Elements and Principles of Design

What You May Have Missed from Art Class

Maybe you didn't study art formally. If not, you're probably only, at best, casually familiar with some of the basic tenants of good design.

You've no doubt heard visual judges in the past make reference to the *elements* and *principles of design*, and if you've never really fully understood what they meant, this article is for you.

The first component to study are the seven elements of design. These are the basic building blocks of any piece of art, and can be thought of as the ingredients used in your visual presentation. Whether well done or not, all pieces of visual art will contain most, if not all, of these elements of design. Some sources may differ on their exact list of elements and definitions, but this will get you started.

- Line – is a continuous mark made on a surface or the edge created when two shapes meet. May be actual, implied, vertical, horizontal, diagonal, and/or contour.
- Shape / Form – is a self-contained defined area, either geometric or organic. Shape refers to a two-dimensional element with area on a plane, while form refers to a three-dimensional element with volume in space.
- Size – refers to the relationship of the area occupied by one shape to that of another.
- Space – is the distance or area around or between elements in a work.
- Color – is the visible spectrum of radiation reflected from an object. Color is also sometimes referred to as hue.
- Value – refers to how light or dark an object, area, or element is, independent of its color. Value is also sometimes referred to as tone.
- Texture – is the surface quality of a shape, or how it appears to feel: rough, smooth, spiky, soft, hard, and glossy, etc. Texture can be real or implied.

See the diagrams at the back of this article for examples and additional details.

The next aspect to study are the principles of design. These can be thought of as what we *do* to the elements of design. If the elements are the ingredients, the principles are the recipe for a good work of art. How the principles of design are applied determines how successful one is in creating a work of art.

- Emphasis – is created by visually reinforcing something we want the viewer to pay attention to. This is often used to train the viewer's eyes on the center of interest, or a focal point – the area of interest the viewer's eye naturally, instinctively skips to. Some of the strategies employed to create

degrees of importance are contrast of values, use of color, placement, variation, alignment, isolation, convergence, anomaly, proximity, size, and contrast.

- Balance – is the distribution of interest or visual weight in a work. A balanced work will have all the elements arranged such that the work will have a sense of visual equilibrium or stability. Balance can be symmetrical, asymmetrical, or radial. Objects, values, colors, textures, shapes, etc. can be used in creating balance in a composition.
- Contrast – is the juxtaposition of opposing elements (opposite colors, value light / dark, direction horizontal / vertical). The greater the contrast, the more something will stand out and call attention to itself.
- Repetition – of elements in regular or cyclic fashion creates interest. Repetition strengthens a design by tying together individual elements and bringing a sense of consistency. It can create rhythm (regular, alternating, flowing, random, progressive) and patterns. Variation introduced to repetition increases the level of interest.
- Movement – is a visual flow through the composition. In some works, movement is implied by the use of static elements to suggest motion and direct a viewer's eye along a path through the work. In a still image, aspects such as lines, diagonals, unbalanced elements, placement, and orientation can play the role of active elements. In others, movement can be real, giving some elements the ability to be moved or move on their own.
- Harmony – brings together a composition with similar, related elements (adjacent colors, similar shapes, etc.). Harmonious elements have a logical relationship, connection, alignment, or progression. They work together and complement each other.
- Unity –is created by using harmonious similarity and repetition, continuance, proximity, and alignment. It is the visual linking of various elements of the work. This allows the disparate elements and principles to create a unified whole that can be greater than the sum of its parts.

For examples of some of the elements and principles of design in action, please take a look at the following links:

- http://www.slideshare.net/mrsbauerart/elements-of-art-and-principles-of-design
- http://www.slideshare.net/kpikuet/elements-and-principles-of-art-presentation
- http://www.slideshare.net/erinsmith.art/principles-of-design-252201
- https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLiOiI1qP-cMURN_8baOr3QWfySmIjqKlj

The above definitions and examples only scratch the surface of the elements and principles of design. Hopefully this serves as a primer, and as something to whet your appetite to learn more about the tenets of good visual design. For those looking to expand their knowledge and understanding there are countless websites, books, and courses dedicated fully to the subjects introduced above.

A good place to start would be the resources used to compile this article and the posters found on the following pages.

Works Cited

- http://flyeschool.com/content/elements-artdesign-and-principles-designorganization
- http://www.johnlovett.com/test.htm
- http://www.incredibleart.org/files/elements2.htm
- http://char.txa.cornell.edu/language/element/element.htm
- http://www.j6design.com.au/6-principles-of-design/
- http://www.projectarticulate.org/principles.php
- https://creativemarket.com/blog/2013/12/02/10-basic-elements-of-design

Special thanks to the team at paper-leaf.com for the beautiful, free quick-reference posters on the following pages.

