

Why do Some Images Distract?

How to Be Sure Your Images Work as Smartly as Your Text



Have you heard of Life Long Learning yet?

Apparently life-long learning is a buzzword in brain science circles right now. More than ever it seems that we are looking for ways to keep our minds sharp, whether by starting to learn a foreign language, taking up new hobbies, or simply exposing ourselves to a field of study we have never embraced before.

Here's your chance!

Whether you're a self-confessed lifelong learner or one of those who heaved a sigh of relief when you left formal education behind, the art and science of using images optimally is a whole new world.

Why not dive in and apply your mind?

You may think the information in this report is pretty simple

It may even seem very obvious. But you may have noticed that common sense is none-too-common when you're out and about in the world.

Things that seem obvious are often overlooked *when the time comes for application*. You'll be amazed to see how often the simple rules of using images correctly remain unapplied ... thus diluting the power of visual messaging all around you.

So read, digest and then translate that into action. Give yourself a competitive advantage by looking at the world through an artist's lens.

I'm pleased to be your co-conspirator in embracing life-long learning 😊

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alison". The name is written in black ink on a white background.

P.S. This document has been edited and spell-checked till the cows came home. And then for a little while after that, too. However, mistakes creep in even when you have highly trained cattle on the job. So if you spot a typo or a grammatical error, please do let me know - I'll be delighted to fix it. No point is too big or too small – I want it to be perfect.

P.P.S. I live in Cape Town, South Africa where we use British spelling rules. That means we write **colour** instead of *color* and **recognise** not *recognize*. Oh, and **centre** instead of *center*. This may look odd if you are used to North American conventions, but it is nevertheless correct 😊

Have you avoided learning about images because you're not a graphic designer?

That would be perfectly understandable, and you can continue to avoid it if you choose. But here are a couple of compelling reasons to educate yourself about the basic use of imagery in your written work.

1. Paying design fees leaves you with less money to spend on excellent images that boost your written message.
2. When your designer returns a project to you, you may be left wondering whether you got the best value for your money. Because you have no *objective* criteria with which to measure the quality of the finished product.

Recycle your design skills... not your images

Chances are you are going to do more than one report, e-book, presentation or even website in your life. So the design skills that you learn now will be put to use many times in the future. In contrast, the idea of using the same tired images many times in different products or settings is... crazy!

With that in mind, what makes the most sense - to learn a handful of design skills and use them over and over with fresh, inspiring images, or buy a handful of images and pay the designer over and over to re-invent them somehow for every new product?

And if you're not sure which of those options makes sense for you, there's always the other issue.

You're at the mercy of your designer

Now your designer is probably a decent person, full of integrity and dedicated to doing the best work they are capable of. But have they done a good job on your project? How can you tell?

Learning some basic design skills empowers you to keep control of how you want your project to look. It gives you tools to discuss options knowledgeably and weigh up what works best to achieve the polished outcome you're aiming for.

So learn now, in order to know what good work looks like later.

You're probably familiar with this saying...

'A picture* is worth a thousand words,' and you know it's true because you've felt the power of a simple image that springs off the page at you, complementing the accompanying text and driving home the author's point.

Then again, you have no doubt seen images that leave you wondering. For whatever reason, they don't seem to add much to the sentences alongside them. You frown, scratch your head, and although you finally read on you remain slightly distracted.

There are three reasons why images distract:

1. They are lazy
2. They break the flow
3. The only words they add are 'blah-blah-blah'

We'll deal with each point in order, starting with the first one.

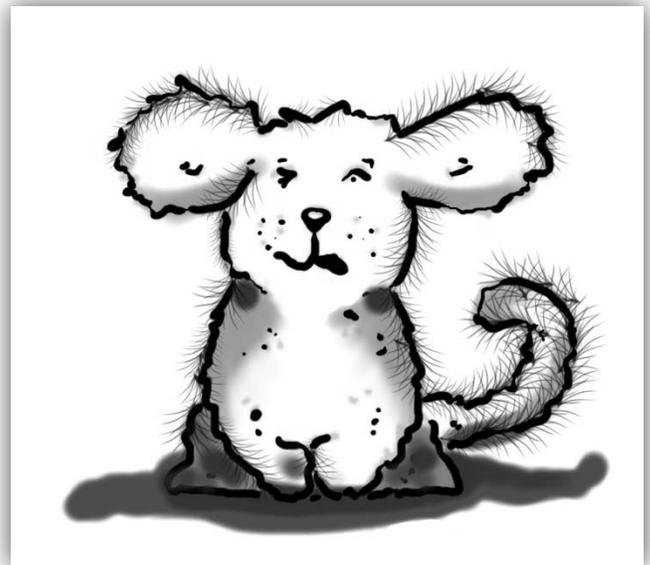
So how do you know if images are lazy?

