

Basic Design Principles for non-designers



Anyone can learn the mechanics of making a web page. And anyone can make an ugly web page. Lots of people do. But the only reason so many people make bad web pages is that they don't understand the very basic design principles. If you have read *The Non-Designer's Design Book*, by Robin, you can skip this chapter, except perhaps to see how those same principles apply to web pages. If you haven't read that [bestselling and award-winning] book (we strongly suggest you do), then this section may well be the most important chapter in the book for you. The following chapters talk about things like "interface" and "navigation," which require a little more thought and planning. The concepts in *this* chapter are very simple things that will easily and quickly change dorky web pages into more professional-looking pages. They won't make you a brilliant designer, and they won't land you \$20,000 web design contracts, but they will keep you from embarrassing yourself in front of millions of people.

The four basic principles this chapter highlights are **alignment**, **proximity**, **repetition**, and **contrast**. These principles are the underlying factors in every designed piece you see anywhere, on screen or in print. If you just remember these four principles, your web (or printed) pages will look clean, neat, and professional. They will communicate more clearly, people will enjoy them more, and you will be proud.

We took the examples in this chapter straight from the web. We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, and we certainly don't want to get snotty about "sites that suck," so most of the bad examples are ones we recreated based on someone's idea, but we won't tell you who did it. When you look at some of these examples and think, "Nobody would have done that," know that someone did. And they often did it on pages claiming to be "award-winning" and "professional." In many cases, a client had to *pay* someone to do it!

Alignment

Alignment simply means that items on the page are lined up with each other. Lack of alignment is the single most prevalent problem on web pages.

You know you can align items on the left side, the right side, or centered. This is the rule to follow:

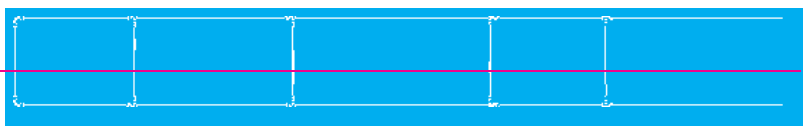
CHOOSE ONE. *Choose one alignment and use it on the entire page.*

Seriously. This means if you choose to align the basic text on the left, then don't center the headline. If you center some of the text, then center all of the text. **Don't mix alignments.**

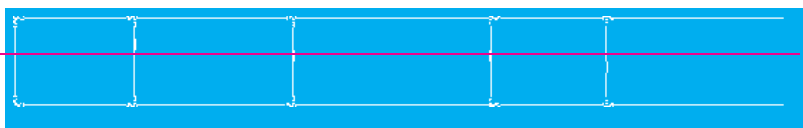
This one principle will radically change the appearance of your pages. We've put several examples on the following pages. The layouts are directly from existing web pages, but we changed the words to protect the innocent.

We know from teaching thousands of non-designers that you might at first find it difficult to line everything up. A centered alignment is safe—it's balanced, symmetrical, calm, formal. And we know that it makes a person with no background in design feel like they are doing cool things by making some text flush left, some flush right, and some centered. But it looks terrible. It's messy. It gives an unprofessional appearance.

And while you're lining up text and graphics, get that text away from the left edge. It is annoying and distracting to have your eyes bump into the left edge of the browser page every time they swing back to get the next line. When you indent text (also called "block quote"), it also indents from the right edge, helping to prevent the text from ending up in those long, dorky, difficult-to-read lines.



Horizontal alignment is just as important as vertical alignment. It's very common to see buttons as in the example above, where the type does not align horizontally. This "up/down/up/down" shift makes the whole strip look messy. So in addition to thinking about vertical alignment, watch the horizontal alignment of the text in your buttons and links.



Type sits on an invisible line called the "baseline." By aligning all the text on the same baseline, the strip of links is neater and more organized. In most web authoring software there is a button for baseline alignment, usually in the table specifications.

Checkout: Select Address

https://www.ratz.com/order/

SIGN IN SHIPPING & PAYMENT PLACE ORDER

Ratty Store

Ship to this address

John
257 Road
Santa Fe, NM 87508
United States

Edit

Choose a shipping address

Is the address you'd like to use displayed below? If so, click the corresponding "Ship to this address" button. Or you can enter a new shipping address.

Or enter a new shipping address

Be sure to click "Ship to this address" when done.

Full Name:

Address Line1:

Address Line2:

City:

State/Province/Region:

ZIP/Postal Code:

Country:

Phone Number:

Ship to this address

Please visit our help pages to learn more about placing an order.

Conditions of Use Privacy Policy © 1996-2006, Amazon.com, Inc.

This form has a great start—there are some strong alignments in place. But there are also several places where the type seems to have been thrown on the page at random.

The fields create a strong alignment. So strengthen the look by aligning the other elements to this line.

In general, nothing should be placed on the page arbitrarily. Everything should have a reason for being where it is. Don't just throw it and see where it sticks. You should be able to state in words why an element is placed where it is.

