A HARMONIOUS DESIGN REQUIRES THAT NOTHING BE ADDED NOR TAKEN AWAY

VITROVIOS

XC-XX BC

Vitruvius foretold Step 3 on the facing page. There is a huge difference between *nothing wrong* and *nothing right* about a design. Being able to identify what is right about one's work is crucial to organizing material for clarity. Merely *having nothing wrong* is no assurance that a design is successful in communicating. There must be something *identifiably right* in a design for it to achieve elegance.

The lettering used here is adapted by the author from lettering carved into the walls at Ephesus, Turkey, circa the 1st century AD.

Preface

Most design education is concerned with combining and sometimes inventing bits of content. It concerns relationships of forms and almost always overlooks the critically important part of the design that goes unnoticed: the background spaces and shapes. It is a reflection of believing what *is* is more important than what *isn't*.

But emptiness, when treated as a full partner in design, becomes dynamic. It, along with an original visual idea, is what defines *great* design.

Dynamic white space plus abstraction, the process of removing unnecessary details, are essential to *sophisticated* design. Abstraction can be harmful, though, when it obscures the message by removing necessary markers. Finding a balance of implicit meaning and clarity is the goal. Judgment in abstraction's use is essential – and is improved with practice and experience.

Unlike mathematics, where there can only be a single "right" answer, design has many alternate solutions. It is up to the designer to find the best among these. Design is misused if it is merely an opportunity to self-indulgently show off one's latest visual experiments. Experimentation *in service to the message*, though, is always a welcome approach.

On the other hand, monotony is not good design either, even if the basic structure of that monotony is pretty. Why? Because sameness doesn't catch or hold viewers. Good design balances deliberate consistency with flexibility so *some* of the goodies will stand out. Designers serve their readers by revealing value, accelerating learning, and making content stick.

Design – whether graphic, industrial, interior, or architecture – is the process of taking unrelated parts and putting them together into an organized unit. Each discipline works with solids and voids, and each must respond to three questions: What are the elements I have to work with? Where do these elements go? What structure is necessary so they go together?

One definition of good design is the balance between the designer's self-indulgence and monotony.

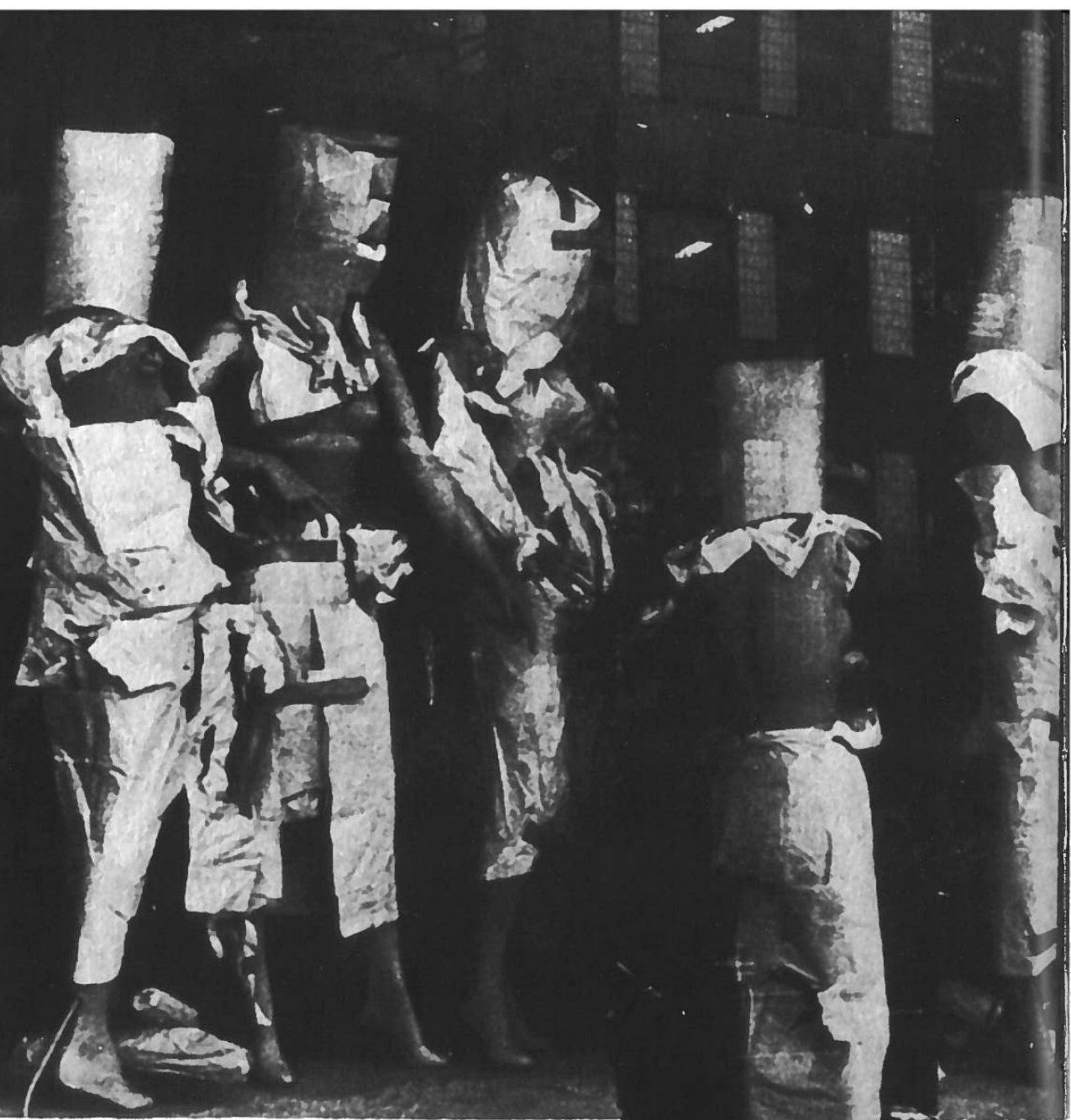Design is simpler when you remember it is a *process*, not a *result*:

1 Define the problem you have been given. This is usually a redefinition because what you have been given is an *apparent* problem. The redefinition must home in on the real issues. If in this redefinition process you don't become clearer about how to handle the material, you haven't redefined the problem accurately enough.

2 Know the material. Digest it fully. At the very least, read it.

3 Distill the essential from the mass of confusing muchness. Nothing may be missing, and nothing may be extraneous. This is the definition of *elegance*.

4 Abstract the main point so its importance to the reader is clear and it is visually arresting. A message that doesn't first stop readers won't be read.

5 Unify all elements so they don't outshout each other. Shouting at readers doesn't provide a solution or an explanation or an expression of importance to their interests and needs. Clear, predigested content does.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Clare, who, like white space, was the glue that held everything together. She was some great lady. Her legacy continues.

Alex W. White
Westport CT

1235. Dummies waiting to be unwrapped.
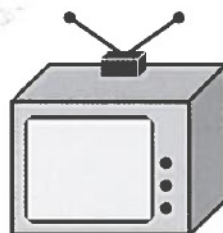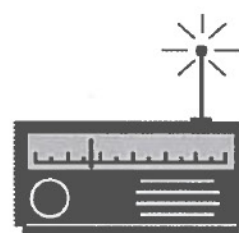Photo by Herbert Migdoll.

Clarity and value to the reader are what designers add to a message. These wrapped mannequins are like messages that have not yet been revealed.

"Perfect communication is person-to-person. You see me, hear me, smell me, touch me. Television is the second form of communication; you can see me and hear me. Radio is the next; you hear me, but you don't see me. And then comes print. You can't see or hear me, so you must be able to interpret the kind of person I am from what is on the printed page. That's where typographic design comes in."
Aaron Burns (1922–1991)

I

Introduction

Nothing puzzles me more than time and space; and yet nothing troubles me less, as I never think about them.
Charles Lamb (1775–1834)