Lazy images encourage your reader to go to sleep. These are the images that are just fluffy filler. They are included simply to make a report look longer and meatier - just like the word fluffy in the preceding sentence. Since they serve no real purpose you can recognize them easily by pretending they are not there.

If you imagine the report without that image and the report manages to make its point anyway, then you have identified a lazy image - or perhaps a lazy writer ;)

Of course you are not a lazy writer, so it's an easy problem to solve – plan your points and include each image only if it serves a specific purpose.

And that brings us to the next point which is how can images be incorrectly positioned?



If an image seems to serve no purpose in a report – like fluffy dog pictures in business writing – there's a good chance it is filler, included simply to make the report seem longer.

(*in this document I use the word picture to mean image, illustration, photo, graph or other visual representations.)

Can the right image be in the wrong place?

Yes, you can indeed have the perfect image to get your message across and still reduce its effect by positioning that image badly. This can be as a result of distracted planning, or even too-hasty editing.

In English we write and read in a certain direction, from left to right. Your eyes are programmed to travel from the top left hand corner of the page, line by line, till you arrive safely at the bottom right hand corner.

When you position images and text a way that forces the reader's eyes to do something different from the left to right habit, the eyes get tired very, very quickly. Tired eyes are bad news for your business because they give up and move on to easier reading. And then you have missed the opportunity to get your point across to the reader.

So once you decide on the perfect image, consider how to position it to maintain the smooth flow of your reader's eye movements. As a rule of thumb, position images against the right hand margin so that the reader's attention is not distracted at the beginning of a new paragraph or line.

Size definitely matters, too. Bigger is not better as it hogs too much of the page, leaving the text to tiptoe around it. At the opposite extreme, having a number of smaller images can make the page look cluttered and 'bitty'. So this is one of the few cases where you want aim for average – pick a neat, medium-sized image that is an appropriate shape (e.g. portrait proportions on a regular page) and go for it.

And when you do your final editing, make sure that your pesky software hasn't rearranged things in ways that you never intended.

But what about a planned pause?

Of course, there may be times when you WANT to make your reader pause at a certain paragraph. In such a case, you can use visual interruption to good effect to make them zero in on a particular space. In that case, an image can become the ultimate exclamation mark. We'll take a closer look at that later on, when we examine some examples.

But for now it's time for the final point, which is blah-di-blah images.



Readers' eyes don't like detours. They want to go from the top left hand to the bottom right hand corner as smoothly as possible.

Have you ever met a *blah-di-blah* image?

How do you identify such an image? Identification is reasonably simple, because a blah-di-blah image says little of interest. Such an image has no spring in its stride, no “kapow” up its sleeve. In short it’s boring and yes, there are many such images around.

Let’s take the hackneyed example of a light bulb as a metaphor for a bright idea. The one thing it has going for it is recognition – everyone gets the message. But it’s also been done to death, so its use can definitely do with some spicing up.

So what can you do to make sure your images have a Wow Factor?

It may not always be easy, but here are some pointers. ‘Wow’ images can be those that tickle a reader’s fancy, either through humour or through lateral thinking. There are a couple of examples in the Image Tour down below.

Alternatively they may simply be cropped and positioned in a way that adds extra visual drama to the document. That ties in with the point in the last section about an image being the ultimate exclamation mark.

The bottom line is that you want every image to be a **contributor**. Each image should add more than its face value to your work. You want images that entertain, illuminate or make your reader really ‘stop and think somehow.

But for now, it’s time for a quick recap.



This is NOT a blah-di-blah image. The 'light bulb moment' example may be overused but it's also recognizable. And there are ways to take old ideas and give them a new spin...

Summary and Next Step

Let's take a quick canter around what we have covered, and then look at where we go to from here.

We've looked at how fluffy images, badly positioned images and blah –di-blah images can all distract a reader to the extent that they don't pay enough attention to absorbing the accompanying text. Within the section on badly positioned images, we also touched on what works well to ensure you get the images in the right place.

However, it's one thing to see things that work, but now it's time to deconstruct and look at why they work. In addition we'll take the learning to the next level and look at some examples that do NOT work, so that you can see that firsthand as well.

So the next section will really hammer home the learning and hone your image critiquing eyes so that you can take your own work to a whole new level. In short, it's time to take the Image Tour...

