

Hierarchy is Everything

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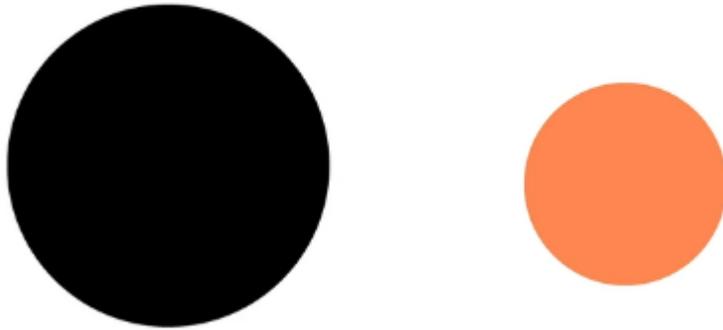
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Introduction

Hello and welcome to the lesson about the importance of the visual hierarchy in your designs. In this lesson, we are going to learn about visual hierarchy in web design and how we can use it to improve our websites and optimize our users' experiences.

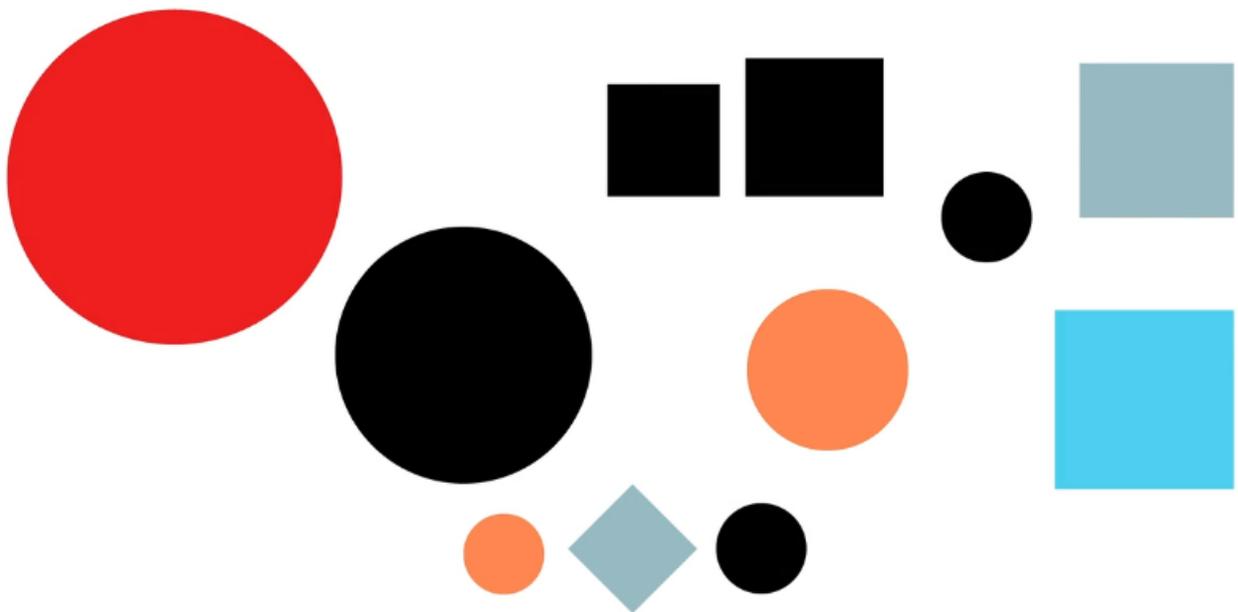
At its core, design is all about visual communication. To make sure our designs are effective, we have to be able to clearly communicate our ideas to website users, or else we will lose their attention.

Take a look at the simple image of two ordinary circles.



Chances are you don't see just two circles, but instead, you see one black circle and one smaller, orange circle.

Let's look at a more complex image.



This one is a bit more complex, and it kind of creates an even stronger desire to classify the objects in terms of relationships.

So, our brains work this way: we immediately notice similarities and differences.

