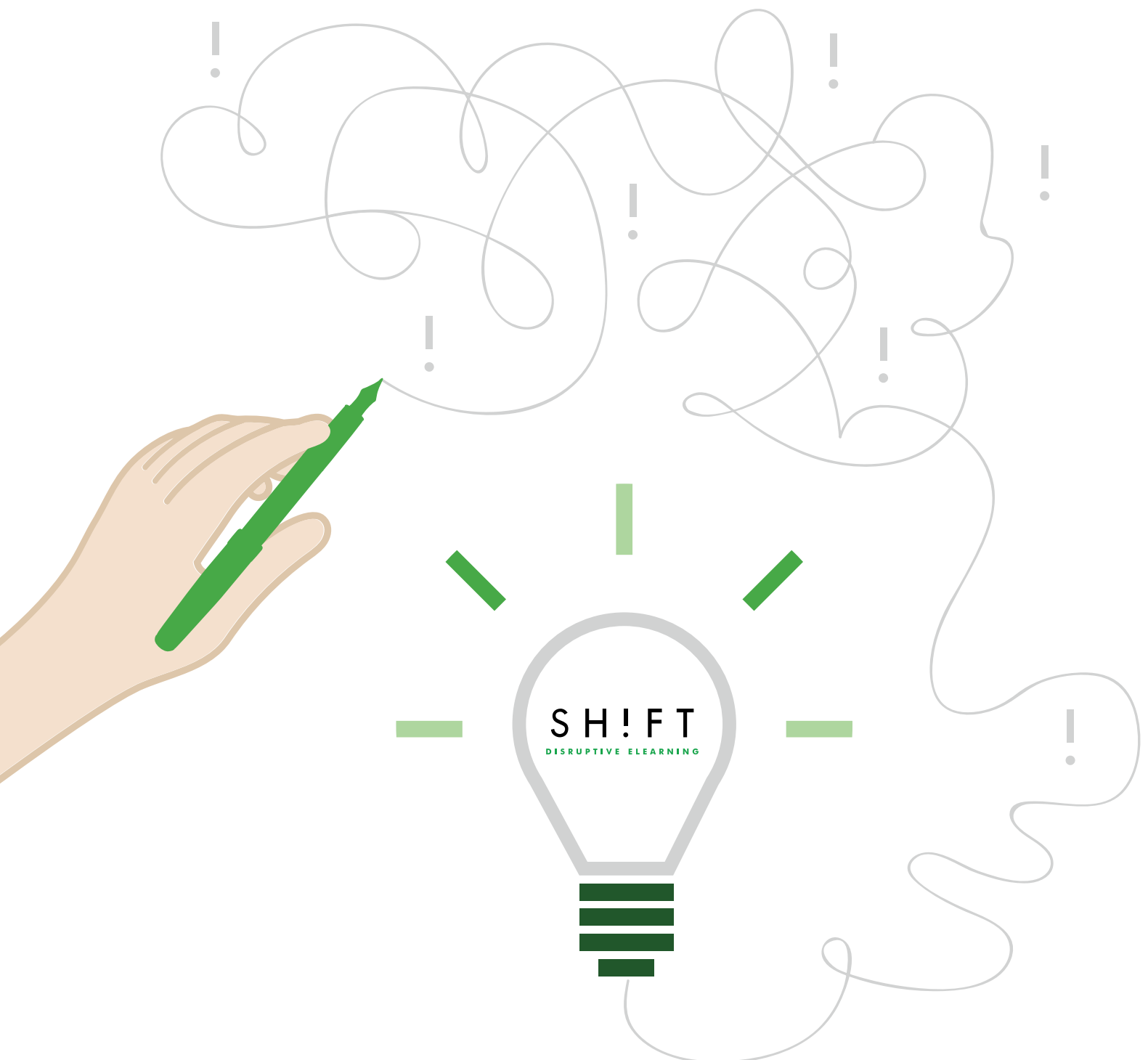# Ideas to Make Dry Content Interesting in eLearning

A list of ideas to ensure boredom does not creep into your eLearning courses.

SH!FT
DISRUPTIVE ELEARNING

TABLE OF **CONTENTS**

INTRO

As Instructional Designers, we are creative folks. We want to create eLearning courses that sparkle with our personalities, dazzle at first sight, stir the learner's emotions, and make a lasting impression. Unfortunately, the topics we have to teach mostly are anything but wildly exciting. Finance. Safety training. Ethics training. Pharmaceutical compliance courses. The heart hardly leaps with joy at the thought of sifting through tons of legalese or pharma-talk (the raw matter) and then creating a course out of the jargons and lingo.

However, our woes lie elsewhere.

As eLearning designers, the onus is on us to create engaging courses out of dry, technical matter. We have to create courses that are not only instructionally effective but also arresting to the senses. It is one of those **challenges that keep us up at night,** as confirmed by more than 500 training professionals we surveyed.