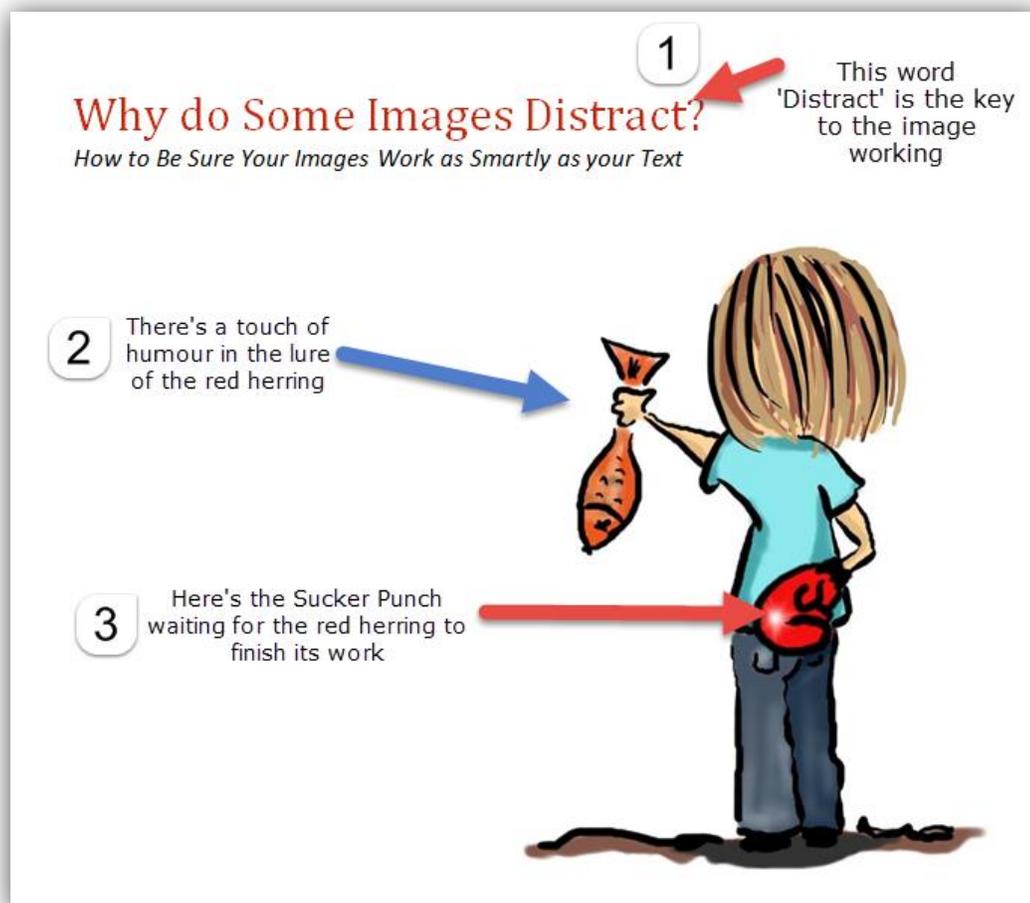
Welcome to the Image Tour

Let's take a look at the images within in this document. We'll look at why they work well as they are, and then we'll monkey about with them to see how much havoc they can cause. By the end of this section, you will have an even better understanding of how visuals can take on a life of their own in your written work.

The Lazy Image – or “Images for Images’ sake”

