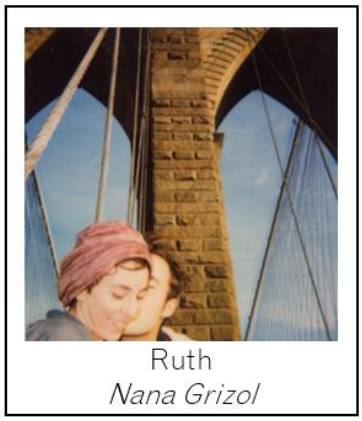
The Tools of Graphic Design

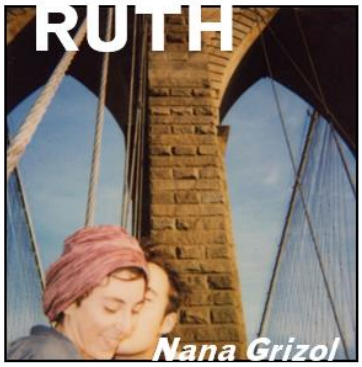
Framing

No graphic can exist without a frame, and, as such, framing is an important tool in how the messages of graphic designs are ultimately expressed (Lupton & Phillips, p117). By themselves, frames are just the containers for the items within it, but, with their use, they can provide visual structure and modularity while separating their contents from the rest of the surrounding page (Lupton & Phillips, p117). In doing so, frames can partition off their contents as self-contained objects, while also setting a standard scale within them. Frames that that are similar can group and compare related objects or can vary with weight and size to emphasize their content's importance (Lupton & Phillips, p117).

Notably, when it comes to the spacing in- and outside of the frame, padding makes up the distance between the frame border and its internal contents, whereas margin makes up the negative-space between the frame border and its external surroundings (Lupton & Phillips, p120; Hossain, web). In doing so, margins can provide a protective space from the frame/contents and the rest of the surrounding page, whereas padding can emphasize the content as an object and leave space for headers, captions, and other information (Lupton & Phillips, p120). In contrast, when little-to-no padding is used, the contents can 'bleed' off the side of the frame, making them appear larger and more active (Lupton & Phillips, p120). As well, some styling conventions also come with 'outlines' that surround a frame's borders, notably which do have set widths and exist within the margin space (Hossain, web).

Despite their usefulness in visual organization and modularity, frames sometimes need to be utilized carefully as to not separate their contents from the surrounding descriptions. Frames that separate image and text, even when both are within it, can enforce a sort of visual ultimatum, forcing the reader to only take in one medium at a time (Lupton & Phillips, p121). While this may be useful for cases such as paintings, where images and descriptors are sometimes best interpreted separately, it can also ruin the immersion for cases where the text is just as important to the piece as the image, such as covers (Lupton & Phillips, p121). There may be different ways of solving this, from incorporating the text within the image itself to overlapping the text in front or on its own place, but care needs to be taken to discern how the method impacts the message (Lupton & Phillips, p121). Framing is important and inherent to all graphic design, but can also contribute to the perceived scale, structure, and mood of their contents.





Hierarchy

Hierarchy is an important tool in graphic design in organizing and ordering the informational or visual importance of several datapoints (Lupton & Phillips, p129). Hierarchy can introduced through a variety of means – most commonly through properties such as scale, color, font, and alignment – but also through the clever use of layout and rhythm. In doing so, an effective hierarchy could guide the viewer through a graphic, emphasizing important datapoints while perhaps recontextualizing others (Lupton & Phillips, p129). A design without hierarchy, whether textually or visually, can look flat and somewhat confusing as to follow, muddling the delivery of the message to its viewers (Lupton & Phillips, p129). Common mistakes in graphics and presentations include the overabundance of similar text, which can overwhelm a hierarchy and the audience's attention as where to look next (Lupton & Phillips, p130). As such, good hierarchies don't only structure the order of datapoints, but can reduce informational bloat in a graphic as well. When considering menus or table of contents, for example, effective hierarchies can eliminate repeated disclaimers, subheaders, and chapter counts for each line. In doing so, it can highlight the main purpose of a datapoint, abstracting it towards center stage (Lupton & Phillips, pp130-132).