Your challenge is to better the engagement levels achieved by PowerPoint presentations, which is almost none. Learners are weary of dull and drab slides that put them to sleep. Your challenge is to create courses that bring to life dull topics, simplify complex technical terms, and make the learning process a memorable journey.

This book makes a 360-degree turn from the traditional way of teaching dry topics. We will give you ideas on Visual Design, Instructional Design, and Writing to help you create courses that sparkle with life and are full of verve and personality.

PART I: VISUAL DESIGN

Teaching drab and complicated technical topics is a compelling reason to focus more intently on the aesthetics of the course. Colors, textures, images and icons offset some of the "seriousness" of the subject matter and assure learners that they are in for an engaging journey.

Besides imparting liveliness to a technical course, visual design also plays an integral role in making a learning program instructionally effective. But beware, visuals—too much, too little, and the wrong ones—can increase the **cognitive load** of a course. Your learners are already grappling with a difficult topic; don't make their lives more miserable with a sloppy-looking course.

Visual design in eLearning comprises several facets. You have to get every one of them right. Let's delve into the details.

IDEA #1: USE COLORS TO SET THE MOOD

Who says you have to stick to dull grays, monotonous blacks, and insipid blues just because you are teaching a complex topic? If you don't want to drive your learners away or bore them to sleep, use colors that evoke particular emotions.

Colors create moods.

Create a course with colors that feels inviting and set the right mood. We humans always go weak in the knees when someone speaks to our hearts!

First of all, learn about the psychology of colors and evoke the right emotions in your learners.

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Print   Sound

What is solar energy?

Solar energy is a source of **renewable energy provided by the sun in the form of electromagnetic radiation** (light, heat and ultraviolet rays), which allows generation of heat and electricity.

Electromagnetic Radiation

Light

Heat

Ultraviolet rays

Electricity

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Print   Sound

What is geothermal energy?

Hot Springs   Volcanic Activity   Geysers

Subsoil   Fumaroles   **APPLICATIONS**   Heat water Air-condition

Geothermal energy is one of the great unknowns when it comes to green energy.

This type of energy **is found in the subsoil and is associated with volcanic activity, hot springs, geysers or fumaroles.**
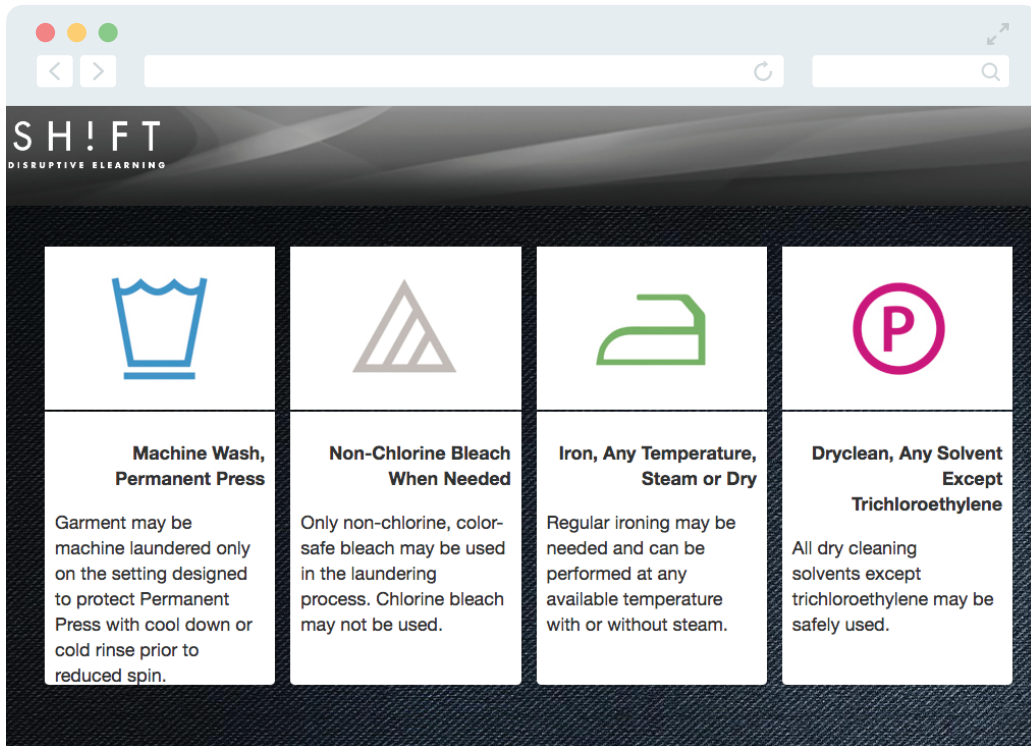
Its main applications are in our daily lives: air conditioning and obtaining hot water in an eco-friendly way, in both large buildings and homes.

