Every layout begins as empty space.

When we add a visual element to that space, its success or failure as a carrier of the piece's message depends on three factors: the quality of the component, its relevance, and its relationship to other elements in the design.

The placement of elements within a composition determines the spatial relationships between those elements and gives the viewer clues for determining their relevance and significance within the layout.

Effective placement and divisions of space provide the underlying grammar of a potent visual vocabulary.

Most new designers focus their studies on the creation of components: logos, illustrations, photos, headlines. Important topics, for sure, but without a proper understanding of effective placement, even the most excellent element of a design is handicapped or doomed.

Imagine a beautiful work of sculpture stored in a crowded closet or under a heap of rubbish. The quality of the sculpture itself is unaffected by its whereabouts, but without proper placement, its message will be tainted and possibly obscured by its surroundings.

The principles outlined in this chapter begin simply and expand to encompass a variety of related axioms that can be applied to bring structure, focus and visual power to all forms of visual design.

PLACEMENT & DIVISIONS

COMPOSITION

The point of design is to encourage and facilitate communication between the viewer and the media being viewed. Effective design initiates this connection by attracting and holding the attention of the viewer through aesthetically satisfying and conceptually intriguing content.

We'll begin here—building a vocabulary of visual language—with the Principle of Unequal Spacing.

The point *on the opposite page has been placed in a carefully chosen position. Notice that each of the horizontal and vertical measurements from the point to the edges of the page are different from the others.*

Variety in *spacing*, just as in life, adds spice. Visual variety allows the eye to play. Play encourages exploration. Exploration draws the viewer in.
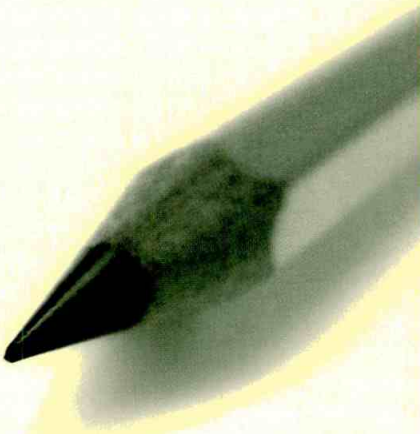
(a)

PLACEMENT & DIVISIONS

COMPOSITION
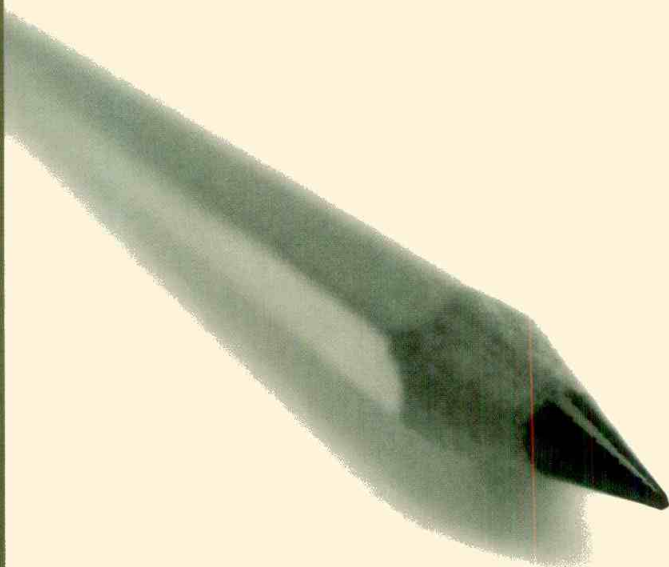
The Principle of
Unequal Spacing can
be applied to more
than one point at a
time. In this exam-
ple, unequal meas-
urements have been
sought in the associ-
ation between the
points themselves
and each of the
bordering elements.

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To make this discussion of *points* relevant to your work on a layout or image, apply the Principle of Unequal Spacing to the *points-of-interest* in your composition.

When evaluating a composition, take note of how the obvious focal points relate to each other and to the edges of the piece.

Varied measurements around points-of-interest tend to heighten the visual interest and energy of the piece and convey a sense of creativity. Most often, this is an appropriate goal for a layout or image.

When you design, do not allow the spacing between elements to "just happen." Develop an active awareness of the spatial relationships that are occurring between the components of a layout or image. Practiced consciously, this awareness quickly becomes second-nature to a designer or artist.

