Design Principles & Theories

Design is about learning the rules so you can break them at opportune moments. Your goal is to make whatever you're composing as clear and easy to read as possible. The following are widely known principles of design and tips to get you started.

LAYOUT

Hierarchy

You want to start by developing an information hierarchy. What is most important on your page? What do you want the viewer to see first? Each element has a visual weight, or a certain degree of success at drawing the eye. If all elements on a page have the same visual weight, not only is the result boring, but also the eye doesn't know where to enter the piece. Your job is to create a path from the most important piece of information to the least.

The methods to do this are—

Scale

How large or small elements are in relation to one another.

Color

In this context, color can attract the eye to a certain element. The brighter the color, the more presence it has.

Contrast

Creating dissimilarity is another way to draw the eye.

Unity & Contrast

Much of design rests on the end result feeling unified and cohesive, and knowing when to make one element contrast from the others for hierarchy's sake as well as to create interest. There are many ways to do this, such as picking a particular color scheme, using one pattern or fonts throughout. You want to end up with a piece in which every element feels like it belongs with every other element.

The formal methods are—

Similarity   Proximity   Rhythm

The Grid

The grid is a helpful layout tool. It is comprised of imaginary lines that line up elements in your composition to create a sense of unity.

Balance

Different types of balance can have different effects. An unbalanced piece will feel tense and leave the viewer a bit unnerved. While this technique might be helpful in some circumstances, in most cases it is best to keep your work balanced, or visually weighted evenly across the page.

Types of balance are →

Symmetry—
exactly mirrored from one side to another or top to bottom

Asymmetry—
More interesting than symmetry, asymmetry lies on creating balance with dissimilar pieces, such as something small and intricate will balance out something large and plain, and something small and dark will balance something large and light. It's like balancing a teeter-totter.

Radial Balance—
examples being rays from the sun or a clock-circular balance all the way around.

Overall Composition—
Something that is balanced because it is the same throughout; like fiz on the television screen.

White Space

Do not be afraid of empty space in your composition. It's a good thing, it allows the piece to breathe, and lets the viewer relax as they work their way through your composition. In fact, the more white space, the more elegant or pricy the piece will feel. The key is to use empty space, or white space, well. This means looking at the empty space as if it was any other element. Does is look awkward? Are the shapes created interesting?

TYPE

Type is important. Respect the type. Just because you can add a drop shadow or stretch the type doesn't mean you should. In most cases, you should never stretch the type, just as you wouldn't stretch or distort an image. Type designers spend years creating fonts and making them look the way they do for a reason. Stretching it not only cuts down on readability, but it also is disrespectful to the type designer. Don't stack or barber-pole letters. This is annoying to read, and is rather overdone. If you desire vertical text, simply rotate the word.

Display Type

You all those fun fonts you get on DaFont or somewhere around the Internet? That is a display font. They are meant only for titles or small bits of text.

Body Type

Avoid using anything fancy for body copy. People won't read it, because it becomes cluttered and difficult to read. For large pieces of text, or body copy, use something simple and readable. If avoidable, try not to leave one word hanging off of a paragraph, as it looks awkward.

THE END

A good way to start a project is by sketching out several ideas of where you want things placed. Please remember that just because you can add bells and whistles to a page doesn't mean you should. It's best to throw them out altogether if they interfere with the readability of your project.

RESOURCES

Web Rescorces

Wikipedia: Design Elements & Principles—
wikipedia.org/wiki/Design_elements_and_principles

Poster session Tips: Penn State—
personal.psu.edu/drs18/postershow

Color Matters—
colormatters.com/color-and-design/basic-color-theory

LyndaCampus Videos

Login at www.ewu.edu/techtraining & search for the following titles:

Before and After: Things Every Designer Should Know

Foundations of Typography

Up and Running with InDesign