

HOW TO MAKE YOUR ONLINE COURSES LOOK AMAZING  
**25 TIPS ON EYE-CATCHING COURSE DESIGN**

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## Introduction

Creating a successful online course is no easy feat. You need an awesome idea on what the course will be about, the most appropriate tech tools to create it and publish it on the web, to build a real network of people who would buy it, and maybe even ask for more, and so on, and so forth. Let's suppose you already have the platform to create your online course and some killer content that will be extremely useful for your audience. These two aspects are really important for the success of your course, but before you make that course public there is a third aspect you need to seriously consider: **making your online course look great.**



### Remember the words of wisdom

You're probably familiar with the saying **Don't judge a book by its cover**. Well, this saying exists precisely because people judge books by their cover all the time. And of course, not just books. The saying extends to all sorts of things, from people to clothes, to jobs, to movies, to any page on the internet, including... you guessed it... your course.

We're all guilty of doing this. We can't help it. We may not know all there is to be known about how the human brain works and why it does what it does, but one thing is certain: **we're subconsciously attracted to beauty**. We're mesmerized by floral patterns, we have a thing for symmetry and for proportions, and judge a web page in milliseconds<sup>1</sup>. If we don't like what we see, we move on.

But you don't want people to move on — and away — from your online course once they're there. You want them to get on the *"Thank you for buying!"* page and then to go through every single page of the course until the *"Congrats for finishing! You're now smarter!"* page. In order to achieve that you need to make your product pretty. No matter what your course is about — lumber cutting tools, Pay Per Click advertising or handcrafted jewellery — it needs to look great in order to attract visitors and keep them on the page.

<sup>1</sup> [www.sweor.com/firstimpressions](http://www.sweor.com/firstimpressions)

Think about this as you think about going to a party, a networking event or any other type of social gathering. You want to look your best when you meet new people. You show up wearing nice clothes, smelling nice and looking sharp; you won't wear your pyjamas and unmended shoes or have messy hair, even if it's still you in this second situation. Nobody wants to be associated with a sloppy person.

Likewise, **your course should look the best** if it's published on the web, because being online is like always attending a party. And since **You have only one chance to make a good first impression** (which is another great saying), you need to make your course as visually appealing as possible.

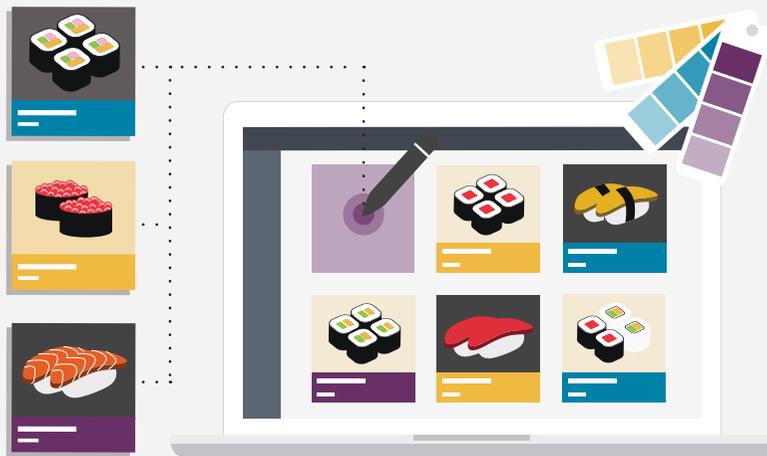
Now let's leave behind the words of wisdom and move on to the words of practicality. What follows is a list of 25 practical tips on how to achieve an eye-catching course design, so that your users will enjoy every second they spend taking your course.



## 25 Tips on how to make your online course look awesome

Online design can get really complicated. Online instructional design can get even more so. If you're new to this field and don't want to make any mistakes (and also have the means) you should definitely consider hiring a professional to make sure this part of your course is perfect before you publish it. However, many online entrepreneurs have to wear multiple hats in their business journey, including that of a designer. Having downloaded this resource you might be one of them. Well, here's good news for you: even though online instructional design can get complicated, anyone can learn how to do it. All you need is a dose of curiosity, a few tools and a willingness to learn. And remember, when in doubt, less is more.

The following list of topics is by no means an exhaustive one, but it does try to cover the basics for fonts and colors, as well as other design elements. Let's dive in!