Just as the visual impact of an element can be enhanced by varying the measurements between it and other elements, so too can the effectiveness of a line's placement (or the *division of space* within a layout) be enhanced through unequal spacing.

Given the dynamic content of the business card and poster designs featured below, an energetic presen-

The dashed line in this business card (added to enforce the automotive concept as well as to group text and image elements) has been placed in a position that adds to the dynamic theme of the card. The dead-center placement in the sample below feels static and uncreative.

The same axiom applies to the placement of vertical lines within a design. The off-center placement, above, creates a pleasing division between image and text. When the vertical line is positioned at the horizontal center of the card (below), it seems to promote an uncomfortable tug-of-war between the image and text.
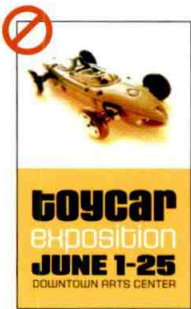
22

tation has been sought by placing the dividing elements in positions other than dead-center.

(Note the dashed "road divider" line just below this text: its placement *is* centered between the text above and images below. The designer of this page felt that, with so much visually active content already in place, a static position was appropriate for *this* dividing line.)
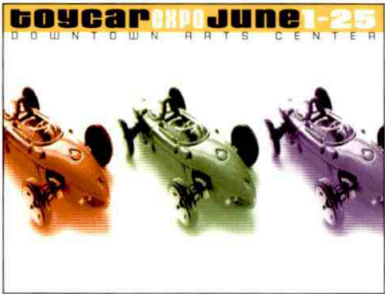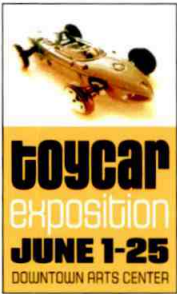
In these poster designs, the space within the composition has been divided by using a block of color behind the text. Both of the samples feature divisions of space that enhance the playful theme of the layout. The dead-center divisions of space in the samples below feel inert by comparison.

A spiral growing out of squares sized according Fibonacci Series— a spiral that can be found in nature, architecture and art galleries the world over.
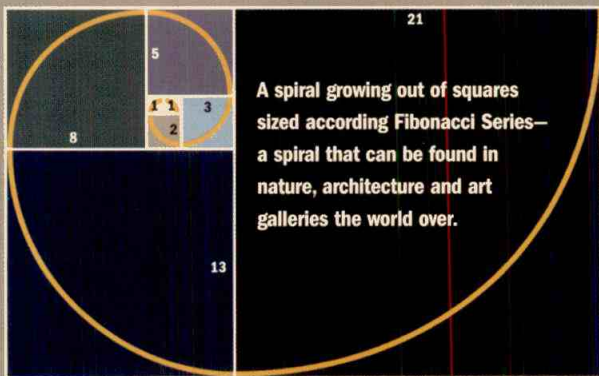
THE FIBONACCI SERIES
AND THE GOLDEN SECTION

The Golden Section is an aesthetically pleasing division of space that is often used by artists as the basis for measurements within their compositions. As illustrated on the opposite page, this division can be obtained using some math and a value known as Phi (pronounced "phee"). The golden section is also related to the numbers of the Fibonacci Series. This series is formed by starting with 0 and 1 and then adding the latest two numbers to get the next in the string. *(Confusing? See the visual example below.)* As the pairs of sums in the series grow larger, the ratio between them approaches Phi (1.618).

$$0 + 1 = 1$$
$$1 + 1 = 2$$
$$1 + 2 = 3$$
$$2 + 3 = 5$$
$$3 + 5 = 8$$
$$5 + 8 = 13$$
$$8 + 13 = 21 \ldots$$

Designers often find themselves wondering just how to partition spaces within a layout, logo, illustration or when cropping a photo. The Golden Section is a good place to start when considering options—its status as an eye-pleasing divider of space is well established.

34

A measurement, divided by Phi, produces the larger of its two Golden Sections—an aesthetically pleasing relationship that has long been favored by artists, architects and the forces of nature itself, i.e., the spiral within a nautilus shell.

Phi
1.618

Ø

Dividing a measurement by Phi produces the larger of its two golden sections.

The vertical bar at left is divided according to this formula, as is this book's vertical navigation bar featured at the far left of this spread (and most others).

