

CHAPTER 6

Arranging Elements

Placement of Elements Creates Meaning

Quite possibly, how slides are arranged has the most impact on whether a slide's message is visually clear. Arrangement tells a story. Based on the arrangement decisions a designer makes, a slide can prompt feelings of tension, confusion, and agitation; conversely, it can maximize clarity by employing the following:

Contrast

The audience can identify the main point quickly.

Flow

The audience knows the order in which to process the information.

Hierarchy

The audience sees the relationship between elements.

Unity

The audience senses that the information belongs together.

Proximity

The audience perceives meaning from the location of elements.

Whitespace

The audience has visual breathing room.

These are the tools of the slide design trade. It's tough to assemble a great slide without paying close attention to each of these issues. Luckily, these are intuitive concepts. That may already be familiar to you.

Slides begin and end with ideas. It's your job to take these invisible, abstract ideas and determine how they can be best represented in a tangible, visual form. It's the presenter's responsibility to ensure that the audience is guided through this invisible world by making ideas easy to decode.

Many presenters don't understand arrangement as a principle. They will put everything on one slide and assign them equal value. It is critical to determine which visual elements should have prominence so they attract attention first.

Create dominance with some elements and practice restraint with others. Force yourself to make a decision about the priority of the information.

It's laziness on the presenter's part to put everything on one slide.



Overcrowding the slide doesn't add to the clarity of the message.

Contrast: Identifying the Main Point Quickly

Audiences need contrast. Viewers immediately perceive the difference between the attributes of two or more things, and this focuses their attention. There are many ways to create contrast on a slide; here are some examples:



Establishing a relationship between slide elements is an important first step. The contrast in the size of the following text, for example, draws the eye to the larger text as if it's a title or context for the text block. Regardless of where the text is placed, the larger text is perceived as the most important.



Creating contrast in a body of text can be done with size, but also through the use of color. Some versions of the Bible highlight the words of Jesus in red. Below, a quote from Edward Tufte, author of *Visual Explanations*, has a key phrase highlighted in red.

Tufte's design strategy of the smallest effective difference uses contrast wisely yet subtly and only when necessary. He says: ...the idea is to use just notable differences, visual elements that make a clear difference but no more—contrasts that are definitive, effective and minimal.

A common mistake presenters make is assigning contrast unintentionally. Virtually any stylistic difference between two elements suggests something to the viewer on either a conscious or subconscious level. Unintentional contrast can confuse the intended message at best, and contradict it at worst. Remember, all stylistic choices have the potential to suggest importance, urgency, and value. As a result, you should base all such choices on a well-defined purpose.

“Without contrast you’re dead.”

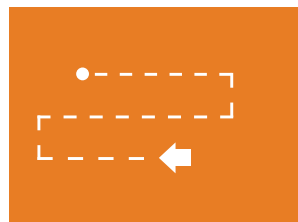
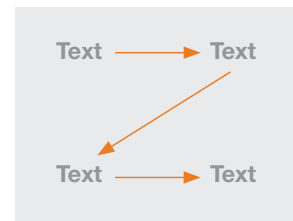
Paul Rand
Designer

Flow: Ordering How the Information Is Processed

A typical Western reading pattern runs from left to right and top to bottom. Readers are conditioned to start at the top left and scan back and forth across content in a Z-shaped path until they've processed the information.

Jerry Weissman, author of *Presenting to Win*, calls this the conditioned carriage return, as it mimics the movement of the carriage on an old fashioned typewriter.

Readers move their eyes back and forth across a slide until they feel they have identified everything on the slide. They then will assign meaning to the information. If, to make your point, your graphic needs to flow in a direction that's counter-intuitive to natural eye movement, build it over time, with discrete elements appearing in the order you want your audience to process it. Alternately, use a symbol or arrow that clearly marks a starting point. The audience should be able to understand the intended order in which to process the information, without ever feeling lost or overwhelmed.



