

Foundations of Email Design



Master the basics of email design with the principles, techniques, and best practices you need straight from our email team.

litmus Foundations of Email Design

At Litmus, we live and breathe email design. Get a strong, foundational understanding of email design principles, straight from our own email team.

We'll walk you through examples, important considerations, and our recommendations—equipping you with the tools you need to design with confidence.

Use this as a compass to help you navigate what lies ahead of your email design journey.

- Lesson 1 Layouts
- Lesson 2- Imagery
- Lesson 3 Fonts & Typography
- Lesson 4 Calls-to-Action
- Lesson 5 Accessibility

FIRST UP: Layouts







Foundations of Email Design

Layouts







According to <u>our latest research</u>, the average time spent reading an email is 10 seconds.

That's why it's important to keep your email layout **simple** and **scannable**.

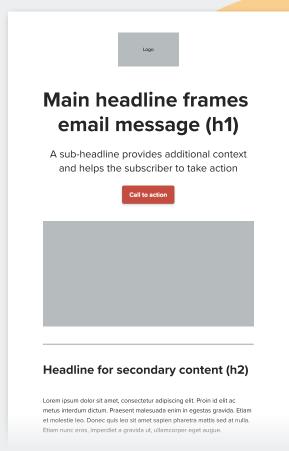
In the following sections, we'll walk you through some important considerations and give our recommendations.

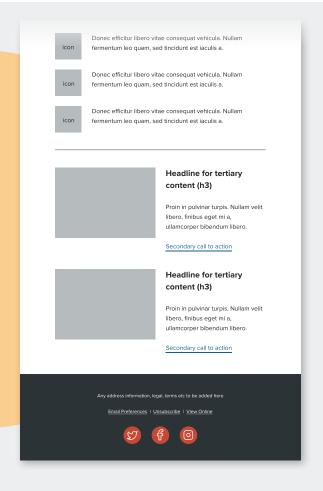
- 1.1 Sample email layout
- 1.2 Hierarchy
- 1.3 Layout elements
- 1.4 Single- vs. multi-column

The following is a sample email layout that we'll reference throughout this lesson.

Lesson 1 | Layouts

1.1 Sample email layout









1.2 Hierarchy

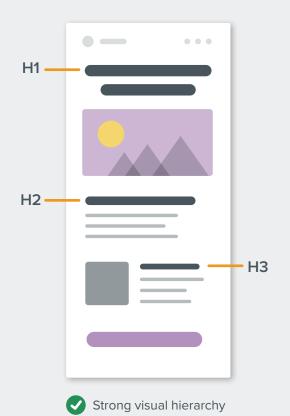
Hierarchy—or creating visual differences that reinforce importance—helps readers consume content in email quickly.

Examples are creating bold, high-contrast headlines above smaller portions of copy and using whitespace between sections to avoid content bleeding together.

By using text size, color, and placement, you can create emails that are easy to scan and read.

Semantic structure to create a strong, visual hierarchy





Another important consideration for creating a strong, visual hierarchy is using headings in a semantic way:

Semantic Structure

- H1, or your primary headline, should be styled in a way that is deemed more important—like larger font size and font weight—to stand out against other elements.
- Reduce the font size for secondary headlines, and consider further styling—such as a lighter weight or color than your H1—to set it apart from your primary messaging.
- H3 The same goes with tertiary headlines—aim to differentiate between your headings.



Hero

clear.

The **hero area** is what your

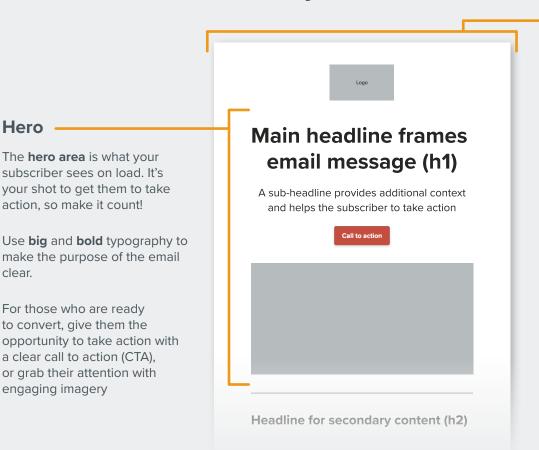
subscriber sees on load. It's your shot to get them to take

action, so make it count!

