

## 5 Principles of Visual Design in UX

**Summary:** The principles of scale, visual hierarchy, balance, contrast, and Gestalt not only create beautiful designs, but also increase usability when applied correctly.

By [Kelley Gordon](#) on March 1, 2020

**Topics:** [Visual Design](#), [Design Patterns](#)

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When looking at a visual, we can usually immediately say whether it is appealing or amiss. (Because they often play out at the visceral level in Don Norman's [model of emotional design](#).) However, few can verbalize why a layout is visually attractive. Graphics that take advantage of the principles of good visual design can drive engagement and increase usability.

**Visual-design principles** inform us how [design elements](#) such as line, shape, color, grid, or space go together to create well-rounded and thoughtful visuals.

This article defines 5 visual-design principles that impact UX:

1. **Scale**
2. **Visual hierarchy**
3. **Balance**
4. **Contrast**
5. **Gestalt**

# 5 Visual-Design Principles in UX

Visual-design principles inform us how design elements go together to create well-rounded and thoughtful visuals. Graphics that take advantage of the principles of good visual design can drive engagement and increase usability.

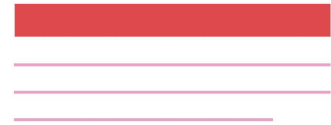
## SCALE

The principle of scale refers to using relative size to signal importance and rank in a composition.



## VISUAL HIERARCHY

The principle of visual hierarchy refers to guiding the eye on the page so that it attends to design elements in the order of their importance.



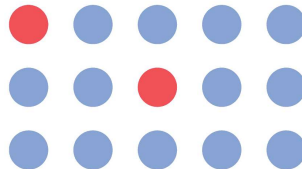
## BALANCE

Balance occurs when there is an equally distributed amount of visual signal on both sides of an imaginary axis.



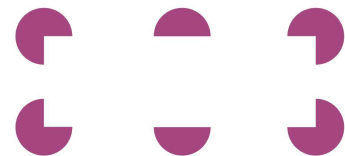
## CONTRAST

The principle of contrast refers to the juxtaposition of visually dissimilar elements in order to convey the fact that these elements are different.



## GESTALT PRINCIPLES

Gestalt principles capture our tendency to perceive the whole as opposed to the individual elements.



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*Following these 5 visual-design principles can drive engagement and increase usability.*

## 1. Scale

This principle is commonly used: almost every good visual design takes advantage of it.

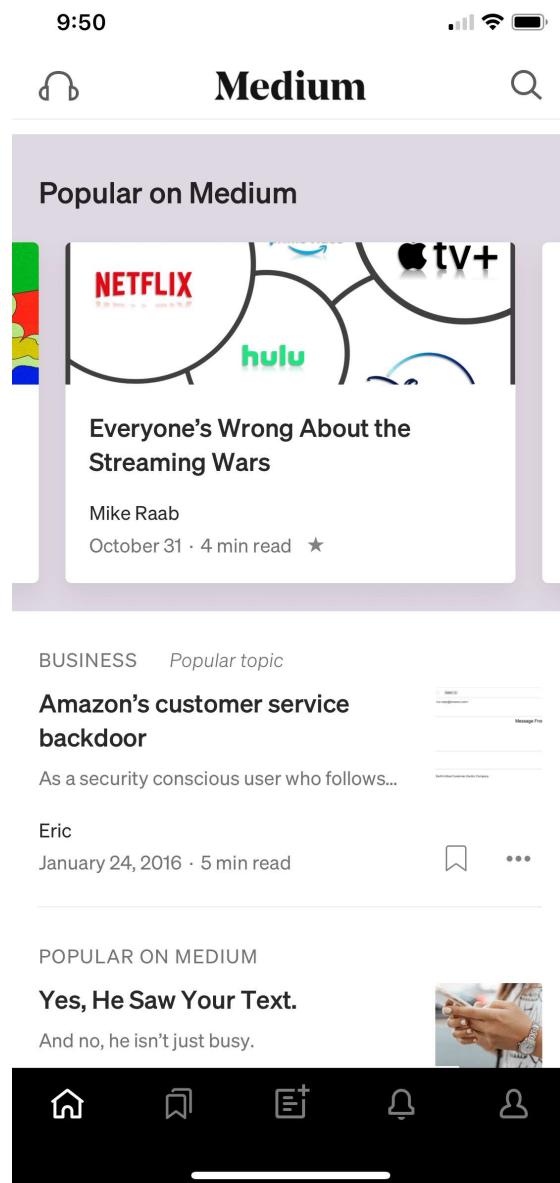
**Definition:** The principle of **scale** refers to using relative size to signal importance and rank in a composition.