The Golden section has developed a cult-like following over the years. A web-search will yield a great deal of additional information!

Golden Section Ruler.

Needed: A vector-based program such as Illustrator or Freehand.

You are more likely to use the Golden Section in your designs if you are able to conveniently access its measurements. So, why not make your own readily-available Golden Section Ruler for use within a variety of graphics programs?

Here's how: using vector-based software, create a line that is 13" long. Now, put a mark at the 8" point along the line. What you now have is a line, divided into its two golden sections. Save this image as an .EPS file and store it in an easy-to-find place on your hard-drive.

The next time you need to find golden sections within a composition, import your .EPS Golden Section Ruler into the document you are working with. Then, scale it up or down to fit the line(s) or space(s) you wish to divide into Golden Sections (the sections on the ruler will remain "golden" regardless of scaling.) When you are done using the ruler, simply delete it from the document.

Note: .EPS is the ideal format for this kind of virtual tool since an .EPS file that has been created in a vector-based program can be scaled up and down without loss of quality.

35

Layouts that are unclear, confusing or overwhelming are rarely investigated unless the viewer knows ahead of time that the content is of personal importance.

It's up to the designer to present visual messages in a quickly and easily understood format. Grouping and Visual Hierarchy (pages 40-49 and 64-65) are key components in building this kind of aesthetic clarity.

Visual grouping aids discovery by helping the viewer make useful connections between elements.

When a person first encounters a group of objects, whether a flock of birds or a block of text, they tend to see the group as a singularity. Designers can use this visual tendency to their advantage. For instance, a designer can avoid overwhelming a viewer by taking, say, ten elements of a complex ad (headline, subhead, text, several images, captions, logos, etc.) and grouping them in such a way that, at first glance, the viewer sees *three distinct areas of interest* (instead of *ten individual items*).

Visual grouping is usually a simple matter of bringing certain elements closer together, and providing an obvious space or dividing element between them and other groups or components.

In this chapter we take a look at visual and thematic associations that are either enforced or negated through proximity to other elements. Look closely: many of the distinctions illustrated are subtle but significant.

GROUPING

COMPOSITION
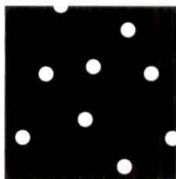
1. Nine dots, casually arranged with no obvious association between them.
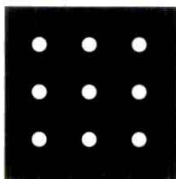
2. Nine dots, clearly associated, but what if we want to show that three of the dots do not belong with the others?
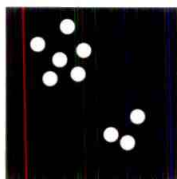
3. Here, three dots, grouped and separated from the others. *It's almost as though there's a story forming in this sample...*

If associations and messages can be established, implied or denied simply by moving nine white dots around a a black square, imagine the power that a designer has at their disposal given images, text, blocks of color and more!

Balance, separation, direction and subtle variation.
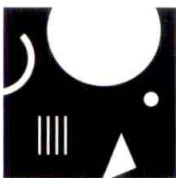
Disorder, chaos, lack of cohesion.

Creativity, informality, asymmetrical organization

*Above, statements made with a vocabulary whose nouns are **shapes** and whose verbs are **grouping** and **placement** (placement is discussed in the previous chapter). Think of headlines, text blocks, areas of color, images and logos in terms of their overall shapes whose message can be strengthened through a vocabulary of visual associations.*

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Effective grouping streamlines the viewer's search for meaning and information. The designer helps the viewer by deciding which (and how) elements should visually relate to each other.
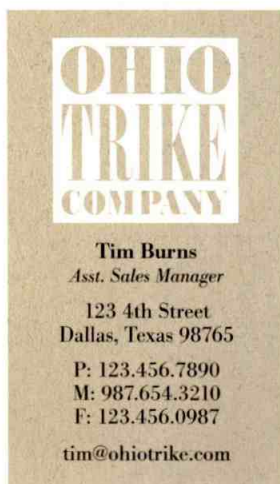

The information in the business card at left is packed into a single mass (potentially frustrating a viewer's search for a specific phone or fax number, etc.). Also, the name at the top seems to relate more to the card's edge than to its content—creating a somewhat scattered look to the whole.

