something very small, like a small sculpture or a painting with complex detail. Again, with a small object such as the middle example of Figure 4.25, the first thing we tend to notice is its miniature quality. Extreme sizes are almost always captivating, and they demand our attention. For that reason, size is an important part of our overall visual awareness.

Often, the size of an object is regarded as small or large in comparison to the size of the human figure. Size, just like value, is relative. For example, if an ant is placed near a human figure, the ant would appear very small. On the other hand, if an ant stood next to a grain of sand, it would seem rather large. When an element is so small that its shape appears secondary, we call it a “point.” Below are a few examples of how large and small elements can achieve size contrast in a comparison (Figure 4.25).

Herbert Matter’s 1935 poster design for a Swiss ski resort is a good example of how extreme size changes the overall dramatic effect of a composition. In Figure 4.26, matter could have created a size contrast between the skier and the man’s face by simply making the two elements slightly bigger. However, he chose to push the size contrast to an extreme for a maximum visual impact.
In order to see how size affects contrast and in what quantities, let’s look at one possible evolution of Matter’s composition. Figure 4.27 illustrates what happens to the smallest element when it progressively increases in size. Starting with the original design and moving to the right, we see that in the second example, relative contrast between the elements does exist, but it isn’t quite as dramatic as in the original. In the last example, the two elements begin to compete for space and as a result, contrast virtually disappears.

Figure 4.28 shows how the above progression works in reverse; when the largest element decreases in size, the same diminishing of contrast occurs. The two elements become equal and contrast diminishes. Knowing when to increase or decrease the size of the elements in a composition is not an exact science–is a design decision.
As we experiment with principles and develop a sense of space and form, decisions on the formal aspects of composition will become easier and more successful. One way you can develop this sense is by simply enlarging a single element in the layout. Seeing all parts of the layout in a new arrangement may stimulate different thinking and new ideas may emerge. Think how different a your living room would look from another vantage point. For example, a crawling baby may see nothing but legs, shoes and bottoms of furniture form his vantage point. For him, space is arranged very differently than for adults. Just get down on your hands and knees and see what a different world it is! A giant looking at the same room may see tops of heads, small moving creatures and tiny objects for creatures to sit on. Changing your vantage point may change your thinking about form, and looking at extremes is sometimes a good place to start.

On the Web, an example of contrast of shape can be seen in this example of the Communication Arts Magazine site (Figure 4.29). The strong, rigid, geometric forms contrast well with the soft, organic image of an eye. Adding further to the drama is the contrast of dark and light value in two shades of blue.

Contrast in Value

Value is another vehicle for controlling contrast. It refers to the relative darkness or brightness of an object. At one extreme is white, and at the other is black. All the tones of gray fall between these two poles. Value is often referred to in relation to color, but for our
purposes, we will focus on black and white. In traditional fine art, value is used to model three-dimensional forms and to indicate light sources. Designers, on the other hand, use value almost exclusively to indicate lightness or darkness on flat shapes.

Depending on the composition, contrast in value can range from dramatic black and white to various shades of gray for more subtle contrasts. A designer must understand the control of value because it means control of contrast and hence control of the impact of the overall design. Many times, black and white alone may not be enough to create the interest you want. Gray tones can be an excellent choice for adding a wide range of values and richness to the composition.

All elements in design are affected by one another. Light values are affected by dark values, and white creates tension against black, but value actually changes according to its surroundings. For example, In Figure 4.30 you can see how the middle value gray appears darker on a light gray background but appears lighter on a darker background. This is called *simultaneous contrast*.

Simultaneous contrast is important because it urges us to make careful choice in the placement of elements and to be sensitive to the subtleties in value. Contrast in value is
critical on the Web, especially between foreground and background because if there isn’t enough contrast, the viewer will not be able to distinguish between elements and design will appear “flat,” or lacking in impact. Figure 4.31 is a good example of “flat” design. All the elements such as headline, links, feather image and the background are are about the same size and all demand equal attention which results in lack of hierarchy. Poor choice of background pattern creates difficulty in reading.

Contrast of Shape

In order to understand contrast through shape, we must first understand the concept of shape. Shape is a word that defines two-dimensional design as an area created by an enclosing boundary defined by outer edges. The boundary can be a line, color or a value change. Value refers to relative lightness or darkness of an object. The word “shape” is used to describe two-dimensional visual elements. In a three-dimensional mass, sometimes called “volume,”
the word “form” is used instead. It’s important to remember that every three-dimensional form has a counterpart form in a two-dimensional space. For example, a cube has an abstract counterpart we call a “square.” The existence of such counterparts allows us to treat three-dimensional forms as abstract elements in a two-dimensional space. This book will deal primarily with simple, abstract, geometric shapes in two-dimensional design; however, the concepts investigated here may be applied to any form or shape in any environment.

