

Design & Layout Principles

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1. Layout Choices

From the social media posts on our phones to the packaging of products we buy, everything has been designed. Anyone who is creating media needs to have a solid foundation of design and layout principles to ensure their content will be clearly communicated and aesthetically pleasing.

Unlike in art, where happy accidents can occur and inspiration can come from unplanned or unintended accidents, successful design is planned and intentional. Before beginning a project, creators should establish the goals they would like to achieve. The goals for a project should include the intended message and the desired response to the project.

For example, an online clothing company is introducing socks into their inventory. The company wants to create a social media post announcing that they now offer socks. The goals of the post would be to inform their followers of their new product and have them purchase the socks.

A designer's responsibility is to rely on their knowledge of design principles to best achieve these goals. Visual hierarchy is one of the most important design principles which should be utilized to achieve the goals of a project. Hierarchy is an organizational structure which ranks objects by importance.

Every design, regardless of its media, will be based around several design elements. These elements can include headings or titles, body text, graphics, images, and white space. These elements should be arranged in a manner that best emphasizes the important information and facilitates the viewer's eye to move around the design.

In design, visual hierarchy is used to draw a viewer's eye to the most important elements first. The elements to emphasize or minimize in a design will always be determined by the project's goals.

There are five tools which can be used to establish hierarchy in a design. These are scale, color, placement, lines, and contrast. All of these tools can be used individually or combined to establish hierarchy in any design.

Scale is one of the simplest tools to establish visual hierarchy throughout all types of media. Our eyes are drawn to the largest design elements. So if something in a project needs to be emphasized, an easy way to do that is by increasing the size. Likewise, information that you want to get less attention can be shrunk. This is why

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coupons often have the limitations written in tiny font sizes or infomercials have disclaimers small at the bottom of the screen. Scale can be overutilized and should always be used in context of the size of the project.

Legibility can be an issue if design elements become too big or too small. But these limits vary based on projects. The smallest element able to be included on a billboard, for example, will be significantly larger than the smallest element able to be included on a business card. Additionally, having too much variety in the size of design elements in a project can also disrupt the rhythm and harmony of a design overall.

Scale-based visual hierarchy is commonly evident in text-based designs. Two examples are novels, which have very limited changes in the size of the design elements on each page to ensure readers are not distracted from reading the content in a linear manner, and magazine articles, which often utilize a variety of text sizes for headlines, subheadings, pull quotes, and main text, which allows readers to scan the content quickly or grab the attention of a viewer flipping through the magazine.

Color is another easy tool used to establish hierarchy which can be used in any medium. If color is used sparingly, a pop of color can draw the eye to certain content first. Contrast in color can also help bring attention to an element in a design. For example, if most colors in the design are cool colors, like purple and blue, using a warm color, like yellow or orange, can draw attention.

However, color is not the most reliable tool for establishing visual hierarchy because when a project utilizes many colors, the impact of any individual color is diminished. A common use of color to emphasize design elements is seen in websites to call attention to important navigational links or form submission buttons.

Placement of design elements is another tool which can be used to establish hierarchy. Depending on the media type, the way placement establishes hierarchy will vary. In text-based layouts, such as websites and books, the eye goes from left to right and top to bottom. Therefore important content can be placed at the top left, where the eye will naturally fall first, while the least important information can be placed at the bottom right.

For example, in long written documents, like reports or essays, the page numbers are commonly placed at the bottom-right corner of the page, so they do not distract from the main content. In more image- or graphic-based layouts, such as those found in videos or web advertisements, the eye naturally gravitates to the center. Important information in these types of layouts can be placed in the center to attract the most attention. For example, movie titles are commonly placed in the center of the screen to draw the eye.

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Lines can be used to direct movement in a design. Typically the eye searches for the end of a line. So lines can be used strategically to direct a viewer's attention to important content. Often, these lines can appear to be subtle design elements, such as a block of color in the background. But they can also be as direct as actual arrows pointing to important content, like on a flow chart or a You Are Here icon on wayfinding signage.

The last tool to establish hierarchy is contrast. Contrast is created when an element looks different from other design elements. Contrast can be created through any difference in line, color, tone, texture, orientation, shape, or anything else which is out of the ordinary or expected.