To design means to plan. The process of design is used to bring order from chaos and randomness. Order is good for readers, who can more easily make sense of an organized message. An *ordered message* is therefore considered good design. But looking through even a short stack of design annuals, you will see that what is judged "good" changes with time. It is apparent that style and fashion are aspects of design that cannot be ignored. Stephen A. Kliment, writing in an *Architectural Record* magazine editorial, advises, "Do not confuse style with fashion. Style is derived from the real needs of a client or of society. Fashion is a superficial condition adopted by those anxious to appear elegant or sophisticated." Leslie Segal, writing in the introduction to *Graphis Diagrams*, says, "Elegance is the measure of the grace and simplicity of the design relative to the complexity of its functions. For example, given two designs of equal simplicity, the one conveying more information is more

EL PESO ES LO DE MENOS
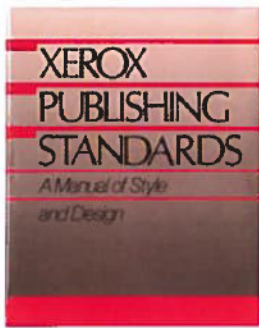
Ellos dejaron de preocuparse por lo que les decía la balanza, se aceptaron tal cual son y se convirtieron en personas triunfadoras, en un mundo que parece pensar solo en los flacos.

Xerox Publishing Standards is a comprehensive four hundred page reference on how to organize, edit, and manage content to ensure documents are useful, read, and understood.
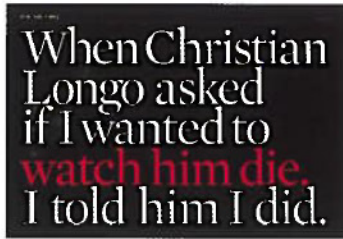
Visual stimulation draws viewers into the page, arousing their curiosity. I dare any reader not to turn the page and give at least the first paragraph of this story a chance.

Visual simplicity eliminates unnecessary elements and structures those that remain in a logical, consistent system, as in this magazine cover.

Good design reduces navigational effort, thereby encouraging readership. This Web site keeps things very simple, which is an accurate representation of their brand experience.

The design process reveals significance by sifting through all the information to find that which is essential. This is done in stages, first by removing the large chunks of less valuable content, then looking through increasingly fine grades of information, even to the granular level, often expressed in subtle typographic adjustments. Having at last identified the essential, designers enhance its significance for their readers, as in this magazine story's opening spread.

elegant. Conversely, of two designs conveying the same information, the simpler is the more elegant. Inelegance is a frequent design failing."

A communicator's job

Having material on the page read and absorbed is a visual communicator's chief responsibility. The Xerox Corporation completed a landmark corporate design project by distributing their *Xerox Publishing Standards* (page 11). In it, they describe their design rationale: "The principal goals of page layout are visual recognition and legibility. These goals are accomplished through consistent typography, effective use of white space and graphics, and controlled use of [lines]. ... A repeated visual logic guides the eye and helps the reader scan. A generous amount of white space is reserved as a blank presentation area, allowing headings to 'pop out' and wide graphics to be extended."

It is important to make the page look inviting – a "reader magnet." Visual stimulation draws viewers into the page, arousing their curiosity and actively involving them in the process of absorbing information. Visual simplicity eliminates unnecessary elements and structures those that remain in a logical, consistent system. Good design reduces the effort of reading as much as possible, thereby encouraging readership and understanding.

"It is better to be good than to be original."
Ludwig Mies van der Rohe
(1886–1969)

Correction.

As most of you know, one of our proudest boasts is the fact (properly researched) that 3 out of 4 architects specify California redwood for their own homes. Now, along comes "Record Houses of 1967" with 4 out of 5 architects' own homes featuring redwood.

Our advertising people, unaccustomed as they are to understating, explain it this way: When you have a concentration of quality such as "Record Houses," the ratio of redwood inevitably increases.

CRA

**Certified Kiln Dried Redwood**

For any information at all about redwood, write: California Redwood Association, 617 Montgomery St., San Francisco, CA. 94111.