For those who are ready to convert, give them the opportunity to take action with a clear call to action (CTA), or grab their attention with

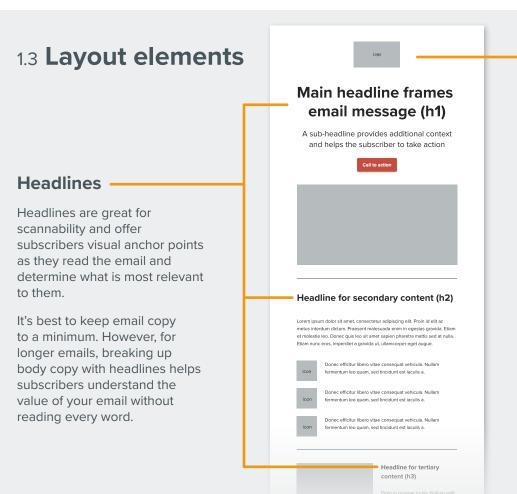
engaging imagery

1.3 Layout elements



To ensure your emails render well across all desktop screens (without using a horizontal scrollbar), we recommend your emails be no wider than 640px.





Logo

Having your logo (or a visual identifier for your brand) helps subscribers recognize you on open.



1.4 Single- vs. multi-column layouts

Single-column layouts are especially effective at creating accessible campaigns. They streamline content and help reinforce hierarchy, aiding scannability in the process.



As a general rule of thumb, we recommend single-column layouts.

Though single-column layouts are the most simple and readable compositions, they aren't practical in every instance.

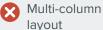
Why we recommend single-column layouts

- Aids in creating accessible emails
- Easier to adjust across different screen sizes
- Complex, multi-column layouts can lead to sensory overload for users









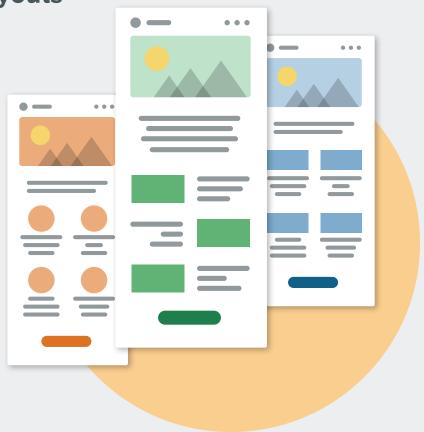


1.4 Single- vs. multi-column layouts

Although **multi-column layouts** are more complex to design and code, they can be a great option to help shape content and structure hierarchy for emails.

So, when should you use a multi-column layout? Here are some instances:

- · Newsletter-style emails
- Emails with secondary and tertiary content
- Emails with more than one action for subscribers to take





Lesson recap

- ☐ Always aim to keep things **simple** and **scannable**.
- ☐ Create a **strong hierarchy** by using text size, color, whitespace, and font weight—and structuring your headings in a semantic way.
- ☐ We recommend designing your emails at a maximum width of 640px for desktop.
- ☐ As a general rule of thumb, **single-column layouts** are the way to go.
- ☐ **Multi-column layouts** can be a great option for emails with **more than one action** for subscribers to take (e.g., newsletters).





Foundations of Email Design

LESSON 2

Imagery





Images are the backbone of many high-performing emails. But, there's a lot to consider with file types, sizes, and load time.

We've got you covered on all things imagery, complete with our picks for file types, guidelines on compression, a breakdown on iconography, and some of our favorite resources.

- 2.1 File types
- 2.2 Compression
- 2.3 **Iconography**
- 2.4 Resources



2.1 File types

What is the best image format for email? There's a number to choose from, but here are our favorites for static imagery:



The best file types for static imagery are **JPG** and **PNG**.



