

TechSmith's
Ultimate Guide
to
Simplified
User Interface (SUI)
Graphics

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Part 1. An introduction to simplified user interface graphics: what they are and why they are important

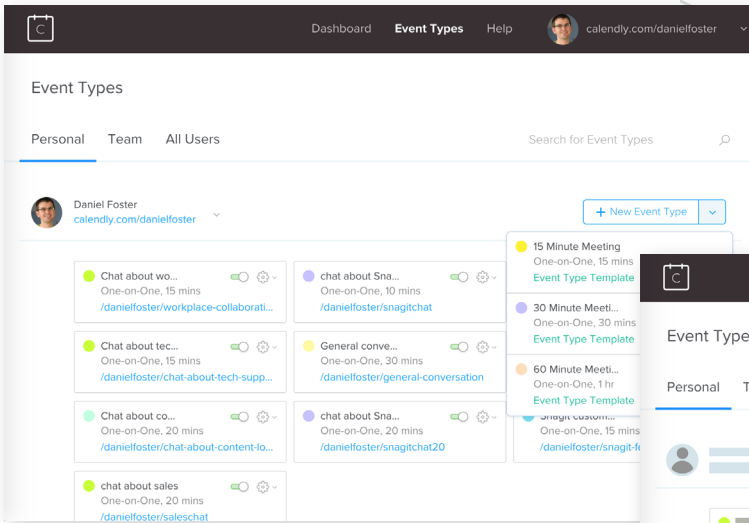
What is simplified user interface (SUI)?

Simplified user interface (SUI) is a visual design technique that's revolutionizing technical communications. It's a solution that grew organically from the need to illustrate products, concepts and technology quickly, but in an attractive, easy-to-understand way.

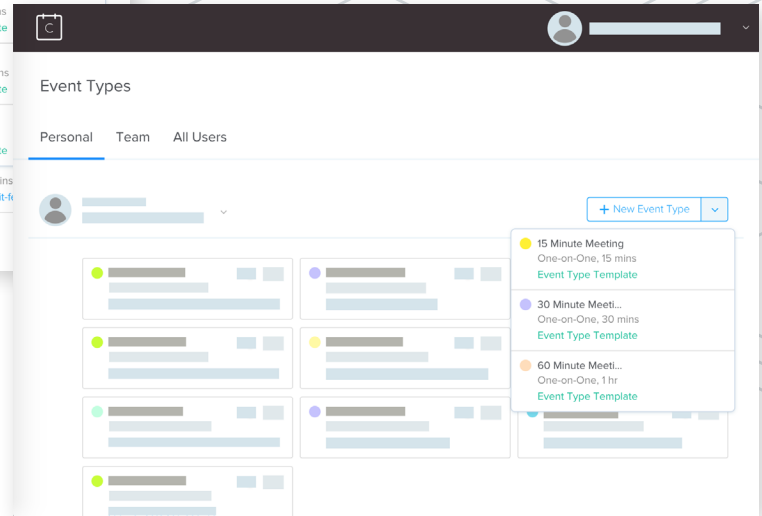
SUI is a design treatment that takes a user interface (UI) or other graphical representation such as web content and simplifies it, turning it into a more basic representation — hence the name: Simplified user interface or simplified graphics.

Although SUI graphics are an abstract representation of the original interface, they keep the features that distinguish it and any essential information. Text and graphics which aren't important for the particular context will be reduced to simpler shapes, such as plain rectangles instead of text, or a gray circle instead of a personal avatar, leaving enough context for the user to orient themselves. This creates a stylized but instantly recognizable image of the software interface.

By maintaining the overall context and layout of the interface, SUI graphics remove unnecessary and distracting visual clutter while drawing the focus to contextually important elements, which remain unchanged.



Before



After

Most people have seen and benefited from simplified graphics; they just may not realize it.

For example, this “Before” image shows a conventional screenshot of a web interface. In the simplified “After” version, simple blocks cover most details, including the individual user’s name and photo. Only the most important details are left: the drop down box on the right, the navigation tabs in the top left, and the company’s logo. In the top toolbar, the tab names have been deleted altogether rather than covered up, making the image as uncluttered as possible.

The quiet revolution: where SUI came from and when it works best

This design style probably looks familiar. In fact, most people — both tech communicators and consumers — have seen and benefited from simplified graphics; they just may not realize it.

In that way, SUI graphics’ simplicity and authenticity can work against them. They’re sometimes so simple and unobtrusive, we hardly notice them. So, while most industry professionals may recognize the visual style,

few are familiar with the terminology, the concept, or its array of benefits.

SUI graphics first began to be widely noticed in marketing communications such as company newsletters around 2013, primarily by marketing brands, startups, and tech companies such as Google. They looked similar to wireframes and showed simple interface visualizations with blocks of color rather than literal captures.

Since then, more and more companies looking for a simple and attractive visual solution have adopted the design style, and used it in product training materials, blog posts, and other forms of “What’s New” content, eventually extending to classic documentation and training outputs.

Now, SUI graphics’ instantly recognizable, modern design style permeates content across the spectrum. They provide an especially effective tool for producing quick, stylish marketing and graphic design, and for illustrating instructions, help content and technical documents to make them more user-friendly and easy to understand. They also have benefits for the technical content teams tasked with creating such content.

What makes SUI special? Benefits for communicators and users

Technical communicators have a wide array of tools and visual styles at their disposal. So, why should you use simplified graphics?

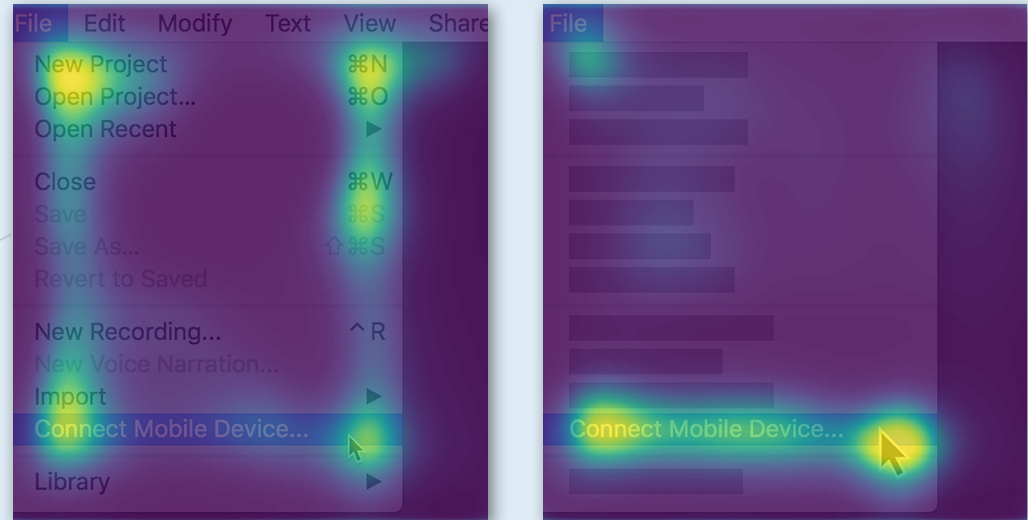
It’s effective

Aside from a modern look, SUI graphics offer strategic benefits when used for technical communication.

