

A large, stylized graphic of the number '10' is positioned on the left side of the page. The '1' is a solid white vertical bar with a dark blue shadow to its right. The '0' is a white circle with a dark blue shadow to its right. The background is a solid red color.

UXPin

# **The Building Blocks of Visual Hierarchy**

**Designing Visually  
Intuitive Web UI**



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**Designing Visually Intuitive Web UI**

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# A Few Quick Words

Visual hierarchy is the difference between a site that strategically influences user flow and decisions, and a site that just “looks nice.”

An interface’s visual hierarchy relies on the same principles of aesthetics used by the Renaissance masters, but on top of that (or rather beneath it) there’s the subtext of secondary goals – promoting specific content, encouraging user signups and CTAs, and generally improving the overall experience so users enjoy their visit beyond just accomplishing their goals.



*Photo credit: [10 Best Practices for Sketch](#)*

Seems like the Renaissance masters got off easy.

In basic terms, visual hierarchy describes which elements dominate your user's attention and draw their eyes most. But there's no one right way to build a concrete hierarchy, and competitive designers must perfect different methods – or invent new ones – to stay on top of the game.

We'll describe 5 of the most basic elements, the essential building blocks necessary to support simple or complex hierarchies.

# Size

At the risk of sounding crass, it is the size of the boat that determines its motion in the ocean.

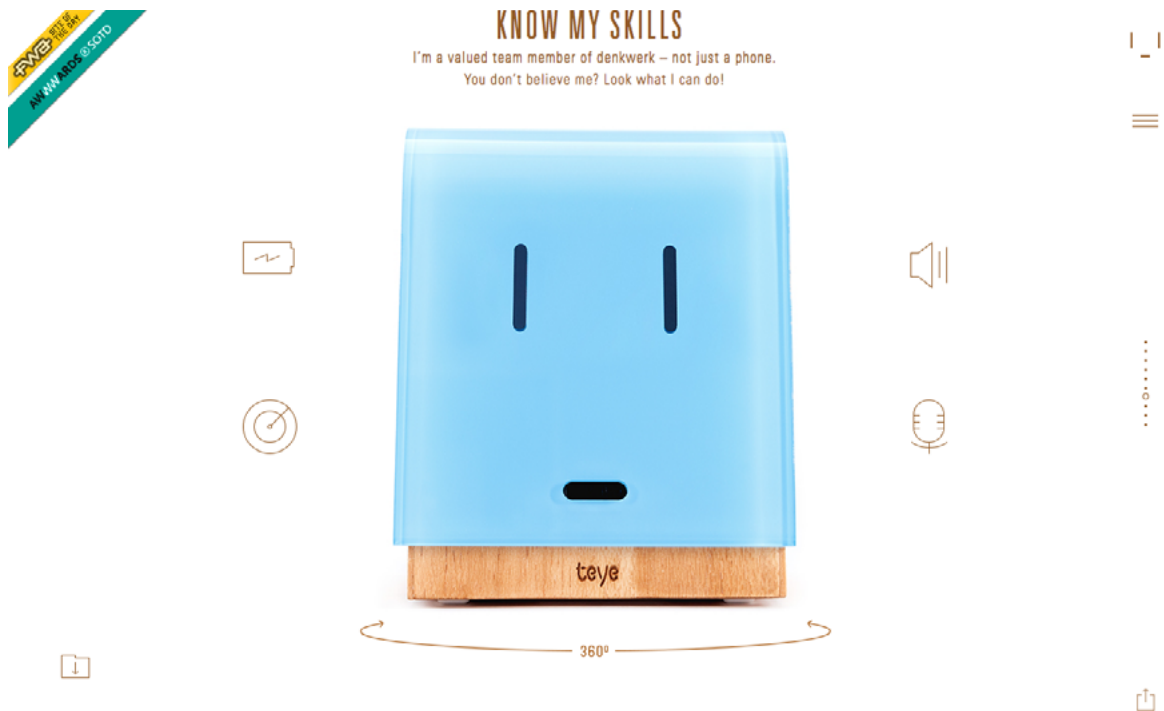
Bigger is more noticeable, but not always better. The simplest way to explain it is that your most important elements should be the biggest, but when we get into the details that becomes more complicated.

One of the principles of [Fitts's Law](#) is that objects with a bigger size – specifically clickable range – are easier to engage with. In other words, the user exerts less effort to click bigger items. This holds especially true for calls-to-action, where you want to leave no question as to where the user should go.

Of course, that's not to say that it's as simple as making your “DOWNLOAD NOW” call-to-action 10x larger for more conversions. Subtlety and harmony between elements is the key.

For example, what do you think the designers of the Teye website want you to interact with most?





*Photo credit: Teye*

The large, clickable, interactive Teye product is obviously the main attraction – and it's obvious because of its size. In fact, no copy is even required to tell users to engage with the product – the image functions as a subtle call-to-action because of its contrasting color and size. As a result, lesser attention is demanded by the four icons around it, which actually expand in size (when you click) to give product descriptions.

Clickability aside, size is still a vital component of the site's overall visuals. Depending on the degree, larger elements can dominate even our hard-wired left-to-right, up-to-down sight patterns. Furthermore, because it's based on perspective, size can also be conditionalized with contrast. You can reach the same benefits by making other elements smaller instead of one element larger – keep that in mind as a useful way of saving screen real estate.

Size affects even text and typography, as you can see by this very article's title, subheadings, and content text. As flexible guidelines, [Smashing Magazine's study of 50 popular websites](#) calculated some average sizes:

- headings: 18-29 pixels
- body copy: 12-14 pixels



Photo credit: [Huge Inc.](#)

All the principles of size are visible in this screenshot from Huge Inc. The first thing you notice is the biggest: the stylistic *H* that serves as their logo. Next is “Nike Making,” whose large typeface and bold style create immediate weight. Next is the line of text directly beneath it, written in a smaller font size so as not to steal attention from the key visuals. If your eyes are still interested enough to wander, they’ll eventually notice the tiny logo and hamburger menu in the corners, or the navigation bar to the right.

The hierarchy makes sense here. First, the large colorful H catches your eye. Soon afterwards, you'll seek context for the unorthodox visual, which is immediately accessible with the hyperlinked "Nike Making" headline and secondary sentence. Visual hierarchy lays out the user path, while [Fitts' Law](#) simplifies interaction by making the entire chunk of copy clickable and in close proximity to its related visual.

Without even thinking about it, you end up clicking exactly where the designer wants you to go.

## Quick Tips for Creating Visual Hierarchy With Space

It's not enough to simply make your more important elements bigger.

Because size is so powerful on your visual hierarchy, you need to use it with delicacy and finesse. Here are some best practices to help you strike big with size.

### 1. Use scale and contrast to save space

"Big" and "small" are relative terms.

Writing for Vanseo Designs, [Steven Bradley explains scalability and how it relates to size](#). Surrounded by smaller elements, an average-sized element will appear bigger. The range of sizes from smallest to largest will determine the scalability of the page, so playing around with one affects them all.

