



## **Basic Design Principles**

*For Visual Novices on Print/Web*

# Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
Objectives .....	3
What exactly is graphic design? .....	4
The Importance of Recognition .....	4
Four Basic Principles .....	4
Proximity .....	5
Alignment .....	7
Repetition.....	8
Contrast.....	9
Good/Bad Design Features .....	10
Bad Design Features .....	10
Good Design Features.....	12
Terminology.....	13
Getting Help.....	16
Help Desk.....	16
Training.....	16

## **Objectives**

- Familiarize with basic design principles
- Identify and implement said principles into projects

## ***What exactly is graphic design?***

**Graphic design** is a complex combination of words, images, numbers, charts, and illustrations that in order urges us to think, react, and or in most cases, persuade. It is everywhere, touching everything that we do, we see, or that we buy. It is both a practical and popular art of visualizing ideas. It is important for a business to use graphic design as a business tool. But not all of us were born with the natural ability to be artists or designers. However, this doesn't mean that we are unable to learn how artists and designers create their work. Much like any other profession, it takes skill as well as having the awareness of the principles and terminology to understand what makes a great design. This documentation will be an introductory guide to these design principles.

## ***The Importance of Recognition***

In grade school most of us learned by merely recognizing objects, words and numbers. We became conscious of their presence. This conscious recognition allowed us to learn what these things were. Once you were mindful of these things, you saw and could point these objects anywhere, or perhaps you began to use those words and numbers. This will be the key in learning about the basic principles of design.

## ***Four Basic Principles***

These basic principles are merely a brief overview of what we will go in depth later. As you begin to identify and work with each of these principles you will notice that they are all unified in one form or another. Make note of the interconnections and correlations between each these principles (**Note:** It is rare that you will apply one principle into a design.), this will help you in learning and identifying everything you need to know about designing a fantastic print or web design. Let's first define our four basic principles and then we will cover each principle in regards to design (and then to typography).

### **Contrast**

Perhaps, the most important visual attraction of a design, contrast is the difference in visual properties that makes an object (or its representation in an image) distinguishable from the rest of the objects and the background. The idea is to avoid elements (such as **color**, **type**, **size**, **line**, **thickness**, **space**, and **shape**) on a design that is too similar. If these elements are not the same it is best to make them different.

### **Repetition**

Repetition is the recurrence of a compositional element such as **color**, **shape**, **texture**, **spatial relationships**, **line thickness**, etc. This assists in developing a sense of organization (even when things look unorganized!) and strengthens the **unity** of your design.

## **Alignment**

Whether it's an image, a shape, or even text, nothing should be placed on the page randomly. Every element that you use should have some visual connection with another element on the page. This creates a clean, sophisticated, fresh look.

## **Proximity**

Elements that relate to each other should be set close together. When several items (or elements) are within **proximity** of each other, they become one visual unit rather than several separate units. This also helps organize your content and reduces a cluttered appearance.

## ***Proximity***

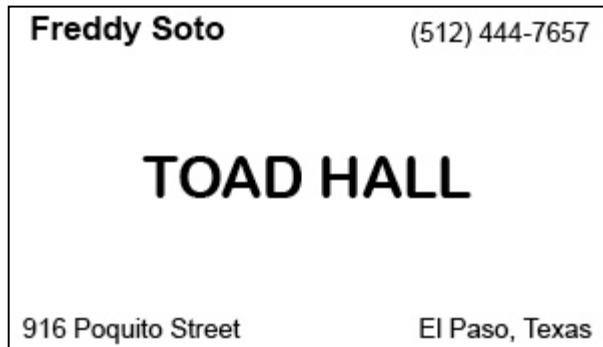
### **Basic Purpose**

The basic purpose of this principle is to organize. A beginning designer tends to create a composition in which words, phrases, and graphics are set all over, taking up every space available as if afraid of having any empty space (also referred to as **white space**). When elements of a design are scattered in this manner, a design appears unorganized and the information may not be instantly accessible to a reader/viewer. This principle encourages for a designer to group related items together, to move them physically close to one another, so each related items are seen as one cohesive group rather than cluttered, unrelated bits of information. This means that items that have no relation should not be near to another element, which gives a reader/viewer an instant visual clue as to the organization of your layout and your content.

