6 Poster Design

Poster design is a fundamental challenge for any graphic designer. A simple composition in two-dimensional space, a poster is put to a thousand uses, ranging from advertising and event promotion, to public service announcements.

The designer's challenge is to use the medium to engage, inform, and finally motivate passersby. Walk down a city street, hop on the subway, or visit a museum, and you'll see posters everywhere. The best pull us in, present their message with alacrity, and leave us thinking about them afterward.

In this chapter, we'll explore some principles of composition that can be helpful in developing effective poster designs. You'll learn approaches to achieving unity, balance, and rhythm in your posters to make them stand out on the street.

COURSE DEVELOPER
PIPER NILSSON

This chapter is based on a lesson developed by Piper Nilsson, a New York-based graphic designer and information architect.

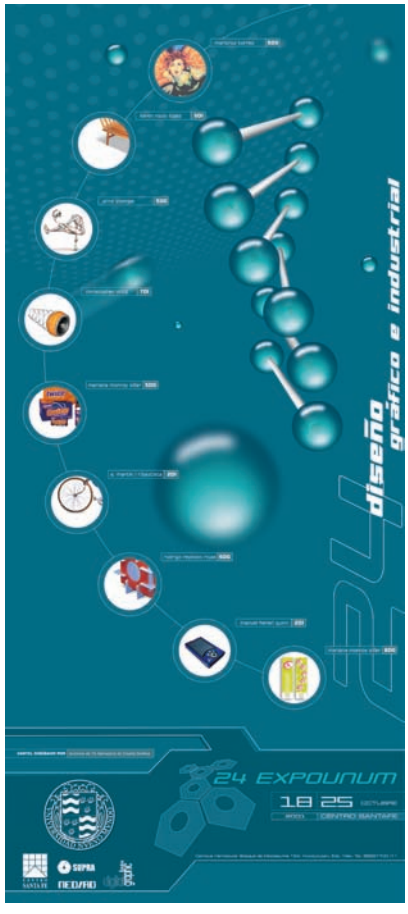


FIGURE 6.1: Posters like this one by designer Gabriela Monroy use balance, repetition, and other intriguing compositional techniques to communicate effectively and make a lasting impression.

In this chapter you will:

- Learn about different methods used in poster design to deliver effective messages.
- Explore methods of creating unity in the design of a poster: proximity, repetition, continuation, and underlying color.
- Learn how and why to create symmetrical and asymmetrical compositions.
- Learn how different methods of balancing a composition influence its effect.
- Learn about three types of rhythmic approaches to composition.
- Learn about proportions found in art, nature, and design.
- Explore some applications of typographical rules in poster design.
- Design a poster for a music festival considering compositional techniques, imagery, typography, and the display environment.

Poster Design Fundamentals

The poster has been around for about as long as people have had something to announce, and it shows no sign of going away. Why is this, when one might have expected video ads and billboards to take over our public signage? One answer is that a well-executed two-dimensional design still has the power to entrance us.

FIGURE 6.2: Urban construction projects generally prohibit posters. Soon after the hoardings go up, posters appear anyway..

Posters are all about economy of expression—using a minimum of information to get a lot across. Sometimes poster designers are asked to whittle down information and translate it into a visual form; at other times, to create a compelling message with typography alone. Finally, designers are sometimes asked to find a way to organize a daunting mass of details and make it accessible.

A designer's choice of image can clearly make or break a poster. The function of an image is to simplify the message—to avoid having to present part of the message in a more complicated way, through lines of text. Images most often represent what a product is, who's providing it, or whom it's for. They are a shorthand explanation for something that's hard to describe, like "providing working-class people with loans to buy a house they couldn't otherwise afford."

FIGURE 6.3: **How do you communicate the names of dozens of performers and composers without information overload? Make them into an attractive piece of art! In this poster for Lincoln Center, the clever use of type works with the photo as a single image to draw viewers in and get them to read more.**

A poster designer must also have a strong grasp of typography. It may come as a surprise that typography is so important when text on a poster is used so sparingly (compared with, say, a product package or a magazine spread). But it's an unwritten rule of design that the fewer elements you use, the more carefully you need to use them. Oftentimes the goal of a poster is to communicate a specific text message: "U2 concert on Friday the 12th," or, "Entrance closed for repairs." The designer's choice of typeface, text layout, and balance between text and images will all determine whether this message is actually read and remembered.

Finally, keep in mind that the poster composition itself must intrigue us to attract our attention. Even the simplest images and wording can get lost in an ineffective composition. How do you create a strong design, direct the viewer to the most important elements first, and make the whole thing memorable? It all comes down to composition, so we'll look at a variety of classic approaches in this chapter.

note

A poster's "stickiness" is just as important as its initial impact. Viewers may see a poster for mere seconds, but some aspect of the poster must leave a lasting impression.

Achieving Unity

Let's face it: Designing a poster series, like any graphic design job, can be chaos. Photographers? Missing in action. Writers? They're wrestling with deadlines and inner demons. Marketers? They're changing their minds every two minutes.

At this point in the process, the designer must bring order through composition. Literally. Poster designers must somehow create a sense of unity from a confusion of headlines, blocks of copy, photographs, and logos. Without unity, a poster becomes chaotic and unreadable. All the parts of a design must fit together to make a coherent whole.

How do we create a "unified" composition? Let's explore some of the classic principles of art and design to find out.

Proximity

The first principle of unity is *proximity*, also called grouping. Proximity is based on a natural principle: Things that belong together, go together. When we see objects that are grouped together on a page, we tend to associate them. We think of them as groups—regardless of whether those objects are actually similar or related. It's like guilt by association.

