The Four Basic Principles of Graphic Design

"You might have gotten away with an ugly flyer in the past, but today your readers/customers/clients are influenced more than ever before by the visual presentation, and ugly flyers go to the bottom of the pile."
Robin Williams, author of the Non-Designer's book series

Whether your task is to design a sales brochure, a display ad, or a newsletter, the purpose is the same: to communicate a message to an audience and to produce a desired response. Put simply, you want to say something to someone so that the person takes a specific action. What this means is that the design you develop is not just about appearance – it is also about the performance of the target audience. Thus, good design is measured equally by form and function.

According to Robin Williams in her extremely popular *Non-Designer's Design Book*, there are four principles of design that underlie every design project:

- *alignment*
- *proximity*
- *contrast*
- *repetition*

Alignment...
Alignment refers to how text and graphics are placed on the page. Alignment creates order, organizes page elements, indicates groups of items, and emphasizes visual connection. Interestingly, good alignment is rarely noticed by the reader, while misalignment is immediately detected.

There are two basic types of alignment: edge and center. Edges can be aligned along the top, bottom, left, or right. Center alignment can be either horizontal or vertical. When designing a page, be sure that each element (text, graphics, photographs) has a visual alignment with another item.

Proximity...
Proximity describes the distance between individual design elements. Close proximity implies a relationship between the elements; conversely, lack of proximity separates them.

Like alignment, proximity is a tool of visual organization. Placing elements in close proximity unifies them and communicates a sense of order and organization to the reader. When it isn't possible to group items proximately, then unity between two elements can be achieved by using a third element to connect them.

Contrast...
Contrast adds interest as well as organization to the page and is created when two elements are different. Common ways to create contrast include varying size, color, thickness, shape, style, or space. The greater the difference between elements, the greater the contrast.

Besides adding interest to the page, contrast can be used to direct the reader around the page and to emphasize importance or differences. Contrast is only effective when it is evident.

Repetition...
Repetition brings visual consistency to page design. When the same design elements – such as uniform size and weight of headline fonts or use of initial caps to begin a chapter – are used, it becomes clear that the pages are related to each other and therefore part of the same document. In this way, repetition creates unity.

Some examples of repetition are using the same style of headlines, the same style of initial capitals, or repeating the same basic layout from one page to another.

The four principles of design are interconnected and work together to communicate the message. Contrast is often the most important visual attraction on a page. If the page elements are not the same, then make them very different, instead of making them similar. Repetition helps develop the organization and strengthens the unity of a page. Repeating visual elements develops the design. Every element should have some visual connection with another element on the page, creating a consistent and sophisticated alignment.

The Basis of Good Design
In *The Desktop Publisher's Idea Book*, Chuck Green describes five steps that form the basis of good design:

- *Set the goal*
- *Compose the message*
- *Choose the medium*
- *Select a design*
- *Illustrate the message*

Set the goal
Every design task begins by defining the end to be achieved – in other words, the goal of the design project. The goal is most often related to the action desired by the target audience. Is the purpose to invite an inquiry? To generate a purchase? To persuade the reader to a new point of view? Keep the goal in mind and allow it to determine the design.

Compose the message
The message is the most important element of any marketing piece, for it informs the reader of the benefits of taking action. Affecting behavior is the result of explaining to the reader what to expect from the product or service; or stated differently, answering the reader's question, "*What's in it for me?*"

If you have a limited amount of space, devote most of it to benefits. Leave the list of features and the company story off altogether, or include it in abbreviated form. Make the message reader-centered, and clearly describe the enjoyment the reader will experience or the pain that will be relieved.

Choose the medium
The project's purpose and message both determine the layout. Sometimes the layout will be obvious – a business card, for example, or a display ad. Other times the choices will be broader. A flyer, a brochure, or a self-mailer are all viable for a marketing piece; the ultimate choice might be determined by the method of delivery to the target audience (for example, via direct mail, at a trade show, or mailed in response to an inquiry).

Select a design
To achieve maximum effectiveness, a design must take into account a myriad of elements related to the target audience. Some of these elements are age, education, language skills, visual preferences, cultural expectations, level of knowledge, and desires. These and other factors affect the selection of color palette, fonts, illustrations, and photographs.

Illustrate the message
Photographs and illustrations work the hardest when they reiterate and reinforce the message, or show what can't be said. Secondary use is to set the tone or draw attention to a specific element of the design. It is always desirable when a photograph or illustration can do both simultaneously.

Clip art collections are a convenient and economical way to find an appropriate illustration. However, we offer a word of caution about websites offering free clip art: read the "Terms of Use" carefully. Clip art that is in the public domain (and therefore free) has no restrictions on use. Look especially for a condition that limits use to personal applications, meaning the image cannot be used in a business application such as a brochure. Also be aware that much clip art is intended for use on websites, which may make the resolution too low for commercial printing.