JPGsBest for photographic imagery



PNGs
Best for illustrative imagery and imagery with transparency

LEVEL UP

Animated Imagery

Want to kick things up a notch? Though animation can add a layer of complexity to your email production, it can bring considerable value—engaging readers by drawing the eye and elevating brand personality.

For animation, we recommend using **GIFs** and **APNGs**.

Recommended reading

For a deeper dive, check out our <u>Guide to Animated GIFs</u> and our blog post on using APNGs in email.



2.2 Compression

Part of a great subscriber experience is ensuring your emails load quickly. One of the factors that impacts load time is image file size. Including just one, heavy image may drastically increase the time it takes for your email to load. That's why ensuring images are compressed appropriately is key.



Aim to keep the overall weight of imagery as low as possible. The combined weight of the imagery in your email shouldn't exceed 2 MB.

There are a number of ways to compress imagery. Design tools like Adobe Photoshop allow you to compress on output, or you can opt for free downloadable compression apps and online tools:

Software and applications	Online
Adobe Photoshop	<u>TinyPNG</u>
ImageOptim (for Mac)	<u>TinyJPG</u>



A tip from Litmus's own email designer, Lily Worth

"Sometimes I save imagery as both JPG and PNG to see which comes out smaller and best quality after compression."







Optional headline



Optional headline

felis feugiat non.

Proin facilisis est Proin facilis elit, eget dictum elit, eget di

Optional headline

Proin facilisis est elit, eget dictum felis feugiat non.

Proin facilisis est elit, eget dictum felis <u>feugiat non</u>.

Call to action



Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod .



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Call to action

2.3 **Iconography**

Icons are a great way to apply visual content to email. They can illustrate list items, create visual anchors, and support content hierarchy.

Functions of iconography:

- Supporting and organizing written content
- Illustrating instructions, steps, or even products
- Offering recognizable anchors (e.g., social media icons or contact information)



2.4 **Resources**

Looking for image resources? Here are some stock photo and illustration libraries:

Free	Paid
<u>Pexels</u>	<u>iStock</u>
<u>Unsplash</u>	Adobe Stock
	Shutterstock

Something to keep in mind is copyright and licensing: Depending on the resource, you may need to obtain a license or other permission before using their imagery in your emails.





A tip from Litmus's own email designer, Lily Worth "Bookmark this <u>handy tool from Blush</u>. It's the lorem ipsum of placeholder imagery!"





Lesson recap

- ☐ The best file types for static images are **JPG** and **PNG**.
- □ The combined weight of the images in your email shouldn't exceed 2 MB.
- \square Some free imagery resources are <u>Pexels</u> and <u>Unsplash</u>.
- □ Some paid imagery resources include <u>iStock</u>, <u>Adobe</u> Stock, and Shutterstock.





Foundations of Email Design

LESSON 3

Fonts and Typography



Fonts & Typography

There's no shortage of factors that can affect the rendering of your emails. Our latest research shows the most popular mobile email apps update every 1.2 days.

We know that typography can speak volumes. But, if you want your email's font to render consistently across email clients, devices, and operating systems, there are several things to consider.

- 3.1 Fonts
- 3.2 Typography
- 3.3 Readability
- 3.4 Live Text



3.1 **Fonts**

Web safe fonts

Typefaces that come installed on most operating systems. These include:

- Arial
- Helvetica
- Verdana
- Georgia
- Times New Roman

Web fonts

Typefaces that are pulled in from a server. They are not available on all operating systems.

If your subscriber's email client doesn't support web fonts, they will see a fallback web safe font instead.

Web safe fonts

Pro:

- **Safer to use:** Your subscriber is likely to have these fonts installed.
- Consistency: When designing
 with a web font, you're only seeing
 what part of your audience will see,
 whereas with a web safe font, you're
 seeing what the majority will see.

Con:

- Limited number of web safe fonts compared to web fonts.
- Used pretty frequently and can make it harder to stand out and recognize your brand.

Web fonts

Pro:

- More creative freedom: Wider variety to choose from.
- Consistency with brand identity: You can align with your brand font.
- Can have a fallback web safe font of your choosing.

