



Better by Design

Ideas from an Award Winner

When someone aspires to be a great writer, everyone is quick with advice: “Read. Read a lot. Read as much as you can. Read work by as many writers as you can.” And do you know what? That is excellent advice for those who want to become great designers, too. Let’s translate it into the world of design: “Look at the world around you. Pay attention to what is already being done. Look at every design on as many levels as you can. Look at designs to figure out what makes them work. . . and try to remember all that you have seen.”

VOICE

In order for a publication to have a consistent personality (voice); designers do more than simply strive for a classic look or one that’s clearly avant garde. In addition to creating a unified look that holds the book or coverage package together, it is important to have enough variations that the readers do not get bored.

Too much variety is not good either, and the various options should present a harmonious and cohesive vision.

SCALE

Keeping the scale of your work comfortable is an easy thing to do, but it’s something that designers who are too literal when they “borrow” from other sources often forget. As journalists who are creating a permanent record for a school community, yearbook designers often have to consider content elements that the pros don’t bother with. Complete yearbook captions are often longer than those in the professional press and few other designers deal with group shots, scoreboards, or membership factoids.

As you add more elements, remember that you may need to adjust the sizes of some pieces. Even if the headline and copy ran across five columns in the magazine, you may find that you need to decrease to three columns of copy in order to include a photo package that is appropriate for your needs. A visual hierarchy is imperative; the readers should know where to look first and should be able to determine which elements are “next most important” as they work their way around a spread.

SPACE

Beginning designers often succumb to the urge to fill every inch of the page. When there is no logical content, they will often add clip art or graphics to fill the white space that makes them uncomfortable.

White space is an important element of design, beginning with the external margins on the spread. The margins in respected publications have been increasing in recent years; this move is based on research that shows readers spend more time on pages that allow their eyes a comfortable space to rest.

While consistent internal margins are crucial to a well-designed publication, there will also be times when an experienced designer makes a conscious decision to use additional white space in the interior of the spread. Keen observers will note that this is done with the intent of showcasing one element or creating a clear division between one part of the visual package and another. Successful use of planned white space usually includes a consistent measure (often a grid-width) used both vertically and horizontally as a reminder that the treatment was intentional.

RELATIONSHIP

The best designers make certain that even casual readers can see that elements are repeated visually because they are related. They create linkage with consistent usage of type, white space, and graphics in a package, section, or publication.

Great designers understand the importance of visual variety and provide options for a mix of content components as well as those with vertical and horizontal shapes. Their first decisions regard the way they will tell the story, and then they deal with actually arranging the elements of the page.

A sense of balance creates spreads that seem to fit comfortably—both on their own and with each other.

Once you master these four principals, you may find that you have more success straying from the formulaic guidelines for basic yearbook design. It might seem that you can “copy” from other publications with greater success or that your experimenting designs are suddenly acceptable in the eyes of the most pragmatic editor or traditional adviser.

The difference between a solid design that is technically “correct” and a spread that really wows the readers is often very subtle. While many designers who attempt to do new things discard the foundations of good design, truly great designers maintain those principals as they break ground by playing with new ideas.

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