In other words, when this principle is used properly, the most important elements in a design are bigger than the ones that are less important. The reason behind this principle is simple: when something is big, it's more likely to be noticed.

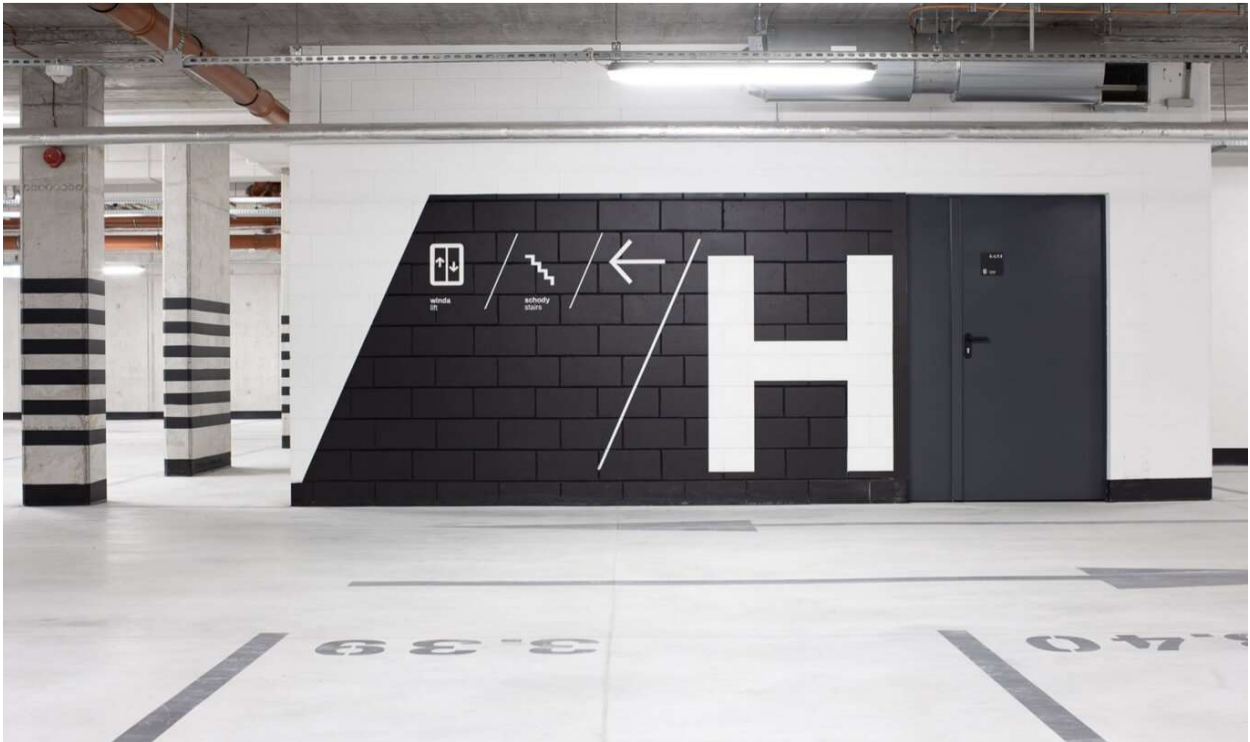
A visually pleasing design generally uses no more than 3 different sizes. Having a range of differently sized elements will not only create variety within your layout,

but it will also establish a visual hierarchy (see next principle) on the page. Be sure to emphasize the most important aspect of your design by making them biggest.

When the principle of scale is used properly and the right elements are emphasized, users will easily parse the visual and know how to use it.



*Medium for iPhone: Popular articles are visually larger than other articles. The scale directs users to potentially more-interesting article.*



*In this parking garage in Cracow, the most important piece of information (zone H — which is where you currently are in the parking garage), is the largest in size. (Image source: [www.behance.com](http://www.behance.com))*

## 2. Visual Hierarchy

A layout with a good visual hierarchy will be easily understood by your users.