We know that images provide faster and more effective communications than text alone. TechSmith’s [“The Value of Visuals”](#) research revealed that 67% of people say they understand information better when presented visually and science shows that the human brain processes visuals 60,000 times faster than text.¹

¹ TechSmith. The value of visuals (accessed April 2019 at www.techsmith.com/visual-communication-research.html) Thermopylae (accessed April 2019 at www.t-sciences.com/news/humans-process-visual-data-better)

This means that — as communicators — we can't rely on text alone to get our message across. But not all images have the same impact. Predictive eye-tracking experiments show that typical screenshots (which typically have far more elements and visual noise) can distract the user's attention from the most important features.



As this eye-tracking heatmap shows, the more elements of an image there are to look at and read, the more fragmented the user's attention will be. The image on the left shows how the user will scan all of the available information (even lists of hotkeys) so as not to miss something important. The SUI graphic on the right removes all information not relevant to the image's specific purpose, allowing the user to focus on the vital details.

It's economical

SUI graphics save time and money. While conventional screenshots can have several different use cases across marketing and technical materials, simplified images often take this to the next level. Because the amount of detail in SUI graphics is reduced, they are future-proofed through multiple rounds of software updates and can often be used across markets which speak different languages. This makes their potential reach and longevity much more extensive, saving the time and effort required to make multiple versions of images and update them.

The efficiencies simplified graphics can provide are becoming even more important as tech products continue to shift from traditional to agile development cycles – or even continuous integration and

continuous delivery. SUI graphics help to future-proof content by eliminating the need to re-capture and swap out product screenshots every time software is slightly updated.

Not only do SUI graphics stay relevant for longer than traditional screenshots and interface images, but depending on your global audiences, they can mean having to create fewer versions in the here and now.

By reducing or completely eliminating text in the image, simplified graphics can minimize or even get rid of the need to localize the images in your content.

This simplification process also provides an efficient way of keeping customer data private. Some content teams only have access to a real instance of the product with a real customer's data. Not only is it time consuming to have to blur out any Personally Identifiable Information (PII), but it rarely looks attractive or professional.

You can also create test instances of the product with dummy data, but it usually takes even longer, especially when it requires help from a developer. When this issue coincides with the need to produce multiple language versions or new versions of product updates, the time cost can be very high. On the other hand, with simplified graphics, PII can be blocked out along with other non-relevant content and features.



As a technical writer whose product UI changes almost every week, I was very happy to start using SUI in my documentation. It helps me avoid the overhead of having to update screenshots and our users have a far better experience since the graphics are much clearer.

— Julia Hornik,
Technical Writer

It's attractive

SUI graphics help boost user experience and brand reputation because they look good. The style is contemporary, clean and attractive, which is another great reason to use it. And, because of its simplicity, it can be easily adapted and updated as design styles and tastes change.

Despite its now-ubiquitous use in tech and marketing, SUI design is still relatively new. It's a trend that originated in tech marketing so the visual style feels fresh and innovative.

But despite this host of benefits for both tech communicators and consumers, many professionals are still not using simplified images. Why is this?

Myth-busting: the misconceptions that hold technical communicators back

Why aren't all tech communicators embracing the benefits of SUI graphics? There are three common fears that cause people to avoid using this visual style:

Myth 1: SUI will be additional work

It's true that turning a screenshot into a simplified graphic is often — but not always — a manual process. But the small time investment made to create SUI images normally leads to far more efficiency in the medium-to-longer term. Here's why:



- Fewer updates. SUI graphics stay relevant for much longer. They rarely need to be replaced because of software updates, unlike traditional images and screenshots.
- One image for all. If you need the same image in multiple languages, one simplified image could work in every location, greatly reducing the time and expense needed for localization.
- Customer comprehension. Simplified graphics work better in many situations. Customers can grasp the concept and learn what you're trying to show more quickly, as the graphics present the most relevant information without drowning it out in unnecessary visual noise. This means happier customers and fewer calls for additional support.

What's more, although creating a SUI image takes marginally more time than taking a screenshot, it takes much less time and effort than most people assume. The Simplify feature in [Snagit](#) makes it easy to create a professional, attractive SUI graphics in a couple of minutes.

Myth 2: SUI design is for graphic designers

Because SUI graphics look so professional, many technical communicators believe they don't have the skills to create them. That's just not true.

In fact, they're simple to create for anyone who knows the basics of image editing software — no pro design background or training in professional-level design tools necessary.

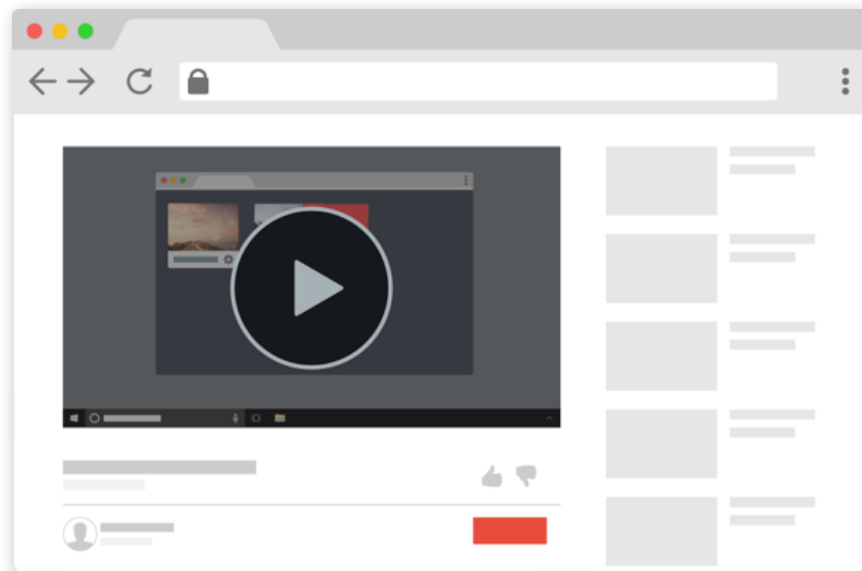
Most technical communicators have some day-to-day experience with image editing tools and a general sense of what makes an effective, attractive image. That's all you need to turn a screenshot into a simplified image.

Myth 3: Users won't recognize edited screenshots

As communicators, we need to convey information as clearly and simply as possible. So, it makes sense that technical communicators want to ensure any graphics don't add to a user's confusion.

Fear not. Not only can users generally recognize the interface or website that a SUI graphic represents, but strong evidence suggests that by reducing visual noise and complexity, users actually understand the most important information much faster.²

By reducing visual noise and complexity, users actually understand the most important information much faster.