In any design layout, you have to consider the basics, the fundamentals of design, hierarchy and balance. Once you get that figured out-- of course, the hierarchy and the balance is always determined by what your message.

Are you trying to scream an offer at somebody? If you're trying to scream an offer-- \$200 off your next purchase-- that needs to be very large and at the top. Everybody reads from top to bottom, left to right. So that's how you do that. Also, you can also bring more attention to a particular portion of your layout with color. So that's how we decide what our layout is going to be.

Contrast can also help create engaging designs. When design elements have little variety, a design can become monotonous, just like a voice speaking in one single pitch. Adding contrast among design elements helps keep them from becoming bored when looking at a design.

Another important design principle that designers should use to create effective design is balance. Balance can be created using symmetry, which means to give each element a counter element to ensure evenness and consistency.

However, balance can also be created in asymmetrical designs, creating equal amounts of visual weight between seemingly unbalanced objects. This works because even though, technically, space is empty, the space itself is considered a design element with its own visual weight.

The thing that I take in account the most when laying out a design is hierarchy. And so I usually get the copy that our copy architect sends over to us. And then I try to consume it as the consumer would. I see the thing that would come to my attention or be the thing that I need to read. And that would be my main text. That would be the thing that I need to see would be the biggest depending on where it is on the page.

And then that information, whether it's the date or addresses, that sort of thing, would

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come secondary to that. And then fine print or small details would be the third in line. It depends on what it is that I'm designing. If they have to incorporate a picture or they have to incorporate a product or something, you want to be careful to not make that compete too much with the text. You have to decide which one of those is more important.

So depending on what the picture is or the product-- or if there's nothing. I love playing with designs that don't have any pictures. There's a lot of-- I guess it's design from the Baltic nations. But they right-align everything. And it still is really successful in communicating and getting your attention. But it's really simple. So I'd say that is probably my favorite.

But whenever there is a product, I try to balance those. So that would depend on the size of the font, the size of the product. I think all of those things are what gives you the freedom to play with the layout.

The final design principle a designer should utilize is repetition. Repetition establishes rhythm and familiarity among design elements. Repetition can be used in color, typeface, and layout choices. This creates a cohesive design from beginning to end. Additionally, repetition can help viewers understand how to interact with content in a project by repeating design choices for content meant to be treated the same.

For example, most websites are designed to have all the navigational elements look the same. Likewise, in a book, all chapter titles have similar stylization. This strategy informs a viewer about what they are looking at. And these visual cues can help simplify complex layouts.

A recent example of a layout that presented a challenge was an annual report that we did for one of our customers in Amarillo, Texas. The project called for, like most annual reports, just a reflection of the past year, how the money was spent from the donors and supporters.

But in addition to that, this was also the 15th anniversary. So they wanted to show a timeline as well. But the timeline-- we wanted it to not take the backseat to all of the financials and all of the data. So we weaved it throughout the annual report along the bottom third of the layout. In trying to integrate the timeline into the annual report, we had to figure out a way to make sure that it didn't blend in with everything else.

And the solution that we ended up with was using this line that went from page to page across each spread that helped the viewer follow along as they flipped the page. We also reserved this large purple block that would be the indicator that you are looking at another entry on this timeline.

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We also included a-- it's just like a typical timeline. You have your long line. You have a line that extends up from it. On most of them, we put a year. In this case, it was phases of the customer's history.

But it worked out pretty well. It was very challenging to have to dedicate that much portion of each page to the timeline. But by separating it with this color that we reserved, the large block of purple, we were able to help the viewer understand this is not part of the content that you're reading on that spread. This is a standalone timeline entry.

2. Color Choices

Color is one of the most important design choices a designer will be faced with. A design with the same content, typefaces, and layout can communicate completely different messages with just a simple change in color. Consider how red and green are used to communicate negative or positive responses, or how certain colors represent specific seasons or holidays.

Every type of visual communication utilizes color, so creators of digital media need to be able to work with color. There are three considerations to understand when using color in any kind of design. These are aesthetic considerations, cultural considerations, and practical considerations.

Aesthetic considerations of color account for the visual aspects of color. The spectrum of colors can be represented in a color wheel. The main reading of the color wheel is made up of hues. Hues refer to the purest form of any color. By adding white or black, the value of a hue can be adjusted. And by adding gray, the saturation of a color can be adjusted. Both pastel seafoam green and forest green come from the same hue.

