Write and Organize for Deeper Learning

28 evidence-based and easy-to-apply tactics
that will make your instruction better for learning

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[Tactic 22] Design for Scanning

Many adults scan materials and web pages to evaluate whether they will meet their needs before committing to the time it takes to read them. Readers on the web, especially, scan and decide quickly whether the page or site is worth their time. We can make our materials better for this purpose by making instruction easy to scan. This not only helps people decide whether the content is likely to be useful, it helps them find content that specifically meets their job needs, now and later.

You may think that if you lock your content inside online learning templates, this issue won't affect you. But most adults feel strongly about making choices, so not being able to decide whether your content will meet their needs may negatively affect how they feel about the content. For example, the lack of a useful menu on the right side of the course shown in Figure 6.2 may cause some people to decide it's poorly designed or likely not for them, even before they view one page. Figure 6.3 shows the same course with a clearer menu.

Figure 6.2 Course menu does not show the course topics.

Figure 6.3 Course menu shows the course topics.

Here are the most important things we can do to help readers scan:

- Use meaningful headings and sub-headings (with words readers know and expect).
- Use ordered (numbered) and unordered (bulleted) lists and tables for collections of information.
- Add captions to concisely explain what the list, figure, or table shows.
- Add signals.

We'll discuss lists, tables, and captions in this tactic, and headings, subheadings, and signals in two other tactics.

Lists and tables

Lists make scanning easier, and they are easier to read and find details in than paragraphs. They also improve understanding of arrangement and sequence (numbered lists). Lists often use less text than a paragraph and naturally add white space. I show list best practices in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 How to make lists more understandable

Types of lists

- Use *numbered* (ordered) lists when the items have a natural order or hierarchy of importance. Clarify the order if it isn't obvious.
- Use *bulleted* (unordered) lists when the items have no natural order or hierarchy of importance.

If the list is long

- Consider highlighting key words to improve scanning.
- Don't overdo highlighting, as it makes reading more difficult.
- Consider grouping list items into subgroups with sub-headings.

All lists

- Use parallel structure to start each list item.
- Present lists sorted logically when possible: priority, date, person, department, task, cost, and so on. If we need to explain sorting, explain it as a heading.

"Parallel structure" means consistently using the same word structure. This makes lists easier to read and understand. In Figure 6.4, I highlighted the non-parallel word.

Figure 6.4 Parallel vs. non-parallel structure

Parallel:	**Non-parallel:**
There are three reasons why it's important to give feedback.	There are three reasons why it's important to give feedback.
Valuable feedback	Valuable feedback
- Helps staff understand expectations - Develops your ability to ask for and manage input - Builds positive relationships	- Helps staff understand expectations - Developing your ability to ask for and manage input - Builds positive relationships

Well-designed tables show relationships between items that readers could easily miss in a description. Clear row or column headers make these relationships clear, so it's critical to use clear, reader-friendly language in headers.

For example, Table 6.2 shows the relationship between different hardwood lumber grades and their sizes. Below the table is a partial example of the same text in paragraph format so you can judge the difference in the formats' ease of understanding.

Table 6.2 Standard hardwood lumber grades and sizes in a table (top) and paragraph (bottom)

| Grade	Trade Name	Min width	Min length
Firsts and Seconds	FAS	6"	8'
Select	SEL	4"	6'
#1 Common	1C	3"	4'
#2A Common	2C	3"	4'
#2B Common	3AC	3"	4'
#3A Common	3BC	3"	4'

One way to summarize standard hardwood lumber grades is by trade name and minimum width and length. The highest grade is firsts and seconds, trade name FAS, with a minimum width of 6 inches and a minimum length of 8 feet. The next grade down is Select, and its trade name is SEL. It has a minimum width of 4 inches and a minimum length of 6 feet. Next is…

Research shows that when the caption is clear, we can often leave out redundant description text. This is especially true when the meaning of the list, figure, or table is clear or when people are more experienced with the content.

Resource: Microsoft Word Insert Caption

Figure 6.5 shows adding a caption in a later version of Word. In Windows, you can right-click and select Insert Caption. Select Figure (for images) or Table (for tables), and then type the desired caption text.

Figure 6.5 Adding a caption in MS Word (Windows)
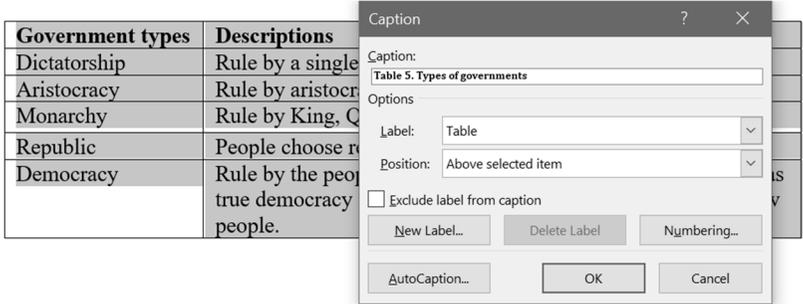
You cannot add a caption to bulleted and numbered lists. But you can put lists inside a one-cell table, remove the borders, and then add a caption, if desired. I do this regularly. I also use two columns and two rows for side-by-side lists. To remove the border, click on the table and select No Border from the Borders item on the Design tab (Windows). I show removing the border from a table in Figure 6.6.

Figure 6.6 Select No Border to remove the border from a table.