Contrast of shape can be achieved by comparing one type of shape to another, but the most dramatic contrast occurs when one shape is compared to a completely opposite shape. Examples include a curvilinear shape contrasted with an angular shape; a geometric shape contrasted with an organic shape; or even an abstract shape with a representative shape (Figure 4.32).

![Figure 4.32: Contrast of Shape](image)

When a designer wishes to contrast two or more elements of the same size and approximately the same shape, not only is the contrast minimal, but the visual impact also tends to be confusing and minimal. On the other hand, when shapes are distinctly different from one another, contrast is achieved.

Figure 4.33 and 4.34 are good examples of this shape contrast on the Web. The San Francisco MoMA (Modern Museum of Art) does a nice job of contrasting simple, open line graphic at the bottom of the page, with a large, flat shape containing an image. In this case, the image is curvilinear which makes for even a more striking contrast. Figure 4.34 is another good example of this shape contrast where the large rectangular photo containing...
a strong organic shape is contrasted with the three circles on the left. A combination of different shapes ranging from capital letters to rectangular logo (right) to the small circular icon (bottom left), there is a nice range of shapes providing contrast of shape on the page.

Figure 4.33: San Francisco MoMA: Contrast of Shape 1

![Figure 4.33: San Francisco MoMA: Contrast of Shape 1](image)

Figure 4.34: San Francisco MoMA: Contrast of Shape 2

![Figure 4.34: San Francisco MoMA: Contrast of Shape 2](image)

4.8 Visual Balance

All compositions whether they appear in fine art or graphic design, are composed of structures which appear to have visual weight. That perceived visual weight can be seen in clusters of elements, which when grouped together, are perceived as “heavier than the isolated
4.8. VISUAL BALANCE

elements. Large, dark areas may also be perceived as heavier than their lighter, smaller counterparts. When a composition seems to be unified and has a seemingly comfortable amount of visual weight throughout a space, it is said to be in balance.

Two of the most common visual balances in design are known as symmetrical and asymmetrical balance. Symmetrical balance, often seen as more formal balance, is achieved by juxtaposing elements in equal amounts to achieve a mirror-like balance. Symmetry can be quite pleasing to the eye in many compositions. For example, one of the most common types of symmetry is the traditional wedding invitation with its centered axis, and text is placed in the center of the page, centered from left to right.

Asymmetrical balance is markedly different from asymmetrical balance in that it is not as obvious or as easily detected as symmetrical balance. An example of this kind of balance can be seen in Figure 4.35, where the small dark element is directly juxtaposed to the large light element creating a visual balance that is not exact, yet somehow both halves seem in balance.

Figure 4.35: Symmetry and Asymmetry

Asymmetrical design is often more difficult to achieve because it requires designers to go beyond the obvious, creating a more sophisticated, less predictable solution. Less predictable solution may be more desirable because it involves the viewer with content for longer period of time. Visual balance can be adjusted in every layout depending on the effect one is trying
to achieve as is illustrated in Figure 4.36 and Figure 4.37.

Figure 4.36: Symmetrical Balance

Figure 4.37: Asymmetrical Balance

Figure 4.36 and 4.37 (from www.x10.com) use almost identical elements such as type, image and color, except that Figure 4.36 is symmetrical, and Figure 4.37 is asymmetrical. Although neither design is exciting, many people would say that the asymmetrical design is slightly more interesting, and maybe less predictable than its symmetrical counterpart.

Most commercial websites have asymmetrically balanced internal layouts such as the DigiKnow site. Even though the entry to the site is symmetrical (Figure 4.38), the subsequent pages are asymmetrical (Figure 4.39).

Although this rule may be applied to many sites, let’s not forget that alignment alone
can’t make good design. There are symmetrical layouts on the Web (www.mattmercer.com) which are dynamic and quite powerful (Figure 4.40).

Although most designer would not mix asymmetry with symmetry in the same layout, it can be done. Figure 4.41 (www.stephenjshuman.com) shows examples of this kind of combined balance works effectively in this situation. When deciding on an visual balance, remember your message, your voice and the big picture you’re trying to convey.