Con:

- May require additional development time and additional testing.
- Higher risk of email not rendering exactly as planned.



3.1 **Fonts**

Web safe fonts vs. web fonts

While web safe fonts are more "safe" to use, web fonts let you show off your brand.

Web fonts open up new avenues of creativity in typography, allowing you to be creative and accessible—all while sticking to your brand's look and feel. The catch? With web fonts, **you should have a fallback web safe font in place** for email clients that don't support web fonts.

Including multiple fonts ensures that if one doesn't work, there is a fallback or backup font of your choosing—often referred to as a font stack. Without this, the email client will render it's default font. For example, Outlook's default font is Times New Roman, a serif font, whereas Gmail will render a sans-serif font.

We shared the pros and cons of each, so ultimately, it's up to you. Take your pick!



Recommended reading

Get into the details of web fonts in our <u>Ultimate Guide</u> to <u>Web Fonts</u>—complete with a full walkthrough on how to embed them in emails.

NEXT UP
Resources
for font stacks, and more





3.1 Fonts

Resources

For web safe CSS font stacks, you can grab them from <u>CSS Fonts</u>.

Ready to give web fonts a try? Here are some places to start looking.

- Google Fonts Free
- Adobe Fonts Included with Creative Cloud subscription
- **Web font services** Available on a paid basis; requires correct licensing to use in your emails
 - Type Network (Web License)
 - Process Type Foundry (Web License)
 - Optimo (Digital Ads License)
 - Fontspring (Custom Email License)

- Typotheque (Web License)
- Production Type (Online Advertising License)
- MyFonts (Web License)
- Commercial Type (Web License)



Some fonts are easier to read than others. Keep accessibility in mind.

NEXT UP
Typography
leveraging it for impact





3.2 Typography

The styling of your written content can make a big impact on your emails.

One of the most effective ways to leverage typography is to create hierarchy to help guide readers through your email.





3.2 Typography

Emails are often scanned as the reader searches for anchor points within your email.

You can create these anchor points by leveraging font styles, sizes, weights, and colors. This helps guide your subscribers to the most important part of your email.

We break it down for you in this example.

Overarching messages with big, bold typography

Secondary hero messaging for additional value on open

Primary call to action

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Aenean in ligula sit amet est ultricies egestas. Curabitur congue, lectus vel blandit porta, est nibh egestas massa, eget laoreet justo diam ac leo. Sed varius at turpis a aliquet. Donec scelerisque ac justo eget tristique. Quisque elementum consectetur odio id blandit

Make the email scannable by highlighting key info in headlines

Suspendisse maximus dolor lacus, in viverra augue semper vel.

Sed dolor enim, volutpat blandit elementum nec, pellentesque

Make the email scannable by highlighting key info in headlines

Suspendisse maximus dolor lacus, in viverra augue semper vel. Sed dolor enim, volutpat blandit elementum nec, pellentesque at nisl. Aenean in placerat lorem. Nulla quis nibh enim. Sed id massa ut ipsum feuqiat varius.

Secondary messaging can be highlighted in less dominant headlines

Vestibulum in condimentum mi. Morbi consequat enim nec quam bibendum, vitae posuere lectus aliquam. Phasellus id pretium nisl. Praesent eu pretium nisl. Proin lobortis id risus sed ultricies. Vivamus ut purus a mauris interdum finibus eu ut massa.

Secondary call to action

Smaller font sizes and lighter colours help the reader to see this content as least important. The absense of a headline makes this section hard to scan, therefore this content must be low value.



3.2 Typography

As for typefaces?



We recommend sticking with serif and sans-serif—especially for body copy.

They are the most commonly used typefaces because they're the most readable, and thus most accessible. They also render well when scaled down and at lower weights.

Script and display typefaces can be hard to read and even harder to scan. If used, they're generally reserved for headlines. Here are web safe fonts best supported across Windows and Mac devices:

Web Safe Fonts Best supported across Windows and Mac		
Sans-serif fonts:	Serif fonts:	
Arial	Baskerville	
Arial Black	Courier New	
Arial Narrow	Georgia	
Tahoma	Palatino	
Trebuchet MS	Times New Roman	
Verdana		



Recommended reading

Want to learn how to leverage typography in a meaningful, impactful way? Read our deep dive on typography in email, featuring tips, examples, and more.