Take note of the following business cards. How many elements do you see in that small space? How many times does your eye stop to look at something? Why are these two business cards confusing? Which is more effective?



Does your eye stop five times? Of course—there are five separate items on this card. You probably begin in the middle because of the bold phrase; followed by reading left to right. What happens when you get to the bottom right corner, where does your eye go?



You have two bold phrases, where do you begin? Do you begin in the upper left or the center? Afterward, where does your eye naturally go?

When we group the related information and elements together (proximity), note what happens.



This card is much easier to read because all the related information is set together. Is there any question about where you begin to read the card? Where you end? With this simple concept, this card is organized much better.

### **How to Get it**

Squint your eyes slightly and count the number of visual elements on the page by counting the number of times your eyes stop. If there are more than five items on your page, see which of the separate elements can be grouped together into a closer proximity to become one visual unit. Also, when you create something remember the following:

1. Be conscious of where your eye is going. Where do you start looking, what path do you follow? Where do you end up?
2. After you've read it, where do you go next?
3. Your piece should follow a logical progression that clearly states the purpose of the information you're trying to relay to your audience.

### **What to Avoid!**

- Avoid too many separate elements on the page.
- Don't stick things in the corners and in the middle.

- Avoid leaving equal amounts of white space between elements unless each group is part of a subset.
- Avoid even a split second of confusion over whether a headline, a subhead, a caption, a graphic, etc., belongs with its related material.
- Don't create relationships with elements that don't belong together! If they are not related, move them apart from each other.

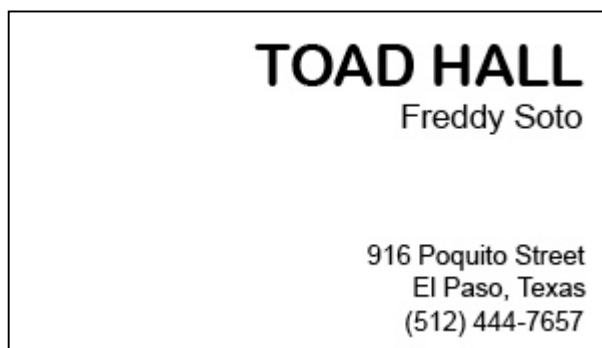
## **Alignment**

### **Basic Purpose**

This principle states that nothing should be placed on the page haphazardly. Every item should have a visual connection with something else on the page. This makes you more conscious about what you insert in a page. When you align things it creates a stronger, more cohesive composition. This is referred to as **Unity**. Even when elements are physically separated from each other, if they are aligned properly, there is an “invisible line” that will connect them. While the principle of proximity indicates the relationship between objects and elements, the principle of alignment will tell your audience that even though items are not close, they belong to the same piece. Let's use Freddy Soto's business card to illustrate alignment.



The problem with the first card below is that nothing is aligned with anything else. They appear as if they were just thrown together.



By moving all the elements towards the right and giving them one alignment, the information is instantly more organized. Take note that related elements were grouped in closer proximity. Using a pen or pencil draw a line down the end of the text.

## **How to Get It**

Be conscious of where you place elements. Be certain to find something else on the page to align with, even if the two objects are physically far away from each other.

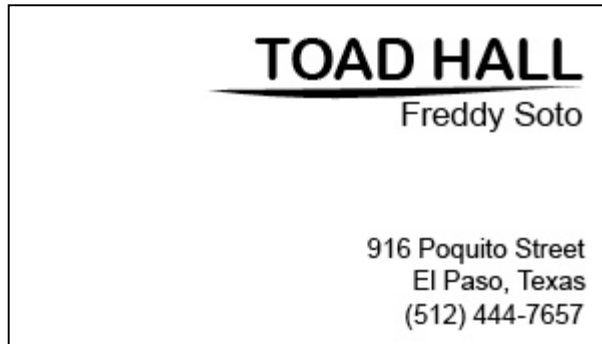
## **What to Avoid!**

- Avoid using more than one text alignment on a page. So, don't center some text and right-align the other text.
- Try very hard to break away from a centered alignment unless you are consciously trying to create a more formal, sedate presentation.