This law of proximity can assist the poster designer in a number of ways. First, the grouping of people, objects, and text can enhance the message. Think of a billboard in which a customer photo, product shot, and ad slogan are all interwoven. The type of person depicted (kid? grandpa? overworked parent?) will be inevitably associated with the product. If the typography is handled well, it will look like the customer is saying "I always use Bleacho," not the advertiser.

Second, grouping elements together can give them greater impact than if they were standing alone or apart from one another. When several items are placed in close proximity (for example, an interlinked group of watches in different styles), the eye moves smoothly from one to the next. The items become one visual unit, providing a single message for the viewer to look at instead of a set of discrete items.

If a group of items is the most prominent part of the poster, the structure will hold together the overall composition and draw attention to it. Any remaining elements will be viewed as secondary.

FIGURE 6.4: In this diagram, notice how your gaze flows from one circle to the next. The individual items are recognized as parts of the whole, which is the focal point of the design.

Repetition

Another way to create unity in your designs is to repeat shapes, colors, or values. When we see a design element repeated on different parts of a page, our eye naturally follows them, linking them visually even if they are not grouped together. We can't help playing connect the dots.

The simplest way to use repetition is to create a pattern of repeated shapes in the background of the poster. A tiling effect in the background can create a visual interest and structure that ties the foreground elements together. In this type of composition, repetition is a secondary element.

Another way of using repetition is to use a line of repeated elements to lead the eye to an important message, logo, or image. Repeated elements can form a path that draws the eye, creating a sense of suspense—where is this going? It's a way of telling a story and compelling a viewer to look at an item you want him to focus on.

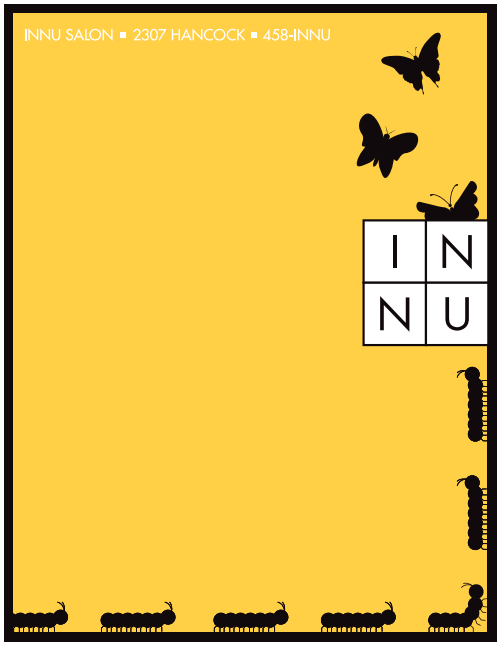


FIGURE 6.5: The series of caterpillars leads the eye directly to the INNU logo. The repetition continues past the logo with the butterflies, which represent how you'll feel after a visit to the salon.

Repetition can work extremely effectively even when objects themselves are not repeated. The mere repetition of a shape or color in a few places can really pull a composition together. It can be very subtle. For example, a poster for a new nail polish might show a large drop of the polish. Elsewhere in composition, the same shape and color may be echoed in the bottle of polish and the model's nails. Without our realizing it, our eyes are drawn to this repetition.

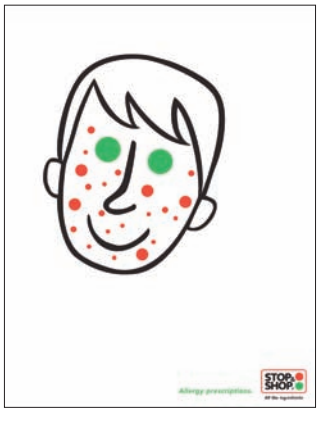


FIGURE 6.6: Here, the dots that are an essential part of the logo are repeated in the illustration—creating unity, getting attention, and reaffirming the brand.

In posters for consumer products, repetition is also an effective strategy for persuading viewers to compare related items. An ad poster might be covered in a dozen pairs of shoes, all different. The initial message (shoes!) is easy to understand because related items are repeated, but a secondary effect is that the poster invites the viewer to look at each pair individually.

Another popular design technique is to present a row or set of items that are all exactly the same except for one that breaks the mold. You might design a grid of 15 squares, 14 of which are blue and 1 that is bright pink and contains a company logo. I know which square people will look at. This stand-out-from-the-pack approach is useful for helping viewers focus on the uniqueness of a product, company, or event. Repeated elements feel mundane, less important, and less exciting than the single, unique one.

It's also worth noting that repetition creates the consistency that is essential when constructing a poster series, whether the posters are to be viewed simultaneously or on separate occasions. A set of outdoor ads designed for a summer concert series must work as a team; seeing one should remind you of other posters in the series. The repetition of positioning, color, scale, or imagery can make a series a cohesive group and promote the recognition and absorption of an overall message.

Continuation

What other techniques for creating unity are there? Continuation is another method for attracting and leading the eye. It's often used in conjunction with repetition, and you've seen it in the prior examples. When a designer uses continuation, the edges of shapes in a composition are aligned to lead the viewer's eye from one item to the next.

This principle uses the properties of lines to help a composition hang together. When we see a line, our eye instinctively wants to follow it, to find out where it leads. The edges of objects can be used in the same way. Any objects in a set can appear disjointed when they are placed on a page. If items just float in space, the viewer has to do too much work to find and ultimately understand the message. By aligning the edges, however—horizontally, vertically, or diagonally—the composition can be unified.

FIGURE 6.7: Continuation is used in this poster to lead the eye vertically, from the text to the U or vice versa. The left and right sides of the U and text line up perfectly, and if "U" look more closely, you'll see the E and C of "PEACE" align with the inner lines of the U.

