

Figure-Ground Relationship

Elements are perceived as either figures (objects of focus) or ground (the rest of the perceptual field).

The figure-ground relationship is one of several principles referred to as *Gestalt principles of perception*. It asserts that the human perceptual system separates stimuli into either figure elements or ground elements. Figure elements are the objects of focus, and ground elements compose an undifferentiated background. This relationship can be demonstrated with both visual stimuli, such as photographs, and auditory stimuli, such as soundtracks with dialog and background music.¹

When the figure and ground of a composition are clear, the relationship is stable; the figure element receives more attention and is better remembered than the ground. In unstable figure-ground relationships, the relationship is ambiguous and can be interpreted in different ways; the interpretation of elements alternates between figure and ground.

The visual cues that determine which elements will be perceived as figure and which as ground are:

- The figure has a definite shape, whereas the ground is shapeless.
- The ground continues behind the figure.
- The figure seems closer with a clear location in space, whereas the ground seems farther away and has no clear location in space.
- Elements below a horizon line are more likely to be perceived as figures, whereas elements above a horizon line are more likely to be perceived as ground.
- Elements in the lower regions of a design are more likely to be perceived as figures, whereas elements in the upper regions are more likely to be perceived as ground.²

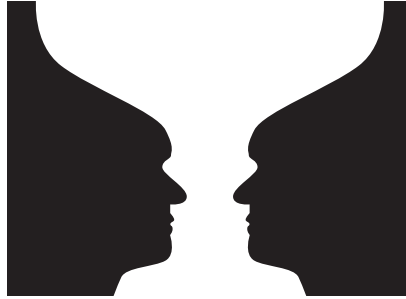
Clearly differentiate between figure and ground in order to focus attention and minimize perceptual confusion. Ensure that designs have stable figure-ground relationships by incorporating the appropriate visual cues listed above. Increase the probability of recall of key elements by making them figures in the composition.

See also Gutenberg Principle, Law of Prägnanz, Top-Down Lighting Bias, and Visuospatial Resonance.

¹ The seminal work on the figure-ground relationship is "Synoplevede Figurer" [Figure and Ground] by Edgar Rubin, Gyldendalske, 1915, translated and reprinted in *Readings in Perception* by David C. Beardslee and Michael Wertheimer, D. Van Nostrand, 1958, p. 194–203.

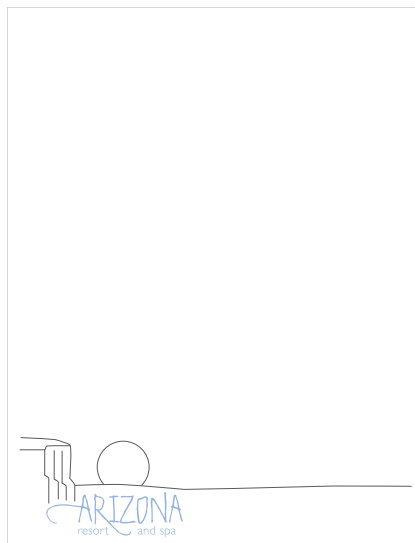
² "Lower Region: A New Cue for Figure-Ground Assignment" by Shaun P. Vecera, Edward K. Vogel, and Geoffrey F. Woodman, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 2002, vol. 131(2), p. 194–205.

The Rubin vase is unstable because it can be perceived as a white vase on a black background or two black faces looking at each other on a white background.



Initially, there is no stable figure-ground relationship in this image. However, after a moment, the Dalmatian pops out and the figure-ground relationship stabilizes.

Placing the logo at the bottom of the page makes it a figure element—it will receive more attention and will be better remembered than the logo at the top of the page.



Placing the spa name below the horizon line in the logo makes it a figure element—it will receive more attention and be better remembered than the design that places the name at the top of the logo.

