

Introduction to Graphic Design Principles



- Graphic design is visual communication solving problems through imagery, typography, and layout



- Seven foundational principles: balance, contrast, hierarchy, alignment, repetition, proximity, and space



- Mastering principles—not just software—separates professional, effective design from amateur work



- 2026 design landscape: shifting toward 'Cognitive Clarity,' bold minimalism, and expressive typography



The Designer's Toolkit: Elements vs. Principles

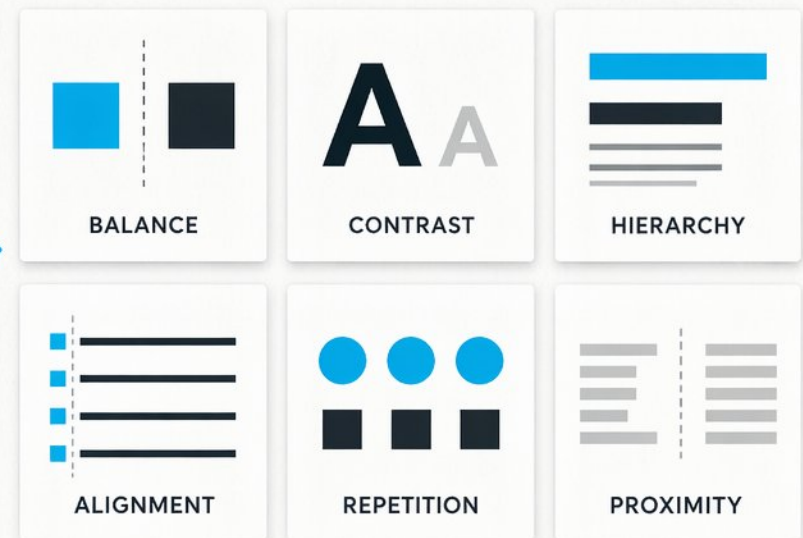
ELEMENTS

Raw ingredients



PRINCIPLES

Organize and bring meaning



- **Elements** are the raw ingredients: line, shape, color, typography, texture



- **Principles** are the rules that organize those ingredients



- **Think of elements** as your 'words' and principles as your 'grammar'



- **When a design feels off**, use principles as your diagnostic checklist

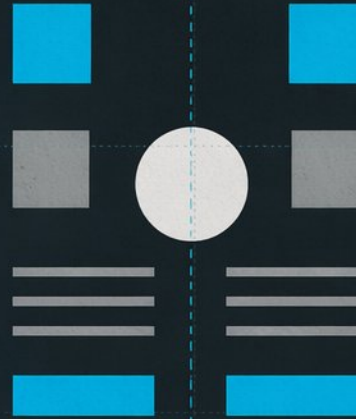
Balance and Visual Weight

- Symmetrical = formal, stable;
Asymmetrical = dynamic, modern
- Radial balance orbits elements around a central focal point
- Visual weight comes from size, color, density, and position
- Counterbalance without mirroring:
large image vs. bold text block
- CSS Grid enables controlled asymmetrical layouts in web design



