Your writing will rarely be published on its own, in a vacuum, with only the most extremely attentive readers. Okay, to be honest, that will never be the case. You’ll need visual variation in the text to both draw the reader’s attention and guide them through your ideas.

Try this exercise: find a magazine or web article to read, maybe a news item. Open the article and keep note of where your eyes and attention move as you read.

Do you read from top to bottom, left to right? Or are you a skimmer, picking out the lines of bolder text before bothering to dive deeper into the rest? If you’re the latter, you’re in the majority.

This attention to text based on visual qualities such as size or weight is called “visual hierarchy.” It’s the natural order in which the human eye perceives what it sees, picking out the most contrasting elements first.

While your writing may not be for newspapers or magazines, your reader is human and needs some visual variation in the text to guide them through your narrative, ideas, or argument.

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Choosing fonts

There’s many ways to create visual hierarchy while still having a unified, cohesive document.

You can use a single font that comes in a wide variety of line widths, and use weight, size, and color for variation.

You can use two or three fonts from the same font family, with the simplest for body text and the “fancier” reserved for headings and titles.

Or, you can use two or three fonts that are very different from one another. For this option to work, it needs to be purposeful and look purposeful. For example, if your text is an essay comparing and contrasting two very different communities, this option can convey a sense of diversity and difference.

Option 1: Use one font
vary boldness, size, color.

Option 2: Use same font family
THESE ARE ALL SANS-SERIF FONTS.

Option 2a: Use same font family
These are all serif fonts.

Option 3: Use contrasting fonts
with a good purpose, no more than three.