Differences in scale may suggest that one object is closer to us than another or that one is more dominant, more important than the other. Different colors may suggest that one element has a unique personality that sets it apart from other elements.

The importance of visual hierarchy

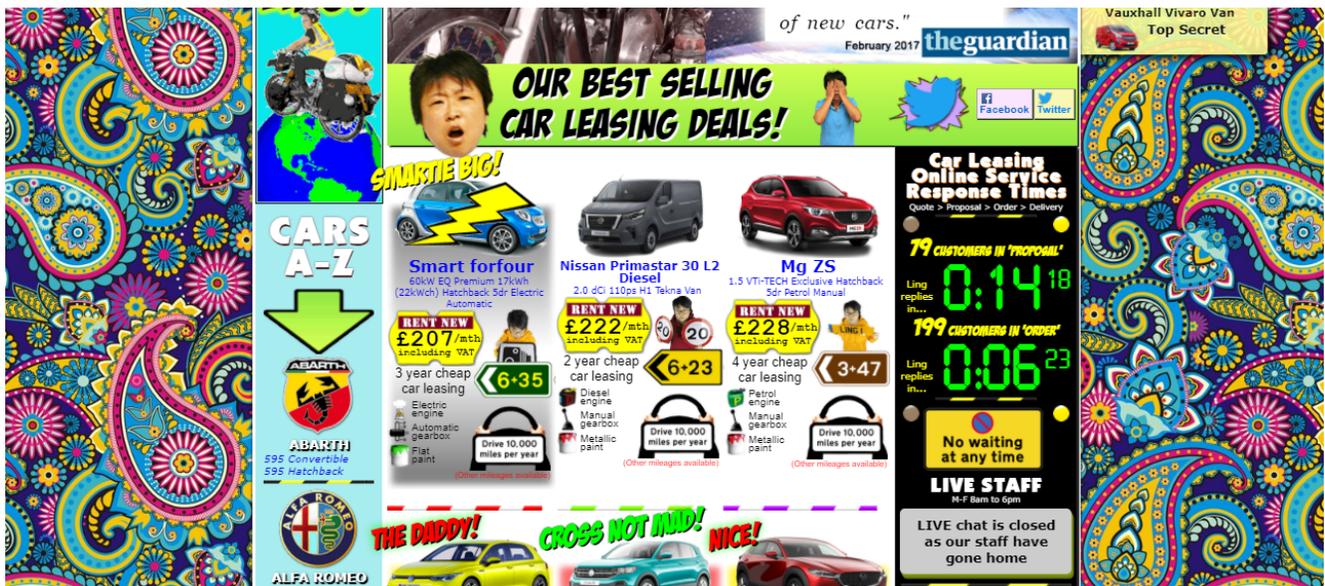
Web design is all about communicating visual information. Understanding that people will see our designs in terms of relationships is crucial to becoming a more effective designer.

It happens very often that we'll get some content from the client, open up Divi, add some sections, text modules, images, some buttons. We try to make it look nice, but we do not think about the goal of the page and the main message we are trying to communicate.

So, I would like to encourage you to identify the key information that visitors are likely seeking or what we want the user to do on a page. And our task is to break down that raw information we often get from our clients and turn it into delicious little chunks of visually relevant information that are easy on the eyes, but more importantly, effective at communicating the message behind the website.

Visual hierarchy refers to how important the elements in an interface appear in relation to one another. It is the most effective tool you have for making something feel "designed".

When everything in an interface is competing for attention, it feels noisy and chaotic, like one big wall of content where it's not clear what actually matters.