Some Additional Tips
Other tips for creating good design include:

- *Be sparse and simple.* Carefully select the design elements so a few will convey the message. A design cluttered with too many elements may confuse or overwhelm the reader. For example, use one large photograph or graphic on a page rather than several smaller ones. And use lots of white space – studies show that designs with significant white space are more pleasant to read and attract attention.
- *Use color sparingly.* As a design element, color is very important, though too much color can be counterproductive. Use a consistent color palette, and use contrasting color sparingly so that its impact is increased.
- *Limit the selection of fonts.* Select one typeface and size for body copy and one typeface for headlines, then use these throughout your design. Using too many fonts can be distracting and may interfere with page organization.
- *Write clear, comprehensible copy. Remember that a good design effectively* conveys a message. Write in short rather than long sentences. Avoid jargon and clichés. Use a vocabulary level appropriate for the audience you are trying to reach.

By paying close attention to the four basic principles of design, the five steps that form the basis of good design, and the additional tips, you will ensure that your design communicates effectively.

a vocabulary of the graphic arts

Alignment: positioning type characters along a horizontal line. Also called justification.

Black space: the graphics, photographs, and type in a layout.

Bleed: in a layout, any image area that extends beyond the trim line.

Body type: the type used for the main text of a document.

Composition: positioning, formatting, and gathering type; also called page makeup.

Contrast: an element of design that draws your eye to look at a page when two elements are different.

Copy fit: making adjustments to text size, text leading, or otherwise editing text so it fits in a given space.

Design grid: a set of guidelines for aligning and arranging elements on a page. Used during the design process but invisible to the viewer/reader.

Dingbats: small, ornamental characters used as design elements. A dingbat consisting of a stylized flower or leaf may also be called a printer's mark or printer's flower.

Focal point: the center of interest in a page layout.

Icon: a visual image that suggests its meaning.

Knockout: white type on a black or dark background. Also called reverse or drop out.

Leading: in composition, the spacing between lines of type measured in points.

Page Layout: a part of graphic design that includes the arrangement of elements on a page. Similar to composition but applied mainly to print media.

Print ready file: the final image composition consisting of type, photographs, line art, and other graphic elements, laid out in the size and position in which they will appear on the final printed product.

Proximity: refers to the spatial relationships between elements.

Repetition: repeating certain elements of the design.

Rule: a line used for borders, boxes, and other typographic effects. Specified in a range of thickness called weights, measured in points.

White space: in design, the absence of type, photographs, or graphic elements. Trapped white space is white space appearing within lines of type, usually created by justifying type on a short line length.

THE idea CORNER

Design Challenges

When your task is to fit a lot of text into a small amount of space, or if your project consists entirely of text, you face some significant design challenges. Over the years, we have developed some tricks for organizing text to improve readability. Try some of these techniques yourself:

- Add contrast to large blocks of text by using headlines, subheads, headers, footers, pull quotes, sidebars, and bulleted lists.
- Make headlines larger and use a different font than the body copy.
- Add a one-point rule above and below a subhead and make it span two columns of text.
- Use white space to balance black space by basing the design on a grid.
- Create a drop-cap from three to six times larger than the body copy.

Good design does not come easily. It is a result of studying good design, understanding how to analyze design problems, knowing to whom the design must appeal, applying simple design principles, developing a sensitivity to good design, and lots of trial and error.

a
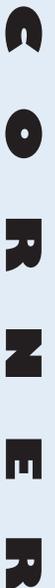
Consider Using a Template

Templates are pre-designed documents that contain placeholders (such as boxes, dummy text, and headlines) that can be overwritten with actual copy and photographs or graphics. Templates may be purchased, or you can create your own.

A template can be a great time-saver, can provide design inspiration, and can augment the design capabilities of an amateur designer. Using a template will also provide consistency.

If you choose to use a template, select one that is appropriate for the job at hand. Begin by selecting a template that is the correct size and does not require extensive alterations. Other tips for customization include:

- *Use your own graphics.* Substitute your own graphics or clip art for what was included in the template. Since graphics also include rules and boxes, you can change the size or location to better fit your needs.

- *Alter the type.* Change the template's typeface, change the leading (the space between lines), or type justification. When selecting a new typeface, be sure not to stray too far away from the original design. For example, substituting a casual typeface for a formal one will likely compromise the design.
- *Change the color.* Sometimes a dramatic change can occur when color is changed, even if the design is unaltered.
- *Change the background.* Create a reverse (white or light text on a dark background) to draw the reader's eye. The reverse can be an entire headline or just the single capital letter that begins the headline. Do remember that not all typefaces and sizes are suitable for reverses. Fine serifs can disappear in a reverse.

Q. *I need to plan a design. Can you give me any tips to get started?*

A. Begin with the end in mind – decide whom you want to reach and what you want them to learn or do. Try using these check questions to organize your thoughts.

1. Who is the target audience?
2. What must this creative design accomplish?
3. Are there any perceptions of the target audience that must be created or overcome?
4. What is the single most important message the target audience should take away from this design?
5. What is the overall or primary benefit to the target audience?
6. What tone should be conveyed to the target audience?
7. What elements or information must be included in this design?

Today people with no background in graphic design are creating a wide variety of printed marketing tools. It's fun to do and usually faster when you do it yourself. There are, of course, many projects that definitely deserve the investment in professional design. Give us a call if you'd like us to assist you with a project, or if you would like us to create a template that you can use repetitively in the future.

questions and answers