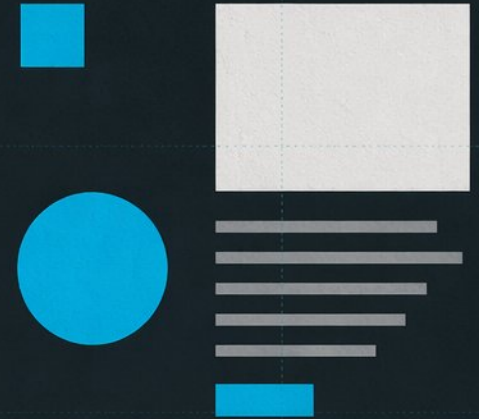
SYMMETRICAL BALANCE

Formal, Stable



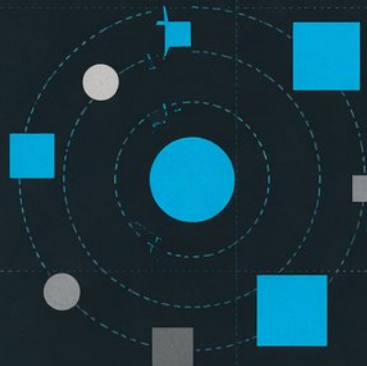
ASYMMETRICAL BALANCE

Dynamic, Modern



RADIAL BALANCE

Orbits around a central focal point

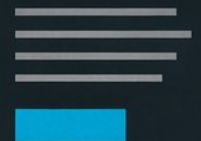


COUNTERBALANCE

Large image vs. bold text block



**BOLD
IDEAS
BUILD**
STRONG FUTURES

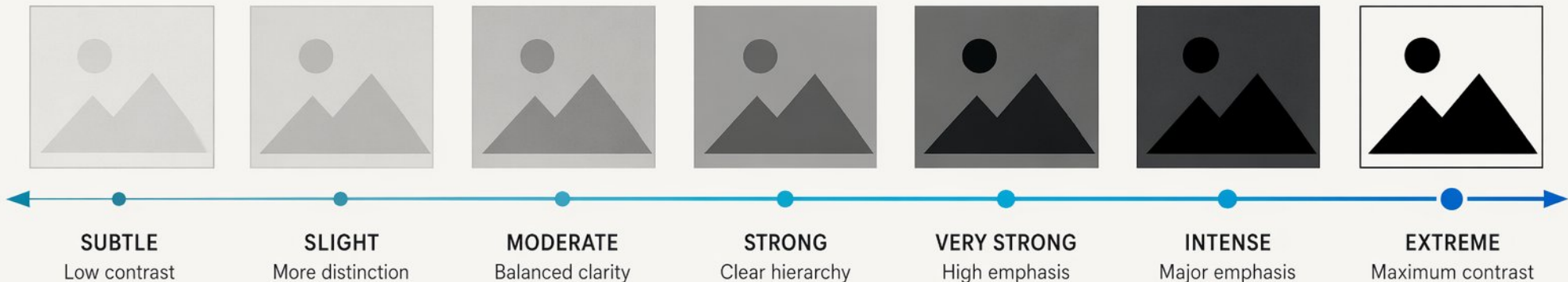


GRID AS FOUNDATION

CSS Grid provides structure, alignment, and rhythm to achieve intentional balance.

Contrast and Emphasis

- Contrast: visible difference between elements (light/dark, big/small, warm/cool)
- Engine of hierarchy—without it, all elements read at the same importance
- Types: tonal, scale, weight, color, shape, and spatial contrast
- WCAG 2.2 AA: 4.5:1 ratio for normal text, 3:1 for large text and UI components



