4.3 Composition

So we talked about layout, and we talked about how important that was to help people make sense of your information. But you could have a great layout and a really ugly piece, and nobody will want to look at it. So the next thing we're going to talk about is composition. And I don't expect anybody here to become an expert in design. But for composition, we can borrow from some other fields, like photography. And so we're going to take a look at a couple examples and talk through how they might come across.

Composition is about the overall feel of the work. We can use composition to create elements that help guide the eye where we want them to look. Some of this has to do with positioning, and for some of this, we can actually borrow from the layout or use the layout. But we can actually add some other design elements as well. Like I said, we're going to borrow from art and photography to talk about composition.

And so let's jump right in with a terrible example. Look, this is bad design. Don't do this. For a final poster project or posters that you're going to use in business to communicate some new project or something like that, or even slide design, having too much text or having a lot of boxes around things really doesn't help. In fact, in this case, these boxes don't even line up well. So this is an example of-- the designer here is using a column structure, but the rows aren't following a very good grid structure. So it just kind of looks messy. I've blurred out the text here, because what it says isn't important. What's important here is the overall effect does not invite somebody to want to look at it.

This is good design. In fact, this poster is great design. They have a pretty clear visual hierarchy. Even though they don't follow a grid structure, really, really terrifically, they break the rules in some key interesting places. But interestingly, this has a two-column structure, where one column's narrow and another column's wider. It has a very big title that tells us right away that we're talking about something that has to do with subscribers. It uses plots for good visual effect, and there's no boxes around things. Things are organized, because we can see that there is basically a grid. It largely follows the grid, and it's got some subheadings that help tell the story, that help set things apart.

The hierarchy, then, here is imposed by or communicated by a grid. It's communicated by these colorful subheading boxes. And it's communicated with fonts that are larger and smaller, that help tell the story. So this is an example of really good design.

Here's another example of terrible design. There's too much on this page. There's no place for your eye to rest. And there isn't really a very good grid or any real communication structure at all. The overall effect is a cacophony of visual noise. There's too many colors. It's just too much. We want things that are simpler and have lots of open space.

So here's an example of really good design. The colors are consistent, right? There's just a few colors. It's not a cacophony of colors. It's a few well-chosen colors. It's got boxes that help layout the structure of the poster. And I'm talking about this in terms of posters, but you can use these same design elements if you think about building a dashboard for a company, or laying out a report that's going to be a PDF. Or building a web page. All of these are going to be similar.

OK, so this is good design, because it's using a relatively simple color structure. It's got some clear lines that help divide the page up. The author of this particular poster follows those lines really well. And it's got a handful of fonts, but it's not a big mess of fonts.

So how did people think about this? This design also uses one narrow column and one wide column. It turns out they're borrowing from something called the rule of thirds. And this comes from, well, it comes from photography, but it actually is older than photography. It comes from fine art as well. But they talk about it a lot when they talk about, how do you layout a photograph? And that is basically-- we're going to break the screen up into a grid of nine squares, where things are roughly cut up into thirds.

And so when you're taking a photograph, you actually can do that. Here's an example. Here's a picture of a rose. The rose is basically taking up the top 2/3 and left 2/3 of the screen. And then you've got some background around the sides that take up a third on both sides.

Interestingly, they also put the center of the rose right on a one third grid line, and they do that intentionally. They do that because our eye actually tends to be drawn to something that's off-center. If we perfectly center an image, oftentimes, it's less interesting. It's more boring than an image that's off-center like this. Now this is a little different than portrait photography. If you're doing portrait photography, you want everything centered. But in this case, this is a very artistic example. And you can actually do this with your poster. And we're going to talk about this-- we're going to talk about how you might do that a little bit later.

But here's another example of the rule of thirds. This is a pretty common kind of photo way of laying something out. Look at the sky. The sky in this picture takes up the top third of the image. And then the watery area below that is taking up the bottom 2/3. This interesting outcropping of a tree-- it's right on that grid line of the thirds. So again, this is very common, and we're going to see ways that we might think about using this in posters as well.

But like I said it is actually older than photography. It shows up in fine art. Here we can see that there's horizontal and vertical points of reference that help the artist determine where the points of interest should be. This artist doesn't place the person, which is the key element of the image, exactly on the rule-- the grid line, but it's actually pretty close. And so they're still using this as a guideline here.

Here's another example that is also pretty close to the rule of thirds. The top third of the image is the background. It's behind the people that are in the foreground that we're supposed to pay attention to. One of the people who actually has the brightest face is pretty darn close to that cross point there. So here's another example where they've used the rule of thirds in older art that's actually hanging up in a museum.

More modernly, this is used very consistently in posters for movies. So we have some in the *Pirates* *of* *the* *Caribbean.* All the information about the movie is down at the bottom. And the people's heads that are the stars of the movie are at the top. So this is a information organization or a composition that's used to help break an image up in a way that's interesting.

So that's the rule of thirds. And like I've said, it's actually been used quite a lot in photography. It's kind of a fallback that you can use. Another one is the golden ratio. This is another way to break an image up to highlight something that's important. Or to organize a layout in a way that draws people in to what's important.

Look right here. This is a photograph that uses the rule of thirds. The person who is the key element we want people to look at is right in the center of that spiral. And in this case, the photographer has actually lined the person up along the spiral. And it draws us right in, right where the photographer wants us to look.

Here's another example. In this case, it's not so much that they're drawing us in, it's that they're using the golden ratio to break the image up into different parts. Here, we've got a large portion of the image that's devoted to the sky. That's where we're going to let our eyes rest. That tree almost takes up the next largest part of the golden ratio.

Here's a golden ratio layout that you can just borrow from these slides to think about a way to layout your poster. So those are some larger compositional things that you can use to impose a kind of interesting composition on a poster. But we can also use some supporting elements.

You saw this image before, when we were talking about color, and I was saying, "Look, that fish really stands out. It stands out because it's the only green in a bunch of orange." But the other reason why it stands out is because there's a bunch of arrows pointing at it. And I don't mean the arrows that I put on top of the fish. I mean, those fish, actually, are pointing, and they're pointing right at that green fish. So here I'm using two different elements to really draw your attention to one thing.

Another use of lines is-- in this photograph here, the photographer used all those lines on the edge of the boat and the boards in the boat to point to the people at the center of the-- at the front of the boat. It's also the case that you can see that there's landscape on the right that's being reflected in the water that's also pointing at the people. So that might sound silly. Oh, yes, I'm going to use pointers to just point to the things that are important. But here we see some concrete examples of how it can work really well.

Here's another example of when we're using lines to point at whatever is the key thing. This image actually takes advantage of the rule of thirds, too. The top third is the sky. The bottom third is the water around it. And my guess is what the photographer wants us to look at is the sunset. And so they're actually using these lines to draw us into the image. This is a very common way of laying out a photograph, too.

OK, so the point of this has just been that in addition to using layout to organize the information, here we're using composition to make the interesting-- to make the image, the overall image more interesting. Now I know that sounds like a lot. And actually, designing a good poster takes a lot of time, because we're thinking about all of these things together. We're thinking about the composition, the overall effect of how the thing looks to people, as well as a layout that helps organize things in a way that makes things cognitively accessible to the people that are looking at the image. There is another piece that we're going to talk about, and that's fonts. So that's coming up soon.