Using an arrow to mark the starting point draws attention to it where to begin.

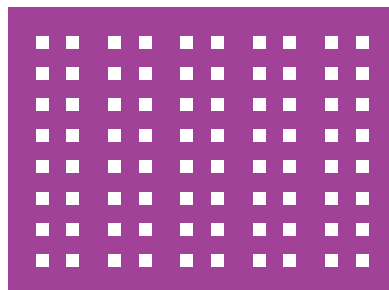
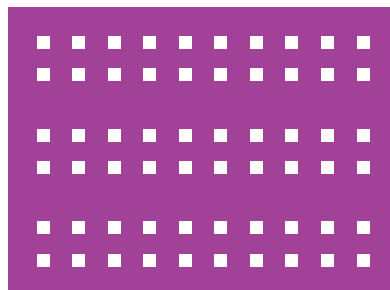


Size and perspective indicate the bottom left as the starting point here.

You should organize slides to guide the audience's eyes through the content in an obvious way. This principle applies not only to text, but to diagrams and images as well.



When using images of people, make sure that they're looking at the content instead of looking away, or fleeing it.



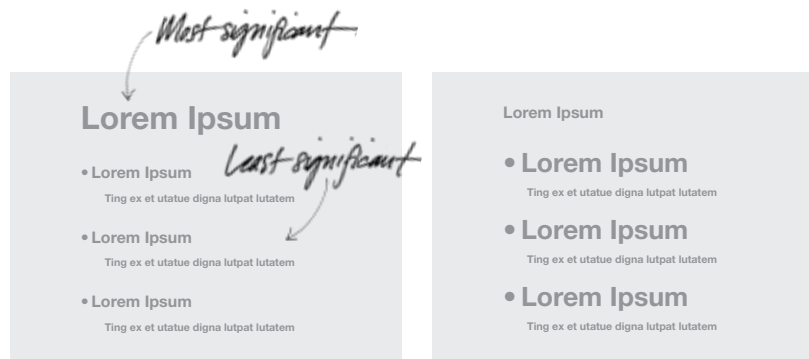
At a glance, the audience should be able to determine whether to read data charts horizontally or vertically.

TIP

- Avoid more than three layers of information on a single plane.
- Create points of interest (one main point and up to two sub-points).
- Develop flow within the slide intentionally.
- Choose images and diagrams with clear directional flow.
- Select images that flow toward the focal point on the slide or toward the next slide.

Hierarchy: Seeing Relationships Between Elements

An audience processes hierarchy almost as quickly as contrast. Visual hierarchy, simply put, defines the structure formed when relationships are applied to a set of elements. A simple example of this is the relationship of a title to its body text. Within the hierarchy, the title is the parent and the text is the child. Just like a family lineage, each element in a hierarchy is the child of the element above it, or the parent of the element below it.



Size and location are used together to indicate a decreasing significance from the top left to the bottom right.

Making the bullet points heavier than the title disrupts the logical flow. The audience would have a hard time making sense of it.

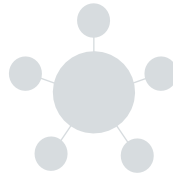
Not coincidentally then, the visual structure precisely mirrors the structure of the information it represents. For example, the following diagrams radiate from a core. The core is what binds the elements together and establishes the parent-child relationship. Modifying the size and proximity of the objects changes the meaning behind the relationships and tells a story about their relative importance.

Changing the Size and Proximity of Objects Modifies Their Visual Story



Elements Are Equal

Story: We all need to rally together as a team around this goal for which you're all equally suited.



Parent Dominates

Story: We all need to rally together as a team around this goal which is more important than activities at the team or individual level.



Child Dominates

Story: We all need to rally together as a team around this goal and some of the teams will have bigger challenges than others.

When your presentation is over, you want the audience to walk away understanding their mission. If you don't intentionally provide that message, the audience will create meaning based on their own interpretation of the information. Make sure that you've presented the graphical hierarchy of your message accurately.

