

# The Design Equation

*The hierarchy of an ordered and harmonious composition.*

*Composition: a verb and a noun.  
The act of composing is the verb,  
the end result is the noun.*

*Composition*

*Composition starts here.*

Harmony

**Harmony** is the ultimate aim of **composition**. **Harmony** assumes that an *appropriate balance* has been achieved among all of the lower **principles**. **Content** directs the application of the **principles** and **elements**. **Harmony** does not mean an *equal* application of the **principles**, it means an *appropriate* application, dictated by the **content**. For example, if the **content** warrants a minor representation of **unity** rather than **variety** then the application of the **elements** to achieve the **principles** should come about through an application of the **principles** towards an end that *de-emphasizes unity* in favor of **variety**. Such a **composition** would only be sought if the desired *end* of the **composition** was a feeling of chaos. If the intent to create a feeling of chaos is achieved, the **composition** can be deemed **harmonious**. A chaotic **composition** that did not *seek* to be chaotic is not **harmonious**. Thus the goal of all **harmonious composition** is the desire to represent a *predetermined* psychological impact upon the viewer.

Figure/Ground

**Figure/ground** is the concept of distinguishing a visual relationship between objects and their environment. **Composition** requires **content** (**figure**) to be organized within the context of an environment (**ground**) in a fashion that achieves an optimal visual interpretation of the **content**. **Ground** should be treated with as much visual consideration as **figure**. As with **unity** and **variety**, an *appropriate balance* must be struck.

Unity Variety

**Unity & variety** are the parent **principles**. They rely upon each other to achieve the highest cause of composition, **harmony**. An *appropriate balance* between these two principles must be achieved to create a harmonious composition. Too much **unity** creates a monotonous composition, too much **variety** creates chaos. As with all of the principles, ignoring their inclusion in a composition should only be done if there is a concrete reason for doing so (ex: it's supposed to look chaotic).

Principles

Emphasis. De-emphasis. Balance. Similarity/Contrast.  
Pattern. Rhythm. Proximity. Scale/Proportion. Relationship.

**Principles** are the at the core of all great design. While all designs, good and bad, contain the **elements**, good design requires an intentional application of the **principles**. The **principles** should only be broken if there is an intentional reason and benefit to breaking them. The **principles** are used to achieve the higher cause of **unity** and **variety**. For example, a combination of **emphasis** and **de-emphasis** achieves **variety** of **scale**. **Proximity** of **elements** can achieve **unity**. **Symmetrical balance** can achieve **unity** while **asymmetrical balance** achieves **variety**.

Elements

Point. Line. Plane (2D). Form (3D). Color. Space. Texture. Value.

**Elements** are used to achieve the principles. For example, **color** can be used to achieve **emphasis**, **balance**, **similarity/contrast**, etc. **Space** can be used to achieve **proximity** and **relationship** or even **pattern** and **rhythm**. **Point**, **line**, and **plane** (PLP) are essential to all good design. PLP is useful in creating **rhythm** and guiding a viewer's eye around the composition. PLP is closely tied to the viewer's psychological instincts (ex: arrows direct a viewer's gaze).

Content

Primary (Hook). Secondary (Functional). Extra (Unnecessary).

Content is the foundation of all composition. Composition begins with an analysis of **content**. It should be broken into three classes: primary, secondary, and extra. Primary content should contain the most **emphasis**. Secondary content should be **de-emphasized** as it only serves a functional purpose to the primary content. Extra content should be eliminated to provide **space** for the primary and secondary content.

© Isaac Christensen. 2014.

*appropriate*: dictated by content and the predetermined desired psychological impact.