



## [Six Minutes Speaking and Presentation Skills](#)

Your guide to be a confident and effective speaker

Article Category: [Visual Aids](#)

# How to Create Pro Slides in Less Time: Don't Worry, Be CRAPpy

by [Chiara Ojeda](#)

Presenters, teachers, and students all **resist design-centered slide design** on the basis of **a perceived lack of time**. Since I know that the visually-driven, Zen approach works, I am not deterred by this resistance; instead, I use one simple phrase to help cultivate strong design from presenters whose time is limited.

If you want to create **beautiful, impactful, and audience-centered slides** but don't have 20 hours or more to devote to designing a slide deck, just remember the acronym **C-R-A-P \***, and create slides that embody strong **Contrast, Repetition, Alignment, and Proximity**.

### Slide Design Series

- Articles
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# **Contrast**

Make elements different to increase understanding.

# **Repetition**

Repeat visual elements to create strong unity.

# **Alignment**

Place elements deliberately and rationally to improve clarity.

# **Proximity**

Place related items together to convey relationships.

## Contrast

Using contrast is the simplest design “tweak” you can make to each slide of a deck.



**Most of us fill our slides** with as much information (text and visuals) as possible; unfortunately, this makes it more difficult for our viewers to understand our message. **Difference is what helps viewers process information quickly.** ([Nancy Duarte emphasizes](#) that a slide is like a billboard—content should be understandable within 3 seconds). Making the most important element on a slide a different typeface, color, size, or shade will **help your viewers understand** the most important point on a slide quickly.

# How to: Contrast

Show difference through typeface, size, color, or shade.

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Design, stripped to its essence, can be defined as the **human nature to shape and make our environment** in ways without precedent in nature...

--John Heskett

Before I understood contrast, I focused more on **filling up slides like a container**, as illustrated by **the worst slide I've ever made** (below, on the left). One way I corrected this problem was by showing importance and emphasis through difference, or contrast. In revising the earlier slide (below, on the right), I **isolated the core message**, chose an image that had enough space for a bit of "signal" or text, and **eliminated the rest of the information** as "noise."

## Contrast: Before and After

De-clutter your slides and focus on signal, not noise.

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Weak contrast, lots of “noise”



Strong contrast, less “noise”

## Repetition

Repetition is a design principle grounded in a simple idea—we recognize visual and cognitive structure best when **similar elements are used consistently**.



In design, this consistency is called unity in idea, look, and layout. Fortunately, **unity is built into your slide software** with the slide template feature. Unfortunately, the pre-made templates provided are used by everyone.



Just like a really excellent metaphor becomes cliché over time and use, a pre-built template loses all visual impact and originality. Instead, you should **create original templates** which repeat typefaces/fonts, well-organized layouts, and consistent core colors. Resist the urge to use colors randomly; **match core colors**—about three—to **theme, industry, and mood**.





For instance, Empowered Presentations, a Hawaii-based design firm, use one consistent typeface, consistent colors, images with a consistent filter, and a repeated image/content layout to create unity in the deck "[What is PechaKucha?](#)".



# How to: **Unity**

Unify through consistent visual elements, grids, and layout.

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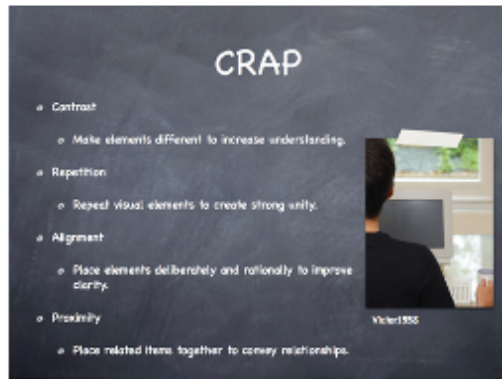


Empowered Presentations, “What is PechaKucha?”

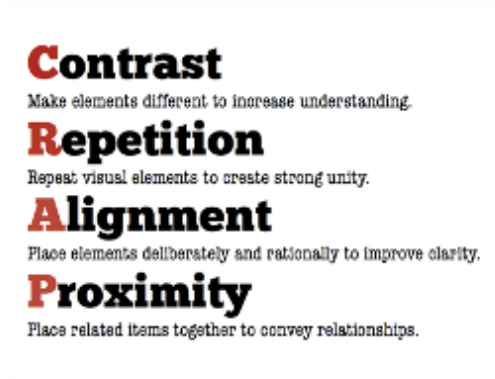
Notice the difference between the CRAP acronym slides below. The forgettable example on the left is similar to thousands of presentations that use Keynote’s “chalkboard” template. **How do you stand out** in a sea of chalkboard templates? Create your own original design, as shown on the right.