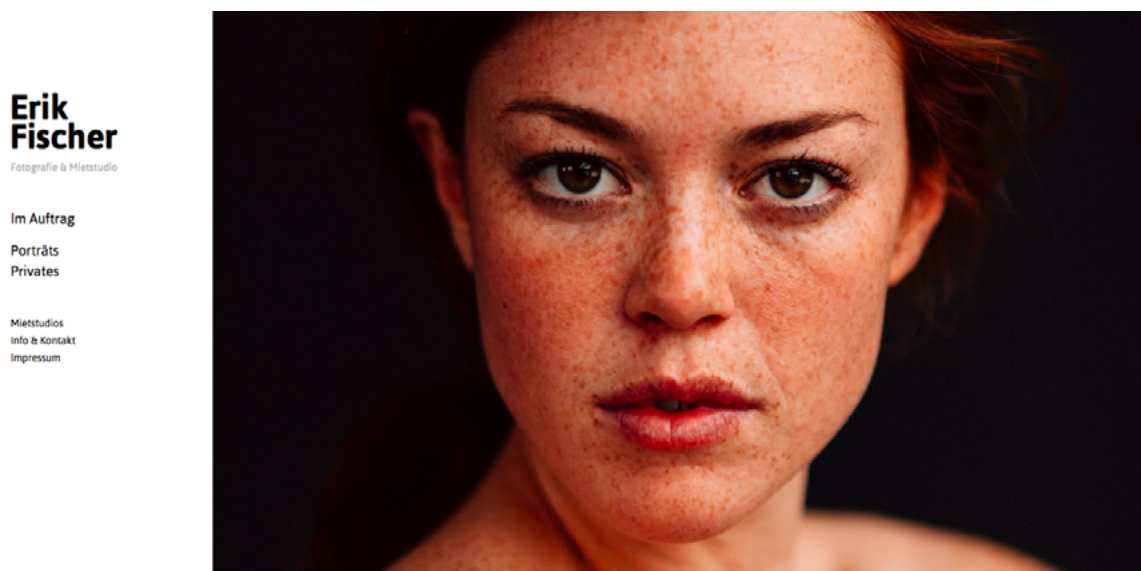
In fact, try shrinking the other elements instead of making one bigger.

## 2. Complement size with minimalism

Minimalist designs accent size well and give them more weight. The more minimalism grows as a design technique, the more we see single, grand-scale elements taking center stage.

If you want to focus your user's attention on only one or two main visuals, try cutting out other secondary elements. You could then enlarge the primary elements (like a photo or graphic), which emphasizes the beauty of what remains.

That's what [Erik Fischer](#) did to highlight his photography.



*Photo credit: [Erik Fischer](#)*

## 3. Make important text stand out

Size doesn't just apply to buttons and images – you can draw attention to certain pieces of text by making them bigger, too.

This is downright essential for headings and subheadings, but also applies to blocks of text. **Because users primarily scan text instead of reading it**, try enlarging certain quotes to create a visual pause between large paragraphs. The print industry figured this out long ago, and with their discovery came the popularization of the **pull quote**.



Our early prototype was based on our own dissatisfaction with existing ways to privately share multiple photos with multiple people at once. It also reflected what we'd heard time and again in qualitative user research:

"I take so many photos, but I always forget to send them to the friends who want them."

Birthday parties, graduations, vacations, holidays, casually hanging out—people take photos together all the time, but they never seem to get around to exchanging them. Yeah, there's texting, email and social media, but that only accounts for a slice of what's captured.

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*Photo credit: [Medium](#)*

From a typographical standpoint, you can also try alternating decorative typefaces with straightforward typefaces. Decorative typefaces in H1 headers immediately catches the eye, while the straightforward typeface further clarify the meaning.

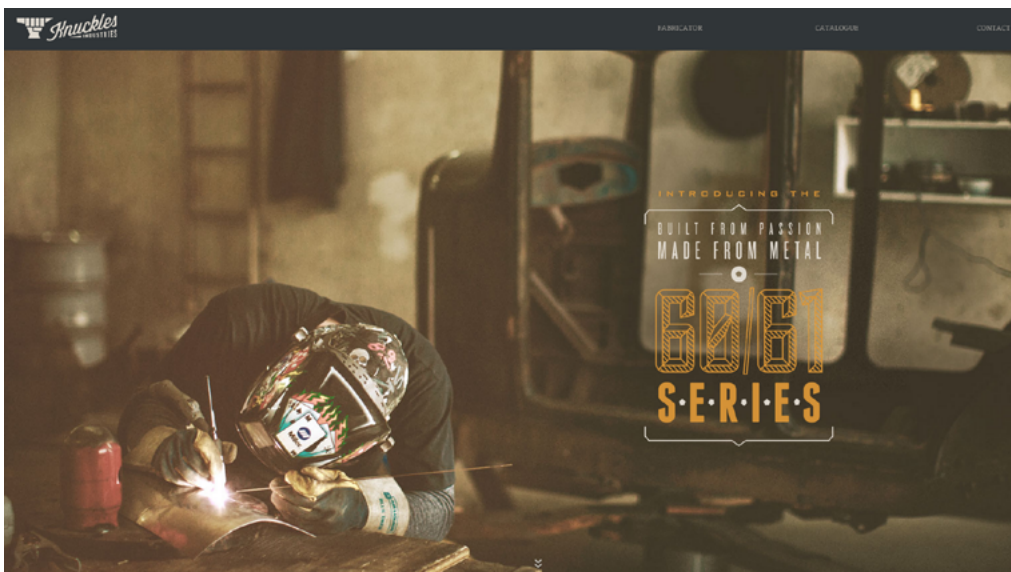


Photo credit: [Knuckle Industries](#)

For example, Knuckle Industries uses typeface and color to vary the visual hierarchy. In the first example above, the colored decorative text stands at the top of visual hierarchy.

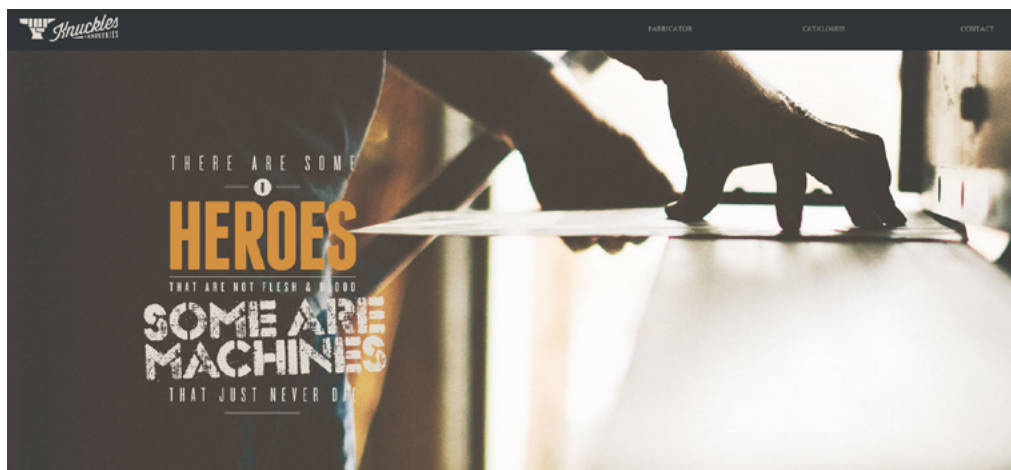


Photo credit: [Knuckle Industries](#)

In the second example, the straightforward text is colored while the decorative text remains in white. As a result, the straightforward text immediately catches your eye. The decorative text becomes secondary, which speaks to the contrasting power of color for bringing elements to our immediate attention.