з.з **Readability**

There are several ways to aid the readability—and accessibility—of your emails. Here are our quick tips to help you get started.



At Litmus, we use 18px for body copy, with 14px applied to tertiary content, such as footer copy, caveats, and captions.

Left-align your body copy

One of the best ways to support readability is to use left-aligned text. A general rule of thumb: If you have any copy longer than three lines, left-align that copy.

Keep line-height to 1.5 to 2 times the size of the text
 The World Wide Web Consortium's <u>guidelines around</u> <u>line spacing</u> recommend 1.5 to 2 over single spacing to improve readability.

Use a minimum font size of 14px

Ensure your text is large enough for people to easily read, regardless of screen size. Some mobile devices will automatically enlarge text that is less than 14px.



3.4 Live text

The majority of copy in your email should be included as live text inside of HTML elements.



At the core of the emails we send at Litmus is a foundation of HTML, CSS, and live text that help keep all of our campaigns accessible.

Curious about our stance on image-only emails? They aren't the best for accessibility.

While a lot of brands opt for all-image emails, we suggest using as much live text as possible—styled with CSS to keep it on brand—so people using assistive technology like screen readers have actual content to consume.





Recommended reading

- See why experts say you shouldn't send image-only emails.
- Learn how to make HTML emails instead of all-image ones (spoiler: It's easier than you think).



ABCDEF GHIJKLMNO PQRSTUVWXY Z0123456789: ;<=>?@!"#\$% &'()*+,-./

Lesson recap

- □ We recommend sticking with serif and sansserif—especially for body copy.
- ☐ Use a **minimum font size of 14px**. At Litmus we use 18px for body copy.
- □ **Left-align** your body copy.
- ☐ Keep line-height to 1.5 to 2.
- ☐ The majority of text in your email should be included as **live text** inside of HTML elements for accessibility.

Need a recap? Revisit the previous lessons on <u>Layouts and Imagery</u> here.





Foundations of Email Design

LESSON 4

Calls-to-Action





Calls-to-action (CTAs) help guide your subscriber to the primary action you want them to take.

Generally speaking, each email you send should have a primary goal. But what about when you have more than one CTA?

In this lesson, we'll walk you through primary CTAs, secondary CTAs, and using bulletproof buttons to make your CTAs more accessible.

- 4.1 Primary CTAs
- 4.2 Secondary CTAs
- 4.3 Bulletproof buttons



4.1 Primary CTAs

Your primary CTA is the main action you want your subscriber to take. It should always be the most prominent in your email and styled in a way to help it stand out.

Some ways to achieve this are by:

- Styling your primary CTA as a button
- Making your button a different color than the other design elements
- Using typography, such as larger or bold text
- · Applying whitespace



At Litmus, we often give buttons between 30px and 50px of whitespace to allow for enough breathing room from other elements.

Primary CTA

One of the key ways to ensure your CTA stands out is by applying whitespace—that is, space that is uninterrupted by other elements.





4.2 Secondary CTAs

After primary CTAs, any further actions you want your subscriber to take are secondary CTAs. These should be styled in a less dominant way.

You can still offer a button, but use a muted style—such as a color that isn't as bold, or a white button with a color border. Or, you can simply offer a styled text link.

For a styled text link to be effective, it should 1) be a different color from the copy and 2) underlined. This helps the reader recognize it as a clickable element.



Styling your primary and secondary CTAs differently prevents them from competing with each other and clearly guides your subscriber to the CTA that takes them where they need to go.



4.3 Bulletproof buttons

Bulletproof buttons are CTA buttons built with code instead of images. By only using code, the button will display in all email clients even with images off, which is what makes them "bulletproof."

Image based buttons get lost when images are turned off due to image-blocking. By using bulletproof buttons, even if your subscribers have their images turned off, they'll still be able to take action on your email.





