The Four Basic Principles of Graphic Design

“You might have gotten away with an ugly flyer in the past, but today your readers/customers/clients are influenced more than ever before by the visual presentation, and ugly flyers go to the bottom of the pile.”

Robin Williams, Author
Non-Designers Design Book

Whether your task is to design a sales brochure, display ad, or newsletter, the purpose is the same: to communicate a message to an audience and produce a desired response. Put simply, the design you develop is not just about appearance—it is also about the performance of the target audience. Thus, good design is measured equally by form and function.

According to Robin Williams in her extremely popular Non-Designers Design Book, there are four principles of design that underlie every design project:

- **Alignment**
- **Proximity**
- **Contrast**
- **Repetition**

**Alignment**
Alignment refers to how text and graphics are placed on the page. Alignment creates order, organizes page elements, indicates groups of items, and emphasizes visual connection. Interestingly, good alignment is rarely noticed by the reader, while misalignment is immediately detected.

There are two basic types of alignment: edge and center. Edges can be aligned along the top, bottom, left or right. Center alignment can be either horizontal or vertical. When designing a page, be sure that each element (text, graphics, photographs) has a visual alignment with another item.

**Proximity**
Proximity describes the distance between individual design elements. Close proximity implies a relationship between the elements; conversely, lack of proximity separates them.
Like alignment, proximity is a tool of visual organization. Placing elements in close proximity unifies them and communicates a sense of order and organization to the reader. When it isn’t possible to group items proximately, then unity between two elements can be achieved by using a third element to connect them.

Contrast
Contrast adds interest as well as organization to the page, and is created when two elements are different. Common ways to create contrast include varying size, color, thickness, shape, style or space. The greater the difference between elements, the greater the contrast.

Besides adding interest to the page, contrast can be used to direct the reader around the page and to emphasize importance or differences. Contrast is only effective when it is evident.

Repetition
Repetition brings visual consistency to page design. When the same design elements—such as uniform size and weight of headline fonts or use of initial caps to begin a chapter—are used, it becomes clear that the pages are related to each other part of the same document. In this way, repetition creates unity.

Some examples of repetition are using the same style of headlines, the same style of initial capitals, or repeating the same basic layout from one page to another.

The four principles of design are interconnected and work together to communicate the message. Contrast is often the most important visual attraction on a page. If the page elements are not the same, then make them very different instead of making them similar. Repetition helps develop the organization and strengthens the unity of a page. Repeating visual elements develops the design. Every element should have some visual connection with another element on the page, creating a consistent and sophisticated alignment.

The Basis of Good Design
In The Desktop Publisher’s Idea Book, Chuck Green describes five steps that form the basis of good design:

- Set the goal
- Compose the message
- Choose the medium
- Select a design
- Illustrate the message

Set the goal
Every design task begins by defining the end to be achieved—the goal of the design project, which is most often related to the action desired by the target audience. Is the purpose to invite an inquiry? To generate a purchase? To persuade the reader to a new point of view? Keep the goal in mind and allow it to determine the design.

Compose the message
The message is the most important element of any marketing piece—it informs the reader of the benefits of taking action. Affecting behavior is the result of explaining to the reader what to expect from the product or service . . . “What’s in it for me?”

If you have a limited amount of space, devote most of it to benefits. Leave the list of features and the company story off altogether, or include it in abbreviated form. Make the message reader-centered, clearly describing the enjoyment the reader will experience or the pain that will be relieved.

Choose the medium
The project’s purpose and message both determine the layout. Sometimes the layout will be obvious—a business card or a display ad. Other times the choices will be broader—a flyer, brochure, or self-mailer. The ultimate choice might be determined by the method of delivery to the target audience (e.g., direct mail, trade show, or mailed in response to an inquiry).

Select a design
To achieve maximum effectiveness, a design must take into account a myriad of elements related to the target audience (e.g., age, education, language skills, visual preferences, cultural expectations, level of knowledge, and desires). These and other factors affect the selection of color palette, fonts, illustrations, and photographs.

Illustrate the message
Photographs and illustrations work the hardest when they reiterate and reinforce the message, or show what can’t be said. Secondary use is to set the tone or draw attention to a specific element of the design. It is always desirable when a photograph or illustration can do both simultaneously.

Clip art collections are a convenient and economical way to find an appropriate illustration. However, we offer a word of caution about websites offering free clip art—read the “Terms of Use” carefully. Clip art in the public domain (and therefore free) has no restrictions on use. Look for conditions that limit use to personal applications—meaning the image cannot be used in a business application such as a brochure. Also be aware that much clip art is intended for use on websites, which may make the resolution too low for commercial printing.