# Color

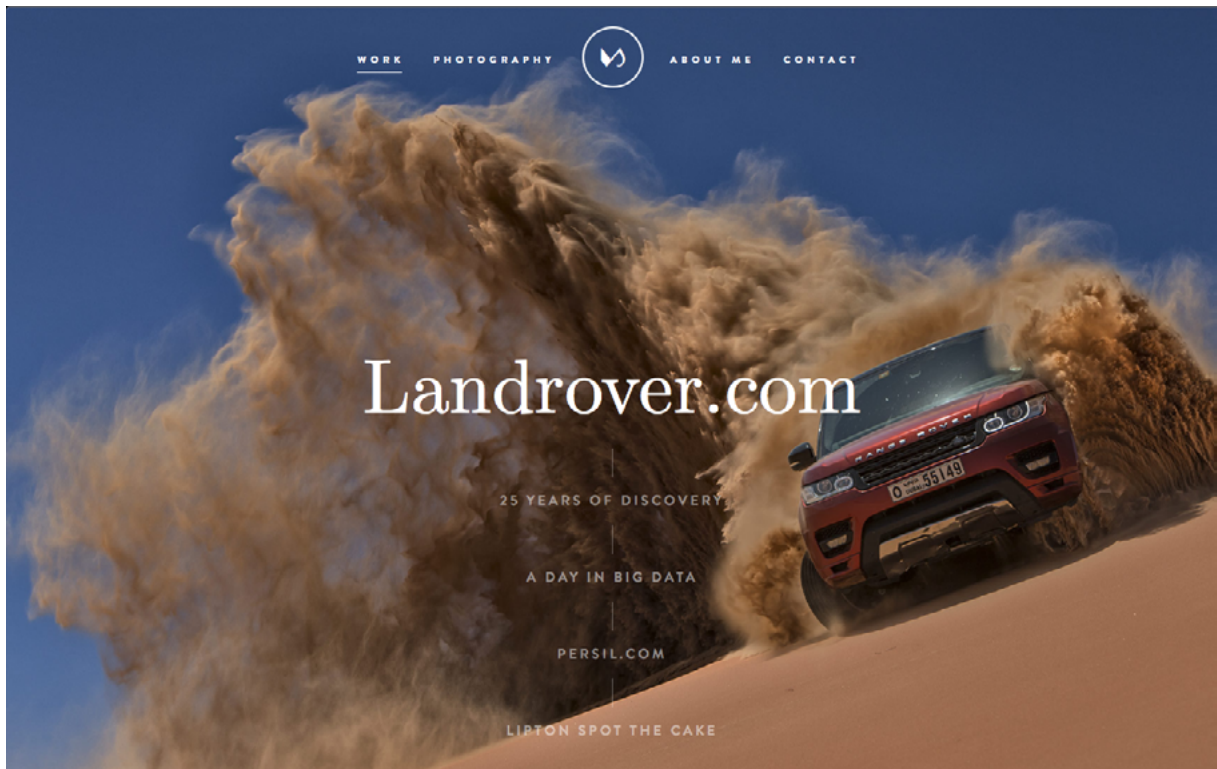
Your choice of color, even if just blacks and whites, greatly influences how users perceive your site.

For starters, each color has its own psychological connections, which we explain in great detail in [Web UI Design for the Human Eye](#). Barring that for a moment, colors themselves have their own hierarchy, where blacks and reds will more readily draw attention, while soft yellows and creams may take a backseat.

However, those effects can be enhanced – and even reversed – by the use of contrast. Contrasting colors against their natural opposite (known as [complementary colors](#)) draws greater attention to both. This has an enormous impact on visual hierarchy, as placing a yellow call-to-action against a blue background may produce better results than a red CTA.

Naturally, the website of digital designer and art director [Vito Salvatore](#) should include compelling visuals. And the photo he chose for his home page demonstrates his ability. In terms of color, the

tan of the sand contrasts with the deep blue of the sky, making this a visually dynamic image. For functionality, the choice of white for the typography allows the links to stand out elegantly, despite the grandeur of the background photography.



*Photo credit: [Vito Salvatore](#)*

On a subtler level, the tan color actually complements the blue sky, as you can see in this [color wheel](#). While that might be pure coincidence in the photograph, it nonetheless creates a balanced feel in the aesthetic. Notice also how the tan dust trail creates a sense of action, leading your eyes towards the red car (which then points in the direction of the white text menu).

When we deconstruct the design, you can really start to see how the color, visuals, and typography lead your eye towards the most valuable part of the screen.



## Tips for Creating Visual Hierarchy With Color

Color theory is a wide and detailed discipline, so we'll focus on just a few fundamentals before you dive deeper.

### 1. Combine colors wisely

Think of color theory like chemistry: each color has its own unique properties, but combining them creates new and surprising effects.

Colors combinations can be complementary, harmonious, or just plain clashing.



*Photo credit: Ray Trygstad. [Wikimedia Commons](#). [GNU Free Documentation License](#).*

Some general guidelines are that color complements (opposites on the color wheel) draw each other out, making them a good pair for calls-to-action and background. Harmonious colors (colors next to each other on the colors wheel) pair well without creating so much of a contrast.

To learn about the 6 most important color schemes, check out our free pocket guide [Color Theory in Web UI Design](#).

## 2. Differentiate primary and secondary colors

Few sites distribute all their colors equally.

A better practice is to choose a primary color, a secondary color, and continue down if applicable. Color will likely make the strongest first impression on users, so pay attention to balance. For example, in a complementary red-green color scheme, if red is dominant, it's energizing properties outweigh green's calming ones.

In this way, the same color scheme can have different impacts.



Photo credit: [Ondo](#)

Look at how [Ondo](#) uses [contrasting colors](#) (which sit 3 steps away from each other on the color wheel) to draw attention to their work. The bright magenta in the right image contrasts with the

muted orange, focusing the user on their work first.

Study the color wheel, know the common color schemes, then apply similar dashes to draw out important site elements.

### 3. Create balance with triadic colors

The triadic is the safest of the color schemes, implementing three perfectly balanced colors joined by an equilateral triangle on the wheel.

That means it works well for adding some liveliness into your interface without creating clashing elements.



*Photo credit: Ray Trygstad. Wikimedia Commons. Creative Commons. Edited from original.*

Look at how [KLM](#) uses red, blue, and yellow to draw attention to the secondary navigation. The triadic color scheme makes the entire grid stand out against the background. The larger size and orange text of the far-left square then bumps that square up to the top of the visual hierarchy (alongside “THE PRIZE” square, which is equally prominent due to its yellow color).