Amazon.com Checkout: Select Address

https://www.ratz.com/order/

SIGN IN SHIPPING & PAYMENT PLACE ORDER

Ratty Store

Ship to this address

John
257 Road
Santa Fe, NM 87508
United States

Edit

Choose a shipping address

Is the address you'd like to use displayed below? If so, click the corresponding "Ship to this address" button. Or you can enter a new shipping address.

Or enter a new shipping address

Be sure to click "Ship to this address" when done.

Full Name:

Address Line1:

Address Line2:

City:

State/Region:

ZIP/Postal Code:

Country:

Phone Number:

Ship to this address

Please visit our help pages to learn more about placing an order.

Privacy Policy

With the one simple move of aligning all the elements along one edge, the page is instantly cleaner and more organized. When things are clean and organized, they communicate better.

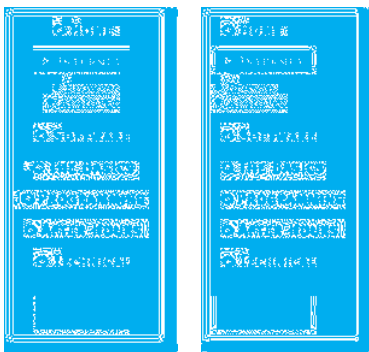
In these examples, draw lines along all the flush left edges. When a strong edge repeats, it gains even more strength.

Alignment doesn't mean that everything is aligned along the **same edge**. It just means that everything has the **same alignment**—either all flush left, all flush right, or all centered.

You're probably so sharp you noticed that we instantly broke our own rule—we have a flush left AND a flush right alignment on this same page. But notice what these alignments do—they strengthen each other.

The other option is to flush left the field names, as in the top example, which makes a ragged edge against the fields themselves. Rather than have a ragged edge against a strong, straight edge, we combined the alignments so their strengths are together.

We discourage beginning designers from centering everything. A centered alignment has its place, but it has to be done consciously—not because you can't think of anything else. One problem with a centered alignment is that it is weak—there's an invisible line down the middle, but the edges have no definition. And because it is so symmetrical and balanced, it's very calm and formal. Is that what you want? (It might be.)



In the right-hand example you can practically see the invisible line down the side of the elements.

Isn't that invisible line stronger than the one going down the center of the left-hand example? The strength of that flush left edge adds strength to the visual impression of the page.

Now, the centered alignment in the left example actually looks rather nice by itself, doesn't it? But it was on a page where everything else was flush left, which made this centered information look weak, which weakened the whole page.

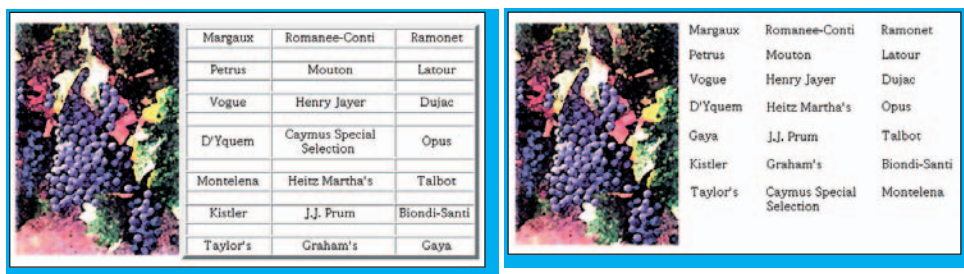
On pages where there is a lot of information to present, it's critical that the layout follow some strict alignment guidelines. This is not just to make it look prettier—it's for clear communication. If a visitor's eye has to wander all over the page trying to follow the flow of information, they're going to miss something or get tired and go away. In the two examples below, which one can you skim faster and still have a better grasp of what's available?



On the left-hand example, someone wasn't very conscious of where items were placed on the page. It doesn't take any more time to line things up than to not line them up.

Turn the dang borders off. In the example below, the strong edges of the aligned text *can* create the visual separations necessary for the columns, but not if the text is centered and the baselines don't align.

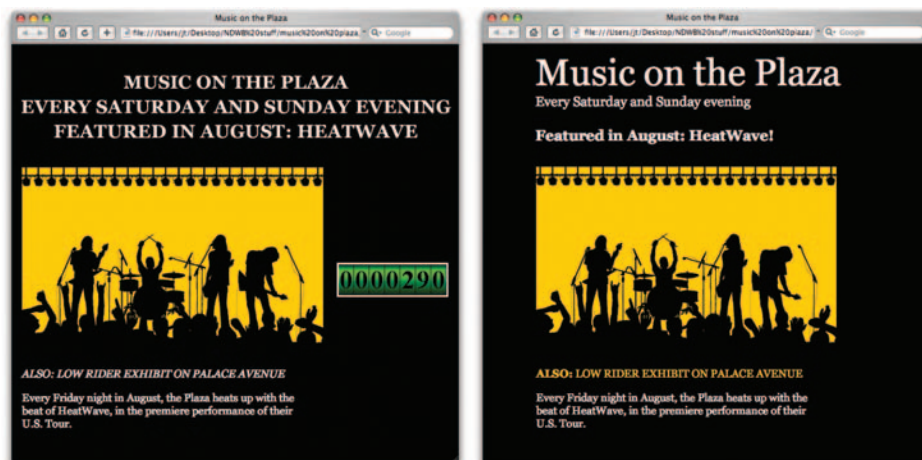
Again, the result of cleaning up the alignment is not just that it looks better, but it communicates better. The table is easier to read.



