THE
CLASSIC EXPLORER

TEMPLATE

NOTESTINE

FULL LAYOUT TEMPLATE

EXPLORERS

THE
CLASSIC EXPLORER

TEMPLATE

DESIGN

WRITING

EDITING

ART

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EXPLORERS

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INTRODUCTION

This A5 template is for roleplaying games and modules with minimal art, mechanics, and systems. In other words, good ideas with spartan presentation. Good examples include *Into the Odd*, *Whitehack*, *Powered by the Apocalypse*, and adventures like *The Isle* and *Silent Titans*.

Layout is a craft. More specifically, it's a craft about problem-solving. You'll get to solve all manner of problems, riddles, and puzzles. Dodge traps. Slay dragons. The problems can be simple, like placing art, or complicated, like text setting. This template doesn't stop problem-solving. It encourages it. Every template must be explored for its gold. This template is no different.

If you're ever stumped, I recommend turning to the internet. You can learn everything through your favorite search engine.

Check out *Explorers Design* for the fundamentals. It's where I teach graphic design through a roleplaying lens. It's the same information from a textbook but with twice as many kobolds and ray guns.

EXPLORERS' VALUES

Design is meaningful. What designers do matters. It has the power to influence others, help or hinder, heal or hurt, excite or incite.

Design is for everyone. If you're passionate, kind, and compassionate, you have something to bring to the table. Design has no entry fee.

Design is human. The best designs have fingerprints. Sometimes that's what makes them art. The designer cannot be excised.

Design is exploration. We become better designers (and people) when we challenge ourselves with new perspectives, work, and ideas. Never stop exploring, learning, and discovering.

II   GETTING STARTED

READING THE TEMPLATE

This template is for manuscript layouts (also known as single-column layouts). If you're reading this in your design software, your view is more intricate. The layout is what the reader sees, and the grid system is what the designer sees. This grid system was built to give you comprehensive options.

Every spread follows that core conceit or pushes it to its limits. This template has three layers to guide you on your journey.

Grid system: The deepest layer of information is the built-in grid of baselines, columns, and margins. You can modify all of these through menus. Clicking and dragging them isn't possible. That's a blessing for me and my clumsy fingers.

Guidelines: The second, less entrenched layer is guidelines, which I've added as suggestions. They're blue dotted lines and can be dragged or deleted. They organize and subdivide your grid. This document's guidelines can be found in the "master pages" group of the pages window.

Commentary: Typically in templates like these, text boxes and tables are besotted with "lorem ipsum" text, a nonsense language made to stand in for real information. The problem is that this filler text is often insufficient. First, because it doesn't mimic the cadence of modern language. Second, because it's a missed opportunity for education, expression, and more.

In this template, I've opted for something different.

Until you replace them, the stand-in text here serves as guidelines, notes, thought-starters, and designer and rpg in-jokes.

III   MAKING IT YOURS

USING THE TEMPLATE

The best templates are made to be destroyed. Don't treat anything as off-limits. Rearrange pages, duplicate spreads, and change everything. The grid system exists to make that easier.

Your layout will be consistent so long as you use the grid. Think of this template as a toolbox. Every element is a building block. What you're doing is arranging them to serve your game, story, and rules.

The grid system gives these pieces a standard unit of measurement, rhythm, and proportion. If you ever want to "break the grid," do it for good reasons. When in doubt, trust your eye.

Remember: When rearranging, spacing is always in 12 pt increments. Text boxes should have 12 pt vertical padding. 24 pt padding if it's a new section. If you made your baseline grid visible, this will be easier to adjust on the fly.

MODIFYING THE TEMPLATE

Most users should copy, paste, and drag pieces around. If you're hungry for more, you can make sweeping changes using the minimal paragraph and character styles provided. Some details, like page numbers, can be found on parent pages in the pages window.

Be careful about changing anything that has other elements dependent on it. For example, if you change the body text, you'll probably have to tweak everything else.

IV WORKSPACE SETUP

Half the battle of layout is workspace and workflow. As you design, you'll hammer together your version. Until then, I recommend starting with the same digital workspace.

A digital workspace configures your program's windows, panels, and view settings. Nearly everything you need starts by being hidden away. We're going to fix that.

Units & Measurements: Your format or "page size" is measured in traditional units of measurement like the *millimeter* and *inch*. We want to organize everything by *points*, a unit of measure in type design. (Points give us precision without using fractions.)