This technique works with images on a poster, leading the eye to information and branding, but it is also a great choice for text-based designs. Continuation makes it clear which elements (such as headlines and subheads, or photos and captions) are meant to be read together.

Underlying Color

How do you unify a composition where there are a variety of objects with no shapes, colors, or edges in common? A simple solution is to place them on a solid color field.

Now this might beg the question, Why would you place unrelated objects in your poster in the first place? Ordinarily, you wouldn't. For most commercial posters where you need to get a message across quickly, you will generally have access to some related shapes or colors.

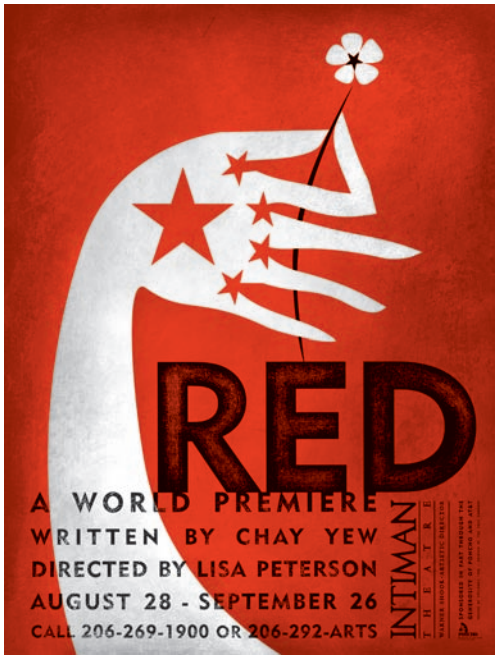


FIGURE 6.8: **In this poster, "Red" is not only the name of the performance and an allusion to its political theme, but it's also the color that holds the elements of this design together. Proximity is used along with a strong sense of balance to make this an incredibly strong piece.**

For art events or posters where the viewer will have some time to interpret the piece, however, discordant elements can provide an interesting, experimental look. Occasionally an advertiser will ask for a surreal combination of items. Using an underlying color as a background for disjointed elements can ground them so the viewer understands they relate.

tip

A word of warning: Don't use the underlying color method as a quick way to avoid a properly aligned or otherwise unified composition.

Achieving Balance

Balance, or a lack thereof, is a powerful tool for any poster layout. And that's because a lack of balance is disturbing. From a young age, we learn to avoid leaning trees, rocks, furniture, and ladders as potential dangers. Seeing imbalance in a design causes a similar visceral reaction: Are we going to fall over? Is something going to fall on us?

In composition, we assume a center vertical axis and expect to see equal weight on both sides. Balance is especially important in a poster design, because a poster will often need to stand alone, with nothing outside of the design to stabilize it. (Some designs, like magazine ads, can be balanced by the adjacent page or another nearby element.)

Symmetrical Balance

Nature is full of examples of symmetrical balance. Butterflies, maple leaves, and snowflakes can be evenly divided down the center. Humans are attracted to symmetrical designs partially because our own bodies are symmetrical (well, mostly).

Designers play with these visual expectations. In creating a poster, a designer will often place a main image or block of text along a vertical axis, distributing equal portions of the object on both sides. This makes the viewer feel comfortable—everything has been neatly ordered for him. When the "object" placed symmetrically is a face or body, it can help viewers make an emotional connection to the composition.

Symmetrical balance also occurs when multiple objects are placed in the same position on each side of a central vertical axis. This combines the benefits of repetition and symmetry to create a completely balanced, rock-solid design.

FIGURE 6.9: This striking design for Champion Athletic is almost entirely symmetrical along the vertical axis, making the design (and thus the product and brand) feel solid and comfortable. Bold color, lines, and use of negative space give it even more strength.

However, symmetry can have drawbacks. We don't always want a design to feel so solid, so comfortable, or so passive. By their nature, posters are often used to introduce new products, events, or ideas with the purpose of persuading viewers to take action. A more energetic composition may be required for such posters. Note that this doesn't mean developing a composition that is unbalanced—it means using balance in a different way.

note

Symmetry on a horizontal axis can also make for a balanced design, though it doesn't generate the comfort level of vertical symmetry.

Asymmetrical Balance

Asymmetrical balance is a common strategy for adding oomph to a poster design. Designers use color, value, shape, and position to balance dissimilar forms without letting chaos rule. Truly asymmetrical balance can be difficult to achieve—if the sizes, colors, or other elements are just a little off, the equilibrium will be as well.