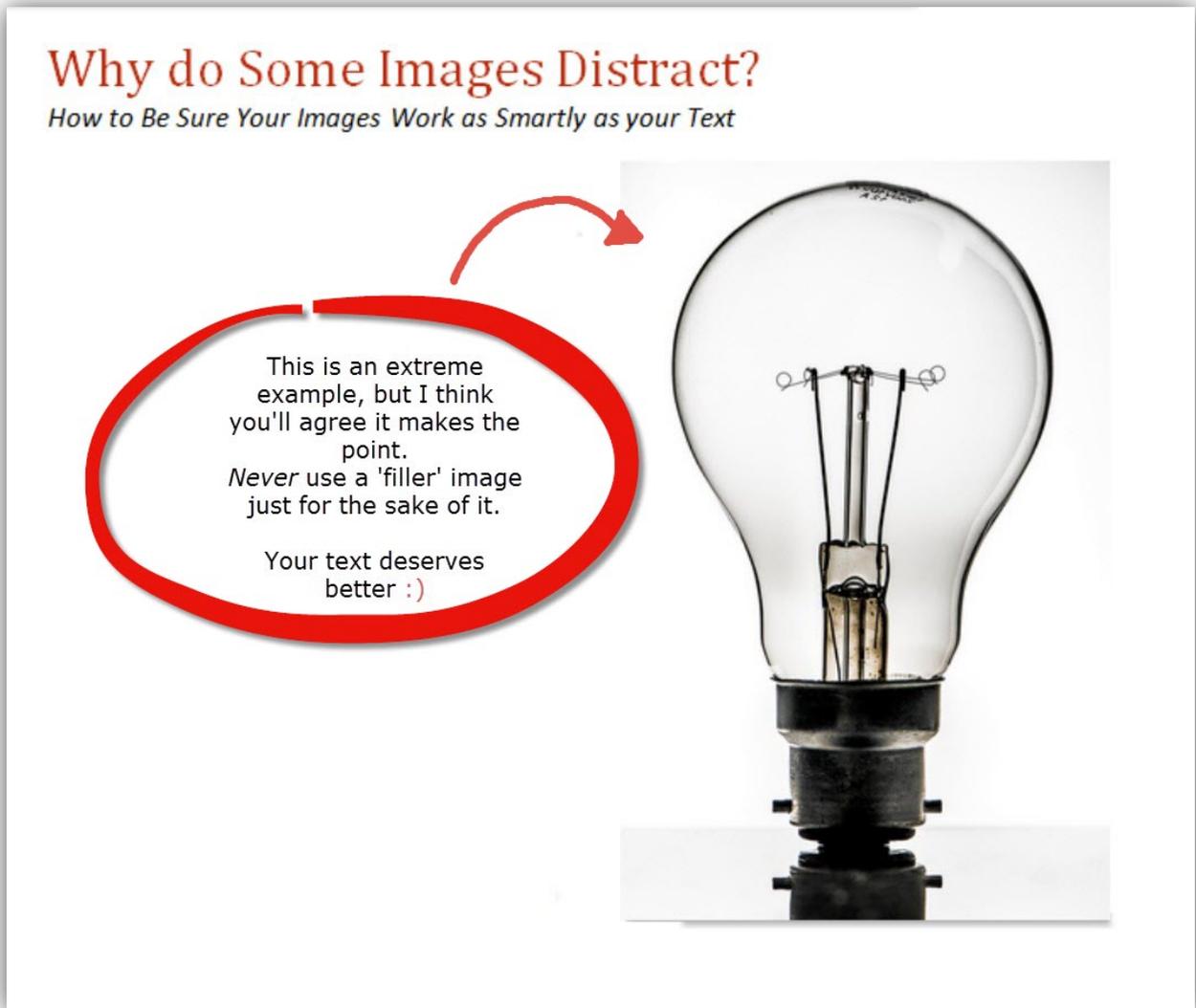
Example 1 – This shows the cover of this report as it really is, and then unpacks the rationale for it.

- First of all, you can see that there's a connection between the wording of the title and the image used.
- Secondly the images is designed to make you think (at least, I hope it does) while you connect the dots between the l'il red herring and the Sucker Punch that lies in wait for the unwary.
- And finally there's the touch of humour that should make you smile at the whole scene.



Example 2 – This shows what happens when any old image is used to fill up a space.

Yes, it's an extreme example, and I am sure you would never do anything as disconnected as this. But sometimes a ridiculous example is just what it takes to make a point quickly and effectively.



Images for images' sake are just... boring. You can always do better than this!

Example 3 – This image is just to see if you're awake ;)

Not really, but it should make you sit up and take notice. After all, in most semi-serious business-related reports, if you see a fluffy dog you're going to suspect that it's out of place!

But it just so happens that this time, the pup is legitimate; he's just there to help you remember that fluff is fluff.

So how do you know if images are lazy?

Lazy images encourage the reader to go to sleep. These are the filler. They are included in reports and presentations and meetings and conferences and many other places for no specific purpose other than to pretend to be relevant.

If you identify an image in a report that seems to be filler, then you have identified a lazy image - or perhaps a lazy writer ;)

Of course you are not a lazy writer, so it's an easy problem to solve – plan your points and include each image only if it serves a specific purpose.

And that brings us to the next point which is how can images be incorrectly positioned?

If an image seems to serve no purpose in a report – like fluffy dog pictures in business writing – there's a good chance it is filler, included simply to make the report seem longer.

And of course, this is not a lazy image - in this case the fluffy dog in the business report really was placed here on purpose ;)



Fluff is fluff - unless it's thoughtful and serves the reader

Images that Break (Or Keep) the Flow

Example 4 – images on the right hand side, logical text wrapping

This is the page as it is, and it works. The image is an appropriate size, it's positioned to the right so that the eye is well into reading before it meets a roadblock. The text wraps neatly and in a way that flows easily and again, does not offer any roadblocks to distract you as a reader.

