Design Principles for Marking Teaching Assistants: From the book “The Non Designers Design Book” by Robin Williams

CRAP → CONTRAST, REPETITION, ALIGNMENT, PROXIMITY

The four basic principles

The following is a brief overview of the basic principles of design that appear in every well-designed piece of work. Although I discuss each one of these principles separately, keep in mind they are really interconnected. Rarely will you apply only one principle.

**Contrast**

The idea behind contrast is to avoid elements on the page that are merely similar. If the elements (type, color, size, line thickness, shape, space, etc.) are not the same, then make them very different. Contrast is often the most important visual attraction on a page—it’s what makes a reader look at the page in the first place.

**Repetition**

Repeat visual elements of the design throughout the piece. You can repeat colors, shapes, textures, spatial relationships, line thicknesses, fonts, sizes, graphic concepts, etc. This develops the organization and strengthens the unity.

**Alignment**

Nothing should be placed on the page arbitrarily. Every element should have some visual connection with another element on the page. This creates a clean, sophisticated, fresh look.

**Proximity**

Items relating to each other should be grouped close together. When several items are in close proximity to each other, they become one visual unit rather than several separate units. This helps organize information, reduces clutter, and gives the reader a clear structure.

Umm...

When gathering these four principles from the vast expanse of design theory, I thought there must be some appropriate and memorable acronym within these conceptual ideas that would help people remember them. Well, uh, there is a memorable—but rather inappropriate—acronym. Sorry,
CONTRAST EXAMPLES:

Contrast is the most fun of the design principles—and the most dramatic! A few simple changes can make the difference between an ordinary design and a powerful one.

BOOK SAVVY
Cynthia Lee Kana
Paperback
228 pages

As the world of books continues to change, so does the way we perceive and interact with them. With the advent of e-readers and online publishing, traditional book design has evolved to meet the demands of a new era. This book explores the principles of contrast in design, offering insights into how to create visually compelling and engaging content.

CONTRAST EXAMPLES:

Which of these two rock cards would you be most likely to take a second look at? This is the power of contrast: it gives you a lot more bang for the buck. Just a few simple changes, and the difference is amazing!

Choosing the headline/Book title front cover to liven up your book gives the reader an extra boost to make it bigger and bolder. Since the rock card is an adventure, let’s have a book bolder! For inspiration, I picked up the strong black font that appears in this book. I use the colors of Cynthia on the other side of the card because the side was getting too busy.

Although the ad below looks like a radical leap from the one on the opposite page, it is actually just a methodical application of the four basic principles.

This ad ran in the local newspaper. Besides the centered alignment, lack of creativity and repetition, one detail that gets my goat is how often you see poor typography in newspapers. It may look good from a distance, but up close, it’s quite difficult to read. The ad is more effective when it’s smaller and less intrusive.

The following is an example of a more effective ad.

Okay, these are the steps to go through to take the ad on the left and start making it into something like the ad above.

Let go of Times New Roman and Arial/verdana. Just eliminate them from your font choices. Trust me (I’m a bit of a font snob as well).

Let go of a consistent alignment. I know it’s hard to do, but you must do it for now. Later, you can experiment with it again.

Find the most interesting or most important item on the page, and emphasize it. In this case, the most interesting is the dog’s face, and the most important is the name of the store. Keep the most important things together so a reader doesn’t lose the focus.

Group the information into logical groups. Use space to set items apart or to connect them.

Find elements you can repeat (including font sizes of elements of contrast).

And most important, add contrast. Always use a contrast in which one color is white, the blue logo color, the gray typeface, sans-serif, sizes, and typeface choices.

Work through each concept over a time. I guarantee you’ll be amazed at what you can create.
REPETITION EXAMPLES:

Do you create multiple-page publications? Repetition is a major factor in the unity of these pages. If two readers open the document, it should be perfectly and instantly obvious that this page and page two are really part of the same publication.

Point out the elements of repetition in the two sample pages below.

Consistent typeface in headlines and subheads, and consistent spacing above.

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The single, wide column format is the same across each page, except in the margins of the outer border.

Sometimes the mere repetition of a repeated element can get the same results as if you used the whole thing. Try including just a portion of a familiar element, or use it in a different way.

If everything is inconsistent, how would anyone visually understand that something in particular is special? If you have a strongly consistent publication, you can throw in surprise elements, since these surprises are more attention seeking.

Can you point out the consistent, repetitive elements of this book?

If an image is familiar to a reader, it takes a piece of it to help the reader make the connection.

The book has a "focusing out" point that jumps across the bottom, but no text on most pages.

Some publications might choose to repeat a similar top matter line across the bottom—possibly with a ragged top line, like a city skyline rather than "long form" or "cathedral" style. Or, this or any other technique should be used consistently.

Repetition also gives a sense of professionalism and authority to your piece. It gives readers the feeling that someone is in charge; because repetition is obviously a thoughtful design decision.
ALIGNMENT EXAMPLES:

Do you tend to automatically center everything? A centered alignment is the most common alignment that beginners use—it’s very safe, it looks comfortable. A centered alignment creates a more formal look, a more austere look; a more orderly and often times downright dull look.

Take notice of the designs you like. I guarantee most designers that have a sophisticated look are not centered. Know it’s difficult, as a beginner, to break away from a centered alignment, you’ll have to force yourself to do it at least. But choose a strong flush left or right alignment with good use of proximity and you will be amazed at the change to your work.

A problem with the publication of many new designers is a subtle lack of alignment, such as centered headings and subheads over indented paragraphs. At first glance, which of the examples on these two pages presents a clearer and sharper image?

Find a strong alignment and stick to it. Even though it may be a while and you how could it say what made the difference between this example and the one before it, the more sophisticated look comes through clearly.

This is a very common sight: headings are centered, text is flush left, paragraph indents are typewriter make that is: five spaces or half an inch, as you may have learned in school, the instruction is centered in a column.

Never center headlines, even flush left copy or text that has an indent. If the text does not have a clear left and right edge, you cannot tell the headline is actually centered. It looks like it’s just hanging around.

All these uni-coded spaces create a messy page: wide margins, ragged right edge of text, centered heads with open space on both sides, centered illustration.

Try this: Draw lines on this example to see all the different alignments.

Insertion

Front Matter

Would you like to learn how to design your own business plan? This is your chance! With this step-by-step guide, you will be able to create a professional-looking plan that will help you achieve your goals.

This is a typical report cover, yes? This standard format presents a bold, almost provocative look, which may influence someone’s initial reaction to the report.

The strong flush left alignment gives the report cover a more sophisticated impression. Even though the author’s name is far from the title, the invisible line of the strong alignment connects the two text blocks.

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PROXIMITY EXAMPLES:

When you create a flyer, brochure, newsletter, or whatever, you already know which pieces of information are logically connected. You then cluster the information in those logically connected groups. The entire layout of the document always needs to work visually as well as logically — which means that the information needs to be placed with appropriate margins on the page, and the relative size of the type and the amount of white space need to be appropriate to the importance of the information.

In this way, we use proximity to make it easier for readers to find the information that they are looking for. By clustering related information together, we make it easier for readers to find the information that they are looking for, and we also make it easier for them to understand the relationship between the different pieces of information.

Sometimes, when grouping items into close proximity, you need to make some changes, such as the size or weight of the text or the size or weight of the graphics. Body copy (the main body of reading text) does not have to be 12 point — information that is subsidiary to the main message, such as the volume number and year of a newsletter, can often be as small as 8 or 8.5 point.