A SPECTRUM OF CONTRAST: FROM SUBTLE TO EXTREME

01 Visual Hierarchy: Guiding the Eye



- **Visual hierarchy:** ordering elements from most to least important



- **Scale:** larger elements command more attention



- **Color:** bright, saturated hues draw the eye first



- **Space:** isolating an element with whitespace emphasizes it

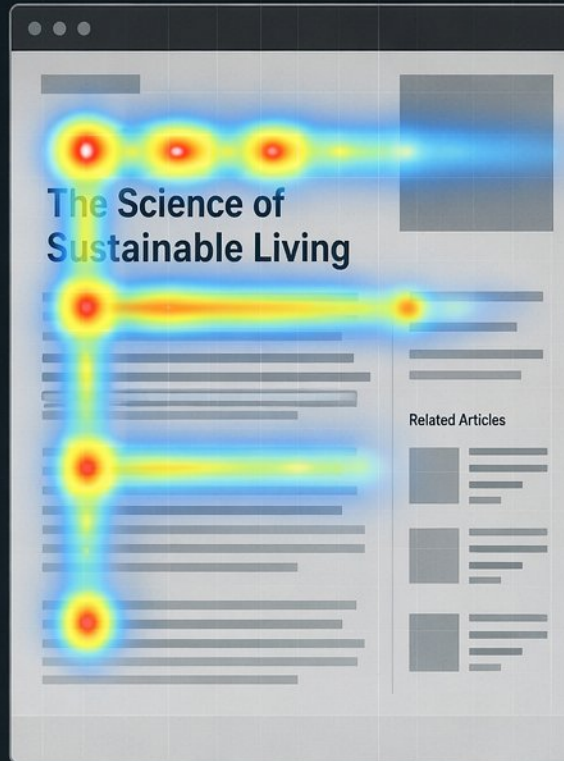


- **Scanning patterns:** F-pattern for text, Z-pattern for marketing

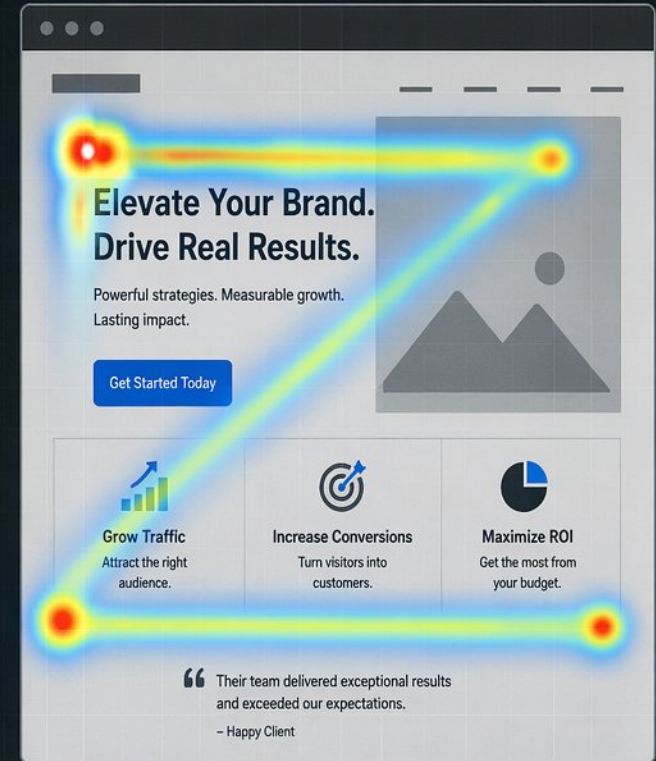


- One primary focal point per design is essential

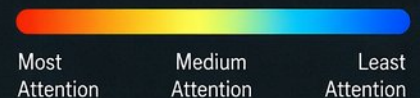
F-PATTERN (FOR TEXT)



Z-PATTERN (FOR MARKETING)



Heatmaps show where users look first, longest, and last. Design with intent. **Guide attention.** Communicate clearly.



KEY TAKEAWAY: Strong visual hierarchy improves understanding, engagement, and action.

01

Alignment: Creating Order and Cohesion

- Invisible lines that connect elements, creating order and professionalism
- Grid systems (column, baseline, 8pt) provide the structural backbone
- Strong alignment reduces cognitive load—users instantly know what belongs where
- Elements snap to a grid vs. random placement that feels 'off' and unprofessional

BEFORE: MISALIGNED

Random placement creates visual chaos and weakens hierarchy.



Design Principles Newsletter

Practical tips and insights to help you create clearer, more effective designs.



Weekly Insights

Actionable ideas delivered when you need them.

Subscribe Now

AFTER: ALIGNED

Aligned to a grid for clarity, balance, and professionalism.



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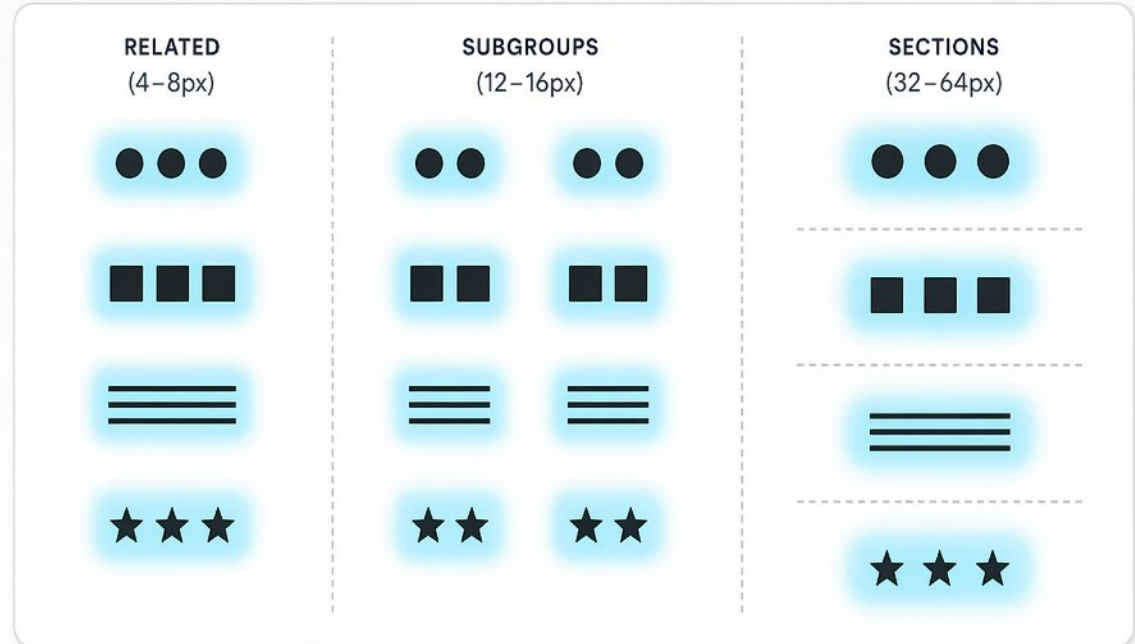
01

Proximity: Grouping Through Space



- Objects close together are perceived as a unified group
- Creates structure and hierarchy without adding visual elements
- Spacing rules: 4-8px for related, 12-16px for subgroups, 32-64px for sections
- Common failures: labels floating between fields, proximity conflicts

PROXIMITY HEATMAP



COMMON FAILURES

The diagram shows two examples of common proximity failures in a form layout, each marked with a red 'X' icon.