LINE

A **line** is a mark between two points. There are various types of lines, from straight to squiggly to curved and more. Lines can be used for a wide range of purposes: stressing a word or phrase, connecting content to one another, creating patterns and much more.

SHAPE

Height + width = shape. We all learned basic shapes in grade school - triangles, squares, circles and rectangles. Odd or lesser seen shapes can be used to attract attention.

There are three basic types of shape: **geometric** (triangles, squares, circles etc), **natural** (leaves, animals, trees, people), and **abstracted** (icons, stylizations, graphic representations etc).

VALUE

Value is how light or how dark an area looks. A gradient, shown above, is a great way to visualize value - everything from dark to white, all the shades in-between, has a value. Use value to create depth and light; to create a pattern; to lead the eye; or to emphasize.

COLOR

Color is used to generate emotions, define importance, create visual interest and more. CMYK (cyan/magenta/yellow/black) is **subtractive**; RGB (red/green/blue) is **additive**.

Some colors are **warm** and **active** (orange, red); some are **cool** and **passive** (blue, purple).

There are various **color types** (primary to analogous) and **relationships** (monochromatic to triad) worth learning more about as well.

TEXTURE

Texture relates the to surface of an object; the look or feel of it. Concrete has a rough texture; drywall has a smooth and subtle texture. Using texture in design is a great way to add depth and visual interest. Printed material has actual, textile texture while screen material has implied texture.

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

quick reference sheet
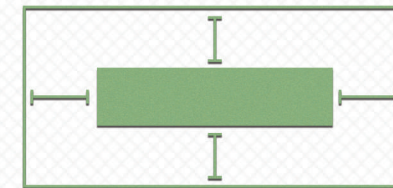
SPACE

Space is the area around or between elements in a design. It can be used to separate or group information. Use it effectively to: give the eye a rest; define importance; lead the eye through a design and more.

SIZE
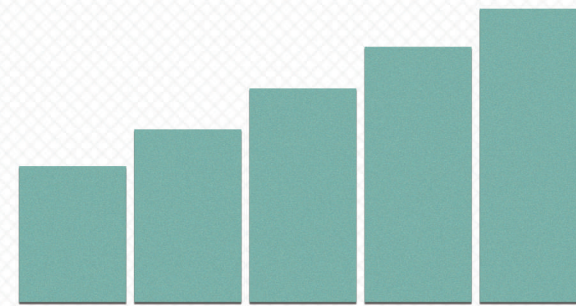
Size is how small or large something is: a small shirt vs. an extra large shirt, for example. Use size to define importance, create visual interest in a design (via contrasting sizes), attract attention and more.