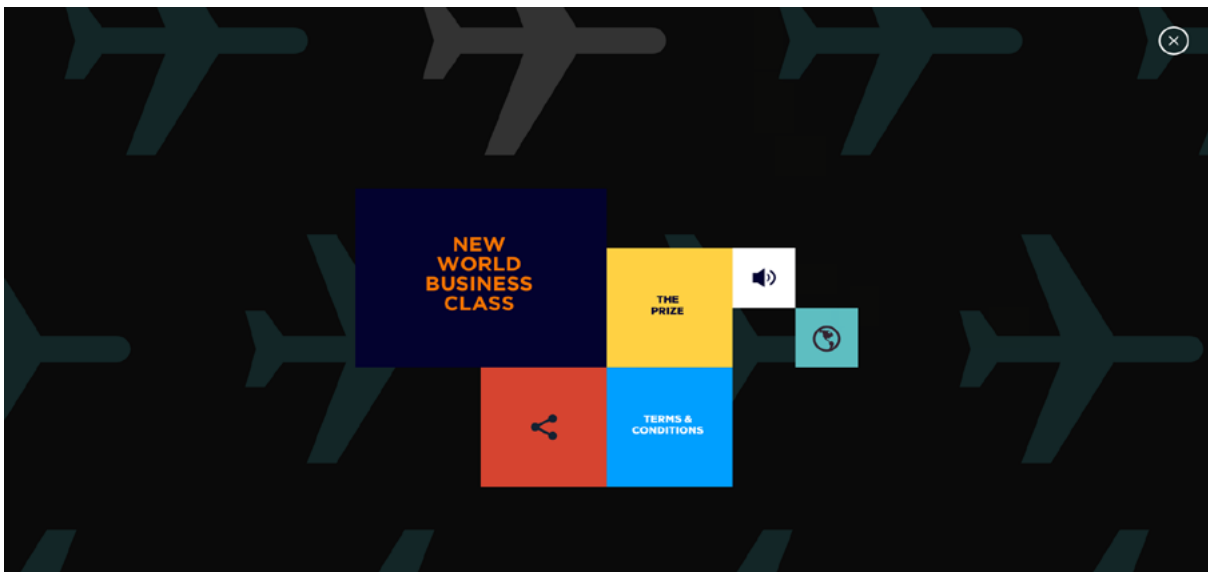


Photo credit: [KLM](#)

By applying size and color, KLM can make two items stand out without making the overall interface look too noisy.

The treatment certainly makes sense since users probably want to learn more about how their new business class airline works, and what prizes are available for the competition.

# Layout

Your website interface's layout is one of the most direct ways to control your visual hierarchy – you can literally place an element at the top of the visual hierarchy by placing it front-and-center. But there's more at play than just height on the screen.

One of these factors are [prime pixels](#). Another principle of Fitt's Law, which we've briefly described, is to take advantage of the locations within easiest reach. In web design these are, amongst others, the corners and border of the screen, as “throwing” the cursor to sides requires less mouse control than a fixed point in the middle.



Photo credit: [Adoratorio](#)

While you'll probably focus primarily on the center of the screen (given its size and contrasting black lines), the stagnant clickable links remain easily accessible in the corner and at the bottom. Scrolling up and down changes what's displayed in the middle, but the site logo, hamburger menu, contact information, and social media links stay firmly in their prime locations.

Of course, your layout certainly affects the visual hierarchy, not to mention usability. The Gestalt principles (described below) dictate that objects in a line create momentum to propel eyesight forward, even dominating the effects of color. Rows and columns, then, aside from supporting an organized structure to keep the chaos at bay, also create some prime real estate when they end – perfect for CTAs or other preferred content.

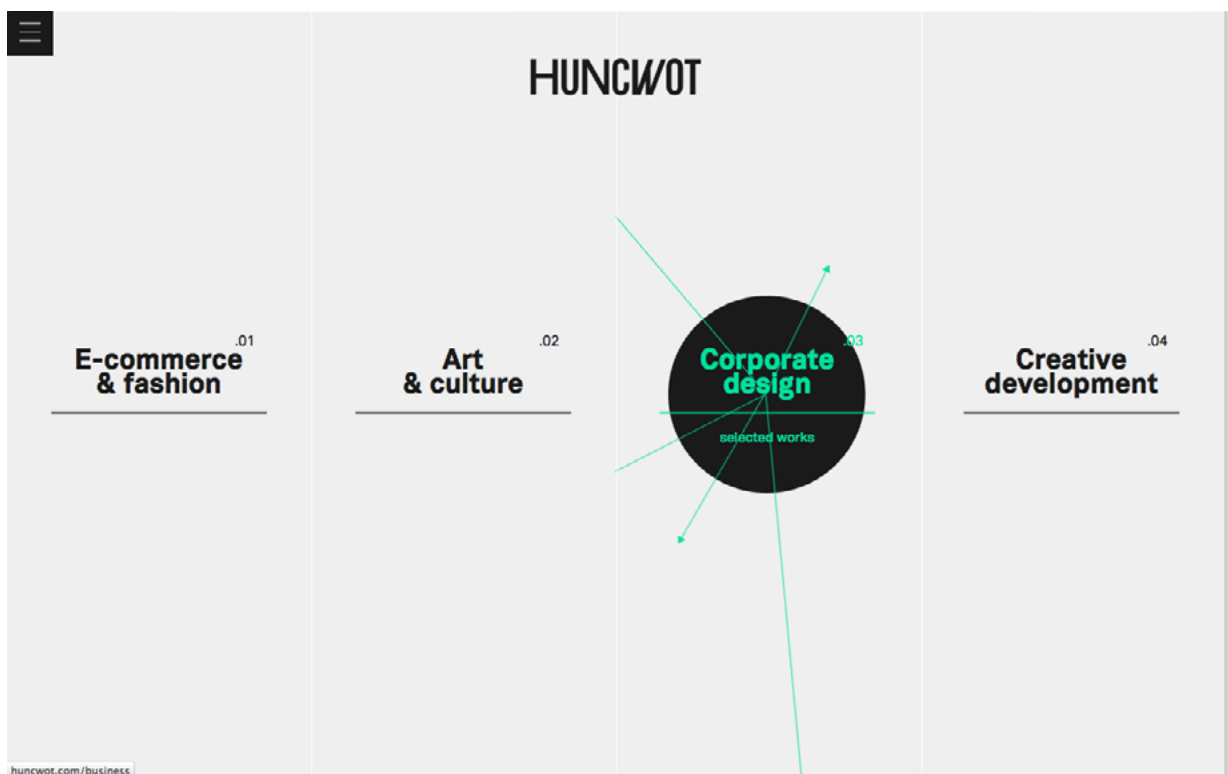


Photo credit: [Huncwot](#)

As you can see, [Huncwot](#) keeps the options for its homepage organized in a straight horizontal line (with an animation behind whichever selection you're hovering over).

When deciding the layout, remember what we said about Hick's law in *Interaction Design Best Practices*. Hicks law, in a nutshell, cites that the more decisions a person has, the longer the decision-making process. Thus, you want to find a perfect balance between giving your users a lot of options and restricting their choices to only the essentials. This will affect which layout method you choose, as you don't want to overburden your user with content, but you also want to provide enough to satisfy them.

