# *Eye on Design*: Lost in Space: Clutter Control

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The common misconception about graphic artists -- that they are all artists -- might prevent you from sharpening your own visual design skills. No, you don't have to spend your days sipping skinny lattes while pouring your soul into a graphic tablet. If you are reading this piece, you probably spend some of your time at work as a graphic artist: advertising library services, creating tutorials and instructional handouts, or updating a website, all of which can benefit from specialized knowledge. These design skills are not generally taught or emphasized in graduate library school, but instruction and outreach are two areas of librarianship that demand professional, savvy graphic design.

In the absence of formal instruction in design arts, librarians frequently rely on either their instincts for creative guidance or just slightly modify what a colleague two cubicles away has used previously. The goal of any designer is not to simply make a pretty picture; information must be communicated. One of the biggest roadblocks to creating great design is clutter -- too much stuff in one space. Clutter can be sneaky and seemingly impossible to control, and it comes in many forms. The availability of fonts, photographs, and clip art make it easy to whip up an informative flyer. The ugly side of this proliferation of visual goodies is an over-indulgence not easily recognized by you, the designer.

My desk is usually a disaster, but I always know right where to find what I need. However, if I ask my husband to locate something for me, all he sees is a big, disorganized mess. He can't find anything, and wonders how I ever get anything done. And so it is with design. Clutter doesn't just make your work look jumbled or less attractive -- it can devalue what you do. You may be able to look at your work and understand every detail; your patrons may glance and look away. Never forget that every single piece you design for your library is a representation of the quality of service you offer. Just as we judge products by advertising we see on TV, so will patrons make determinations about the library. (So much for your low-pressure job!)

So how do you reel in an untidy design? By using the right BAIT: **B**alance, **A**rt, **I**nformation, and **T**ext. Analyzing your pieces using these four simple principles will make easy work of reducing clutter. To illustrate, let's compare two flyers I created - X and Y (see next page) - that both employ a space theme and contain similar copy.

**Balance** is the relationship of all text and images to each other and to the page itself. What is the first thing you look at on these flyers? I am drawn to the library's logo on flyer X; others might be drawn to the pod alien sphere. In contrast, the headline catches my attention on flyer Y. The headline and copy text on X is aligned with the top and sides of the page, leaving no white space. Also, the sphere in the bottom right corner is too large compared to the rest of the elements and the library's logo could be smaller. Flyer Y is anchored nicely at the bottom with the black text box. This text box is well complimented by the alien and bold headline at the top of the page because these elements are of similar size and style. Flyer Y is in good balance.

Next, we can evaluate the artistic choices that were made. The principle of **Art** can be defined as all the photographs, illustrations, and graphic elements used. Questions you want to ask yourself in this area are:

- Am I using too many pictures?
- Is there another way to convey this message by using different artwork?
- Does the picture or background get in the way of the text?

Flyer X has an eerie alien sphere image, which definitely matches the theme, but the background is too dark. The picture of Earth doesn't exactly fit. In contrast, flyer Y uses simple, easily identifiable images, but the theme is still supported. Also, the little alien can be re-used on a number of related items: bookmarks, coasters, handouts, and mobile communication. The image on flyer X is less iconographic and brand-able.

Sometimes, clutter seems unavoidable because of content. The *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* can dominate your available space. But you can take control of your copy. The **Information** principle asks you to question what words get put on the page. As we can see in the two sample flyers, small changes can equal big results. The headline on flyer X is too wordy; by keeping the concept and rephrasing, the headline on flyer Y is leaner and easier to read. Other modifications in the remaining body text reduce the amount of letters on the page. Moving "We Can Help" from the top to the bottom of the space brings focus to the core idea of this flyer: librarians are here to help you.

Finally, careful consideration of your **Text** choice is an easy way to create an organized piece. Font style and size are extremely important to the overall appearance of any design piece. Flyer X uses a great font for the header, but loses the theme with the body text. Flyer Y uses three different fonts: the header, the footer, and the body fonts. The header and footer are decorative fonts and therefore used sparingly. Notice how these three fonts not only support the theme, but also compliment each other. They are easy to read, too. Take time to visit free font sites and familiarize yourself with the fonts you already own.

Clutter doesn't just happen. It is created by choices we make in the design process. Learning to cut the visual fat in your layouts takes practice, but you will get better with time. While you may not have headhunters calling you from ad agencies, begging you to toss together the next Nike ad, you can become highly proficient at designing graphics by experimenting and trying new things. Becoming a better designer will not only enhance your library's image, it will positively impact your patrons' library experience. Now, go grab yourself a skinny latte on the way to the museum -- you've earned it!

**Flyer X**



**Flyer Y**