The design at right addresses these issues by grouping related elements. Here, all text elements have been brought together while subtle increases in the spacing between different blocks of information (name vs. address, etc.) create easily distinguished subgroups.

COMPOSITION   GROUPING

The elements in this ad, though placed in close proximity to one another, are not grouped in a way that aids the viewer's navigation or understanding of the content. The eye is drawn here and there by elements that call for attention from different, disconnected areas of the layout. The composition at right solves these problems.

There is a *thematic problem* with the group at the center of this layout. The *50-year* emblem is associated with the *Think Red* headline. This does not make sense—after all, the line of trikes has been around for 50 years, not the headline. A sharp-eyed viewer might experience a moment of confusion or irritation at the illogical association of elements and the ad's credibility could suffer accordingly.
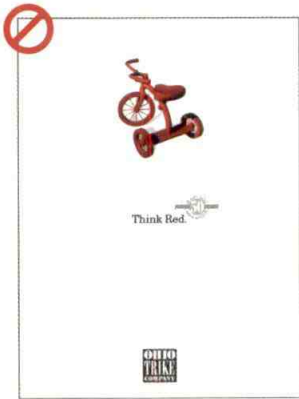
The issue here is subtle but important. Look closely at the placement of the headline relative to the image above and the text below. Here, the headline is close to, and thereby forms an association with, the illustration.

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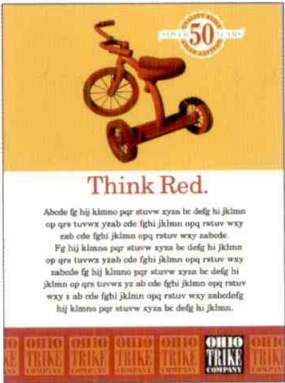
Rearranging the elements into groups of related components results in a layout that is easy on the eyes (and brain) of the viewer. The headline and text now relate clearly to each other, as do the logo and emblem. Note also how the trike image has been enlarged significantly to establish its clear dominance over the other elements (see the chapter on Emphasis, pages 62-77).
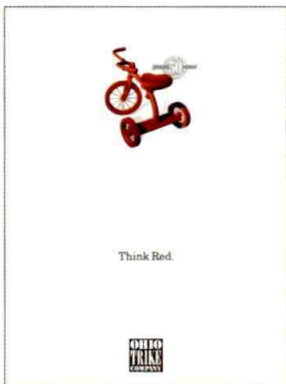
Here, the emblem is properly associated with the trike. The lesson here: take a close look at both the visual *and* thematic associations between elements in a layout. Is everything as it should be?

In this version, the headline relates to the text below it. This solution eliminates the visual break that occurs when the headline is nearer to the image than the text (as in the previous version). Neither solution is definitely right or wrong: it's up to the designer in cases like this to decide which grouping better suits the ad's appearance, message and flow.

Emphasis is a lot like coals in a campfire—when the embers are collected into a pile, their concentrated heat can ignite a log in seconds. Spread thin, their energy can barely warm a pair of cold hands.

Often enough, a client will ask the designer to make each and every element in their brochure or ad "stand out." Trying to obey a directive of this sort is bound to result in a piece that, at best, will be lukewarm in its appeal.

If everyone shouts, how will any one voice be heard?

The designer must decide which elements of a layout are to dominate and must strive to create a visual hierarchy that will first attract the viewer's attention, and then help guide them through the design. (Hierarchy, to paraphrase the dictionary, is *a system of graded ranks.)*

Creating visual hierarchy demands that the designer bolster the visual dominance of certain significant items, and restrain the impact of other supporting elements.

Emphasis can be implemented in degrees. A piece that needs to visually SHOUT requires a bold application of contrast, color and/or content. A design that is meant to soothe or quietly inform will require a more sensitive treatment by the designer; likely through elements and colors that are *not* in stark contrast with one another.

