

Effective Graphic Design

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Good graphic design is essential to the success of promotional and educational products. This NebGuide serves as a roadmap for how to achieve effective graphic design.

What is Graphic Design?

Graphic design is the arrangement of elements on media, such as pages in a publication, a poster, sign, brochure, or website. Design elements include symbols, images, shapes, photographs, colors, textures, illustrations, and type.

Much research has been done on how to develop a visually appealing and stimulating design. Understanding how to effectively select and place graphic elements will help you design an effective communication tool for your audience.

Why Graphic Design Is Important

Quality graphic design is essential to the effectiveness of any visual communication. In most advertising, marketing, or educational piece, graphic design is as important as the writing because it helps draw a reader's attention and helps them focus on the text. Both help ensure that the message will be retained.

You'll use graphic design when:

- creating a brochure,
- designing a website,
- making a business card,
- laying out a magazine or newsletter,
- designing a wayside exhibit,
- creating interpretive signs, or
- making posters and flyers.

Principles of Good Design

The basic principles of graphic design are proportion, proximity, balance, emphasis, contrast, repetition, alignment, white space, levels, and typography.

Proximity and Proportion

Proximity and proportion create a visual relationship between items on a page. Proximity is the measure of how close

or far apart items are from each other. Proportion is the relationship between items with regard to size, color, or quantity. Good proximity and proportion can provide organization, help reduce clutter, and create visual interest.

Tips to help achieve good proximity and proportion:

- Group related items together.
- Set unrelated items apart.
- Use white space, lines, bars, colored margins, and boxes to help define space.
- Create visually appealing proportion by dividing the page into thirds and using a 2:3 ratio. Use two-thirds of the page for one type of element — text, graphics, or white space — and the other one-third for another element.



Emphasis

Graphic emphasis occurs when there is contrast in the design, such as when two elements are different. The greater the difference, the greater the emphasis created. Emphasizing elements this way creates visual interest, illustrates importance, and helps direct the reader's eye.

Use graphic emphasis to help highlight the most important points so a reader can get the message quickly.

Tips to help achieve graphic emphasis:

- Isolate an element by providing more white space around it.
- Change the appearance of a word, phrase, or image to help it stand out.



- Use different shapes. For example, if there are many boxes, use a circle instead.
- Make your most important graphic the largest element on the page and consider placing it at the top or near the center of the page to attract the eye.
- Use horizontal lines to break up columns.
- Increase the emphasis of an element by placing it within the top one-third of the page; decrease emphasis by placing it lower on the page.
- Brighter, prominent colors will create emphasis, just as larger text will stand out more. Use the largest text for headings and extremely important points.

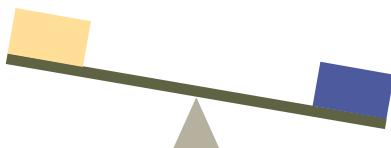


This illustration uses color and contrasting vertical and horizontal boxes to create emphasis

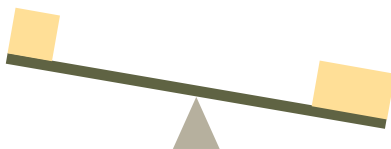
Balance

Balance keeps the design focused and easy to read. Create balance by using big items closer to the center and small items on the outer edges. Think of balance as a seesaw (*Figure 1*). Big items weigh more and hold down that end of the seesaw. Centered items are naturally balanced but can be predictable; consequently, they don't create as much visual interest. Balance can be created using one of the following arrangements:

- Symmetrical balance — elements are arranged as mirror images, either vertically or horizontally. Asymmetrical balance — elements are off center. Items are often arranged in ways that attract the eye across the page, rather than in the predictable pattern of symmetrical designs.
- Radial balance — elements are arranged in a circular pattern.



Light colors appear to weigh less than dark colors.



Big things appear to weigh more than little things.