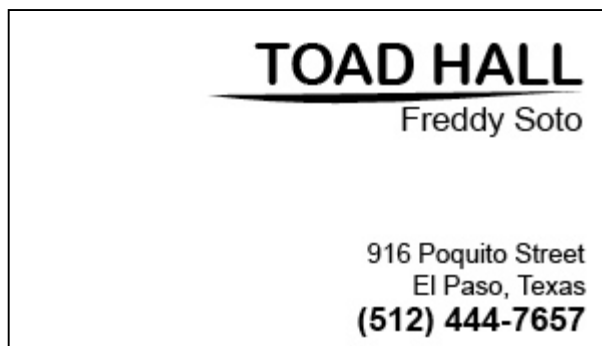
## ***Repetition***

### **Basic Purpose**

This principle states that you repeat some aspect of the design throughout the entire piece. A repetitive element may be a bold font, a thick line, bullets, color, design elements, etc. It can be anything that a reader will visually recognize. One already does this inherently in everything that they do, but what a novice designer should do is to push it further, and turn what may appear as inconspicuous repetition into a visual key that ties everything together in a spectacular fashion. It is yet another way to unify your work.



Do your eyes just wander off the card after you get to the end of the business card?



Now, when you get to the end of the information, where does your eye go? Do you find that it bounces back and forth between the bold type elements?



## **How to Get It**

Consider repetition as “consistency.” Try exploring the extent of that consistency. Can you convert some of those consistent elements into a part of the conscious graphic design? Then take a look at the possibility of adding other elements just to create repetition. Consider using a distinct font or a reversed number, and then repeating that treatment throughout every numbered list in your design.

## **What to Avoid!**

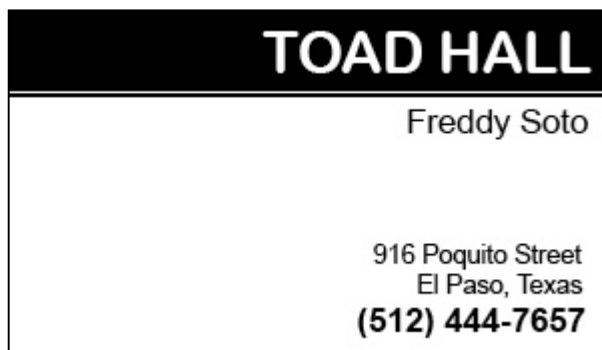
- Avoid overdoing the repetition that it becomes annoying or overwhelming.
- Be aware that if you do create repetition with shapes, graphics, or other compositional elements, that you are aware of the value of contrast. You want to unify but you don’t want to confound your audience.

## **Contrast**

### **Basic Purpose**

Contrast is one of the most effective ways to add visual interest to your designs. You can really create something very striking by merely contrasting elements. One thing to remember though is that for contrast to work in a piece it must be strong. Do not be afraid to experiment! Contrast is created when two elements (**large type/small type, thin line/ thick line, cool color/warm color**, etc.) or items (texts, graphics, etc.) that are not exactly the same, are purposely made different, very different.

Let’s continue modifying our business card by including contrast into the design and keeping the principles of proximity, alignment, and repetition.



Your eyes should be drawn to the top of the business card more than if you compared to one without contrast.

Think about the usage of contrast in other designs such as resumes, pamphlets, fliers, and web pages. How would you incorporate this principle in their layouts?

## **How to Get It**

Add contrast to typeface **choices, line thickness, colors, shapes, sizes**, etc. If items aren’t exactly the same, then make them different! Contrast is very much like matching wall paint when you need to spot paint—you can’t sort of match the color, either you match it exactly or you repaint the wall entirely.

**What to Avoid!**

- Avoid a sort-of-heavy line with a sort-of-heavier line.
- Avoid contrasting brown with black headlines. Or anything similar.
- Avoid using two or more typefaces that are similar.

**Good/Bad Design Features**

The following is a list of things designers have cited as depicting good and bad designs. It's easy to create a design that appears dorky or bad, but what one may not know is that it's also easy to create a design that's striking, attractive and fantastic. Here are a few points to consider for both print and web.