## Mastering fonts

The written word is pretty much the basis of mass communication. You can't really create an online course without writing words; even those that are heavily based on video materials have a written script beforehand most of the time, and a transcribed version of what is being said is a great way to meet various accessibility needs of your learners. Written text is still the basis of learning, so mastering how to make that text look nice on a web page is the first step in creating beautiful online courses. So check out these tips on how to use fonts the right way:

### 1 Know your serifs

First of all, you need to recognize the presence of strokes on **serif fonts** and their absence on **sans-serif fonts**. It's in the name actually; serifs are those fine strokes on each letter in fonts like Times New Roman and simply don't exist on fonts like Helvetica. Sans-serif fonts were considered the best option for web pages at the dawn of the Internet, but with the latest advancements in screen resolution, both types can work very well in your course. A third type of fonts that should be mentioned are **display fonts**, which look like they were written by hand. Even though they can be a great way to emphasize something, it's best to use them sparingly.



### 2 Be glad that font families never fight

Some fonts come in families: there's the regular type, and based on it there is a bold version, an italics version, a very very thin version (called hairline thin), a condensed version (that has a slightly smaller space between letters), and so on. Some fonts are heavier, others are thinner, others are taller, others are rounder. All fonts in a font family are designed to look great together, so if you want to spend as little time as possible on choosing fonts for your course, just go for a font family.

### 3 Feel the font

It's enough to take a look at a font to perceive its "mood". Fonts can be serious, modern, elegant, feminine or cheerful, vintage, eccentric, masculine etc. Depending on what your online course is about, some of these characteristics could be a better option than others. For a course about financial calculus it might be best to have more serious fonts, while a course about skyscraper architecture could include a tall and condensed font (similar to skyscrapers) for emphasis. Whatever fonts you choose, they should be complementary to the content in the learning materials you will create.

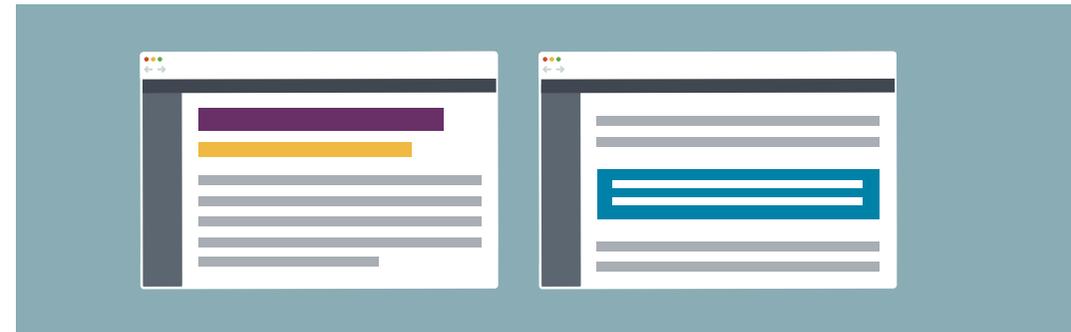
#### 4 Remember 3 as a magic number

Three fonts should be more than enough to use within an online course. Of the three types, one is to be used most often, for the regular text, a second one for highlights like titles and subtitles and the third one only if it's necessary, for short quotes or other rare elements on the page. Too many types of fonts can be distracting for the user and hinder the message on each page (or even paragraph). There really is no need to use more than three fonts on web content that is supposed to teach something.

#### 5 Experiment with font pairing

Practice makes perfect. Put together different types of fonts and you'll see some that obviously clash, others that look ok and others that seem to have been made for each other. Try pairing sans-serif fonts with serif or display fonts, using the sans-serif for the most text and the other for the elements you'd like to emphasize. Or, you could pair two fonts from the same category, by one rounder and one taller, or one thinner and the other bolder. You can even take it a step further and pair very contrasting fonts from different font families. Considering the subject of your course, you should be able to choose the right amount of similarity and contrast based on family, weight or mood. Pairing fonts and getting the perfect combination for each online course is part art, part science, part personal taste, part guessing and a large part practicing.

thin	<i>italic</i>
regular	regular
bold	bold



#### 6 Create order

Online learning needs structure, so the text in your course needs to be presented in a clear hierarchy. The most important element on a page should be the title, followed by subtitles and quotes. Subtitles should look similar to the title (just choose a smaller font size), quotes need to draw attention in a different way; a display font might be a good idea, or just change its color. Regular text should be just that: regular. Last but not least, footnotes and other resources should be either separated from all other text, or have a smaller font size, or both.