- Labels floating between fields:** A form with fields for 'Name', 'Email', and a dashed box. The 'Name' label is positioned between the 'Name' and 'Email' fields, causing confusion.
- Proximity conflicts:** A form with fields for 'Username', 'Password', 'Remember me', and 'Sign in'. The 'Remember me' checkbox is positioned between the 'Password' and 'Sign in' fields, causing confusion.

The Power of White Space

- Active white space is deliberately added for hierarchy and emphasis
- Passive white space is the minimum spacing needed for readability
- Generous space improves comprehension by up to 20% and signals premium quality
- Apple and Hermès use white space to signal confidence; dense layouts signal anxiety
- Practical techniques: increase line-height to 1.5-1.7x, add 80-160px section spacing, cut content rather than shrink it

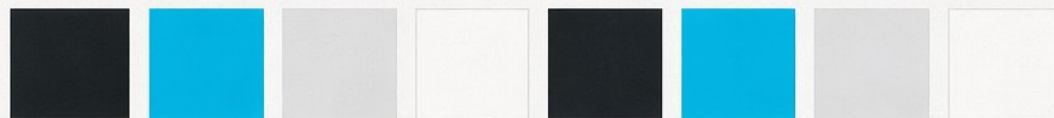




Repetition and Consistency

- Repetition: rhythmic reuse of colors, fonts, shapes, and spacing
- Unifies multi-page documents and strengthens brand recognition
- Creates rhythm and predictability; avoid monotony without variation
- Powers design systems with consistent buttons, palettes, icons, and type scales

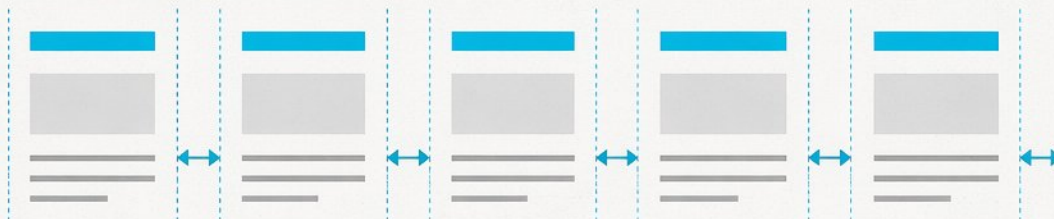
COLOR PALETTE



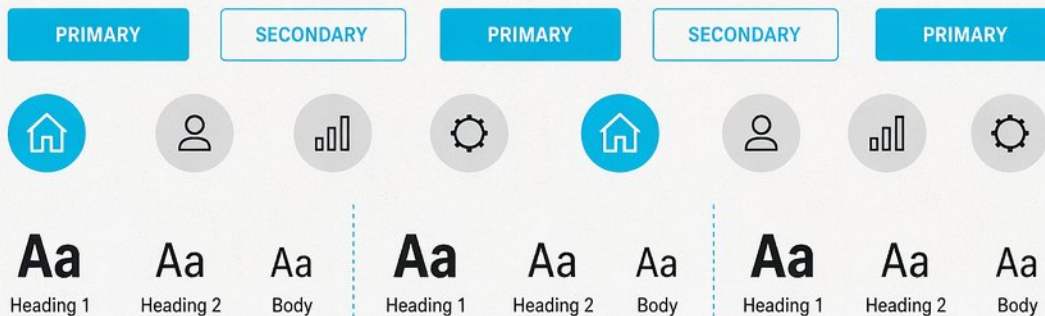
SHAPES



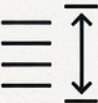
SPACING & LAYOUT RHYTHM



UI ELEMENTS PATTERN



Typography Fundamentals

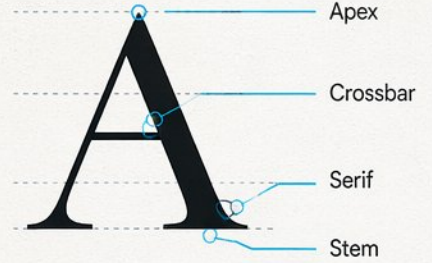
- 
 - Classify typefaces: serif, sans-serif, script, and display
- 
 - Readability is how easily words flow; legibility is character recognition
- 
 - 2026 trends: expressive variable serifs, bouba grotesks, anti-AI handwriting
- 
 - Body text rules: 50-75 chars/line, 1.5-1.7x line-height, generous spacing

01

SERIF

Aa

Playfair Display
ELEGANT & TRADITIONAL



02

SANS-SERIF

Aa

Inter
CLEAN & MODERN



03

SCRIPT

Aa

Great Vibes
FLUID & PERSONAL



04

DISPLAY

Aa

Bebas Neue
BOLD & EXPRESSIVE



GOOD TYPE IS INVISIBLE,
GREAT TYPE IS UNFORGETTABLE.