Unity: Sensing the Structure of Information

You can achieve unity through structure (grid), look (graphical style), and theme (big idea). Here, you'll focus on the grid.

Since every brand and presenter is unique, the grid used should reflect you or your company.

A grid system provides a flexible way to organize content.

To guide the organization of content, create rectangular regions for placement of elements. Each region is a container for an element, such as a block of text or an image.



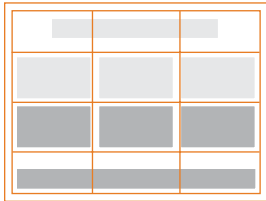
Placing objects within a grid anchors the individual elements so they don't bounce around or appear like they were positioned haphazardly or randomly. This stability helps the audience identify patterns in the placement of content. Having text and graphics show up in the same place, anchored to the same points, helps an audience anticipate where content will appear. Additionally, grids ensure that across multiple slides of a similar layout, elements don't appear to "jump." For instance, if three consecutive slides feature graphs, the location of their axes should remain constant even though the data changes.

Grids also help streamline design decisions for corporations where thousands of employees develop slides independently. Organizations benefit from the ability to re-use slides when they look similar and follow a basic grid system.



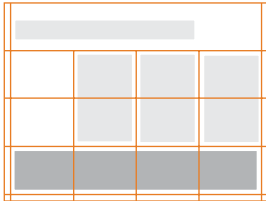
Once you've sketched out a grid that you like, pencil in where you might place images, text, and objects. Be sure to leave plenty of the tiles open to preserve clear space. Now, draw the grid lines in your presentation application and place it on the master slide, being sure to remove the grid when you've completed the design process. To speed development of your presentation in the future, save the grid as a tool by pasting it into a new file or saving it on a slide at the very back of your deck.

The slides below were created in four different grid patterns. The orange grids with gray boxes serve as keys for the slides beneath them. You can see how the elements fit into the grid.



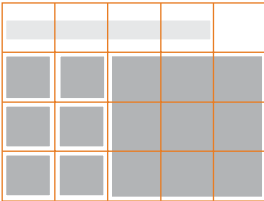
Three Column





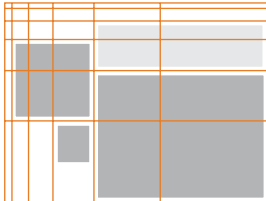
Four Column



Five Column



Fibonacci



■ Graphic

■ Text

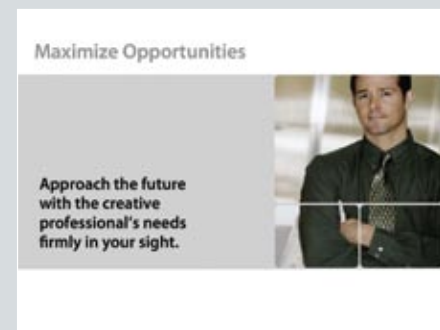
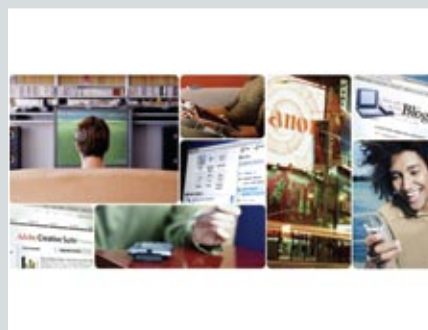
These slides look uniform because the grid gives them structure.