Margaux	Romanee-Conti	Ramonet
Petrus	Mouton	Latour
Vogue	Henry Jay	Dujac
D'Yquem	Caymus Special Selection	Opus
Montelena	Heitz Martha's	Talbot
Kistler	J.J. Prum	Biondi-Santi
Taylor's	Graham's	Gaya

Pages with strong flush left or flush right alignments usually look more sophisticated than pages where there is a mixture of alignments. The alignment creates a unifying force.

Below is a very typical example of a web page—centered heading, flush left body copy. The flush left elements are bumped up against the left edge. Below are some tips that would help organize the information.



- First, choose one alignment—either center everything or flush everything.*
- Second, move elements away from the extreme left edge of the web page.*
- Third, don't set headline type in all caps. It's hard to read and it looks dumb.*
- Fourth, if you need words in all caps, don't italicize them.*
- Fifth, get rid of the counter. In this case it's superfluous and only serves as junk on the page. If you really want it, put it somewhere else.*
- Sixth, see page 126 for a note about the contrast on this page.*

Proximity

The principle of **proximity** refers to the relationships that items develop when they are close together, in close proximity. When two items are close, they appear to have a relationship, to belong together. When items are physically far from each other, they don't have a relationship. Often on web pages (as well as on printed pages), many items are orphaned unnecessarily, and many other items have inappropriate relationships.

It often happens on web pages that a headline or a subhead is far from the text it belongs with. Sometimes a caption is far from the picture it describes; sometimes a subhead is closer to the text above it than to the text below it. Be conscious of the space between elements. Group items together that belong together.

Open your eyes to the relationships on the screen: squint your eyes and see what elements on the page seem to have connections because of the spatial arrangements. Are they appropriate connections? If not, fix them.



Notice the headlines (see arrows) in this example. They're not only far away from their respective paragraphs, but there is the same amount of space **above** each headline as there is **below** it. Because of all the space, each headline and each paragraph appear as separate elements. Every headline should be close to what it is related to.

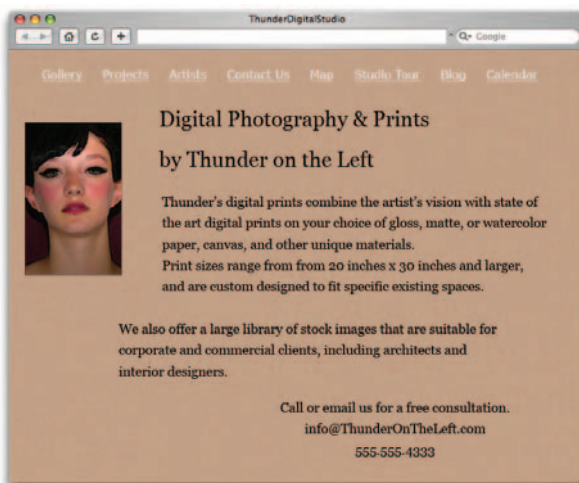


Now the headlines are closely connected with their paragraphs. The page is tidier and the communication is clearer. We used the technique explained at the bottom of page 121 to get the heads closer to the body copy.

You could also use CSS style sheets, as explained on pages 256–260 (which is actually a better solution but not quite as simple).

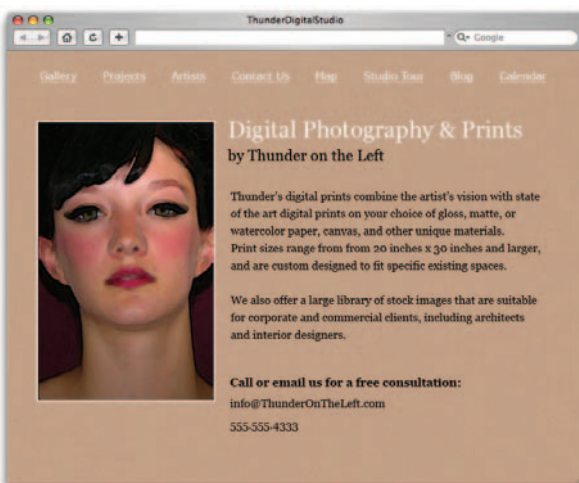
When items that belong together are grouped closer together, the information is much more organized and easier to read. The visual spaces create a hierarchy of information. The individual groups of information are still separated by space, but the space is organized and has a purpose—it's not random space that is breaking elements apart that should be together.

