

Visual Design



Effective visual design helps readers understand how information is organized and which information is most important. While specific design guidelines may vary depending on the field and audience, general design principles can be applied to almost any type of visual design, including flyers, brochures, slide presentations, articles, and résumés. This handout covers five design principles: **contrast**, **repetition**, **balance**, **alignment**, and **hierarchy**, but tailor your work to your audience and assignment.

Contrast

Contrast refers to differences in color, value, size, font, etc. When things look different, they draw the reader's attention and create a focus for the document. Carefully choose a few elements you want to emphasize, and make them look intentionally different from the rest of the text.

Example: The title and headings on this handout are a different size, value, and font than the body text, which makes them stand out.

Repetition

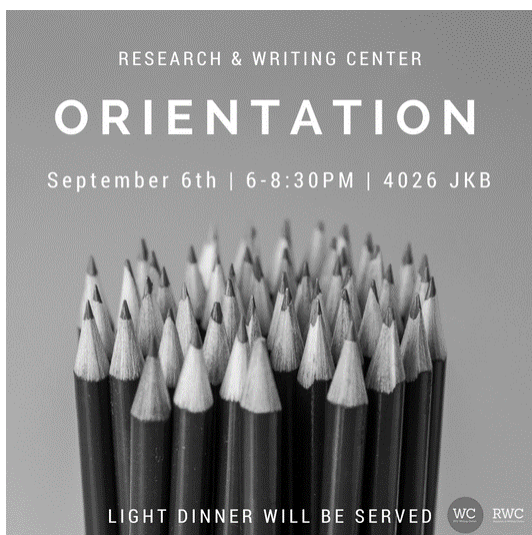
Repeating visual elements gives a piece of work unity. Making things look the same indicates that they are on the same organizational level. Elements such as font, bullets, numbering, lines, design elements, color, or formatting can be repeated to make the piece more aesthetically pleasing.

Example: The title and headings on this handout use the same font style, which provides unity throughout the document.

Balance

In visual design, elements in the piece that are large, dark, or dense have visual weight. Areas of white space, or blank areas in a piece, have no visual weight. *Balance* usually refers to an equal distribution of visual weight. To achieve a balanced design, arrange the elements so that the visual weight is evenly distributed.

Example: A design could be balanced with a symmetrical layout by placing the same number of equal sized elements on both sides of the piece. A design could also be balanced with an asymmetrical layout by offsetting one large element with several small elements or by placing small elements opposite large elements. The flyer below provides one example of balance.



- **Contrast:** The white words stand out against the dark background. Additionally, the larger size of the word *orientation* helps the reader know it is the most important word. **Note:** Making too many elements contrast can be distracting.
- **Repetition:** Repeating the font type, capitalization, lines, spacing, and alignment creates unity.
- **Balance:** The text on the top balances with the image on the bottom because visual weight is evenly distributed. The white space on the left and the right of the image is equal.

Alignment

Aligning text or visuals can create a more aesthetic design. Alignment indicates the organizational structure of the piece. Since English is read from left to right, most text is left aligned. Ideas that are subordinate are often indented. Choosing to make an element right aligned, center aligned, or justified draws the reader's attention.

Example: The headings and body text on this handout are left aligned. All of the examples are indented, but still aligned with each other. The title is centered so it catches the reader's eye.

Hierarchy

Hierarchy is arranging and organizing visual elements to show which elements are most important. Hierarchy is used for titles and headings and is created through contrast, repetition, and alignment. Making words large, capitalized, bold, underlined, or colored shows the reader that those words are on a higher organizational level. Indenting words indicates a lower organizational level.

Example: The reader will know that the examples on this handout are important because the word *example* is bolded. The reader will also know that the example fits under the category listed above it because the whole example is indented. The résumé below provides an additional example of alignment and hierarchy.



- **Alignment:** The title and contact information are right aligned to draw the reader's attention. The headings and explanations are left aligned, so they are easy to read. The descriptions are bulleted and indented to set them apart from the rest of the text.
- **Hierarchy:** The headings are bolded, so the reader can easily see how the document is organized. The examples are indented to indicate they are subordinate.

Tips and Best Practices

- Consider your audience as you use visual design. What do they value? How will they be accessing your work? What visual design elements are commonly used with this audience or within this field?
- Get feedback from colleagues and potential audience members. Use feedback to revise your visual design to enhance your communication and connection with the audience.
- Look at your document from several distances. Does it look good up close and far away?
- Explain each visual element you include in a larger work, such as a paper or presentation. This can be done in the text, as a caption, or as a verbal explanation.
- Remember to include citations for protected material you have used or adapted.