Recommended reading

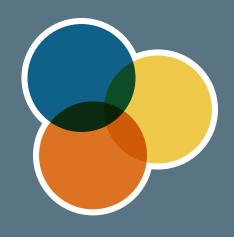
Dive deeper on how to style and code bulletproof buttons on our blog.





Lesson recap

- ☐ At Litmus, we ensure there's around **30 to 50px of padding** between buttons and other elements.
- ☐ Style **secondary CTAs** in a less prominent way, such as with muted colors or simply a styled text link.
- ☐ Use **bulletproof buttons** to make your emails actionable, even with images off.





Foundations of Email Design

LESSON 5

Accessibility



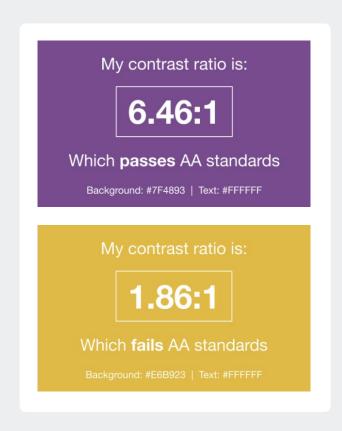
5.1 Color contrasts

Contrast is the difference between two elements in an email. Most often, it's the difference between the color of the text and the background on which it sits.

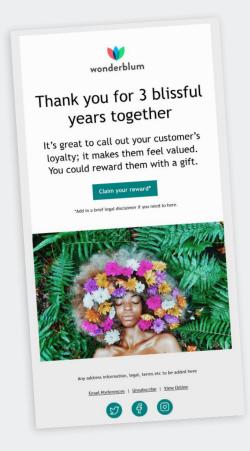
When selecting text colors, make sure they stand out against your background to help make your content readable for subscribers with a range of vision impairments.



The best way to check whether you have a good contrast ratio is to use a tool like the WebAim contrast checker.







5.2 Simplification

Simplification is key to providing a better, more inclusive experience for your subscribers. By designing and writing simpler, more subscriber-friendly emails, you open up your content to a wider audience.

Some ways you can achieve this are by:

- Creating a strong hierarchy
 Hierarchy—or creating visual differences that reinforce importance—helps readers quickly consume content in email.
- Keeping your content concise

 Avoid overcomplicating your content. Keep copy short, calls-toaction easy to spot, and use language that is easy to understand.
- Using a simple layout

The layout of your email itself can affect accessibility. The more complex a layout, the easier it is to get lost in an email, so simpler layouts are often preferred.



5.2 Simplification

RECALL: LESSON 1

In Lesson 1, we touched upon single-column layouts and how effective they can be for creating accessible campaigns, as they streamline content and help reinforce hierarchy, aiding scannability in the process. Single-column layouts are also generally easier to adjust across different screen sizes. Regardless of whether you're using single- or multi-column layouts, keeping your emails responsive across different devices is a great way to improve the subscriber experience.

Free templates made for you Need some inspiration, or help getting started? We've got you covered with this email template pack—optimized for Dark Mode and tested in 100+ email clients and devices. What did you think? Thank your customer for making a purchase or getting a subscription. Then state just how valuable it is to get feedback about their experience and how that benefits them. Rate your experience Click on the number of stars you would like to give us for your recent purchasing experience: Any address information, legal, terms etc to be added here Canal Preference | Limiting Called | Ying Coline Called | Ying Coline



5.3 **Readability**

In Lesson 3, we shared some guidelines to aid readability. The same applies when making your emails accessible.

RECALL: LESSON 3

- · Left-align your body copy
- Keep line-height to 1.5 to 2 times the size of the text
- Use a minimum font size of 14px



Recommended reading

For a deeper dive into accessibility, check out our <u>Ultimate Guide</u> to <u>Email Accessibility</u> for insights and step-by-step advice.

LEVEL UP

Dark Mode

Learn how to design emails that work across both light and dark modes—all while keeping your campaigns onbrand and accessible in our <u>Ultimate</u> Guide to Dark Mode Email.