Ling's Cars

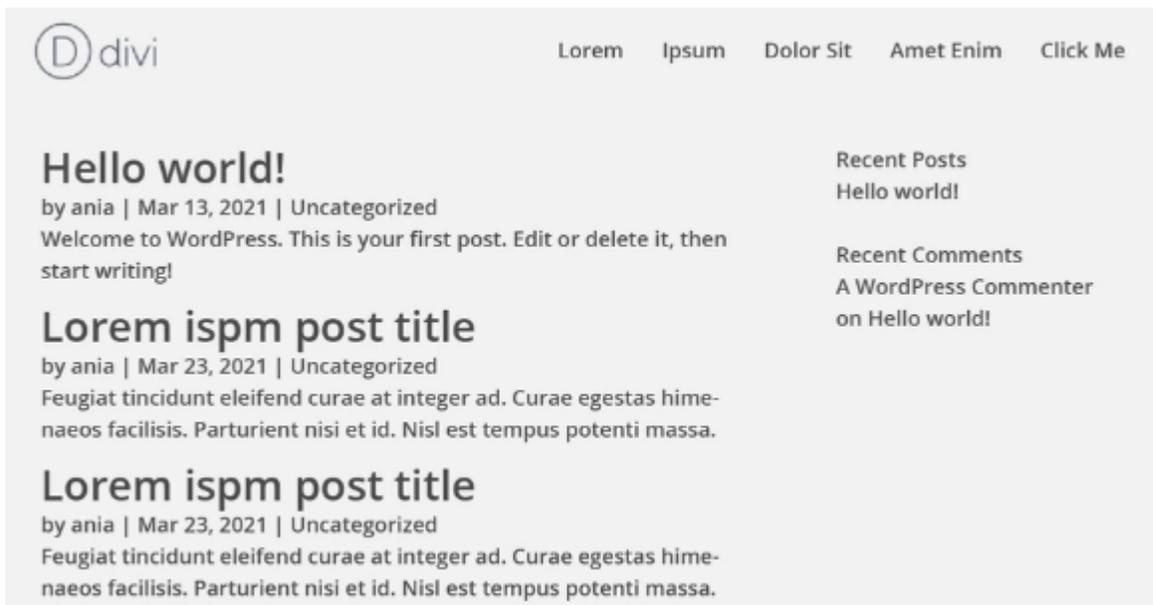
Of course, this is an extreme example, and this website has become famous for being so noisy, but I hope you can see what I mean.

Introducing visual hierarchy on a page

In this lesson, I am going to discuss a few ways we can introduce hierarchy on a page and that includes: size, color, perspective, alignment, and spacing.

Using size and scale to draw attention

First of all: sizing. Objects that are bigger demand more attention. Using size is an effective way of guiding the viewer's eye to a particular portion of the page.



Because size is one of the most powerful forms of organization, it's important to correlate size with importance in a design. The biggest elements should be the most important, in most cases. The smallest elements should be the least important.

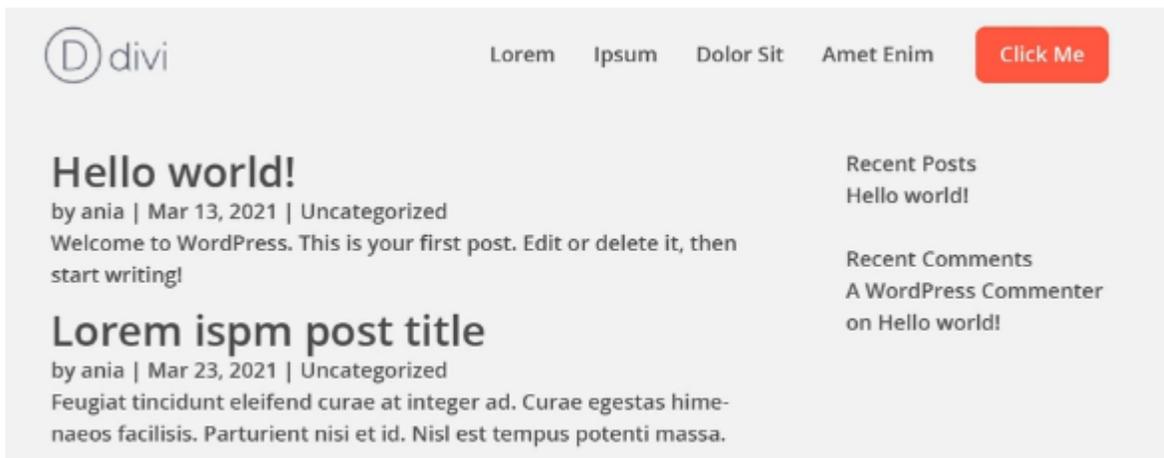
You want to be careful, however, not to enlarge too many elements or increase the size in a way that might decrease the importance of other elements on the screen.