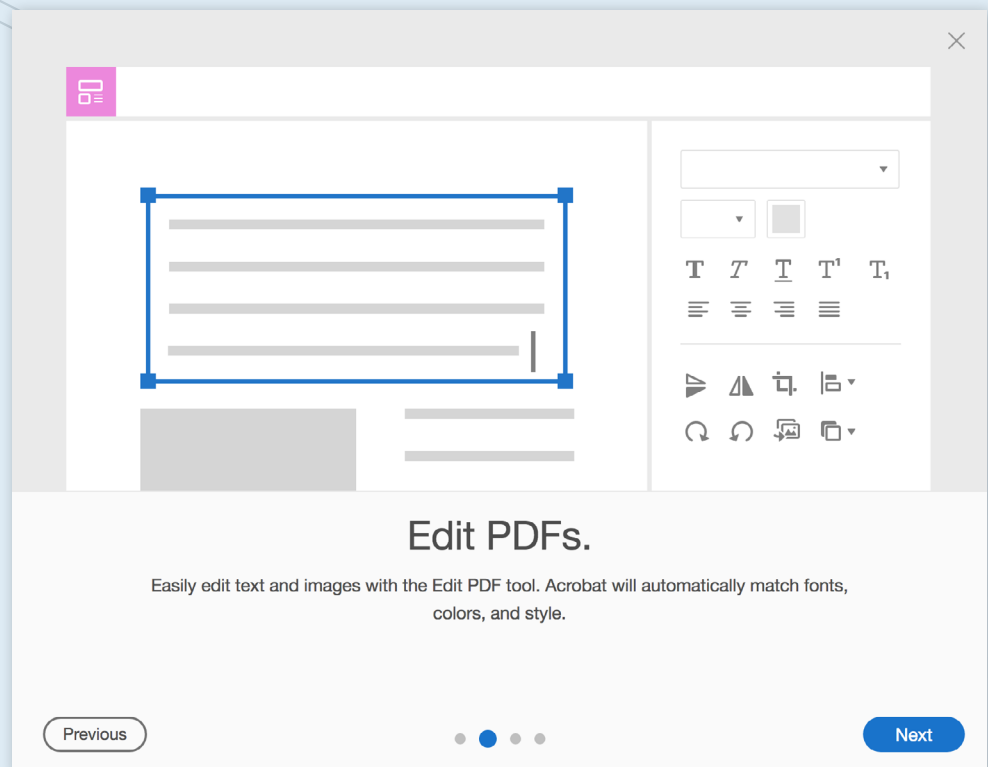
A SUI graphic of a popular video sharing site

² The eLearning Coach. (Accessed April 2019 at <http://thelearningcoach.com/media/graphics/realistic-graphics-and-learning/>)

Inspiration: SUI in practice

You can only learn so much by hearing about SUI graphics. To really get an idea of how they help build better content (and some ways they may not), you need to see them in action.

Often, it's not a good idea to simplify every aspect of an image – with some notable exceptions. This can work well for some marketing materials where you want an attractive image that displays a very high-level concept of a webpage or platform devices, for example.



However, for instructive content it's important to keep the few elements that are directly related to the task or instruction in their original, organic state. This will help the user orient themselves to the image and apply what they can see to what's in front of them.

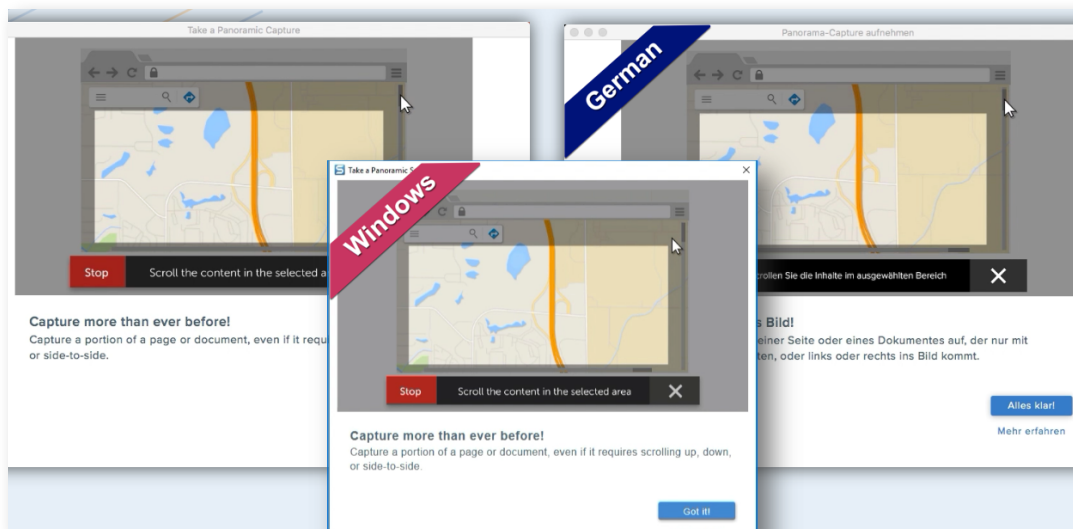
It is also important to keep the color palette to a small range of complementary colors, and avoid anything too bright or garish. Important features can be allowed to stand out more, but background shapes usually benefit from being more muted than they would be in reality.

Case Study: One graphic, 24 use cases

Just how widely can you use GUI graphics in the real world? At TechSmith, we first implemented simplified graphics in 2013, when we created a simplified Snagit Panoramic Capture onboarding animation.

The visual is clean and easy to understand. And, because all the interface text has been removed, we could use the same image across the four language versions of our software: English, German, French and Japanese. Further, we deploy the same graphic for both Mac and Windows users and have done so for three major versions: By not showing the exact details of the rest of the interface, we can continue to use it today even as other features and actions have changed.

All in all, this single image has been used in at least 24 different ways! And we can't see any reason why it won't be able to keep travelling further, providing clear instructions while saving us time and money.



Part 2. Best practice: how to create simplified graphics with impact

When to use simplified graphics

Despite their wide range of benefits, SUI graphics won't work well for every situation. A number of factors determine whether a SUI image is appropriate for a particular use. Here are some instances where SUI graphics are most likely to be beneficial:

