of colors, shapes, and sizes without them seeming cluttered or disorderly.

*In practice:* To organize a large number of elements (these could be blocks of text, images, and charts—not just images) in a learning deliverable, try using the principle of balance.

In Figure 2, the objects and text in the slide are left-aligned, leaving a large swath of unused space on the right side. The slide has poor balance, which makes the text—and more importantly, the content—unappealing at first glance. By instead aligning the visual elements across both vertical and horizontal axes without resizing the icons or editing the text (see Figure 3), the slide becomes more approachable, even though it isn't a perfect visual design.

Figure 1. Last Judgment



Michelangelo, 1536–1541  
Source: Wikimedia Commons

### Balance in TD Deliverables

Distribute visual elements across one or more axes to provide learners with a sense of structure and stability.

Figure 2



Figure 3

