Page Design:

Directing the Reader's Eye

By Christine Sevilla

Effective page design maps a viewer's route through information. When designing information, your objective is to lead the viewer's eye directly to your message. Readers of English read from left to right and from the top of the page to the bottom. (The typical page-scanning pattern actually forms a Z.) This habit of left-to-right eye movement dominates most design decisions in the West and is the basis for most conventional graphic design of print publications.

A few important principles—emphasis, flow, alignment, repetition, and unity—and a couple of techniques—styles and grids—can make your layout work for you. Use and place graphics and copy well (with feedback from representatives of your audience), develop clear, understandable content, and your message will come through loud and clear.

A Few Design Principles

Design principles offer guidelines for presenting information clearly. Sure, the rules are made to be broken, but they are best broken by the experts.

Emphasis

Without emphasis, nothing stands out. In any document, you undoubtedly want to stress something. Generally the top of the page is the most eye-catching location, but readers also tend to focus on the brightest, most contrasting, and heaviest elements. Your focal point should dominate the layout; to be safe, you can locate it at the top, where a reader's eyes naturally begin to scan the page. Use color, placement, and size judiciously to amplify the meaning of your text. Color, for instance, is not absolutely necessary for readability—and if used without restraint, it can be distracting. If a page has more than one dominant element or focal point, your reader has to guess where to start.

Flow

The elements in your design should flow, directing the reader's eye from element to element. For example, look at the two report covers in Figure 1. Which one leads your eye better along the page?

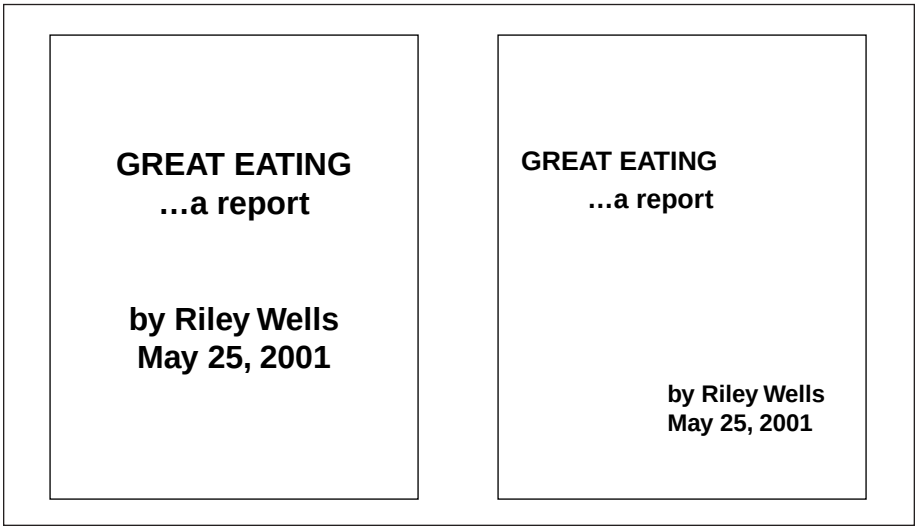
The example on the right makes better use of the space on the page and aligns the elements along an implied line from the end of the word "report" to the beginning of the word "by." The reader's eye follows the path.

Simple lines can pull the reader's eye toward the most important information, or toward elements that follow in a sequence. A line used this way, called a *leading line* in art or photography, guides viewers in the direction you set. Often the line is implied: Think of a news photo in which several people are looking intently at one person in the corner—the line of this gaze directs the reader's attention toward this person.

Alignment

Alignment assists the flow of a document. The document on the top in Figure 2 contains many random elements. Readers are not directed to any particular place as a starting point, nor are they provided a clear path to follow as they scan the page. Aligning the textual elements, removing unnecessary elements, sizing the needed graphics, and creating a large banner to signal a starting point give readers a path to follow in the bottom document in Figure 2.

Figure 1. Two examples of a report cover.



Patrick J. LaCroix/Getty

Figure 2. The document on the bottom illustrates how proper alignment directs the reader's eye.