So what is it that maintains the unified structure of the piece, if elements are separated by space? Alignment. Those invisible lines connect the various parts of the page.



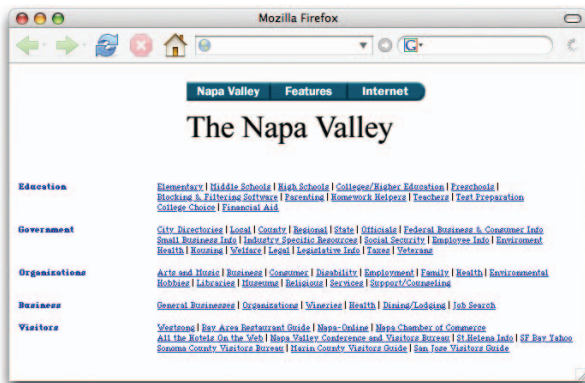
Count how many times your eye has to jump from one element to another on this page. About seven times?

When elements are separated by space, they become visually disconnected from each other. That's one of the reasons you should NEVER hit two Returns between paragraphs—it creates too much separation between items that belong together, as you can see on this page.



Notice how and why the different pieces of information have been grouped. Notice how the elements are aligned. Notice how the spacing arrangements provide visual clues as to the meaning and importance of different pieces of information.

If this page was set in another language, you would still know what each piece of text referred to because of the spacing.



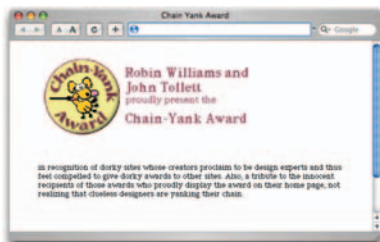
This is a lovely, clean site. The designer created a great solution here to the problem of presenting a large number of links. Let's just tweak two tiny details—



We moved the head over a bit to the left so now it aligns with the body of links. And we moved the links closer to the headings they belong with (that's applying the principle of proximity). This also allows the page to fit within 800 pixels wide so no one has to scroll sideways.



How many separate elements do you see on this page? Four? Each piece of text on the page looks like an unrelated piece because of the distances between elements. There isn't much unity.



If we group the elements that belong together into clusters, we have a more unified and organized layout with clear relationships.



Let's go one step further and strengthen the alignment. There is already a nice, strong line along the edge of the headline. Let's take advantage of that and align the rest of the body copy along that same line.

Paragraph vs. Break

Often you can prevent a big gap between text items that belong together by using a Break instead of a Paragraph.

- The **Paragraph** code in HTML, **<P>**, automatically creates extra space between the elements (between the lines of text, or between a graphic and the text, etc.).

In your web authoring software, **create a Paragraph by hitting Return or Enter.**

- The **Break** code in HTML, **
**, makes the line break at that point where you enter it, but a Break does *not* create extra space.

In your web authoring software, **create a Break by hitting Shift Return or Shift Enter.** (If neither of those work, check your manual.)

As you learned earlier, certain formatting is **paragraph specific**, meaning the formatting applies to the entire paragraph, even if you select only one character. All of the HTML Headings, plus the default text (called Paragraph or Normal), are paragraph specific. Indents, block quotes, and alignments (flush left, flush right, or centered) are also paragraph specific.

Now, the lines or objects separated by a Break are considered by the browser software to be *one paragraph*, even though the lines break at various points. The disadvantage of using a Break, then, is that when you apply something like a Heading format, that Heading applies *to the entire paragraph*, even if you inserted several Breaks within it.

For instance, you might want a headline above a paragraph of text, but you want to use a Break instead of a Paragraph so the headline stays close to its body copy. But then if you apply a Heading format to the headline, the entire paragraph of body copy also takes on the Heading format.

The solution to keeping a headline close to its body copy: Use a Break, but don't apply a Heading format. Instead, select the headline and apply *individual* formatting to it (as explained on page 54): Make the size a little larger, and make it bold and/or a different color (shown below, right).



Repetition

The concept of **repetition** is that throughout a project you repeat certain elements that tie all the disparate parts together. Each page in the web site should look like it belongs to the same web site, the same company, the same concept. Repetition makes this happen.

On a web site, your navigation buttons are a repetitive element. Colors, style, illustrations, format, layout, typography, and so on can all be part of the repetition that unifies the entire site.

Besides unifying a web site, a repetitive (consistent) navigation system helps visitors get the most out of your site because they don't have to learn their way around again on every new page.