Additional tips
- Be sparse and simple. Carefully select the design elements so a few will convey the message. A design cluttered with too many elements may confuse or overwhelm the reader. For example, use one large photograph or graphic on a page rather than several smaller ones. Use lots of white space—studies show that designs with significant white space are more pleasant to read and attract attention.
- Use color sparingly. As a design element, color is very important, though too much color can be counterproductive. Use a consistent color palette, using contrasting color sparingly, so that its impact is increased.
- Limit the selection of fonts. Select one typeface and size for body copy, and one typeface for headlines—use these throughout your design. Using too many fonts can be distracting, and may interfere with page organization.
- Write clear, comprehensible copy. Good design effectively conveys a message. Write in short rather than long sentences. Avoid jargon and clichés. Use a vocabulary level appropriate for the audience you are trying to reach.

By paying close attention to the four basic principles of design, the five steps that form the basis of good design, and the additional tips, you will ensure that your design communicates effectively.

Ask us to critique
Because we know you want the best possible design and layout, we will be happy to look at your preliminary layout and let you know whether your design is compelling or could use a modification.
Consider Using a Template

Templates are pre-designed documents that contain placeholders (such as boxes, dummy text, and headlines) that can be overwritten with actual copy, photographs and/or graphics. Templates may be purchased, or you can create your own.

A template can be a great time saver, can provide design inspiration, and can augment the design capabilities of an amateur designer. Using a template will also provide consistency.

If you choose to use a template, select one that is appropriate for the job at hand. Begin by selecting a template that is the correct size and does not require extensive alterations. Other tips for customization include:

- **Use your own graphics.** Substitute your own graphics or clip art for what was included in the template. Since graphics also include rules and boxes, you can change the size or location to better fit your needs.

- **Alter the type.** Change the template’s typeface, change the leading (the space between lines), or type justification. When selecting a new typeface, be sure not to stray too far away from the original design. For example, substituting a casual typeface for a formal one will likely compromise the design.

- **Change the color.** Sometimes a dramatic change can occur when color is changed—even if the design is unaltered.

- **Change the background.** Create a reverse (white or light text on a dark background) to draw the reader’s eye. The reverse can be an entire headline or just the single capital letter that begins the headline. Do remember that not all typefaces and sizes are suitable for reverses. Fine serifs can disappear in a reverse.

I need to plan a design. Can you give me any tips to get started?

Begin with the end in mind—decide whom you want to reach, and what you want them to learn or do. Try using these check questions to organize your thoughts.

1. Who is the target audience?
2. What must this creative design accomplish?
3. Are there any perceptions of the target audience that must be created or overcome?
4. What is the single most important message the target audience should take away from this design?
5. What is the overall or primary benefit to the target audience?
6. What tone should be conveyed to the target audience?
7. What elements or information must be included in this design?

Today, people with no background in graphic design are creating a wide variety of printed marketing tools. It’s fun to do and usually faster when you do it yourself. There are, of course, many projects that definitely deserve the investment in professional design. Give us a call if you’d like to assist you with a project, or if you would like us to create a template that you can use repetitively in the future.
Design Challenges

When your task is to fit a lot of text into a small amount of space, or if your project consists entirely of text, you face some significant design challenges. Over the years, we have developed some tricks for organizing text to improve readability. Try some of these techniques yourself:

- Add contrast to large blocks of text by using headlines, subheads, headers, footers, pull quotes, sidebars, and bulleted lists.
- Make headlines larger and use a different font than the body copy.
- Add a one-point rule above and below a subhead, and make it span two columns of text.
- Use white space to balance black space by basing the design on a grid.
- Create a drop-cap from three to six times larger than the body copy.

Good design does not come easily. It is a result of studying good design, understanding how to analyze design problems, knowing to whom the design must appeal, applying simple design principles, developing a sensitivity to good design, and lots of trial and error.

Alignment: positioning type characters along a horizontal line. Also called justification.

Black space: the graphics, photographs, and type in a layout.

Bleed: in a layout, any image area that extends beyond the trim line.

Body type: the type used for the main text of a document.

Composition: positioning, formatting, and gathering type; also called page makeup.

Contrast: an element of design that draws your eye to look at a page when two elements are different.

Copy fit: making adjustments to text size, text leading, or otherwise editing text so it fits in a given space.

Design grid: a set of guidelines for aligning and arranging elements on a page. Used during the design process, but invisible to the viewer/reader.

Dingbats: small, ornamental characters used as design elements. A dingbat consisting of a stylized flower or leaf may also be called a printer’s mark or printer’s flower.

Focal point: the center of interest in a page layout.

Icon: a visual image that suggests its meaning.