# Unity: Before and After

Move from the pre-built template towards original design.



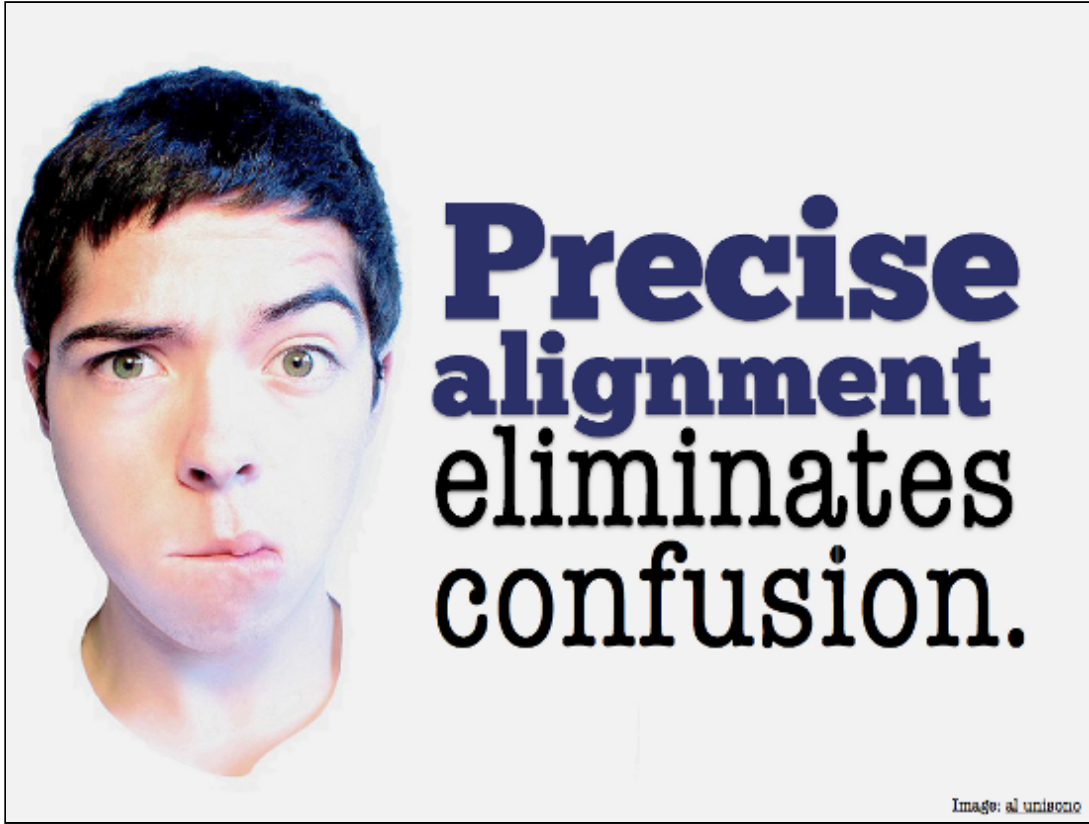
Chalkboard Template



Original Design

## Alignment

You might think only designers are hypersensitive to precise placement and arrangement of information on a visual. But, every member of your audience makes decisions regarding the importance of information and the relationship between elements on a slide based on their alignment or arrangement. Precise alignment **eliminates confusion and assists your audience** in processing information.

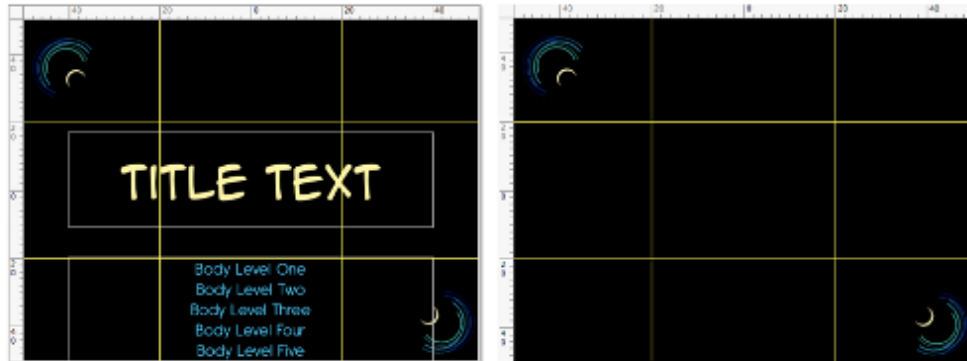


Many novice presenters place multiple elements on a slide haphazardly. Slide software comes equipped with tools (gridlines, rulers, guides) that can help you **place elements deliberately**.

