

The Designer's Guide to Gestalt Theory

Utilise the Gestalt principles to make your designs more coherent.

In the 1920s, a group of psychologists in Germany developed a series of theories of visual perception. The Gestalt principles – or Gestalt Theory, as it's also known – form the basis of many design rules we follow today. It's important for graphic communicators to learn the principles. If you understand what they tell us about how we perceive visual objects and their arrangements, you'll be able to create a more coherent design that will better connect with your audience.

What is Gestalt Theory?

The term Gestalt means 'unified whole', which is a good way of describing the over-arching theme behind the Gestalt principles. These refer to the way in which humans, when looking at a group of objects, will see the whole before we see the individual parts.

If you collect together your design elements in a visual arrangement using one of the various approaches that we explain below, your design will feel more connected, coherent and complete.

The prominent founders of the collection of theories and principles were Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Kohler, and Kurt Koffka.

But while the principles were developed over a number of years, they came to prominence in part thanks to Rudolf Arnheim's 1954 book, Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye. This became a must-have art book of the 20th century, and regularly features on university course text lists.

Six Gestalt principles

The best way to understand Gestalt is to look at the different principles. It's well worth reading Arnheim's book, but to summarise there are six common, basic Gestalt Principles.

We've broken each of these down with a simple example below.

01. Similarity



This design has similarity because the individual elements that make up the design have the same basic shape characteristics

When objects look similar to one another, viewers will often see the individual elements as part of a pattern or group. This effect can be used to create a single illustration, image or message from a series of separate elements.



Attention is drawn to the different element in this composition because it breaks the pattern of similarity.

The similarity between different elements can be shape, colour, size, texture or value. The more commonality that individual elements have, the greater the sense of coherence, thanks to similarity.

A particular element can be emphasized when it's dissimilar, breaking the pattern of similarity. This effect is called an **anomaly**.

02. Continuation



In this example the eye is led through the first design element towards the star that aligns with the curve. Continuation is the principle through which the eye is drawn along a path, line or curve, preferring to see a



single continuous figure than separate lines. This can be used to point towards another element in the composition, and is seen where a line is cut through one object, often in a curve, aligning perfectly with a secondary element.

The illustration to the left consists of 4 lines that meet at the central point, but we prefer to see two intersecting lines rather than 4 lines that converge

03. Closure

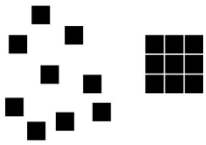


The World Wildlife Fund logo uses the closure principle to describe a panda, even though the shape is not fully closed

Closure is a common design technique that uses the human eye's tendency to see closed shapes. Closure works where an object is incomplete or the interior space of an element is not fully closed, but the viewer perceives a complete shape by filling in the missing information. This technique is often

associated with stencilled artwork, but is also closely associated with logo forms.

04. Proximity (aka grouping)



The arrangement of boxes on the left are not close enough to have proximity, while the group on the right is perceived as a single whole element. Proximity uses the close arrangement of elements to create a group association between those objects. If individual elements are also similar, they will tend to be perceived as a single whole, even though they are separate elements.



The shapes don't have to be regular to achieve proximity. Similar shapes arranged together to describe a bigger image, such as the illustration of a flame on the left. Proximity or grouping can be achieved with lots of different commonality including shape, colour, texture, size or any other visual attribute.

05. Figure/ground

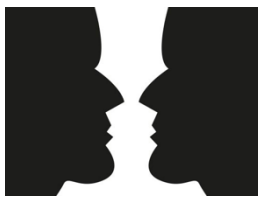


Figure and ground often uses the idea of light and shade to help create an image that jumps out from a series of shapes. This principle describes the eye's tendency to see and separate objects from their surrounding background. A classic example uses a vase/candlestick illustration to show two faces peering at each other, but you can also see this effect in a variety of logo designs. It works

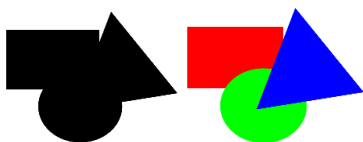


because human eyes want to see the figure (foreground object) and background (ground) as two different planes of focus.

MC Escher's famous woodblock Sky and Water 1 (1938) uses the figure and ground principle. Everything that is not figure is considered ground, which can be used to create some interesting visual effects and tricks, particularly when the designer or artist introduces deliberate ambiguity - a favourite technique of the surrealist MC Escher.

06. Simplicity or Order (sometimes known as Pragnanz)

The fundamental core of Gestalt perception is the law of simplicity which says that we tend to order our experience in a manner that is regular, orderly, symmetrical and simple.



The shape far left is ambiguous (having several possible meanings or interpretations) and complex taken as a whole. You most likely see it made up of three simple shapes, square, circle, and triangle. These shapes can be seen clearly when each is given a different color.

Reality is reduced to the simplest forms possible or: **The whole is greater than the sum of the parts!**