Knockout: white type on a black or dark background. Also called reverse or drop out.

Leading: in composition, the spacing between lines of type measured in points.

Page layout: a part of graphic design that includes the arrangement of elements on a page. Similar to composition, but applied mainly to print media.

Print ready file: the final image composition consisting of type, photographs, line art, and other graphic elements, laid out in the size and position in which they will appear on the final printed product.

Proximity: refers to the spatial relationships between elements.

Repetition: repeating certain elements of the design.

Rule: a line used for borders, boxes, and other typographic effects. Specified in a range of thickness called weights, measured in points.

White space: in design, the absence of type, photographs, or graphic elements. Trapped white space is white space appearing within lines of type, usually created by justifying type on a short line length.
Variable Data Strategies

Beyond ‘Dear John’ personalization!
The early days of variable data digital printing conjure up images of dot-matrix printers and personalized salutations. Our state-of-the-art systems provide both enhanced flexibility and true commercial print quality for each piece produced.

Understanding the possibilities
With variable data digital printing, each piece produced has the potential to be unique. This is achieved by marrying a base layout with specific information associated with the recipient.

Substitution variables
An example is a salutation such as Dear [firstname], which uses a simple substitution variable to insert each recipient’s first name. Each variable that will be substituted must have its own unique placeholder. Our software links the placeholder value, in this case [firstname], with the corresponding field, which in this case is the first name field of your data.

Substitution variables are not limited to the standard name-and-address fields of a typical contact record. There is no limitation on the placeholders you can insert in your layouts; of course, each placeholder must have a field associated with it in your data set.

Substitution variables aren’t limited to text, either. There are actually five types of substitution variables we can define for a given run:

- **Text.** The most basic variable type, a text value in the record replaces the placeholder text in the layout.
- **Calculation.** A calculation variable combines one or more variable values and static text to create the value for each record. You could calculate the [fullname] variable, for example, by combining [firstname, a space and [lastname].
- **Color.** You can specify Pantone or CMYK color values as a variable—define a color not otherwise used as a placeholder—and we replace all instances of that color with the color associated with each record or with a logic statement (e.g., if male, blue; if female, red).
- **Image.** You can create image substitution variables by including a file name with the data for each record. You’ll need to supply us with all of the files that will be substituted, along with the image placeholder file name that has been included in the master layout.
- **Layout.** Finally, you can define multiple base layouts for your job if you identify the layout file to use with each record. An example of where this might be applicable would be an event sponsored by two organizations. Invitations mailed to each contact could reflect the branding of the organization that supplied the contact be processed.

Creating rules to simplify data
In the layout example mentioned previously, you wouldn’t have to specify the layout as part of your data set. If there is a field identifying the source of the contact, we can write a rule that determines the file to be used based on the source field value. This would eliminate the need to have frequently-appearing values in every contact record you create.
A Guide to Postcard Marketing

“Postcards are the simplest, most cost-effective format available. They’re an excellent choice for making an announcement or driving customers to a store, website, or event.”

United States Postal Service

A postcard is one of the most versatile, inexpensive, and effective tools you can have in your marketing tool kit. Compared to the effort and cost of a brochure or a traditional direct mail package mailed in an envelope, a postcard is quick, easy, and a great way to stretch your marketing budget. In addition, some kinds of postcards will help you keep your mailing list updated.

What is a postcard?

Think of a postcard as a miniature billboard—a design space that can hold:

- A photograph of a new product, a staff member, or your location
- A handwritten message to customers
- A reprint of a press release or published article
- A reminder of an upcoming event
- A request for an appointment
- A mini newsletter
- A discount coupon or admission ticket
- A newsworthy happening in your company

The advantage of a postcard is that it does not have to be opened to be read, and if creatively designed, can have impact far beyond its size and cost.

Postcard sizes

Perhaps when you think of a postcard, you think of two sizes: 4.25 x 5.5 inches (one-quarter of an 8.5 x 11 sheet of paper) or 5.5 x 8.56 inches (one-half of an 8.5 x 11 sheet of paper). These two sizes are common and popular, in part because they fit on a standard letter-sized sheet of paper.

To the United States Postal Service (USPS), a postcard is a self-mailer—something that is not in an envelope. A self-mailer can be either a single ply like a postcard, or can be folded over like a brochure or an invitation. It can also be a wide variety of sizes—from 3.5 x 5 inches to 6.125 x 11.5 inches.

Though a postcard may not immediately come to mind when you think of a self-mailer, this can be a very effective direct mail marketing piece. Since postcards do not have to be opened to be read, you may be able to engage the reader with eye-catching graphics or an attention-getting headline. For example, vivid color blocks can draw the reader in to your copy without the reader’s conscious decision to participate. This allows you to make the most of the seven-to-ten-second window of opportunity to interest your reader.

