

**Working
design principles:
So what is
good design,
anyway?**

A few thoughts
from Mary Baum

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design principles 1: hierarchy

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What is good design, anyway?

It's easy to say that design is purely a matter of personal taste.

But when we spend hard dollars to communicate an idea, we want to attract people to the page and keep their interest long enough for them to get the message. And there is a body of evidence that suggests certain design principles achieve that goal better than others.

Of course, those principles don't just apply to the printed page. They extend to giant posters, web pages, movie screens great and small (and every frame within) – anywhere words and pictures come together, moving or still, to communicate and, most especially, to persuade.

So what are they?

Design's first principle – a hierarchy of elements.

This means one dominant visual element – a place where the eye goes first.

Generally that element will dominate because it's the biggest. But some things catch the eye automatically regardless of size: pictures, especially photographs, and especially of people. A representation of the human face will draw us in like a magnet every time – that's genetically hard-wired. Picture captions will catch the eye, too, even before a headline in many cases.

Another way an element can dominate is with visual weight, or contrast with the background. On a white page full of light type and airy visuals, a big black dot becomes the dominant element.

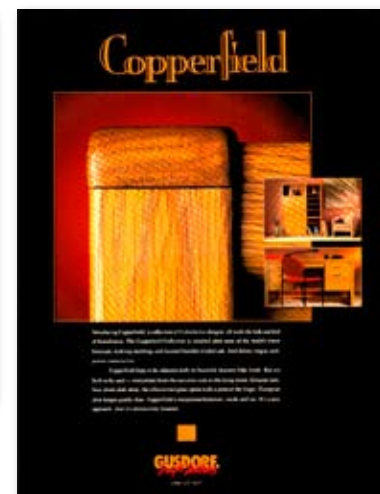
But by and large, a page that commands folks to stop and look will have one element that is bigger than anything else on the page.

Then it will have an element that's a little smaller, and one that's a little smaller than that, until you get to the body copy and the subheads. Anytime you see two elements that are the same size, they actually count as one element, or one class of elements. But you shouldn't see two classes of elements competing for attention.

Here are two more examples, from the low-fashion world of wound healing and the significantly higher-style world of home furnishings:



The gel poster's headline dominates in both size and weight: it's the biggest thing on the page – and the boldest.



design principles 2: typography



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Typefaces each have a personality all their own. Plus, as visual elements in their own right, their shapes interact with the space around them.

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Of course, those principles don't just apply to the printed page. More and more, the page is a screen – big or small, moving or still. But the goal is the same – to communicate and, most especially, to persuade.

So how do we get there?

Design's second principle – typography.

If the first job of design is to catch the eye, its second is to keep it. And here's where typography has to walk a fine line: the most brilliant copy in the world is useless if nobody can read it – and just as useless if, for lack of attention to design, nobody stops to read it.

In type, there are two basic issues: the faces we use, and how we set them.

Issue #1: For every typeface, there's a reason.

The least expensive thing we can do to make a campaign or an identity truly our own is to buy a new typeface. Prices start at less than \$20US, and the selection is endless.

True, we won't be using it for body copy on the web, because it's not installed on most users' machines, but that's exactly why it looks fresh and different. Instead, it communicates the exact voice, the exact personality, an organization wants to get across.

Are we serious and corporate? Artistic or passionate? Bold and daring? Fun and lively? How do we speak to our target audience? What emotions are we selling? (Because, let's face it. We're always selling emotions.)

Issue #2: Kern, kern, kern.

How we set type is maybe more important than what faces we use. When Apple and Microsoft chose the faces to include as their default fonts, they weren't looking for the ugliest typefaces on the planet. In fact, Times New Roman, Helvetica and Palatino were at the time considered among the most beautiful. In capable hands, they still can be.

The main issue is kerning – the space between the letters. Too much space, and a word falls **a part**, or worse, **a part**; too little, and the letters get mashed **together until we don't know where the thoughts end and start again**. Word-processing programs have long been the worst offenders, because they imitate typewriters, putting each letter in the same-size box without any thought for the letters that come before or after. That's the main reason designers use page-layout software – the main reason it exists, in our view – and building in the level of control we need is one reason design software costs so much to develop and use.

Finally, a word about body-text size. Certainly bigger type is easier to read as we get older – but we all have to put on our glasses eventually. We do a kindness to all our readers to give them adjustable type onscreen and keep the type in print as big as we can; more important for readers of any age is to keep our column widths under control. A column of type should not exceed about 50 characters, or 60 in a pinch. The column you're reading now is pushing it – any wider, and it should be two columns.