

Magazine Columns – Backbone of Every Good Layout

(Nikola)

Columns are essential tools to standardize your layout. They will help you in getting order and structure of your magazine, but do resist to imprison your thinking into standard format because rigidity dulls the creativity. To avoid that trap you can play with column width and shapes. You should treat each story as a separate unit and mix the number of columns in each story. One story can be laid out on a two column grid while the other can be laid out in three, four or more column grid.

In this article we will talk more about columns as a design element and in another separated article we will talk about the width of the columns and the number of characters that would be ideal for such columns. Line length (the number of characters or words per line) is closely related to column width and those two terms should work together as a unit and since this subject is very important for proper column setup it deserves an article on its own.

But let's go back to columns as design element and take a look at several typical column sizes. The unwritten rule is to design more important stories on fewer columns. For example your main story in the magazine should be done on a two column grid. This will give more importance to the story, it will look more elegant and the reader won't have to jump to the next line of text so often.

Less important stories like news sections can be laid out in 4 or more columns. Since these articles are shorter in length they do not need wide columns and can be placed in narrower ones because reading them will take very little time.

Depending on your design of various parts of the magazine your columns can vary in width. No one says that your text blocks should be equally wide. You can even mix several types of columns on one page. For example your main text can be set across two columns, while below it you can place a list, which has short text blocks, on a 4 column grid.



Standard one column layout. Rarely used because they are too wide for magazine layouts.



One column layout with narrow sidebar. You can use this kind of layouts for editor-in-chief letter.

One column layout. Standard one column layout. Rarely used because they are too wide for magazine layouts. *One column layout.* One column layout with narrow sidebar. You can use this kind of layouts for editor-in-chief letter.

One column

Used very rarely in magazine design. Text laid out in this one very wide column can look dull and heavy since lots of it can be poured into the column. If you opt for this option your text should be larger in size with larger leading. Readers will get lost in columns that have more than 80 characters in one row. Generally the ideal number of characters for best legibility would be around 60 characters per row.

You can make it more elegant and interesting if you make outer margin much wider, thus making column much narrower. By making this column narrower you can make the text size smaller along with its leading, but don't go over 60-65 characters in a row. Type size for such columns should be around 9-12 points, depending on the fonts you use. Since a lot of white space will be left on the outer part of the page you can fill it with images or you can leave it white for a more dignified look. These types of layouts are commonly used in editor's letters at the beginning of the magazines.



Standard two column layout. Used mainly for most important articles.



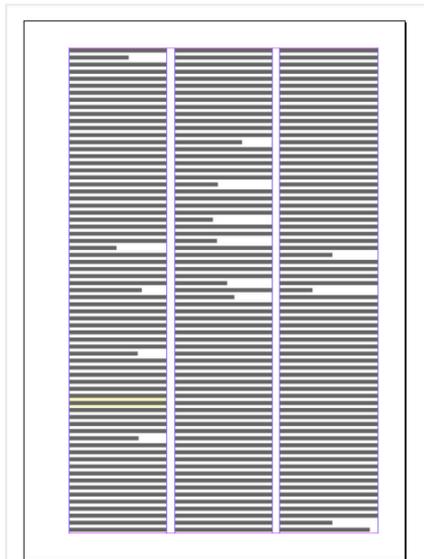
Two narrow columns with sidebar. In this case placing side bar in between columns will look dull because it will be centered on the page. Leaving it aside looks much more interesting.

Two columns layout. Standard two column layout. Used mainly for most important articles. *Two columns layout.* Two narrow columns with sidebar. In this case placing sidebar in between columns will look dull because it will be centered on the page. Leaving it aside looks much more interesting.

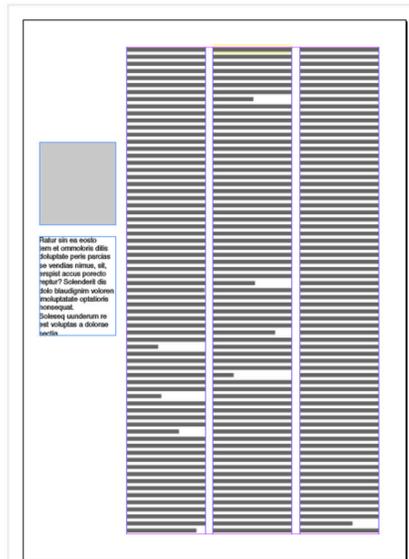
Two columns

As stated earlier, mostly used in top stories in magazines. Again do not use maximum space on the page. Make some room around columns, give them some space. You can also make bigger outer margin and make two narrower columns which will bring some drama to the page.

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Standard three column layout. Usually used for longer articles.