The advantages of first class mail

Mailing the postcard at the first class postage rate has definite advantages. First, the postcard receives delivery priority over all other classes of mail except Priority and Express. Secondly,
it is eligible for ancillary services such as forwarding and address correction at no charge or at rates lower than for standard mail. Here is an example: if the postcard is undeliverable as addressed (UAA) and has Return Service Requested as the ancillary service endorsement, then the postcard will be returned at no charge to the sender with the new address or with the reason for non-delivery.

Because the ancillary service of return service requested is available at no charge, postcards are an excellent way to update your mail list. For less postage than it costs to mail a letter, you can get the information you need to keep the addresses in your mail list current. With approximately 17% of the population moving every year (according to the USPS), this is an important part of mail list management.

**When is a postcard not a postcard?**

To be eligible for the postcard price, the card must be:

- Shaped like a rectangle with an aspect ratio between 1:1.3 and 1:2.5
- Not less than 3.5 or more than 4.25 inches high
- Not less than 5 inches or more than 6 inches long, and
- Not less than .007 inches or more than .016 inches thick

If a postcard exceeds 4.25 x 6 inches, the USPS classifies it as letter mail for the purpose of determining postage. So, despite the advantages of using a postcard size for mailing, when you need more room for your message than can fit on 4.25 x 6 inches, you will have to move to a larger size.

One popular size is 5.5 x 8.5 inches—half of a sheet of letter paper. This size offers advantages in printing, since it is a clean cut with no waste out of an 8.5 x 11 sheet. For example, if you want to take delivery of 1000 postcards, it will take a press run of only 500 sheets to produce a yield of 1000. However, since the USPS considers this letter-sized mail for the purpose of determining postage, it now becomes advantageous to consider using the standard mail class for your mailing.

Standard Mail has two very big pros over First Class and Presorted First Class. First, it is the least expensive commercial postage class . . . almost 50% cheaper than first Class. This enables you to save quite a bit on postage. Second, it also allows up to 3.3 ounces per piece without any increase in postage. If your mail is heavier than 3.3 ounces, the postage surcharge for being overweight increases very gradually.

These reduced rates invite the interesting prospect of an oversized postcard—perhaps 6 x 9 inches or even a full 6 1/8 x 11. These "super size" postcards are eye catching in a stack of mail because they will be either taller or longer than the rest of the mail pieces.

Regardless of the size you select for your postcard, you will need to pay close attention to two things: the aspect ratio and the mail panel. The aspect ratio is the relationship of the length to the height of the postcard. It is calculated by dividing the length by the height. To qualify as letter mail, the aspect ratio must fall between 1:1.3 and 1:2.5. If you mail often, you might want to request a handy template of letter-sized mail dimensional standards from the USPS.

**Seven uses for postcards**

1. **Direct prospects to your website.** Using a postcard to direct prospects to your website has traditionally been one of the best ways to announce a new or updated site.
2. **Feature a single product or service.** Consider a series of postcards that feature your fastest selling or most useful products and services.
3. **Test an offer.** Using a postcard to test various offers is a cost-effective way to determine which offer generates the greatest response rate.
4. **Remind people about an event.** Postcards can be an important part of building attendance at an event such as a fundraising activity.
5. **Provide something of value.** A postcard can serve as a redeemable coupon or discount certificate in order to reward customers or encourage prospects to make an initial purchase.
6. **Convince prospects to move ahead.** A postcard provides an alternative to phone calls and emails in order to convince a customer to move ahead.
7. **Highlight a staff member.** Remember, people buy from people. Help your customers get to know your customer service and sales staff.

**Effective use of the mail panel**

Contrary to common usage, the mail panel on a postcard does not need to take up the entire right half of one side. An addressing area of 4 inches wide by 2.25 inches high is sufficient for most inkjet addressing machines or for affixing labels.

When positioning the mail panel, remember this important rule—to meet the aspect ratio, the mail panel must be oriented so that the length is greater than the width. If the width is greater than the length, the postcard will be subject to a surcharge for size.

We’d also like to remind you that we would be happy to relieve you of remembering all these things by designing for you. Just call [RepFullName] at [RepPhone].
What makes a great offer?

Compelling offers are:

- Valuable to your customer or prospect
- Aligned with your products and services
- Easy to understand
- Relevant to your target audience’s business or personal needs
- Unique to your brand
- Easy to redeem
- Accompanied by a compelling call to action

Interested in making a lasting impression with promotional products? Call [RepFullName] at [RepPhone].