

Highlighting

A technique for bringing attention to an area of text or image.

Highlighting is an effective technique for bringing attention to elements of a design. If applied improperly, however, highlighting can be ineffective, and actually reduce performance in these areas. The following guidelines address the benefits and liabilities of common highlighting techniques.¹

General

Highlight no more than 10 percent of the visible design; highlighting effects are diluted as the percentage increases. Use a small number of highlighting techniques applied consistently throughout the design.

Bold, Italics, and Underlining

Use bold, italics, and underlining for titles, labels, captions, and short word sequences when the elements need to be subtly differentiated. Bolding is generally preferred over other techniques as it adds minimal noise to the design and clearly highlights target elements. Italics add minimal noise to a design, but are less detectable and legible. Underlining adds considerable noise and compromises legibility, and should be used sparingly if at all.²

Typeface

Uppercase text in short word sequences is easily scanned, and thus can be advantageous when applied to labels and keywords within a busy display. Avoid using different fonts as a highlighting technique. A detectable difference between fonts is difficult to achieve without also disrupting the aesthetics of the typography.

Color

Color is a potentially effective highlighting technique, but should be used sparingly and only in concert with other highlighting techniques. Highlight using a few desaturated colors that are clearly distinct from one another.

Inversing

Inversing elements works well with text, but may not work as well with icons or shapes. It is effective at attracting attention, but adds considerable noise to the design and therefore should be used sparingly.

Blinking

Blinking—flashing an element between two states—is a powerful technique for attracting attention. Blinking should be used only to indicate highly critical information that requires an immediate response, such as an emergency status light. It is important to be able to turn off the blinking once it is acknowledged, as it compromises legibility, and distracts from other tasks.

See also Color, Legibility, and Readability.

¹ See, for example, “A Review of Human Factors Guidelines and Techniques for the Design of Graphical Human-Computer Interfaces” by Martin Maguire, *International Journal of Man-Machine Studies*, 1982, vol. 16(3), p. 237–261.

² A concise summary of typographic principles of this kind is found in *The Mac is Not a Typewriter* by Robin Williams, Peachpit Press, 1990. Despite the title, the book is of value to non-Macintosh owners as well.

General

“**You mean you can’t take less,**” said the Hatter, “**it’s very easy to take more than nothing.**”

“**Nobody asked your opinion,**” said Alice.

“You mean you can’t take **less,**” said the Hatter, “it’s very easy to take **more** than nothing.”

“Nobody asked **your** opinion,” said Alice.

Bold, Italics, and Underlining

Advice from a Caterpillar

“I can’t explain **myself**, I’m afraid, sir”
said Alice, “because I’m not myself,
you see.”

Advice from a Caterpillar

“I can’t explain *myself*, I’m afraid, sir”
said Alice, “because I’m not myself,
you see.”

Advice from a Caterpillar

“I can’t explain myself, I’m afraid, sir”
said Alice, “because I’m not myself,
you see.”

Typeface

“What is a Caucus-race?” said Alice; not that she wanted much to know, but the Dodo had paused as if it thought that somebody ought to speak, and no one else seemed inclined to say anything.

“What **IS** a Caucus-race?” said Alice; not that she wanted much to know, but the Dodo had paused as if it thought that **SOME**BODY ought to speak, and no one else seemed inclined to say anything.

Color

Which brought them back again to the **beginning** of the conversation. Alice felt a **little irritated** at the Caterpillar’s making such **very short** remarks, and she drew herself up and said, very gravely, “I think, you ought to tell me who **you** are, first.”

Which brought them back again to the beginning of the conversation. Alice felt a little irritated at the Caterpillar’s making such **very** short remarks, and she drew herself up and said, very gravely, “I think, you ought to tell me who **you** are, first.”

Inversing

Who stole the tarts?



Who stole the tarts?