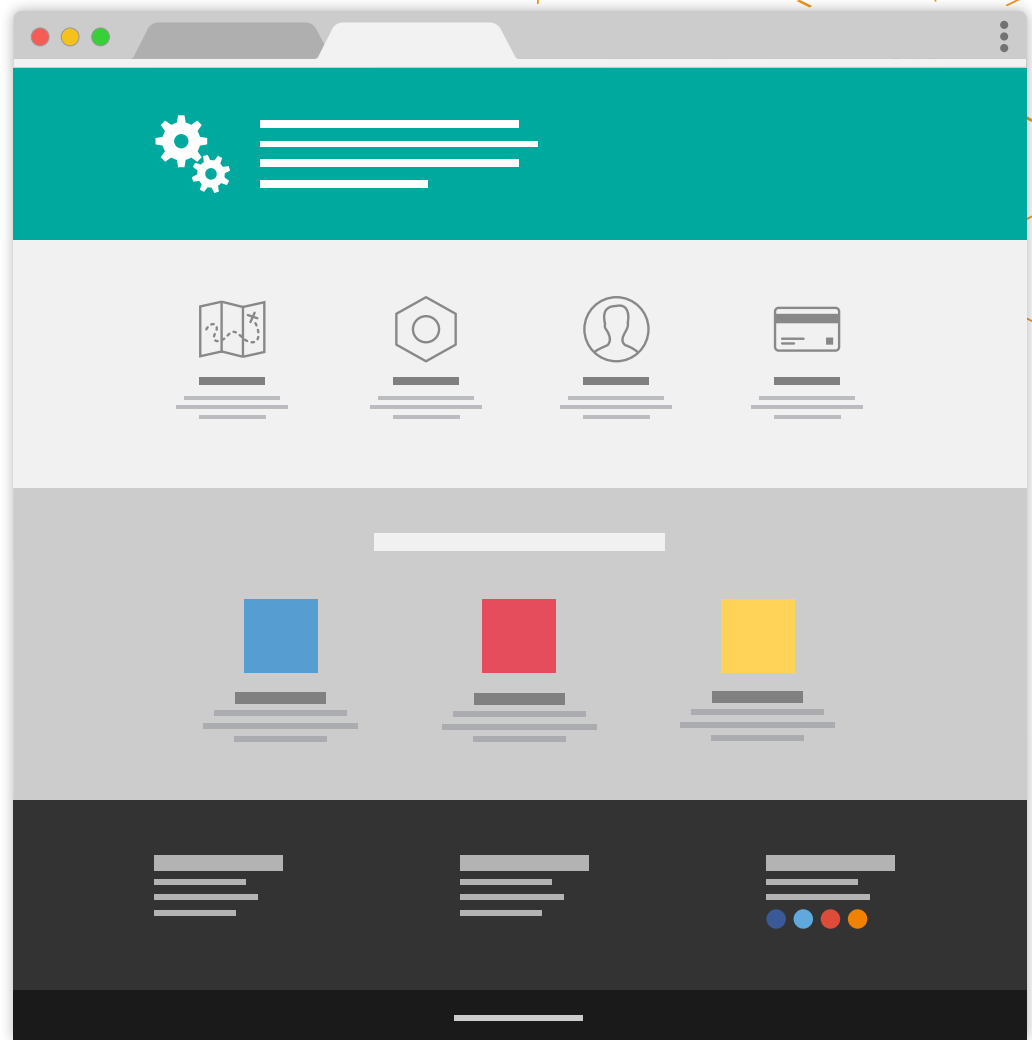
Instructional content

SUI images and videos are great at helping learners get the “big picture” of a new workflow, idea, or concept. By removing visual complexity and distractions, SUI graphics allow a user to focus on the most important features and actions. This reduces the learner's cognitive load, allowing them to absorb information without becoming overwhelmed or distracted by irrelevant details.

Then, when learners first use the product, they will better recognize which features to look for and which actions to take. Once they understand these basic processes, they can explore other functionality and learn additional features more easily.

Top tip: Although simplified graphics and animations stand well on their own, to ensure clear communication and better accessibility for those who are blind or visually impaired, we recommend accompanying SUI images with text. Place the text outside of the actual graphic, to make it easier to reuse the visual across multiple instances.

// This is particularly helpful when you know what you want something to look like, but not exactly what the content will be yet.



Marketing product mock-ups

We know that SUI graphics help customers understand processes and concepts, but that's not the limit of their effectiveness. When you need to express a layout or concept to your colleagues to plan a project, get an idea signed off, or so coworkers can go away and build it, you can use SUI rather than sketches, wireframes, or trying to explain verbally or with plain text via email.

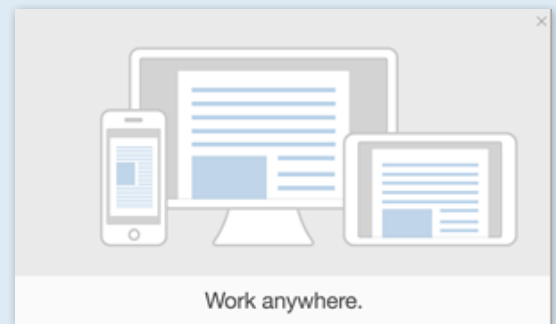
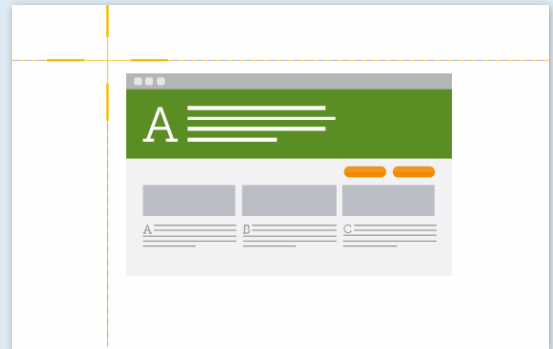
This is particularly helpful when you know what you want something to look like, but not exactly what the content will be yet, for example in a new website design, a PDF, or high-level marketing graphics.

Multi-purpose icons

Technical communicators likely need to use certain visuals multiple times to add appropriate color and context. Create SUI graphics icons or images which represent these objects or concepts to reuse them across numerous pieces of documentation without becoming repetitive or having to worry about syncing up the visual style.

Some of the most common and useful SUI icons include representations of a:

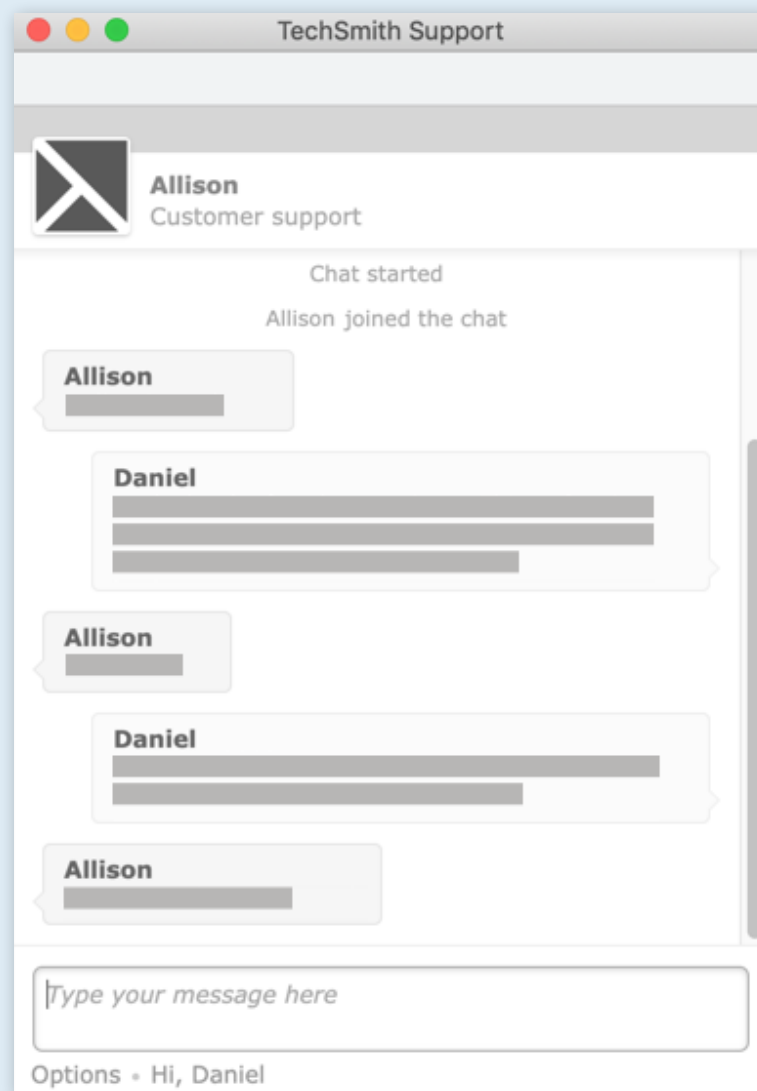
- computer desktop
- website
- sample document or spreadsheet
- chatbot or messenger
- graphs and diagrams
- email