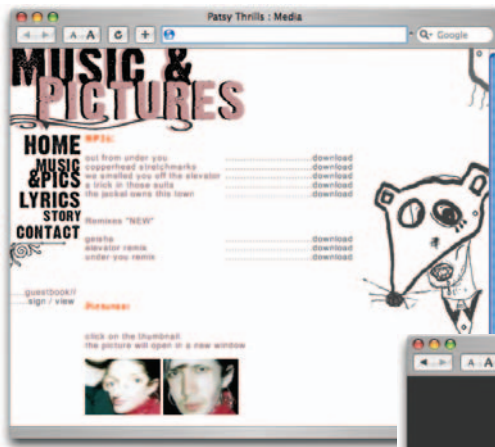
Notice the repetitive elements within each individual page, in addition to those that tie all of the pages together.



So exactly what is it that makes these three pages look like they belong together? They're very simply designed:

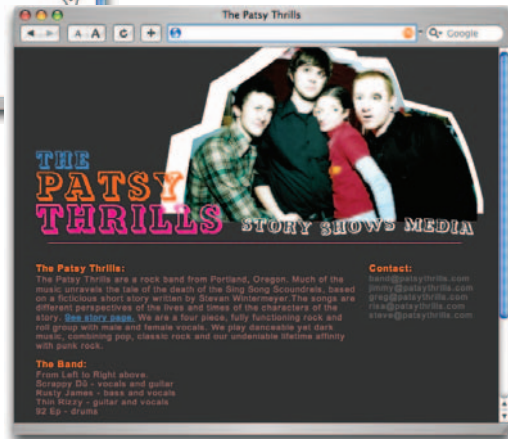
- The logo (that has been **consciously** placed to appear to "bleed" off the edge).
- The background page color.
- The color scheme.
- Repetitive headlines.
- The basic layout is repeated on each page.
- The subheads and visited links are the same pale color.
- The navigation is always in the same place.





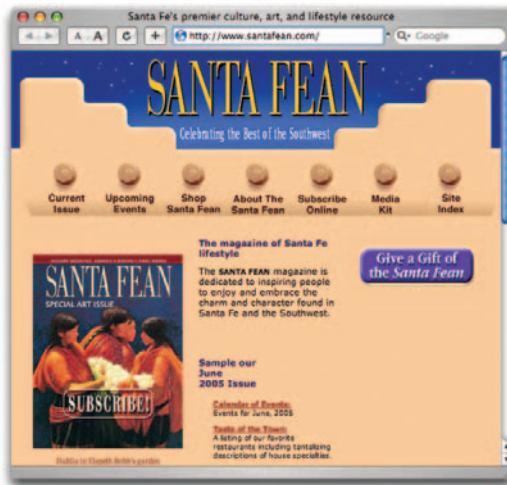
These pages are part of the Patsy Thrills' band web site. Each individual page is nicely done (and there's interesting information), but there is no continuity among the web pages. It looks like different designers were in different rooms designing different pages without ever talking to each other.

Notice, above, that the graphics bump into the edges on purpose, as a design choice, not just because the designer didn't notice or didn't know how to prevent it. It's always amazing to me that you can tell the difference between accidental design and purposeful design.



In this site, it's easy to see the repetitive elements—background, typeface, link images, and colors. Notice the nice, clean alignments. Notice that the home page is an excellent example of a page that looks great centered—why? Imagine that same page in Times, all caps. Can you visualize the difference?

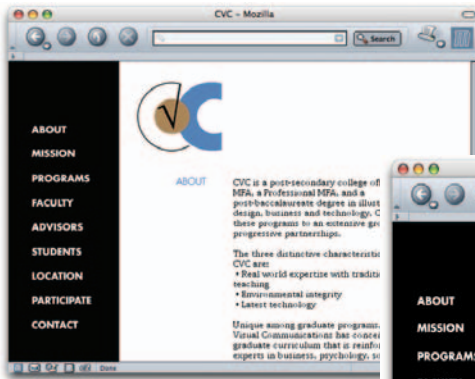




Hey, do these three pages look like they belong together? Why?

- The home page graphics have been adapted to apply to the rest of the pages. (The separate graphic elements that comprise the rooftop are all the same, so once the graphics download on the first page, the rest of the pages come in very quickly.)
- Certain elements recur on every page in the same place—what are they?
- Besides the repetition, also notice the links above the wall—there is a clue that tells you what page you are currently viewing.