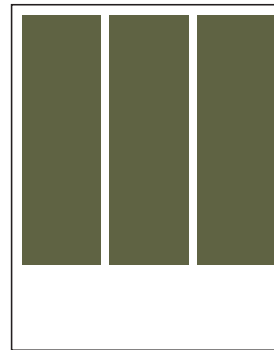


Big things closer to the center are balanced with little things out on the edge.

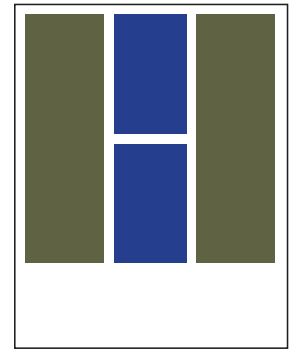
Figure 1. These seesaw illustrations show how the visual weight of items affects visual balance.

The following illustrations represent block placements of elements (such as text blocks that are arranged in columns or boxes and/or images), demonstrating how placement

creates balance, interest and leads the eye across the page (*Figure 2*).



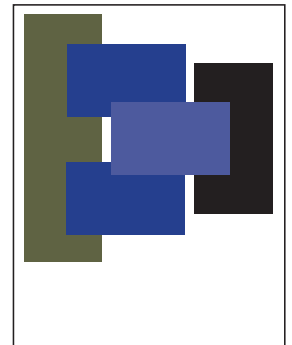
This layout is balanced but boring



Centered and symmetrical



This layout is balanced and interesting



This layout draws the eye and points the reader to a specific point

Figure 2. Effective layouts use different design elements to create interest and balance, and help reader's follow the flow of information presented.

The design below illustrates how the text draws the eye across the page and to the emphasized text.



Repetition

Repeating visual elements creates unity and can direct the reader's eye through the piece. It also helps with organization and clarity. Using the same colors for different elements, such as headings or shapes, using lines to separate sections, or using novel bullets such as a jack-o'-lanterns throughout a Halloween flyer, are all examples of repetition. Repetition also curbs the desire to use too much variation. Too much variety can look cluttered and confusing to the reader.

Alignment

Effective alignment visually connects every item and helps create interest. Good alignment produces a stronger, more cohesive and readable message. The text in this guide

and in the block below is *justified*, aligning at both the right and the left margins (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Alignment helps create balance.

Tips for aligning text and images:

- Do not center every item on the same page. It makes text harder to read and some people find it off-putting. It also can fail to create interest.
- Nothing should be placed on the page arbitrarily — have a purpose to the placement of every text box and image.
- Every item should have a visual connection with something else on the page.

Alignment can be created vertically, horizontally, or even diagonally. The edges of the page can be used to align objects or text, like on this page, or elements can be centered. Create interest by mixing up how things are aligned, but avoid having too much variety, or the look you create could be chaotic.

Levels of Information

For educational and promotional materials, it is important to use design techniques that create levels of information. The levels correspond to the amount of detail provided about a topic.

Four levels of design are:

- the title or theme,
- subtitles or bulleted points,
- text that adds detail to the subtitles or bulleted points, and
- call to action, which tells the reader what to do next — buy your product, patronize your business, learn more about the topic, or begin doing something, such as recycling.

Not every reader will be interested in all of the information. A design that makes the levels of information clear will attract readers by helping them zero in on the parts of the message they are interested in. People who prefer to scan text will read the title and subtitles, and look at illustrations; others will be interested enough to read the details at all levels.

The designs at the end of this guide illustrate the use of levels of information.

White Space

White space is not merely the spaces on a page that do not contain images or text. White space is a graphic design tool crucial to attractive layouts.

Use white space to create emphasis, contrast, and balance. Designs that do not have enough white space can look crowded and busy, and may turn off potential readers.

Tips to help increase white space:

- Add space around the title or heading.
- Increase spacing between elements, such as text and photographs.
- Expand margins, including the space between columns.
- Increase space in between the lines of text.

Typography

Typography is the way a font is used within a design. This includes type size and style. When used appropriately, typography is a tool that can help set the tone of the design. If used improperly, it can detract from the message by making the piece look bland and uninteresting, or messy and hard to read.