Staging complex examples

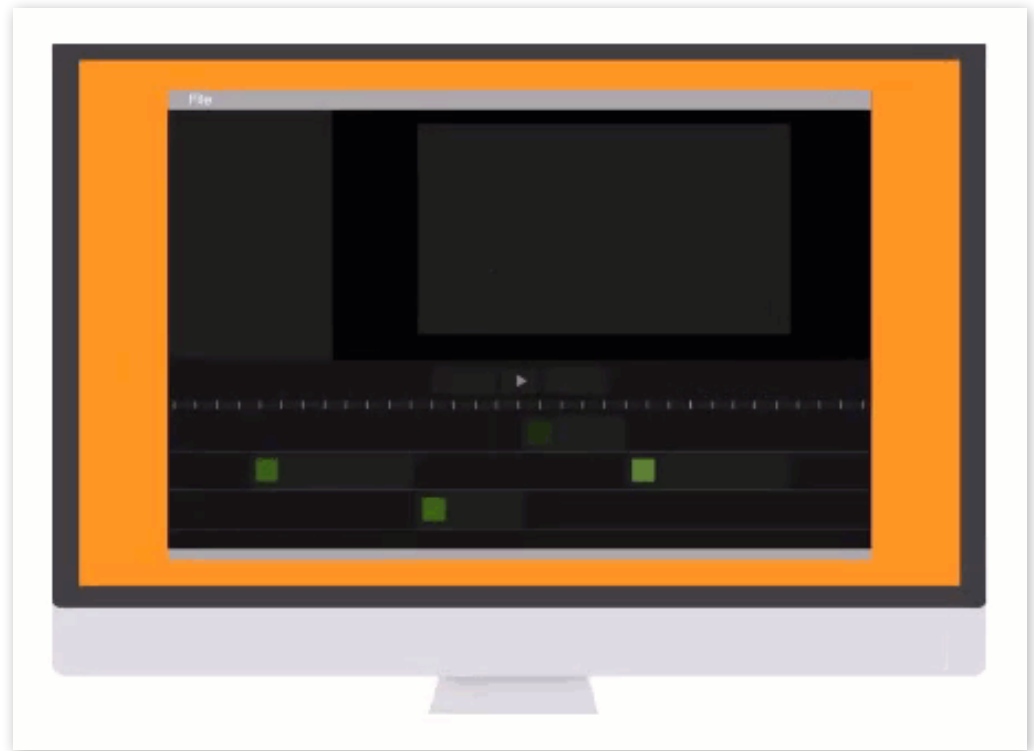
Avoid having to set up example content that will be complex or time-consuming to create by creating a SUI image instead. **Some examples where the traditional method requires significant content creation include:**

- Staging a chat conversation between multiple users
- Processes that involve multiple computers, devices or users
- Specific states or use cases that you can't easily set up in your products or services, such as a "Storage Full" status, or a virus or malware alert.



Directing focus

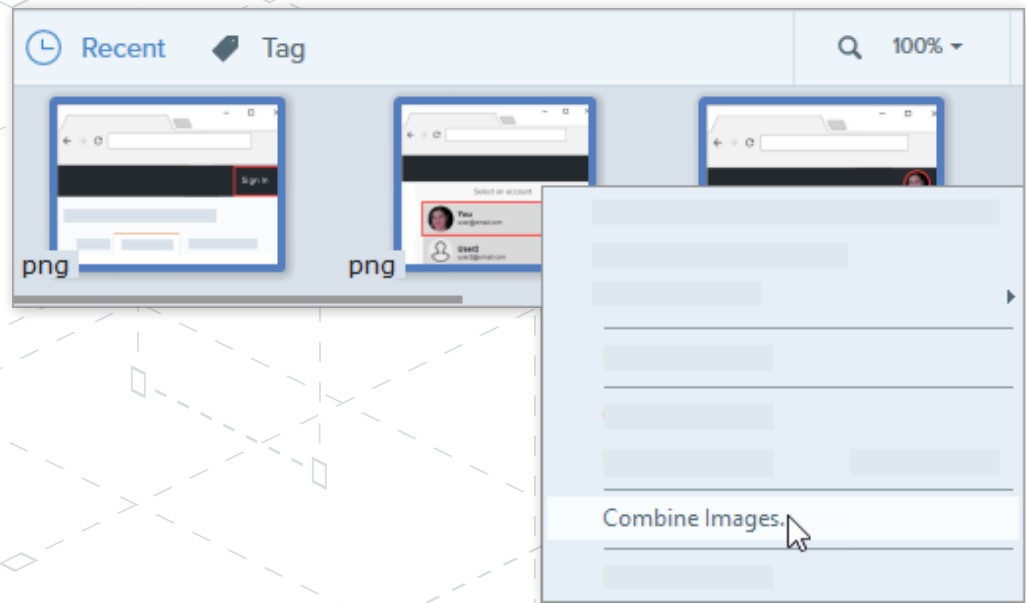
SUI graphics can be highly effective when you need to draw attention to one element of a crowded UI. For example, in this image, the SUI graphics draw attention to the menus and buttons that the viewer needs to click on.



Parity across platforms

Often, user interfaces vary between web browsers, mobile devices, and other platforms. But even if these platforms have different layouts, often just one SUI graphic may be used to represent all of them without causing confusion, as long as the elements in the action are the same. The same is often not true for standard screenshots.

Menus benefit from the future-proofing qualities of SUI graphics. With updates changing the quantity and order of drop-down menu items fairly regularly, SUI avoids the need to update these every time there's a change. Furthermore, as long as the action has the same wording in each, the same SUI will be appropriate for users with different operating systems.



In the example above, the SUI menu instructs users to select “Combine Images”, whether they’re using Windows or Mac, and will likely stay applicable through multiple versions of software updates where the other options might change. It’s worth noting that the number of gray blocks in the drop down do not have to be in exactly the same number or position as in reality for the image to be effective.

“Most technical communicators create content in more than one language, and around a third in six language or more.”