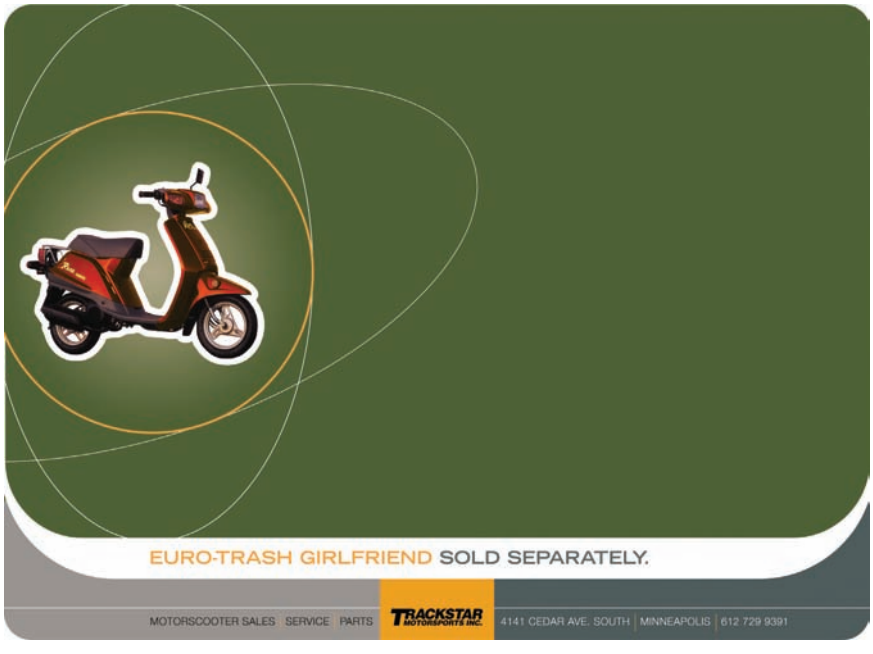


FIGURE 6.10: The asymmetry in this Trackstar Motorsports poster makes the image arresting, and you can almost feel the scooter moving to the right.

Let's look at several types of asymmetrical balance and examine ways to achieve them.

BALANCE BY COLOR

Have you ever wondered what made the painting of Dutch artist Piet Mondrian tick? Mondrian devoted a great deal of his work to the balance of weight in colors. For example, one of his paintings features mostly white blocks with a large yellow block in the upper left and a small blue one in the lower right. The small area of blue perfectly balances the large area of yellow. To form such a balance, Mondrian moved colors around the grid until they were just right.

FIGURE 6.11: In this design exhibition poster, the large yellow field is beautifully balanced by the small black bar and color photos along the bottom.

Balancing colors is mostly intuitive, so practice is required. Here are some guidelines:

- A small area of color can balance a much larger neutral area. Color attracts the eye more than neutrals, giving a spot of color equal weight to a large neutral area.
- Warm colors carry more weight visually than cool colors. Oranges and reds jump out at us, while blues and greens tend to recede. Therefore, a large area of a cool color is needed to balance a small area of a warm color.

- The more vivid the color intensity, the greater its weight. A richly saturated blue will seem heavier than a dull blue. How do you work with this? Balance small bits of vivid color with larger areas of muted color.

BALANCE BY VALUE

Asymmetrical balance is based on equal eye attraction, which occurs when dissimilar objects are balanced so that they are equally interesting to the eye. One element that invariably attracts our attention is *value difference*, the contrast of light and dark. Black against white creates a strong contrast. Gray against white creates less contrast and less visual weight.

How do you balance values to enhance a poster design? You can do it by balancing light and dark values intuitively, the same way you balance shapes—across the surface as a whole. Test your intuition by blocking out any questionable area and looking at the remaining picture. Then unblock it and see whether you feel better about the balance of values and shapes in the design.

tip

If you're not sure about the values of the color choices in your design, convert your image to grayscale momentarily. Seeing just white, gray, and black will give you a better sense of how your lights and darks balance.

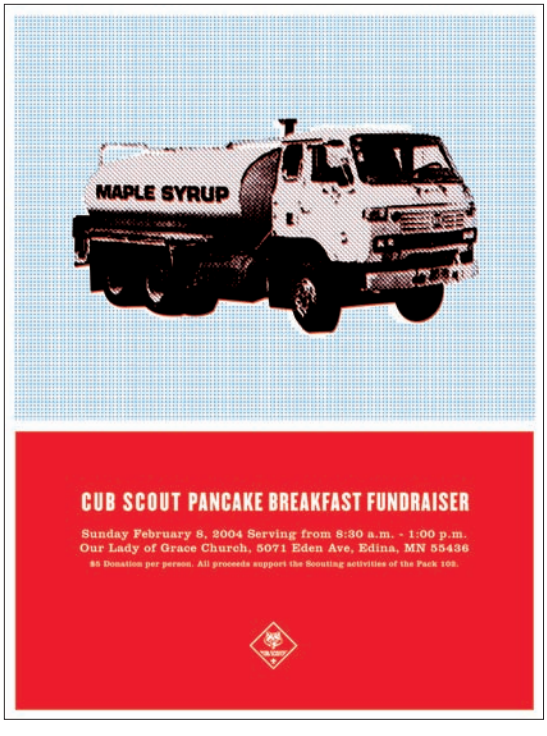


FIGURE 6.12: Balance by value is used in this Cub Scouts poster. The blue dots on white create an illusion of very light blue—much lighter than the rich red in the lower section. The elements in each section also balance by value—notice the dark truck and the white lettering.

A contrast of values on each side of a poster creates so much eye interest that a tension is created between the sides. The eye skips from one to the other, wanting to pull the two components together. A visual energy and a subconscious excitement are created simply by the interaction of different elements in the composition.

BALANCE BY SHAPE AND POSITION

Balancing shapes will also help bring unity to your poster design. A large, simple shape (or image or text area) can be balanced by smaller, more complex elements. The larger shape will generally attract attention to the overall composition. The smaller elements will be viewed as secondary, but they can be just as important to the visual equilibrium of the poster.

FIGURE 6.13: In this diagram, the detailed field of varying stars is balanced by the simple, solid wave.