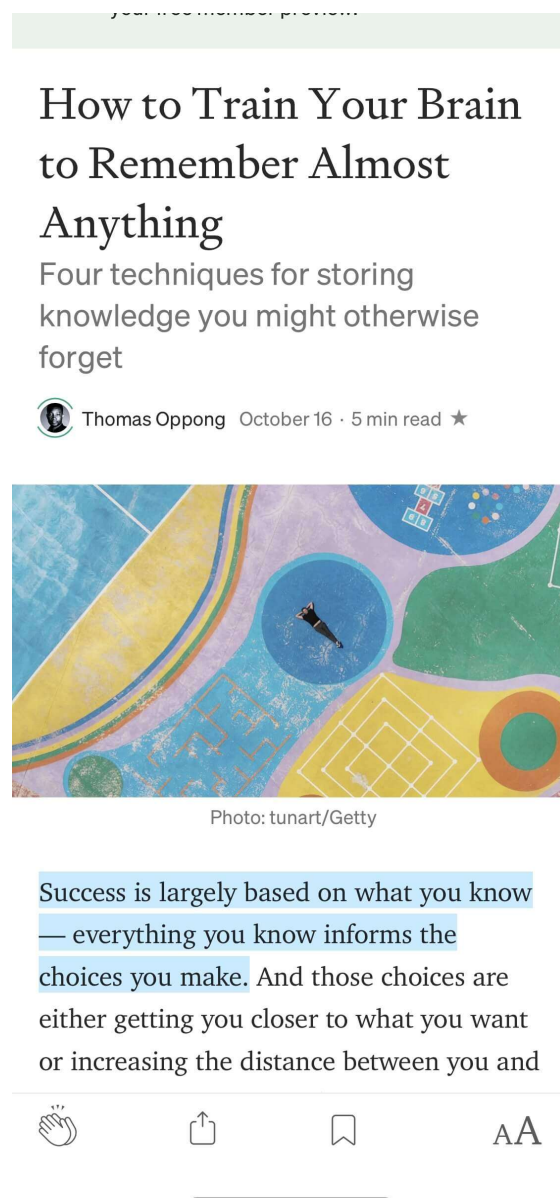
**Definition:** The principle of **visual hierarchy** refers to guiding the eye on the page so that it attends to different design elements in the order of their importance.

Visual hierarchy can be implemented through variations in scale, value, color, spacing, placement, and a variety of other signals.

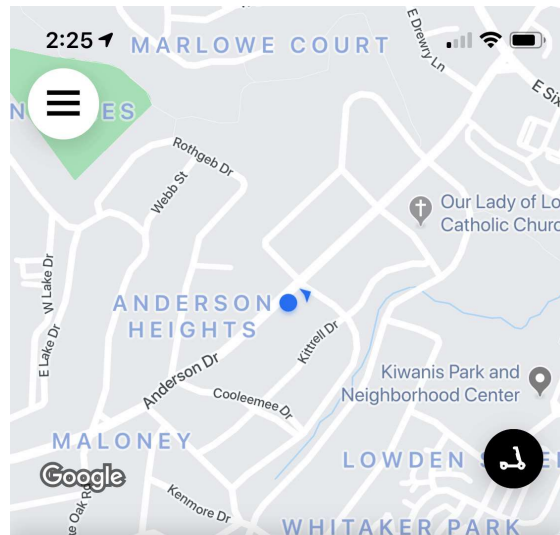
Visual hierarchy controls the delivery of the experience. If you have a hard time figuring out where to look on a page, it's more than likely that its layout is missing a clear visual hierarchy.

To create a clear visual hierarchy, use 2–3 typeface sizes to indicate to users what pieces of content are most important or at the highest level in the page's [mini information architecture](#). Or, consider using bright colors for important items and muted colors for less important ones.

Scale can also help define the visual hierarchy, so incorporate various scales for your different design elements. A general rule of thumb is to include small, medium, and large components in the design.




*Medium mobile app: There is a clear visual hierarchy of title, subtitle, and body text. Each component of the article is in a type size equal to its importance.*





Good afternoon, Kelley


Where to?