A variety of methods of establishing visual emphasis are illustrated in this chapter. The samples shown are just the tips of very large icebergs (conceptually speaking, of course): view the strategies and axioms presented here as the basis for techniques that can be applied with endless variations of degree and effect.
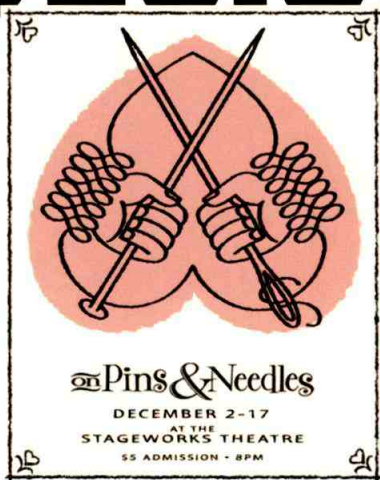
You must be

A clear order of visual dominance between elements not only helps attract attention to a piece, it serves to guide the viewer's eye through its content. Elements can dominate through relative size, comparisons of color or an intriguing presentation. As a designer it's up to you to act as referee between competing elements and decide which ones will dominate and how. Avoid a fainthearted approach when making these decisions. Be decisive.

No. ▶
The design of this poster gives no clear emphasis to any one element. There is a visual tug-of-war between the illustration, title and subtext that leaves the viewer unsure of where to enter the piece, and where to go once inside.

ʚᴑPins & Needles

DECEMBER 2–17
AT THE
STAGEWORKS THEATRE
$5 ADMISSION · 8PM

64

DECISIVE.

on Pins & Needles
DECEMBER 2-17
AT THE
STAGEWORKS THEATRE
$5 ADMISSION · 8PM

◀ Yes.
Here, the domi-
nant illustration
gives the viewer a
clear and meaning-
ful point-of-entry
to the poster.

on Pins & Needles
DEC.
2-17
$5⁰⁰
8pm
AT THE STAGEWORKS THEATRE
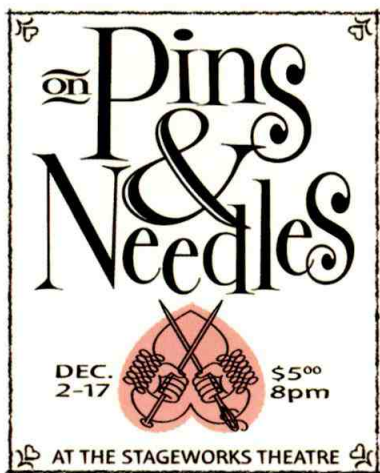
◀ Yes again.
In this sample,
the title of the
play is given the
leading role. Any
element of a
design that is
both visually
sound and rele-
vant to the overall
theme can be
considered for
a leading role.

Impact is relative. The bowling pin icons in each of these layouts are the same size. The pin in the layout below dominates through position and comparative sizing. At left, the same pin feels dwarfed by bold typographic elements and its function is more or less ornamental. Either solution could be considered "correct." It's up to the designer to decide which will be more effective in reaching the target audience.
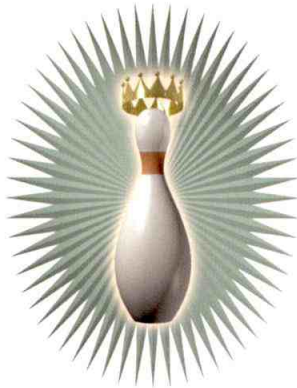
KING·PIN
BOWLING TOURNAMENT
8:00 PM, APRIL 8TH

LOU'S LANES
12345 67th MILWUAKEE

There is often more than one right (or wrong) answer when it comes to visual relationships between elements in a layout, logo or illustration. It's important to explore options in order to determine which arrangement best suits the piece's audience and purpose.

The image in this arrangement dominates, but does not overwhelm the condensed typeface below. This is a comfortable hierarchy that gains a contemporary and stylish note from its somewhat unconventional typography and vertical arrangement of elements. ▶

The difference in visual weight between image and type here is minimal—each element holds similar value to the eye. Low-contrast relationships such as this tend to feel unified, conservative, corporate. ▶

In this arrangement, typography dominates image. When type is emphasized (and especially when the typeface used is a tasteful serif font such as this), the look tends to come across as responsible, secure, formal. ▶

Extreme differences in emphasis tend to project a feeling of creative non-conformity. Note that while the image clearly presides in this arrangement, a sub-hierarchy exists within the type: the word "digital" stands out above the other words by means of color contrast and placement. ▶

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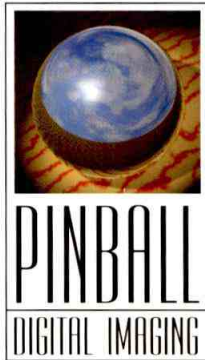
Color is an extremely effective tool when it comes to making one element stand out above others. But, just as with other forms of emphasis, its effect depends on how it is used in relation to its surroundings.

