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CARP (Contrast, Alignment, Repetition, Proximity)

I think all of us have had the feeling that some print or Web pages are more eye-catching and/or more professional-looking than others, but for those of us not trained in art and design it can be difficult to explain our reactions to those pages in a systematic way. In this section we'll take a look at four concepts we can use to talk about visual designs and why or how they're working. These concepts are contrast, alignment, repetition, and proximity.

Contrast

As we noted earlier, each of us is constantly being bombarded by sensory data. To some extent, schema theory helps explain how we organize a great deal of that information, but how else can we think about which things get noticed? What principle could we consciously employ if we wanted to draw someone's gaze to one area of a page, canvas, or screen? One way to create a focal point or area of emphasis is to create contrast; "Gestalt psychologists [have] suggested that the eye is attracted to areas of high contrast" (*Dynamics in Document Design*, 512).

Whether you're working with language or images, you can achieve emphasis by introducing something that's different--something that will create contrast or interrupt a rhythm. When we use language, we can create emphatic contrast by injecting a short phrase into the middle of a document or speech dominated by medium-length to long sentences, which interrupts the rhythm and gets empahsis. Am I right?

In terms of visual communication, there are a number of ways to create contrast; the hands in this Benetton ad use both color and size.

Here, a black hand is shown pressed trustingly up against a white hand. Does this communicate something about racial harmony? Or white paternalism? Given that size often symbolizes power, whatever trust is suggested here is at the same time at odds with a history of white domination and colonization.Now consider the fact that this image appears in an ad branded with the Benetton logo. Is this an appropriation of multi-culturalism?

This painting exihibits contrast in terms of color, shape and (at least implied) texture.

As a lead-in to our next principle, we might note that the shape on the bottom is not quite centered on the page beneath the red shape above it. This subtle asymmetry lends to the sense of almost chaotic movement conveyed by the bottom shape.

⊞ Alignment

There are two main ideas we can remember when we're thinking about alignment.

1. Create strong lines to connect objects that belong together (Williams, *Non-Designer's Design Book*). Based on what we know about the way we see imaginary lines connecting objects, we can consciously align objects in certain ways (in doing so we create on type of *continuity*) to help readers navigate a document or Web page. An everyday instance of this is the way we align text horizontally across the page and, usually, vertically as well. Compare this block of text we saw earlier

This is why we refer to 'lines of text'
This is why we refer to 'lines of text'
This is why we refer to 'lines of text'
This is why we refer to 'lines of text'

to this

Have you ever read a document where the author has decided to center a long-ish block of text (kind of like I'm doing here)? Isn't it a little harder to read this text when it's centered than it would be if the text were left-justified? We *might* argue that it's just a matter of convention, that we're just more used to reading text that's left-justified. But the principle of alignment suggests that creating a strong implied line connecting objects on the page creates cohesion.

2. Asymmetry is usually more visually interesting that symmetry. Conservative, traditional kinds of documents (like term papers and diplomas) often center titles and blocks of text. Because these texts are "even" (in the sense of being symmetrical), they feel very safe and comfortable - but they tend not to be as visually interesting as

asymmetrical compositions, which are more likely to create a sense of movement and interest.

Repetition

Repetition can help bring a sense of unity to a composition or design. *Van Gogh's Bedroom At Arles*, for example, repeats rectangles across the top half of the composition, moving us visually from the left to the right side of the image. (In relation to the previous section, we might note the way the large block of brown from the footboard creates a sense asymmetry in this composition.) Similarly, the repetition in the second composition draws the eye from the top left corner and diagonally down across the page.

Repetition can also work to unify a document or web page. The 'Visual Literacy & Web Spaces' header at the top of each page (hopefully) unite the web pages that make up this site and convey a sense of continuity--this can be especially important for web pages, where it is easy to leave a site and not realize it. Lynch and Horton refer to this as "consistent graphic identity" (*Web Style Guide*).

Proximity

The principle of proximity rests upon the idea that things which are visually grouped together in space will appear to belong together. Like repetition, proximity is a way to create a sense of unity in a composition, but it's also a way to help construct meaning. Think of the way we group sentences related to each other (or to a similar topic) together to form paragraphs, or the way we categorize different kinds of information about ourselves on a resume.

As you mouse over this resume, notice how the information is "chunked" with each category separated from those before and after by whitespace.

This is also referred to as "chunking" and it helps readers skim and locate information more easily, something that's important on the web because most of what people do read online they're apt to skim rather than read word for word (Lynch and Horton, *Web Style Guide*).