Font Pairing Strategies

- One 'voice' font for headlines, one 'workhorse' for body text
- Pair by contrast: serif headline with sans-serif body, or vice versa
- Use superfamilies (IBM Plex, Roboto) for low-risk, coherent pairings
- Test with real content: wrapped headlines, dates, and small buttons

EXAMPLE 1: SERIF HEADLINE + SANS BODY

INSIGHTS

Designing for Clarity and Impact

May 20, 2025

Good typography supports your message. It builds trust, improves comprehension, and creates a clear visual hierarchy across every touchpoint.

[Read Article](#)[Save for Later](#)

HEADLINE

Playfair Display
(Serif)

BODY

IBM Plex Sans
(Sans-Serif)

EXAMPLE 2: SANS HEADLINE + SERIF BODY

INSIGHTS

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HEADLINE

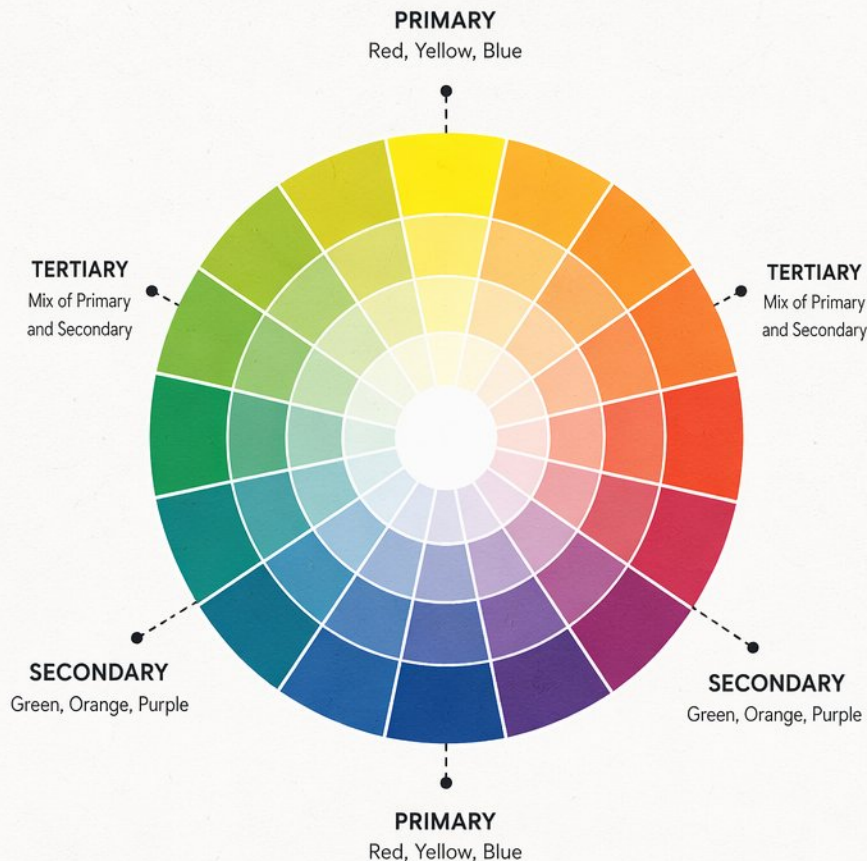
Roboto
(Sans-Serif)

BODY

Playfair Text
(Serif)

Color Theory Essentials

- The color wheel: primary, secondary, and tertiary hues as the foundation of color relationships
- Key harmonies: complementary, analogous, triadic, and monochromatic palettes
- Color models: RGB for digital, CMYK for print, and HSL for intuitive picking
- 2026 trends: Earthy Futurism and Soft Minimalism use muted, organic tones



KEY HARMONIES

COMPLEMENTARY



ANALOGOUS



TRIADIC



MONOCHROMATIC



COLOR MODELS



RGB

For digital

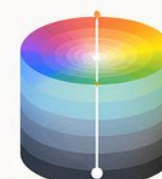
Additive color model for screens and emissive light.



CMYK

For print

Subtractive color model for inks and printed materials.



HSL

For intuitive picking

Hue, Saturation, Lightness for precise and natural color selection.



2026
TRENDS



EARTHY FUTURISM

Grounded, organic, and tech-inspired muted tones.



SOFT MINIMALISM

Calm, refined, and timeless muted neutrals.

