

# **The Principles of Design**

## **Introduction**

The principles of design form the foundations of the composition, reveal the intent of the designer, and determine to some extent the manner of the reception by the viewer when used in any form of visual communication. Deliberate composition helps to communicate visual ideas more economically, with more clarity, and more effectively. Effective graphic design communicates a specific message in an interesting and memorable way. Before you make any compositional decision, it's important to establish what it is that you are trying to communicate. As Walter Gropius said (he was head of the Bauhaus from 1919-1928), "Form follows function." A good analogy to understanding composition and the elements of design is that of grammar and vocabulary to language, so the principles and elements of design are to visual communication.

## **The Elements**

The elements are the individual components of an image that are organized according to the principles of design to form a composition. It is always important to think about how you are using these elements in relation to what you are trying to say.

## **The Principles**

Formal principles include: balance/visual weight, unity, emphasis/focal point, dynamic tension, hierarchy, rhythm/pattern/repetition/, movement, contrast, variety, and proportion.

Again, a question to ask yourself is: What is the relationship between the use of the principles of composition and what you are trying to convey?

## **Composition**

The composition uses the principles of design to arrange the various groupings of the elements in order to communicate visually.

## **Balance/Visual Weight**

Balance is the distribution of the visual weight of the elements. For example: In symmetrical balance, the elements used on one side of the design are similar to those on the other side. In asymmetrical balance, the sides are different but still look balanced. In radial balance, the elements are arranged around a central point and may be similar. Vertical balance is how the image is weighted on the top half as opposed to the bottom half of the frame. Diagonal balance refers to the weight that is distributed on either side of the diagonal part of the image.

## **Unity**

Unity is when all the elements in the design work together to create the idea/illusion that the design operates as a single unit. Unity is achieved through gestalt.

Gestalt operates to create unity. Questions to ask yourself when trying to create unity are: How close do the elements need to be? How few elements are needed? What is the relationship between the use of these elements in the composition and what you are trying to convey? All these factors combine to form a unified composition that may play

perceptual tricks or not. Here are some gestalt “laws” that relate to perceptual observation:

- Law of Proximity: Visual elements are grouped together according to how close they are to each other.
- Law of Similarity: Elements that are similar in some way, by form or content, tend to be grouped.
- Law of Closure: Elements roughly arranged together are seen to complete an outline shape. The mind seeks completeness.
- Law of Simplicity: The mind tends towards visual explanations that are simple, simple lines, curves, and shapes are preferred, as is symmetry and balance.
- Law of Common Fate: Grouped Elements are assumed to move together and behave as one.
- Law of Good Continuation: The mind tends to continue shapes and lines beyond their ending points.
- Law of Segregation: In order for a figure to be perceived, it must stand out from its background.

### **Emphasis/Focal point**

Emphasis or the focal point is the part of the design that catches the viewer’s attention. It can be achieved through accentuating certain shapes, intensifying contrast or color, the use of directional line, strategically placing objects and images, or isolating an object or subject.

### **Dynamic Tension**

Dynamic tension is an important component in making the design captivating for the audience. Using different elements or principles of design that are reactive in some way to one another results in dynamic tension.

### **Hierarchy**

Hierarchy is a way of describing the order in which the viewer looks at different parts of the design. Hierarchy can be achieved through various strategies when using the elements and principles of design.

### **Rhythm/Pattern/Repetition**

Pattern is the repetition of an element, symbol, or image all over the design. Rhythm works with pattern and repetition to make images seem more active. The repetition of elements of design can create unity. Regularly interrupted repetition can create rhythm in the design. To keep rhythm exciting and active, variety is essential.

### **Movement**

Movement is the path the viewer’s eye takes through the work of art, often to focal areas. Such movement can be directed along lines, edges, shape, and color within the image.

## **Contrast**

Contrast is when you use an element of design with opposite properties. For example: large/small, smooth/rough, serif/sans serif, hand-made/machine-made, black/white, red/green, geometric/organic, thick/thin, high/low etc.

## **Variety**

Variety can be a quality of diversion, disunity, or tension in a composition. When variety works in a harmonious and unifying way it uses of several elements of design to hold the viewer's attention and it can serve to guide the viewer's eye through and around the image

## **Proportion**

Proportion refers to the relationship between the elements of design in regard to their size and scale. What we perceive to be large and small is dependent on the juxtaposition of the elements to one another or some form of context.

## **Typography**

Typography is an important component of graphic design. It communicates in a two-pronged fashion: literally as language but also as a form of visual communication. Like most communication, it has the ability to both connote and denote meaning. As a visual form of communication it operates similarly to a compositional element. There are 5 different historic families of type: old style faces, transitional style faces, modern style fonts, Egyptian style fonts, sans serif style fonts, and decorative and display fonts.

### **Old Style Faces**

- Organic, gently curved and round cup-faced serifs
- Little thick/thin contrast between stem and hairline weight
- Oblique stress on the characters
- Heavily bracketed serifs
- Capital height is shorter than the height of the lowercase ascenders
- Terminals on some lowercase letters are shaped like teardrops
- Have stability, mass, and are grounded
- Easy on the eye to discern
- Classic or traditional feel
- Goudy

### **Transitional Style Fonts**

- Strong thick and thin contrast in weight of stem and hairline
- Finely bracketed serifs
- Almost vertical stress
- Capitals are the same height as the lower case ascenders
- Lowercase letters are very short and wide, and almost appear extended
- New Baskerville

### **Modern Style Fonts**

- Extreme contrast of thick and thin in weight of stem and hairline
- No bracketing of serifs
- Strong vertical stress
- Lowercase letters have small body height in proportion to cup height
- Terminals on some letters are circular
- Bodoni

### **Egyptian Style Fonts**

- Little contrast of thick and thin in the weight of the stem and hairline
- Large body height to lowercase letters
- Thick, squarish or slab serifs
- Little or no bracketing between the stem and the serif
- Vertical stress
- Clarendon

### **Sans Serif Style Fonts**

- No serifs
- Little stress, because weights and stem of hairline optically appear even
- Large body height in proportion to capital height
- Often squared-off terminals

### **Display Style Fonts**

- Scripts
- Inline, outline, contour, shaded
- Ornate faces
- Historic faces
- Illuminated initials
- Rustic, textured faces
- Extremely extended faces
- “Western” faces
- “Circus” faces