5.3 **Readability**

From an accessibility perspective

Left-align your body copy

The start of a new line acts as an anchor for our eyes, and when that anchor is in the same place for every new line in longer bits of text—such as with left-alignment—it aids readability.

Keep line-height to 1.5 to 2 times the text height

When lines of copy are too close together, it's hard to tell them apart. But when they're too far apart, it's hard to look for the next line as they all look like short, individual paragraphs.

The World Wide Web Consortium recommends 1.5 to 2 over single spacing to help with readability.

Use a minimum font size of 14px

Keep your font to a minimum of 14px preferably even larger—to create a better reading experience. Ensure your text is large enough for people to easily read, regardless of screen size.



We use 18px for body copy, and 14px for tertiary content—such as footer copy, caveats, and captions—at Litmus.



Lesson recap

- ☐ Check your contrast ratio with a tool like the WebAim contrast checker.
- ☐ Create a **strong**, **visual hierarchy**.
- ☐ Keep your content **concise**.
- □ Opt for a simple layout.
- ☐ Use a **minimum font size of 14px**.
- □ **Left-justify** your body copy.
- ☐ Keep **line-height to 1.5 to 2 times** the size of the text.



Ready to take the leap?

Now that you've built a solid foundation on email design, it's time to put things into action! To guide you along the way, we compiled our top tips from each lesson. Keep this checklist by your side and you'll be off to the races.



Layouts

- ☐ Always aim to keep things **simple** and **scannable**.
- □ Create a **strong hierarchy** by using text size, color, whitespace, and font weight—and structuring your headings in a semantic way.
- ☐ We recommend designing your emails at a maximum width of 640px for desktop.
- ☐ As a general rule of thumb, **single-column layouts** are the way to go.
- ☐ **Multi-column layouts** can be a great option for emails with **more than one action** for subscribers to take (e.g., newsletters).



Imagery

- ☐ The best file types for static images are **JPG** and **PNG**.
- ☐ The combined weight of the images in your email **shouldn't exceed 2 MB**.
- $\hfill \square$ Some free imagery resources are $\underline{\mathsf{Pexels}}$ and $\underline{\mathsf{Unsplash}}.$
- □ Some paid imagery resources include <u>iStock</u>, <u>Adobe Stock</u>, and <u>Shutterstock</u>.





Calls to action

- □ At Litmus, we ensure there's around **30 to 50px of padding** between buttons and other elements.
- ☐ Style **secondary CTAs** in a less prominent way, such as with muted colors or simply a styled text link.
- ☐ Use **bulletproof buttons** to make your emails actionable, even with images off.



Fonts and Typography

- ☐ We recommend sticking with **serif** and **sans-serif**—especially for body copy.
- ☐ Use a minimum font size of 14px.
- □ **Left-align** your body copy.
- ☐ Keep **line-height to 1.5 to 2 times** the size of the text.
- ☐ The majority of text in your email should be included as **live text** inside of HTML elements for accessibility.



Accessibility

- ☐ Create a **strong**, **visual hierarchy**.
- ☐ Keep your **content concise**.
- ☐ Opt for a **simple layout**.
- ☐ Check your **contrast ratio** with a tool like the <u>WebAim contrast checker</u>.



Foundations of Email Design

Foundations of Email Design—complete.√

You did it. Now it's time to get out there. We can't wait to see where your email design journey takes you.

Want to stay in touch?

Get how-tos, inspiration, and more from our newsletters—for email pros, by email pros.

Subscribe today



A little about about us

Here at Litmus, we're passionate about everything email marketing. And our mission is to help brands access what they need to send better email, faster. Through our blog, Litmus Live conferences, ebooks, webinars, and more, we share best practices and trends to help your team stay at the forefront of the industry.

Another thing we're into? Software that makes creating high-performing email easy. Marketers pair Litmus with existing email service providers (ESPs) to ensure a consistently great brand experience for every subscriber, work more efficiently, accelerate campaign performance, reduce errors, and stay out of the spam folder. With Litmus by your side, you'll have the tools and insights you need to provide your customers with an incredible email experience—and an incredible ROI.