

Producing Great Materials on a Shoestring

Note: This workshop is based on the material in *The Non-Designer's Design Book* by Robin Williams. Her writing is lively and accessible, and the book has excellent examples throughout. It revolutionized my layouts. Highly recommended!

The Four Basic Design Principles

- Proximity** Group related items together so that they hang together logically and visually. When the information is organized, it's more likely to be read and understood.
- Alignment** Make sure every item on the page has a visual connection to something else on the page. This makes the information more cohesive, and impacts the overall feel of your project (sophisticated, bold, fun, formal, etc.).
- Repetition** Repeat some aspect of the design throughout the entire piece. This helps unify the design, as well as make it more interesting visually.
- Contrast** Use design elements that contrast – rather than conflict – to add visual interest. Be bold! If you're not making them identical, make them *very* different.

Remember that your goal is to communicate clearly. Your design should always serve your message.

Proximity

When you look at a flyer, invitation, or web site, you should be able to tell right away what information belongs together. Where does your eye start? Where does it move from there? By keeping elements that relate to each other close to one another on the page, you're giving visual clues about how to understand the information, even before anyone has read a word.

In this example, just changing proximity makes a huge difference:



When elements belong together, they should be close to each other. When they're not related, though, make sure they're clearly separate. Don't be afraid of white space! Not only does it help organize the information, it also gives the eyes a chance to rest.

Hints on proximity:

- Make related material instantly recognizable when you look at the page. If they're related, keep them near each other. If not, make the spacing distinct.
- Don't spread elements all over the page.
- Avoid equal amounts of white space between elements unless each group is part of a subset (for example, program names with descriptions listed in a brochure about your organization).

Alignment

Alignment strengthens the cohesion of your piece. Even when elements are separated from each other on the page, the visual connections between the elements show the reader that they're still part of the same whole. Lack of alignment makes a piece look messy and unpleasant. The reader may end up feeling slightly uneasy, even if she can't figure out why. As Ms. Williams puts it, "Find a strong line and use it."

Here's that sample business card again:



The right alignment on the second example makes an invisible edge that connects the elements. The look is bolder and cleaner. If you have graphic elements on the page, make sure they're aligned as well.

Watch out for a subtle lack of alignment – it can make the difference between a piece that looks passable and one that looks professional.

Good Stuff
Welcome to the Good Stuff Center! This brochure includes information.

About Us
At the Good Stuff Center, we believe in doing terrific things in the community.

About You
And you're just the kind of

person we want to do them for. Won't you please stop by?

Our Offices
We're located in a place full of



people.
If that sounds good to you, too, come join us!

◀ *A common example of subtle alignment problems*

Can you name the ways that this design is better? ➤

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Text alignments

You'll generally want to stay with one text alignment. When you do mix them, make sure the elements still align somehow (for example, right-aligned text lining up with the right edge of a headline). Don't center some text blocks and left-align/right-align others.

This text is **flush left**.
It's also called left aligned
or left justified.

This text is **flush right**.
It's also called right aligned
or right justified.

This text is **centered**.
When you center text,
be sure to think about
line breaks.

You'll also notice that long
bits of centered text are not
the easiest to read, because the
line lengths are different.

This text is **justified**. That means
that both the left and right sides
are aligned. However, the spacing
between words varies, which
makes it harder to read.
Sometimes, it just looks silly.

Hints on alignment:

- Strong alignment gives a less cluttered look that is easier and more interesting to read.
- Make conscious decisions about where you place your elements. Each item should relate to something else.
- Centered alignment tends to give a more sedate, formal feel – don't make it your default. If you're going to center, be very conscious of the effect. Add visual interest in other ways (unless you indeed want a sedate, formal feel).

Repetition

Repeat some aspect of the design throughout the entire piece. Again, this ties elements together to make the look more unified and consistent, as well as more interesting. People are more likely to read something that captures their attention visually.

Some examples of repetition include making all the headings a larger font size than the body text, using the same bullet throughout a document, or using a portion of a graphic in the layout. Take advantage of what you're already doing and make it stronger.

When you apply repetition across pieces – such as letterhead, business cards, and business envelopes – it will give your organization a consistent image.