→   Use cool colors to help learners focus on the learning and improve the learning outcome.

→   Use warm colors if you want learners to get excited or to inject some liveliness into a dull subject.

To make the content stand out, insert a colored or textured background. The background will also create a cozy nook of sorts for the content to be housed in; this will add "personality" and an element of interest. (See example page 4)

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Machine Wash, Permanent Press	Non-Chlorine Bleach When Needed	Iron, Any Temperature, Steam or Dry	Dryclean, Any Solvent Except Trichloroethylene
Garment may be machine laundered only on the setting designed to protect Permanent Press with cool down or cold rinse prior to reduced spin.	Only non-chlorine, color-safe bleach may be used in the laundering process. Chlorine bleach may not be used.	Regular ironing may be needed and can be performed at any available temperature with or without steam.	All dry cleaning solvents except trichloroethylene may be safely used.

Note: Don't sacrifice visibility for the sake of using colors. Make sure that your colored backgrounds don't make text illegible.

💡 IDEA #2: ADD MORE VISUAL POWER

Insert visuals to break the monotony of a seemingly endless series of text. You can also create infographics to liven up content, say, for example, a list of statistics. **Here** is a 5-step guide to help you create compelling and effective **infographics.**
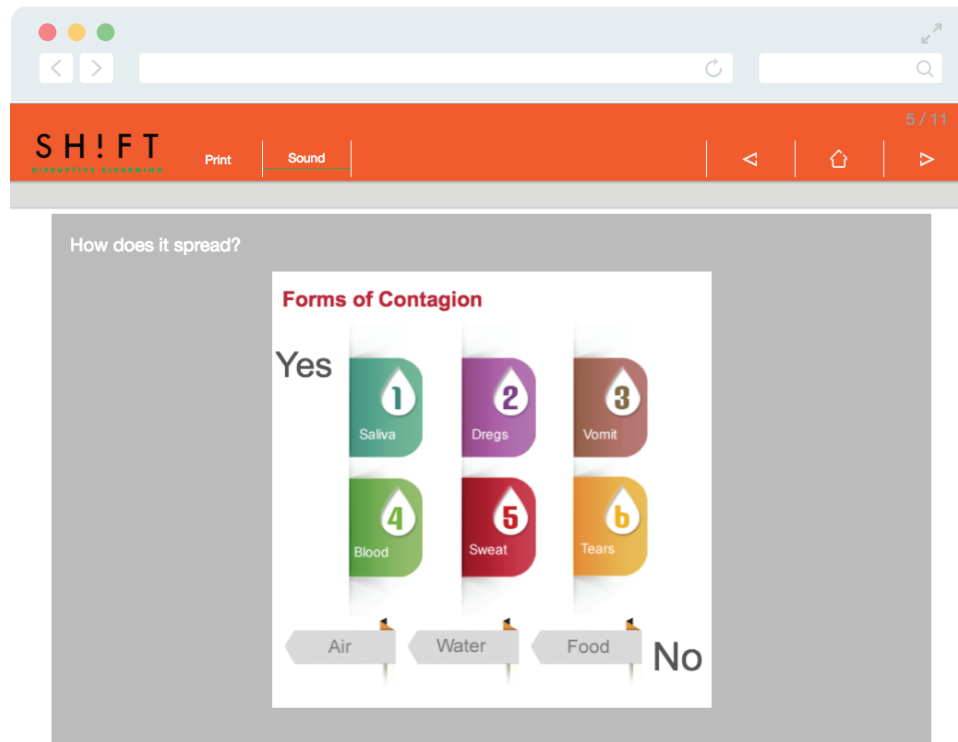
Use animated or interactive visuals to explain complex procedures. For instance, an animated GIF that demonstrates the steps of a method is more effective as a learning tool than a chunk of text. It is the next best thing to attending a workshop and seeing a demonstrator perform the steps right in front of you. And just like in a workshop where you can ask the demonstrator to repeat a step for you, you can pause and replay the GIF demonstration to review a step.

Here are some sites where you can learn to create your own animated GIFs:

https://gifs.com/
https://giphy.com/create/gifmaker

Identify keywords that define the content and create graphics to represent these ideas and concepts.

Use interactive icons for bullet points. This adds an element of interest to the content without taking up valuable screen real estate.

Screenshots. Anything that can be done on a computer should mainly be explained with screenshots. This type of visual example helps you show your learners exactly what you mean. How much easier is it to see where an icon is rather than trying to find it based on a word description? Screenshots are ideally suited to visualize computer tasks, lab operations, a sequence of events or tasks, teaching software, and walkthroughs.

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Print | Sound/On | Glossary

After learning about the five kinds of **nutrients, let's go over the food groups in which they are categorized**. Go ahead!