Value (the relative light-to-dark measure of a specific hue) can also be used to bring notice to one element above others.

Refer to the section on color beginning on page 206 for more definitions of color terms—as well as strategies and techniques for the effective use of color.
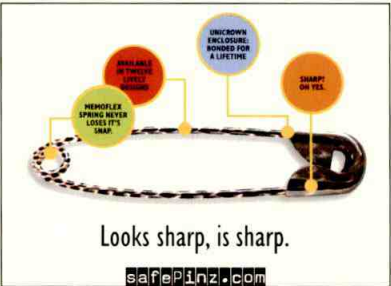
Below, case in point.

Color is used here against a white backdrop, not only to bring attention to a key element of the headline, but also to visually connect the headline to a detail within the image.

BUILDING A
BETTER LOOKING
SAFETY PIN

safePinz.com

The bright hues used here to highlight information face no competition with vibrant hues elsewhere. Again, emphasis is always relative.

AVAILABLE IN TWELVE LIVELY DESIGNS

UNICROWN ENCLOSURE: BONDED FOR A LIFETIME

SHARP? OH YES.

MEMOFLEX SPRING NEVER LOSES IT'S SNAP

Looks sharp, is sharp.

safePinz.com

Warm colors tend to stand out well against cooler, complementary hues. (See page 217 for more about complementary colors.)


Out with the old. The new has arrived.

safePinz.com

Here, the same layout succeeds with no color at all; only variations in value.

Out with the old. The new has arrived.

safePinz.com

75

There are times when contrast, in its most amplified form, is ideal for the conveyance of a message. *Other times, it's appropriate to tone down the amount of contrast between elements and/or the background on which they rest.*

At right are some fundamental techniques that can be applied broadly to all sorts of media to reduce contrast between elements.

(A.) The original, high contrast image.

(B.) The value or color of an element can be toned down to reduce its contrast with the background. This is a good a good technique to apply to large headlines, for instance, when their visual impact needs to be lessened.

(C.) On the other hand, you might want to consider adjusting the value or color of the background to reduce contrast.

(D.) The warm hue in the background of this sample keeps the energy of the composition high, while simultaneously keeping the overall contrast between elements in check. If you squint at this sample, you'll see that the contrast in value between the red background and black type is minimal.

(E.) An expanded border around an element can be used to soften the transition between element and background by providing an intermediary "visual step."

(F.) Subtle and halo-like, this border treatment provides an even softer transition.

76
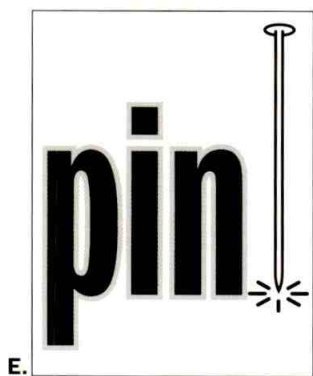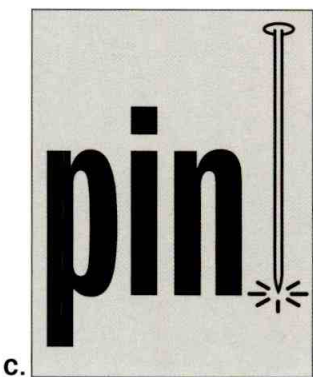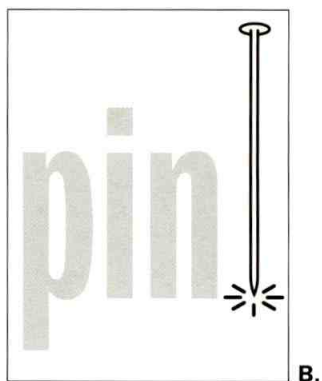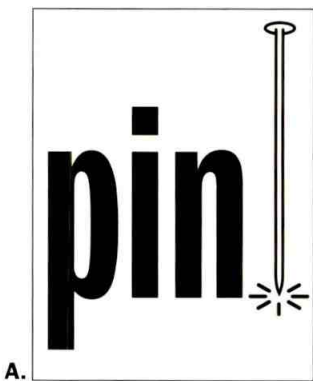
Think of alignment within a composition as its

structural framework.