What *not* to do with space: society has not improved the landscape by overfilling it with construction. Neither does a designer improve a page by overfilling it with content. This shows the before and after of a site on Long Island, the earliest example of tract development and the invention of suburbia, 1947-1951.
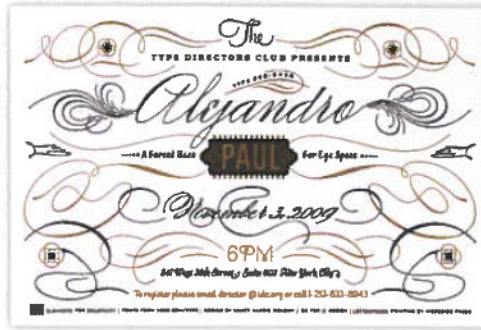
This invitation is an example of intentional overfulness in which there is little room to breathe. Though handsome and an excellent expression of Alejandro Paul's letterform designs, its use of space is equivalent to the housing development at the left.

Everything the designer does should be calculated to help a reluctant reader become effortlessly involved with the text, which is where the story usually is. The visual simplicity, vast area of empty space, and an interesting if very short headline make us willing to read at least the first sentence of the copy of this 1967 ad.

Readers respond to consistent page structure. The job is not to fill in all the space in order to impress the reader with sheer quantity of information. That will just overwhelm the reader with overfullness.

Imagine coffee being poured in a cup. If the cup is filled to the very top, it is difficult to avoid spilling it on yourself as you take the first sip. By having *too much* of a good thing, we have created a problem – and quite likely a mess. This is exactly the same reaction readers have to being given too much information at once. It is perceived as a problem and their response is to avoid it. Umberto Eco writes about too-muchness in his description of William Randolph Hearst's castle in San Simeon, "The striking aspect of the whole is not the quantity of antique pieces plundered from half of Europe, or the nonchalance with which the artificial tissue seamlessly connects fake and genuine, but rather the sense of fullness, the obsessive determination not to leave a single space ... and hence the masterpiece of bricolage, haunted by horror vacui, that is here achieved. The insane abundance makes the place unlivable ..."

Again, *the designer's job is not to fill in all the space*. It is to make information accessible and appealing. The best use of the page's empty space is to help make information scannable, not to make the pages pretty. The point is to increase the page's *absorbability*.

Signs of too much of a good thing leave a mess and turn a good thing, whether coffee or information, into a problem. Avoid this by leaving a little space at the top of the cup and on the page.

Readers are looking for valuable bits among the muchness of information, like sea glass among the shells on the beach.

Physical form conveys meaning. Matching an element's form to its meaning helps reveal the message. And it is clearly a *purposeful* design

decision, which is the wonderful and much-to-be-admired opposite of a random design decision.

Substituting form attracts attention because it results in unexpected contrast. A shirt made from bread? Makes sense when the "Breakfast Collection" shirts are "bread colored."

What makes this image startling is the juxtaposition of the familiar with the unfamiliar. There are many definitions of art, but the one that makes more sense than most is *Art is making the familiar unfamiliar.* By that standard, this Volkswagen Beetle has been made into art. Further, the definition of *creative* is "Characterized by originality and expressiveness; imaginative."

The mind searches for meaning

As humans evolved, an important attribute we acquired was the ability to see potential dangers around us, to see differences in our surroundings. Anything that moved irregularly or was a different color or texture was worthy of our attention. After all, it might eat us. Noticing differences became an evolutionary advantage for humans. As a result, when we modern humans look at a printed document or a monitor screen, our eyes instinctively and subconsciously look for similarities and differences among the elements. We search for the unique, which is determined by *relative unusualness.*

Perception is like looking for sea glass on a beach. We look for clues that one particular spot or one sparkle is valuable – or more valuable than the stones and shells we *also* see. The human brain sifts images and bits of type. It innately simplifies and groups similar elements. If it cannot easily make these connections, it perceives confusion. The majority of readers are disinclined to exert much effort in digging out the meaning or importance of a message. They may be too busy or they may be uninterested in the subject. Indeed, many readers subconsciously look for reasons to *stop* reading. It's demanding hard work, it takes concentration, and we're all a little lazy. As has been said about advertising messages, "Tell me sweet, tell me true, or else my dear, to hell with you."
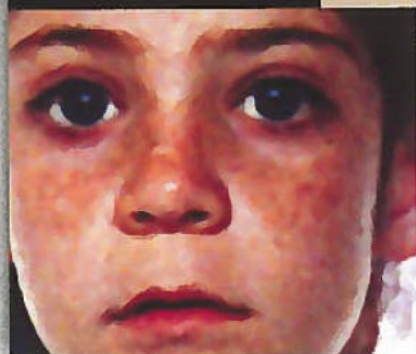
"Art is not a mirror.
Art is a hammer."
SoHo graffito, NYC

Southern light and northern skill come together in a photographer's portraits of his two daughters.