Now


 Home

 Raleigh-Durham International Air...  
2400 John Brantley Blvd, Morrisville

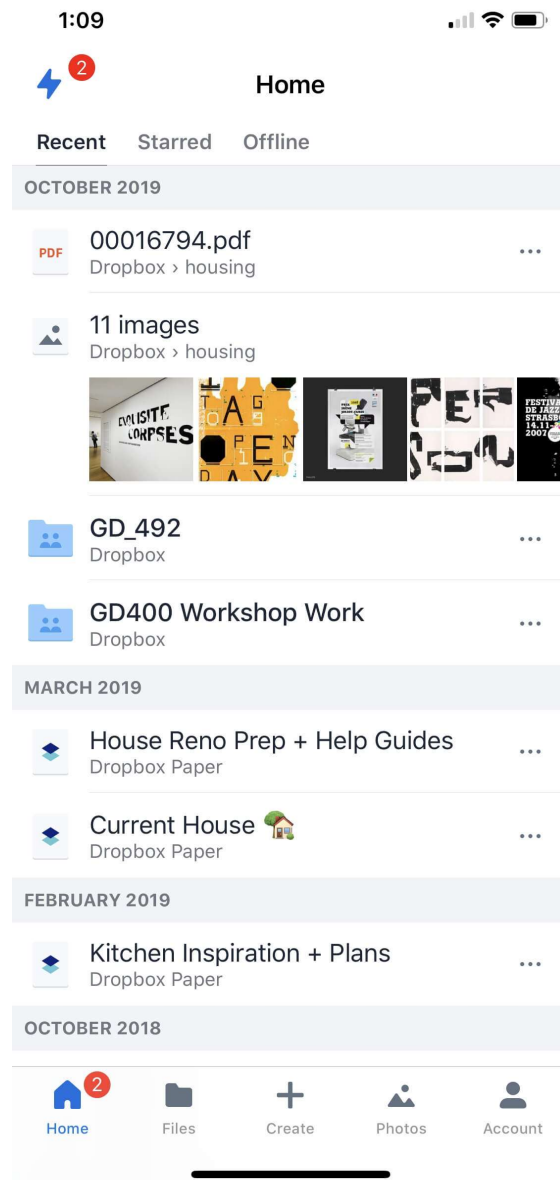
 Blue

Your next reward 

 Ride

 Order food

*Uber mobile app: The visual hierarchy is clear in Uber's mobile app. The screen is split in half between the map and input form (bottom half of screen), which enforces the thought that these components are equally important to the user. The eye is immediately drawn to the Where to? field because of its gray background, then to the recent locations below it, which are slightly smaller in font size.*



*Dropbox mobile app: The visual hierarchy is less clear in Dropbox's mobile app. Even though the explanatory text is lower in size than the file name, it's hard to distinguish among the different files. Thumbnails provide an additional layer to the hierarchy, but their presence depends on the available file types. Users ultimately have to do a lot of parsing and reading to find the folder or file they are looking for.*

### 3. Balance

Balance is like a seesaw: instead of weight, you are balancing design elements.

**Definition:** The principle of **balance** refers to a satisfying arrangement or proportion of design elements. Balance occurs when there is an equally

distributed (but not necessarily symmetrical) amount of visual signal on both sides of an imaginary axis going through the middle of the screen. This axis is often vertical but can also be horizontal.

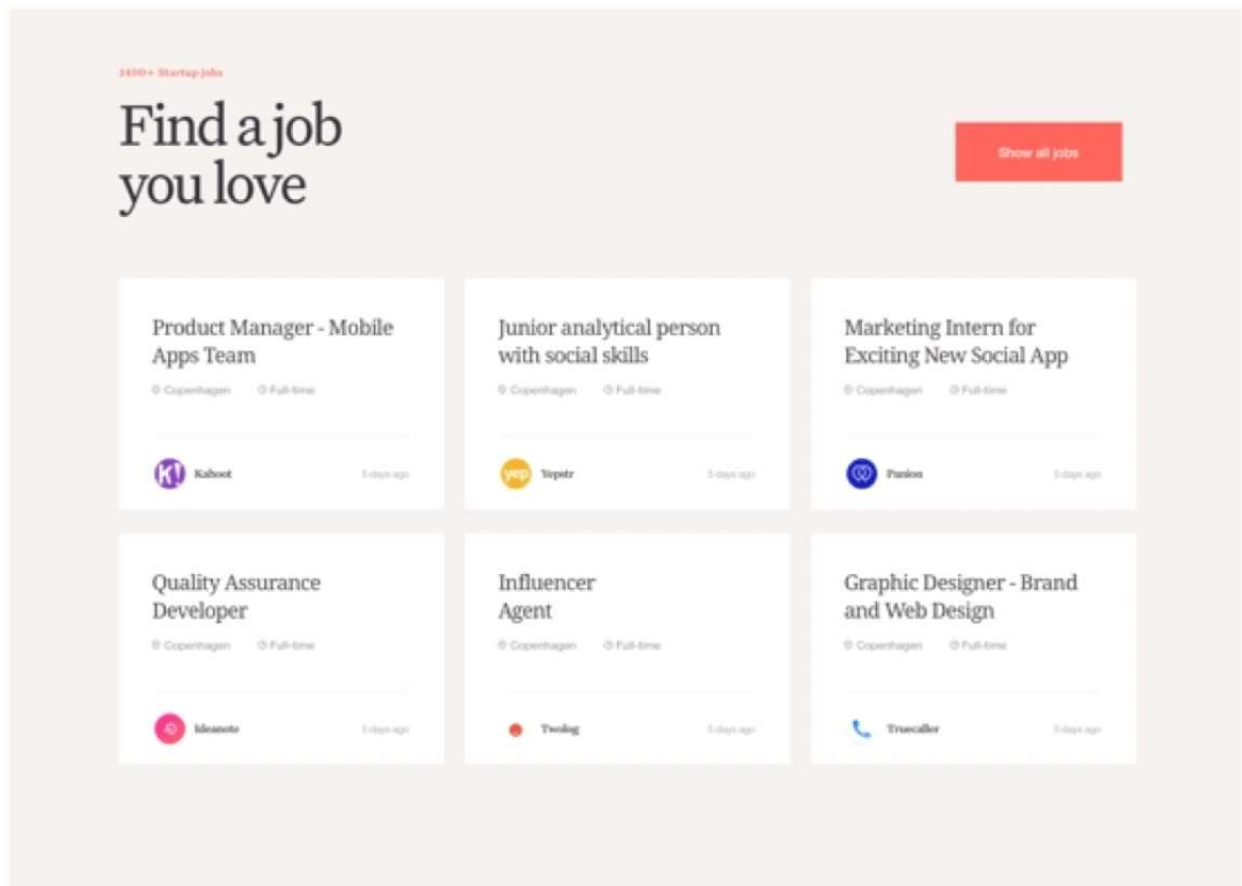
Just like when balancing weight, if you were to have one small design element and one large design element on the two sides of the axis, the design would feel a bit unbalanced. The area taken by the design element matters when creating balance, not just the number of elements.

