
READING PATTERN

The experience of reading in a particular language shapes the way we orient ourselves to a visual field. Reinforced across thousands of examples in our lifetimes, reading order influences how we confront a page.

The Gutenberg Diagram, articulated by newspaper designer Edmund Arnold (1913–2007), describes how Western readers typically approach a printed page. The diagram divides the visual field into four quadrants, each attracting attention in a particular order ([Figure 4.24](#)). A visual sweep of the composition begins at the upper left of the page and moves horizontally to the right along aligned elements, such as lines of text. Readers work their way to the lower right of the page in subsequent scans. Fallow areas attract less attention unless a dominant element pulls the eyes in that direction. This pattern is often referred to as *reading gravity* and explains why compositions with the same top and bottom margins sometimes appear bottom heavy ([Figure 4.25](#)). A slightly larger bottom margin tends to make the vertical orientation of the

composition read as optically centered.

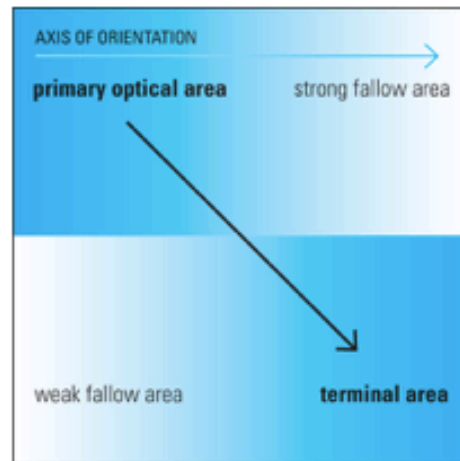


Figure 4.24

Gutenberg Diagram Edmund Arnold (1913–2007)

The Gutenberg Diagram describes the reading pattern in Western languages. Readers enter at the top left and work their way horizontally to the lower right, resulting in fallow areas in the upper right and lower left corners of the page.



Figure 4.25

Reading gravity

The upper left to lower right reading pattern in Western

languages tends to make images and text feel heavier toward the bottom of the page when mathematically centered (left).

Adding slightly more space to the bottom margin than the top (right) creates the illusion of vertically centered elements.

Paula Scher's poster for the Public Theatre makes successful use of the top-left-to-lower-right reading pattern, reinforcing it through the large type and a stair step arrangement of secondary information ([Figure 4.26](#)). Other examples are less explicit in their application, yet the emphasis among elements and their location in space correspond to the typical reading pattern. An arrangement of visual form however, can undermine this typical orientation to content. Michael Bierut's *Inner City* poster subverts the normal reading pattern, taking the reader into the center of the composition through a series of layered words ([Figure 4.27](#)). The altered reading pattern is consistent with the concept of urban infill.

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Photo: [illegible]

Figure 4.26

Public Theater, season poster, *Simpatico*, 1994 Paula Scher

Scher's poster for the Public Theater uses an obvious reference to the typical reading pattern in the stair-stepped typography. At the same time, the heavy border and large type in the background keep the smaller text from "sliding off the page."



Figure 4.27

Inner City Infill. Poster for the 1984 architectural competition sponsored by the New York State Council on the Arts Michael Bierut/Pentagram

Bierut's poster undermines the typical reading pattern by stacking large type rather than aligning it with a single horizontal baseline. As a result, readers read into the space rather than across it, consistent with the topic.