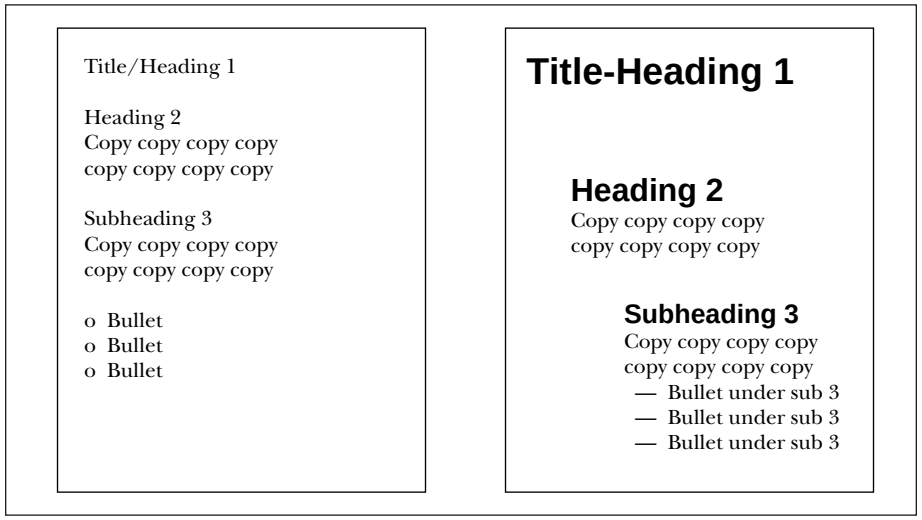
Repetition

Graphic elements cannot do all the work in the variety of documents and Web sites we create. Consistent repetition is a key to navigation. If your text is arranged in regular, repeating patterns, your readers can easily learn the rhythms in your document and predict where information will be located.

Unity

Unity refers to how well the layout hangs together. What would you think if your grocery store stocked dog food, candy, and beer on the same aisle? How would you know where to find these items? Fortunately, most stores are orga-

Figure 3. A document without a design style (left) and a document with a design style (right).



nized more coherently, but even if disparate items were on the same aisle, consistent signage and different shelving styles could signal their location. Unity establishes a relationship among parts, even if the parts are quite different. Repetition of headings throughout this magazine, for example, establishes a unifying visual guide, connecting a variety of content types.

A Few Techniques

Two significant ways to ensure consistency and unity in document layout are setting styles and using a grid.

Styles

Spend much time writing on a computer and you'll want to establish a design style—a consistent visual hierarchy. The main benefit of establishing a style before creating a document, presentation, or Web site is enhancing the user's ease of navigation. Word processing packages have default styles that you can modify, or you can develop your own style. The beauty of automated style setting is its uniformity, which allows you to do less thinking about structure and more thinking about content. This advantage is especially critical for large documents.

To get an idea of how styles can work for you, create a short document like the one on the left in Figure 3 and modify it until you see exactly the look you want. The original document is very "flat" and undifferentiated, while the document on the right has a certain "texture" that draws the eye to specific items.

In the example on the right in Figure 3, formatting items such as outdenting, indenting, alignment, and font styles and sizes organize the copy for readability.

Grids

Page design layout grids, like those in Figure 4, are most often depicted as gray blocks (the copy) against a white background (the page). For a text-heavy document, a good layout is critical to the reader's comfort and ability to navigate. You create patterns that will familiarize the reader with the organization of elements on the page.

The first thing your reader sees is not the title or other details of the page, but its overall pattern and contrast. Repetition is a key to navigation. If your text is organized into regular, repeating patterns, you will make it easy for the reader to learn the structure and rhythm of your document and to predict where information is likely to be found.

A grid is a basis for decisions, like a visual procedure. Establish a layout grid for handling your text and graphics and use it to build consistency and unity within a longer document. (If you're creating a poster or an ad, you don't need to use a grid since repetition isn't a factor.) Repetition provides a coherent graphic identity that reinforces a distinct sense of "place," making your document more memorable. A clear and consistent visual hierarchy allows readers to find information quickly.

Page through a few books and sketch out the grids you observe. Look at an encyclopedia, a cookbook, and other books full of illustrations, and then look at some newsletters or magazines. The grid provides the structure for the layout and items that cross columns, like headlines, photos, illustrations, or captions, which add liveliness and visual variety. The modified version of Grid C in Figure 5 shows a graphic, represented as a box with an X, and body text that spans two columns. The eye accepts the merger of the two right columns, and the document is enhanced by controlled variety.

Almost any grid can be made to work, but there are some clear choices. Newspapers use the multi-column grid for two reasons: Several stories need to appear on one page, and articles can be read more quickly if the column is narrower. A narrative report or book would employ Grids B or D, which contain a scanning column (the white space beside the text) for inclusion of graphics or headings. A dictionary or encyclopedia might use a variation on Grid A, which allows for illustrations in the scanning column while permitting quick reading of the text areas. Newsletters often use formats like Grid E. Considerations such as font and

Figure 4. Examples of layout grids.

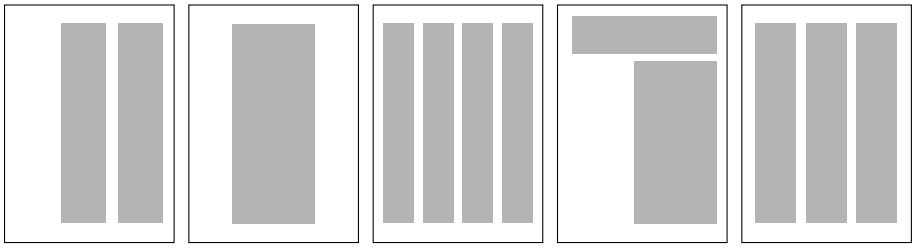
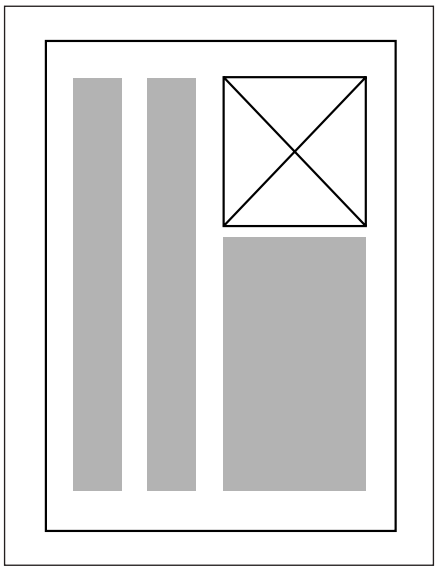