The imaginary axis you establish on your visual will be the reference point for how to organize your layout and will help you understand the current state of balance on your visual. In a balanced design, no one area draws your eye so much that you can't see the other areas (even though some elements might carry more visual weight and be focal points). Balance can be:

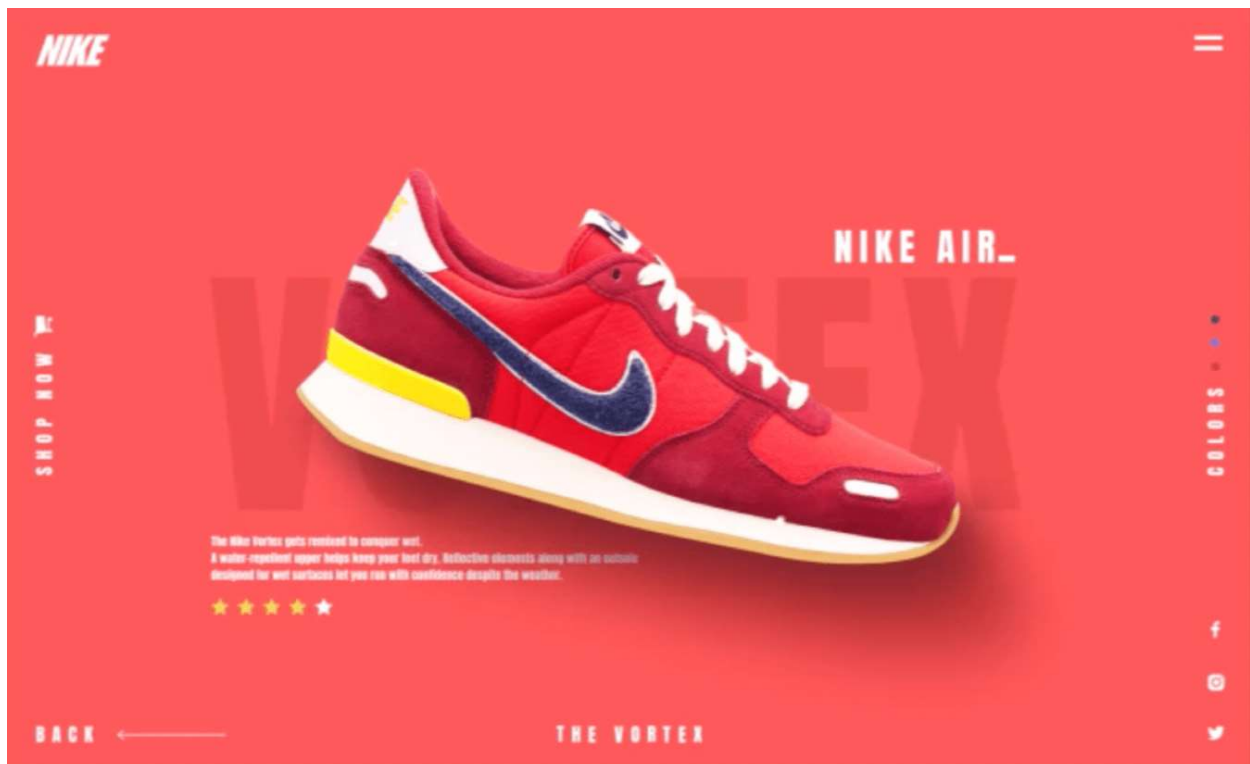
- Symmetrical: elements are symmetrically distributed relative to the central imaginary axis
- [Asymmetrical: elements are asymmetrically distributed relative to the central axis](#)
- Radial: elements radiate out from a central, common point in a circular direction.