Using color to make objects stand out

The second tool a designer can use to determine visual hierarchy is color. Colors can be used similarly to size to give importance to elements in your design. Brighter colors are typically going to grab the viewer's attention much more than dull, non-saturated colors.

Using one bright color as a focal point can help draw attention, no matter where you place that element in the order of your design.



In this example, which you'll often see being used on live website navigation, we have a primary high contrasting color on a button that serves as the most crucial call to action.

By helping our users, the page visitors, understand where you want them to go, you can give them a more pleasant experience and increase conversions.

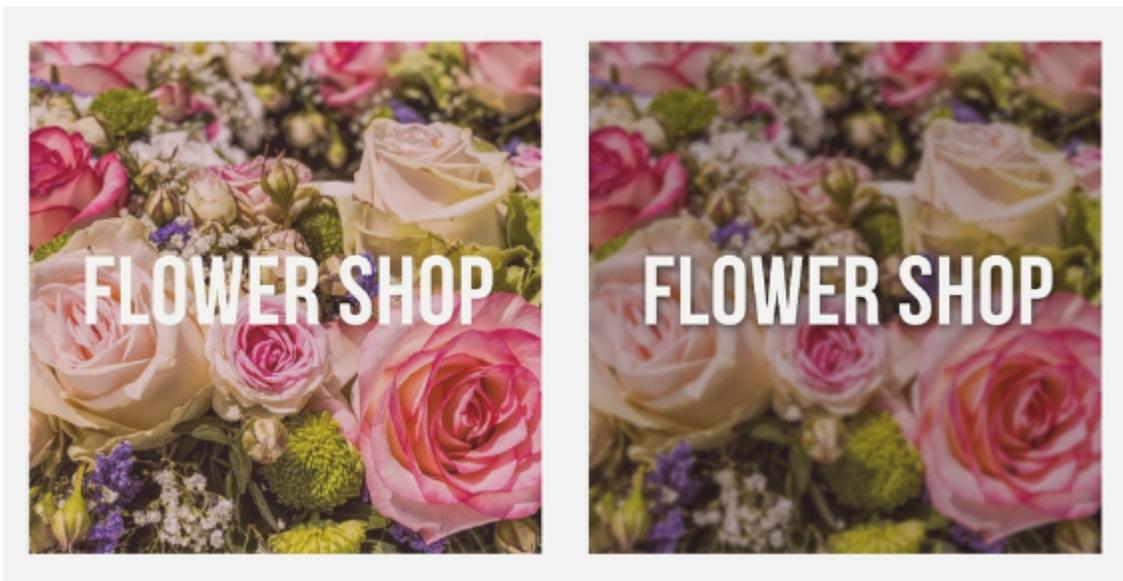
Playing with depth and perspective

Now, let's look at ways we can add depth and perspective to our website. Most websites are designed to be two-dimensional and can often appear flat. By playing with perspective, you can create an illusion of distance, separate elements from each other to help bring focus to the areas that are more important.

Here are a few ways you can give the illusion of perspective. One way is to increase the size of elements in relation to those around it. This will make those elements appear closer to you.

Another way is adding a parallax scrolling effect to your elements, so that an element or a background image moves slower or faster than other elements around it.