Can the right image be in the wrong place?

Yes, you can indeed have the perfect image across and still reduce its effect by positioning that image badly. There are no images at the left hand margin, so no distractions at the beginnings of lines or paragraphs.

In English we write and read from left to right. Your eyes are programmed to travel from the top left hand corner to the bottom right hand corner. You arrive safely at the bottom right hand corner.

When you position images and text in a way that forces the reader's eyes to do something different from the left to right habit, the eyes get tired very, very quickly. Tired eyes are bad news for your business because they give up and move on to easier reading.

And then you have missed the opportunity to get your point across to the reader.

So once you decide on the perfect image, consider how to position it in the smooth flow of your reading. As a rule of thumb, position the image in the right hand margin so that the reader's eye is not distracted at the beginning of a line or paragraph.

The image is large enough to be clear, but does not take over the page or cause the text to wrap awkwardly. Size is not better as it hogs the page. The text to tiptoe around it. The page, having a number of smaller images, does not look cluttered and 'bitty'. So this is one of the few cases where you want aim for average – pick a neat, medium-sized image that is an appropriate shape (e.g. portrait proportions on a regular page) and go for it.

And when you do your final editing, make sure that your pesky software hasn't rearranged things in ways that you never intended.



Readers' eyes don't like detours. They want to go from the top left hand to the bottom right hand corner as smoothly as possible.

Yep, this one's a keeper. No roadblocks on this straight stretch!

Example 5 – a number of smaller images

This is the page laid out with three smaller images. The problem with smaller images is that they make the eyes jump around like a kid on a pogo stick. Up and down, back and forth they go, jumping between the text and the images. Multiple images also make it likely that the text will wrap awkwardly which means... you guessed it... more ways for the reader to get tired.

Can the right image be in the wrong place?

Yes, you can. A perfect image to get your message across and still reduce its effect by positioning it poorly can be as a result of distracted planning.

In English, we read in a certain direction, from left to right. Your eyes don't just travel from the top left hand corner of the page, line by line, till you arrive safely at the bottom right hand corner.

When you position images and text a way that forces the reader's eyes to do the opposite of the left to right habit, the eyes get confused. This is bad news for your business.

Then you notice that reading the wrapped text feels messy...

Consider how to position it to match the reader's eye movements. As a rule of thumb, position images against the left hand margin so that the reader's attention is not distracted at the beginning of a new paragraph.

Bigger is not better as it hogs too much space. Smaller images can make the page look cluttered. One of the few cases where you want aim for average – pick a neat, appropriate shape (e.g. portrait proportions on an regular page) and go for it.

After final editing, make sure that your page layout software hasn't rearranged things in ways you intended.

But what about a plan?