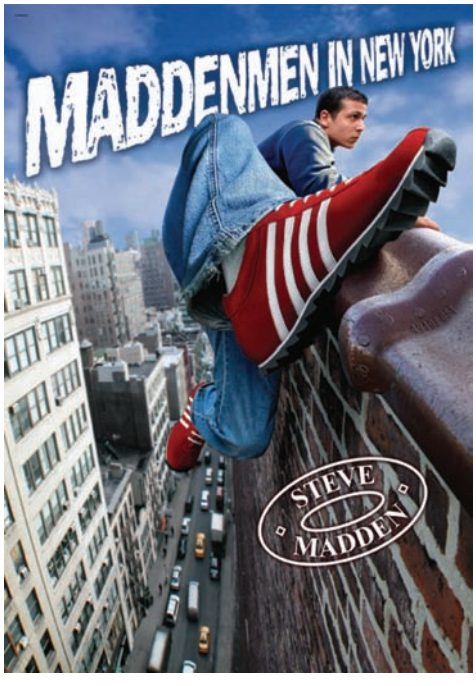


FIGURE 6.14: **This type of balance works great in photography-based posters. The large, simple focal point of the man and sneaker balances against the distant and detailed street scene below him.**

The positioning or placement of the elements plays an important role in balance. The farther an object is from the center of the page, the more visual weight it will suggest. This visual association is based on our experiences with balance in the real world: On a seesaw, for instance, a child on the end of a beam can lift an adult sitting near the center.

FIGURE 6.15: **This outdoor ad for a technology firm dramatizes the concept of customization by showing different sizes. The balance between the XL and XS tees draws the eye to the poster.**

A single, very small element can counterbalance a large one (or group) if placed all the way to one side of a poster. For example, a tiny logo might sit flush against the right edge of a horizontal ad while a large photo of a model takes up much of the left side. Although the logo is no match for the large image on its own, its position in the outermost edge of the composition levels the design.

This method of balance applies to angled compositions as well. A large object angled in one direction will usually require a counterbalance in the opposite direction, or the whole poster will appear crooked.

Creating Rhythm

Music creates a structure through rhythm, the repetition and variation of groups of notes. When we hear a musical phrase, we hear the timing of each note and mentally record the spacing from one note to the next. If the rhythm is memorable, we will recognize it every time it is repeated or varied throughout the musical composition.

Rhythm in design works the same way. When you put together a sequence of items for your viewer, you can arrange them rhythmically to make them memorable and moving. This goes beyond the concept of repetition we explored earlier, as you can create visual rhythm in a number of ways.

Repetitive Rhythm

Repetitive rhythm is the successive appearance of groups of elements. A flow of elements with variation is required to make it rhythmic. Think of all the ways that rhythm is achieved in music: Over an underlying pulse, the composer can create long, flowing phrases or short, abrupt ones. Space is necessary, too; the listener must have time to absorb one group of elements before hearing the next.

As a designer, you might repeat a circular shape 20 times in a single poster composition. Repeat the color, position, and contents of the circles to establish a "beat" and provide variety to keep the eye entertained.

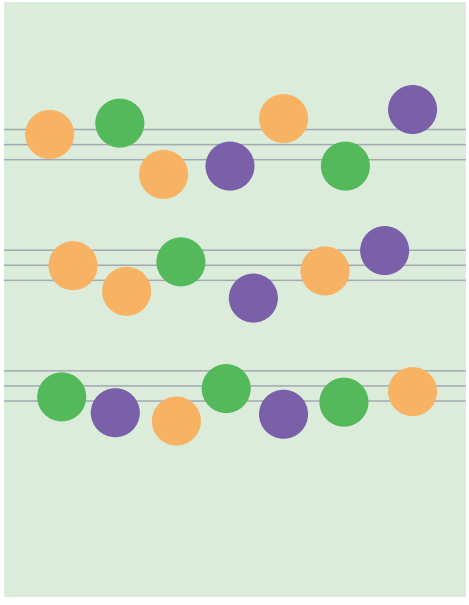
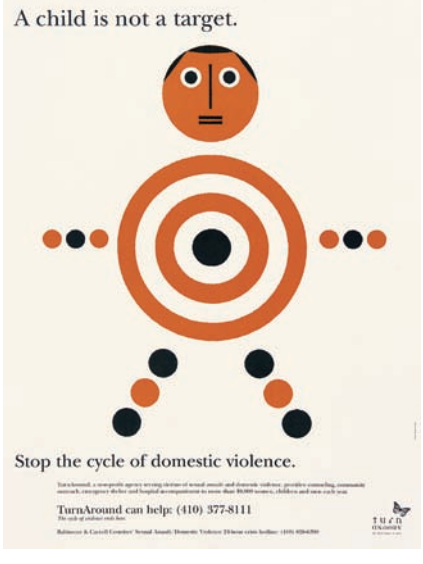


FIGURE 6.16: The circles in this diagram are repeated elements that entertain the viewer as they vary throughout the composition.



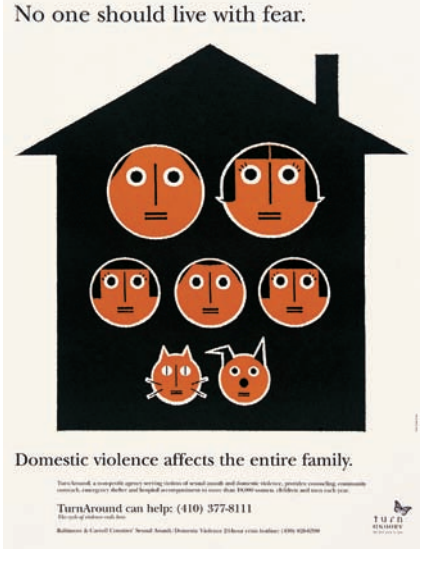


FIGURE 6.17: The repeated circle is both a structural and a thematic element in these public service posters – an intriguing visual element and a statement about protecting children.

Alternating Rhythm

In alternating rhythm, two or more motifs alternate with each other to create a sequence or pattern. It's like two singers taking turns delivering their lyrics. If you're working with an image of a row of people in a poster, you might want the models' pants (or even their skin tones) to alternate in color and form a rhythm.

The same goes for the typography in a poster. If you are using two styles of a typeface or two colors of type, you can alternate between them on the poster to create a rhythmic order. We are so used to seeing evenly spaced left-aligned type that any such unusual typography tends to grab the eye.