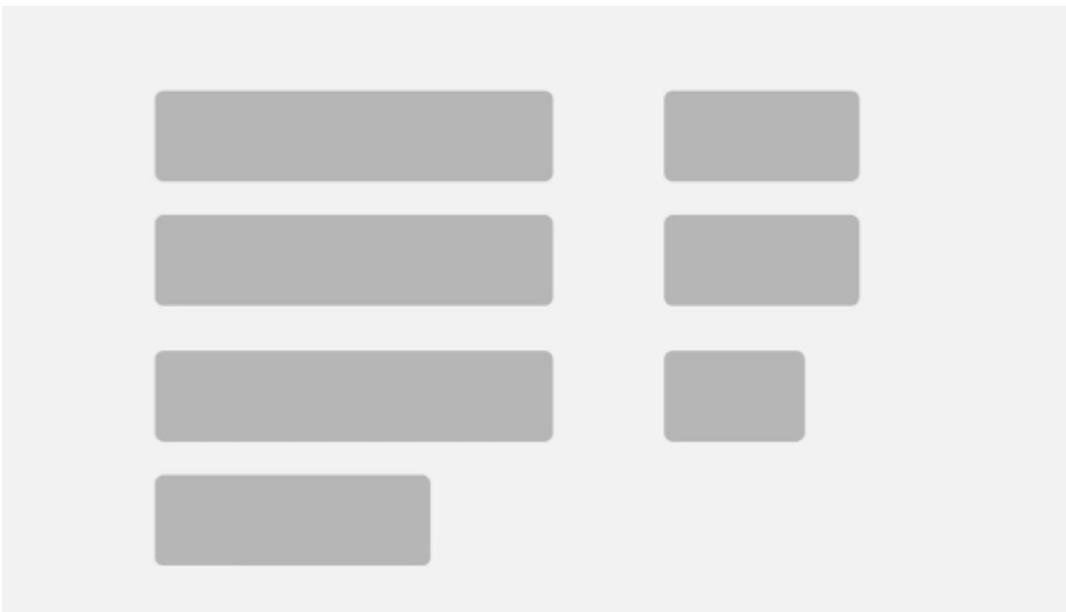
You can also add drop shadows or add blur over a background or foreground layer. This can have a great effect and help add perspective and depth.



In the example on the left, all the elements appear flat and it's hard to read the text because the color competes with the background image. On the right image, on the other hand, we've added some blur to the background image and some text-shadow. This helps give these elements some distance and makes things much easier to visualize.

Alignment and the viewing patterns

Now, let's talk about alignment. Aligning things together creates order among the elements. The alignment can be as simple as the difference between a "content column" and a "sidebar column", but it can also take on a more complex role that helps establish visual hierarchy.



When you align elements along the same path, you can help them feel associated with each other, making it easier to scan the similar content around it.

When talking about alignment on the screen, it is hard not to mention the viewing patterns. According to different eye-tracking studies, there are several popular scanning patterns for web pages. The two most popular are the **F** and the **Z** pattern.