The kind of balance you use in your visual depends on what you want to convey. Asymmetry is dynamic and engaging. It creates a sense of energy and movement. Symmetry is quiet and static. Radial balance will always lead the eye to the center of the composition.





*The Hub Style Exploration: The composition feels stable, which is especially appropriate when you're looking for a job you love. The balance here is symmetrical. If you were to draw an imaginary vertical axis down the center of the website, elements are distributed equally on both sides of the axis. (Image source: [dribbble.com](https://dribbble.com))*



*Nike: This page is asymmetrically balanced, giving a sense of energy and movement that is fitting to Nike's brand. If you were to draw a vertical axis down the center on this visual, the number of elements is about the same on both sides of the axis. However, the difference is that they are not identical and in the same exact locations. Even though there is technically a bit more text on the left side of the shoe, it is balanced out with the larger text on the right that takes up more space and visual weight, thus making them appear pretty similar.*



*Brathwait wrist watch: This classic watch is balanced radially. The eye is immediately drawn to the center of the watch face and all visual weight is distributed equally, regardless of where the imaginary axis is drawn.*

Otra de las necesidades que identificamos fue la de organizar el tráfico. Como primera medida, la cuestión del cruce hacia la facultad, una posible solución sería un semáforo para organizarlo mejor sin la necesidad de la presencia de los organizadores del tránsito. Por otro lado, vimos que no está muy bien señalizado el sendero por donde van solamente los colectivos y tal vez un usuario que no frecuente la facultad, se puede confundir. Esto lo percibimos en el ejercicio de las preguntas al generar los dos usuarios posibles.

Dentro de el ámbito de organización, también nos dimos cuenta que el estacionamiento pago, no era del todo funcional. Dado que, al no haber señalización, cada persona estaciona donde decide lo que decanta en una situación caótica. A su vez, si fuese, hay muchos lugares del estacionamiento que se embarran y se genera un embrollo para estacionar cuando en realidad debería ser más simple. Una posible solución sería pavimentar el estacionamiento y hacer un control de éste.

Por último, las cuestiones climáticas como puede ser la lluvia, son un problema en conjunto con las paradas, ya que la cantidad de gente excede la parcela techada. Como ya expliqué antes, esto no es solamente un problema de diseño, sino que también de los colectivos, que, si tuvieran una mejor frecuencia, esto no sucedería. De todas maneras, el diseño podría haber contemplado esto, dado que, ya se sabe que la cantidad de usuarios es exorbitante. Pero también hay que tener en cuenta, que no se puede techar toda la explanada de ciudad universitaria, por lo que, es algo con lo que habrá que lidiar.

*This editorial spread is not balanced. If you were to draw a vertical axis down the page, elements are not equally distributed on both sides of the axis. (Image source: [www.behance.net](http://www.behance.net))*

## 4. Contrast

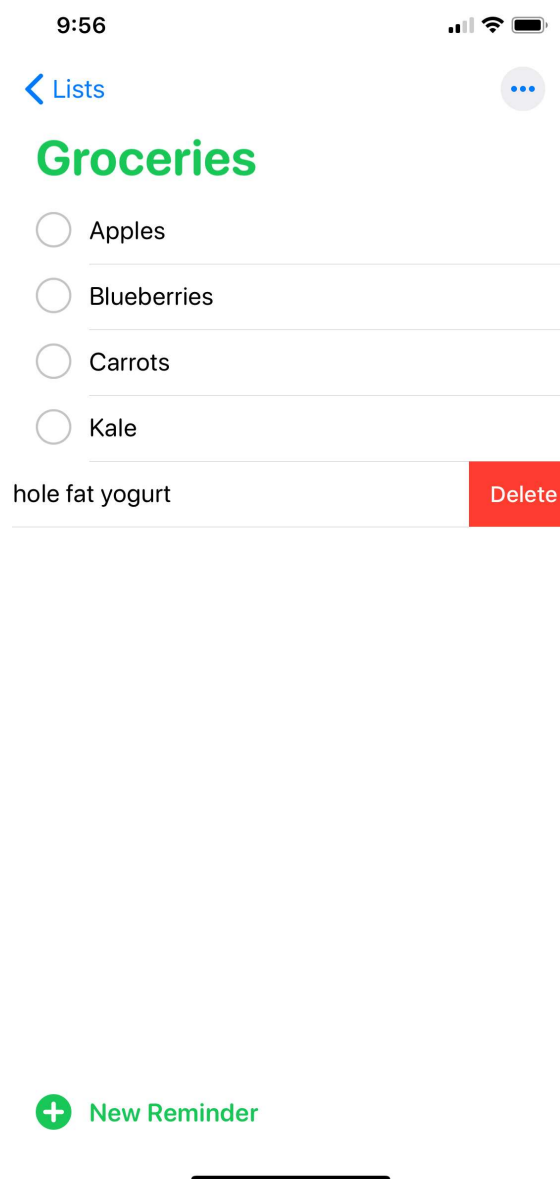
This is another commonly used principle that makes certain parts of your design stand out to your users.