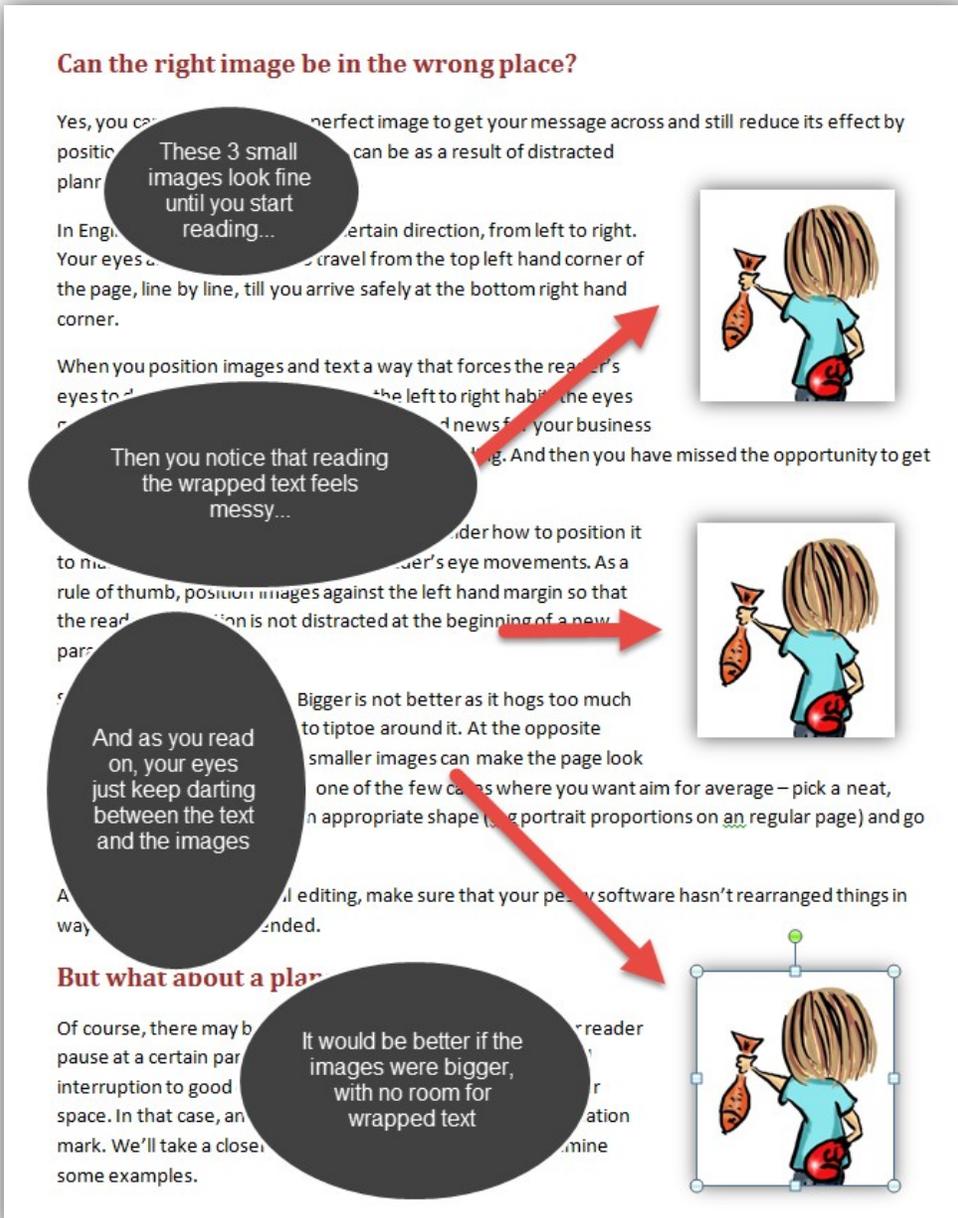
Of course, there may be a case where a reader needs to pause at a certain part of the text. An interruption to good flow is not always a bad thing. In that case, an image can be a good mark. We'll take a closer look at some examples.

These 3 small images look fine until you start reading...

Then you notice that reading the wrapped text feels messy...

And as you read on, your eyes just keep darting between the text and the images

It would be better if the images were bigger, with no room for wrapped text



These 3 little red herrings are major distractions. Stick to a single image per page, or perhaps two – no matter what, space them out to avoid odd text wrapping

Example 6 – too large an image

This is the page with the single image still placed on the right, but now it's bigger, and the size has become a problem because the image has stolen the limelight. Instead of being the understudy, it has taken centre stage and is competing with the text.

Can the right image be in the wrong place?

Yes, you can indeed have the perfect image to get your message  and still reduce its effect by positioning that image badly. This can be as a result of distracted planning, or even too-hasty editing.

In English we write and read in a certain direction, from left to right. Your eyes are programmed to travel from the top left hand corner of the page, line by line, till you arrive safely at the bottom right hand corner.

When you position images and text a way that forces the reader's eyes to do something different from the left to right habit, the eyes get tired very, very quickly. Tired eyes are bad news for your business because they give up and move on to the next page. And then you have the opportunity to read to the reader.

So once you do have an image, consider its position. Maintain the reader's eye path, position the image on the left hand margin, so that attention is not jumping across to the beginning of a line.

Size definitely matters. It is not better as it hog the page, leaving the text around it. At the opposite extreme, having

The large image dominates here, and as you read down the text, your eye cannot help jumping across to the picture.



Readers' eyes don't like detours. They want to go from the top left hand to the bottom right hand corner as smoothly as

Bah! No self-respecting text wants to compete with the image. Unless it's a portfolio, images should play a supporting role

Blah-di-blah Images?

Example 7 – lights, camera, action!

The image on this page has the Wow factor – even though it's just a light-bulb, it's big and bold and cropped for drama. And best of all it has a little cartoon figure in it – yup, **I'm shamelessly punting the power of cartoons here**. But admit it, they add a light-hearted touch, and engage the attention of the reader

Have you ever read a blah-di-blah image?

How do you identify a blah-di-blah image? It's often simple, because a blah-di-blah image lacks interest. Such an image has no spring in its step and it's tucked up its sleeve. In short it's boring and yes, there are many such images out there.