The color wheel can help visualize color relationships to determine how they will work together in a design. Each color has a complementary color which sits across the color wheel. Complementary colors look good together and have high visual contrast. However, there are a variety of color schemes, which are visually pleasing beyond complementary colors. These are monochromatic, split complementary, double complementary, analogous, and triadic color schemes. When working on a project, it is a good idea to have a color scheme selected before beginning to design. This allows designers to consider the contexts of the colors they want to utilize.

So with every new client that we get when we're branding them, we try to keep at least three colors-- one that is a primary color, meaning something really bold and something that you can use quite a bit. And then you want something that will contrast with that, and then a third color which can contrast with both. So just like a dark tone, a light tone, and a mid-tone-- that's what we use as a foundation.

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You also have to keep in account the tone of the client. For a hospital, you don't want to use a neon color. You want something that's gonna be timeless and can be used to talk about serious things. Whereas for a bakery, you want to use really fun colors. So it just depends on who the client is.

Colors all carry associations that are held across cultures, regions, and even individuals. Consider the color orange. Culturally, in the United States, orange is used to indicate situations which require caution, such as a construction worker or traffic cones. In certain cities, orange may be associated with sports teams or universities such as the Miami Dolphins or the University of Texas. Additionally, orange has been found to be the most common, least favorite color. If a designer wants to use orange in a design, it must take into consideration the cultural and regional associations with the color and may also have to navigate a client's personal preferences.

When choosing colors for a project, you have to be cautious of a lot of things that could affect the customer's perception of that color. For example, their competitors-- if their competitors are all using blues, and greens, and whites, or whatever, then you have to sort of find something else that's gonna help them stand out from the crowd. Something else to consider is in a given geographical area, especially in our market which is a little bit smaller market, we're very strong on red and black. And if you use any of the colors of the competing schools or other schools that are rivals, you may have a hard time getting that product approved.

Brands will also have associations they desire to have. For example, an organic grocery store might want people to associate words like "fresh," "natural," and "nutritious" with the brand. A designer should then select colors which also reflect those terms such as greens, reds, and browns.

So at one point we had a client, and they were a funeral home. So it was really delicate on what we could use and what we couldn't use. Obviously, you know, we couldn't use anything bright. But it was interesting-- you know, the psychology of the colors. You know, the comforting colors of like a light blue-green color or the warm tones of a burgundy color that really make a company like that feel like they can use those branding items and still just be like, comforting, that that would reflect on who they are as a company.

Additionally, if designers are working with a client or customer, they may have to work within brand guidelines brand guidelines are established by organizations to provide rules about design decisions, which must be made to reflect consistency in a brand across all communications. These brand guidelines typically dictate color choices, logos, typefaces, and may even provide instructions for how to layout communications.

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How we choose what colors are gonna go into any design are heavily dictated by the brand guidelines of any particular customer. If they don't have brand guidelines established, they at least have colors that they use in their primary logo. So that's usually where we start. The idea of graphic design, and marketing, and advertising is to make sure that you're establishing that brand and establishing brand recognition so that each time a viewer, or a customer, or a potential new customer sees your brand they immediately start to relate it back to who you are.

So we try to keep it on-brand by choosing whatever colors that are primarily being used. If we're trying to evoke some kind of emotion, of course, blue is cool. It's usually more corporate. Orange is very energetic. And red kind of has that sort of like angst to it. So you might use red for something if you want to attract more attention to it, but every color evokes a different emotion. So it's all based on what we're trying to achieve in the end.

Finally, practical considerations might also affect what colors are selected for a project. When working with print media, color can drastically impact the production cost of a project. Digital media allows designers more freedom with color choices. However, different types of media will display different ranges of color, so designers should understand the limitations of their media before working with color. For example, a 4K video will be able to display color much more accurately than a photograph on a website.

3. Typography Choices

Typography is the collection of design choices made to communicate the written word. These design choices includes selecting the size, weight, color, and typeface used to communicate text. In addition, typography concerns also include paragraph structure to enable audience to read the text properly the primary concern of any typographic choices should be to ensure the text is legible. This means that letter should be discernible enough for the words to be read.