It's a tricky balance, but mandatory for every single website. Otherwise, if you crowd your website with too many interface elements, your visual hierarchy flattens and nothing stands out to the user.

## Quick Tips for Creating Visual Hierarchy Through Layout

The layout of your interface is its *feng shui*. Placement influence when, if at all, your user notices each interface object. When organizing your sites, keep these tips in mind:

### 1. Choose a single focal point

Define the most important element on your page and design around that.

This could be a large picture, or single-line greeting, or a call-to-action. Knowing the most important visual element will allow you to organize the other elements to promote it, plus it will make starting out from scratch easier.

## 2. Use a grid

Using a grid system is a quick and efficient method for ensuring your layout stays balanced. Designing with a grid overlay is the perfect aid for keeping all the elements in line and balanced across the page.

This extra help frees up some of your mental faculties for more important layout issues. Sites like [Gridpak](#) generate grids for you according to your specifications.

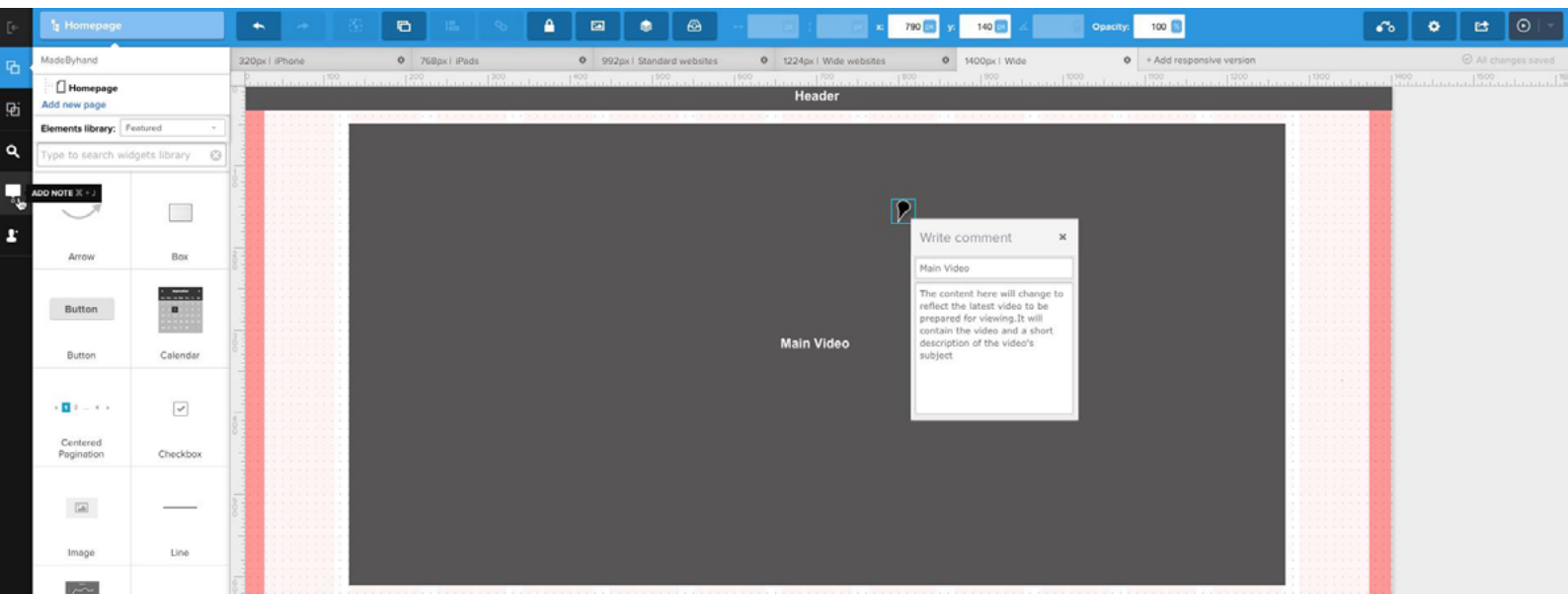


Photo credit: [UXPin](#)

On a side note, [UXPin](#) also comes with a built-in grid to help improve alignment of all objects in your wireframe or prototype.



### 3. Take advantage of user sight patterns

Eye tracking studies identified several **common and predictable patterns** followed by web users. By taking advantage of these patterns, you can not only anticipate where your user will look, but also encourage and promote such a pattern, giving you more control.