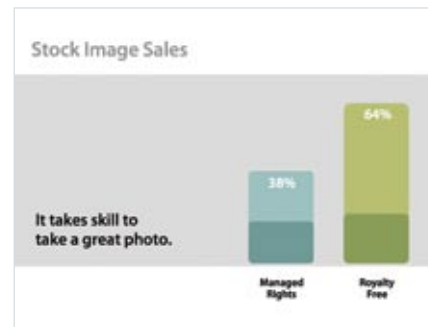
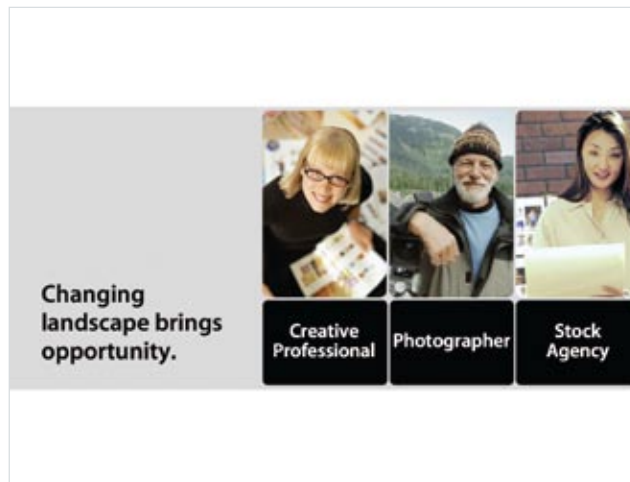
Case Study: Adobe Controlling Elements with a Grid

Call it the price of success for Adobe Systems. Being the number one developer of software applications for graphic designers means that every piece of collateral, every package design, every advertisement will be scrutinized by the experts, who are also the customers.

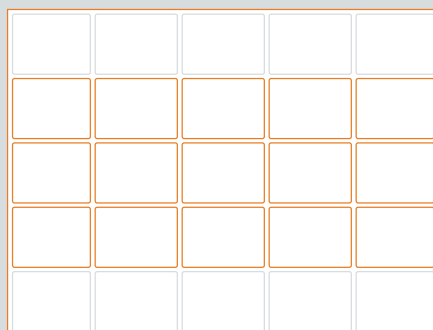
The same goes for presentations, only this time it is personal: imagine not connecting with an audience because they're distracted by the slide layouts. At best, the audience will be mildly critical; at worst, the presenter stands to lose some credibility. The solution? Combine the best in presentation design with the fundamentals of graphic design. The results showcase Adobe's commitment to the industry they transformed.



Derived from their product packaging, the fresh color palette reflects Adobe's brand. The dynamic grid provides a way to introduce photography through a series of builds.



Breaking the grid can be an effective way to focus attention on specific elements. But make sure that this is the exception and not the rule: overuse will diminish its impact.



Adobe's presentations rely on an underlying 5x5 grid to determine the placement of text, imagery, and objects. Though the shapes and sizes of elements vary, the regularity of layouts produces a sense of structure and solidity. Additionally, leaving the top and bottom channels empty creates a more cinematic feeling while providing space for titles and similar information.

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Proximity: Perceiving Meaning from Location

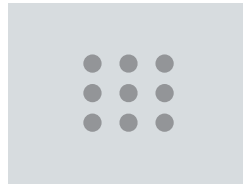
When more than a single element or person appears in a scene, their placement relative to each other tells a secondary story to the image itself. Haphazardly placed elements can leave an impression different than the one intended.

Space Proximity

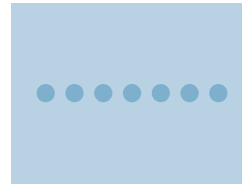
You should place elements associated with each other intentionally. Leave nothing to chance. How the objects are assembled communicates antagonism or protagonism, chaos or order, decline or growth, and so on. Ultimately, your goal is to preempt the audience from making unintended interpretations.



