

Five Steps to Improve Your Design Process: Refining a design idea is a logical process

Logic provides the best route to smart, visible, effective design solutions. Logic is *reasoning or rationality or making choices based on valid deductive argument*.

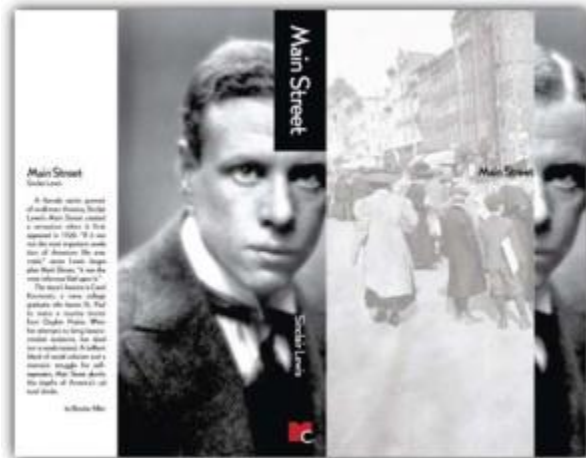
Design is often thought of as an artistic, intuitive activity. It isn't really that at all – at least few *targets* think of it that way. Design is actually a service that is supposed to give messages stopping power and make their meaning and value plain. This latter is “value added” and well worth every dollar paid by the client.

By comparison, decoration is distraction and rarely worth the investment by a client – or effective on a target's awareness. Properly applied, design is a tool that engages the viewer and pushes a message forward. It doesn't matter what particular kind of design you do, whether Web, advertising, or editorial: your targets are attacked by 4,500 advertising (sales) and editorial (information) messages per day.

Out of self-preservation, we've trained our targets to ignore our messages. It is as if your message were an annoying mosquito and they have mosquito netting over their heads. How do you get your message through that mosquito-proof netting?

What gets your message noticed and given the attention you want it to receive? Give it stopping power by making it sufficiently different from its surroundings. That often means, perhaps counter-intuitively, reducing its legibility. But be sure all legibility sacrifices to increase noticeability are in service to the message's real meaning.

Here are five ways to use logic to develop a message's noticeability:



One

Design is a process, not a result: think of it as a verb, not as a noun. It is refining *relationships between parts*. The quality of a design is determined by the quality and clarity of the relationships that unify – or fail to unify – the parts. In this book cover study, relationships have been created of repeating elements, cropping, alignments, type sizes and baselines, and value (i.e., relative lightness and darkness).



Two

Create “lively unity” by balancing contrast with similarity. Contrast is essential to make a design visible. Lack of contrast makes your design look like a monotonous bowl of oatmeal: an eventless monotone of grey. Messages must be *noticeable* before they can possibly be read.

“Lively unity” is also achieved by making space *ambiguous*, or not immediately clear which shape is in front or behind. (On left: raw material, before. Black is in front of white space. On right: after, a study whose purpose is to reveal intentional contrast and similarities to create the focal point.)



Three

Develop an order to our perception of the elements. Hierarchy is essential to make the most important element stand out and to show relative importance. Developing hierarchy is actually a process that requires a conscious effort to make all the less important parts appear alike, so the most significant can be treated differently to stand apart. Size and weight contrast are typically used to reveal a headline, for example, but there are other less-ordinary contrasts available to increase visibility. Hierarchy is essential to make the most important element stand out and to show relative importance.

Because design is a problem-solving process, creativity is sourced by limitations in manipulating the parts, not infinite freedom and infinite variations until time runs out.



Four

Arrange elements and the space surrounding them. Structure is the underlying anatomy of the elements. There are two kinds of structure in two-dimensional design: external structure (*left*) and internal structure (*right*), and both are used to make unrelated elements look like they belong together.

Structure is a significant aid to creating design unity: a singular impression made from many parts.

External structure is imposed on the elements by fitting them on a grid. The grid is best used to chop away (or cover over) bits of the imagery and letterforms placed on it.

The final should be a marvellous refinement of an already sophisticated set of relationships.



Five

Use colour as a tool to relate and differentiate. Colour is a raw material to be used strategically for a clear purpose. Colour use has the same potential for communicating hierarchy as typeface, weight, size, or placement contrasts. Colour's random application works against clarity and understanding just as do any other random design changes. Define what's most useful – and its value to your target – with colour.

A limiting palette of typefaces and paragraph styles and spacing between elements is common practice to impose design unity. Why not develop a limiting colour palette – a limited set of colours – to ensure colour unity?