Color Accessibility and WCAG Compliance



- WCAG 2.2 AA: 4.5:1 contrast for normal text, 3:1 for large text and UI components



- Never use color alone to convey information—300M+ people have color vision deficiencies

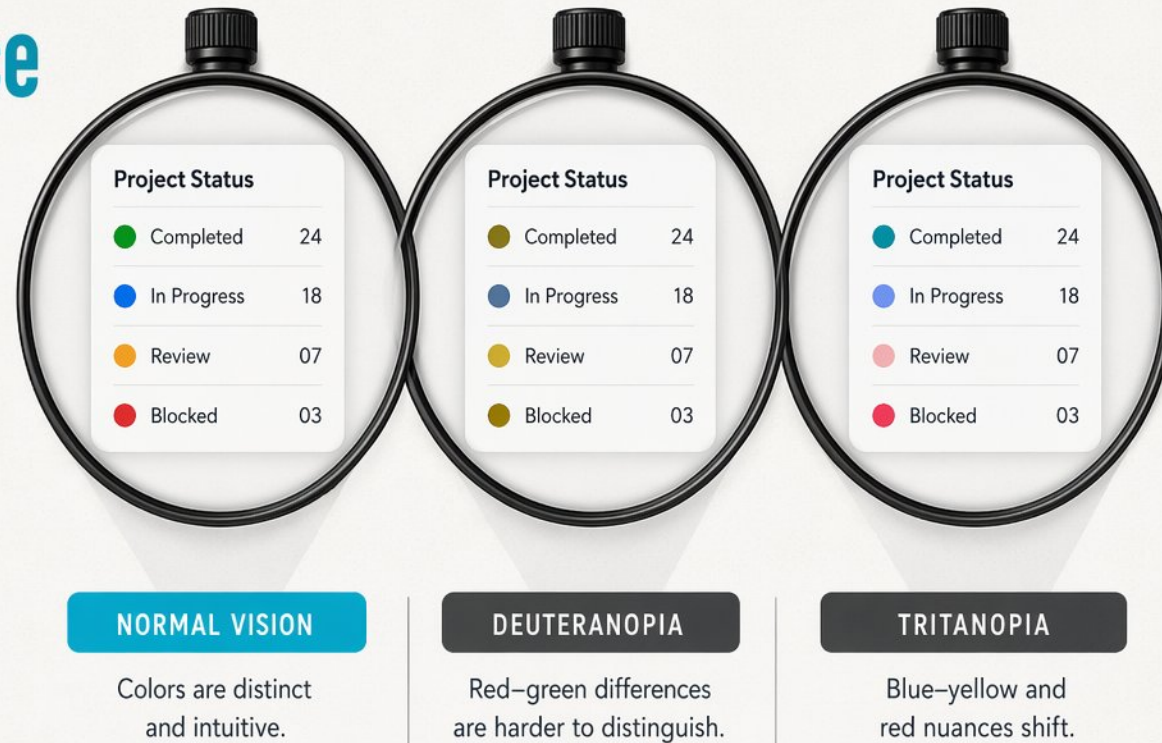


- Use contrast checkers, color blindness simulators, and automated CI/CD pipeline testing



- Accessible colors often look better—compliance and good design reinforce each other

UI COMPONENT THROUGH COLOR VISION FILTERS



Design for all users. Ensure information is clear and distinguishable across different ways of seeing.



DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS.
SAME UNDERSTANDING.

