

The Key to Better Graphic Design and 5 Ways to Nail It

The right words are important when it comes to promoting your brand. But without smart visual treatment, the potential impact of those words can be lost and your message hindered. Conversely, when brilliant copy is showcased in visually strategic ways, your message can soar to new heights. The key (at least a very important one) is establishing visual hierarchy.

Visual hierarchy is the use of visual cues, such as color, typeface, size, and positioning, to convey the relative importance of information in a design. Like punctuation or syntax, hierarchy provides order and helps readers prioritize and comprehend information more quickly and accurately, and ultimately enhances communication. By giving different pieces of information different visual weight and by strategically organizing how you group and position your information, you can elevate and reinforce key points and make your messages more effective, efficient, and engaging.

In this post, we're exploring some of the strategies for establishing visual hierarchy in order to give your message a boost. Click on any of the graphics included in this article to employ the strategies right away and scroll down to learn how to easily adjust color, font, shape, and more with [Spark Post's new multi-style text](#) editing.

1. Use color to make key info pop.

Creating contrast is at the heart of establishing visual hierarchy. Elements that look the most different from their surroundings demand attention first; therefore, your most important information should be strongly differentiated. This intrigue effect can be created using a number of variables, but one of the most effective (and fun) ways to create contrast is with color. Consider the following example:



BIG BRIGHT LIGHT SHOW

Spark Space Labs
1234 Main Street, Seattle
December 1-31

What is the first thing that jumps out at you in this design? We're betting the word "Bright" or the white lines. The deep purple background sets the stage for those elements to pop. It allows the lightbulb to glow as a light value and have visual continuity with the large stand-out word "bright." The three lines provide direction, steering the eye down toward the show name. Through the strategic use of color, positioning, and shapes, a viewer could glean the gist of this poster (bright light) without reading any of the lower-contrast dark text.

The use of color to communicate similarity or continuity is just as important as its use in creating contrast. Take, for instance, this marvel of an advertisement for Bifröst Bridge:



The Bifröst Bridge

Magically getting you
from Midgard to Asgard
as long as Heimdall permits it

Reds are the highest-energy hues in the color wheel. They demand attention first and convey vitality, passion, and excitement. The magenta hue on the left grabs attention and brings the other magenta item to the foreground. That other item happens to be most important piece of textual information (if you don't take away anything else from the words here, you will at least know it's about a bridge.) The magenta pairing with navy in the text mirrors the first and last colors in the rainbow bridge above, subtly reinforcing the concept of connection.

2. Let text size do the the heavy lifting.

Size is another tool in creating contrast and visual weight. Contrasting sizes help convey scale and relative importance. Let's look at another example:



NEW YORK

BIG CITY

LITTLE WORLD

In this book cover, high-contrast colors combine with large, bold text to produce the most visually heavy element in the composition: the title of the book (Big City). Its heaviness overrides the fact that it is placed far down on the page and ensures that it is our focal point. Although “New York” is also treated in high contrast, it sits below “Big City” in the hierarchy because of its relative size.