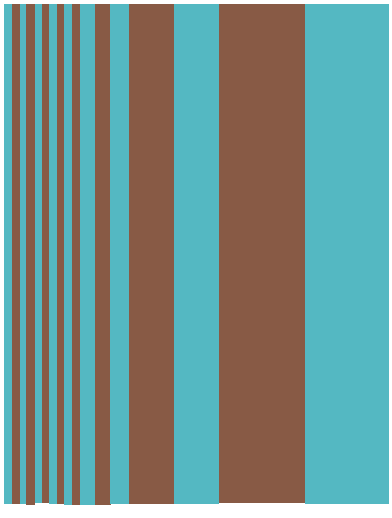


FIGURE 6.18: The aqua and brown bars alternate to create a beat, and the variation in widths keeps it interesting.

Note that alternating elements do not need to be boldly different from one another—even subtle variations (such as alternating heights of people in a row) can give a poster added interest. Viewers might not even consciously notice what you are alternating in this case, but the effect will still draw them in and help make the experience memorable.

Progressive Rhythm

In progressive rhythm, the idea of change or at least gradual variation in forms is explored. As the rhythm continues, the forms become more or less intense. The color may become more (or less) vivid, for example. Progressive rhythm is the visual equivalent of a song's crescendo or diminuendo—its increase or decrease in volume.

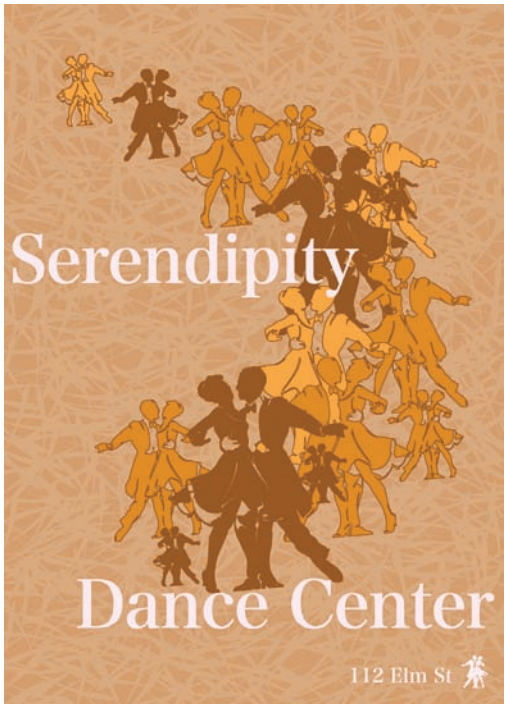


FIGURE 6.19: A cascade of dancers adorn this dance school poster, creating a visual crescendo that leads to eye from top left to bottom right.

The elements that make up a progressive rhythm—whether they're images or words—must have some qualities in common and some that vary. You might create a diagonal row of butterflies that are all the same shape but gradually change their color, size, and rotation, or a series of identical words that progressively fade, receding into the background.

Progressive rhythm can add depth to otherwise flat posters such as those containing two-dimensional illustrations or only typography. The feeling that something is morphing or coming toward you can make the poster feel more active and lively.

Using Proportion

Most designers rely on their intuitive sense of proportion in approaching a poster. When our intuition hits a roadblock, however, the principles of proportion can be very helpful in determining the correct division of space within a layout. Let's look at some basic ones now.

The Golden Section

The golden section, discovered by the Greeks in the fifth century B.C., was once referred to as a "key" to proportion. The *golden section* is a ratio that divides a whole into two segments so that the smaller segment has the same proportion to the larger that the larger has to the whole. This can be expressed algebraically as $a:b = b:(a+b)$. The sides of a golden rectangle have a proportion of 1:1.618.

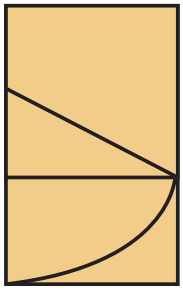


FIGURE 6.20: To construct a golden rectangle, begin with a square. Draw a diagonal from a midpoint of one side to an opposite corner, and then draw an arc from that diagonal.

Whether they realize it or not, most people prefer a rectangle with proportions close to the golden section. A composition using a golden rectangle feels more balanced, comfortable, and natural to the viewer.

Golden section proportions are used in works of sculpture, painting, and architecture. In addition to man-made works, golden section proportions can even be found in humans, plants, and animals.

note

Like vertical symmetry, the golden section is found in nature, which is why it feels familiar and comfortable in a design. Nautilus shells, sunflowers, and pinecones all have features that are closely tied to the golden section ratio.

If you look at a variety of posters, magazine ads, and other rectangular compositions carefully, you'll find that they are often divided into two parts using the golden section, or that the point of interest tends to lie along the line that forms the golden section.

FIGURE 6.21: **Loosely based on the golden rectangle, like many posters are, the action in this Theatre Project poster by Spur Design is broken up into a square section (containing the illustration) and a smaller section (containing the type and branding).**

The Root 2 Rectangle

Root 2 rectangles are also used in poster layouts, though their proportion is approximately 1:1.414, slightly different from that of the golden rectangle. (If you're wondering how this rectangle got its name, 1.414 is the approximate square root of 2.) The root 2 rectangle is said to be sacred or a symbol of birth, and can be found in some ancient artworks.

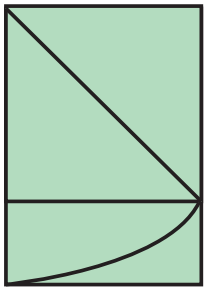


FIGURE 6.22: To construct a root 2 rectangle, draw a diagonal across a square, and then draw an arc from that diagonal.