"Yeah, well. The Dude abides."
The Dude
The Big Lebowski.
Directed by the Coen Brothers.
Working Title Films, 1998.

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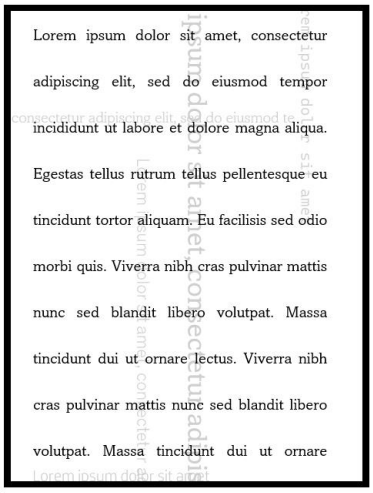
Notably, hierarchy tends to have rules as to how visual properties correspond to their rank of importance. For example, linear properties such as scale can communicate hierarchy quite intuitively; Items that are larger tend to draw more attention and impression, often reserved for purposes such as titles and headers, while decreasingly smaller items often make up the bulk of or less-relevant information, from text passages to subnotes to even citations. However, when it comes to less binary properties such as color and font, the difference can be muddier and perhaps even subjective to the viewer. Common conventions often place complementing and

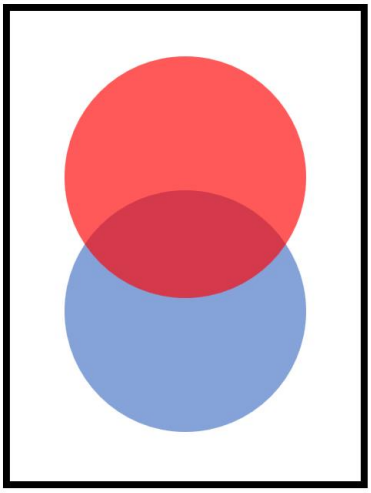
analogous colors at different ends of a hierarchy, or perhaps may recommend sans-serif titles contrasted against serif bodies of text, but in the process of ordering these properties, the structures can also communicate something greater about the hierarchy itself. By playing with these conventions and what their own hierarchy builds upon, one can change the presentation of the graphic itself, whether it focuses on formality, contrast, weight, et cetera.

Layers

Layers are an important consideration in graphic design, as they can add depth and structure to a graphic, as well as deconstruct it into several overlapping parts (Lupton & Phillips, p141). Layers themselves are just several planes that intersect, creating an illusion of items at the top being closer to the viewer than those underneath (Lupton & Phillips, p141). This contributes to a sense of visual hierarchy and structure, highlighting the information in front while obscuring or even grounding the rest as literal background information. Common works that implement heavy layering include collages and maps, which may use the bottom layer as a foundation which it then builds upon with more information (Lupton & Phillips, p142). Layering is particularly thematic in graphic design due to its role in the design and production process throughout history. In the pre-digital era of graphic design, works know as mechanicals or 'paste-ups' used to be created to lay out and eventually capture a publication page, which would involve cutting and pasting elements on separate precisely-aligned layers of paper and acetate (Lupton & Phillips, p141). Today, many applications related to graphic design and image/video editing often mechanically implement layers as overlapping places with related subjects and effects, such that a graphic can designed in parts (Lupton & Phillips, p141). Functionally, not only does this allow the designer to edit and rollback certain features at any time, but it also reinforces the contents of layers as self-contained subjects (Banerjee, web).

Transparency is a useful consideration to layers as well, potentially being a way to add visual complexity, clarity, and comparisons to present images (Lupton & Phillips, p155). Also known as the alpha-level, transparency is a common addition to color systems as well as image processing, allowing one to change the opacity of the current plane or item (w3schools, web). By itself, varying the transparency of a plane or image will just make it appear brighter or darker according to the background color, but when overlapping other layers, it can allow the contents underneath to show through (Lupton & Phillips, p155). This allows layers to be built without obstructing existing information, and can support the legibility of text and other items that would otherwise blend in with the image itself (Lupton & Phillips, p121). When two transparent planes are introduced such that they overlap in part, it can communicate to the reader a visual conflict similar to a Venn diagram, leading them to build relationships between the elements (Lupton & Phillips, p159). Transparency can add to the overall intricacy and complexity of a graphic as well and has often been used to create popular patterns and motifs in other works (Lupton & Phillips, p158). Plaid patterns, see-through fabrics, and even stained-glass windows are all works outside of graphic design that implement transparency, each carrying their own associations (Lupton & Phillips, p158).