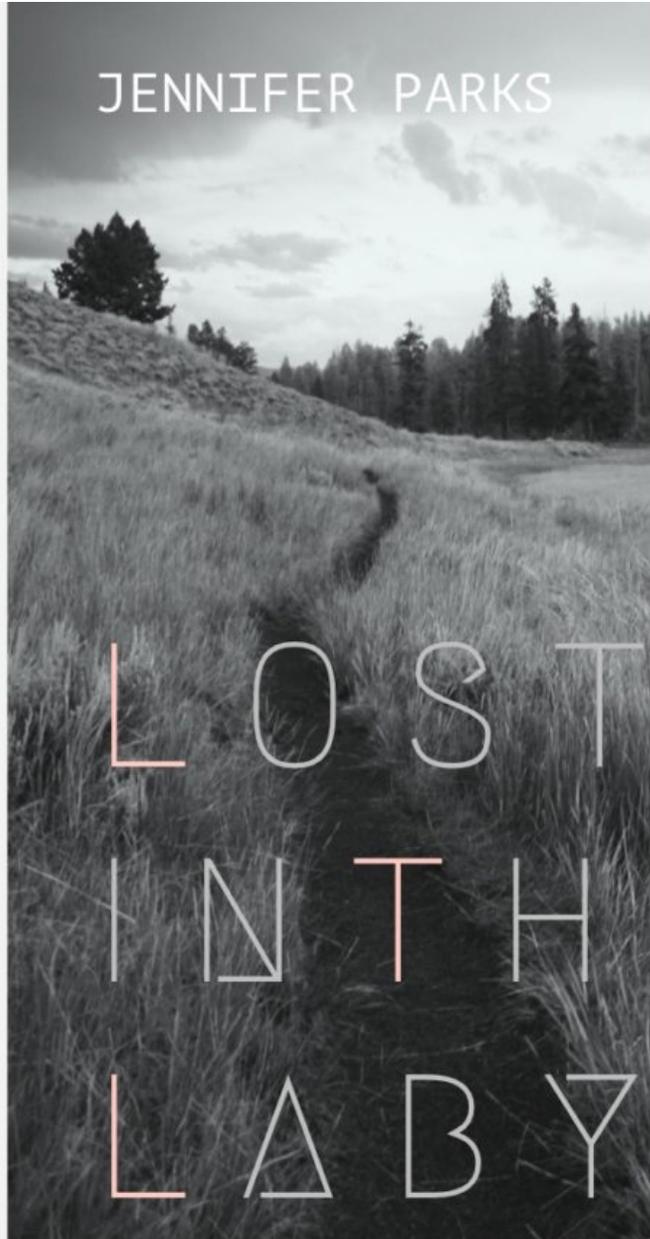
3. Employ typeface in strategic ways.

The **impact of the right (or wrong) font** cannot be overestimated. Like **color**, typography conveys mood and tone, sometimes more powerfully than the copy it delivers. When considering how to utilize it to establish hierarchy, you should think about the desired tone of your words. Some of your copy may be intended as more humorous; some more serious. Know where you have room for expressive flourishes with your typeface, and where you’d like your font to be more neutral. From there, you can explore **which typefaces work best together**.

The **COMEBACK**
is always **STRONGER**
than the **SETBACK.**

In the example above, copy on the left is set in clean, neutral Lato Bold typeface, and the power words “comeback,” “stronger,” and “setback” are set in the more expressive Flood. This pairing creates emphasis on keywords and helps show the grit and motivation behind the sentiment. A good rule of thumb when pairing fonts is to choose drastically different typefaces, then apply a more expressive or decorative font to the words you want to emphasize. More simple or neutral fonts are typically good for communicating logistics, such as the when and where of an event, while decorative fonts can shine in headers or short phrases.

JENNIFER PARKS



LOST
IN THE
LABY

RINTH

The typeface in the book cover above, called Megrim, is very thin and ephemeral. The color contrasts are not high, and the letter spacing is loose and irregular. These variables along with the placement of the text partially on the image background and partially off work together to create a disorientation in the reader. Although perhaps not the best example of legibility, the typeface and layout here are extremely effective in evoking a feeling of being lost. Not incidentally, the word “Lost” is the most compelling visual element here.

4. Add backing shapes to create focal points.

Shape is another important tool in creating visual weight. Adding shapes to your messages can help establish focal points, or signal categories of importance. For example, there are four main levels of information in the menu example below. The first tier in the hierarchy is the restaurant name “Wild Sparks Kitchen” (sounds good!), conveyed by font size and the border that is unique to it. Then we have the price info with the white background, which is also unique. In the tertiary tier, we have the category names “salads,” “pizzettas,” etc. And fourth, the individual dishes.

WILD SPARKS KITCHEN

FOR \$4.99 EXTRA
WE DELIVER ALL OVER SEATTLE

SALADS
All salads are made with fresh organic vegetables

- \$12 Wild Sparks Salad
- \$10 Mixed Greens Salad
- \$14 Kale Caesar Salad
- \$12 Arugula Tomato Salad

PIZZETTAS
We can make pizzettas with vegan cheese

- \$12 Margherita
- \$15 Margherita with Burrata
- \$13 Wild Mushroom Medley
- \$15 Spicy Sausage with Basil
- \$15 Pesto Chicken
- \$12 Grilled Veggie Mix