In poster design, root 2 rectangles are used in the same way that golden rectangles are, forming two balanced sections or providing compelling placement for a point of interest.

FIGURE 6.23: Like posters based on golden rectangles, root 2 posters have a square area as the focal point, as with the bull image in this Professional Bull Riders design. The other section, in this case containing the type, is slightly smaller than that of a golden rectangle design.

Using Typography

The general public usually thinks of graphic design as a nontextual medium—and yet the printed word is considered by many designers to be the most important component of visual communication.

Think of the most compelling, seductive poster you've found on your commute to work. Sure, that grainy image of young lovers running through crashing waves is evocative. But without the skilful use of typography—the company logo, the clever tagline, those small letters declaring *London, Paris, New York, Tokyo*—what does it communicate?

Typography is an essential tool for poster designers, partly because type is so powerful, and partly because it must be used economically to get a message across quickly. Typography today includes everything related to the publication of text and the placement of words and images on the page—so much more than just picking a typeface.

Nevertheless, when designing a poster, choosing a typeface is where typography begins. With thousands of different typefaces available, where do you start?

The desktop publishing revolution encouraged everyone to go mad with fonts. To provide visual consistency, however, an individual poster should use no more than three typefaces. When two or three different typefaces are used, they should be fairly distinct from one another—they should contrast. Alternately, if using multiple variations of a single typeface, each should still be distinct in some way. The items' contrast should indicate which ones are most important. If they are too similar looking, it's confusing for the reader. Especially on a poster, where the message must be delivered quickly, the hierarchy of information should be extremely clear. Care should be taken not to overuse bold and italics. In certain fonts, bold and italics look very different from their parent typefaces.

The Virtues of Typography

Of the many tenets or virtues in typography, perhaps the most important in poster design are simplicity and restraint.

It can be very tempting to use highly decorative fonts. There's no doubt that this can draw attention to your poster design—but not all attention is good attention. The wrong choices, particularly overly decorative ones, can undermine your message. In many cases, a decorative font is not necessary. If there

tip

Just like overly decorative fonts, banal fonts (both simple and decorative) can undermine the message. Try not to rely on the default options that came with your computer—find typefaces that are fresh and work best with the design.

are busy elements in the design, such as photographs or many repeating elements, a simple font and perhaps a variation of it may be all you need to get your message across. It will balance out the other busy elements and call attention that way.

In a simpler overall design, a more complex font can be introduced for your main text. This can serve two purposes. First, it helps to decorate the design and add interest to the entire look. Second, it draws attention to the main text. A simple font can get lost in an ultrasimple design.

When using a decorative font, though, it's important to use it as sparingly as possible, such as for just a word or two of the main text rather than all of the copy in a design. Using a cleaner font for secondary type will balance with the decorative font and will more strongly convey the hierarchy of text.

This leads to the other important virtues in font usage: balance and contrast. The tension between these two elements can help a design capture attention or stand out from the crowd. Balance and contrast can be created between typefaces or between text and other elements, like images.

FIGURE 6.24: An ad campaign to raise public support for hosting the 2012 Olympics in New York City began with an image – a logo that combined an image of an athlete with and image of the Statue of Liberty. The logo appeared all around the city, even on subway trains.

FIGURE 6.25: The outdoor ad campaign for the NYC 2012 bid was pure typography: aspirational messages in the many colors of the Olympic rings, depicting the feeling of the witnessing the event, some horizontal and others hanging banners of text.

Think back to the compositional tools we talked about earlier, like asymmetrical balance and repetitive rhythm. These aren't limited to images and geometric shapes. Juxtaposing text against text or image against text works just as effectively with these techniques.

Finally, there's the virtue of placement—not the placement of text on the page, but the placement of your poster in public. Will it be in a subway car, where you have time to read several lines of text? Or on a street poster that you're zipping past in your car? Your poster's surroundings should determine your use of text—including your choice of typeface, the size and spacing around the text, and the level of contrast against the background.

Poster Design Project

Throughout this chapter, you learned how to direct the viewer's attention using a variety of compositional techniques. Now you'll use this knowledge to design an event poster that interests and informs.

Your client is giving you a lot of creative freedom for the poster, so use it wisely. Consider methods for getting the message across economically with a killer composition and use of typography.

Project Brief: Mozart Festival

You have been commissioned to design a poster for a touring Mozart festival that's visiting your city. The festival, which originated at New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, celebrates the compositions of Mozart plus a few other classical music icons such as Beethoven, Schubert, and Haydn.

Your client would like an effective poster design that captures the sophisticated but fun spirit of the festival. The poster will be displayed outside your town theater, so it must be designed to be viewed from a distance. Pedestrian passersby will see it, as will commuters on bikes and in cars.

FIGURE 6.26: Arts organizations like New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts rely on posters to advertise a multitude of events and performances to passersby.

The festival is aimed at classical music fans, who are typically older and more affluent, but organizers are also hoping to get a younger crowd interested in classical music.

The dimensions of the poster are 20 inches wide by 30 inches tall, to fit in a vertical marquee, but for the purposes of this project you may scale it down to 10 inches wide by 15 inches tall, or 4 by 6.

The copy should read:

The New York Traveling Orchestra presents:

Mozart Festival

Discover Mozart, Beethoven, and more

[insert your local venue name]

[insert a date of your choice]

Project Summary

- **Research the subject and location for the poster, and find appropriate images to use in the design.**
- **Conceptualize the poster design, considering the target audience and your research.**
- **Choose the compositional techniques you feel are appropriate to delivering your message.**
- **Produce the poster, considering the focal point, the hierarchy of information, and the presentation of typography.**

Project Steps

Like every good design project, this one will start with some research and conceptualization—then it's onto your creative composition.