Let's take the hackneyed example of a light bulb. It's a symbol of a bright idea. The one thing it has going for it is that everyone gets the message. But it's a cliché and its use can definitely do with some spice.

So what can you do to make a light bulb image have a Wow Factor?

It may not always be easy, but here are some pointers. 'Wow' images can be those that tickle a reader's fancy, either through humour or through lateral thinking. Here are some examples in the Image Tour down below.

Alternatively, you can position a light bulb in a way that adds extra interest. This ties in with the point in the last section about using an exclamation mark.

The bottom line is that you want every image to be a contributor. Each image should add more than its face value to your work. You want images that entertain, illuminate or make your reader really stop and think somehow.

But for now, it's time for a quick recap.

Cropped to create drama

Plus a super-sized light bulb, for a touch of the unexpected

And the cartoon character to add fun and humour



This is NOT a blah-di-blah image. The 'light bulb moment' example may be overused but it's also recognizable. And there are ways to take old ideas and give them a new spin...

For WOW factor, this image ticks all the boxes!

Example 7 – lights, camera, action!

Actually, the lightbulb could have had a load of drama without the cartoon figure – just by being big, bold and cropped. So that is always another option.

Have you ever met a *blah-di-blah* image?

How do you identify such an image? Identification is reasonably simple, because a blah-di-blah image says little of interest. Such an image has no spring in its stride, no “kapow” up its sleeve. In short it’s boring and yes, there are many such images around.

Let’s take the hackneyed example of a light bulb as a metaphor for a bright idea. The one thing it has going for it is recognition – everyone gets the message. But it’s also been done to death, so its use can definitely do with some spicing up.

So what can you do to make sure your images have a Wow Factor?

It may not always be easy, but here are some pointers. ‘Wow’ images can be those that tickle a reader’s funny bone either through humour or lateral thinking.

Alternatively they may simply be cropped and positioned in a way that adds extra visual drama to the document. That ties in with the point in the last section about an image being the ultimate exclamation mark.

The bottom line is that you want every image to be a **contributor**. Each image should add more than its face value to your work. You want images that entertain, illuminate or make your reader really stop and think somehow.

But for now, it’s time for a quick recap.



This is NOT a blah-di-blah image. The ‘light bulb moment’ example may be overused but it’s also recognizable. And there are ways to take old ideas and give them a new spin...

Tons of ‘kapow’ – here the humble light bulb hogs the spotlight!

Example 8 – meh!

On the other hand, it could all have fizzled into a damp squib quite easily, and if you don't believe me, take a look down below...

Here is the light bulb again – this time with no drama at all. And yes, it fizzles and fails and falls by the wayside.

Have you ever met a *blah-di-blah* image?

How do you identify such an image? It is reasonably simple, because a blah-di-blah image says little of interest. Such an image marches in its stride, no "kapow" up its sleeve. In short it's boring and yes, there are many examples.

Let's take the hackneyed example of a light bulb. The one thing it does get the message. But it's a cliché and definitely do with some spirit.

So what can you do to make it work? It may not always be easy, but here are some ideas: those that tickle a reader's imagination, lateral thinking. Alternatively, position it in a way that adds to the text. It ties in with the point in the layout and is the ultimate exclamation mark.

The bottom line is that you want to be a contributor. Each image should add more than its face value to your work. You want images that entertain, illuminate or make your reader really 'stop and think somehow.

But now it's time for a quick recap.

You can see how the light bulb lacks 'oomph' here, in comparison to the previous image. And it's simply because the image is a predictable size, and not cropped for drama.

Metaphor for a moment – even one use can be overused. How Factor? It's not always obvious. Images can be used in a variety of ways. Some are used to add humour or interest. Some are used to document. That's not always being the best use.



This is a blah-di-blah image. The 'light bulb moment' example may be recognizable but it's also overused.

And yes, there are ways to take old ideas and give them a new spin...

No drama at all - this image shines no light at all...

And that brings us to the end of the Image Tour, but you may be wondering something...

If you don't implement all this immediately, is your work only fit for the garbage dump?

When you re-carpet a room, it shows up against the other decorative elements and makes them look shabby by comparison. In the same way, when you learn a new skill it shines a light on areas you may have been unaware of up to now. And then the tendency is to think, "Oh no! All my earlier work is so shabby!"

And of course, that's just not the case. Your work to date is likely of high quality and has been received as such. You've added significant value to your readers before and you will continue to do so.

On the other hand, could your work get better? Of course! No matter what heights we rise to, all of us can afford to add extra polish to what we do. And if you can improve on something, why would you choose not to do so?