CONTRAST
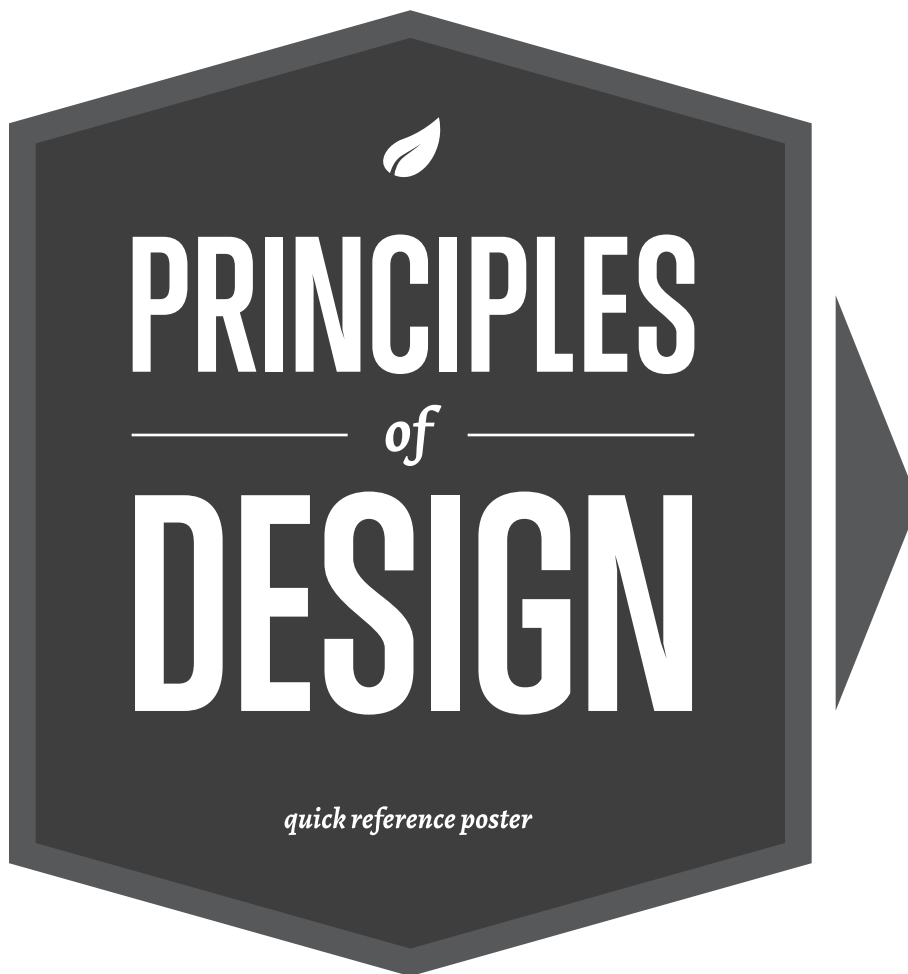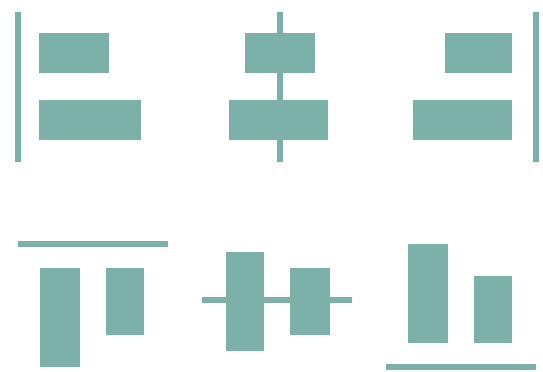
COLOR

TONE/VALUE

SIZE/SHAPE

DIRECTION

Unique elements in a design should stand apart from one another. One way to do this is to use contrast. Good contrast in a design – which can be achieved using elements like color, tone, size, and more – allows the viewer's eye to flow naturally.

To the left, you can see 4 ways to create contrast in your design.

REPETITION

Repetition breeds cohesiveness in a design. Once a design pattern has been established – for example, a dotted border or a specific typographic styling – repeat this pattern to establish consistency.

The short version?

Establish a style for each element in a design and use it on similar elements.

PRINCIPLES
of
DESIGN

quick reference poster

ALIGNMENT

Proper alignment in a design means that every element in it is visually connected to another element. Alignment allows for cohesiveness; nothing feels out of place or disconnected when alignment has been handled well.
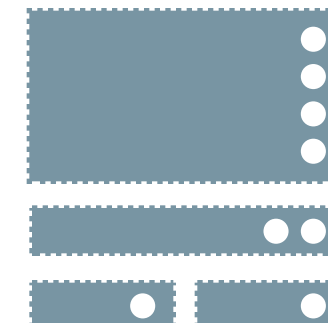
PROXIMITY

Proximity allows for visual unity in a design. If two elements are related to each other, they should be placed in close proximity to one another. Doing so minimizes visual clutter, emphasizes organization, and increases viewer comprehension.

Imagine how ridiculous it would be if the proximity icons on this graphic were located on the other side of this document.
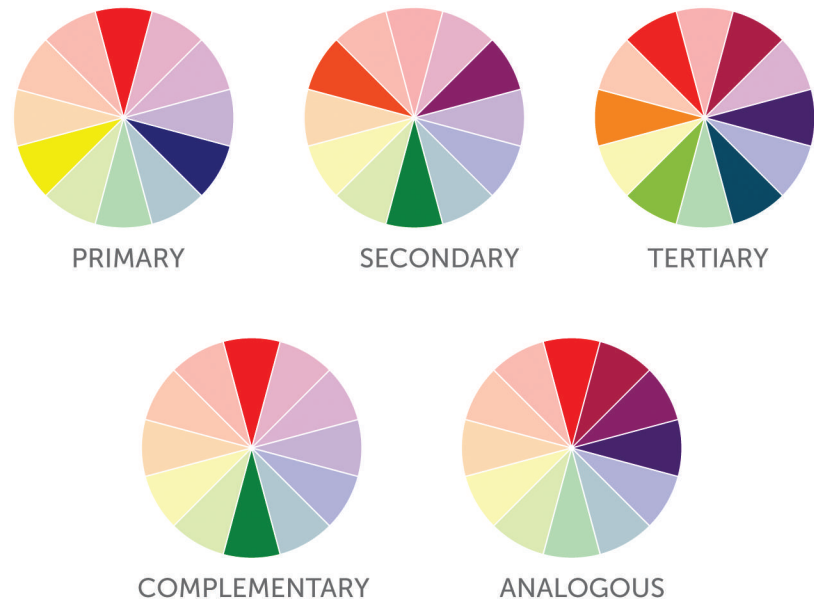
COLOR THEORY
QUICK REFERENCE SHEET FOR DESIGNERS