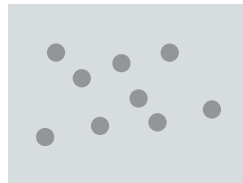
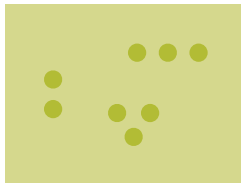
unite • fragment



order • chaos



equal • unequal

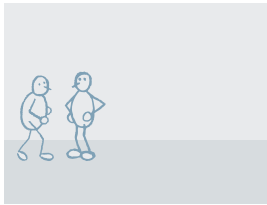


Other Relationships

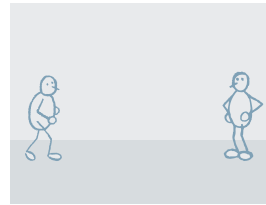
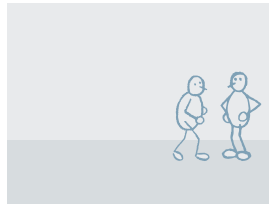
symmetric • asymmetric
balanced • imbalanced
consistent • inconsistent
clear • obscure
spacious • crowded
sequential • random
understated • exaggerated
attractive • repellent
deep • wide
static • active
distributed • consolidated
near • far

People Proximity

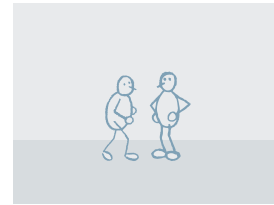
In the theatre, directors position actors on stage in support of the story. For instance, consider the different placement of people in the following frames. Each placement takes on meaning, even without context or knowledge of the narrative of which they might be a part. The following concepts were inspired by Robert Horn's seminal work, *Visual Language*.



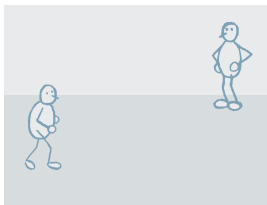
The subject at the left or right edge is often perceived as weak, relative to the subject closer to the center.



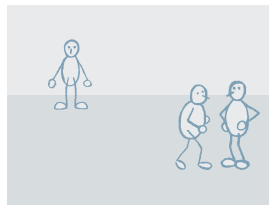
Subjects on opposite sides of the screen are distantly related or perhaps antagonists.



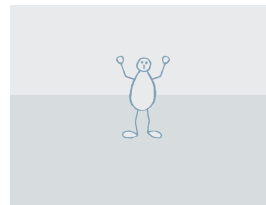
Subjects in the center are perceived as closely related.



A subject at the bottom is frequently perceived as submissive, weak, vulnerable. A subject at the top is often seen as dominant, powerful.



Isolated subjects convey more visual weight than grouped subjects.



A subject with a lot of space in the frame suggests freedom.



Clustered subjects that are out of balance in the scene emphasize action.

Whitespace: Getting Visual Breathing Room

The visible elements of a slide often receive the most focus. But you need to pay equal attention to how much space you leave open. This is often referred to as whitespace, negative space, or clear space.

Whitespace isn't necessarily white; it refers to the areas of the slide left unused. It could be the empty areas that separate elements from one another or the drama created when an element is set in vast amounts of space. The book so far has discussed the role of hierarchy, flow, and proximity, but until now, the role of whitespace has been merely implied.

Inexperienced presenters often think whitespace is expendable—especially when they need to incorporate unwieldy amounts of content that's “too important” to be distilled or simplified despite its cumbersome density. After all, whitespace by definition carries no information, so what's the harm in filling it up? The harm is that audiences find these slides difficult to comprehend. Whitespace is as much an element of a slide as titles, bullets, and diagrams. In large part, the use or misuse of whitespace determines a slide's effectiveness.

Generally, any slide that needs to sacrifice whitespace to make room for content is packed too tightly. When a slide is expected to present more information than it can comfortably hold, it is no longer the right tool for the job.

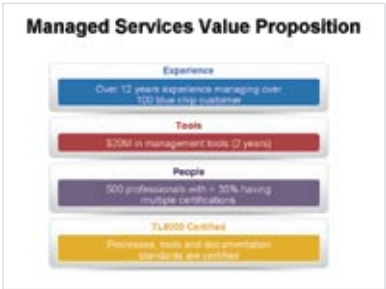
Ask yourself, “What can I take away that won't change the meaning?” or “Where can I split the content into more than one slide?” Keep in mind that a slide's value is determined not by the amount of information it contains, but by how clearly it communicates its message.