#### 7 Don't yell. That's rude

While some situations do require the use of capital letters, it's best to not overdo it. The title and the subtitles are the only elements on a page that could be written with Caps Lock on. However, using them for any length of text makes it difficult for people to read it. Not only that, but all caps unofficially means yelling online. Nobody learns anything when they are being yelled at, so with the exception of proper names, acronyms or the beginning of a sentence, it's better to avoid using capital letters.

## 8 Forget about special effects

Effects like drop shadows, bevelling, textures, gradients or wrappings should be used sparingly or not at all. Unless your course is about web design and you want to give examples of unfortunate choices some people make. Perhaps in the case of graphics one of these could be used to draw more attention to them, but usually, these special effects unnecessarily clutter the page and give the entire design an unprofessional feel.



## 9 Know the types of alignment

All text in an online course should be aligned so that it won't distract the eye of the reader. **Left alignment** is the most familiar type, as it's easy for readers to follow each line of text. **Center alignment** can be used for quotes, for poetry and of course, for the title. (However, except for the title, it's best that no written



element be centered on a page). **Justified alignment** may seem nice at first glance, with both margins neatly aligned, but the problem arises with what's in the middle; uneven spaces between words do not make the text easier to read; on the contrary. Lastly, the **right alignment** is to be used only if your course is in a language that is normally written from right to left (like Arabic).

## 10 Be consistent

No matter what type, size, weight, family of fonts you choose for your online course, remember to use them consistently. All titles should look the same, as well as every other type of writing. This helps readers to recognize patterns in the learning materials and therefore focus easily on what it is to be learned rather than find ways to make use of all the information presented to them. Consistency in patterns is one aspect of beauty, after all.

Considering that the largest amount of information in an online training course comes in the form of text, it's worthwhile for any instructional designer to master the basics of typography. Fonts can steal the show of any course, so it's up to you to make sure they do it for the better.

## Matching colors

Choosing a great color scheme for an online course requires some specific knowledge as well. Just like fonts, some colors play nicely with each other, while others not so much. Having an aesthetic sense can help you in this endeavor, but if you just don't think that you're a natural, don't fret. Anyone can learn how to match colors in a digital environment. Here are some basic tips about how to pick the right colors for your online course:



### 11 Remember the rainbow

The seven colors of the rainbow are just the tip of the iceberg, really. Starting from the three basic colors (red, yellow, blue), secondary colors are formed (orange, green, purple) and then tertiary colors (brown, slate, olive). Then things go wild when black and white jump in the mix, creating numerous tints (a color mixed with white) and shades (a color mixed with black) for each color. To make matters even more interesting, all of these newly formed colors have their own names! You're allowed to panic when faced with so many choices, but don't worry; picking the right color theme for your online course is possible.

### 12 Play with a color wheel

The first thing to remember when you pick the colors for your online course is to avoid the ones in the rainbow. And most of the time you should avoid pure black or pure white as well. There are so many light colors that you have to find one perfect for the background. Likewise, there are so many grays on the color wheel that you'll definitely find one that is not pure black for the text. And if you need a brighter color to use for emphasis, there are plenty of those that are not that strong. The problem with pure colors is that they can cause strain to the eyes when used too much on a page.

### 13 Look at the neighbors

The color wheel is a great visual aid in the process of picking up a color theme for your online course. After you decide on a first color that you'll use throughout the course, pinpoint it on the color wheel and then check out its neighboring colors. These colors, also known as *analogous* colors, are located next to each other on the color wheel, which gives them a seamless, low contrast harmony. These colors share strong undertones, which means they're rich and strong to work with. Just like with the families of fonts, settling on an analogous color scheme is the easiest way to do it.





## 14 Go monochrome

Another easy way to pick a color scheme is to check the same color wheel based on the first color you decided to use, then draw a line from the middle of the wheel, touching that color and ending on the margin of the wheel, then pick a tinted version and a shaded one of the original color from that line. These inline colors are also called *monochromatic* as they're basically the same color mixed with white or black. Monochromatic color schemes are fairly common in web design and are a great alternative to analogous ones.

## 15 Or create contrast

Going back to the color wheel and your first color, look at the one placed exactly on the opposite side of the wheel. These colors are called *complementary* and create the most dramatic contrast of all color relationship. You can even go for two analogous colors or a monochrome one and pick the third as a contrasting one. A bright color that is used sparingly throughout a pages draws the eyes to itself instantly. That's why you should make your call to action buttons a bright contrasting color with the rest of the page; they'll just pop out on the screen, grabbing users' attention and encourage them to click.