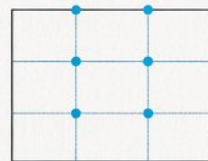
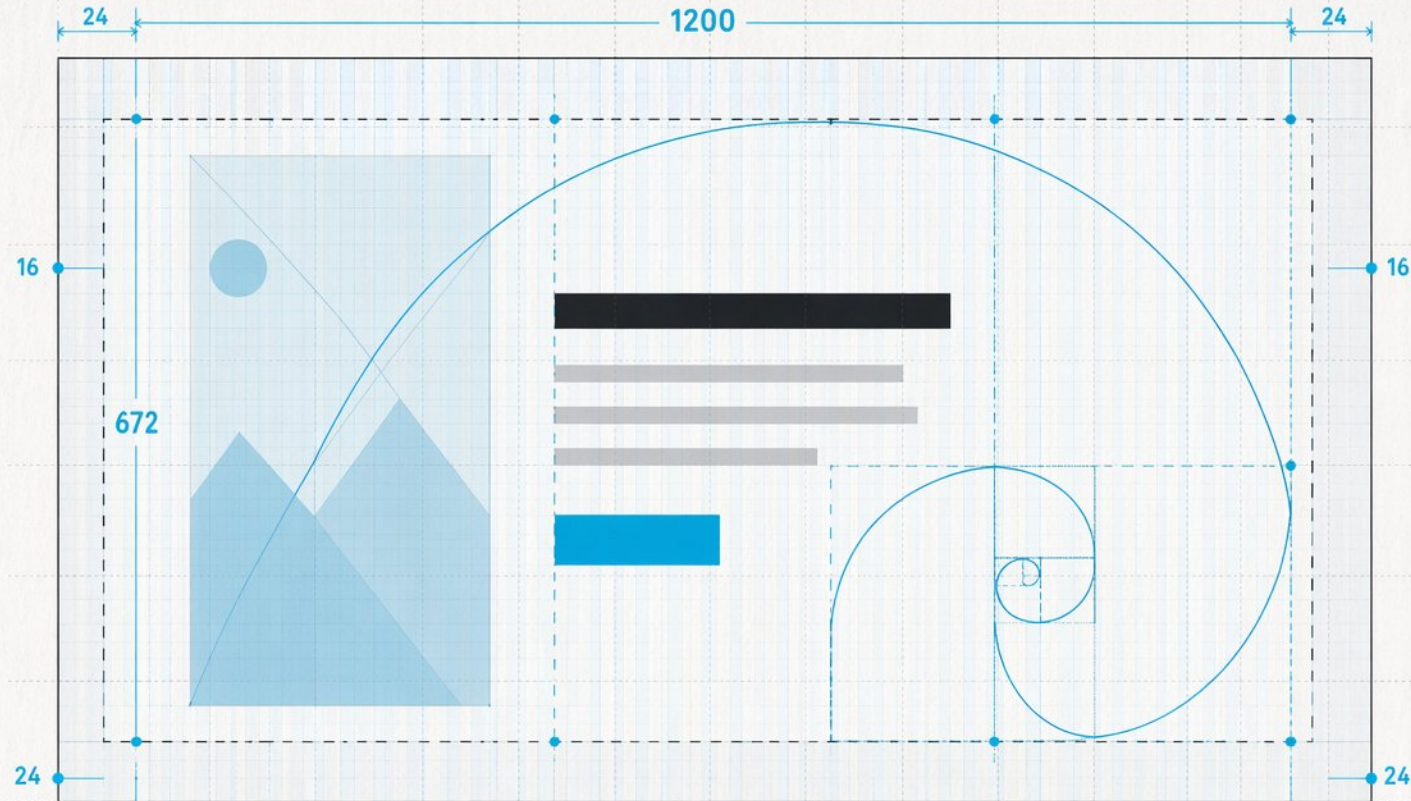
Composition and Layout Systems

- Composition arranges all elements within a format using design principles
- The 8pt grid system: all margins and padding are multiples of 8
- Frameworks include the rule of thirds, golden ratio, and modular scales
- Responsive design uses fluid grids, `clamp()`, and adaptive spacing tokens

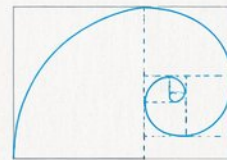
THE 8PT GRID SYSTEM

All margins and padding are multiples of 8

8pt unit  Content area 



RULE OF THIRDS



GOLDEN RATIO



MODULAR SCALES



RESPONSIVE LAYOUTS

RESPONSIVE DESIGN TOKENS

Fluid grids, `clamp()`, and adaptive spacing tokens



SPACE (8PT BASE)

8 16 24 32 48 64 96



CONTAINER (MAX-WIDTH)

320px 768px 1024px 1440px



TYPE SCALE (CLAMP)

`clamp(1rem, 0.875rem + 0.5vw, 1.25rem)`



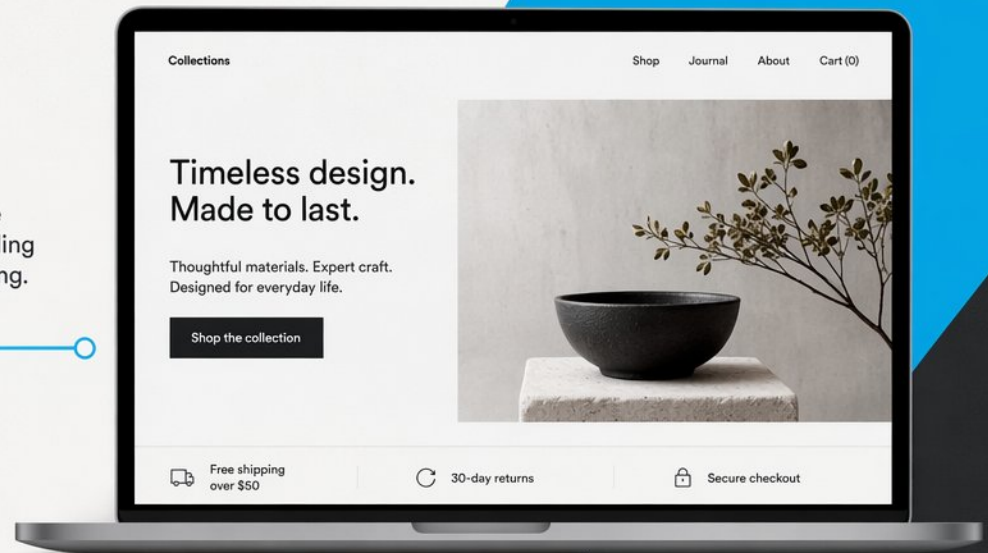
GUTTER (FLUID)