**Definition:** The principle of **contrast** refers to the juxtaposition of visually dissimilar elements in order to convey the fact that these elements are different

(e.g., belong in different categories, have different functions, behave differently).

In other words, contrast provides the eye with a noticeable difference (e.g., in size or color) between two objects (or between two sets of objects) in order to emphasize that they are distinct.

The principle of contrast is often applied through color. For example, red is frequently used in UI designs, especially on iOS, to signify deleting. The bright color signals that a red element is different from the rest.



*Reminders app on iOS: The color red, which has high contrast to its surrounding context, is reserved for deleting.*

Often, in UX the word “contrast” brings to mind the contrast between text and its background. Sometimes designers deliberately decrease the text contrast in order to deemphasize less important text. But this approach is dangerous — [reducing text contrast](#) also [reduces legibility](#) and may make your content inaccessible. Use a color-contrast checker to ensure that your content can still be read by all your target users.



*Greenhouse Juice Co: The legibility of the text on the bottle relies on the color of juice. Although the contrast works beautifully for some juices, labels for bottles with light colored juices are nearly impossible to read. (Image source: [www.instagram.com](http://www.instagram.com))*

## 5. Gestalt Principles

These are a set of principles that were established in the early twentieth century by the Gestalt psychologists. They capture how humans make sense of images.

**Definition: Gestalt principles** explain how humans simplify and organize complex images that consist of many elements, by subconsciously arranging the parts into an organized system that creates a whole, rather than interpreting them as a series of disparate elements. In other words, Gestalt principles capture our tendency to perceive the whole as opposed to the individual elements.

There are several Gestalt principles, including [similarity](#), continuation, closure, [proximity](#), [common region](#), figure/ground, and symmetry and order. Proximity is especially important for UX — it refers to the fact that items that are [visually closer together](#) are perceived as part of the same group.