When choosing a font consider the size, color, and type.

Size. Font sizes are measured in *points*. One point is equal to 1/72 of an inch, measured at the full height of the text block. The larger the point size, the larger the type will be.

Before selecting the point size, consider the information. Larger type emphasizes, so it's often used for the main title and subheads. The size of the font should work within the space available — too large and words will be hyphenated and become hard to read. Conversely, if the point size is too small, text will be difficult and frustrating to read.

Tips to help you use typography effectively:

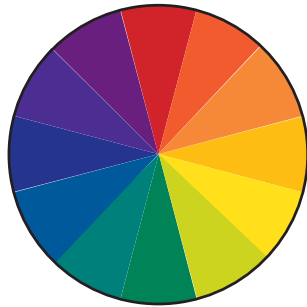
- A font size that is too large can create too much emphasis and look strange.
- The largest font size on a piece should be reserved for the most important or emphasized element, such as the title. Subheadings should be the next size smaller, or the same size distinguished from the text by italics or bold type.
- Secondary ideas should be the same the size as text, and can be set off using italics or bold type.
- AVOID USING ALL CAPITAL LETTERS. It makes text difficult to read, especially in large blocks of type.
- Consider using drop caps and pull quotes to emphasize text. Use both sparingly to ensure impact.

“Pull quotes use a text box to emphasize a quote from the text.”

Color. Using color helps create emphasis and can be used to create a special effect, such as making words fade into the background. Make sure the font color is readable against the color of the background. Generally, the higher the contrast, the easier text is to read. However, sometimes it's a judgment call.

For example, black text on a white background is very readable, but white text on a black background is more difficult for most people to read.

Font colors can be complimentary or contrasting. Color wheels can help you identify complimentary and contrasting combinations. You can find color wheels online, and many software programs, including Microsoft Word, include color wheels.



Be careful when using color — too many can create cause the piece to look busy. Remember to use consistency and repetition, as well as emphasis.

Type. A font can convey mood, so choose one that supports your design and message. For example, if creating flyer about a summer camp for kids, you might choose a font that looks like a child’s handwriting. Or, you might use a theme font such as Broadway to advertise a play, or Chiller for a Halloween event. These types of fonts can be hard to read when used for text. They are most effective when used for titles and subtitles.

Tips to help you choose effective fonts:

- Serif fonts (a font with “hooks and tails” on the ends of letters), such as Times New Roman, helps words look distinct. Serif fonts are easy to read and are ideal for text.
- Sans-serif fonts (letters with smooth ends), such as Arial used here, can be harder to read than serif fonts because letters do not look as distinct. Sans serif fonts work best for short blocks of text, or for titles and subtitles.
- Choose separate fonts for titles and headings, but don’t use more than two fonts within a piece.
- Use online resources to find free fonts.

The butterfly sign (*Figure 4*) uses illustrations more than text to provide information. This makes the piece more attractive, as does the balanced, yet not perfectly symmetrical design.



Figure 4. Colorful illustrations and a balanced, asymmetrical design create an eye-catching piece.

The bat sign (*Figure 5*) uses bat silhouettes repetitively to help the reader’s eye across and down the page. The illustrations are balanced and to the sides. Levels of information are illustrated, with the title as the most emphasized text and subtitles the next largest text. Both are different colors than the detailed text written.

The text probably will only be read by people motivated by the subject, but most people will scan the illustrations title, and subtitles. Finally, readers are directed to take action by the “How Can You Help?” and the “To Learn More About Bats” sections.



Figure 5. The bat sign uses bat silhouettes repetitively to help the reader’s eye across and down the page.

Summary

Following basic principles of design including proportion and proximity, creating emphasis, balance and alignment, repetition, white space, and typography can make your business communication and educational materials more attractive, thereby creating interest and grabbing attention. Creating interest helps readers sustain attention and retain information. Whether you create your own materials or hire a graphic designer, understanding the elements of good design will help you be confident that you’re materials will have a positive impact on readers.

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