Syntax
Visual Hierarchy

In addition to attracting viewers' attention, artists have to help viewers navigate by creating a pattern they can dissect and follow—what is called a hierarchy (which basically means, "the order of things"). They do that as a starting point by making the most important thing different enough from the others, through the use of contrast, so that the viewer is able to focus on it. Creating other contrasts is still important, but

the designer must be really careful with how he or she applies them to whatever is intended to be seen second, then third, and so on. The distinction between "important" and "not important" is the first idea a viewer will understand. Creating a hierarchy involves applying **"gestalt"** principles of perception (gestalt means "totality", or how we understand the parts of a composition as a whole, and how we break it down).


Differentiation / When an element in a visual field disconnects from the others (A), it becomes a focal point and, therefore, assumes the greatest level of importance. Although there may be other kinds of contrast have been introduced in the second example (B), the extreme degree to which the primary element disconnects diminishes the effect of these contrasts—that element thus remains at the top of the hierarchy (the most important thing, and the place where the eye "enters"); and groups of less important elements are identifiable.
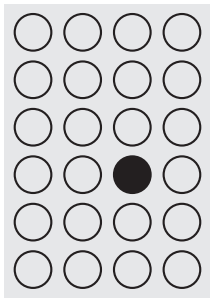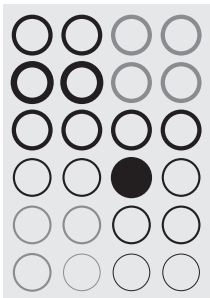
A   B

Too much difference, or contrast, among elements works in the opposite way: If every element is remarkably different, not only does the totality fall apart, but so does the hierarchy: In being all different, the elements become equivalent in importance and impossible to order in a meaningful way.


Simplicity / A gestalt principle that describes how we will tend to find unification among multiple elements to more clearly order an experience: reducing a complex grouping into a single unit, or seeing fewer elements out of many: Many elements resolve themselves into a single image (A); we perceive two lines crossing, rather than four individual lines converging on a single location (B); the complicated arrangement of lines and dots is perceived as a single structure (C). Very often, other kinds of principles (see proximity, similarity, and closure, below) help in creating simplicity.
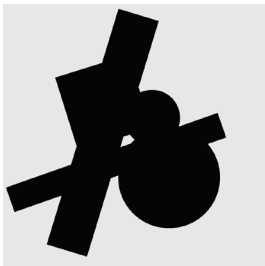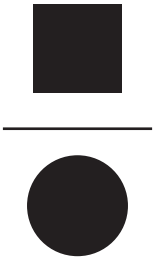

A
B   C

Symmetrical arrangements of elements (even if they're visually very different from each other) will typically be perceived as a group or unit.

Proximity / A gestalt principle that governs how we distinguish or relate groups within a totality based on how close together they appear. In general, elements that are closer together will form a group, and seem more related to each other; elements that are farther apart will seem distinct from each other, and possibly unrelated to each other (or meaning something in opposition to each other).
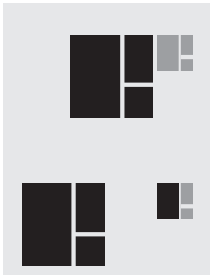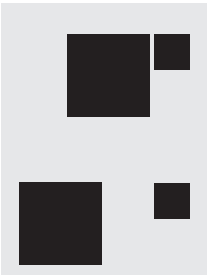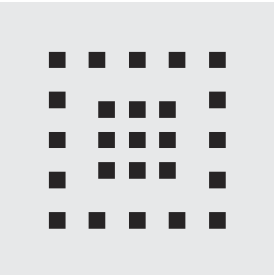
Relationships of proximity can help separate—and so distinguish—or join, and thereby relate, elements. In separating the main levels of this hierarchy, the radical distinction among levels by large spaces allows for the creation of similar, but smaller-scale, more complex—but secondary, or less important—hierarchies within each level.


