

15 Ways to Make Investment Reports Easier to Read

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You put on your best outfit for client and marketing meetings. Your offices are well appointed, reflecting the professional culture of your firm. Then you pass the presentation materials around. The font is quirky and informal. In places it's too small for some clients to read comfortably. With the flip of a page, your chance of making a positive first impression is lost.

Most of us don't think much about fonts, but they make a big difference in how your clients respond to the information you want to convey. Researchers at MIT found that good typography not only improved the readers' moods, but subjects also underestimated the time it took to read the assigned text.[i] So before you default to whatever font choice comes with your software package, consider these 15 time-tested design strategies that will help you make a font selection that gives you the best advantage in client reports and marketing materials.



To serif or not to serif?

The first step in producing professional-quality presentations and reports is to identify the best font for the task at hand. There are two types of fonts: serif and sans serif. Serif fonts have “serifs” – those little notches at the ends of letters. **Times New Roman** is a common serif font. Sans serif fonts don't have those embellishments. **Arial** is an example of a sans serif font.

Serif fonts

Serif fonts convey a sense of dignity and authority. With origins dating back to early days of print, they add a traditional feel to the text. Those little serifs in the lettering help pull the reader through the material, making them perfect for longer reports that are meant to be read in print.

Sans serif fonts

Sans serif fonts became indispensable in the Internet era. Clean and simple, they are easy to read in digital formats. Sans serif fonts are perfect for PowerPoint slides or material meant for online reading.

Since you likely use a mixture of print and online material in your practice, which type of font should you go for? Your best option is to choose one of each. With a good sans serif and serif font in your toolkit, your readers will stay engaged no matter how you deliver the information. And you can mix them up within a document to add variety, too.

Use the following strategies for combining your two font types in presentations and reports:

Strategy 1: Never use more than two fonts in one document.

Strategy 2: Never use two serif fonts or two sans serif fonts in the same document. This may cause visual confusion.

Strategy 3: For printed material, use the serif font for the main body, and add variety by using the sans serif font for subtitles, call-outs, sidebars, and captions for charts and graphs.

Strategy 4: For online or screen viewing, use the sans serif font for the main body copy, and add variety by using a serif font for subtitles, call-outs and sidebars.

Good fonts for financial reports and presentations

If you never use anything but common default fonts like **Calibri** or **Times New Roman**, you'd be just fine, but your client reports and marketing materials would look like everyone else's!

There are many fonts well suited to professional financial reports and presentations. If you want to stand out from the crowd, but still project a professional image, consider serif fonts like **Cambria/Cambria Math**, **Palatino** or **Whitney**, all of which offer good numeric and symbol options, too. Professional sans serif choices include **Arial**, **Century Gothic** and **Helvetica**.

Strategy 5: Using a less-common font will help you stand out from the crowd.

*Strategy 6: Avoid novelty fonts like **Comic Sans**. They aren't professional and can be hard to read.*

Add variety, but keep it in the (font) family

Limiting yourself to two fonts – one serif, one sans – doesn't mean your client and marketing materials have to look boring. You can add variety through thoughtful use of different elements within each font family, like weights – bold, italic and regular are the most common – and sizes.

Adding visual interest goes a long way toward holding readers' attention. More importantly, it can help direct their attention to particular parts of your report or presentation, and create a "visual hierarchy" that will enhance their understanding of the information that you want to convey.

Use regular-weight type for your main content, but consider boldface and/or larger type sizes for headlines, titles and subheadings. Italics are great for calling attention to key points, as we have done with the *Strategies* in this article.

And don't forget color. Changing the color of a typeface can also establish a visual hierarchy and add spice to your report or presentation. Just be sure the colors you use reflect your professional brand image. You can read more about that in my previous article.

Strategy 7: Use one good font and create emphasis and visual hierarchy with color, size and bold weights.

Strategy 8: Avoid glitzy add-ons like shadows when designing professional materials.

Don't forget the numbers – or the money

Numbers are the heart of most financial advisors' presentations and reports. All font families include numbers and basic symbols, but you'll probably need more than that.

Consider all the ways you use numbers – within the text of a report, in a column, as plot points in graphs and so on – before you commit to a font family. Be sure it includes equations, mathematical and statistical elements and other symbols you frequently use.

And speaking of symbols, don't forget currency! Most fonts include symbols for the dollar, euro, pound and yen, but they stop there. As the global economy expands to include emerging and frontier markets, forward-looking advisors need a font that includes symbols for currencies like rupees, pesos and the new shekel.

Once you have a solid list, follow these strategies to find the best font choice for your needs:

Strategy 9: Look for fonts that offer proportional figures for numerals to be read within the text.

Strategy 10: Use a font that offers tabular figures if you present numbers in columns. Invest in fonts with weight duplexing, which lets you bold numbers within columns without making that number appear bigger than others.

Strategy 11: Use a font with indices, which are numbers within circles, when your presentations require numbers that plot points on graphs.

Strategy 12: Be sure your font includes all the global currency symbols you need for your investment reports and

commentary.

A special word about presentations

Sans serif fonts work best in PowerPoint presentations. Even if you will be using the slides as hard copy handouts, stick to sans serif for the main text and use your serif font for title pages and page headings to provide contrast and visual interest.

Strategy 13: Keep text on slides to a minimum. Use hard copy handouts or online resources for supplemental information.

Strategy 14: Provide a good balance of text and images per page, both to create interest and to address the needs of verbal and visual learners in the audience.

Strategy 15: Make sure all content is set in a font size large enough to be seen by everyone in the room, but not so big it causes bullet points to run over one line.

Conclusion

Typography is a subtle tool. When used well, it doesn't call attention to itself. Instead, it helps the reader understand the important information in your presentation or report. But poor typographical choices become a distraction – like a cheesy necktie worn by a presenter – overshadowing the message. Financial advisors who dismiss the importance of font choice in their presentations and reports do so at their own expense.

This article is adapted from the paper "First Impressions Matter: The Importance of Typography in Investment Management Presentations and Reporting," done in collaboration with Assette. The next article will focus on the 3rd pillar of a standout presentation: Optimizing Information Organization and Design for Investment Industry Reports and Presentations.

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<http://affect.media.mit.edu/pdfs/05.larson-picard.pdf>