Three columns with a sidebar. You can place a sidebar in between columns, creating white space between them that can result in interesting layout.

Three columns layout. Standard three column layout. Usually used for longer articles.

Three columns layout. Three columns with a sidebar. You can place a sidebar in between columns, creating white space between them that can result in interesting layout.

Three columns

This number of columns also provides for an elegant layout and big stories can be laid out in this way. You can break this column with some pull out quote spread across two columns. This is a great tool to break a page a bit and add some splash to the page. In three column layout your number of characters should drop way below 60, ideal number would be around 40-50 characters, or you can reduce type size.

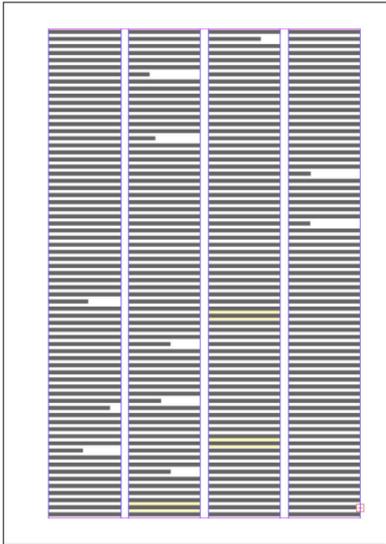
Four columns

This is a great number to use because now you can play with different column widths. Your text can be laid out in two, two column wide, blocks or you can lay it out in three columns and leave the fourth one for the images or some pullout quote.

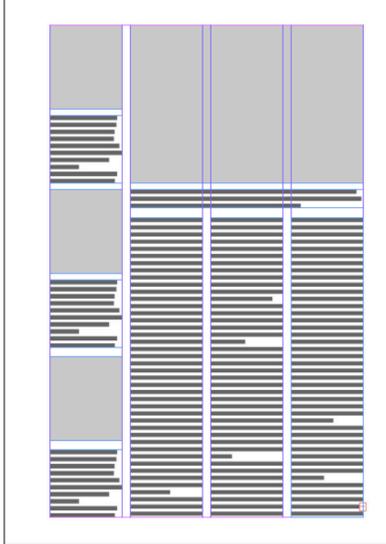
If you are going to put text in all four columns you should reduce the text size and your character should be around 30-35 characters. You can use one column, which will be very narrow, for some small pieces of information. Font of your choice can be some condensed type but make sure your text is not too long because reading long condensed text is not pleasing to the eye.

Four column layout gives much space for improvisation and you can use this number of columns for unexpected and dramatic layouts.

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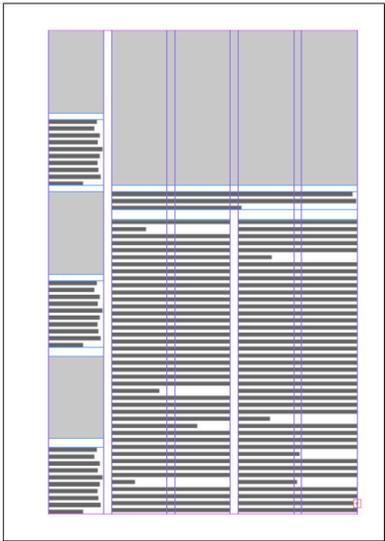


Standard four column layout.

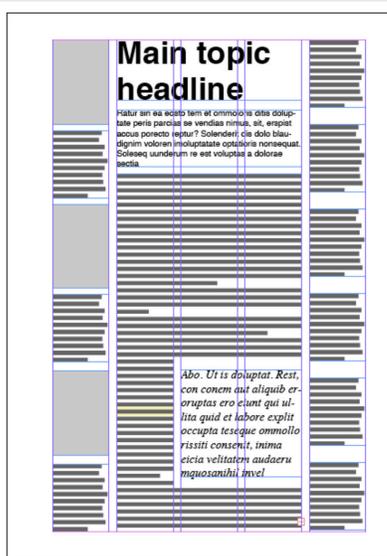


Layout variation with four columns. Three of them for main text and the main image on top with a caption below and one column serving as a sidebar.

Four columns layout. Standard four column layout. *Four columns layout.* Layout variation with four columns. Three of them for main text and the main image on top with a caption below and one column serving as a sidebar.



Layout variation with five columns.



Five columns give you much more flexibility.

Five columns. Layout variation with five columns. *Five columns.* Five columns gives you much more flexibility.

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Five columns

This number of columns you will see mostly in the news sections, culture sections and other informational part of the magazine. Again as in four column layout you can play around with two or three adjacent columns. Place the most important story on the page in one wide column and use other columns for less important stories. Combining columns will allow you infinite possibilities and variations in layout. Use this to your advantage to create dynamic layouts.

