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# Using visuals to support e-learning

**Helen Hill** gives advice on the reasons for using visuals and the different types of visuals that can be used in e-learning.

*Visuals are powerful. They can transcend language barriers, and appeal to audiences of different cultures, experience, knowledge and skill levels. The sheer breadth of styling and options means that the same piece of information could be represented in a number of different ways, and each of us would visually represent the same information in a different way. Visuals can help turn dull, unimaginative content into something more fun, engaging and thought provoking. They provide focus.*

In this age of searching for answers on the internet, many of us often reach out for quick visual answers to our questions through resources like YouTube, Vimeo and animated 'how to' guides. We use visuals, or visual clues, every day to help with everything from building flat-pack furniture, to familiarising ourselves with aircraft emergency procedures, or finding our way around unfamiliar destinations through signage and icons.

In an age where we continually absorb information, often without even realising, the information we need to remember must break through the noise, and as designers we must do all we can to help embed the information in the learners' memory. The more efficiently we can do this, the more likely the information is to be embedded in our audience's mind.

Being quite unique in that I do both the words and the pictures, I am often asked how I choose the right medium to present information. There is no easy answer for this. I think you develop a 'feel' for it which comes with experience, lots of experimentation and a good understanding of your audience. But having said that, each medium does have its own advantages and uses, which can help to inform your decision.

I am a very visual person and will picture the information in a certain media, styling and structure and consider how the audience would relate to it. The ideas usually start with a very quick sketch (usually incomprehensible to anyone but me).

In this article I aim to condense my thought process and reasoning to explain why I think visuals are important, plus explain my reasoning behind choosing (or avoiding) types of visuals. Finally, I give some tips to help you in creating your visuals or places to look for inspiration.

## Why use visuals?

There are many reasons why visuals can be used. I've listed the most important.

### *Bring learning to life*

A visual tells a story. It gives context and relates the information to our lives or our job. It makes information feel familiar and personable. Visuals can provide characters to tell us their story, a chart to support our argument, or a video that we can follow step-by-step. The information becomes a journey we can follow.

### *Increase engagement and enjoyment*

Visual design can significantly affect the response to the learning. We are more likely to complete learning if it is relatable, enjoyable and relevant to our lives. The more we move away from the 'textbook on a screen' approach the better.

### *Help clarify understanding of complicated concepts*

Visuals can make concepts easier to digest, presenting it in ways suitable to the information, audience, and topic. They can break down the data, whilst providing structure and flow to guide the learner through the concept.

### *Make information quicker to interpret*

Visual clues help learners to progress through the learning quicker. By responding to visual cues such as colour coded sections, consistent layouts and navigation, and calls to action, behaviours become learnt by rote and intuition. This is particularly useful in a suite of modules.

### *Break up information*

Visuals can help us to reduce monotony and break down walls of text, to learn in chunks, and ultimately to fit the learning into our busy lives. By breaking down the information it is easier to scan the information for what we need, find the information again if we need to revisit and provides clarity on the important points in the learning.

### *Provide a fresh way to learn information*

Many of us are continually confronted by walls of information or screens of text daily. Though e-learning is popular in many organisations now, it still gives us an opportunity to present information in new ways to how our learners are most likely to interact with information day-to-day, where they are more likely to find an answer to a question through websites, social media, a Google search, or a book.

Within the e-learning itself, we have the opportunity to introduce a whole range of media and technologies, and not just visually (think podcasts, webinars and more). Despite the amount of hours spent on screens

*"Ninety percent of the information sent to the brain is visual, and 93% of all human communication is visual."*

Ritu Pant

*"Did you know that visual aids have been found to improve learning by up to 400 percent?"*

3M, Polishing your Presentation

*"Did you realize that we can process visuals 60,000 times faster than text?"*

3M, Polishing your Presentation

every day many of us still struggle to read a significant amount of text on screen, therefore, representing the information visually helps to overcome this. If done right, many of the visuals created can also be reused for a second purpose such as social media promotions, posters, printed resources, and more.

#### *Reduce cognitive overload*

The points provided above combine to significantly reduce cognitive load for the learners, as the visuals help the learner use less brain capacity to interpret the information, commit it to memory, and apply it to their own circumstances.

### Types of visuals

#### *Photography*

A very powerful medium and the one that is likely to be the most relatable for the learners, though it can be difficult to find photographs for sensitive topics. Caution should also be used here as photography could trigger negative reactions when used for some sensitive topics due to being too realistic, for example in child safety modules. Stock imagery can also be too posed and make learning feel thrown together, insincere or unrelatable.

Sometimes customers will have their own bank of photography which can be immensely helpful, though as I have discovered in the past, sometimes this consists of low quality photographs or stock imagery they have used in the past — not their own, resourced imagery taken by a photographer. So establish up front what, if anything, is available for you to use.

If you do have a bank of photography from the customer or stock library at hand, production can be significantly quicker than personalised illustration. But on the flip side it can be harder to style to fit in brand guidelines and often feels forced.