Photos by Baden de Oliveira
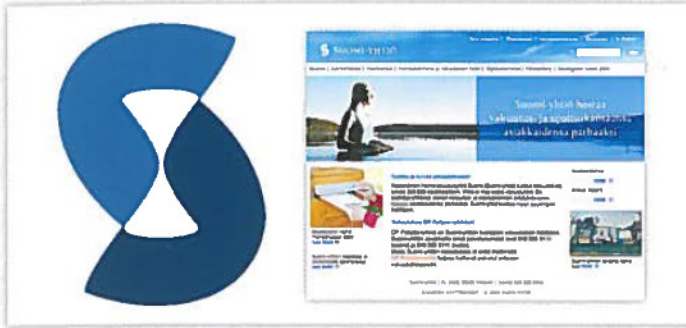Text by Jean-Pierre Raffin

North and South
of the Equator

North
and South
of the Equator

Southern light and northern skill come together
in a photographer's portraits of his two daughters.

Photos by
Baden
de Oliveira

Text by
Jean-Pierre
Raffin

The stylized "Y" inside this logo for a Finnish life insurance provider is easily visible. But it takes a moment longer to recognize the "S" shape that represents the first half of the company's name, Suomi-Yhtiö, which means "Finland Group." The company's home page is shown here as a sample of the logo's application.

Target, long known for sophisticated design, uses the *absence* of the promoted item to make passersby notice their billboard. They know emptiness has value.

The places where type becomes image, image becomes space, and space becomes type are the most interesting and fruitful areas for the designer.

Making the content a reader magnet: the top layout is confusing because 1] three different typefaces – and their placement – do not connect thoughts; 2] there is a total lack of alignment or connectedness between elements; and 3] the empty space has been distributed evenly throughout the spread. The bottom example is more appealing because there is now a primary image and typographic element. Also, things align: connectedness has been created – things touch – leading the reader from one element to the next. Also, a unique display font (textured to relate to the details in the pink fleece) has been used, the words have been placed in their natural order, and space has been carefully determined *to separate without disconnecting* neighboring elements.

Designing is the process of looking for and showing off the similarities and differences inherent in the content of a visual message. This can sometimes take a good deal of time if the similarities do not immediately present themselves. But the search for similarities is at the heart of what a designer does.

In addition to searching for similarities and differences in our environment, we look for meaning in the physical form of the things we see. The form of a thing tells us certain things about it. A couple of decades ago, Transformers® were introduced and quickly became a best-selling toy. Their popularity was based on the idea that an object could be disguised as something it is not. Designers struggle to reveal the meaning of their messages by using type, imagery, and space. If used well, the meaning is illuminated and the process of communication is well served. If used poorly, the meaning is confused by poor choices or is subsumed by the prettiness of the message's presentation.

Successful designs describe the content fully and as simply as possible. This is the definition of *elegance*. Ideally, the reader should be unaware of the act of reading, for reading is then truly effortless. In design, more is *not* better. There must be an economy in using type and imagery, or marks of any kind. If it hasn't got a purpose that pushes the message forward (like decoration,

"The usefulness of a water pitcher dwells in the emptiness where water might be put, not in the form of the pitcher or the material of which it is made." Lao-tse (604–531BC), Book of Tea

