Designing Documents for Skimming

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Headings Should Help Readers Skim

- Heading Content: Use headings and subheadings that create an informative package—a document that can be easily skimmed. In general do not have more than half a page of text without a heading on any document—including email. Informative headings and subheadings are a little bit like newspaper headlines. They give the reader an overview of what each section covers.

Weak: Recommendations
Introduction
Conclusion
Financials

These kinds of headings do not help readers to skim the document. They tell you nothing about the actual content of the sections they introduce.

Better: Recommendation: Open a New Distribution Center in Ohio
Inefficient Distribution System is Hurting Sales
Approval Expected by June
Sales Should Grow by 6% in 2003

These headings are better because they serve as summaries.

- Leveled headings format: For most reports you will probably have about three different levels of headings. Each level of heading should be
  Parallel
  Visually distinct from the other levels
  Easily distinguishable from the text
  Informative
  Consistently formatted-size, font, style, capitalization
  -Avoid using all caps
- Be consistent with capitalization within each level of heading. For example, either capitalize all words in the headings (except articles and prepositions—a, an, the, by, for, etc.) or only capitalize the first word.

Lists, Bullets, and White Space Improve Skimming

- Divide long paragraphs into shorter ones.
- Use one inch margins
- Do not justify the right margin—leave it ragged to avoid spacing inconsistencies.
- Avoid crowding your text too close to any graphics or figures.
- Break up long paragraphs and chunks of text into lists or bullets when possible.
- Use numbers for sequencing or ranking; use bullets for everything else.
- Use hanging indentations for lists and bullets—every line is indented—to help the bullet or number stand out.

Typography Can Improve Skimming

- Make typography choices—boldface, italics, underlining, fonts, capitals, size—that draw readers' eyes to important points.
- Avoid overusing typography features.
- Use typography features consistently.
- Use serif fonts for text—Times New Roman for example; sans serif for headings—Helvetica for example.
- Avoid using more than two fonts in a document.
- Avoid using all capitals.
- Choose a legible font size—10-12 pt for text; 14-20 for headings; 26-30 for visual aids.