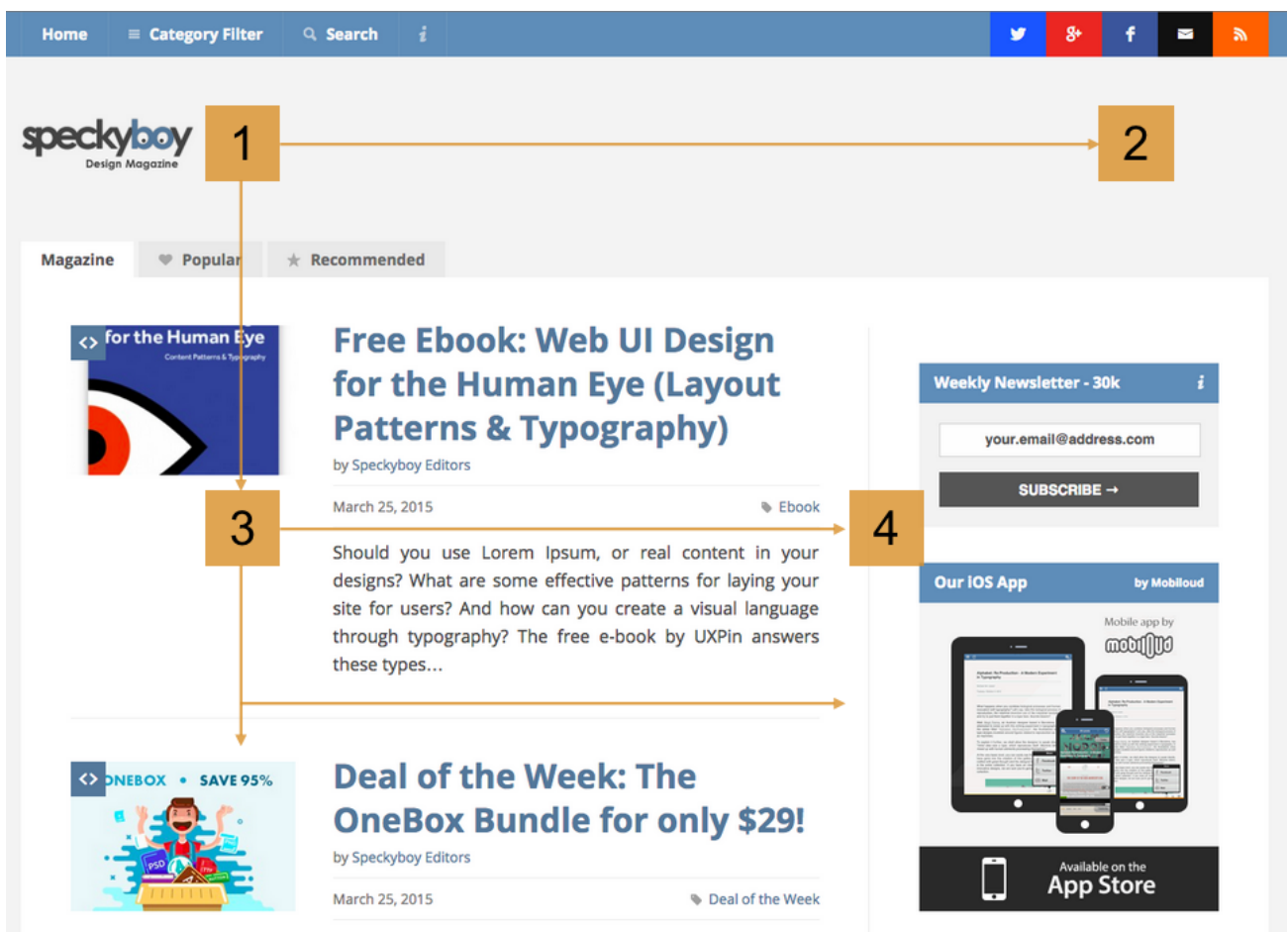


Photo credit: *Speckyboy*

The two most common patterns are the F-pattern and the Z-pattern. The F-pattern is mostly used in large blocks of text: the user scans a row for words of interest, then scans down the left column, and starts scanning horizontally if they come across something that catches their eye.

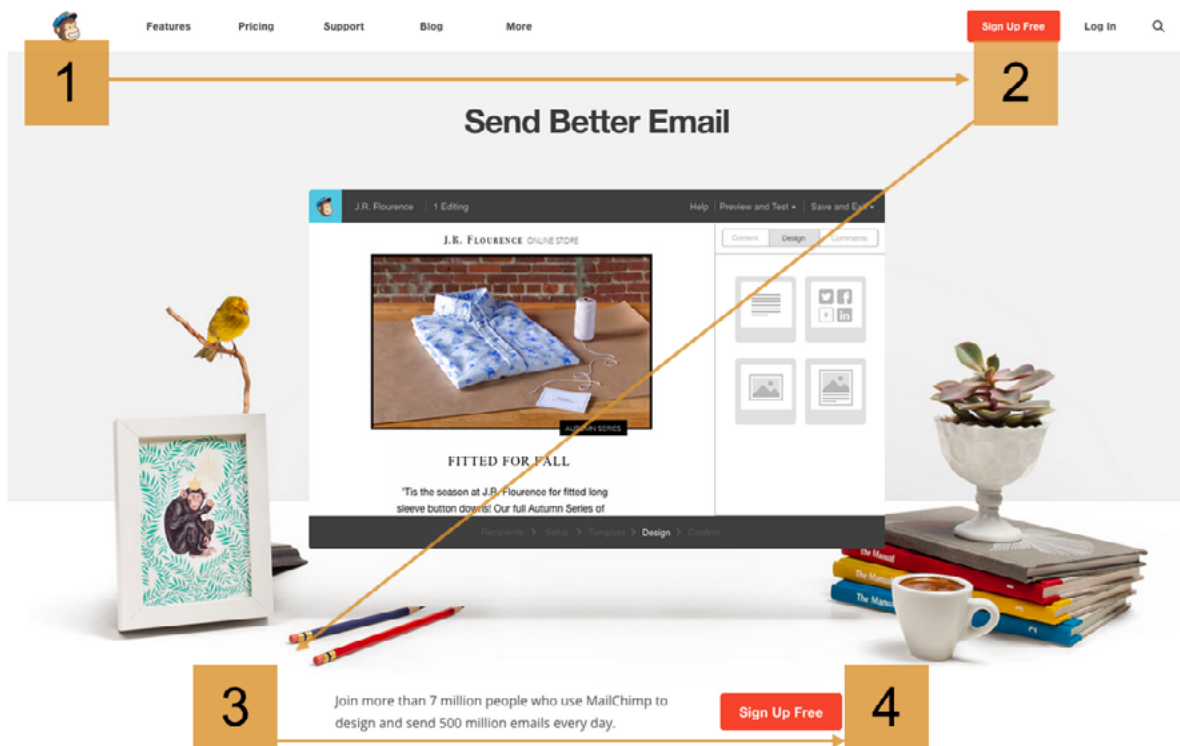


Photo credit: [UXPin](#) via [MailChimp](#)

The Z-pattern occurs on more open pages: the user scans right horizontally, then to the bottom left corner, and then repeats in a zigzag down the page.

For more information on how to take advantage of these patterns, download our free e-book [Web UI Design for the Human Eye, Book 2](#).

# Spacing

Related to layout, the spacing within your interface guides the eye and, under the right circumstances, explains or suggests function. Spacing impacts your visual hierarchy in two distinct ways: proximity and negative space.

Proximity is a powerful tool for a web designer as it can suggest an element's meaning and functionality using only visuals. The [Gestalt principles](#), from the visual-psychological school of thought from the early twentieth century, led to the discovery that users tends to perceive elements placed close together as having similar functions.

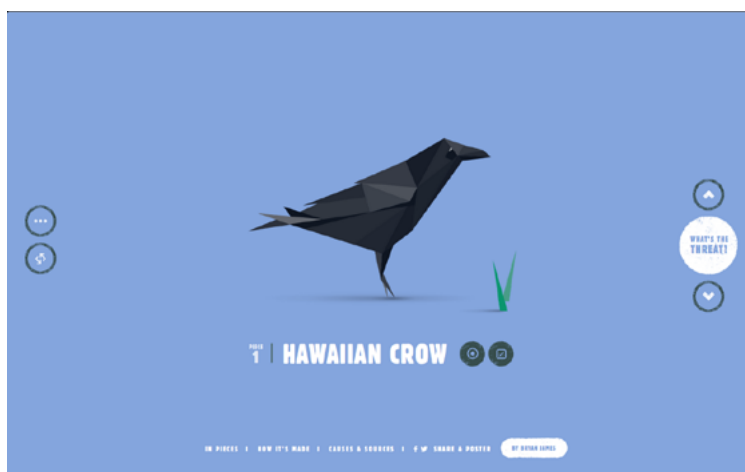


Photo credit: [In Pieces](#)

The spacing for the [In Pieces](#) page demonstrates the Gestalt's grouping principles.

Elements related to the central image are directly beneath it. The site's content, with related navigation options, are grouped together at the right. The navigation controls for the site as a whole are grouped together at the left, and non-navigational links for the entire site are grouped together at the bottom. On a related note, also notice how it takes advantage of prime pixels by placing important scrolling options on the horizontal borders.

Another aspect is [negative space](#), commonly known as white space. It's a rookie mistake in web design to treat white space as an empty canvas rather than as a design tool. Skilled designers know the less elements you have, the more potent the ones that remain. The right amount of empty space between your crucial elements will keep them the center of attention.