Instructions: Click on the images to see the content in each step. When you are finished, click the forward button.

2 Cereals and derivatives

Cereals are an important source of iron, vitamin B, carbohydrates and proteins

SH!FT DISRUPTIVE ELEARNING

Print | Sound

What are the symptoms?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the Ebola virus has an incubation period of **2 to 21 days**; that is, this is the amount of time that may elapse between infection and the onset of the **first symptoms**.

Instructions: Click on the images to see the content in each step. When you're finished, click the forward button.

Incubation Period

7-9 DAYS

10 DAY

11-21 DAYS

16 Sites to Find the Best Free Images for eLearning

Free high-resolution images that can be used for personal and commercial use.
http://info.shiftelearning.com/blog/free-images-for-your-elearning-courses

PART II: INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

You can make learning effortless if you follow the most appropriate instructional strategy. As an eLearning designer who has to teach dry technical topics, you have to make sure that you are aware of the different instructional strategies.

IDEA #3: ANALOGIES AND VISUAL METAPHORS

Analogies and metaphors simplify complex concepts and ideas by comparing and tying them to common and known objects or events. This bridges the understanding gap by making learners see the association or points of similarity between an unfamiliar and a familiar idea.

Ensure that you use relatable analogies and visual metaphors that learners are familiar with and can readily understand. **Here** is a quick guide on how to create powerful visual metaphors.

IDEA #4: EXAMPLES AND NON-EXAMPLES

Sometimes specifying both examples (what something is) and non-examples (what something is not) can nail down a concept more vividly than just defining it. For instance, statistics do not often convey the gravity of a natural calamity. We are more shocked when we see the visuals on TV. Real consequences stir us more than possible implications whose magnitude have to be imagined.
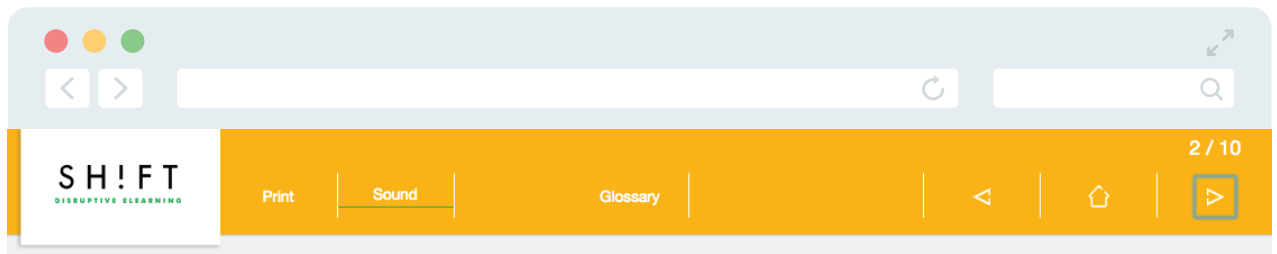
When you teach policies for instance, explain with examples and non-examples. Gather information about instances of policy violations that may have taken place in the company in recent times and what happened as a result of the breach. Then weave a story of a non-example into the scenario and present it to the learners. The examples along with the non-examples provide irrefutable rationales.

💡 IDEA #5: VIDEO

Here is a golden rule of using videos in eLearning: if you have to demonstrate something, use a video. A chunk of text, however descriptive it may be, cannot recreate the realism of a video.

This is a video we used in a course to explain the role of vitamins and minerals the human body. This is much more impactful than just explaining it through a static visual or a dump of text.
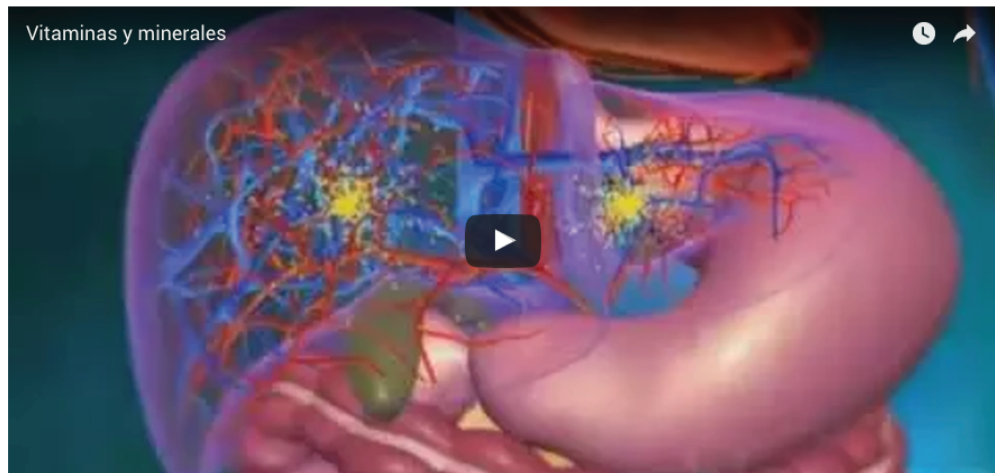
Here are some tips on how and when to use videos to achieve the most effective learning outcome:

- Use videos to demonstrate what can go wrong during a procedure and how to fix the problem.