1. Research the Subject and Location

Unless you're quite the classical music aficionado, you'll need to spend some time understanding the graphic style typically used in this genre. CD covers, Web sites, other classical music event posters—all of these should be part of your research. Ask yourself some questions as you work:

- What colors are common in this genre? What feelings do they evoke?
- What styles of type are used? What do they tell me about how the music might sound?
- Are photographs or illustrations used? How are they used, and what effect do they have?

As you view the artwork, try to put yourself in the shoes of a typical member of the target audience, and consider the location of the poster outside the theater. If you can, visit a theater in your area to see what environmental features may enhance or get in the way of your poster. For example, if the theater's exterior is red brick, you may want to stay away from a dark red main color so as to keep the poster from blending in too much.

FIGURE 6.27: This poster for the Cascade Festival of Music has a goal similar to that of your poster project, and achieves it with balanced composition, text with a rhythmic beat, and an image that suggests both the location and the music.

2. Conceptualize and Find Images

With research in hand, plan a concept that integrates your city and the Mozart/classical music theme. And don't forget the audience! How will you design your poster to reach true classical music fans as well as energize young newcomers?

As you conceptualize, don't worry too much about specifics. For now, just get a sense of the direction and tone you think your poster should take, what types of colors and images are appropriate, and how you can get the message across quickly within its environment.

From here, you can begin finding the images you plan to use, if any. (A text-based design is perfectly valid, too, as long as it is effective.) If possible, take your own photos or make your own illustrations—but you may use other sources for your images as you see fit.

3. Sketch Out Your Composition

If your concept is developed and you know which text and images you will use, you can plan your composition. Decide which part of the design is the focal point, how you will move the viewer through the design, and how you will create a hierarchy of information.

Before you begin, review the techniques for unity, balance, rhythm, and proportion. Start sketching while you consider the following:

- How will you unify the various elements of your poster? Should any elements be repeated, aligned, or grouped? How will your choice influence the recognition of the poster and the delivery of its message?
- How will you balance this vertical poster—symmetrically or asymmetrically? How will this choice help draw attention to the poster? If asymmetrically, how can you use your design elements to form the balance? Consider color, size, position, value, and so on.
- Is a rhythm or "beat" appropriate to this poster? If so, how will you create it using your design elements?
- Do you plan to work with a golden rectangle or root 2 rectangle? If so, how? Remember, you can break up the poster according to the golden section or root 2 proportion, or you can place your point of interest along its dividing segment.

4. Produce Your Artwork

Don't confine yourself here. Begin on a fresh Photoshop canvas in the size you'd like to work with (4" by 6", 10" by 15", or the actual size of 20" by 30", which is great for your portfolio), and produce your background elements. To help you along, you may want to overlay a grid on your canvas (View > Show > Grid), or show the document rulers (View > Rulers).

With background elements in place (colors, patterns, geometric areas, and so on), you can bring in your photographs or illustrations. If you need to edit them or clean them up, do that first, and then position them according to the composition decisions you made.

Nothing is set in stone—take a step back and see if this composition truly gets your point across in the best way possible. Simple tweaks to the placement, value, or size of your images can often turn an off-kilter layout into a more balanced one.

5. Incorporate Typography

Now you can add your typography. As you set all of the wording supplied by the client, consider the virtues we discussed—simplicity, balance, and placement. How will you make the text easy to read (but still interesting!), balance it with other elements, and be sure it is appropriate to the public placement of your poster?

Choose your typefaces carefully, remembering to stick to just a couple and to go decorative only when appropriate. And don't forget the personality of your type and how it works within your overall composition scheme. Will it engage audiences young and old? Will it give the festival the appropriate tone? Is the hierarchy clear?

6. Review Your Work

Make any final tweaks that you feel are appropriate, and then take a step back and look at your work.

How do the shapes relate to each other? Is your design unified and balanced? Do you feel a sense of rhythm? Is there a clear focal point? Good; now you are ready to present your work to the client!

If you want to go one step further, why not adapt your composition to a horizontal format? Suppose it will be used for advertisement on the side of a bus. The dimensions should be 12" by 4" for this optional project.

Student Work

Here are some sample posters from Sessions students with a similar music project:

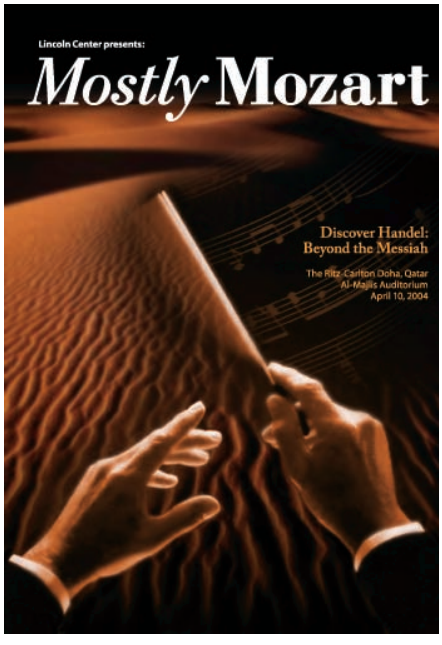


FIGURE 6.28: Hammad Iqbal creates a strong balance in his muted, sophisticated composition, and keeps the text simple and clean against the detailed photography.

FIGURE 6.29: Wilbert Reddit makes some great type choices in this poster. Notice the interesting negative space created by the outline of the violin.

FIGURE 6.30: Ulf Finndahl's poster uses a large, simplified photo to balance perfectly with the smaller, more detailed photo and typography. Also notice how the violin itself leads the eye.