

Guidelines and Principles in Graphic Design

Good design trains the eye and is based on acquired experiences and education. No matter how simple the design may be, there are certain principles that must be applied.

Quality of design can be evaluated by observation and practice.

Principles of design should always be incorporated in any graphic design project to assist its communicating and graphic interest, however in the planning of a basic design, the designer must produce a job to suit the class of work, the copy, and the tastes of the customer.

To develop a sense of design use the four ‘eyes’:

Conceptualize:

This is your imagination at work. In order to identify possible directions you must define your client and the client’s target audience. Creating a personality brief outlining the features that are important is essential.

The brainstorming process using methods such as Mind Mapping, word association techniques et al so that you may single out a word, idea, or concept that you can key off of is essential.

Visual eyes:

This is what we are reinforcing every week with our Graphic Design explorations. Go and experience other’s work.

Critical eyes:

Define what makes something work? (What provokes, motivates or inspires?) Examine critically all types of printed material, i.e. physically see/look at what others have done that has won acclaim or been awarded peer recognition. What catches or eludes your attention, and why?)

Analyze it:

Select the element that makes it a good design. The focal point. The first read should compel the viewer to explore the landscape of the piece. You start at the door of any construction and then proceed to look more carefully if it attracts. Try to create a reason for the viewer to be drawn in for a closer look. One method to accomplish this is using scale.

Vision: The key to a successful piece is how you are able to detect an idea and then to toss it around in your head (objects, tones, shapes, colors — everything around you). Remain aware of your environment and develop a visual dictionary in your mind where you can refer to as a resource for developing concepts. Become a Maven, as Malcolm Gladwell, calls it. You must be open to all possible outcomes. As a problem solver you can develop a sense of style that becomes “your vision,” but not until you have developed as many possible outcomes as possible. Refer to the Pareto Principle.

Judgement: To be able to assess the idea’s value and correct place and use, i.e. limitations always arise after you come up with an idea. Limit your focus and you will develop a better sense of what will work. Remember Hick’s Law.

Balance: This is the result of an arrangement of one or more elements in the design so that visually, they equal each other. Every object in nature has structural balance, from the symmetry of a flower petal to the chambers of a snail’s shell. We discussed the fractal nature of the universe, where simply put systems and organisms are built out of smaller and smaller variations in pattern. Keep in mind out of chaos there is structure and vice versa.

The balance needed every time we perform any form of physical movement is automatically maintained by a built-in equilibrium that we take for granted. We strive for control, structure and equilibrium as humans.

Man-made structures, even if not formally equal on all sides, must maintain a balance in relation to a per-

pendicular surface. Physical balance can be measured by use of a balance scale; there is no agreed scientific method, however, for determining the weights of shapes in the arts. Instead, balance is determined by weighing the objects visually.

For graphic design, the visual center of any typical A4 which is a better example than the typical 8.5 x 11 page of the business world is not the actual physical center but what is termed the Optical Center. This visual point of balance can be determined mathematically as being located three-eighths from the top of the page, five-eighths from the bottom. Why is that? One can relate it to how we see ourselves and the human form. The Golden Rectangle and the Golden Section provide insights into that relationship. You might also refer to the Fibonacci Sequence of numbers and the relationships they express as a way towards a “mathematical solution...but this can only be a guide. There is no specific rubric of measurement.

Mathematical Balance.

For a single sheet design, type and images are easily positioned vertically to ensure an even amount of space on either side of the design to achieve balance. When positioned evenly across the horizontal axis, the elements appear, to the eye, to actually sit lower down on the page.

Regardless of the design style of work that is to be produced, Optical Center must always be carefully considered during the initial design stages for a printed piece to work successfully.

One of the most fundamental differences in a design is whether balance is symmetrical (centered) or asymmetrical (off-center). The choice between them profoundly affects the layout and feeling of a design.

The selection of which is the more desirable should be based on which of the two is going to achieve the result you need to get a particular sort of information over to a particular readership.

Symmetrical Balance

Symmetrical (or formal) balance has elements of equal weight as well as tone placed on both sides of an imaginary vertical line on the page and gives the feeling of permanence and stability.

Any symmetrical layout is likely to produce a more static, restful design. However, because a centered layout is so static, it is very easy to make it pleasantly innocuous but boring which could be the death knell for your designs “permanence.”

Formal balance is nice but nice is not great.

The general tone of the centered design is restrained and formal. Business like comes readily to mind. It can be used in some corporate circles especially in areas which require a sense of trust and stability. Information transference as in books and newspapers have strict and formal structure for the ease of transferring information, but when you are dealing with impact situations when the design is key to grabbing attention...nice is as far away from acceptable as you can get. So identify your audience and your purpose, then define if symmetrical balance is advantageous or not.

Asymmetrical

One of the major advantages of an asymmetrical layout is that it allows for the more dynamic use of white space. This is particularly important if illustrations are included. Asymmetrical (or informal) balance may be unequal in position and intensity. To create asymmetrical balance, there must be an increase in intensity to compensate for the change in position. Intensity can be increased by changing size, shape, or tone. For a particular job, the designer might choose to position the elements to one side of the picture plane. The white space opposing must then act as a *counter-balancing force*.