- Use videos to teach about harassment or discrimination. Instead of listing workplace don'ts, provide a video that illustrates body language, facial expression, and the subtle or overt signs of aggression present in the environment.

- Use videos to teach behavioral responses, for instance, when you have to teach your sales force how to respond to the subtle cues given off by potential customers and recognize the right moment to upsell.

- Create videos where employees speak about their experiences in handling risky situations and overcoming challenges. Such documentary videos featuring real people—co-workers—make the course relatable and add an inspirational touch.

- You can add more interactivity to your course by letting learners share their experiences of the training session through video or audio. This adds context to the course and more reliability.

Want to create your own videos? Check out this guide:
http://info.shiftelearning.com/blog/how-do-i-produce-my-own-elearning-video-a-diy-guide

— Trust —
your crazy
ideas

💡 IDEA #6: REAL-LIFE STORIES

Stories are effective strategies for teaching dry, technical content. They keep your learners hooked to the material, keep away boredom, and make a course relevant. Instead of going through a series of regulations, you can have learners analyze real-life situations.

Here are some pointers to help you weave a good story:

- **Weave the story into the course using the story arc simulation model.** Because an online course differs from the Kindle storybook as a medium of communication and audience expectations are different (they are here to learn), you have to mold your story accordingly. You have to weave the story into the course. Use the **story arc simulation model** where your story will unfold through a series of interactivities. This will add drama and anticipation to the course.

The Freytag Pyramid — Inciting Incident, Conflict, Crisis, Resolution
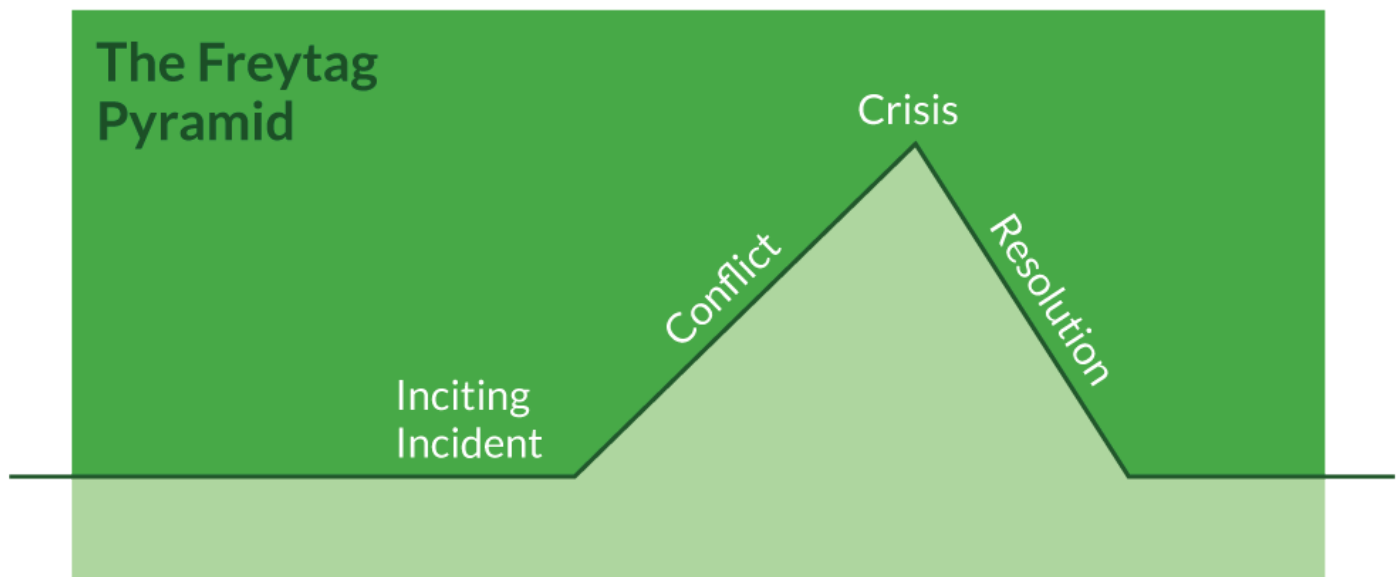
- **Tell half the story and ask learners to explore outcomes.** This is one way you can employ the story arc simulation model. You can interrupt the story at vital decision points and ask learners to predict outcomes. This lets them engage with the story and also apply their knowledge. They get involved in their own learning journey, and this cements the learning.