Any dipstick can use this oil.
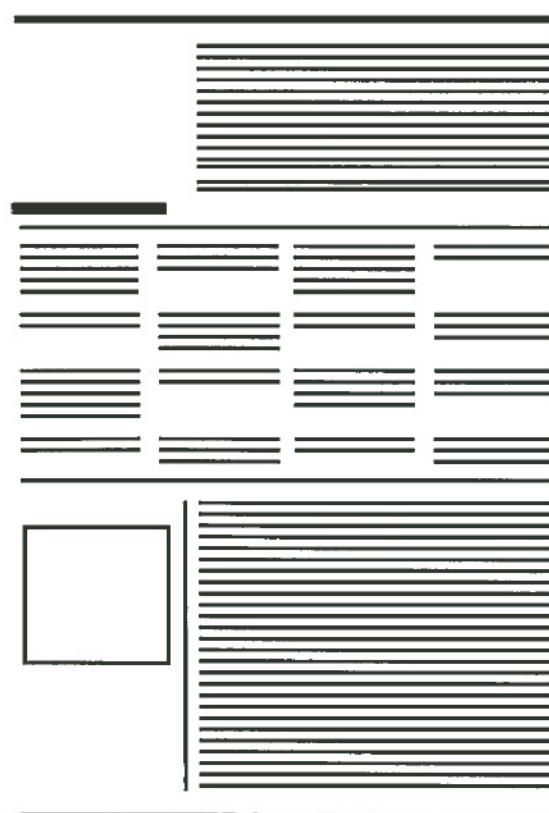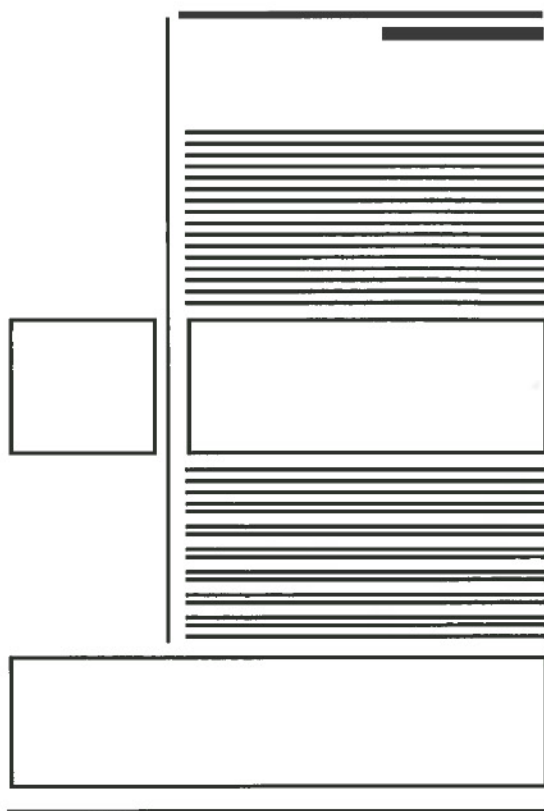
Overfilling a page is good only if it actually helps get the message across, as shown here. Otherwise, an overfilled page repels readers.

Each of the six pieces (plus two rules) in this magazine "flag," or logo for the cover, is carefully sized and positioned to have its own integrity and to fit into the overall design.

Contrasts in addition to size include black and white color, roman and italic, baseline alignment, caps and lower case, and bold and light type weights.

Publications need structure *and* flexibility. Structured white space makes headings stand out, helping readers quickly find what they need. These samples, from *Xerox Publishing Standards*, show a wide main column that fits text economically. The narrower column creates headline visibility and a specific place for imagery. The basic page structure allows great flexibility in placing unusual combinations of materials while maintaining enough consistent proportions to engender its own look and feel as a publication.

perhaps?), it shouldn't be used. Despite the abundance of busy, overproduced design work we've seen in recent years, the excellence of a design is, in fact, in direct proportion to its simplicity and clarity.

Space attracts readers

LP records have a narrow space of relatively empty vinyl between songs. The songs share similar texture because the spiral groove in which the needle tracks is tightly spaced. The space between songs, by comparison, is smooth vinyl interrupted by only a single groove for the needle to follow. The visual dividers make it possible to count the number of songs and estimate their relative length, serving as cues when we make recordings from them. Digital media makes far more accurate information available, but it can't be seen by the naked eye on the disk itself.