In fact, Dmitry Fadeyev cites a study that found [white space between paragraphs and in margins improved comprehension by almost 20%](#).

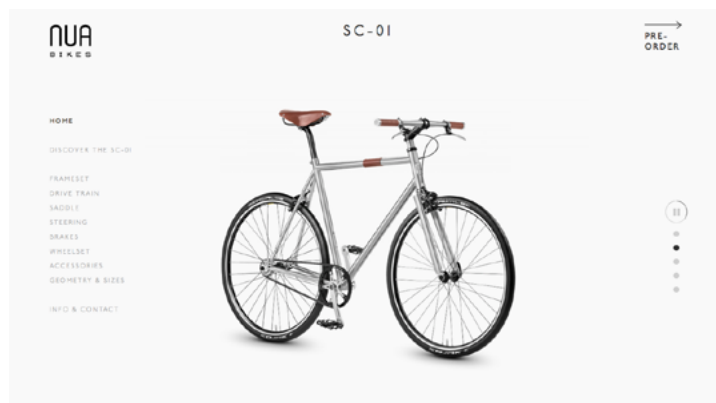


Photo credit: [Nua Bikes](#)

[Nua Bikes](#) makes good use of negative space with its literally white space. With its minimalistic approach and lack of conflicting visuals, the site sets the users' focus on only what's important – the bike it's selling.

To learn more about the power of negative space, check out [The Zen of White Space in Web Design Book 1 & Book 2](#).

## Quick Tips for Creating Visual Hierarchy With Space

Negative space isn't simply a canvas to design on top of – it is an element, to be used actively and skillfully. Below we'll talk about some ways to help create something from nothing:

### 1. Use variety

Many designers avoid white space because they think it's boring... and it certainly can be.

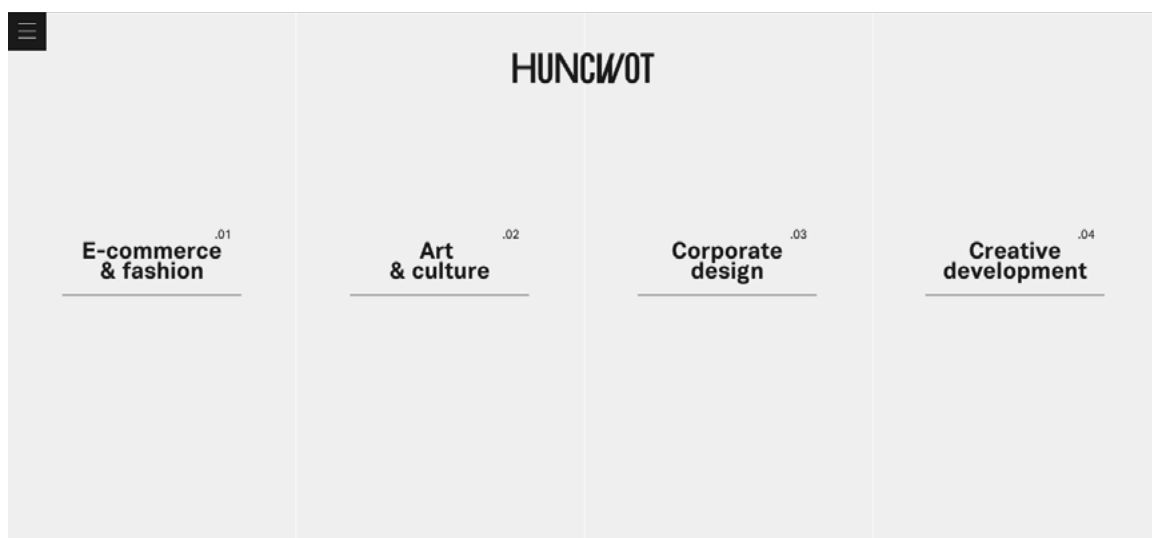


Photo credit: [Hungcwot](#) via [awwwards](#)

Change up your distribution of white space to keep things interesting. Play with symmetry and balance – having only a few elements on the page means even slight modifications to them will impact the entire look.

To learn about the 4 types of symmetry in white space, check out [The Elegance of Minimalism](#).

## 2. Take advantage of grouping properties

Grouping elements together suggests similarity. This learnability shortcut gives your interface an intuitive familiarity your users will appreciate.

Be mindful of the spacing between elements of a group, and between multiple groups – this is the key to showing what's related and what's not.

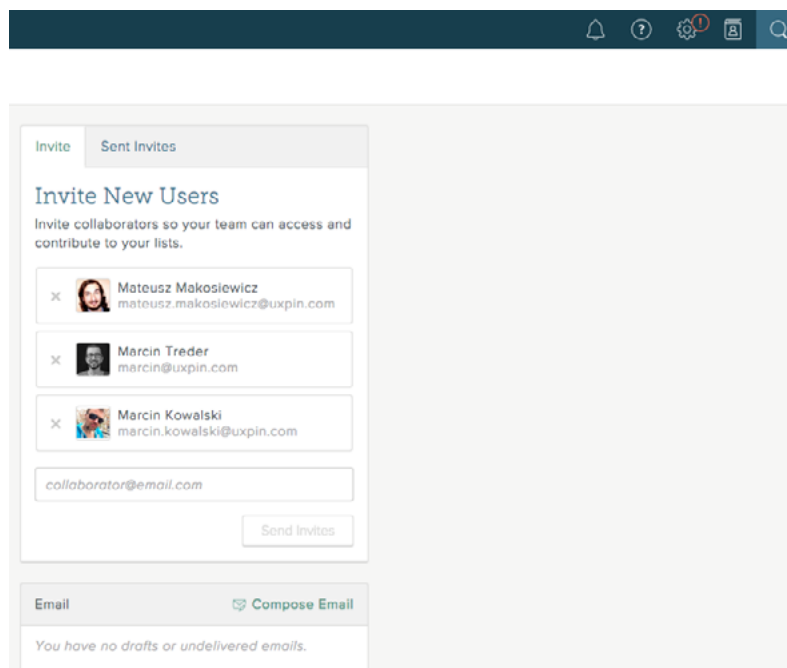


Photo credit: [RelateIQ](#)

For example, notice how the interface objects that help “Invite New Users” are all closely grouped to convey their related function. The whole group, however, is located quite far from the top-right account settings, visually communicating the different functions.

The greater the distance, the more the viewer will be drawn to the more prominent group (based on size, color, or text treatment).

### 3. Limit elements per page

While you should modify the amount of space for content, no matter what type of site you have, you should always avoid clutter.

[In an article about spacing](#), Paul Boeg explains his helpful method of assigning each page 15 “points” of attention. Each individual element gets one “point,” but when you want one element to stand out more than others, you assign them more points. This is a great system of personal organization for visual hierarchy in general, and especially useful in allocating the right amount of space.

### 4. Don’t overdo It

There’s a fine line between minimalism and dullness.

Too much white space will mean your site lacks interesting content. Likewise, too much spacing between elements will confuse your users. For advice on striking the right balance, check out the [Zen of White Space in Web UI Design, Book 1](#).