Multiple languages

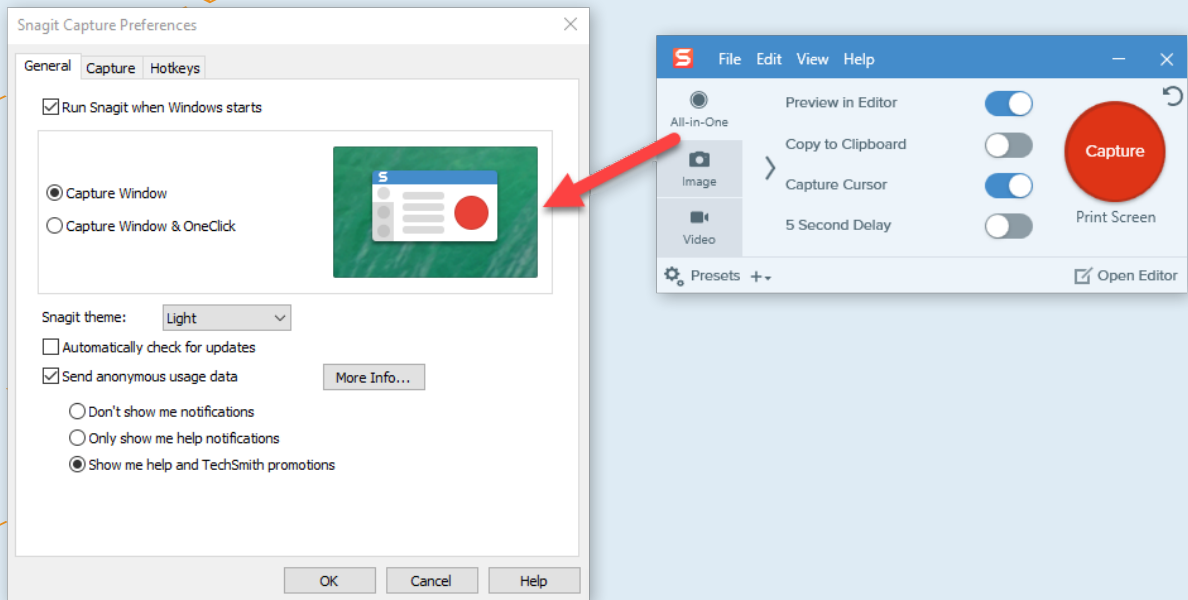
According to the Technical Communication Benchmarking Survey, most technical communicators create content in more than one language, and around a third in six languages or more.³ This can mean traditional images have to be recreated multiple times to be understood in each different language.

By removing unnecessary text and turning it into visual blocks, SUI graphics can greatly minimize — and often eliminate — the need to create images in each language, without losing any meaning or attractiveness.

³ The Content Wrangler. (Accessed March 2019 at <https://thecontentwrangler.com/2016/05/26/2016-technical-communication-industry-benchmarking-survey/#>)

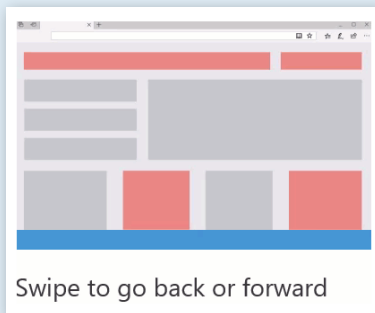
Small graphics

SUI is perfect when a graphic is too small to display text details. In this example, the SUI graphic provides a visual representation of the Capture interface without adding unnecessary clutter or complexity to the text-heavy Preferences dialog.

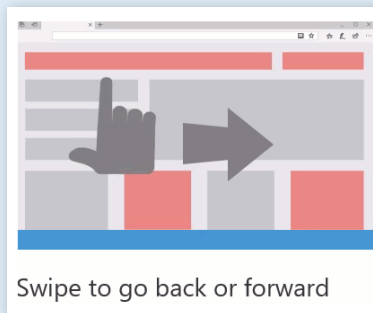


Conveying actions or user interactions

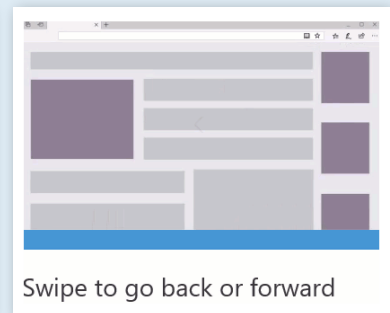
SUI animations are perfect for conveying actions, such as rotate, drag or swipe, to users simply and visually. A simple text instruction - as shown below - can also help aid understanding, but might not always be necessary.



Swipe to go back or forward



Swipe to go back or forward



Swipe to go back or forward

To simplify or not to simplify?

Although some image editing tools make the process relatively quick and simple, creating SUI graphics is still usually a manual process. There is always some time investment involved, particularly when creating SUI videos.

To get the most of SUI graphics, tech communicators must decide when they're most beneficial to use and when they may not be needed. **Key factors include:**

- How many different versions will need to be produced if you decide to use traditional images or screenshots?
- Will the content be localized?
- Will future software updates mean recreating the traditional image?
- Will the screenshot include sensitive data, such as customer information or proprietary company information?



Creating lengthy SUI video clips can certainly be time consuming, so this is one case where it is best to weigh the options carefully.

“There are two main factors I take into consideration when making this decision. First, if the screenshot is going to be localized, then I’m much more likely to simplify it. Second, if the instruction would greatly benefit from a simplified approach, then I’ll go with it. The kicker here is that the simplified approach with video is often much more time consuming, so the benefits need to outweigh the costs.”

Instructional Designer, on when to use SUIs

Practical tips and best practices

When you've decided to create a SUI graphic, how can you make sure the image you create is effective?

1. Take "simplified" seriously

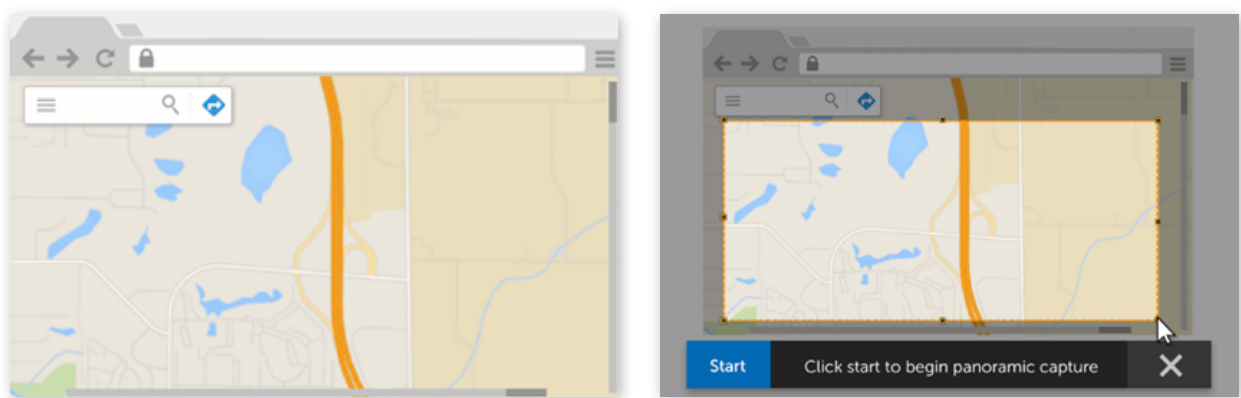
Only leave what's necessary for the SUI graphic to be clearly understood. Remove any unnecessary content that can distract the user, and any part of the image that isn't required in that context. This will also depend on the purpose of the graphic: teaching users a new skill will probably require more details than an image which is just there to express the idea or concept of a webpage or spreadsheet document

You need to keep the overall architecture of the page the same to avoid confusing the user, but you don't need to replace every visual element exactly.