PLATTERS
All platters include a side of quinoa and grilled veggies

- \$10 Grilled Marinated Tofu
- \$10 Grilled Mediterranean Mix
- \$12 Grilled Seasoned Steak
- \$12 Grilled Chicken Thighs
- \$10 Grilled Chicken Wings
- \$15 Grilled Zesty Prawns
- \$20 Grilled Meat Combo
- \$25 Grilled Seafood Combo

DESSERT
All desserts are made fresh every day

- \$8 Sorbetto Trio
- \$8 Triple Berry Pie

Highlighting, as done with the category names above, can function in a similar way as typeface in terms of emphasizing copy, but it is a little more nuanced and neutral since [typefaces tend to carry their own personalities](#). In the example below, the last syllable is altered for humorous effect, but the highlighting of that syllable draws attention to the wordplay and adds emphasis and enthusiasm. With this simple design touch, this graphic was lifted out of the realm of borderline-funny ambiguous-typo territory and transformed into sharable meme content.



5. Consider positioning and don't be afraid to think outside the box.

When we talk about positioning in design, we are talking about where you choose to place your various elements (copy, imagery, shapes) in your frame, and to what effect. These choices encompass alignment and spacing as well as areas, such as top, bottom, center, left right, etc.

It may seem intuitive that more important information should live at the top of a page; this is because we are used to reading top-down, and left-to-right. And it's true that employing that classic arrangement can be effective and instantly understandable to the reader. But as we've seen with the examples above, visual hierarchy is not necessarily so literal (or vertical). The most important question to consider is how your positioning works (or doesn't work) to establish your most important information as your focal point. In the example below, this is done by positioning your copy so that is acting out the action it describes. Hierarchy is also at work in the color of the text; although the orange on white is not as high contrast as the black on white, its difference makes it an outlier, which alerts readers of its importance.

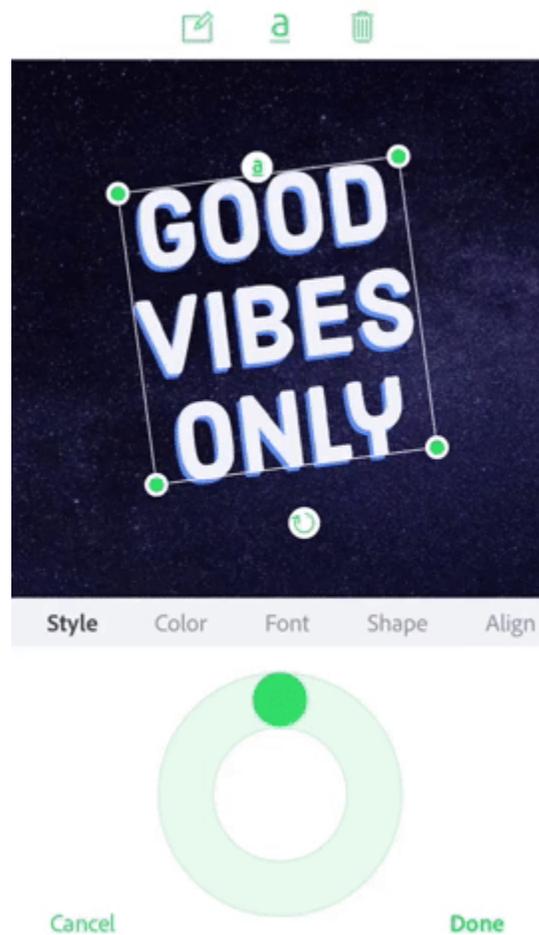
**GOING
OVER
THE
EDGE**

BY PETER THOMAS

While there's no one right way to establish hierarchy in your designs (and you may employ a few tactics in one design as these examples do), being aware of the methods at your disposal can help you be purposeful in your visual communication or troubleshoot a design that isn't quite right yet.

How to Establish Visual Hierarchy with Spark Post

Giving parts of your message more visual weight is easier than ever with [Spark Post's new multi-style text editing](#), which allows you to adjust the style of key parts of your message with just a few taps.



Long-press on the part of the message you want to emphasize in order to apply distinct styles or tap on the 'a' icon to enter the new multi-styling mode.