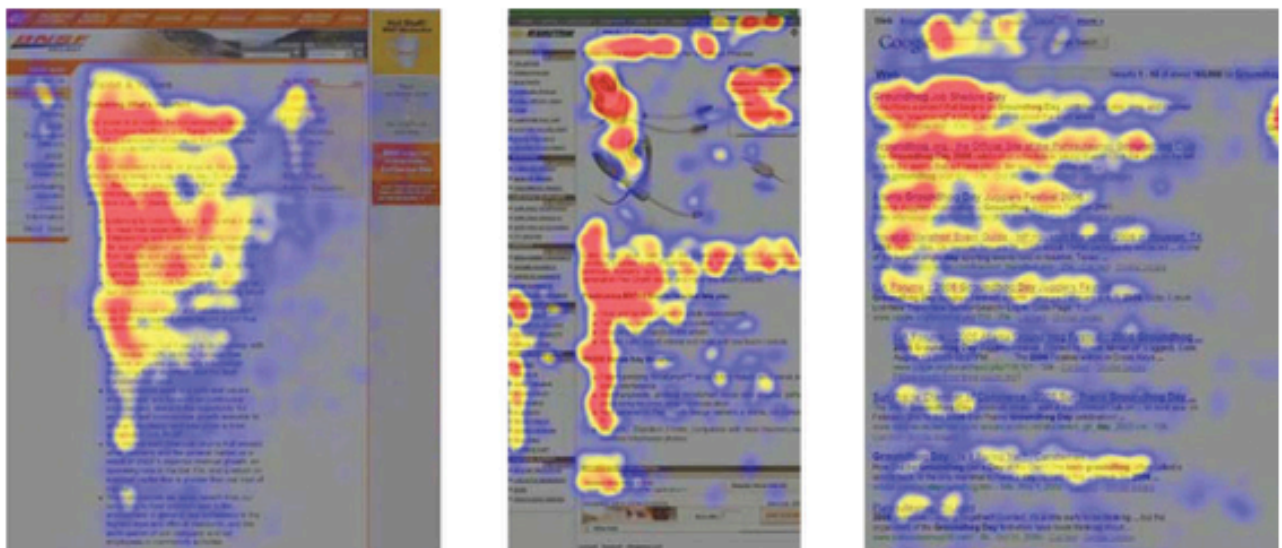


Figure 4.28

F-shaped reading pattern for web content Heatmaps from user eyetracking studies of three websites, April 17, 2006 Nielsen Norman Group, Jakob Nielsen

Usability expert Nielsen's eye-tracking study of 232 readers illustrates the tendency to read horizontally at the top of the screen, drop down and read horizontally again, and then read vertically at the start of sentences, paragraphs, and lists.

Nielsen recommends putting the most important

information in the first two paragraphs of text and making the beginning words of paragraphs and lists information rich. Red indicates the most fixations, yellow fewer than red, and blue the least. Gray areas didn't attract any attention. (<https://www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-reading-pattern-web-content>)

There have been attempts to describe how readers move through screen-based information. Usability researcher Jakob Nielsen, who tracked eye movement on several types of sites, describes a recurring F-shaped pattern of viewing. His studies indicate that we do not read online text word-for-word. We look for key words (subheads, bullet points, and so forth) at the left edge of paragraphs ([Figure 4.28](#)). What is not clear is whether this behavior is the result of natural reading patterns or a specific consequence of the configurations in the test presentations. There appears to be somewhat less predictable behavior in the areas of the second test devoted to image, suggesting that alternative configurations could produce different patterns, as they do in the Inner City poster.

Regardless of findings, it is obvious that how we read language is an orienting force to be reckoned with in

designing information. Compositions can be consistent with dominant reading patterns or use attention-getting visual strategies to reorient readers' interpretive behavior. Designer Jonathan Barnbrook's book design intentionally redirects the natural reading order to slow down interpretation for greater contemplation ([Figure 4.29](#)). In one spread, centered type with highlighted words encourages a staccato scanning behavior as well as a left-to-right, top-to-bottom pattern. Other spreads read first as shapes and second as text, encouraging an alternate approach to the page from more traditional layouts.

Shifting the orientation of text within the visual field or undermining a common baseline for letterforms in the same word or sentence further complicates orientation to the reading task. It slows down the speed of reading for some gain in reflection or reference to forms other than text.