## 16 Don't create too much contrast though

Even though there are many nice ways to create contrast on a web course page, it's better to be subtle about it. Too many contrasting colors can really hurt the eye and make everything confusing, since the learners won't be able to identify what are the most important things on the page. Some won't be able to focus on the content either when the color theme has too much going on. Don't get carried away when spinning the color wheel and pick colors just because they seem nice. There needs to be harmony between them as well.

## 17 Consider 3 as a magic number again

Just like in the case of fonts, two or three colors are enough for an online course. Maybe four. Depending on what your online course is all about and what you want to transmit, you need to decide on the contrast between the background color and the main color; one needs to be dark, while the other needs to be light. If you consider how many books people have read over the years, dark text on light background is your best bet. But if you want to stand out and your course topic allows it, you can swap. And if you go for a four-color scheme, make sure there is only one bright contrasting color.

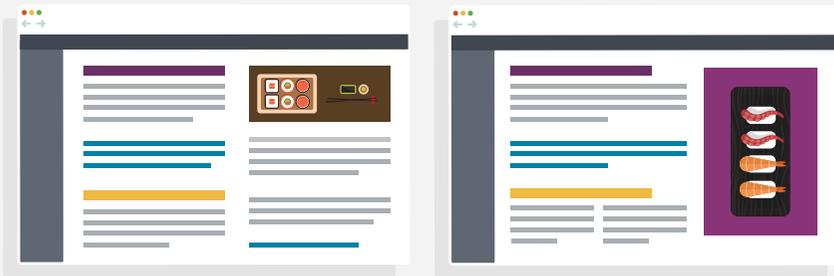


## 18 Feel the emotions

Colors have this power to stimulate emotions in people, and you want to stimulate interest for your course and a desire for more in the mind of your learners. For example, use blue if you want to inspire trust, green if your course is related to health, red if you feel your subject is bold, add a bit of gold if you want to seem sophisticated. Mastering the psychology of color can help you increase the number of conversions for your online course, so you should pay special attention to the color theme you pick.

## 19 Be consistent

Once you make your choices, stick to them. Use the same background color on all the pages on your course. Use the same contrasting color only on those elements that need to stand out on all pages yet again. If you want to experiment with different color themes, do that in different courses, not within the same course. People enjoy repeating patterns in their learning process, as this contributes to their feeling of familiarity and later mastery. Don't ruin things for them and use your color scheme consistently.



## 20 Be creative

On a different note, know that you can break the rules if you really want to. Go for five colors if you feel it's best. Just keep in mind the guidelines on how to choose them and know that you can create consistency through other elements of design, be they fonts, lines or other graphics. Don't be afraid of making things yours, but do this only when you feel confident enough you know what you're doing; otherwise, stick to the basics.

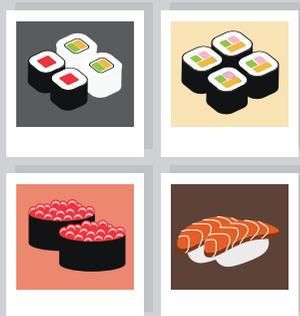
A great color theme must also complement what the course is about. Keep in mind the emotions associated with each rainbow color in order to create not only a visually pleasant online course, but also make learners eager to go through it all.

## Extra tips

Fonts and colors are really the basis of online design. If you master these, you've got a lot covered. However, fonts and colors are not the only design elements that should need your attention in your journey to the beautyland of online courses. Great online designers know and apply various principles and follow various guidelines on how to make all elements on a web page look great. Here are the last five tips:

### 21 Pick your images carefully

The most important aspect you need to be aware of when picking the imagery for your course is relevancy. Whether you choose pictures with people in them, nature, objects or abstract patterns, you need them to work with the topic of your course, not against it. For example, if your course is about knitting, pictures with men in suits in corporate offices with grey or blue hues might not be a great option. On the other hand, pictures of threads and needles in pastel colors might work perfectly. Another tip regarding pictures with people in them is to make sure your audience can identify with what they see. If your course is about mastering Excel at work, adding pictures of a grandma working on some flowers in her garden won't cut it. The good news is, there are plenty of free online resources on the web where you can find the most relevant imagery for your online course, at a small or no cost at all.