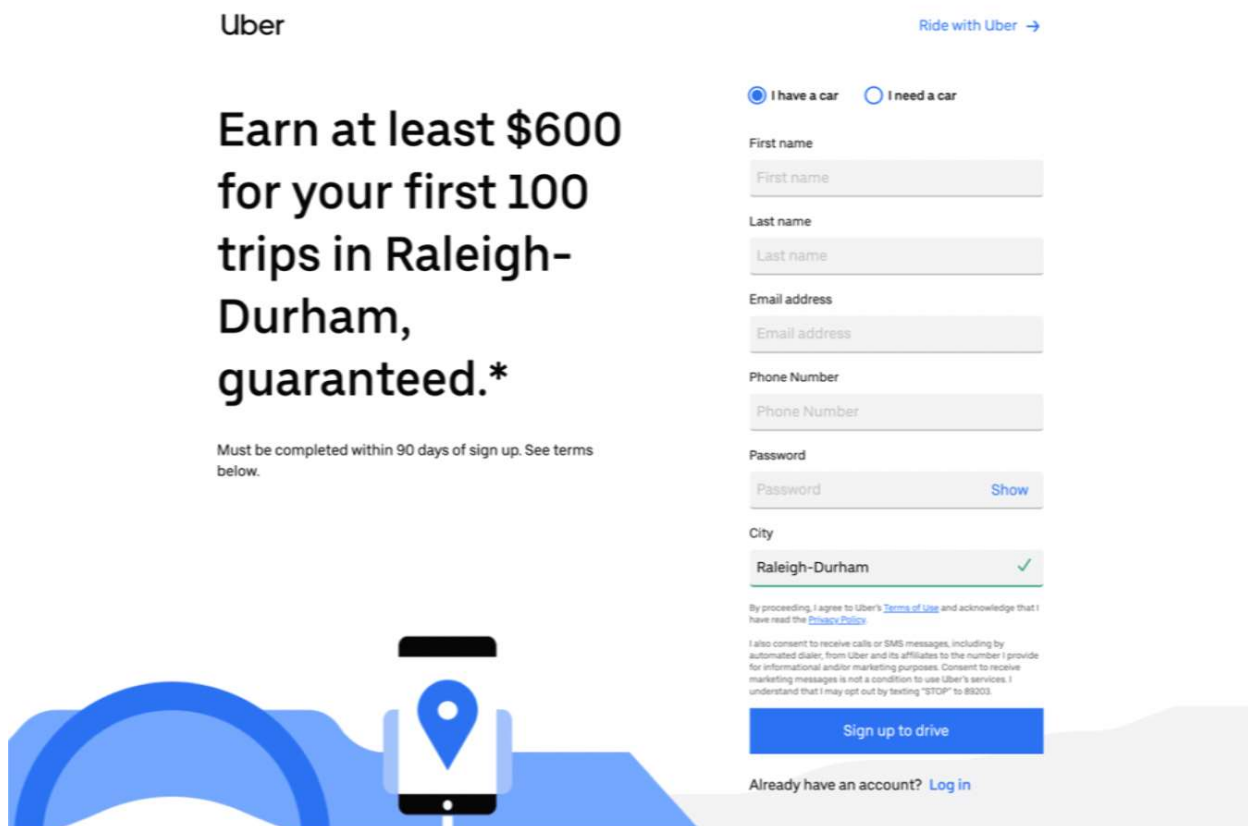


*It is the Gestalt closure principle that allows us to see two figures kissing instead of random shapes in Picasso's painting. Our brains fill in the missing pieces to create two figures.*






*We also often see applications of the Gestalt theory in logos. In the NBC logo, there is no peacock in the white space, but our brain understands there to be one.*



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Must be completed within 90 days of sign up. See terms below.



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First name

Last name

Email address

Phone Number

Password  [Show](#)

City  ✓

By proceeding, I agree to Uber's [Terms of Use](#) and acknowledge that I have read the [Privacy Policy](#).

I also consent to receive calls or SMS messages, including by automated dialer, from Uber and its affiliates to the number I provide for informational and/or marketing purposes. Consent to receive marketing messages is not a condition to use Uber's services. I understand that I may opt out by texting "STOP" to 80203.

[Sign up to drive](#)

Already have an account? [Log in](#)

The Uber sign up form uses the Gestalt proximity principle: field labels are close to their corresponding text boxes, making it easy to understand what information to type in which fields. If there was less space between a field and the subsequent label (for the next field), it would get confusing for users to know what belongs with what.

Form	<b>1040</b>	Department of the Treasury—Internal Revenue Service (99) <b>U.S. Individual Income Tax Return</b>	<b>2017</b>	OMB No. 1545-0074	IRS Use Only—Do not write or staple in this space.
For the year Jan. 1–Dec. 31, 2017, or other tax year beginning		, 2017, ending		, 20	
Your first name and initial		Last name		See separate instructions.	
If a joint return, spouse's first name and initial		Last name		Your social security number	
Home address (number and street). If you have a P.O. box, see instructions.		Apt. no.		Your social security number	
City, town or post office, state, and ZIP code. If you have a foreign address, also complete spaces below (see instructions).				Spouse's social security number	
Foreign country name		Foreign province/state/county		Foreign postal code	

**▲ Make sure the SSN(s) above and on line 6c are correct.**

**Presidential Election Campaign**  
Check here if you, or your spouse if filing jointly, want \$3 to go to this fund. Checking a box below will not change your tax or refund.  
☐ You ☐ Spouse

2017 US tax form: The lack of space between fields makes filling it out a cumbersome experience. You could easily miss that what the second Last name field refers to. Using the Gestalt proximity principle to distinguish between fields that refer to self and to the spouse would have benefited the UX.

# Why Visual-Design Principles are Important

Why should we care about and understand visual-design principles? Beyond making something “look pretty,” understanding and taking advantage of them serves to:

- **Increase usability.** Following these visual-design principles often results in layouts that are easy to use. For example, the golden ratio, which is frequently used for creating beautiful works of art was also used in typesetting to create a visually pleasing relationship between font size, line height, and line width. The result typically led to shortened line lengths, which created balance (via white space) on a webpage and made the text easier to read. When paired with a strong interaction design, visual design will increase task success rates and user engagement.
- **Provoke [emotion](#) and delight.** Beautiful things elicit positive emotions. (In fact, the [aesthetic–usability](#) effect says that when people find a design visually appealing, they may be more forgiving of minor usability mishaps.) By following the principles of good visual designs, designers can create UIs that look good and thus make users feel good.
- **Strengthen brand perception.** A strong visual system builds user trust and interest in the product and appropriately represents and reinforces the [brand](#).

## References

Lupton, E. (2008). *Graphic Design: The New Basics*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Poulin, R. (2018). *The Language of Graphic Design*. Beverly: Quarto Publishing Group USA, Inc.

## Downloads

[Visual Design Principles \(A4 size\) \(PDF\)](#)

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