Reading pattern, therefore, is an orienting force that determines perceptions of hierarchy in complex layouts. Subverting reading pattern for expressive means requires strong attention-getting characteristics

in elements located in the fallow areas of the composition.

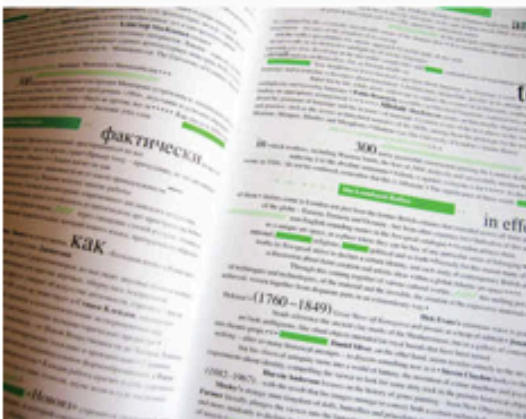
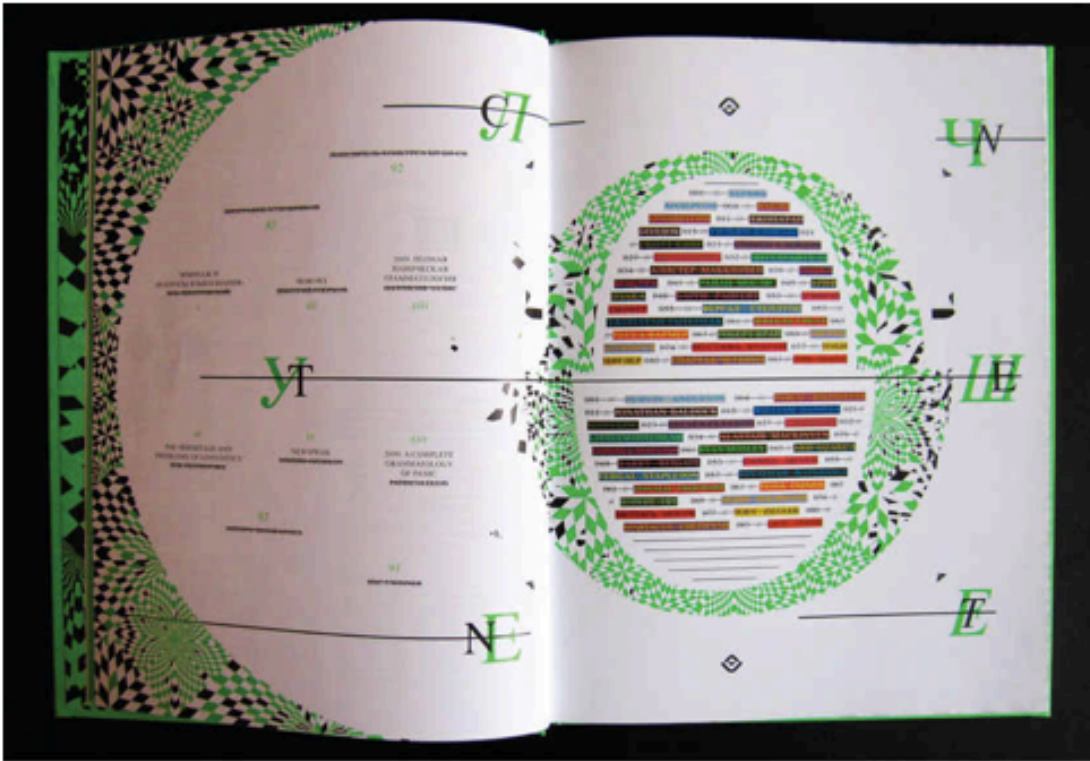


Figure 4.29

Newspeak: British Art Now, 2010 Booth-Clibborn Editions Jonathan Barnbrook

Barnbrook's typographic layouts forgo traditional reading patterns in favor of more contemplative layouts that intentionally slow down reading.