Figure 5. Modified Grid C from Figure 4.



space between lines affect grid decisions, too: Smaller fonts and tighter spacing lend themselves to grids with narrower columns.

It isn't necessary to limit yourself to one grid within a document. But each grid should have a purpose; don't confuse the reader by using different grids carelessly. You'll notice the use of several grids in a magazine, for example, but they will all appear in a logical format that is suited to the material. Letters to the editor will appear in two or three narrow columns, while a main article may have one large column with a scanning column of white space. Letters are usually short and readers appreciate a format that allows quick scanning, while a main article commands a larger dedicated space, with headlines or illustrations in the scanning column. The grid you choose depends on what you're building. There is no "one-size-fits-all" for the variety of documents out there. Fitting the formatting to the content can make the information more understandable.

Handling Graphics

Graphic Markers

People often skim a document to find something worth reading. The markers they see should be integral to the content. Decorative graphics, such as icons and other visual markers, have their uses, but they can cause confusion if used without a clear purpose. Ask yourself or a potential audience member whether an element adds clarity or helps the reader navigate. If the reader can manage just as well without the graphic element, leave it out. Clarity is enhanced by restraint. Give your readers only what they need to understand the message.

I recall a book that was intended to be a reference for a computer system. Unfortunately, the book employed an elaborate set of graphic symbols that required as much effort to decode as it took to read the text they labeled! A good example of the use of graphic symbols is a guide to flowering plants that includes simple symbols for shade or sun, perennial or annual, and wet or dry conditions. In this case, the symbols are functioning as shorthand, freeing the reader from poring over text to find out specific details.

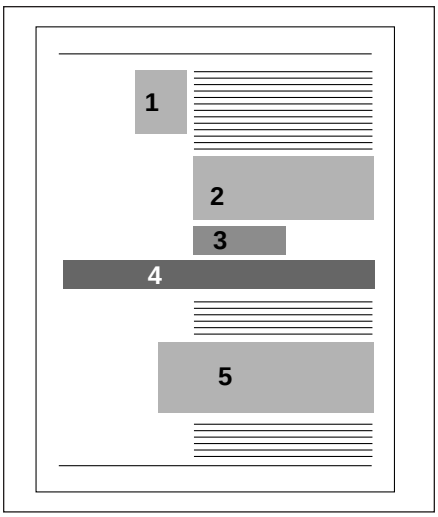
Placing Graphics

It is best to use flush left or flush right placement for headings and graphics. Think of these positions as having a hinge upon which things can hang and flip one way or the other: The hinge provides an anchor in space so that elements do not appear to be free floating. (Free-floating text can be used effectively, but it requires some know-how.) Centering elements within a column is less effective because white space is broken; it is better to combine white space into one larger unit. Also, centering breaks the reader's rhythm of returning to the beginning of the line.

A very useful guideline, offered by the out-of-print *Xerox Publishing Standards: A Manual of Style and Design* (Watson-Guptill Publications, 1988), is to maintain the integrity of the vertical scanning area and the right margin. Xerox defines the following rules for placing graphics (numbers correspond to the blocks in Figure 6):

1. Place a *small* graphic flush right with the column of text. Positioning the graphic close to the text indicates the connection between them.
2. Place a graphic that is *the same width as the text column* flush right and left justified.
3. If the graphic is *narrower than the text column,* place it flush left within the text column.
4. Limit the *area of an illustration* to the width of the margins of the document.
5. If the graphic is *wider than the text column,* place it flush right within the text column and let it extend into the white space, which is called the scanning column.

Figure 6. An example of graphics aligned with column edges.



The Test

When you think your work is complete, ask at least one member of your target audience to look at it and tell you what message is initially conveyed. Find out if he or she has reviewed it in the way you had expected, and if any elements were inappropriate—perhaps too jarring, too large, too small, or difficult to read. Your reviewer's feedback can help you fine-tune your message beyond the design basics.

Enjoy your next layout project!

Christine Sevilla is president of lumin guild. She leads seminars on information design, conducts courses and focus groups via the Web, and creates instructional systems. She is the author of many articles and is an adjunct professor for Rochester Institute of Technology. This article is based on her new book, Information Design Desk Reference, *to be published in September 2002 by Crisp Publications, Inc. Christine can be reached at* ***cs@luminguild.com****.*