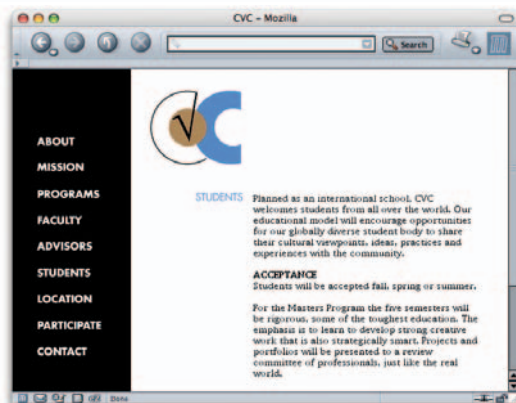
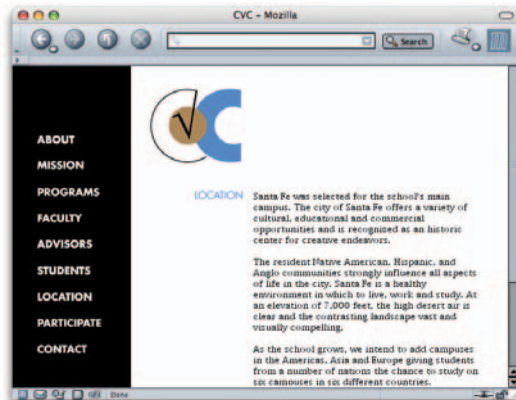
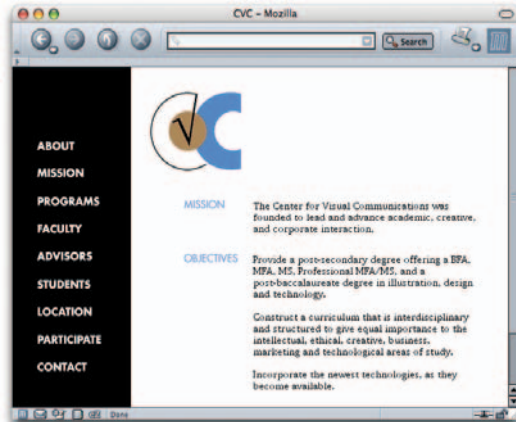


So exactly what is it that makes this very simple layout look so sophisticated and elegant? Think about it for a minute or two.

For one thing, there is very clear repetition, not just in the strong black bar and logo, but in the stark and simple layout, the rules, the spacing, and of course in the colors. In this site you can clearly see how the strong repetition of elements has added a high level of professionalism to the design.

Also look at the clean alignments. I guarantee that if some of the text was centered and some flush left, the pages would not feel so strong.

The contrast is great, starting with the logo itself. The black and white background is also strong contrast. The size of the logo in relation to the rest of the text is strong.



It takes a very self-assured designer to recognize and act on the power of simplicity. Don't get fooled or intimidated by all the hoopla and fancy moving objects on the web. Many great and powerful things are created quietly and with grace.

Contrast

Contrast draws your eye into a page, it pulls you in. Contrasting elements guide your eyes around the page, create a hierarchy of information, and enable you to skim through the vast array of information and pick out what you need.

The contrast might be type that is bolder, bigger, or a very different style. It might be different colors, graphic signposts, or a spatial arrangement. To be effective, contrast must be strong—don't be a wimp. **If two elements, such as type, rules, graphics, color, texture, etc., are not the same, make them very different—don't make them almost the same!**

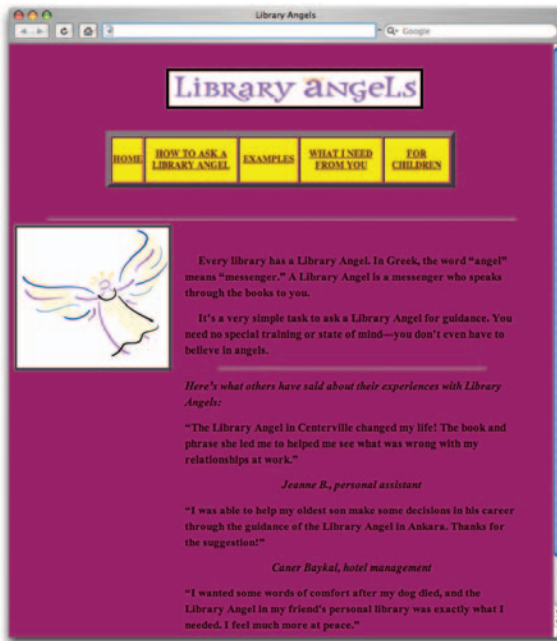
There are times when you don't want contrast on a page, most often when you want to present continuous text, as in a novel or some articles. In that case, don't interrupt the reading process by throwing contrast into it. Even links can be a form of contrast by virtue of their color, underline, and interruptive status. If you want people to sit and read through an entire piece, then let the page be very bland and uninterrupted, let the readers' eyes start at the beginning and continue to the end. Let the words simply communicate.

Create a focal point

On any designed piece, whether it is on screen, paper, or a package, there must be a **focal point**. Something must be the dominating force, and the other elements follow a hierarchy from that point down. This focus is created through **contrast**.

When all the type is the same size, as in the heading below-left, there is no hierarchy of importance. If everything has the **same** priority, then **nothing** has priority. But **SOMETHING** should be the most important. Contrast helps define what is important.





*In the example to the left, what is the focal point? Eh, you say, there are three focal points? But which one appears to be the most important of those three? The angel graphic? The links? Are these items **supposed** to be the most important elements?*

This page is a little confused about its focal point. Something needs to be the boss. Just a couple of simple changes will make a big difference.