***Bad Design Features*****Backgrounds**

- Default gray color
- Color combinations of text and background that make the text hard to read
- Busy, distracting backgrounds that make the text hard to read

**Text**

- Text that is too small to read
- Text crowding against the left edge
- Text that stretches all the way across the page
- Centered type over flush left body copy
- Paragraphs of type in all caps
- Paragraphs of type in bold
- Paragraphs of type in italic
- Paragraphs of type in all caps, bold, and italic all at once
- Underlined text that is not a link

**Links**

- Default blue links
- Blue link borders around graphics
- Links that are not clear about where they will take you
- Links in body copy that distract readers and lead them off to remote, useless pages
- Text links that are not underlined so you don't know they are links
- Dead links (links that don't work anymore)

**Graphics**

- Large graphic files that take forever to load

- Meaningless or useless graphics
- Thumbnail images that are nearly as large as the full-sized images they link to
- Graphics with no alt labels
- Missing graphics, especially missing graphics with no alt labels
- Graphics that don't fit on the screen (assuming a screen of 640x460 pixels)

### **Tables**

- Borders turned on in tables
- Tables used as design elements, especially with extra large (dorky) borders

### **Blinking and animations**

- Anything that blinks, especially text
- Multiple things that blink
- Rainbow rules (lines)
- Rainbow rules that blink or animate
- "Under construction" signs, especially of little men working
- Animated "under construction" signs
- Animated pictures for e-mail
- Animations that never stop
- Multiple animations that never stop

### **Junk**

- Counters on pages--who cares
- Junky advertising
- Having to scroll sideways (640 x 460 pixels)
- Too many little pictures of meaningless awards on the first page
- Frame scroll bars in the middle of a page
- Multiple frame scroll bars in the middle of a page

### **Navigation**

- Unclear navigation; over complex navigation
- Complicated frames, too many frames, unnecessary scroll bars in frames
- Orphan pages (no links back to where they came from, no identification)
- Useless page titles that don't explain what the page is about

### **General Design**

- Entry page or home page that does not fit within standard browser window (640 x 460 pixels)
- Frames that make you scroll sideways
- No focal point on the page
- Too many focal points on the page

- Navigation buttons as the only visual interest, especially when they're large (and dorky)
- Cluttered, not enough alignment of elements
- Lack of contrast (in color, text, to create hierarchy of information, etc.)
- Pages that look okay in one browser but not in another

## ***Good Design Features***

It is quite easy to create a good design. The one thing you must keep in mind is to avoid anything found in the list for Bad designs. If you are able to do this, then more likely you have a strong design layout. However, keep the following points in mind.

### **Text**

- Background does not interrupt the text
- Text is big enough to read, but not too big
- The hierarchy of information is perfectly clear
- Columns of text are narrower than in a book to make reading easier on the screen

### **Navigation**

- Navigation buttons and bars are easy to understand and use
- Navigation is consistent throughout web site
- Navigation buttons and bars provide the visitor with a clue as to where they are, what page of the site they are currently on
- Frames, if used, are not obtrusive
- A large site has an index or site map

### **Links**

- Link colors coordinate with page colors
- Links are underlined so they are instantly clear to the visitor

### **Graphics**

- Buttons are not big and dorky
- Every graphic has an alt label
- Every graphic link has a matching text link
- Graphics and backgrounds use browser-safe colors
- Animated graphics turn off by themselves

### **General Design**

- Pages download quickly
- First page and home page fit into 640 x 460 pixel space

- All of the other pages have the immediate visual impact within 640 x 460 pixels
- Good use of graphic elements (photos, subheads, pull quotes) to break up large areas of text
- Every web page in the site looks like it belongs to the same site; there are repetitive elements that carry throughout the pages

## **Terminology**

**Additive process:** colors add up to white.

**Axis:** the imaginary line drawn through the center of a composition, either vertically or horizontally, to determine its balance as either symmetrical or asymmetrical.

**Balance:** the equilibrium of opposing or interacting forces in a visual composition. There are two main kinds of balance:

*Symmetrical* – compositions that have elements that are evenly distributed on the design.

*Asymmetrical* – compositions that have elements that are uneven in distribution and thus makes a design appear more dynamic.