# How to: Alignment

Use grids and rulers to place elements precisely.

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In the “2<sup>nd</sup> worst slide I’ve ever created” (below, on the left), I focused more on filling up all available space along an unclear path and less on aligning elements so that they were:

1. clearly organized, and
2. placed precisely.

In the revised slide (below, on the right), I’ve used guides, rules, and invisible gridlines to help the audience process information more easily.

# Alignment: Before and After

Align elements along clear lines; use grids and rulers.



Haphazard alignment = confusion



Clear horizontal alignment = clarity

## Proximity

Proximity is often overlooked, yet it has subtle impact. Proximity has to do with the spatial relationship between two or more elements, objects, or ideas.



- Objects that are **close together** are generally perceived as being **related** or, depending on body language, on having a **positive relationship** to one another.
- Objects that are **further apart** are generally perceived as being **unrelated** or as having a **negative relationship** to one another.

Your audience members perceive spatial and relational proximity with or without your deliberate design decisions. Your speech may say “unity,” but your visual design may say “chaos”.

# How to: Proximity

Place items further or closer depending on their relationship.

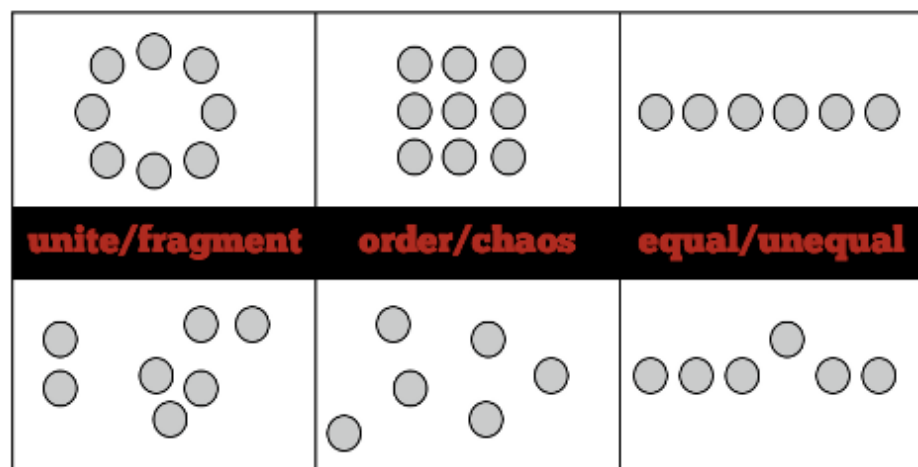


Image created from [slide:ology](#) by Nancy Duarte

To ensure your elements are reinforcing your verbal message, study up on spatial and relational proximity, and **follow the golden rule—alike, together; different, apart.**

In developing this article, I created different versions of the “rising action” alignment slide. The original version (on the left) featured a rising structure, but unclear proximity (which made processing information quickly more difficult). After some sage advice, I revised the slide (on the right) using a cleaner horizontal line and placed the images and their corresponding text closer together, improving processing, use of space, and readability.



# Proximity: Before and After

Clear proximity can improve how your audience processes information.



## In Summary...

Great design is not just the realm of professional designers. With limited time, you, too, can apply a bit of design problem-solving to your slides by using contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity. These four tools can greatly impact not only your design but your audience as well. Remember that great visuals don't have to take all of your time — don't worry, be CRAPpy!

## References and Resources

Check out these great resources, which were used when writing this article:

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  - [Clear and to the Point](#)

- [The Non-Designer's Design Book](#) (1994), by Robin Williams
- [Universal Principles of Design](#) (2003), by William Lidwell, Kritina Holden, and Jill Butler  
[Read the [Six Minutes book review](#).]
- [Presentation Zen](#) (2008), by Garr Reynolds  
[Read the [Six Minutes book review](#).]
- [slide:ology](#) (2008), by Nancy Duarte  
[Read the [Six Minutes book review](#).]

\* The C-R-A-P acronym is widely used across the field of design to group the principles of contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity. Both Williams and Reynolds feature this grouping in their respective books mentioned above.

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**Chiara Ojeda** is an educator, blogger, and speaker residing in Orlando, Florida. When she is not working on her latest deck of bullet-free slides, writing for her blog, [Tweak Your Slides](#), teaching business students at Full Sail University, or advising student organizations, she enjoys blogging, cooking, watching and reading science fiction, listening to live music, and participating in local art, literature, and music functions.

Twitter: [@The\\_Bombadier](#)

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