

Newsletter Design — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into the decisions, specs, and reusable assets you need to launch a recognisable newsletter. Work each section as you go: define your editorial grid and spacing scale, design and lock your masthead and inbox identity, build the kit of standing sections and content blocks an issue is assembled from, then translate your voice into a type and colour system and recreate it inside Substack, Mailchimp, or Beehiiv. The templates are built to be filled in for your own publication and reused as the working documents you take into your platform and run before every send.

The Editorial Grid for Newsletters

Set the structure every issue inherits: a single-column grid, a readable measure, and a modular spacing scale.

Worksheet: Grid and Spacing Specification

Define the structural foundations of your newsletter once, then reuse these exact values in every issue. Fill every field; these are the numbers your platform settings and blocks will be set to.

Content width (px, typically ~600)

Column structure (single column / single with rare side-by-side)

Body font size (px, typically 16-18)

Target measure (characters per line, aim 45-75)

Body line height (e.g., 1.5)

Spacing base unit (4px or 8px)

Spacing scale (list the steps, e.g., 4, 8, 12, 16, 24, 32, 48, 64)

Standard section-gap value (the large step used at every section break)

Exercise: Find Your Measure on a Real Phone

Test whether your body size produces a comfortable line length where readers actually read, and fix it before designing anything else.

- At your chosen content width and body size, roughly how many characters fit on a line, and is it inside the 45-75 range?
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- Open a draft on a real phone: where do lines look too long, too short, or broken (often a wide image or pasted code block)?

- What body size and line height read most comfortably to you across phone and desktop, and why?

- Which large spacing value will you use at every section break so every break feels equal?

Checklist: Grid Readiness Check

- I am treating the newsletter as a recurring publication with a fixed structure, not a one-off email
- The layout is a single column that stacks cleanly on mobile
- Body text is sized so each line lands near 45-75 characters
- Every space in the issue comes from my modular spacing scale, not nudged by eye
- One consistent large gap marks every section break
- I checked the measure and spacing on a real phone, not just the desktop preview

Masthead, Nameplate, and Recognition

Lock the assets that build recognition: the inbox identity, the nameplate, and a header that brands without burying the lead.

Worksheet: Masthead and Nameplate Specification

Specify your nameplate so it can be rebuilt identically every issue. This is the recognition asset you must never casually redesign.

Publication name (exact wording and capitalisation)

Nameplate typeface or wordmark

Logo / mark (yes / no — describe)

Tagline or one-line descriptor (optional)

Issue metadata shown (issue number / date / volume / none)

Nameplate height target (px, e.g., 60-120)

Name as live text or image? (live text preferred; note image alt text if used)

Logo asset provided at 2x for retina? (yes / no)

Worksheet: Inbox Identity: Sender, Subject, Preheader

Design the three strings the reader sees before opening. Draft them as one unit and judge whether that inbox row earns the tap.

From name (the permanent identity — personal name or brand)

Subject line draft (aim ~30-50 characters before mobile truncation)

Preheader / preview text (complements the subject, does not repeat it)

Where the subject truncates on a phone (does the key word survive?)

Is the preheader set explicitly so no link or boilerplate leaks in? (yes / no)

Does the three-string row read as the 'cover' of the issue? (notes)

Exercise: Decide What Lives in the Header vs. the Footer

Be ruthless about the top of the issue so it brands fast and hands the reader to the content high on the screen.

- What sits in the header (nameplate, optional date/issue number, optional 2-3 link nav) and why does each earn its place?
 - What did you move to the footer (social icons, secondary links, address, unsubscribe)?
 - On a phone, does the lead story begin before a full screen of header chrome?
 - If you use a logo image, what is its height and alt text, and is the name also present as live text as a fallback?
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Checklist: Recognition Check

- The nameplate is locked: same typeface, size, and position every issue
 - The from name is a permanent identity element, never varied in format
 - Subject and preheader are written as a complementary pair, not duplicates
 - The header brands quickly and does not push the lead below the fold on mobile
 - Name and nav use live text so they survive image blocking
 - Any logo image has descriptive alt text and a 2x asset for sharp rendering
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Section Templating and Modular Layout

Build the kit of standing sections and content blocks so every issue is assembled, not designed from scratch.

Worksheet: Standing Sections and Running Order

Define the recurring sections and the fixed order they run in. List only sections you can realistically produce every issue.

Section name (e.g., Hello / Lead story / Secondary / Link roundup / Sign-off)

Position in running order (1, 2, 3...)

