Five Design Principles for Writers and Editors

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More than ornate frill, the design of a page can make your words sing or disappear. Readability is at stake here. Readability is the accessibility of the text. How easily can a passage be read or understood? If something is well written, why does it need design help?

As a design practitioner and writer for more than 20 years and a medical writer/editor for more than 10, I would argue that it is not that our writing requires graphic design help, it is that the action of placing words on a page, aka writing, is already designing the page. Would then a random pouring out of words from a bucket onto paper be graphic design? Yes. That bucketload of words would have landed in a design, but no thanks to any conscious attention by a designer. The resulting design may be pleasing to some viewers and unpleasant to others, meaningful to some but meaningless to others.

Graphic design is what we do to words so that they can be read on a page, the means by which words, images, shapes, and symbols convey meaning. By creating numbered lists in our instruction sheets, we are creating hierarchies of action. By grouping like things together in our agendas, we create nuggets of content. We indent paragraphs, capitalize words, place commas, underline phrases, give titles special treatment, and italicize quotations—all elements of graphic design.

How words are arranged on the page determines the legibility and readability of the text. The placement and visual attributes (typeface, color, size) of these words also determines whether a reader will be attracted to the page at all. The "page" could be analogue or digital: housed in a Microsoft Word document, Excel spreadsheet, tablet screen, email, e-book, or LinkedIn post.

In the Middle Ages, monks used gold leaf, color, patterns, and detailed images to create pages of beauty in illuminated manuscripts[1] that would attract their readers, mainly at first other monks who were studying the sacred texts (Figure 1). The images served another purpose: listeners who could not read would have something to look at as monks read the text to them. Since these stories contained the essence of a culture/religion and descriptions of how to live a good life, it was important that these stories be remembered, repeated, and widely known. The images helped them remember the plot, characters, and messages of the narratives and lessons.

Figure 1. Inner board page from the *Gondarine Sensul*, an accordion book created from a single folded strip of parchment attached to heavy leather "boards" at each end. This pocketsize illuminated manuscript book was made in the Gondarine region of Ethiopia in the 17th century. The original is now part of the Walters Museum of Art in Baltimore.[1] *(Licensed by CC-BY-SA 3.0 US). http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/*

This article on C-WRAP (contrast, white space, repetition, alignment, and proximity) provides an introduction to 5 design elements that can inform your writing and editing. You might then more readily embrace, if you do not already, design challenges (opportunities) in your everyday work in the pursuit of communicating meaning through the written word, whether in an email, a chat, or a journal article.

In my 6 years as a managing medical editor at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, I have had those challenges, and as a freelance writer and graphic designer today, I still have them. I may need to create a book cover that will attract readers, craft an annual report that will get a deep read instead of a quick scan, formulate an agenda that people will actually read before a meeting, or write and design an

email that will get a prompt response. To heighten the chance that your words will be given the attention they deserve, these basic 5 elements of graphic design rubrics can be helpful in creating business letters, memos, agendas, blogs, progress reports, evaluations, Web pages, résumés, informational graphics, research posters, patient brochures, slide decks, and long documents.

Like the fundamentals of music, the C-WRAP principles are what one learns at the beginning of design practice and then can spend a lifetime working with—studying with great mentors and experimenting along the way. The basic design principles are the same for novice and expert designers, and writers can use them. Four of these (contrast, repetition, alignment, proximity) are described with great examples in Robin William's *The Non-Designer's Design Book*,[2] a much-loved graphic design book now in its third edition. A fifth element, white space, is one that I usually add when I teach my AMWA workshop, The Good Page: Design and Typography Basics for Writers, because an awareness of white space is an underlying fundamental for understanding and using the other 4 principles.

CONTRAST

Contrast is about comparison, one element noticeably different from another, and it is one of the best ways to attract readers to your page and create a visual hierarchy of the various text elements. There are many ways to create contrast. You can use large type and small type, a bright color and a neutral color, large blocks of text and small blocks of text, large photo and small photo, densely packed lines and widely spaced lines, a decorative typeface and a standard typeface, all caps and sentence case. You also have type, color, size, shapes, lines, images, and white space to work with, plus the meaning of the words. The key to effective contrast is to make the elements VERY different (Figure 2). If you want contrast on your page, make elements very different, not just a little different. **Make one element bigger, brighter, darker, or bolder than another.** Subtle differences do not often work, eg, 12-point text combined with 10-point text.

Figure 2. Two business cards. One uses contrast to focus attention, whereas the other does not.

WHITE SPACE

Like water for fish, white space in design is that element of the layout that we generally don't notice. That part of the page not marked by text, images, lines, or shapes, it is also called "negative space" and refers to that part of a page left blank, empty.