- Go to: *File > Document Setup > Document*
- Change **Document Units** to *points*

Baseline Grid: Everything in this template is built on the baseline grid, a typographic grid used in tandem with other grid systems.

- Go to: *Baseline Grid Manager (A visual button near the top.)*
- Toggle **Use Baseline Grid** so it's active
- Set **Start Position** to *12 pt* and **Relative To** *Top of Page*
- Set **Grid Spacing** to *12 pt*
- Toggle **Show Baseline Grid** so it's active
- Change **Display Threshold** to your preference (Mine is 25%)

View Settings: Now that we've confirmed our baseline grid works, it's important we make it and all our guides visible in the document.

- Go to: *View (Found in the top navigation window)*
- Toggle **Show Baseline Grid** so it's visible
- Toggle **Margins, Guides, Column Guides,** and **Rulers**
- Avoid activating **Show Grid** which is different

V GRID SYSTEM SETUP

This template stems from a technique I call the "typography-first approach." Everything, from the margins to the alleys, is based on this document's body text, PT Serif, and its leading (rhymes with "sledding" and referred to by many as "line-height").

Therefore, the base unit of measurement for this template is 12 pt. The same height as PT Serif's leading.

The baseline grid is divided into 12 pt segments. The alleys are exactly 12 pt wide. The outer margin is 36, the inner 48, and the top 36. The only exception is the bottom margin which is 43.5 pt tall. (The A5 format cannot be evenly divided into multiples of 12 pt.)

USING STYLES

A layout tool called "styles" reinforces consistency. Every major piece of layout, like individual levels of type, is grouped into styles in their corresponding window. In this template, look in the *Text Styles* window. (I recommend changing the view to **Show Hierarchy** only.)

- Click on a style to apply it to whatever you have selected.
- Styled elements highlight their applied styles when selected.
- If a style has a (+) that means the selection has variables.
- Modifying a style will modify all elements with that style.

HEADING ONE

Amarante 20 pt / 12 pt

HEADING TWO

Amarante 12 pt / 24 pt

Body Text
PT Serif Regular 8.5 pt / 12 pt

VI   MAKING LAYOUTS

CREATING LISTS

Not every rpg needs lists. The key is making lists do something sentences and paragraphs cannot. For that, you need consistency and style. You can find more details in the paragraph styles window.

Bullet point are always better when limited to one line.

- Make sure lists have 12 pt of padding from other elements.
- You can modify the spacing between lines in the styles.
- Some layouts use a typeface just for bullets. Not this one.
- There's a rule that you never punctuate bullet points.
- That rule is outdated and can be ignored.

Numbered lists are even more prescriptive than bullet points. Use them wisely.

1. Numbers and bullets are not interchangeable.
2. Order always matters, but in a numbered list, it's explicit.
3. Use a numbered list when you want the reader to follow it.
4. The number indicates importance, dependence, or usage.

CREATING SUB-COLUMNS

The optimal line width for columns is between 45 and 75 characters. This template's average is around 65.

You may want multiple columns in your document. Thanks to the grid system, that's relatively easy. With current divisions, you can make symmetrical two-column layouts or asymmetrical layouts with accompanying images and whitespace.

Remember: Line width is essential. If you make your columns too long, your writing will exhaust the reader. Make them too narrow, and the prose will be choppy.

You can find examples of multi-column layouts on the following pages. There are no hard rules—only best practices. The only fundamental truth to adhere to is your message and what you're trying to convey.

PLACING VISUALS

Use the grid system and its baseline grid to plug in your visuals. By spacing your visuals in 12 pt intervals, you can create an invisible rhythm and pattern to your work. The visual placeholders on this page are precisely 12 pt apart.

TWEAKING VISUALS

In some layouts, you can "fudge" the exact placement of visuals and hang their edges in the alleys. Do this carefully. The alleys are narrow in this grid system and don't give you much room to spare. It's often better to have your visuals terminate somewhere between alleys in the columns.

WHAT ARE FRAMES?

Frames are boxes you put your visuals into. It automatically crops your visuals to the frame's boundaries. It may seem like an extra step, but it'll save you time if you need to rearrange the layout or replace images. I recommend using the layers window to do this.