It's okay to have clear space—clutter is a failure of design.

Breaking the content into three slides is much more effective for audiences than being thrown into a one slide mess, and expecting them to interpret the data all at once. Spreading the information across three slides doesn't solve the density problem alone. Displaying the elements sequentially guides the audience through the information.



BEFORE: The slide contains dense information that requires effort to process. The lack of whitespace between various elements makes it hard to derive meaning from content. We divided the content on this slide into three slides shown below.



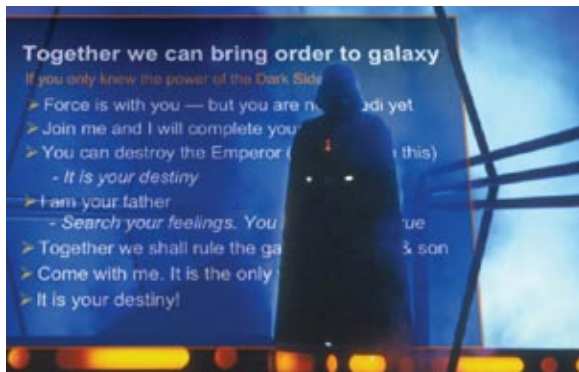
AFTER: By distributing the elements across multiple slides, each receives the attention it deserves—and the audience benefits from a better understanding of the concepts.

Case Study: Garr Reynolds

A Lesson on Space

By far one of the most significant influencers of great presentation design, Garr Reynolds is transforming presenters through his blog and book, both titled *Presentation Zen*. Reynolds' insights and clever wit systematically cover sound principles for content, design, and delivery.


He believes that “design isn't about decoration or about ornamentation. Design is about making communication as easy and clear for the viewer as possible.” Reynolds has his own signature style of large, striking images and enormous amounts of empty space that lead the eye.



Here Garr's blog spoofs the presentation styles of Darth Vader and Yoda.



Even though this is a quote from Reynolds' book, you can probably picture Yoda saying: "Empty space is not nothing; it is a powerful something. Learn to see it."



"A Zen garden is also a lesson in simplicity. Open space without ornamentation, a few rocks carefully selected and placed, raked gravel. Beautiful. Simple. The Zen garden is very different from gardens in the West that are absolutely filled with beauty, so much beauty, in fact, that we miss much of it. Presentations are a bit like this. Sometimes, we're presented with so much visual and auditory stimulation in such a short time that we end up understanding very little and remembering even less."

Garr Reynolds
Author, Presentation Zen

Finding Beauty in the Design Around You

Designers create meaning by carefully arranging elements. It's never a haphazard splatter of text and graphics; there is intent and that intent creates meaning. Whether that meaning informs or creates a feeling or structure, it all serves a purpose.

Take a moment and study your environment. Look at graphic design, architecture, and product design. Ask yourself why the designers made the decisions they did. Why did they use the typeface, colors, or particular placement of the elements? Then determine the contrast, flow, hierarchy, unity, proximity, and space.

These elements exist even in nature. Look for them.

Processing the beauty around you is important. When you watch a film, look through a magazine, hike across a spring meadow, attend a ballet, or visit a museum, study the beauty and grow in appreciation for things that are beautiful.

If you visually ingest beautiful design, you will be able to output beauty. But it takes study and contemplation of what makes those things beautiful.



Each art form has considerations for how to arrange elements to create meaning and beauty.

Japanese flower arrangement is designed to create harmony and balance in how the visual elements (flora in this case) are assembled.

At the onset, the designer plans out exactly the journey they want the eyes to travel across the arrangement. The designer controls the eye movement by stripping all but the essential blossoms out of the arrangement. Similarly, you should remove everything on a slide that doesn't bring emphasis to your point.