Writing is a visual thing. We see words. But we also see the spaces between the words, and it is in the placing of letterforms and white space that we achieve readability and then meaning in the mind of the reader. **Negative spaces on pages function much like the rests in musical notation, which are as important as the notes themselves.** The white space between individual words (word space) allows us to read the sentence and not have to decipher this: thewhitespacebetweenindividualwordsallowsustoread

White space can be literally white, or as early rough drafts of the book cover shown below, not white, but light gray (Figure 3). The first row shows the text needed on the cover. The second row emphasizes the shapes of negative space. Each of the 3 book cover versions could be said to contain just one "piece" of negative space, not counting the confined spaces within the letters O, R, A, and P. Of the 3 different shapes of

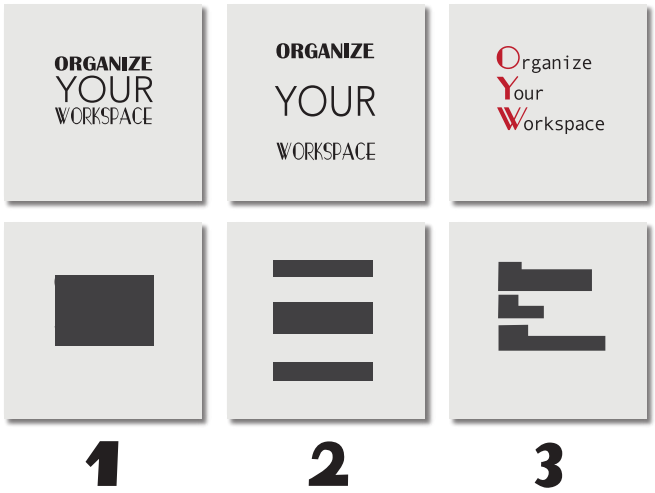

Figure 3. Three versions of a book cover.[3] Same text, same size cover, but different shapes for the negative space. Seeing the negative (gray) space as foreground and the black space as background is helpful. The shape of the negative space in example 1 draws the reader's eye to the title, while the shape of the negative space in example 3 is more dynamic.

negative space, the first draws attention to the center and appears more "organized" than the second. The second example could be distracting as the 2 words in black could appear to be moving away from the center, and if those 2 words were placed closer to the top and bottom edges of the page, it could look as if they are out of control and about to fall off the page. Since the book is about organization and order, this may not be

what you want in the mind of your potential reader. The third example of negative space has the less predictable and possibly more interesting and dynamic shape. However, there is something slightly off-balance about the whole design so it might require more work to both keep the interesting negative shape and also achieve a balanced look to the page.

REPETITION

Our eyes like patterns and rhythms, which create unity and add visual appeal. Repeated visual elements—a line, a logo, a color, a typeface—all of these are pleasing to us on a page and provide consistency in multipage documents. Bold headings, numbered lists, and quotations in italics are repetitive visual elements used daily by many writers.

In the list of design principles (Figure 4), I used the same amount of white space between each category, the same red color for letters and bullets, and the same indent spacing of all bullets, and also used left alignment of all elements except the title. However, what a relief that the line lengths are different! Otherwise, all this visual consistency could become

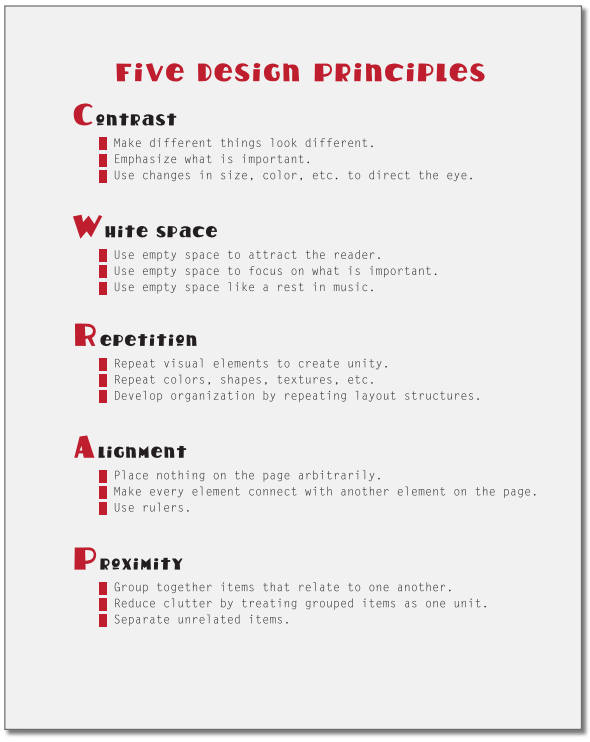

Figure 4. Handout showing repetition of color, bullets, indents, large initial cap, and one line description for each bullet.

annoying. These repeated elements order the parts and make it easy to see the parallel structure and main ideas. Understanding this design principle can be especially useful at a time when we are all streamlining our texts for blogs, emails, tweets, and web pages. Repetition of design elements can help eliminate unnecessary words by relying upon structure to convey some of the meaning.

