

WHY DESIGNERS USE TEMPLATES

Finding a common solution to multiple problems. By now you've seen that starting your design project with a grid will help you immensely in keeping your work ordered and visually balanced. By determining structure *before* introducing content, you'll have made your work easier and will have taken chance out of the design equation. But there's another reason that starting with a structure (or "scaffold" as Quentin would say) will serve you well as a designer, and that involves replication. In this case, our grid becomes a template.

Let's say you're designing an annual report, a project that will involve the layout of dozens if not hundreds of pages. In a job of this scope, a replicable structure - a template, to be precise - will be the key to moving quickly as well as to producing quality work. You may recall the National Parks visitors guides we looked at earlier. These guides are a classic example of the importance of working with templates:

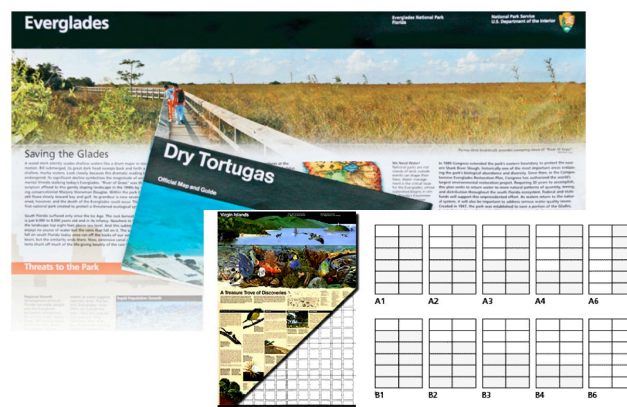


Figure 1: So many wild places... and one template to tame them all.

Anytime we find ourselves designing multiple pages, slide decks, or a series of ads or posters, utilizing templates can save us hours of undue frustration and wasted work. Once a workable template is in place, production time drops and the quality of our work increases dramatically. The slides in our Effective Communication course - and there are hundreds of them - are all built on a single, simple template. The initial design involved a bit of trial-and-error, of course, but once we were satisfied with the look and functionality of the template, the rest was easy.

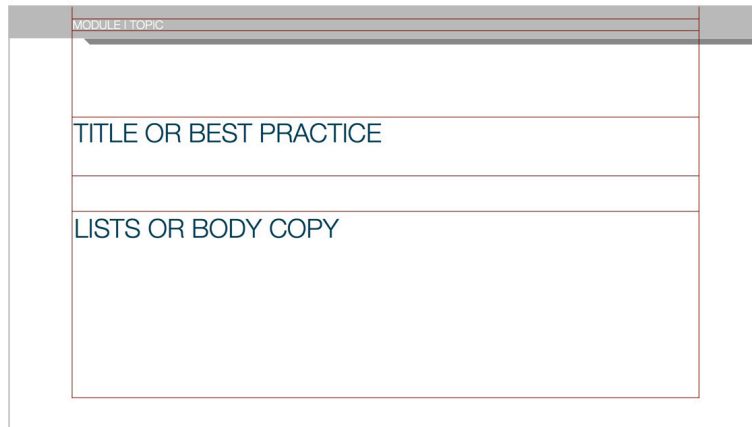


Figure 3: It looks simple because it is simple: the template we've designed for the slides in our *Effective Communication Specialization*.

Getting started with templates. Though most software applications and web design sites offer templates that users can customize to fit their own needs, a good designer should be able to construct an effective template from scratch. It's not at all difficult, and doing original work means working originally from the ground up. Here are some things to keep in mind.

Anticipate types of layouts within the broader project. Let's say you're designing a slide presentation. You'll have a title slide, certainly, but you may also have topic introduction slides, list slides, photo slides, charts, and more. Looking ahead, you can see that you'll need a template for each. That sounds daunting, but the good news is that all of these slides can - and should - be very similar. Try to keep margins, headers, any graphics like logos, and, of course, type and colors, consistent throughout.

Always start a template design with your biggest challenge. Most likely this will involve your slides or pages with the most content. Once you've solved placement and layout problems for these more difficult pieces, working through the others will be easy.

In presentation programs like PowerPoint and page layout software like Adobe InDesign, building master documents or style sheets for use as guides for multiple slides and pages is an extremely powerful way to enforce template choices across an entire project. But if you don't feel the need for that level of sophistication, a simple solution to "templating" a project can lie in simply duplicating your master layout to cover as many slides or pages as you need, then "switching out" the content as you go.

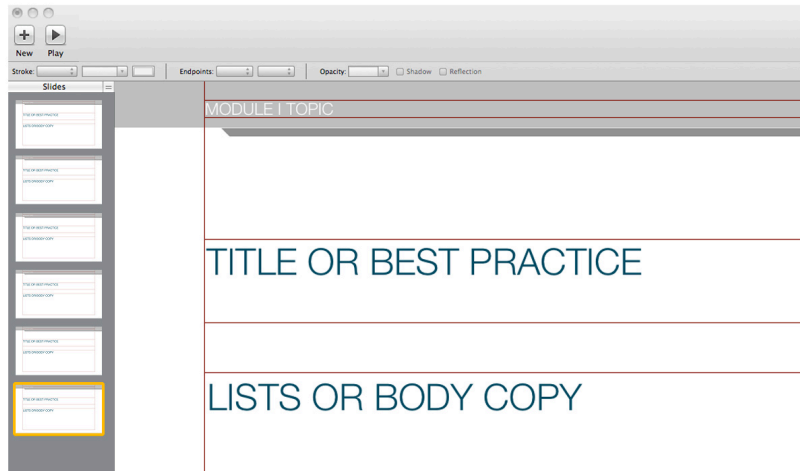


Figure 3: Duplicate your way to consistency.

Make notes. In our lesson on grids we said that how we define structure in our work is entirely up to us. We may use lines, boxes, or arrows – it really doesn’t matter as long as we give ourselves easy-to-follow guidelines. In building templates, the concept is the same, except now we may want to add notes to ourselves. Items labeled “TITLE” or “LOGO” or “SIDEBAR,” for instance, can help us stay even more organized. Remember that the template, like the grid, is yours to use however you wish.

Templates are recyclable. If you’ve created a project using a template that you feel is attractive and functional, don’t relegate it to history once the project is completed. That same template can be applied to other work as well. As with all of your design work, think of your efforts as cumulative rather than singular. You’ll discover things along your creative path that will be useful again and again. And first and foremost among these can be a solid, beautiful template.