The pauses between songs on a record show content the way white space does. Space attracts readers by making the page look accessible, unthreatening, and manageable. Leaving too little white space makes a page look crowded – good only if that's the point you want to make. Leaving too much white space is almost impossible. I say "almost" because you will get groans of disapproval if you toss around chunks of *unused* white space, that is, emptiness purely for its own sake, rather

Ordinarily, an LP record has one long groove on each side of the disc. Monty Python, the British comedy troupe, released a record in the 1970s that was billed as a "three-sided, two-sided record." Python put the normal single groove on one side and two concentric grooves on the other side, making it a matter of chance before a listener would happen to put the needle down on one or the other groove. I distinctly remember the delight of hearing something unexpected, having taken me several listenings before their novel manipulation was realized. Their gag worked because they reinvented the rules of LP recordings.

Introduction 11
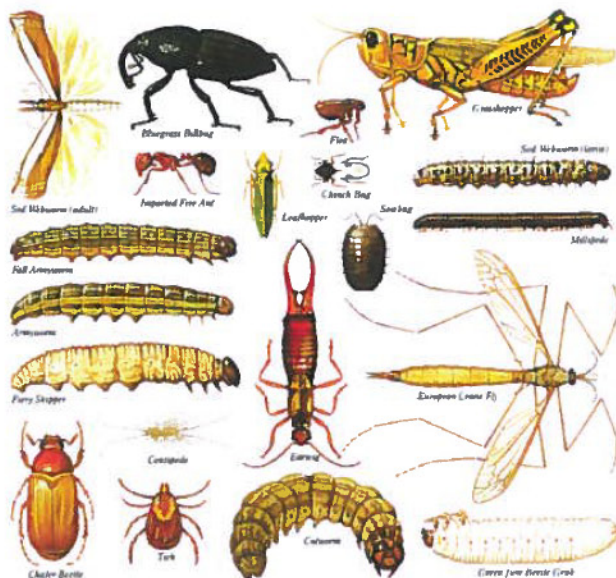
Illegibility results when an image is put behind text. This neither enhances the value of the image (it is being covered up!), nor makes the text easy to read (with a changing background).

Lack of color contrast adds to illegibility, with yellow on white the weakest contrast of all. This German ad for a ten-liter barrel of beer nevertheless uses yellow lettering on white appropriately.
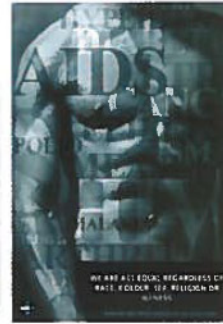
Overlapping display type over type *and* over an image makes each individual element harder to read but increases overall impact as a unified visual.

Flirting with illegibility is a powerful way to get attention, but knowing when the elaborate presentation overwhelms the content is essential.

Use the paper's whiteness to attract readers. Does this much "emptiness" justify its cost to the client? Yes, if the emptiness communicates the message, which it does in these two examples (facing page).

The space *where a camera would be held* is more arresting than a mundane shot of a camera being held. The camera (albeit not in proportional size) is then placed horizontally across the spread from the space, creating a visual link between the two images.

than for the sake of the message. Readers are far less likely to notice or object to too much white space than to an unreadable, crowded page.

Readability is a term that refers to the adequacy of an object to attract readers. It should not be confused with *legibility*, which describes the adequacy of an object to be deciphered. Good readability makes the page comfortable to read. Poor readability makes pages look dull or busy. Richard Lewis, an annual reports expert, says, "Make exciting design. Dullness and mediocrity are curses of the annual report. For every overdesigned, unreadable report there are a hundred undistinguished ones that just plod along." Regarding legibility, Lewis says, "Designers who play with type until they have rendered it unreadable are engaged in a destructive act that hurts us all. Hard-to-read [design] is useless." Make unnecessary demands on your readers with great care and only when you are sure the extra effort they are being asked to make will quickly become evident to them.

Considered use of white space shows off the subject. Go through the pages of any newspaper and you will find wall-to-wall ads of even grayness, occasionally punctuated by darker areas of bold type. Few ads utilize the whiteness of the paper to attract attention. Using the whiteness of the paper is an especially good approach if the paper's whiteness expresses *the idea of the ad*.

"What you see depends to a great extent on what you expect to see, what you are used to seeing."
Sir Jonathan Miller (1934–), public intellectual