### 22 Align all elements

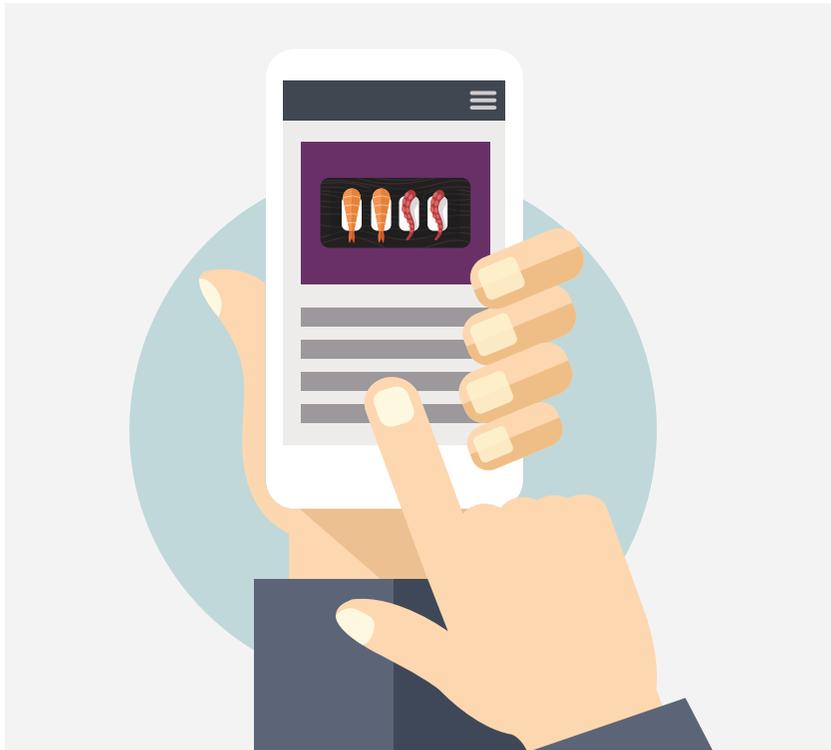
Text may be the king of instructional content, but you should include as many images, videos, audio files and other multimedia elements in your online course as well. You can even make the video format your most used type of content. In that case, it's better to center all your videos on the page. You should do this to all the pictures and graphics as well. If you have more pictures in the same page, try to align them on the same side, or opt for a zig-zag pattern for them. In this case, making them the same size is crucial. Aligning all elements gives a web page a clean look and feel.

### 23 Know the grids

Using grids and frames can give your design a professional edge. With grids you can make sure your alignment of all elements in a course is perfect every time. If you choose to align your multimedia elements on one side, make sure they fit in a grid: they must have the same size so that they meet the text on the same vertical line. This will give a feeling of symmetry to the overall page and help course participants keep their focus and not be distracted from the content by a rogue line.

## 24 Embrace the white space

White space is often referred to as empty space. But don't make the mistake of thinking it needs to be filled with something. A web page needs white space just like it needs text, colors and other design elements. Well used white space supports the contrast on the page, it can help balance out elements and generally lets your design 'breathe'. A cluttered page is a hard to follow page, so go ahead and embrace as much white space as possible. Your users will be thankful.



## 25 Be consistent beyond one course

If you want to grow your business, you'll probably end up creating more than one online course. If you manage to apply the majority of the above tips and create a course that looks great you might want to save a template of your design for future use. That will come in really handy when you create new courses. Plus, it will help you develop and consolidate your unique brand. If all your courses share some common elements, your users will be more than likely to recognize your style and they'll associate that familiar feeling with the new course they are taking.

And so we reach the end of the 25 tips for online course designers on how to make their content look great. This list only covers the basics, but if you're an online entrepreneur who has a real interest in creating the best looking courses, this list has plenty of ideas on where to start and what to learn next.

## Conclusion

Online course creators should aim to make their content look its best, besides making the course content very useful for their learners. After all, if it's on the internet, it's like attending a party: people's eyes notice and judge everything, and a web page only gets a few milliseconds to make a great first impression. By remembering and applying most (if not all) of the above 25 tips, you can create a really nice "cover" for your online course, so that when people see it, they'll be positively impressed by the course and will be more likely to buy, learn and recommend it.

If you're looking for a tool to create a visually appealing online course, check out **CYPHER Learning**, a learning platform designed for entrepreneurs just like you. CYPHER Learning is the perfect solution for entrepreneurs that are looking for a great way to create online courses that not just provide useful content to participants but also an awesome look for that content.

[www.cypherlearning.com](http://www.cypherlearning.com)