**Great for:** *bringing learning to life, telling a story, speeding up the build process*

**Limitations:** *difficult to source for some topics, feel fake or posed, can be expensive to source*

#### Videos

Videos are a great way to support e-learning, reinforce content and provide added value.

They are generally the most expensive and time consuming type of visuals to make, but they can be very powerful, especially in giving life or personality to a scenario or character story. Your client may have some videos ready-made or have permission to use other sources, but make sure if you are linking out to them that they are controlled by the client, not a third party. Or else you may find they get moved or deleted and links no longer work.

Similarly, if any of the information in the video changes a year down the line, it is difficult to amend without expensive reshoots and a significant amount of editing time. Bear this in mind when creating scripts — if something such as legislation is likely to change, can you avoid mentioning the specifics?

**Great for:** *empathy, relatability, supporting the learning*

**Limitations:** *expensive to produce, is likely to need outsourcing, difficult to amend if anything changes*

#### *Infographics*

Infographics are intended to be a brief snapshot or overview of a topic. They break information into very easily digestible chunks, with strong visual styling and structure. They are often used for figure-heavy data or technical information, and have become popular for explaining complex concepts and getting a lot of data across to an audience in a short burst. Think of them as a visual form of bullet points. Key items are extracted and put into a visual which guides the eye through in a logical way.

However, not all information is suitable to be turned into an infographic, for example, text heavy information with no data or figures to pick out, or information will lose meaning when removed from the bulk of the content.

They can also be used as a supplement to learning. They are very easy to brand or stylise like the rest of the module and are a great resource to use as teasers, promotional items to sell the course or as a recap tool for the learner to download and keep.

However, it is not as easy as it looks to do it well. Ensure you work with a designer who has some experience breaking information down in this way and has a strong understanding of flow and hierarchy.

**Great for:** *condensing information, providing context for a topic, summarising key facts*

**Limitations:** *don't provide depth in the information, can be time consuming to produce (relative to the amount of information on them), some information does not lend itself to this way of presenting*

#### *Illustration*

When the time is taken to understand your audience and use a style that is appropriate to them and the topic of learning, illustration can greatly enhance the learning experience. You will never satisfy everyone's preferences, but with research and development to back up the styling, you have a strong argument to back up your styling choices.

It is also easy to localise or adapt for multiple audiences or rebrand for specific customers.

*Cognitive load is when working memory is overloaded and cannot process any more incoming information (Sweller, 1988).*

For example, if you have a course which is scenario based and a widely needed topic such as Health and Safety or Data Protection, you could adapt the styling and branding to match your customers, providing the opportunity for multiple resells for diminishing cost and development time.

You can of course also combine illustration with photography, but it creates an inconsistent style and requires extra interpretation from the learner, therefore adding to interpretation and knowledge conversion times.

**Great for:** providing consistency, bespoke styling, tying to branding guidelines, character creation

**Limitations:** personal preferences can make it difficult to style for everybody in your audience, stock illustration can be expensive, less relatability due to subjectivity

*“When used properly, animation can bring your content to life and engage your learners. When combined with powerful visuals and audio narration, animation can be used to explain complex ideas, processes, or concepts by creating a multi-sensory learning experience. Even after the learning has long ended, the types of multi-sensory learning experiences help to make the content “stick” in the learner’s mind.”*

Tim Slade — Award winning e-learning designer

### Icons and symbols

Icons and symbols are particularly useful for signposting and as a navigation aid. They are useful for added clarity when learners may not be native speakers of the language used, whilst also adding the opportunity for interactions for all learners.

Many icons and symbols are recognised internationally and will help a learner to process information quicker when used alongside text. But do not rely on icons alone — there is often room for misinterpretation or taking the image out of context, so they should be used with the relevant text or information, not be a solo means of presenting information. And do not overuse them, or they can make the course feel very repetitive and heavy on ‘click and reveal’ interactions.

**Great for:** adding functionality, navigation, helping non-native speakers interpret information

**Limitations:** purely a supporting aid — they don’t provide actual information or knowledge, some things can be difficult to represent through icons, often overused and courses become click/reveal heavy

### Animations

Animations are a fantastic way to support learning and reinforce content; they boost accessibility, describe information in a short time frame and can help to maintain attention spans. They are not always the cheapest option to produce, but they are a worthy investment when done well.

They are a very accommodating medium — the ability to pause, replay, mute and provide narration and subtitles help the learner to learn at their own speed and in their own way. When learning a process or skill, animations can help to reduce cognitive load through following a

visual demonstration, rather than the learner having to read text and visualise the steps for themselves. Therefore there is less chance of misinterpretation and in turn it speeds up the learning process.

Animations can vary hugely in complexity and ‘wow’ factor, but sometimes simple is best and can be used to great effect. Assess what level is needed to get your point across and help the learning, don’t go flashy just because you can.

