

4.7.22: Visual Design Principles

Learning Outcome

- Describe basic visual design principles

Business communicators don't always have access to a graphic artist. In the event that you as communicator find yourself needing to create visuals that dazzle without the help of a graphic artist, here are a few basic principles of visual design you can keep in your back pocket.

Contrast

Contrast is when two aspects of an image are strikingly different from one another, like dark and light. Contrast is an important principle in visual design and helps highlight the important part of the image. It adds “weight” to your design and guides the viewer’s eye to what you want them to see.



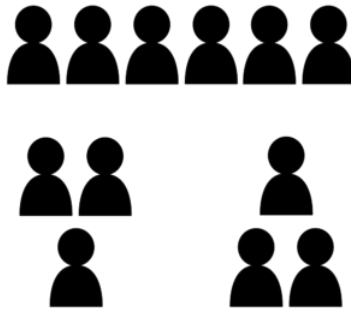
Alignment

Alignment creates a sharp, linear order to the elements of your visual, so they all have a connection to each other. If objects are closer together, the viewer assumes that they're related. In the first image of trees below, we see six trees that are in two rows even though they're not precisely linear. In the second image, we perceive two groups of three.



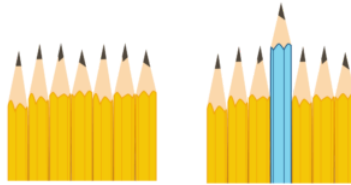
Hierarchy

If there are multiple elements in a design, more visual “weight” should be given to the most important part of the graphic. Establish the most essential part of the graphic first, and then fill in the rest with the less important parts.



Repetition and Pattern

Repetition strengthens the overall design and ties together elements to make them more consistent. This technique is often used in branding to make items more recognizable.



Color

Color is an important choice in visual communication because each color has a meaning. If you're following brand guidelines, your colors will reinforce your brand, but if not, you might want to consider some of the universal associations that go along with each color. Green tends to conjure images of the environment, while red symbolizes anger, and yellow, happiness. Which of these roses looks cold to you?



Xerox dug deep into why color is important in communication. Check out their [two-page cheat sheet](#) to learn more about how to leverage color for the best effect in your presentation.

Balance and Space

Keeping the elements of your design balanced gives the design some form and stability. Even spacing makes it look professional and attractive, but that doesn't mean it needs to be symmetrical. It can be asymmetrical, with larger items in the upper left corner balancing out smaller ones in the lower right, and so on.

Leaving open or "negative" space ensures that your visual isn't cluttered and can highlight the important parts of a design. As we mentioned in our adopted standards above, simplicity is your friend!

Font

Design doesn't stop at the picture. Fonts have everything to do with your audience's engagement with your communication. Take a look at this font and decide if it's easy to read:

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

You can tell what it says; however, reading this font for too long could get taxing, especially on a screen. Is this next font easier to read?

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Your audience won't continue to read your communication if you've chosen a font that's difficult to read.

In addition to legibility, there's a question of style. How do you feel about these lines of text and how they work together?

IF YOU CAN
dream it
YOU CAN
DO IT

———Walt Disney———

They're just words, but they're very visual; the use of color and different fonts draws your attention to the words "dream it" and "do it."

✓ watch it

Graphic artists use a variety of rules to choose fonts and lay them out in a graphic design. This video shows you—very visually—how graphic artists make fonts work as a component of visual media.

A link to an interactive elements can be found at the bottom of this page.

Business communicators aren't necessarily graphic artists, but a good command of a graphic designer's visual design techniques will help you evaluate your visual media and decide if it's going to support your message. These aren't all the visual design principles a graphic designer employs, of course, but for our purposes, they're a good place to start.

? Additional Resources

- [Visual Design Principles](#) by Joel Marsh
- [Beginning Graphic Design: Fundamentals of Design](#) from Goodwill Community Foundation, Inc.

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