Purpose (what this section is for)

Section-header style (typeface, size, weight, colour, eyebrow vs. heading)

Appears every issue? (yes / occasional)

Typical content block used inside it

Worksheet: Content Block Library

Specify each reusable content block once. These become the saved blocks you reuse, so define spacing and type precisely.

Block name (lead story / link item / personal note / quote / image+caption / CTA)

Structure (the elements in order, e.g., heading > image > 2-3 paragraphs > read-more link)

Image size / aspect (if any)

Type styles used (which hierarchy levels)

Internal spacing (gaps from your scale)

Saved where in your platform? (Mailchimp saved block / Beehiiv block / Substack skeleton)

Exercise: Design the Sponsor Slot and the Issue CTA

Plan advertising and the single reader ask so both are clearly marked, on-brand, and effective without breaking trust.

- Where does the sponsor slot sit in the running order, and what fixed container and label (Sponsored / Together with) does it use?
 - How does the ad's type and spacing match the rest of the publication so it reads as part of it?
 - What is the single primary call to action for a typical issue (subscribe / upgrade / reply / share), and where is it placed?
 - If you run a referral or share prompt, is it its own consistent block rather than buried in body text?
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Checklist: Templating Check

- I have 3-6 standing sections in a fixed running order readers can learn
- Each section header uses the same visual treatment every issue
- My most-used content blocks are defined with fixed structure, type, and spacing
- Blocks are saved in my platform so I never rebuild them
- A master template / duplicate-able draft contains the sections in order, ready to fill
- The sponsor slot is labelled honestly and matched to the design; each issue has one primary CTA

Brand Voice in Layout and Platform Builds

Turn voice into a type and colour system, recreate it in your platform, and run a pre-send check every issue.

Worksheet: Type and Colour System

Translate your newsletter's personality into a fixed type hierarchy and a restrained palette. Reuse only these styles and colours.

Brand personality in 3 words (e.g., calm, considered, literary)

Heading style (typeface, size, weight)

Section-header style (typeface, size, weight, colour)

Body style (typeface, size, line height)

Caption / meta style

Email-safe fallback font stack

Accent colour (hex) and what it always means (links / primary button)

Body-text contrast ratio vs. background (target WCAG AA 4.5:1 — pass/fail)

Worksheet: Platform Build Plan

Record exactly where your design system lives inside your chosen platform so any issue starts from the saved system, not a blank page.

Chosen platform (Substack / Mailchimp / Beehiiv) and why

Where global brand is set (logo, accent, fonts in settings)

How standing sections are saved (saved blocks / snippets / skeleton draft)

Name of the master template or duplicate-able draft

Platform constraints to design around (e.g., Substack minimal layout, Beehiiv growth blocks)

Per-issue workflow (duplicate master > pour in content > check > send)

Checklist: Pre-Send Layout and Rendering Check

- I sent a real test to myself and opened it on an actual phone
- The nameplate, section order, and spacing match my template
- Sender name, subject truncation, and preheader read correctly in the inbox preview
- I toggled dark mode and confirmed text stays legible and the logo does not vanish
- I clicked every link, including read-more and the sponsor link, and confirmed destinations
- Every image has alt text, and I proofread the subject, preheader, and first paragraph last

Your Action Plan

1. Define your editorial grid: single column, ~600px content width, body 16-18px for a 45-75 character measure, and a modular spacing scale on a 4px or 8px base.
2. Design and lock your nameplate: publication name in one fixed typeface or wordmark, optional mark and tagline, kept short and legible as live text where possible.
3. Lock your inbox identity: a permanent from name, and a subject and preheader written as a complementary pair.
4. Choose 3-6 standing sections and commit to a fixed running order with a consistent section-header style.

5. Build and save your core content blocks (lead story, link item, personal note, quote, CTA) with fixed structure, type, and spacing.
6. Design a labelled, on-brand sponsor slot in a fixed position, and decide one primary call to action per issue.
7. Set a fixed type hierarchy (four levels) and a restrained, WCAG-AA-contrast palette with one accent colour that always means action.
8. Pick a platform (Substack, Mailchimp, or Beehiiv), set your global brand in its settings, and recreate your sections as saved blocks.
9. Create a master template or duplicate-able draft that already contains your standing sections in order, ready to fill.
10. Run the same pre-send check every issue: test send, read on a phone, toggle dark mode, click every link, proof the first lines.