PLACEHOLDERS

Frames only show up in the normal view mode. So, to make the structure of this template more visible, I've laid boxes over the frames. You can hide them by going to the layers panel and selecting the placeholder layer.

VII MAKING TABLES

GETTING STARTED WITH TABLES

Something about tables confounds even the most advanced layout software. It's a level of complexity stacked on top of complexity.

Take your time with it. Don't be afraid to experiment.

Forget the baseline grid: Normally, we respect baselines, but that adds too much complexity right now. When using a table, click on it, and confirm that its text is separate from the baseline grid. The table will have its own logic; we don't want it to conflict with the underlying baseline grid.

Paragraph Panel > Do not align to baseline grid

Using Styles: Styles are almost impossible to ignore when it comes to tables. This template's tables use the same set in different arrangements (with exception to the shaded table).

Command keys!

*While in a table you can **Cmd + Click** to select an entire cell rather than just its contents.*

Clicking on a cell, row, or column highlights its style in the appropriate style panel. This template uses a combination of paragraph styles and cell styles. Clicking on a different style while selecting a row, column, or cell will change it to whatever you click, so be careful.

Small details: The first row under the header is always slightly taller than the remaining "body rows." This creates a more pronounced divide between the results of a table and its labels above. Therefore, a "top cell" inset has been added to the taller row to keep the text in pleasing symmetry with the other body rows.

1d4	Types of roleplaying game products
1	Roleplaying game system. *New system. New genre. New everything.*
2	Adventure module. *Perilous foes. Harrowing places. Limitless treasure.*
3	Supplemental rules. *Sub-systems. Mini-games. Bonus content.*
4	Play aids. *Tools. Cheat sheets. References.*

1d6	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Rand	Cooper	Lubalin	Lupen	Bierut	Tanaka
2	Carson	Brockmann	Maeda	Glaser	Rodchenko	Lustig
3	Vignelli	Davidson	Barnbrook	Scher	Samara	Ansel
4	Fili	Hische	Trochut	Janoff	Awazu	Millman
5	Chwast	Games	Pineles	Davidson	Brody	Brodovitch
6	Moross	Sagmeister	Kare	Greiman	Lois	Müller

1d4	Header Typeface
1	Oldstyle serif
2	Modern serif
3	Humanist san serif
4	Grotesque san serif

1d4	Body Typeface
1	Oldstyle serif
2	Modern serif
3	Humanist san serif
4	Grotesque san serif

1d4	Conditions
1	Concepted
2	Drafted
3	Proofread
4	Published

1d4	Layout Project
1	Manuscript layout. *Clean, approachable, and timeless.*
2	Column layout. *Robust, functional, and familiar.*
3	Modular layout. *Dense, orderly, and experimental.*
4	Hierarchical layout. *Intuitive, engaging, and exciting.*

VIII   MAKING SPREADS

THE CLASSIC OPTION

The classic option is classic for a reason. Resist the urge to toss it out when there's a world of opportunity in the details.

A common way to start a section or chapter is with a spread like this; one full-page image opposite another with type. If you choose this option, I recommend setting a pattern.

Always use the same sides on every chapter.

The purpose of these spreads is to telegraph a new chapter to the reader. Similarities in your section breaks reinforce that relationship. If a full-page image is on the right side, the reader can use that for quick navigation at the table (assuming table usage is a goal).

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

Look at your favorite books for examples. You'll probably find commonalities.

There are countless variations you can make with this template. One approach is to change the size and hierarchy of type on a page. Many great rpgs, for example, like to start their sections with extra large headers that act like art all on their own.

Another method is by changing the size and placement of images. On pages 1 and 2, you'll notice that the image spreads across the gutter onto the opposite page. This is a great way to showcase strong visuals and writing. By condensing type down to a smaller footprint, we draw attention to it.

Drop caps. Dazzling readers since 400 CE

Features like drop caps (the oversized letter in the introduction chapter) can also indicate significance. The trick to their execution is showing restraint on when and why you use them. It would lose its power if we used a drop cap on every page. And if we used multiple drop caps on a page, it wouldn't just become powerless but tiresome.

IX   MAKING MAPS

MAP BEST-PRACTICES

Treat your maps like any other image and you can build a layout that's tailored specifically for them.

Great maps succeed on multiple fronts. They inspire, entertain, educate, guide, and often serve as a visual table of contents. The trick is knowing how to represent your game's map best.

