

Design Fundamentals

Design Elements and Principles of Good Design

The fundamentals of graphic design involve the ways visual elements — shapes, images, colors, typography, and layout — all work well together. Knowing which qualities of each are relevant, engaging, and useful for solving a visual problem takes training and practice. As a starting point, you can learn to think like a designer and look at the designed world around you differently. This includes:

- Viewing layouts and materials with an appreciation for design
- Understanding basic design elements and good design principles
- Spotting and correcting inappropriate and ineffective design elements in your work

Basic Design Elements

Each element might not seem important on its own, however, careful consideration must be paid to how they work together.

- **Type:** selection of typefaces and type styles used to reinforce a message, ease readability or highlight and enhance content.
- **Color:** selection of colors that are complementary and pleasing in hue, saturation, and value, or that help to draw the eye or trigger a response in the viewer.
- **Line:** an element that connects two or more points. It can be fat, thin, wavy, or jagged, and can appear in drawings, illustrations, textures, patterns, and backgrounds. Lines are often used in compositions for organization, emphasis, or decoration. For example, lines can be used to guide the reader's eye from one element to the next. The weight, color, texture, and style of the lines in a design can have a big impact on the way it is perceived. Text is made up of lines. Different qualities of the line in a font will give you different results.
- **Shape:** any two-dimensional area with a recognizable boundary. Shapes can be geometric (circles, squares, and triangles, etc.) or organic where the shapes are more free form. They can help you organize or separate content, create simple illustrations, or just add interest.
- **Form:** a shape that is visually transformed into a three-dimensional object. Techniques such as light, shadow, and perspective help create the illusion of depth and realism in printed materials. Stylized lighting and shading can add dimension, form, and depth to less realistic images.
- **Texture:** an effect that adds depth to otherwise flat images. Objects can appear smooth, rough, hard, or soft, depending on the elements at play. Textures can be background images, or add interest to your work such as distressed fonts or smooth, glossy icons.
- **Balance:** the equal distribution of visual weight (how much any one element attracts the viewer's eye). Balance can be affected by many things, including color, size, number, and negative space. Symmetrical designs are the same or similar on both sides of an axis. They feel balanced because each side is effectively the same (if not identical). Asymmetrical designs are different on both sides, but the weight is still evenly distributed. The composition is balanced because it calls attention to the right things.

Basic Design Principles

People naturally perceive objects as organized patterns and objects. Using this in your design yields great power to help guide your viewer where you want them to look. In good design, the whole experience is greater than the individual elements.

- **Alignment:** keeps design elements in line. It allows us to create order and organization among elements and unifies elements on a page. For example, sticking to the same grid throughout a spread or publication will help maintain consistency.
- **Contrast:** makes things stand out. Some ways of creating contrast include using contrasting colors, sizes, shapes, locations, or relationships. For text, contrast is achieved by mixing serif and sans-serif on the page, by using very different type styles, or by using type in surprising ways.
- **Hierarchy:** organizes elements by importance. For example, a large title treatment makes the title stand out and draws the eyes first. General information is smaller than the title and more specific information is even smaller.
- **Proximity:** places elements close together when they are intended to be perceived as a group. Related items should be near one another (event info, contact information, etc.). Grouping of this sort can be achieved with tone or value, color, shape, size, or other physical attributes.
- **Repetition:** creates visual unity, cohesiveness, and consistency. Keep fonts, colors, and design elements similar to enforce the overall design. For example, use the same style of headlines, the same style of initial capitals, or repeating the same basic layout from one page to another.
- **White space:** uses areas of a layout void of text or graphics as an important element of the overall design. White space includes margins, gutters, space between lines of type (leading), off-set of text from images (text wraps) and any other part of the page that is empty. It can add to or detract from the balance, unity, harmony, rhythm and overall success of a design. White space can give emphasis, contrast, and movement. Avoid too much content and clutter for available space.

Resources

Goodwill Community Foundation: Beginning Design Tutorials

This free, online course uses visuals to reinforce the design fundamentals covered in our data visualization talks: <https://www.gcflearnfree.org/beginning-graphic-design/fundamentals-of-design/1/>.