A house can contain rooms of widely varied decor, from classic to modern, functional to frivolous. But behind the painted and treated walls of each is a shared frame of wood, metal and plaster.

Works of design, too, can vary greatly in their final effect while adhering to a common conceptual framework of alignment and structure.

Alignment between elements can be used to create a sense of agreement, soundness and unity within a piece, regardless of the tone of its overall message.

Sometimes the designer follows a structural system that is plainly obvious and strictly followed. Other times, a designer will take advantage of any opportunity to break convention—as long as, in doing so, the piece's message will be amplified.

As discussed on pages 38-39, it is a good idea to know certain "rules" of design before breaking them. This is especially true in regard to the rules of alignment: make an effort to understand the effects of abiding by—and breaking—the axioms of alignment.

This chapter is heavy on visuals, light on verbiage. Explore the samples and their captions thoroughly with both your eyes and mind. In addition to the exercises suggested, make an effort to open your eyes to the ways that effective designers do and don't align components within their layouts.

Consider these illustrations of alignment principles:

Flush-left: safe and sure. The image, type and logo of this brochure cover are all aligned along their left edges. The result has a well organized and conservative feel.

Flush-right: all elements in agreement once again. This time, along their right edges. Slightly less conventional than the more commonly used flush-left tactic.

Visual disagreement. Type and logo along the left; image to the right. The result feels scattered and unsure.

Centered alignment. Image, heading and logo each centered horizontally—a common and conventional approach.


Justified alignment. Through letterspacing adjustments, the width of the subhead has been made to match the width of the image above it. Here, a strict alignment technique is paired with a creative typographic solution.
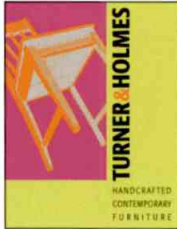

Subtle violation. In this sample, a strongly centered logo and image are paired with a subhead that is aligned flush left. The look is accidental and amateurish.
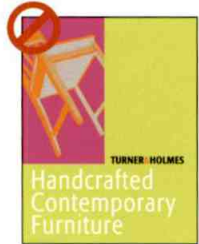
80

And these...
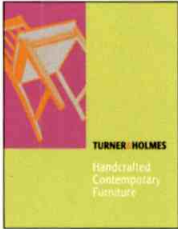
Structure though association. Note how the edges of the various elements provide alignment cues for the placement of others.


Creating solidarity. Even a sideways logo and tipping chair feel securely anchored in this layout because of strong and clear horizontal and vertical alignments between elements.


Subtle discrepancy. The right-most edges of the logo and headline are neither clearly aligned nor clearly non-aligned. Visual indecision weakens structure; avoid it!

A subtle strength. The legs of the chair at the page's bottom provide a cue for the logo's width at top. Look for opportunistic relationships such as this if help is needed in conveying a sense of structure.
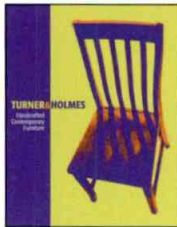

Taking advantage. The crux of angles in the chair's image provide a strong point-of-focus; an ideal position for the logo's baseline.
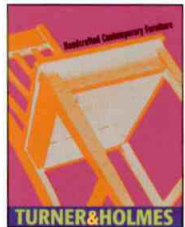
This works, too. Sometimes effective alignment is not a matter of aligning horizontally or vertically, but rather following an edge or a contour.

COMPOSITION   ALIGNMENT

The content of this book strives to make few hard-and-fast assertions about the "rules" of design. This spread is an exception: here are five bona-fide "don'ts" of alignment.

1.

Stair-stepping type. No. Never.

Handcrafted

Contemporary

Furniture

TURNER HOLMES
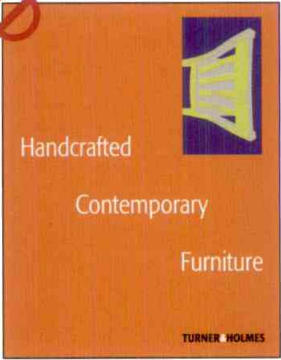
2.

Stair-stepping images: Rarely a good idea, and never when paired with other elements of varied alignment (as shown).