SUBTRACTIVE

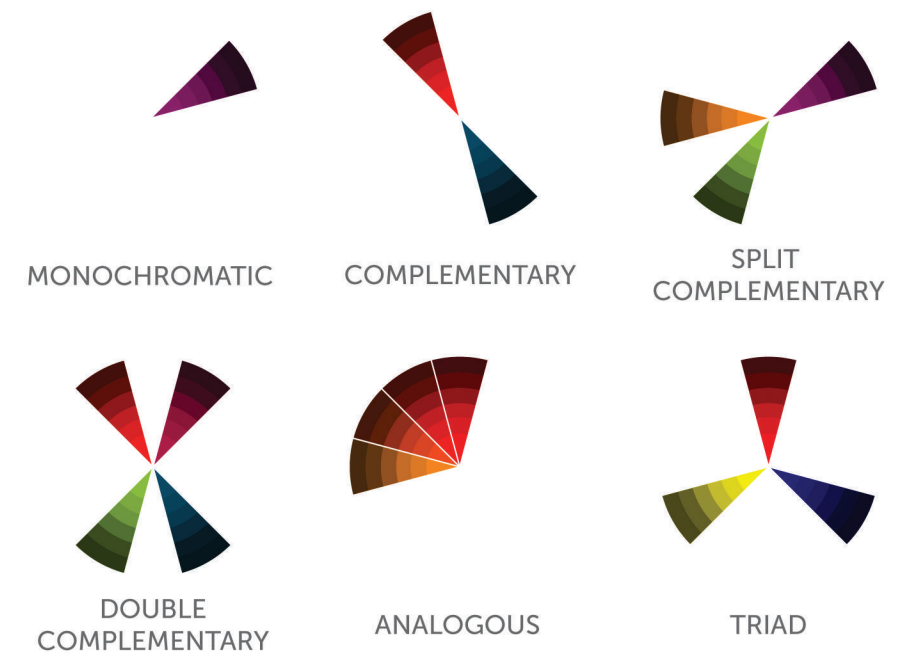CREATED WITH INK;
START WITH WHITE, ADD COLOR.
CMYK

CMYK

ADDITIVE

CREATED WITH LIGHT;
START WITH BLACK, ADD COLOR.
RGB

RGB

COLOR TYPES

PRIMARY

SECONDARY

TERTIARY

COMPLEMENTARY

ANALOGOUS

COLOR RELATIONSHIPS

MONOCHROMATIC

COMPLEMENTARY

SPLIT COMPLEMENTARY

DOUBLE COMPLEMENTARY

ANALOGOUS

TRIAD

COOL, PASSIVE

WARM, ACTIVE

MEANINGS

INTENSE. FIRE & BLOOD.
ENERGY, WAR, DANGER, LOVE
PASSIONATE, STRONG.

SKY, SEA.
DEPTH, STABILITY, TRUST
MASCULINE, TRANQUIL.

ROYALTY, POWER.
NOBILITY, WEALTH, AMBITION
DIGNIFIED, MYSTERIOUS.

SUNSHINE, JOY.
CHEERFULNESS, INTELLECT, ENERGY
ATTENTION-GETTER.

NATURE, GROWTH.
FERTILITY, FRESHNESS, HEALING
SAFETY, MONEY.

WARM, STIMULATING.
ENTHUSIASM, HAPPINESS, SUCCESS
CREATIVE, AUTUMN.

TERMS

CHROMA: How pure a hue is in relation to gray

SATURATION: The degree of purity of a hue

INTENSITY: The brightness or dullness of a hue

LUMINANCE/VALUE: A measure of the amount of light reflected from a hue

SHADE: A hue produced by the addition of black

TINT: A hue produced by the addition of white