# Style

We don't mean to give the impression that web design is a quantifiable practice with only one way of doing things. Personal style, such as the use of textures, graphics, and the type of imagery (e.g. icon or photo-heavy), all affect the visual hierarchy and allow you to express an individual [design persona](#).

One of the most powerful stylistic tools is [texture](#). When used properly, texture enjoys the same advantages of size and color (in terms of aesthetic appeal) while adding depth and atmosphere.

The clearest example of this is in displacement: giving just a single element texture will make it stand out, while having a textured background will make non-textured objects in the foreground stand out. But remember that moderation is the key – otherwise you'll end up going full-skeuomorphic which just feels tacky.

As you can see below on *Le Mystère de Grimouville*, the texture on the title not only draws attention to it, it also infuses a quaint atmo



sphere and style to the site. The texture, as well as the size and place, set the title apart from the less important body text.



Photo credit: *Le Mystère de Grimouville*

The mysterious effect is perfect, considering that the site tells the story of a mystery that haunted the 140 residents of Normandy for over four years.



Photo credit: *Jib Strategic*

Taking an opposite approach, [Jib Strategic](#) adds texture to the background to draw out the foreground. This not only influences the user's focus, it creates an old-fashioned style with the grainy wood, but still appears modern with crisp typography and graphics.

In addition to texture, the types of graphics and imagery you use also affects your visual hierarchy. A swirling flourish around the logo draws attention and reflect the site's personality. Likewise, rich photographs or clever icons will be sure to draw the eye, regardless of your site's layout or color scheme.



Photo credit: [Risotteria Melotti](#)

Not to downplay the use of color in [Risotteria Melotti's site](#), but it's the allure of the content – a delicious-looking meal – that makes it the most appetizing item on the screen. In fact, the texture in this site isn't executed in the traditional format of gradients, shading, or somewhat photo-realistic effects. Just by using a rich photograph showing a rustic dinner table, the identity of the site still permeates the screen.

## Quick Tips for Creating Visual Hierarchy With Style

### 1. Ensure readability and legibility

Textures and other visual flourishes should not affect the user's ability to read between lines (readability) and discern individual letters (legibility).

Remember that style is created through moderation. If you already use plenty of decorative text and color, then too much texture distracts from your content. As you dial up other elements, remember you also need to tone down what's left.

### 2. Contrast is your friend

If your background is textured, your foreground should be clear. The opposite is also true.

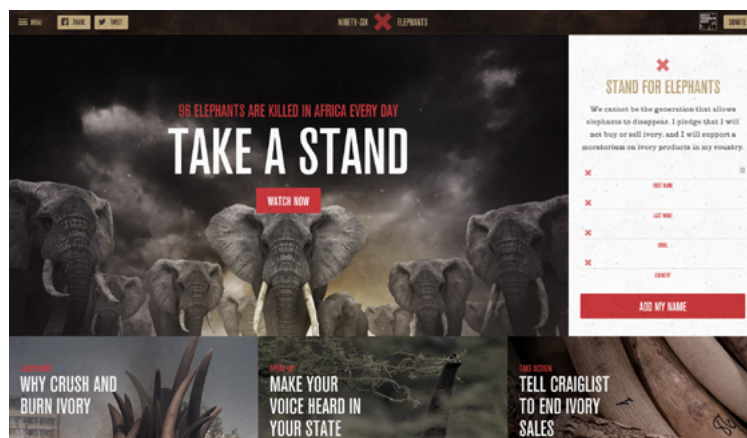


Photo credit: [96 Elephants](#)

In a similar vein, don't go overboard with texture – otherwise you'll end up with a skeuomorphic mess. Instead of laying on a thick textured background, try applying texture to just a few site elements that you want to gently stand out.

### 3. Alternatives are just as powerful

Textured effects and rich illustrations aren't the only ways to give your site a unique style.

In our experience, photography helps draw attention to important content while also retaining the rawness of textured effects. With high quality photography, you also create a sense of elegance while avoiding the risk of textured tackiness. It's a sound tactic for beginners and experienced designers alike.



*Photo credit: Kaspersky*

Look at how Kaspersky applies all of the techniques we've discussed so far to create a clear visual hierarchy and visual style. The large pink color block immediately draws your attention, which then refocuses on the large "38%" before reading the rest of the white text. Considering the cost of actually building a cardboard cityscape, the background is likely a very tasteful stock photo that's been carefully worked over.

As a result, the content hierarchy is crystal clear, but the site still retains a fun sense of texture and reality.

# Takeaway

Knowing how to use each of these building blocks is a standard requirement for a web designer, but know when to use which – and even better, how to use them together – is what creates a mastery of the skill.

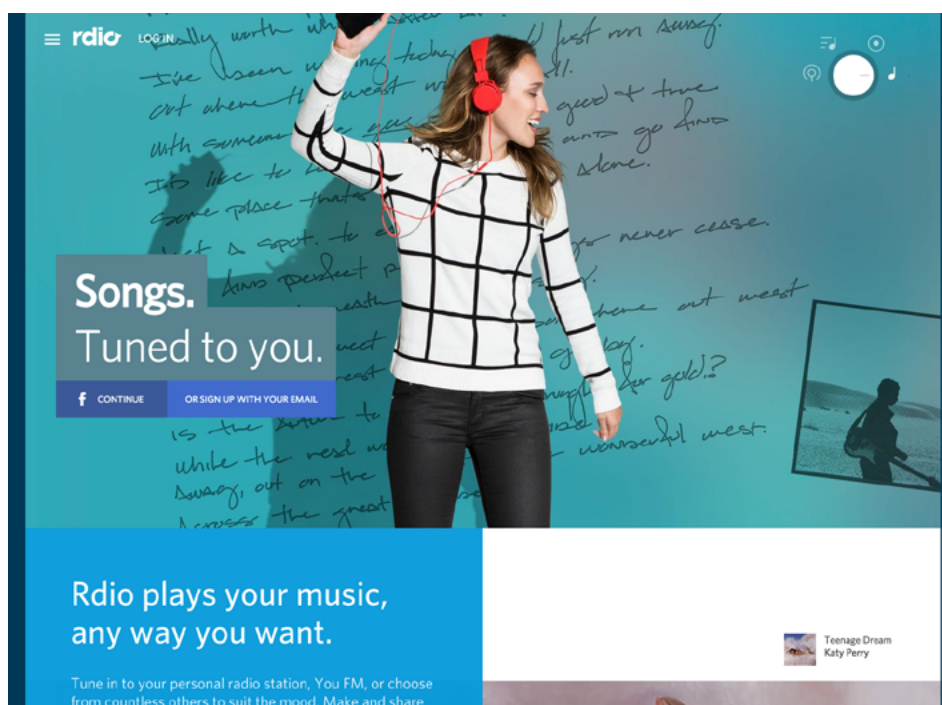


Photo credit: Rdio

Every element in your interface will intermingle and vie for visual dominance. Even if your design is pixel-perfect, each user will bring

with them an element of unpredictability (for example, User A might have a preference for the color green...).

Keep in mind that this is not only a science but an art. Feel free to experiment and allow your own creativity to shine.

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