**Baseline:** is the invisible line that type sits on.

**Body copy, body text, (body or text):** refer to the main block of text that you read, as opposed to headlines, subheads, titles, etc. Body text is usually between 9 and 12 point type.

**Composition:** the overall arrangement of visual elements on a 2-dimensional surface. Elements of composition include: Shape, Balance, Positive and Negative Space, Size, Emphasis, and Movement.

**Dynamic:** a term describing a composition with a sense of drama or uneasiness, often achieved through the use of asymmetry.

**Elements:** are the separate objects on the page or web page. An element might be a single line of text, or a graphic, or a group of items that are so close together they are perceived as one unit.

**Emphasis:** the relative importance of elements indicated in a composition through the layout.

**Focal point:** the object that your eye is first attracted to that which is emphasized by the layout.

**Hue** refers to the name of the color, such as red, orange or green.

**Implied motion:** visual activity in a composition that can help convey a message that is kinetic, such as “fast-moving,” “active,” or infer the passage of time.

**Intensity** refers to the brightness of a color.

**Justified:** occurs when a block of text is lined up on both the left and right edges.

**Kinetic:** related to movement or action. In terms of a composition, a kinetic layout implies a lot of movement and is dynamic.

**Negative space:** usually the *background* of a composition. As important as positive space to the communication of a concept, negative space should be carefully considered and can actually “activate” the positive space.

**Pattern** is related to texture, in that it can create a sense of a tactile surface with depth, but involves the repetition of elements in a (usually) anticipated sequence.

**Positive space:** the “foreground” of a composition—what the designer wants you to focus on, often the “subject” of a piece.

**Primary light colors** are Red, Green and Blue.

**Primary paint colors** are Red, Yellow and Blue.

**Process ink colors** are Cyan, Magenta, Yellow & Black (CMYK) spectrum of colors.

**Rule:** is a line, a drawn line, such as the one under the headline “mini-glossary.”

**Shape** or “form”: a visually perceived area created by an enclosing line of by color and value changes defining the outer edges.

**Size** or “*scale*”: the relative *proportions* of elements in a composition.

**Static:** appearing to be still in terms of composition, often symmetrical.

**Subtractive process:** colors add up to black

**Texture** refers to the surface quality of objects. It can be *tactile* texture (such as in an embossing,) or *visual* texture, which is actually the illusion or sense of texture.

**Unity** is a complement to variety, and involves the process of binding elements in a composition together in various ways, such as with color, similar scale, alignment or shape.

**Value** refers to the relative darkness or lightness of design elements.

**Value** refers to the relative lightness or darkness of the hue

**Value:** the relative darkness or lightness of elements within a composition. Black has a darker *value* than grey, and white has a lighter *value* than grey.

**Visual rhythm** is best understood by thinking of musical rhythms. Rhythm can be regular (like a picket fence) or irregular (like a picket fence in disrepair)

**Visual weight:** the relative darkness or lightness of a composition, often assessed by “squinting” at it to focus on shapes. If a piece has a lot of dark areas at the bottom, it would be described as “*bottom heavy*.”

**White space** is the space on a page that is not occupied by any text or graphics. You might call it “blank” space. Beginners tend to be afraid of white space; professional designers “use” lots of white space.

## **Getting Help**

### ***Help Desk***

#### **Help Desk Contact Information**

Moody Hall 309  
448-8443  
helpline@stedwards.edu  
[http://www.stedwards.edu/it\\_dept/computer/](http://www.stedwards.edu/it_dept/computer/)

#### **Help Desk Hours of Operation**

Monday – Thursday  
8:00 AM – 10:00 PM

Friday  
8:00 AM – 6:00 PM

Saturday  
9:00 AM – 6:00 PM

### ***Training***

#### **Joana Trimble, Computer Competencies and Training Manager**

Moody Hall 311  
448-8816  
joanat@stedwards.edu

#### **Megan Garza, Training Coordinator**

Moody Hall 101  
448-8554  
megang@stedwards.edu

#### **Mike Bell, Part-Time Training Coordinator**

Moody Hall 311  
428-1296  
mikekb@stedwards.edu