- **Consider the "A Day in the Life of…" model to explain roles and responsibilities.** Each button, screen or a module can depict a different part of the day and the associated role(s). This mode of storytelling is ideal for focusing on the actions of the hero who can be the role model learner's look up to.

You are in front of the Complaints department of your company

One day, you see one of your best customers come into your store. Immediately you try to approach her and say hi, but a sales assistant gets to her first and you hear the following conversation.

⚠ *Click on the images to see the situation. When finished, press the forward button.*

*Assistant*

Good morning, Mrs. Johnson. What I can do for you?

Mrs. Johnson

I am very upset about the products we received yesterday. They sent me the wrong paint color causing our production process to be delayed.

Assistant

What products did you received?

- **Create a dynamic and enthusiastic narrator.** A dull, flat, uninspiring voiceover that sounds as enthusiastic as a robot puts learners to sleep midway through the course. Create a lively narrator who sounds as if he really believes in what he is saying and is happy to share the knowledge with you. The narrator should also have that ring of authority in his voice that makes him more believable.

- **Create relatable characters.** Like the narrator, your characters should also be believable. They should share the learner's dreams and aspirations and face challenges that mimic the learner's reality.
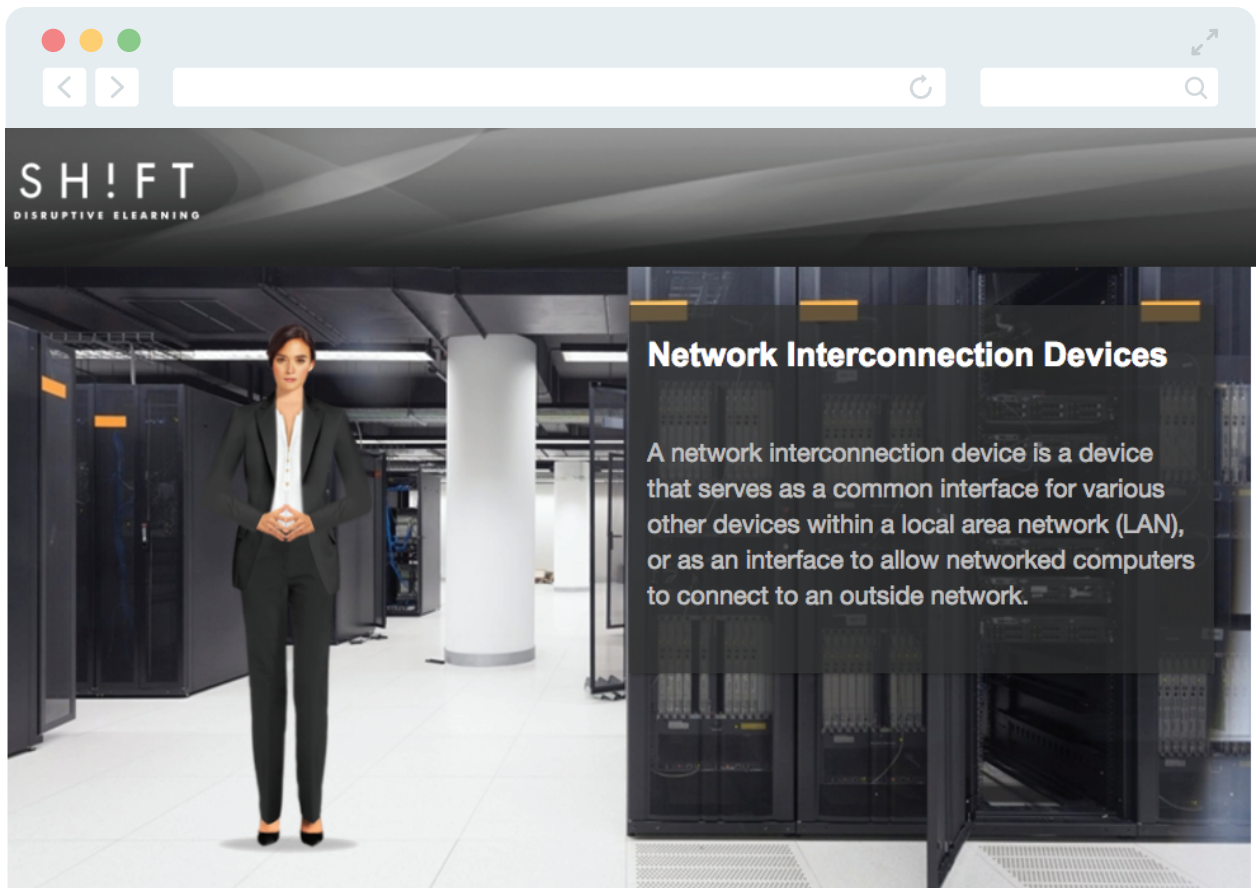
IDEA #7: INTERACTIVE SCENARIOS

Presenting real-life scenarios not only helps place the learning in context but also encourages learners to engage with the learning by analyzing the events presented in the scenarios and pondering solutions and consequences.