If you don't deploy maps in your game, this spread can be ignored or retrofitted for a different purpose. For everyone else, let's talk about best practices.

"Chunking" is a UX term for breaking large ideas into smaller, bite-sized pieces.

Chunking: If your map is large, like a mega-dungeon, break it into smaller digestible chunks after showing its entirety. The easiest way to do that is to create a spread that showcases the larger map with an abbreviated summary of its features. Then, on later pages, you can show smaller portions of the map with a great depth of detail.

Labeling: Obscuring a room's overall purpose and function at the table can inspire players to explore it proactively. However, if your goal is to make a functional map for the GM, labeling your maps inside the document can help.
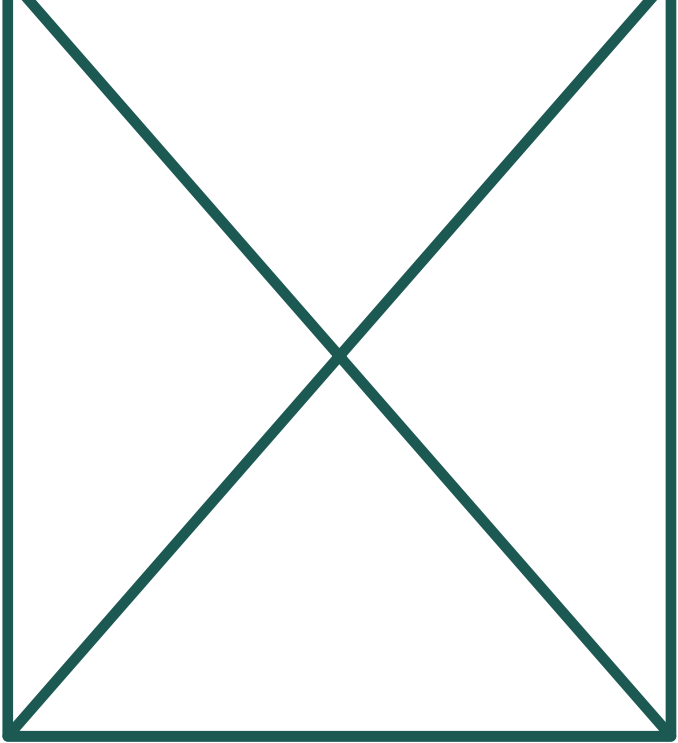
Map parts: A scale, legend, and compass separate functional maps from decorative ones. The more tactical or lethal the gameplay, the more valuable a tool like a scale becomes.

It's a book. Not a steering wheel. Most of the time, anyway.

Orientation: Unless you have a good reason, it's often better if the reader doesn't have to rotate the book to read it. Always plan. If you know the map will be wide, it's better to simplify it so it's legible when you shrink it. In some cases, you can extend the image across the spread. Just remember to plan for the gutter.

Monster name.

Every designer comes upon the dreaded Horror Vacui. Slay it or be slain.