If your organization puts out a newsletter or other multipage documents, you can carry over elements from page to page, such as pull-quotes. If the layout usually uses two columns, play with making some of the text two columns wide (lining up the left and right edges with the other columns, of course).



◀ *Here, the graphics pick up the moon theme, and the bullet points echo it*

Hints on repetition:

- Find existing repetitions and strengthen them to enhance both clarity and visual appeal.
- Avoid repeating things so much that they wear out their welcome.

Contrast

Contrast is a great way to add visual interest to your design, as well to emphasize the structure of the information. You can create contrast in many ways – font sizes and types, colors, directionality, horizontal lines, spacing, and so on. The most important rule is that to be effective, the elements must be *very* different (contrast), not just a little different (conflict). Elements that contrast are visually enticing. Elements that conflict make people twitch. Fonts are the easiest way to add contrast.

In the example below, the revised version makes the thickness of the different lines more distinct, uses a contrasting font for the title, and changes the title to mixed case (which lets the font size go up as well). The result is a stronger, more sophisticated look.

THE GOOD STUFF CENTER'S GOALS

Being nice to people
Doing great things in the world
Having compassion
Telling funny jokes

The Good Stuff Center's Goals

Being nice to people
Doing great things in the world
Having compassion
Telling funny jokes

Hints on contrast:

- Contrast should always enhance the organization of the information in your piece, not confuse it.
- Make differences **strong**.

Type Faces

Type makes up the bulk of the documents we produce. The elements on the page are always in relationship to one another:

- Concordant** This relationship occurs when you use only one type family on the page. It's easy to keep the look harmonious, and harder to make it look interesting.
- Conflicting** This relationship occurs when you use fonts that are merely *similar* in style, size, weight, and so on. The result is unpleasant, because it just looks *off*.
- Contrasting** This relationship occurs when you combine typefaces whose differences from each other are immediately apparent.

Categories of Type

Most typefaces can be classified into the six categories below, although many fonts don't fit neatly into a single group. Looking at these categories will help you understand how they're different, and thus how to combine them on the page.

For more information on pretty much anything you'd want to know about typefaces and how to use them, see *The Non-Designer's Type Book* by Robin Williams.

Oldstyle

Oldstyle fonts tend to have a warm, graceful look, and are the best for large sections of text – they're highly readable. They're characterized by serifs, slanted serifs on the lowercase letters, a moderate “thick/thin transition” (the letterform strokes go from kind-of-thin to kind-of-thicker), and a diagonal stress (a straight line through the thinnest parts of the letter is on a diagonal).

Garamond

Book Antiqua

Times New Roman

Centaur

Modern

Modern fonts tend to have a cold, elegant look, and are best suited for short amounts of text (such as headlines). They're characterized by serifs, thin and horizontal serifs on the lowercase letters, a radical thick/thin transition, and a vertical stress.

Bodoni

Elephant

Modern No. 20

Times New Roman Bold

Slab Serif

Slab serif fonts grew out of type designers' desire to make modern fonts more readable. Slab serif fonts are characterized by thick horizontal serifs, small (if any) thick/thin transition, and vertical (if any) stress.

Bernard Condensed

Century Schoolbook

Courier New

Rockwell

Sans Serif

Sans serif fonts do not have serifs ("sans" means "without" in French). They have almost no visible thick/thin transition, which means they also have no stress.

Trebuchet

Century Gothic

Haettenschweiler

Verdana

A few sans serif fonts (such as Optimum) do have stress, which means they share similarities with both serif and sans serif fonts. You'll need to be very careful about how you combine them with other fonts.

Script

The script category includes all the fonts that look as though they were hand-lettered. They should be used sparingly, and *never* in all caps.

Tempus Sans

Blackadder

Papyrus

*Viner Hand***Decorative**

Decorative fonts are easy to identify: they're fun, distinctive, and add instant personality. They should never be used for blocks of text, though – too much of a good thing can ruin your design. Also, try going beyond your first impression of a font. For example, see what happens when you use an informal font in a more formal setting.

Magneto**Snap**

Chiller

Curly