Create problem-solving scenarios where the learners have to analyze a situation and make a decision after pondering its consequences. This exercise involves them in their own learning process and also lets them explore the outcomes of their decisions safely in the virtual environment.

For instance, in a safety and compliance course, you can present three different workplace safety-related scenarios to learners and ask them to evaluate the responses made or behaviors exhibited in each case. If they decide that the appropriate strategy was not followed in any case, ask them to think and come up with an alternative plan that they think would have been apt in that instance.

### IDEA #8: EXERCISES AND PRACTICE

Learning sticks when we discover the answers to questions on our own. Posing questions is an effective learning strategy because it compels learners to switch from a passive to an active and engaged learning mode where they try to apply their knowledge to solve problems.

Here are some pointers to help you use this instructional strategy most effectively:

- You can ask priming questions to learners to introduce them to a topic and get them to think about it. This strategy is very helpful in case of very dry subjects where you want the learners to be engaged with the learning right from the start. Choose multiple-choice questions in this case to keep alive the challenge of the problem without overwhelming the learners.

- Ask higher-order questions to encourage learners to apply the knowledge they have acquired. Questions like "how," "what if," and "why" compel learners to ponder the different angles of a problem and weigh the pros and cons of various actions before choosing a solution.

- You can ask questions in between stories and scenarios as well.

This is a short drag and drop question quiz you can create with SHIFT, to help learners review previously learned content:
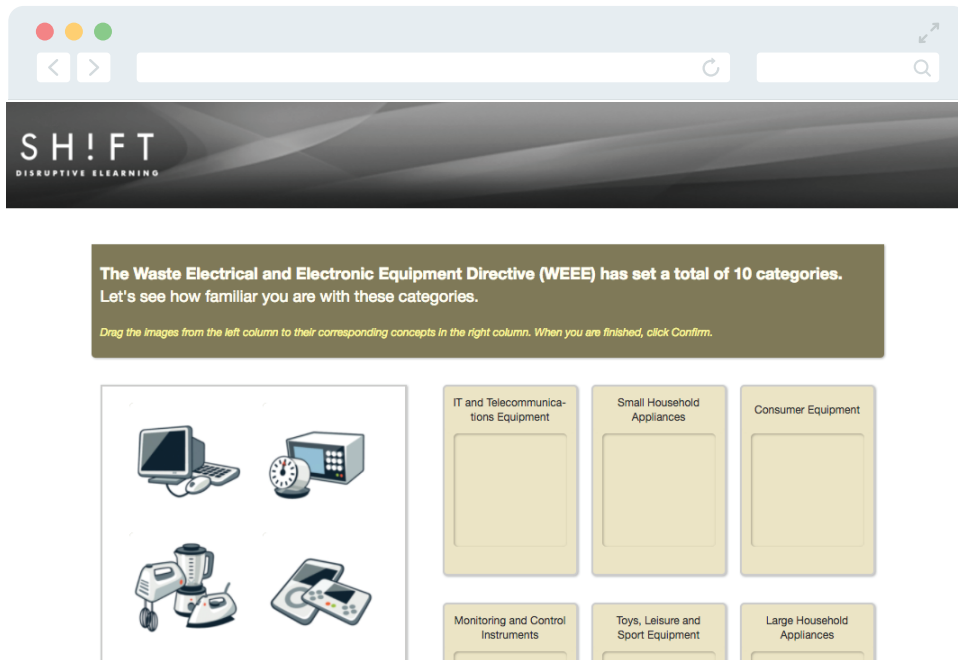
See this live example here:
http://innovation.shiftelearning.com.s3.amazonaws.com/Demos/AURA-ORD-01999-G5J0N8_Links02/app.html?u=3&t=1&s=1

Don't be
AFRAID
to be
GREAT

IDEA #9: CASE STUDIES

This type of content layout is especially useful for teaching complex topics, judgment and decision-making skills, to show best practices, how to apply tools and to develop creative and critical thinking.

Or, instead of listing the steps of a procedure (*a conventional but staid way of presenting content*), you can show learners the results of the actions taken according to a well-defined plan. You can create a comparative case study where you first demonstrate the results of not following a procedure and then show the positive outcome that results from adhering to a process.