*To provide **contrast** and create a **focal point**:*

- Take the logo out of its confining box and make it **LARGE**, make it the focal point by virtue of it being the biggest and first thing you see. It's such a great image—show it off!
- Reduce the size of the links (take them out of the bordered table!) and put them in an appropriate, subordinate position.
- Get rid of the dark background. Black text on a dark background does not have enough contrast.

And by the way:

- Remove the box around the graphic. Strong alignments create their own “containers” for holding elements. Boxes with borders just add clutter.
- There's a great **alignment** started—follow it!
- Paragraphs need space between them **OR** indents—not both!
- **Proximity!** The name of each person should be closest to his/her own quote.
- **Repetition!** Pick up the colors of the logo and use them in the links and important text.



Oh dear. Too much junk. Too much clutter. What's the most important element? What do you read first? How does your eye flow through the page? The beautiful illustration and the title get lost among all the other things that call attention to themselves.



Remove superfluous stuff like the line with eyeballs and the grapes (WHY are they there??). Find the focal point and make everything else subordinate—contrast in size, placement, and color. Clean it up—use alignment and proximity.

Also, see page 317 for important reasons why you should NOT set your list of text links as the first item on your page, and why—instead—you should write a descriptive paragraph as the first text on the page.



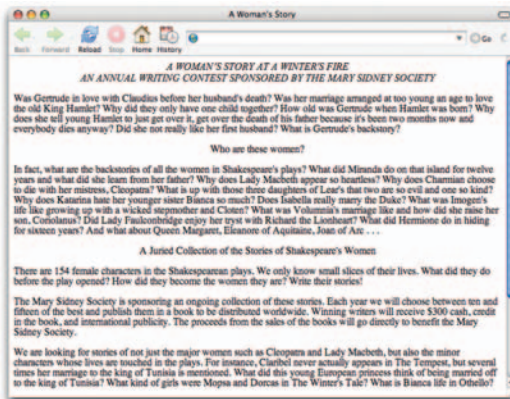
If everything is given the same value, then nothing is important, nothing is the focal point. Establish a hierarchy of information through contrast (combined with proximity). Pay attention to how your eye flows through this page. Where does it go first? Next? Are you sure you've read everything on the page? Does someone else follow the same path you did?



Reorganize the elements into logical groups defined by space (proximity), give the important elements the visual prominence they deserve (contrast), and unify the various elements by aligning them. Do you find that your eye now has a clearer path to follow? Does someone else follow the same path?

Combine the principles

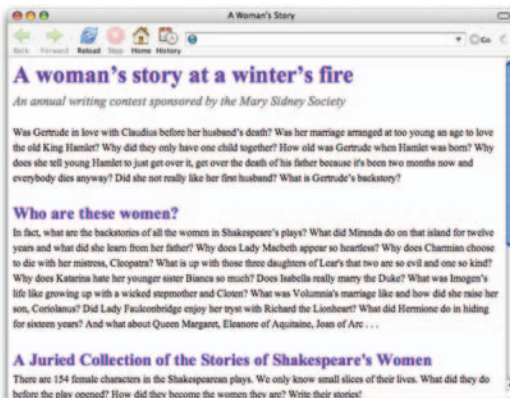
Applying any one of the principles in this chapter will radically improve the design of your web pages, but you will usually find yourself applying more than one principle, and probably all four. Even if you have never had any graphic training, we guarantee you will see a marked difference in your pages by simply using these four basic principles.



1. Here is a very typical web page: default background, headlines in all caps and italic, text running from one edge to the other, and a mixture of alignments. Let's make it a little more communicative.



2. First, align the text. Get rid of the caps. Get rid of the italic.



3. Emphasize the subheads so visitors can skim the information and find what they need. Add bold and perhaps a color for contrast. It looks better already.



4. Set the headlines closer to their body copies (see page 121).

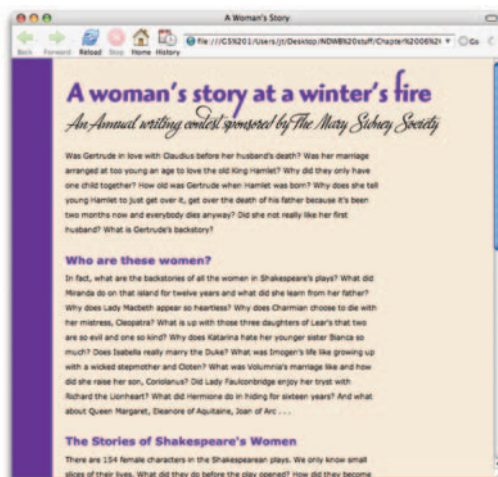
If you use CSS (Cascading Style Sheets), spacing is easier to control; see pages 256–260.