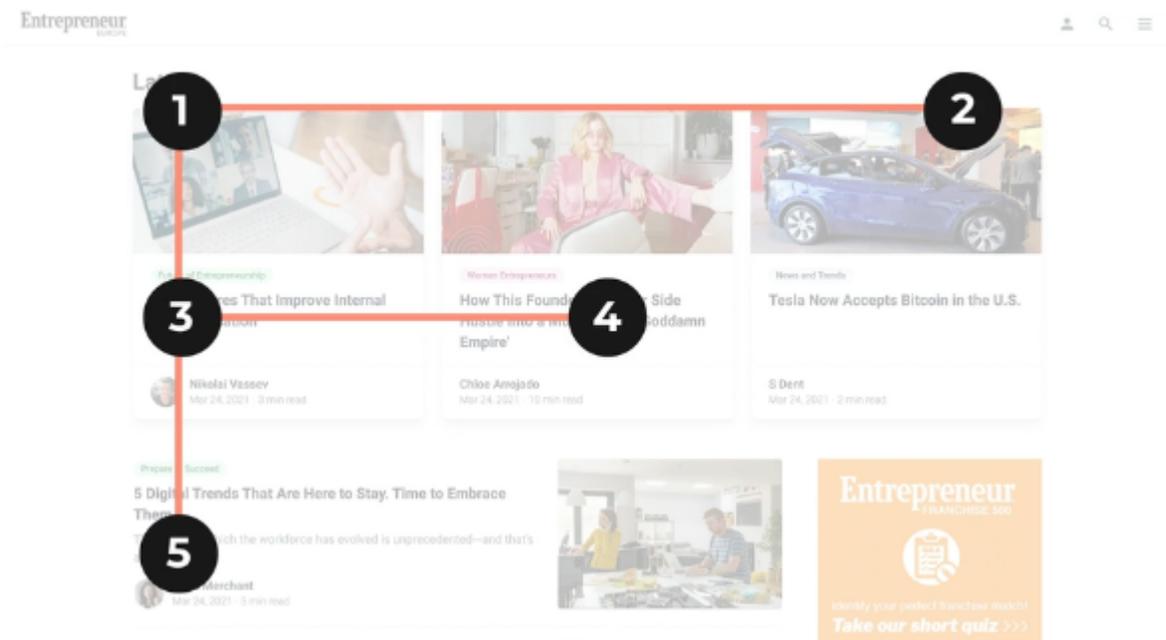
The F pattern

If a human eye uses the **F pattern**, we would first read in a horizontal movement across the upper part of the content area. Next, our eyes move down the page a bit and then

again read across the second horizontal line that's usually shorter than the previous one. Lastly, we will follow the contents on the left side in a vertical movement.



You will usually see the F pattern in a content-heavy website like here, where you have a lot of articles.



The user will most likely just scan the top of the page and some headlines, then just scroll further down to see the list of the following articles, right? So that's the F scrolling pattern.

The Z pattern

The Z pattern follows a path from top-left to top-right, then down to the lower left, and across to the lower right.



The Z pattern is best to use for a site that is not text or content-heavy. Designing your content to flow with this pattern will help your readers scan through each element quickly and get a sense of where you place the importance of each element.

Let's take a look at Apple's website.



The Mac page is designed to show multiple Mac options at the top, scanning horizontally and then placing a tagline on the diagonal. It finishes off with a call to action for their product. All information is laid out very clearly in a path that many people will already subconsciously use.

Using spacing and proximity

Finally, we have spacing and proximity. We'll talk more about spacing in the next lesson, but just to note here: when you start a new project, starting with the blank canvas, you might be thinking of all the ways to utilize the space. You might be tempted to fit as many elements as possible, but keep in mind - the space you leave blank is just as important as the space you use.

Adding too many elements makes the website feel heavy and cluttered. On the other hand, when elements are spaced out too much, they may lose their relationships to one another.

When the page is designed just right, the eye will easily recognize when the elements are related and when they aren't. The principle of proximity is based on the idea that objects

that appear close to each other are related to each other, especially in comparison with those placed further away.

Placing elements closer together can give the reader the perception that they are related, which will then give them the incentive to read on or engage further. Using correct spacing will make the content easier to read, and using proximity (which is really as simple as placing related elements close together) will help to make it clear to your visitors what elements belong together.

Spacing and proximity tips:

- Use generous white space for a clean look
- Place related elements close together
- Direct website viewers' attention intentionally

Final thoughts

There are many different ways to draw a website viewer's attention, but the important thing is to actually stop for a moment and think about the hierarchy.

To sum up, if you're building websites for clients, letting them know that you considered their goals when making specific decisions (for example, to use this font size or this color, place this element in that particular place) will make them see that you made these design decisions to help them meet their goals. As a result, they will be much less likely to ask for countless tweaks or edits.

Communicating to your clients why you use design elements in a certain way makes you way more professional in their eyes and builds trust. Hopefully, you will give this some thought and consider thinking about visual hierarchy during your next project.

Action Items

Here are two exercises to help you check if your website has a strong visual hierarchy.

- The Blurry Test: Basically, look at a blurred version of your site and see what elements stand out. If it's not what you want to stand out, it's time to go back and make some revisions. The blurred version will present a bare bones representation of your visual hierarchy, allowing you to evaluate your interface fresh without any distractions. You can take a screenshot of your site and add a 5-10 px Gaussian blur in Photoshop. If you don't want to play with the graphic software, try looking at your page from a distance. Get up, take a few steps back from your desk and look at the screen to check which elements stand out.

- Assign Points: First, list the key information points that visitors are likely seeking. Next, assign values (1-5) according to their importance to the average visitor. Next, look at the actual design again and assign values (1-5) according to the actual visual importance as you see it in the live design. Consider: Does the expected importance match up with the actual designed importance?