So if you are interested in taking your use of images to new levels, take a look at the free resources listed on my website at <http://alisonbeere.com/free-resources>. Knowledge is the new currency, after all!

Services & Courses

Do you want a unique, custom cartoon character for your brand?

So, you've decided you want to give yourself the edge and add a level of branding that goes beyond logos and taglines. You want something that is uniquely you, quirky and different.

Something that your clients will associate with your work and remember with a smile...

[Click here for details of the Quirkily You package](#)

What if you could afford to add cartoon spice to your written work, week in and week out? You can, with a Cartoon Library Collab

The time and creativity invested in making one-off custom cartoons makes everyday use an expensive prospect. Using stock photos or illustrations isn't much less pricey, and you're back to the same old problem – hours spent searching it out, and the picture still isn't what you are looking for.

But what if you could get in on the ground-floor of designing a large collection of cartoons... that would be available to you for little more than the cost of a single custom-drawn one?

[Click here for details of the Cartoon Library Collab package](#)

Love you (Gran)Ma

There are certain times when you just want to treat a special person in your life. You want to give them a gift that shows them that you know what's important to them. Or that offers them the opportunity to view themselves through your eyes.

When you want to give Gran or Ma a deep sense that they mean **a lot** to you, you can use a personalized sketch to do so.

[Click here for details of the Love you Gran\(Ma\) package](#)

The Da Vinci Course

Would you like to be able to draw cartoons to liven up your own work? Can one really learn to cartoon online? And is this even possible if you haven't picked up a pencil since grade school? Ask a random adult the question "Can you draw?" and they'll probably look at you like a deer caught in the headlights. "I can't draw to save my life" is a common response.

Is that true for you?

[Click here to find out how you can break the "I can't draw" curse for good...](#)

About the Author

Alison Beere is a cartoonist who takes personal delight in jump-starting adventurous adults to creativity. She achieves this through teaching beginner through intermediate cartooning classes online.

She also draws custom cartoon character commissions for selected authors and clients.

Alison wasn't always a cartoonist

She used to be (well, still could be if she chose) a Chartered Accountant. Alison took a career break to be with her children kids and started a web business. As part of her travels on the ol' Interwebz, she became part of a vibrant online marketing community run by... (can you believe it?) ... a gifted cartoonist.

At that point, Alison was one of those who thought she 'couldn't draw'. She hadn't even picked up a coloured crayon since primary school.

So why did Alison sign up to learn to cartoon?

She wanted to use 'the other side' of her brain. And have some fun. And hey, we all know that cartoons are hardly art critic territory, so that made the Big Scary Leap possible even to an introverted, risk-averse accountant.

Another compelling reason was probably that her mentor doesn't believe in inborn talent. "Talent is skill," he says, "and skill is built through one heck of a lot of practice, and feedback from the right teacher."

Turns out he was right.

And she went over to the Dark Light-Hearted Side

Within three months Alison had perfect strangers coming up to her in coffee shops where she was sketching and asking "Are you a professional cartoonist?" At first she just laughed at the thought of how they had been duped. But as it happened over and over and over again, eventually she began to answer quite simply: "Yes." Her class mates reported similar experiences, so clearly they were all growing talented.



Hammock-loving, terrier-like, vertically-challenged, cartoonist and teacher – and delighted to meet you!

From student to artist

For carefully selected commission clients, the unique characters Alison draws are a secret weapon when it comes to standing out from the crowd. Her work adds memorability and humour to their offerings, which translates to more sales and higher profits.

And from artist to teacher

After a few years, Alison's mentor was generous enough to invite her to co-pilot his cartoon courses and learn his teaching methods as well as his cartooning skills. And he has now given her wings so that she can do it herself, still using his engineered –to-succeed methodology.

Alison's cartooning students find they can reach a level of expertise where they are confident to do their own product illustrations within 6 months. Plus there are two added bonuses: learning to access their quirky side to unlock creativity, and gaining habits that improve their daily workflow far beyond cartooning.

From a personal point of view, Alison has found her natural habitat in safe, online forums where as an introvert she can engage and encourage with ease and watch peoples' skills unfurl and blossom to reach levels of skill that they did not dare to dream of before.

In the end, it boils down to one word...

Alison's friends and colleagues describe her as loyal, reliable, dependable, **and tenacious**. And though that may not be a shoot-the-lights-out description, it describes her well because she **hates** to let anyone down, ever.



Alison has a terrier-like tenacity. She goes to great lengths to produce what her clients are looking for and to deliver on time.

For students, she shows up every day and offers the laser-clear insights they appreciate.