Informal balance creates visual interest

A useful way to determine the balance of elements on a page is to compare one area with another; it is helpful to analyze the space with an imaginary grid. In this way, you can optically weigh the masses and determine their intensity and direction. How space is handled will depend on the number of imaginary grid units you have selected and how much space is available.

Emphasis - is the first thing that grabs the viewer’s attention. Also known as dominance.

This condition exists when an element or elements within a visual format contains a hierarchy of visual importance.

Usually the artist will make one area stand out by contrasting it with other areas. The area will be different in size, color, texture, shape, etc.

Rhythm - is a recurrence or repetition of one or more elements within a visual format, creating harmony. Created when the spaces between shapes and colors create a mood in your artwork. For example, evenly spaced shapes give a feeling of sedateness while overlapping and wide spaces give a feeling of chaos or excitement.

Contrast

Of all the design principles, contrast is probably the next most important. Contrast creates interest in the printed product by providing variety in the design. An expressive voice will emphasize a word or phrase by raising or lowering the tone, or by increasing or decreasing the speed of delivery. The contrasting tones of the voice in speech give expression and life to the words spoken. In music, a sharp or flat that is outside the primary tonality is a modest but definite emphasis. Similarly, in typography, an italic of the same point size as its roman provides a modest but definite change. To gain emphasis in a layout, there must necessarily be strong contrast between the elements. Contrast can be added in the design by changing the sizes, shapes, position, weights and colors.

Contrast in Size

This is really a question of whether the picture should dominate or if the type should have the upper hand. The answer to this question depends on many considerations and cannot be answered in general ways.

Contrast — picture dominates; headline dominates

Obviously, the design considerations of multi-page formats such as magazine pages are different from those for an advertisement to be placed in a magazine or produced on a single page. Good design requires a deliberate choice of the levels of emphasis that are the most applicable to the subject.

Contrast in Weight

Most popular type faces of today have a number of companion letters such as Bold, Italic, Extra Bold. The careful use of type families within a design can add visual interest for the reader in addition to providing visual guides, or cues, to a change of thought or item of importance.

Contrast achieved by varying the type styles must be carefully planned, otherwise the end result will be too much contrast which only defeats itself. If you try to emphasize everything, you only gain a monotony of emphasis resulting in a visually confusing design.

Contrast in Position

The very act of placing any design style (formal or informal) on the slant will cause the design to be in visual contrast to the normal horizontal position. As a general rule, the placing of such designs on a slant is not a desirable practice, although in some cases it can prove to be very effective. It can create a sense of motion but you may also be in danger of the faux pas of triteness.

Ease of reading...transfer of information must always be considered, and tilted designs might make it more difficult to read. An alternate method which can often result in an equally visually dynamic layout is to position the design elements of the page in such a way as to obtain contrast from the white space which surrounds all of these elements.

Contrast in Shape (Why do I have to keep repeating myself ?)

Trying to put a square peg into a round hole is an impossible task because the shapes are at contrast to each other. This principle can be incorporated into a design where the visual elements are deliberately arranged to be in conflict to each other. Repetition has its place but contrast in shape generates interest.

This may be achieved in a variety of ways, e.g. Introducing graphics and/or illustrations that differ from the normal proportion of the page; using an extremely large display face that appears to dominate the body text, page itself, or illustrations; incorporating a stunning border or thick rule within the design.

Contrast in Color

The concept of contrast in color should not be limited to the narrow perspective of natural colors, i.e. red, blue, purple, green, yellow, etc. Certainly, the use of color opposites will achieve contrast in a design, as for example the use of a color opposite, together with a color which harmonizes with the substrate.

The Color Wheel

It should also be considered in relation to the color of the typesetting, i.e. the degree of blackness that hits the eye. Careful selection of type, both size and weight, will give a distinctive visual color to the overall design. The use of contrast should be handled carefully because it can cause the layout to become too forceful and thus alter the personality of the product or idea.

Harmony

Harmony is the opposite of contrast and relates to the unity of all parts in the design. A layout can contain harmony of shape, tone, color, and treatment.

Shape

Achieved by ensuring that type masses and illustration(s) conform to the shape of the design.

Tone

equality in the use of the weight of type faces, decoration and illustrations.

Color

relationship of one color to another, i.e. stock and ink, two-color job.

Treatment

Relationship of type face design, decoration, or border, to the product or idea being sold.

Variety

The introduction of variety will give liveliness and vigor to the layout. An otherwise dull page, is strengthened by the use of variety. This can be achieved by making subtle or obvious changes in the size, shape and color of the various units of a design.

The grouping of type elements together with the careful use of type families within a layout will result in an inviting design for the reader. One of the chief dangers lies in the use of too many kinds of type.

Action

Since you will most likely not be present when the reader views your design, the opportunity of showing the reader what information is most important will not present itself. To overcome this problem, there must be some type of action in the layout.

Action refers to the principle that governs the movements of the eye from one part of a design to another. The eye will see not only what the mind wants it to, but also what is thrust upon it.

The information contained in a design will have varying degrees of importance, using the principle of action, the reader should be visually guided to each of the elements according to its importance. Therefore, the eye of the reader may be selectively directed by careful placement of type, illustration/s or border/s in the design.

Clusters