When dealing with long sections of text, a designer may also consider readability. This is a measurement of how easy it is to read the text at length. Not all legible text will be readable. Most readable text is written in a transparent typeface. This simply means the typeface, itself, is not unique enough to distract from what has been written. However, short bursts of display text only needs to be legible. So designers have freedom to experiment with unique and creative typefaces.

There are five types of typeface-- serif, sans serif, script, decorative, and symbols. Serif typefaces feature projections at the end of strokes, which help make letter forms more distinguishable from one another and can help improve reading speed. Serif typefaces are commonly considered to be more readable in print, though they tend to become less legible in sizes below 10 points.

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Sans serif typefaces do not have serifs. Sans serif typefaces are more readable on screens, and they can be legible at smaller sizes and resolutions.

Script typefaces appear handwritten. Script typefaces in both print and digital media have become more popular because they can make a design appear more customized or handcrafted. There is a significant variety in script typefaces. So some can be relatively readable in print and on screens, while other script typefaces can be nearly illegible.

Decorative typefaces have decorative elements beyond the letter forms. These should be reserved for short amounts of text such as headlines or titles because they are rarely readable and can become illegible if the designer is not careful.

Symbol typefaces are made up of symbols rather than letters, such as windings or emojis. These typefaces are rarely used to communicate significant text but may be used to include specific symbols such as math symbols, alternative letter forms from foreign languages, or fun graphics.

Just like color, in choosing a typeface you can evoke a different emotion depending on what font you choose to use. So if you're trying to go with something that's more corporate, you kind of go for a serif font. If you're trying to find something that's youthful and more energetic, you might go for a display font that's very heavy, very bold. Of course, something to always consider is legibility.

So that's kind of like the number one rule when you're choosing a font is make sure that it's legible. There's no point in putting out a piece of advertising or marketing material if the person cannot read it. So we always choose typefaces based on, of course, making sure that it's gonna actually communicate the message properly. The typeface can create all kinds of different emotions as well.

If it's a very heavy bold sans serif font, you know, you're screaming at them. You're telling them like, read this first. If it's a nice soft traditional serif typeface, your kind of saying this is corporate. This is professional. So it just all depends on who were designing for.

If it's something youthful and it's for like a church youth camp and you want to encourage these kids to enroll for this summer camp, then you want it to be fun and energetic. You want to be sure that the fonts that you choose are definitely gonna have that youthful energy to them. As for annual report, you pick fonts that are gonna have good numbers-- numbers that are going to look well in financials and things like that. So you have to consider what your material is that you're trying to design.

Designers should choose typefaces both by considering the aesthetic characteristics

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of typefaces while still considering how to best communicate a message.

So there is this client that we worked with recently, and they were heading up this company to teach children different languages. So they wanted something really fun and something that nobody else had. So I was able to choose a font. I think it was Gotham, which can be a little bit playful. But for their actual logo, I played it up even more. I used the same round edges and like, really bubbly letters. But I was able to draw them by myself.

So for the things that were really important that they needed to communicate like paragraphs, or information, pricing about their classes we used the Gotham font. But for their logo, or introductory words, or anything that they really wanted to stand out, I was able to use the font that I played around with a little bit more.

So typefaces-- I think that's really important when it comes to who your audience is. Also, the tone of the company, but more so the audience because you want to be able to make sure that you have a font that's easily readable by whatever your audience is. If you have an older audience, you can't use a lot of script fonts because they're just not as easy to read. And so because you know our purpose is communication, that would be how I choose my font.

Practical concerns such as the color or size of a typeface in a final product should always be considered before completing a final project.

An example of typography being a bit of a challenge would be in display type. I did a project for a bank, and the font that I wanted to use was like an extra compressed, super condensed sans serif typeface. And while it looked really good in my mock-ups, when it was executed on a particular project at a smaller size, that font was a little more illegible because it was much smaller than the brochure that I designed of the billboard that I designed.

So that presented a challenge where had to then create a new rule and say, at this size, we use this typeface. So that kind of created a challenge that I wasn't quite ready for but. Luckily, we found a solution that worked for the customer. But yeah, sometimes they choose a font that just doesn't quite read in certain applications.

Before beginning any project, designers should always determine the physical and technological constraints of a project. This will allow designers to make informed decisions about the type and size of typefaces which should be used. Additionally, because some digital media such as websites or mobile apps have limited typographic options. Designers will need to work with limited functions or display capabilities.