`clamp(16px, 2vw, 32px)`

Designing for Real Devices and Contexts

Desktop

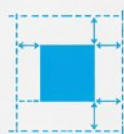
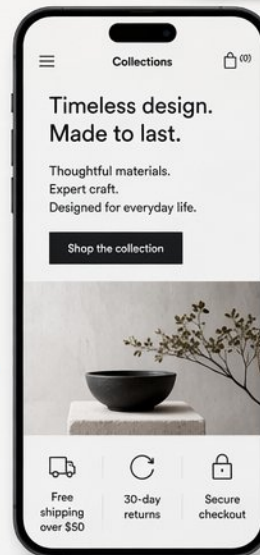
More space for storytelling and browsing.



- - Over half of traffic is mobile—design for small screens first.
- - 16px minimum touch targets and 8px gutters prevent mis-taps.
- - E-commerce needs density; luxury pages need generous white space.
- - Preview on mobile frames, social feeds, and multiple screen sizes.

Mobile

Prioritize clarity, thumb-friendly layout, and essential actions.

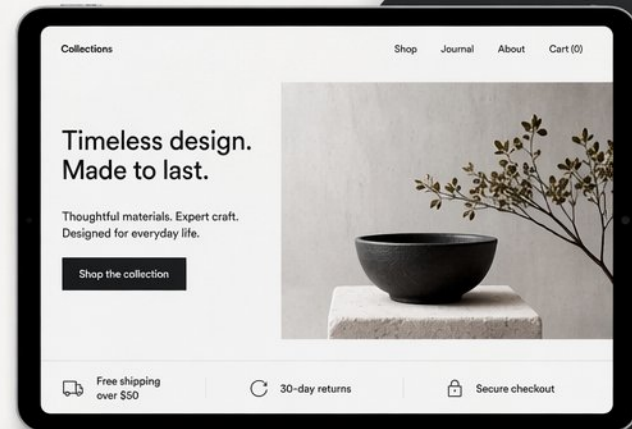


16px minimum touch target
8px gutters

Tablet

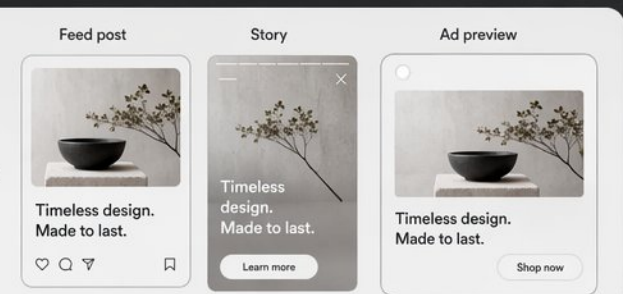
Tablet

Balanced layout for comfortable reading and touch.



Social feeds

Ensure the key message and hierarchy work in narrow, scrolling contexts.



Screen size range

320px
Mobile

768px
Tablet

1024px
Small desktop

1440px
Desktop

1920px+
Large desktop

The 2026 Design Landscape: Trends and Movements



- Neo-Minimalism: clean layouts with bold, vibrant color accents



- Expressive variable serifs: loud, high-contrast display fonts



- Bouba grotesks: soft, rounded, friendly neo-grotesks



- Anti-AI handwriting: human-made marks as deliberate signal



- Shift from clinical geometry to warmer, humanist type

Vivid



BOUBA
GROTESK

a

Approachable.
Human. Friendly. •

*Design is feeling.
Not auto-generated.*

*Made by humans,
for humans.*



ANTI-AI
HANDWRITING

FROM
CLINICAL
GEOMETRY

TO WARMER,
HUMANIST
TYPE



Clear thinking.
Human touch.



Applying Principles:

A Design Audit Checklist



01



- Start with Emphasis: identify the single focal point the eye sees first

02



- Use the "squint test" to verify visual groupings and hierarchy

03



- Check for proximity conflicts, trapped white space, and inconsistent spacing

04



- Diagnose by finding the one broken principle—fix that before adjusting anything else

DESIGNER'S DIAGNOSTIC CHECKLIST

Next Steps and Resources



- Start with theory: read The Non-Designer's Design Book, take Coursera's Fundamentals of Graphic Design



- Learn one vector tool deeply: Illustrator for branding, Figma for UX/product work



- Build a portfolio: 5 strong projects outweigh credentials for hiring managers



- Join communities: Dribbble, Behance, Designer Hangouts, local meetups



- Recreate existing layouts, design a brand identity, audit everyday designs daily



PersonWise.

PersonWise • AI digital-human course platform



Scan the code or click anywhere to watch this course live, with voice Q&A

personwise.ai/t/08a9ff53/public