You will rarely use only one column as placeholder for your text, because it will be too narrow. It can be used for very short text blocks, like image captions. Narrower columns should have smaller type size.

Six columns layout.

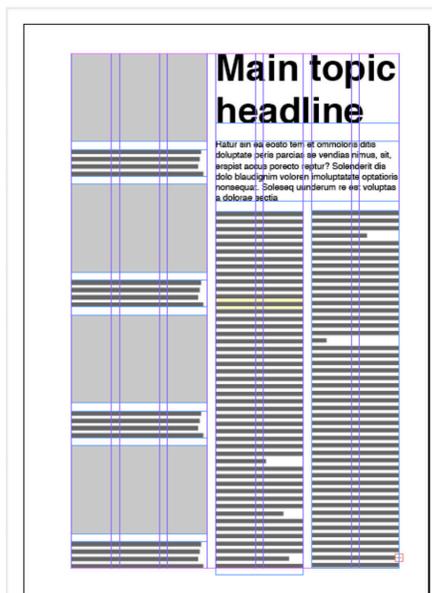
Six column layout does not have to be used as two-three column blocks. You can use one narrow column for small image and caption.

Seven columns layout.

Seven column layout. This is also a great number of columns because it gives you even more options for your design.



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Seven column layout. This is also a great number of columns because it gives you even more options for your design.

Nine columns layout.

Magazine layout with nine columns. With so many columns you can have several options how to lay out your pages.

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Twelve columns layout.

Twelve column layout. It gives you so many options on how to lay out your text and image blocks. Rarely used in magazines, more often in newspapers.

Six, seven, nine, twelve columns

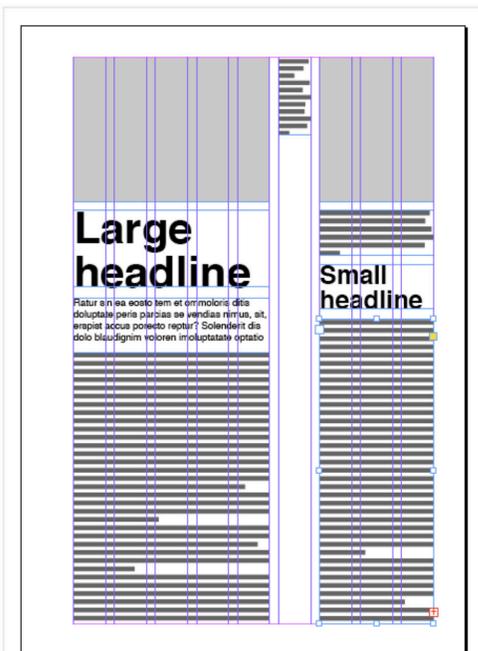
When you have so many columns you won't be placing text in one column since it is too narrow for the text but you should use them as a flexible tool at your command.

You can use such a narrow column for short image captions.

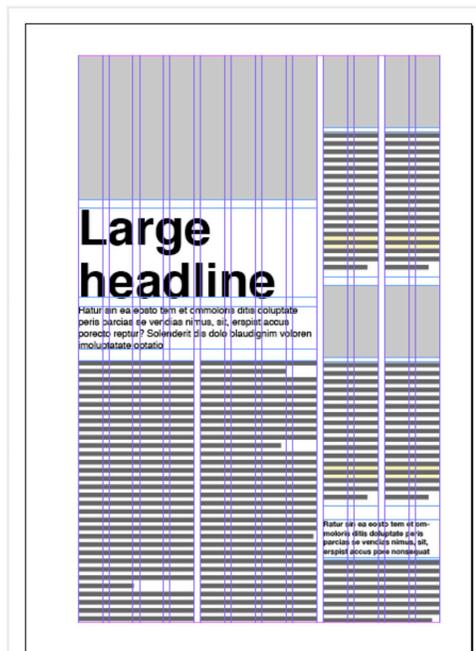
Mix several columns into one and opposite it to another text block consisting of few other columns. For example you can lay out text in 4 combined columns and use another for pull out quotes, additional info or you can place small images into them.

Twelve columns are not common in magazine design, because there is rarely any need for them. They are common in newspapers where you have to lay out lots of small chunks of text, and the text is then placed in two columns that represents one column. In this case you get 6 column layout, or you can use those columns in any other variation necessary.

Columns are a great way to keep everything organized and structured, but they do not have to be dull. Use them as your playground and mix them up and you will get unexpected results that will make your layouts stand out. Of course, do not overdo it and keep an eye on your type sizes.



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Twelve column layout. It gives you so many options on how to lay out your text and image blocks. Rarely used in magazines, more often in newspapers.