Use repetition in a layout to draw readers to your text, speed comprehension, and provide unity for your entire document or project. For example, use the same color scheme and typeface for your business card, stationery letterhead, Web page, and annual report, which will go a long way toward establishing an integrated and positive business identity.

ALIGNMENT

Alignment is about providing a sense of order to your page when you want that, as opposed to the design-equivalent of the messy-desk effect, ie, old coffee cups, newspapers, open books, sticky notes, and pens scattered around. Giving each item a visual relationship with something else (aligning every element to at least one other element) will help provide strength, visual pleasure, and logic to your page. Aligned items are attractive and help the reader to navigate though the text. Align what you can and with intention.

This strategy can be effective even for an outline contained in an email message (Figure 5). You can greatly increase the readability just by using the bullet/number icons on the formatting option toolbar. Usually these icons can be found on a toolbar at the bottom of your email "compose" message screen. This will align all the text, not just the first bullet or number item, and you will have something much easier on the eye and hence more likely to be read.

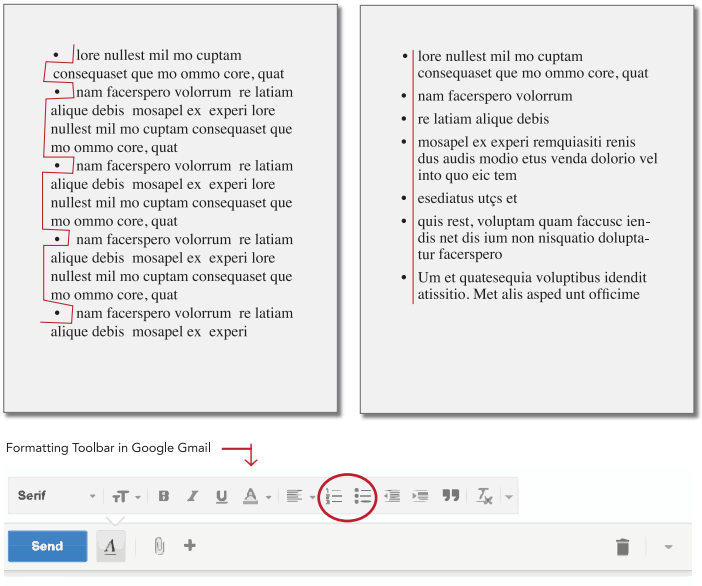

Figure 5. Numbered or bulleted lists are easier to read when text is aligned. Using the text format bar in the email–compose screens to align your bullet or number lists will increase the likelihood that readers will actually read your list.

PROXIMITY

Items relating to each other should be placed physically near one another and apart from unrelated items. Reduce clutter by treating grouped items as one unit. In the 2 business cards (Figure 6), the one on the left looks cluttered, and items are placed in no particular order. By grouping together the name of the restaurant and the type of food and separating that group from the location information, the card becomes easier to read and more appealing to the eye. Editing the text also helps.

When making your design decisions, whether you make these while you are writing the text or when the text is completed, consider starting with the proximity idea. Once you know what information groups you have, it can be easier to make decisions about contrast, repetition, etc.

Figure 6. The business card on the left includes perhaps too much information and no focus for the eye. The card on the right has focus, fewer details, and hierarchy of information. To include more details, use the back.

CONCLUSION

The guides for creating beautiful pages and beautiful lettering have been in the world for centuries. Like all arts, graphic design and typography deserve time devoted to study and practice, but, as with spices in cooking, knowing how to use just one or two good spices can change the whole dish. Notice the exploding world of graphic design savvy all around you. Desktop publishing, color printers for home and office, and the ability to upload pages to the Internet have encouraged much experimentation. Some of this is blatantly awful, but there is much that is truly beautiful. You can borrow some of these ideas, as great designers have always done, to design elegant layouts—whether Web pages, business cards, articles, or article proposals—in the service of meaning.

Barbara Kristaponis is a freelance graphic designer and writer working in New York City. A member of AMWA since 2002, she worked previously as a senior medical editor at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and as a senior writer/editor at the New York Hall of Science.

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Colophon

Typefaces used in examples: Abadi, Avenir, Britannic Bold, Hot Coffee, Letter Gothic, Fashion Victim, Medieval Scribish, Neuva, and Skia.