2. ...but don't simplify too much!

On the other hand, it is possible to simplify too much. Keep enough details and visual elements to allow users to recognize the UI. This can be a balancing act. You may need to crowdsource opinions within your wider team, or to show it to someone with less knowledge to see how readily they understand.

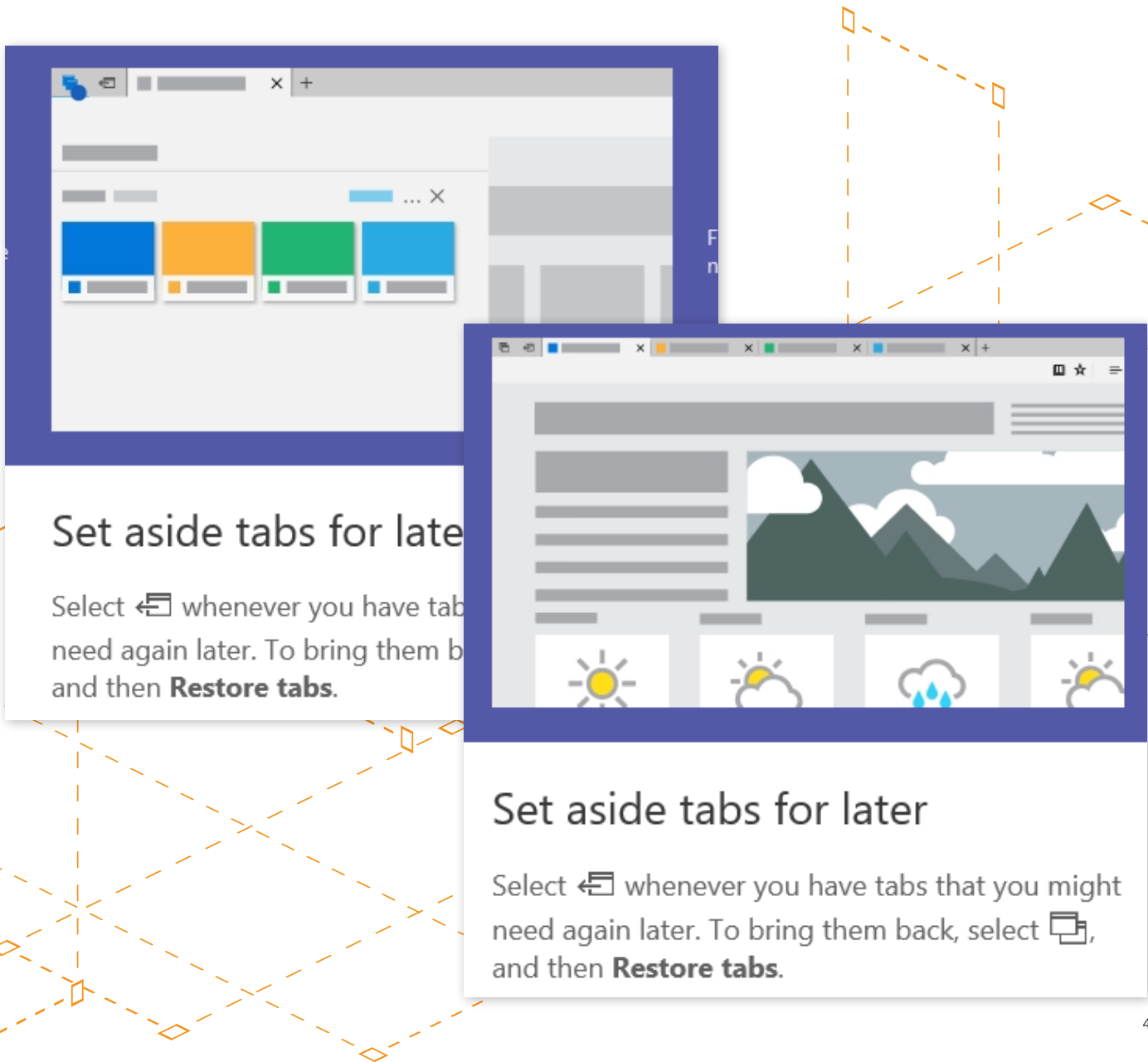
In the example below, the still images are supposed to be instructing users on a panoramic capture, but the sequence of events and actions is not very clearly expressed. Using arrows or an animation to show clicking, dragging and scrolling could help the reader locate themselves in the interface or process.



3. Use visual anchors

Keep visual anchors such as icons, titles, and menu labels to provide overall context for the page, even if they're not important for the action. Keeping the overall structure and layout helps the user grasp the concept.

In this example, Microsoft effectively uses the real icons in the top left corner to help the viewer orient themselves.



⁴ Microsoft: Microsoft Edge Onboarding Tool Tips (Accessed June 2019 at <https://microsoftedgetips.microsoft.com/en-us/0/35?source=menu>)

4. Consider the color palette

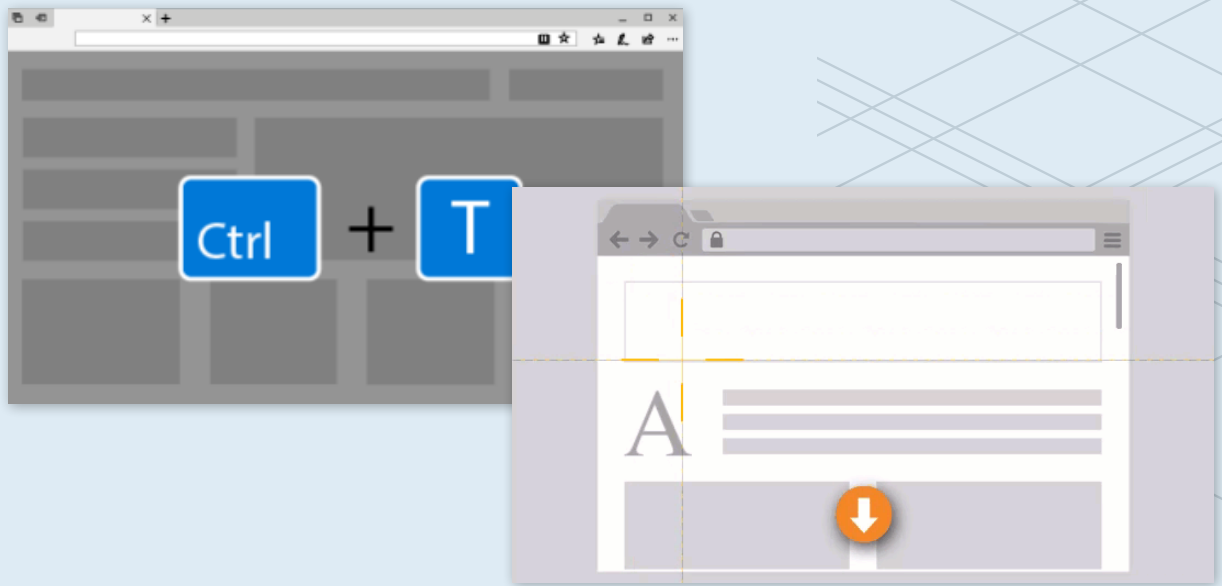
Make sure you select a complementary color scheme for visual elements in the UI, so that the design of the simplified content matches the design of the original content. If done well, a simplified image won't stand out as simplified. It will look relatively natural, and getting the colors right is an important part of this.