**Great for:** showing a process or procedure, supporting learning, reinforcing content

**Limitations:** expensive and time consuming to produce (or amend in future), can be glitchy on slow internet connections due to the large file size, often misused or lacking purpose and so become a distraction

### Data representations (charts, graphs, etc)

Though not always considered to be the most exciting things to look at visually, data representations can be a much more successful way of showing data than through text. It is much easier to see a story or pattern laid out in a chart or graph and so can speed up interpretation and understanding. Think about the time it would take you to read and interpret a wall of text with lots of numerical data in it, compared to seeing it laid out in a bar chart. There is also the added benefit of all learners being familiar with bar charts and graphs — we have all come across them at some point — even if we haven’t had to interpret one since school.

Consider the styling of the charts too. Often charts are provided from other sources and just dropped into the course and, as a result, feel visually separate, or are of a low quality and not easily read. Ensure you use high quality visuals, and if possible recreate them yourself in the style of the rest of the course, to help the information flow and to make them feel more embedded into the rest of the content.

**Great for:** backing up the learning with evidence and research, working with data, showing patterns in information

**Limitations:** not the most engaging or exciting type of visual, cannot be used solo — they usually still require some text to explain them, the audience may not be able to interpret the information without guidance

### Tips for choosing or creating visuals

If you are not a designer yourself or don’t have one at hand, all is not lost. Make use of the many free tools out there, which sometimes just need a citation when the image is used. Some great examples are Canva, Pexels, Unsplash, FlatIcon, FreePik, DaFont — plus don’t forget to look if there are inbuilt resources and templates in the software you are using.

Agree a look and feel before the project starts, to prevent costly redesigns and ensure that everyone is in agreement from the start. Use mood boards and create mock-ups (4 or 5 pages with a variety of layouts or interactions). Get a sign-off that they are happy with the proposed style in writing before you begin, and agree any possible cost implication upfront (buy stock imagery, fonts etc). Be careful of colleagues that try to sway the design based on their personal preference — you are designing for the audience, not for them. Prepare your arguments for why your proposed styling is right for the audience!

Check if your client has brand guidelines and ensure that your designs follow them. Some may be as simple as providing colour values and guidance on using their logo. However, these will often guide you not just visually, but in the language and terminology you use also.

Ensure consistent styling, especially if multiple designers are working on the project, you have outsourced any work, or it involves a suite of modules. Inconsistencies easily creep in. Always get a second pair of eyes on it, as once you have looked at a project for a while it is easy to become blind to inconsistencies. Ensure someone is tasked with checking for this, don't presume it will happen. And do it throughout, not just at the end. Which brings me to my next point.

Create a style guide. This can be an especially handy reference to help consistency and to brief your designer on what is expected. This should include visual standards, but also specifications around spelling, grammar, templates for scripts and any customer specifics from the brand guidelines.

Make sure the visuals enhance the message, and don't cause a distraction. If the visuals are not clearly linked to the text, they will increase cognitive load and move the learners' focus away from the actual learning.

Create yourself a toolbox of resources — both ones you have created yourself and those created by others. Include anything you find inspirational, templates, sources of free stock imagery, etc. I use a combination of bookmarks, a Trello board, (50+) Pinterest boards, and a folder in my documents. There are probably better methods out there, but it works for me (mostly — sometimes I know I have saved something but have no idea where). Find what works for you, and look at them regularly for inspiration.

Don't forget to consider the devices that are used for learning. Many busy workers will be completing compulsory learning on the train on the way to work on their mobile or tablet. Will the visual you choose be readable on a small device? Will the learner be able to listen to a video on a busy train? Will they be technically savvy enough to follow a step-by-step animation?

## Summary

There is more to creating successful learning than the visuals, more than we can possibly consider here. And successful visuals rely on the balance between image and text, hierarchy, structure, accessibility and understanding the technology on which they will be viewed.

The visuals should be relevant and eye-catching, but good design should also blend into the background. The learner should see the content, not the page. A learner should not trip over the visuals to get to the learning. If a visual is not directly related to the learning, it becomes counterproductive — a distraction rather than a tool. Good design will help the reader flow through the learning, and not have to think about what their next action is. It's a fine balance, but when it's there, the positive impact will be felt.

Learning needs structure, impact, relatability and memorability. There is no point creating blindingly good content if the design lets it down, makes it hard to follow or distracts from the purpose. And vice versa. There is little point in having beautiful, inspiring visuals and flashy animations if the content does not answer the user's needs.

And don't forget the wealth of other options out there other than visuals — podcasts, blogs, vlogs, websites, printed resources, blended learning, etc. Done right, visuals and their styling can be adapted across other media to create consistency and recognition and you can provide engagement through the variety used. There are new media popping up every year and we need to harness these to engage our audiences. 

*Make sure the visuals enhance the message, not cause a distraction.*

## Resources:

Canva.com  
Pexels.com  
Unsplash.com  
FlatIcon.com  
FreePik.com  
DaFont.com

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