This example is showing the page being built in Dreamweaver



5. Make a simple left-edge background (see page 220).

Coordinate your colors between the background, the headings, and the links. (Change the link color to anything except that default blue.)



6. For visual interest, make a graphic headline to replace the HTML text headline. Use the colors in your color scheme.

7. To make the text easier to read (which also looks nicer), make the columns narrower and add a little more space between the lines (use CSS).

Try using a sans serif font like Verdana.

This page is still very simple and straightforward. But now it not only looks nicer, which will inspire more people to read it, but it communicates more clearly.

Spell it right!

Yeah, we know, spelling isn't part of design. Neither is grammar. But both bad spelling and bad grammar can destroy the professional effect of your web site just as easily as can bad design. Many web authoring software programs now have spell checkers. Whether your software does or doesn't, have someone else look carefully at your work. Especially check the pieces of type you have set as graphic elements because they are much more difficult and time-consuming to correct later.

From producing so many books, we know too well how easily those dang typos and accidentally misspelled words sneak in. And they hide until the job is printed—somehow they sneak around on the page, avoiding everyone's eyes, until 20,000 copies of the page are printed. There are surely several typos hiding away in this book right at this very moment. Fortunately, it is much easier to correct spelling and grammar on the web than in print. So fix it. All it takes is one really dumb error or some really poor grammar to blow your whole cover as a professional business. The examples below were really and truly taken right off the web. We recreated or disguised them so you can't tell who made them.



WHY PICK US?

We are the web experts which will make your web site better than any other site you can have. with you and us working together, we are making your bussiness sucessful.

100% PROFESSIONAL

Our guaranty is browsers will lust for your pages. Because remember, we are the professionals which you can do no better than -- its just the way we are -- and want to be. You will see.

How do you like the use of proximity in this piece?

Self-Guided Tour of the web

Watch for the following sorts of design concepts on the web. You might want to save a bookmark or favorite of several of the worst pages you find so you can use them in the quiz on the next page.

- ☐ Go to ten different pages, chosen at random. How many of the pages utilize strong alignments in the layout? How many have an arbitrary mix of alignments? Which pages have more organized, clean presentations, and why do they appear that way?
- ☐ On every web page you look at from now on, notice how elements have been aligned. Spend a minute to put into words what the page looks like, how it affects you. When viewing a messy page, think about how it might look if things were aligned.
- ☐ On the next ten web pages you see, consciously note how the principle of proximity affects your instant impression of the page and what it is trying to communicate, both positively and negatively.
- ☐ Choose three web pages that are oblivious to the principle of proximity. Put into words how the lack of proximity disrupts the design layout, and how it disrupts the communication process. Think of solutions and put them into words.
- ☐ Go to several large, corporate web sites. Try some museums or art sites. Poke around in the pages and put into words what the designers have done, using repetitive elements, to unify all the pages of their sites. If the designers didn't do a very good job, put that into words also: Why doesn't the site appear unified? What could be done to make it unified? Do you see why it is important to use repetition?
- ☐ Find pages where the "rules" have been consciously broken, yet the pages communicate clearly. Put into words how the designer did this.
- ☐ Find two pages where the contrasting elements disrupt the natural flow of the page. What can be done to improve those pages?

Oh boy, it's a Quiz!

Do some simple redesigning of two of your own web pages. Open them in your web authoring software. Print the pages as they are right now, then print them again after you do some easy rearranging.

1. **Check the alignment.** Remember, this doesn't mean everything is aligned on one edge—you might have three columns, but they should all be left-aligned (not two left-aligned and one centered, for instance), or maybe they're all centered under a centered head. Just don't mix alignments.

Does everything on the page have some visual connection with something else on the page? Can you draw a straight line from the edge of each item, such as a block of text, to the edge of another?

2. **Group similar elements into closer proximity.** Make sure headlines are closer to their related body copy than to the text or graphics above them.

If a headline is two lines, make sure the lines are close to each other.

Make sure captions are close to their photos.

Make sure subheads have more space above than below them.

Make sure there is enough space between elements that are not similar.

Make sure the spatial arrangements provide a visitor with instant visual clues as to the hierarchy of information.

3. **Create repetitive elements.** Especially if this page is part of a larger site (which it probably is), create repetitive elements that will let a reader know instantly that this page is part of the complete site. The repetition might be as simple as a color scheme, a consistent background pattern, an arrangement of elements, graphic headlines, a navigation bar, etc.

Even if your entire web "site" is only one page, that page could probably use some repetitive elements to unify the various pieces. Find something you're using already, such as bullets, and make them interesting (but not big) bullets—those can be your repeating element.

4. **Create contrast in appropriate places.** Avoid a flat, gray page. Use a background that contrasts with the text and graphics.

If there isn't one already, establish a hierarchy of information so the reader can easily skim to the section they need. Use contrast of size and weight (boldness) to create the hierarchy.

Pick up a color from your color scheme and use it in headlines and important words.