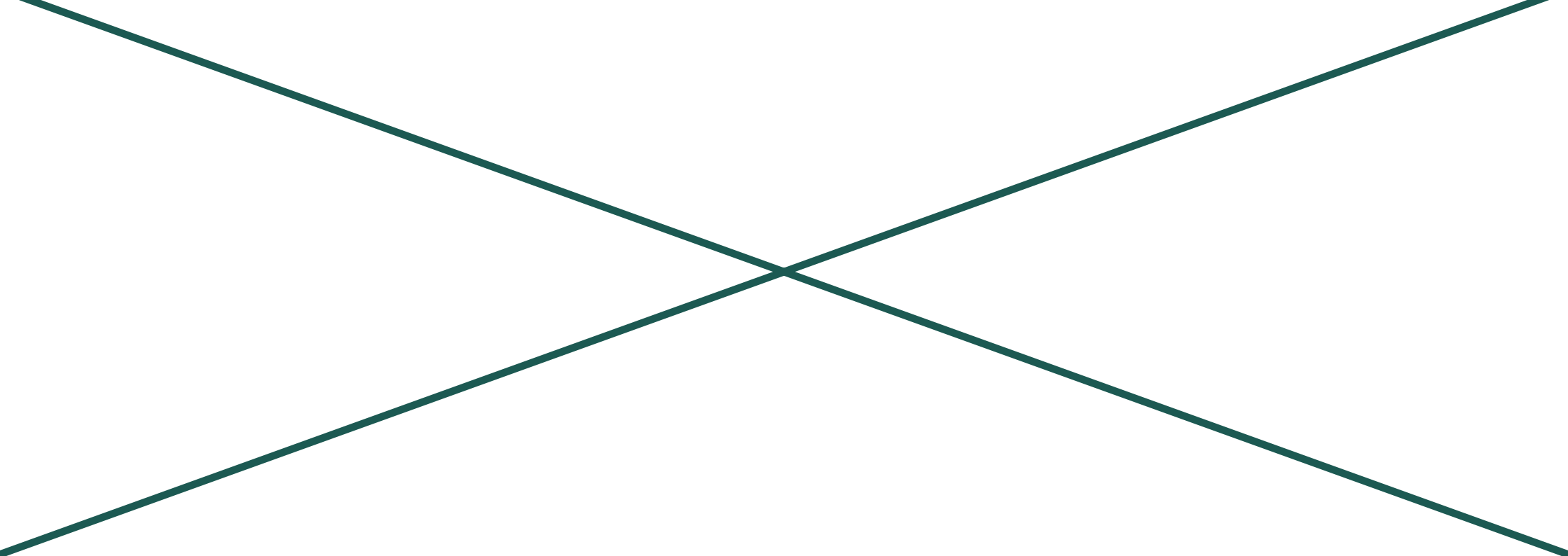| 1d4	Loot
1	compass
2	scale
3	legend
4	title

LOCATION NAME

Map representation has many permutations. This template assumes you might depict a larger map and then break it into pieces.

This is an example of what that smaller map chunk might look like. Notice how it still adheres to the same pattern as the rest of the document. The only real difference is what the additional white space is for.

- Be smart about bulleted lists.
- Readers often recall first and last.
- Consider ordering by priority.
- Or, consider ordering for effect.
- Kobolds!

BIG MAP SPREADS

Want to show off a map in a big way? This is an example of what that looks like. Don't be afraid to experiment.

A spread like this can be an overview of a location, a tool for the GM at the table, or an evocative introduction to a setting. Whatever you choose to showcase, remember to:

- Maintain consistent spacing.
- Keep writing out of the margins.
- Never warp or compromise the map.
- Don't overfill. Maintain whitespace.

SUB-LOCATION

Some maps have divisions or territories. A spread like this could show them off.

LOCATION FACTIONS

Pig-headed orcs, rival adventurers, or skeletons with a great sense of rhythm.

LOCATION THREATS

Telegraph location-wide threats, like plagues, fires, or clowns.

1d10	TABLE ENCOUNTERS
1	LOCATION-BASED LOOT
2	WANDERING MONSTERS
3	RANDOM ENCOUNTERS
4	SETTING ESCALATION
5	WEATHER CONDITIONS
6	DUNGEON ECOLOGY
7	GRID-BREAKING ZOMBIES
8	LICHES SEEKING THRILLS
9	POLITICALLY ORGANIZED BEES
10	PUSHY SALESFOLK

X CONCLUDING NOTES

BEYOND THIS DOCUMENT

The best way to discover new design is to keep reading, playing, and exploring other designs.

There's a treasure trove of design techniques lying in wait. Toggle layers. Hyperlinks. HTML tagging. Alt-text. Interactive features. Running headers. Line composition. Anything and everything.

This document scratches the surface.

Further Reading: *Explorers Design*—this document's source and home—endeavors to be the first stop in your rpg design journey. There you will find deep dives into other games, links to design textbooks, and articles that teach the conceptual ideas of design.

After that, things get more interesting. Every designer owes it to themselves to set aside software-specific knowledge so they can focus on conceptual ideas. Tools change but theory lasts forever.

If you must buy, please buy from my bookshop.

Here are a few books you should check out at your local library:

- *Making and Breaking the Grid* by Timothy Samara
- *Thinking with Type* by Ellen Lupton
- *The Elements of Typographic Style* by Robert Bringhurst
- *Universal Principles of Design* by Lidwell and Holden

SHARING YOUR WORK

Made something with this template? I'd love to hear about it. Share your work on social media with the hashtag #explorersdesign and link me. I'll showcase your work, give thoughts, and maybe feature it on the template's product page with links.

The teaching goes both ways. I'm excited to learn from you!