For instance, courses that are created for compliance on environmental issues and social responsibility, can use a case study to demonstrate how not complying will negatively affect the company's image and financial bottom line, not only the environment.
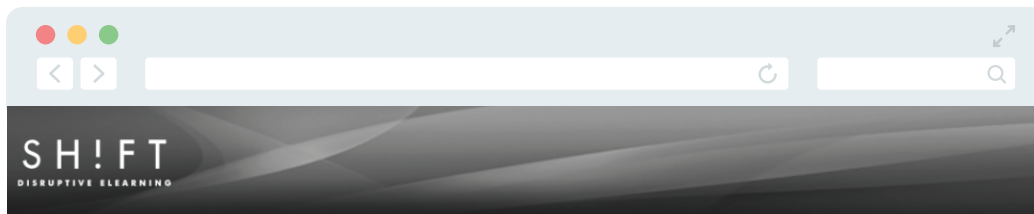
http://innovation.shiftelearning.com.s3.amazonaws.com/Demos/AURA-ORD-01999-G5J0N8_Links02/app.html?u=2&t=1&s=1

IDEA #10: GAMIFICATION AND GAMES

Compliance, ethics, and safety courses pose peculiar challenges to eLearning developers because of the nature of their content. More often than not, the learning matter is inherently dry. Employees are required to take refresher courses covering these topics periodically, so they are familiar with most of the content in the updated courses. It also doesn't help that these courses usually do not require learners to interact till they reach the final assessment.

To counter these multiple challenges, consider including games in your courses. Learners dread the boredom of the content, so **when you gamify it**, the sheer novelty gives their brains a shake-up. The interactivities force them to pay attention to what is being presented on screen, so they can make the right decisions and score points.

Here are some ideas for gamifying dry, technical content:

- Create timed and/or scored games. This makes the course competitive and challenging. Follow these **principles of gamifying** content.

These are some of the games you can create in SHIFT:

20.

- Infuse excitement and anticipation by creating levels. Let learners unlock the next level of the game when they score a certain number of points.

- Award badges every time learners reach some milestone.

- Let learners compete against one another via the leaderboard feature. This added dose of competition gets learners on their feet as they try to outscore one another.

- A board game-themed course will let learners choose a game piece (a particular module they want to take) and then play to go around the board (the course) by answering questions pertaining to the module they have chosen.

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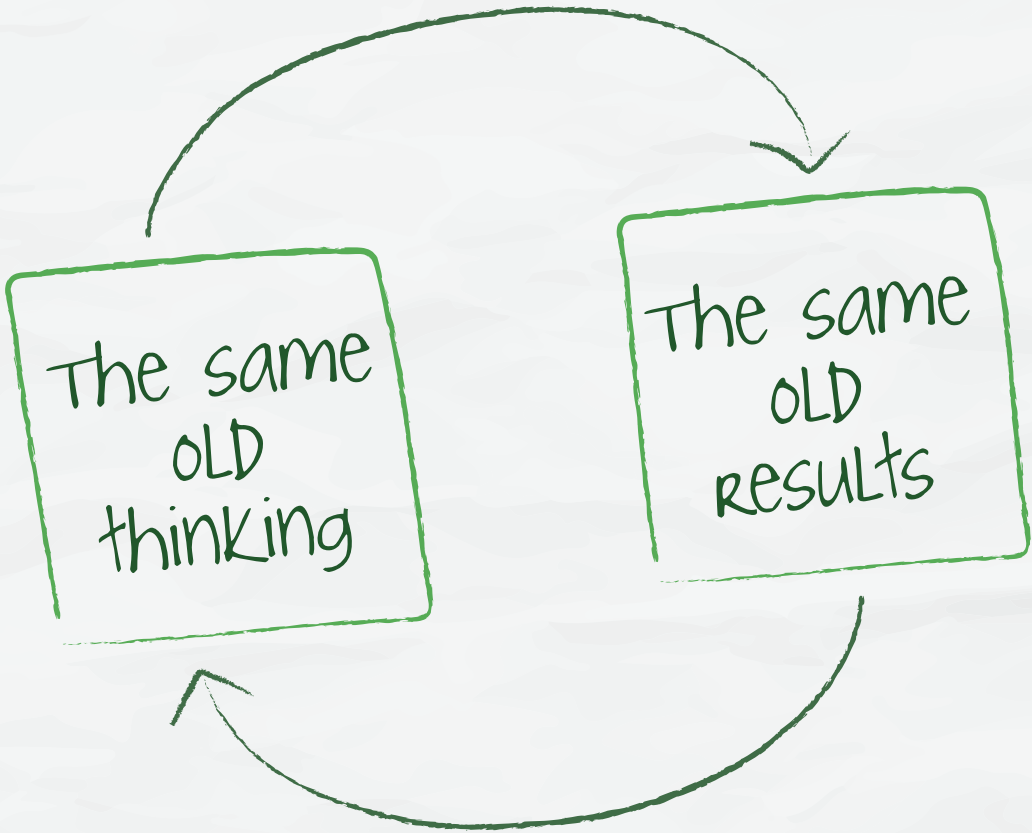
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See samples   **Request a Live Demo**

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