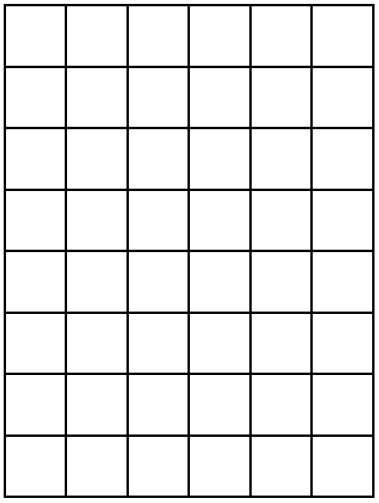




Grid

Gridding in graphic design is an important tool in creating the framework of a graphic, helping direct the placement of items while maintaining a sense of consistency and modularity (Lupton & Phillips, p187). The 'grids' themselves are typically collections of vertical, horizontal, and sometimes even diagonal lines that together form outlines for potential items, and can vary in quantity, angle, and shape (Lupton & Phillips, p187). Using these lines, items can be positioned such that they always exhibit the same angle and spacing, as well as very precisely on certain measurements about the graphic (Lupton & Phillips, p187). This helps improve the modularity of items around the graphic, as the entire layout doesn't need to change to add or swap one image, but instead just needs to snap along the grid. As well, grids can help create consistent spacing for margins and padding, working with the negative-space to provide structure to the overall graphic (Lupton & Phillips, p196). While the grid itself doesn't often exist in the final product, they can often be made out according to the placement of objects along it (Lupton & Phillips, p187). As such, grids are typically implemented as background mechanics within graphic design applications, with the ability to halve or double the width between lines as the player zooms in or out.

Beyond just the sake of consistency and precision, grids can also help guide the aesthetic of graphics in subtle but important ways. As grids decrease the amount of lines that make them up, it is usually easier for a reader to discern where each column starts and stops, giving the graphic a very geometric and rational aesthetic. (Lupton & Phillips, p192) As well, grids can be useful to divide an image compositionally, demonstrating how items and planes can contribute to a graphic's balance and rhythm (Lupton & Phillips, p188-191). Other compositional rules that involve grids include the rule of thirds, which separates a graphic or image into thirds both horizontally and vertically, and argue that points of interest should be place at the intersection at their outlines, as that is where the most visual tension and intrigue is concentrated (Gendelman, web).



Patterns

Patterns are a common technique within graphic design, with the power to create a consistent visual motif across planes and layers while also contributing to the larger overall texture of a graphic (Lupton & Phillips, p201). Broken down, any pattern consists of a repetition of three abstract elements, those being isolated points, linear stripes, and the intersection of the other two elements (Lupton & Phillips, p202). Together, they start to form a complex grid that takes on a new texture by combining the outlines of each of the smaller objects into one larger subject (Lupton & Phillips, p202). In doing so, the positive and negative space can switch between what is considered the points and what is considered the line, creating an interesting dichotomy for the viewer. Notably, any image or shape can comprise the points and lines if they're geometrically similar, enabling patterns to be made using any object whatsoever (Lupton & Phillips, p203). The repetition formed by these objects contributes to the overall rhythm of a piece without needing to be in perfect geometric intervals (Lupton & Phillips, p203). In doing so, the pattern extends a certain cohesiveness across the entire plane, linking in both rhythmic and informational themes.

Due to their versatility, patterns can often be found in works outside of just graphic design, whether that be fabric, architecture, nature, or other sources entirely. As such, they can also carry the cultural weight of connotations they are associated with, and must be used carefully as to not imply unintended messages (Lupton & Phillips, p206; Schank, web). For example, classic camouflage patterns can suggest a more militaristic undertone to a piece, while floral patterns can imply a light and delicate mood instead, both being associated with iconic outfits (Schank, web). As a result, patterns can communicate a sense of identity along with their visual appeal, subtly alluding to outside sources and cultures.