Similarity / A gestalt principle that governs how we assign relationships between elements: Most simply, elements that are visually similar will be interpreted as the same in meaning (and vice versa)even if separated by material that is clearly different. Hierarchy, in addition to being strictly about level of importance, is also about relation or establishing which elements are alike in meaning (whether they are important or not).
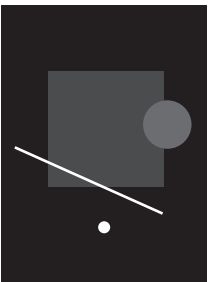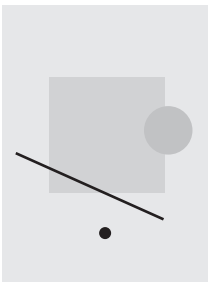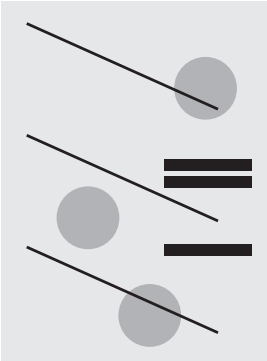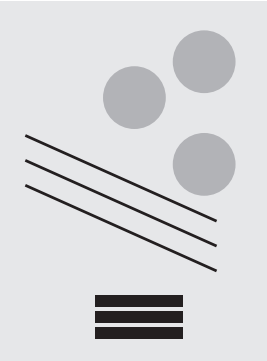
Following the notion of similarity, elements that are similar in value will visually join into groups or levels, while those that exhibit the greatest contrast in value (compared to other such contrasts) will differentiate. If the field is overall light in value (above, left), each successively darker element will become increasingly important;

the opposite is true if the field is of relatively dark value (above, right). Within each example, the square and large dot, being similar in value to each other (and to the field), form a group; the line and the small dot form a second group (which is dominant through greater value contrast).

Closure / A gestalt principle that describes the mental completion of an incomplete visual form that results from the accumulated perception of its parts. A weird thing happens through the process of "closing": In perceiving the parts first, a viewer interprets these as the most important; but upon completing the "incomplete" image, the viewer will interpret that newly discovered thing to be most important.
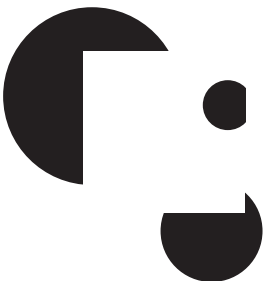
In this simple example, the square is incomplete, revealed by the interruption of the circular forms.

The volumes of the teapot and cup in this graphic translation are able to be perceived as complete, despite mnay of the objects' contours not being literally present,

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Continuity / A gestalt principle that describes how our minds will create interconnection among disconnected parts, or elements that have been interrupted, to create continuous wholes. Very often, the actions of similarity, proximity, and closure are working to help us do so.
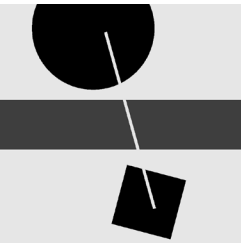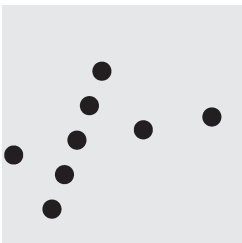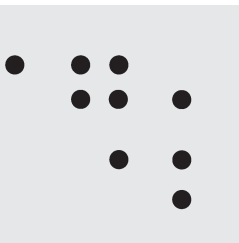
Compositional Flow / Sometimes called "eye path," this kind of continuity occurs as a viewer compares each hierarchic level's degree of contrast from the others and senses the difference as a decrease in optical resistance (another way of thinking about contrast, incidentally). The eye will move from area of greatest overall contrast to area of least overall contrast, regardless of where these areas are located within the visual field and, thus, the direction(s) in which the eye must move.