Fun with words and pictures

Wired magazine’s table of contents is a toy box of visual techniques that you can use on all kinds of projects.

Our busy, sound-bite world puts a premium on being brief, visually and verbally. Few examples of brevity are better than magazines’ tables of contents. Part talk show, part road map, a contents page rolls a magazine’s voice, typography, graphics, colors and other elements into a compact menu of titles and micro-“trailers” that convey a lot in tiny spaces.

Take Wired magazine, which is famous for its tight, high-energy integration of words and images. Its contents page is a party mix of numerals, illustrations, lists, bars and visual sprites—a toy box of visual techniques that can be applied to all kinds of small-space projects. Let’s scoop up the lively stuff that makes it work.
Reconfigure the images
Every image has an expressive core. To reveal it, big graphics are not simply shrunk but reconfigured by masking, re-cropping, rearranging and so on.

Un-crop
The Nikon is lifted from a page of cameras, then un-cropped, so it now looks at you like a big robotic eye.

Mask
The red diving helmet is extracted from its background, which simplifies it, essential for small graphics.

Downsize
Pieces are cut from a much bigger collage and rearranged for the tiny space, which is on-so-more effective than merely resizing the large original.

Super-crop
Full-size Jeff Bezos is just right for the editorial layout but radically cropped for the contents page, which fits and focuses attention at the same time.
Basic styles

Words (or numerals) and images tightly interact. There are a dozen or so basic configurations. Each configuration conveys some kind of meaning.

Images
Cropping conveys meaning—a standard box is formal and restrained, a silhouette is open and free, and a breakout conveys motion. Illustration is iconic, artificial.

Sizes
Size in real life conveys two things—how big or small an object is, and how near or far away it is. Same-size elements are flat and static. Mix sizes liberally to convey depth, motion, activity.

Relationships
Numerals can be placed next to, on top of, behind and beside the image, and can look like stickers, peekaboos, labels and physical objects, depending on which one you use.
Basic typography
Small spaces require super-tight writing and typography. A word or two in three or four styles and sizes combine in each message. Each level signals a difference.

Contributors
This month’s writers and artists

Rants
Reader rants and raves

Start
ESSAY Technolust takes down the housing market
ROVER Meet NASA’s Mars Science Lab. Q&A Nicholas Carr rains on cloud computing
HOW TO Skip sleep. TOOL Nuclear vise grip. ATLAS Worst airports ever

Short copy, multiple styles
Quick! How do you jam a section head, page number, six sub-section heads and six headlines into one, easy-to-read square inch of space? By using four, carefully crafted levels of type, like this:

Section head
Big, bold, serif, upper-and lowercase

ESSAY Technolust takes down the housing market
ROVER Meet NASA’s Mars Science Lab. Q&A Nicholas Carr rains on cloud computing
HOW TO Skip sleep. TOOL Nuclear vise grip. ATLAS Worst airports ever

Page number
A light version of the section-head typeface, for continuity, colored gray to avoid looking like spots; matches section-head x height.

Sub-sections and headlines
Light and bold versions of one sans-serif typeface; one upper-case, one lower. Note sizes (right).

For maximum clarity in the tiny space, cinema-style typesetting separates numbers from text flush down the middle.
Basic layout
A strong, repetitive structure is a must. Put words on one side, images on the other, which keeps the look consistent no matter what's on the page.

A place for everything
The page is divided into two main zones—text column on the left, images on the right—then two small ones—logo at the top, heavy footer at the bottom.

Flirty
Like sloshing party beverages, the images splash over everywhere—here, across text column and footer—but the page structure remains in place, which is why it looks right even with different images.
Techniques

Transparent
Page number through the windshield is faded slightly to mimic the glare of real glass.

Unexpected viewpoint
Is that a tugboat or a camera? Hard to tell at a glance, which creates the double-take.

Snapshot
Ordinary, rectangular mug, a counterpoint to all the exuberance.

Standing by
Superhero by number looks surprisingly dimensional.

Crunching a number
The Mars Rover rolling along

Platform
An 84 as a three-deck performance stage

Teensy
Just ordinary page numbers, useful for contrast

Crash landing
Jet sprawled over the footer, number behind
Off the edge
Playful drawing bleeds to the edge, lengthening the page.

Wordy flag
No graphic? Craft your own. Colored words are pretty interesting.

Pen and ink
Medical-illustration style is classy; extinct rhino is menacing from ground level. (Below) 8s can be confused with 3s; pay attention.

Hot wings
Flying chicken parts

Double overlap
If one overlap is good, two may be better. Garish magenta, out-of-register, comic-style art stands out.
Article resources

Typefaces
The following typefaces were custom-designed by Hoefler & Frere-Jones for Wired Magazine:

1. Vitesse
2. Retina
3. Retina Bold

Credits
Wired Magazine (www.wired.com)