TURNER HOLMES

Handcrafted
Contemporary
Furniture

3. 🚫

In this sample, flush-left typography is paired with an image containing obviously centered content. Be aware of details within elements (photos, illustrations, logos, etc.) that might have an effect on broader alignment issues.

4. 🚫

Trapped space. Here, an area of confined space exists between the logo, headline and image. In general, both humans and their eyes are uneasy when it comes to confinement. In this sample the trapped space is particularly irksome since it occurs at the center of the page. See pages 114-115 for a larger discussion of trapped space and its effects.
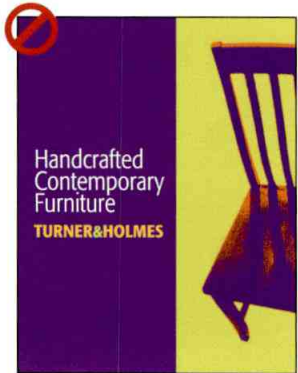
5. 🚫

Elements with sharp contours that barely touch the edges of other elements (or the edges of the layout itself) generate tension. This is appropriate only when tension is desired.

Intricate, "busy" images attract notice. When such visuals are placed in the corner of a layout they tend to distract the viewer and pull their attention away from equally or more important content areas.

Handcrafted
Contemporary Furniture

Abcde fg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op
qrs tuvwx yzab cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy zab cde
fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy zabcde fg hi jklmn op qrs tuvwx
yzab c defg hi jkl mn opq rstuv wx.

Fg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs
tuvwx yzab cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy zabcde fg hij
klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn opq qrs tuvwx yz
ab cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy z ab cde fghi jklmn opq
rstuv wxy zabcdefg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi
jklmn op qrs tuvwx yz ab cde fghi jk.

TURNER&HOLMES

In this promotional flyer, most elements are tightly held between the left and right margins. The ragged edges of the centered text provide a degree of relief to the strict alignment elsewhere while adhering to the overall centered alignment of the layout.

Alignment, strictly followed, can feel overbearing at times.

Handcrafted
Contemporary Furniture

Abcde fg hij klmno pqr stuvw
xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs
tuvwx yzab cde fghi jklmn opq
rstuv wxy zab cde fghi jklmn
opq rstuv wxy zabcde fg hi
jklmn op qrs tuvwx yzabc defg
hi jklmn op qrs tuvwx yz abc.

TURNER&HOLMES

Here, the chair image provides cues for the left and right margins of most of the elements below. Only the second line of the header breaks free. This format-bending element adds a touch of flair to a solid, well-composed layout.

Handcrafted Contemporary Furniture

Abcde fg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs tuvwx yzab cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy zab cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy zabcde fg hi jklm n op qrs tuvwx yzab.

Cdefg hi jkl fg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs tuvwx yzab cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy zabcde fg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs tuvwx yz ab

cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy z ab cde fghi jkl mn opq rstuv wxy zabcdefg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs tuvw xyza bcdefg hi jkl fg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs tuvwx yzab cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy zabcde fg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs tuvwx yz ab cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy z ab cde fghi jkl mn opq rstuv wxy zabcdefg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs tuvw xy zabcde fg hi jklm n op qrs tuvwx yzabc defg hi jkl fg hij klmno.

TURNER&HOLMES

Highly formatted and no-nonsense in its presentation, this flyer gives a slight nod to the creative by interrupting the flow of the justified text with two brightly colored images.

Consider relaxing the rules here and there for good effect.

Abcde fg hij kl mno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jkl mn op qrs tu vwx yzab cde fghi jklmn.

HANDCRAFTED CONTEMPORARY FURNITURE

S abcde fg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs tuvwx yzab cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy zab cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy zabcde fg hi jklm n op qrs tuvwx yzab.

Cdefg hi jkl fg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs

tuvwx yzab cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy zabcde fg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs tuvwx yz ab cde fghi jklmn opq rstuv wxy z ab cde fghi jkl mn opq rstuv wxy zabcdefg hij klmno pqr stuvw xyza bc defg hi jklmn op qrs tuvw xyza bcdefg.

TURNER&HOLMES

Strict alignment need not appear stodgy. Nearly every element in this composition is tightly anchored to a horizontal or vertical detail of another element. A creative application of the rules of alignment can lead to a dynamic conveyance of variety and verve.