4.9 Summary

Design is a process which involves creating, and communicating ideas or concepts through form. Designer’s primary role is to create perception in their viewers mind through form.
This perception is based on the Gestalt theory which states that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, meaning that viewers perceive the entire design first, before they notice details which make up that whole.

We were introduced to the principles of design such as hierarchy, contrast, focal point and visual balance such as asymmetry and symmetry. We also learned ways to achieve these principles in a two-dimensional space.

Designers use a variety of elements in order to create forms. These elements can all be distilled into point, line and plane in a given space. We have learned several ways to manipulate that space through such devices as overlapping, transparency and perspective. Understanding basic elements and principles alone will not make one a good designer, but it is the first step in understanding how form can be manipulated to create perception and communicate ideas.

Unity in design is desirable and is something designers seek to achieve in a two-dimensional
space, as well as on the computer screen. Unity alone may become monotonous and requires variety to temper design. And a combination of unity and variety achieves aesthetically pleasing design and visual balance.

Because the author considers contrast to be one of the most important design principles, this chapter focused on three important kinds of contrasts: contrast of size, value and shape. Design styles, variations in aesthetics, and as popular culture have had a significant impact on style in the last century, but basic design principles have remained constant. Emphasis, focal point, hierarchy, contrast and continue to play a significant role in Web design.

**Exercises**

**Review Questions**

1. One good way to learn about design is to examine how other designers have solved similar visual problems. Select a website which you think is aesthetically pleasing and well designed. Applying the principles that you have learned, list specific things that make this design successful. Here are a few suggestions on what to look for.

   - What is it about this particular design that you find intriguing?
   - Why do you think this design is successful?
   - What is your perception of this design? Why?
   - Describe how the design is unified?
   - What is the visual balance; symmetrical or asymmetrical?
   - What is the focal point of the design?
   - What is the hierarchy? Describe what you read first, second, third and so on.
   - What kind of contrast does it use; size, shape or value or all three?
   - Does the design use a grid? Find it and show how it was used.
   - How does the crop of the photos or other images impact overall design?
• Did they use perspective or other depth creating device to draw you into the image?

Assignments

1. Creating simple unity. Figure 4.13 and 4.13 were created from Figure 4.13. Using the exact same elements found in Figure 4.13, create a third variation of this design. Test your skill in arranging and organizing elements in a simple space by adding order to a disorganized elements. Strive to create visual unity.

2. Using the grid Refer to Figure 4.3, Kenneth Cole page. Using the exact same grid shown here, create a variation on that design. Consider rearranging the various elements in this design to see how it effects the visual impact.

• Change the focal point by enlarging or reducing images
• Enlarge and reduce the type
• Switch to a different color
• Reposition graphics and type on another part of the grid.

3. Creating asymmetry Refer to Figure 4.36. Find one symmetrical layout of your choice on the Web. Change it to asymmetrical design. Try to create as many variations on that design as you can.

4. Cropping photos. Choose a particular company for your hypothetical website. Say you choose a computer store. What images do you want to show on your website? Most people have seen images of computers, software, monitors, keyboards and so on. What can you do with a photo crop to make these products exciting? How can you make the image dynamic and fresh? Can you effectively reveal the product and still make it unpredictable? Find as many images as you can and crop them in a more dynamic way.

5. Creating contrast. Find two pages on the Web, each from different sites. Page one uses good contrast of size, shape or value, page 2 does not. Compare and contrast the two sites. Why is the first one successful? How was this achieved? What devices did the designer use on page 1? What devices did the designer use on page 2? What can be done to page 2 to improve it? Try to redesign page 2 to more successfully use contrast of size, shape or value or all three.

6. Object translation; point, line and plane (Problem developed for the Introduction to Graphic Design course in Kent State University, School of Visual Communication Design) Use the examples in Figure 4.4 and 4.5 to construct the following. 1. Begin by choosing a black and white photo or copy in b/w a color photo. 2. Paste the photograph on the bristol paper and cover with three layers of tracing paper. 3. Isolate the points on one layer of tracing paper, isolate the lines on the second and isolate the points on the third layer. Be sure to select at many of these point as possible. 4. Take another piece of tissue paper and begin constructing an asymmetrical design using the elements collected in step three. 5. Your objective is to come up with aesthetically pleasing composition which uses the following principles of design: contrast of size, value and shape, hierarchy and asymmetry.

7. Once you have decided on the final design, transfer it from tracing tissue to the bristol board. Using a thin, black marker and ruler, draft the final composition on to bristol paper. 7. Critique the work by placing everyone’s project on the wall.