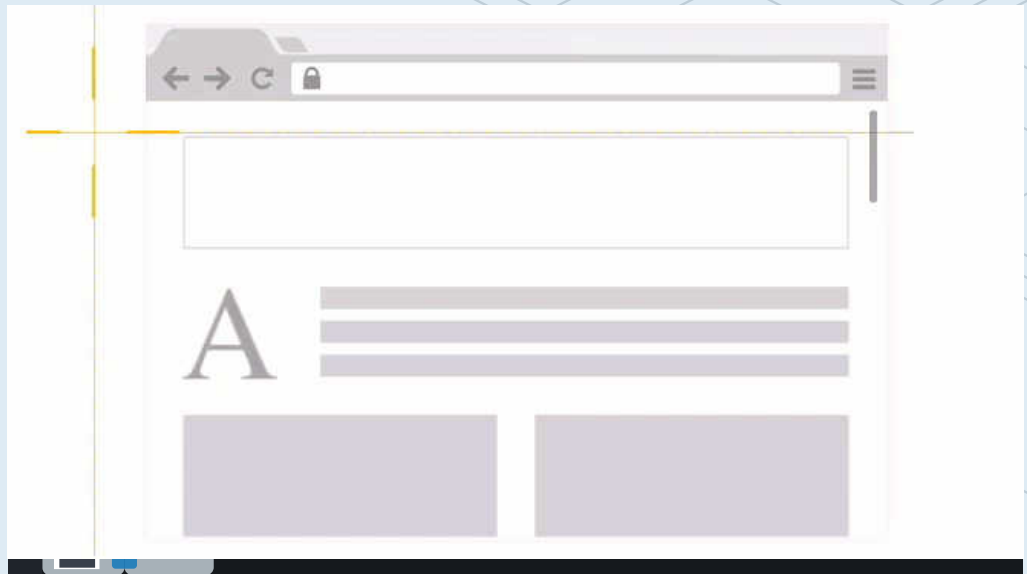
The following tips will help you use color to your advantage:

- Select a set of neutral colors (such as shades of grey) for the text, menu and background elements.
- Be considerate about color contrast. If something needs to stand out, allow it to. If it doesn't, consider toning down the opacity or intensity of the color so it draws less attention.
- Do not overuse bright colors. Save the highlight or high-contrast colors for visual anchors, callouts, frames, or other elements that draw attention to the important action or elements in an image.

These examples use a palette of white and grays, with one color - blue in the first example and orange in the second - to highlight the key action the user needs to take.

**If done well,
a simplified
image won't
stand out as
simplified.**





5. Be consistent

If you use SUI design regularly, build a SUI interface graphic of your product or interface to use across your team/project.

This will:

- Help to maintain a consistent and recognizable look and style to the user.
- Save duplication of work and the time it takes to build the SUI for your product every time you need to create an image.



At TechSmith, the User Assistance and Documentation teams create SUI graphics for our product interfaces, which we use as our base for the product UI in videos and images. We tweak the assets as needed based on the scenario or deliverable, but having this starting point helps to save individual time and decision-making, as well as keeping our outputs consistent and high quality.

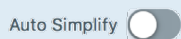
Part 3. A step-by-step how-to guide for creating SUI graphics with Snagit

Most image editing software is capable of manually creating SUI graphics. But Snagit’s Simplify feature is a dedicated tool designed to make creating SUI graphics incredibly quick and easy. It even offers an auto-simplify workflow process, instantly providing a suggested SUI which you can save and share, or tweak as necessary.

How to auto-create a Snagit SUI



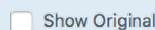
> **Step 1:** With a screenshot open in Snagit editor, select the “Simplify” tool under “More” in the editing toolbar.



> **Step 2:** Select “Auto Simplify” in the right hand side bar. Your SUI graphic will be generated instantly.

> **Step 3:** Tweak your SUI to get the right look and level of detail. **You can:**

- Adjust the color palette
- Add extra elements
- Remove shapes added by the auto-simplify process to restore more detail to your design
- Use the alignment controls to line everything up perfectly
- Use the “move” tool to select and reposition multiple elements at once



Your original screenshot is always available to view if you need it. Just click the “Show Original” box.

> **Step 4:** When you’re happy with your SUI, click “Share” to save it or show it to colleagues.

Tips and tricks:

- Depending on the end goal for the image, you might want to leave some elements completely unchanged.
- Make sure all blocks and shapes are a similar size and shape, and aligned neatly with each other.
- Don't change the overall architecture of the page. Although deleting unimportant features is fine, moving elements around will make the image confusing. So keep the layout intact.

How to manually create a Snagit SUI graphic



Simplify

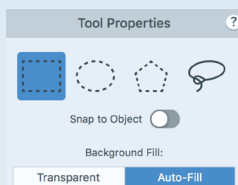
> **Step 1:** With a screenshot open in Snagit editor, select the “Simplify” tool under “More” in the editing toolbar.



> **Step 2:** A selection of shapes and other graphic elements are provided in “Quickstyles” and a color palette is also suggested, but you can change any of these by clicking the color palette to choose your desired color.



> **Step 3:** Select and place shapes to cover the remaining screenshot elements. It's best to cover text with the multiple line graphic and images with a circle or square shape.



Selection

> **Step 4:** Erase any unnecessary clutter, such as unnecessary labels, icons and even buttons. Use the “Selection” feature to highlight the area, then select “Auto-Fill” in the right-hand properties panel (to convert the area to the background color), and press Delete on your keyboard.

> **Step 5:** When you're happy with your SUI, click “Share” to save it or show it to colleagues.

Further reading

The Content Wrangler.

[“The 2016 Technical Communication Benchmarking Survey”](#)

(accessed March 2019)

The eLearning Coach.

[“Realistic Graphics and Learning: What’s most effective?”](#)

(accessed April 2019)

TechSmith.

[“The Value of Visuals”](#)

(accessed April 2019)

[Thermopylae.](#)

(accessed April 2019)