Concept

Visual hierarchy

The order of importance a composition communicates: through size, weight, color, contrast, position, and space, some parts are seen before others and set the reading order.



In Spanish

Jerarquía visual

Origin

No single author: it is craft knowledge, gathered in handbooks such as Lupton and Phillips (2015); research on visual attention explains why it works (Treisman and Gelade, 1980)

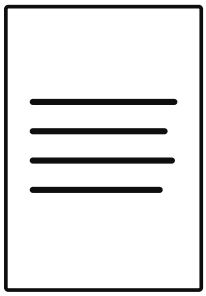
What problem it addresses

If everything carries the same weight, the eyes don't know where to start and what matters competes with what doesn't. Graphic design uses hierarchy to decide what is seen first, what comes next, and what is seen only when someone looks for it.

An example

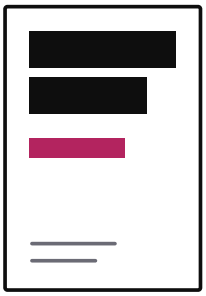
An illustrative example: a concert poster with the band's name, the date, the venue, and the price.

Everything the same



Four lines of the same size, weight, and color. **You have to read all of it to know what it's about.**

With hierarchy



The band large, the date in color, the rest small and at the bottom. **At a glance you know what it is and when.**

The text is the same; what changes is the order in which it arrives. If everything stands out, nothing does.

Why it happens

1 

The eyes don't take in everything at once; they go first to what contrasts most with its surroundings.

2 

Size, weight, and color create that contrast, and position and space reinforce it.

3 

That is how design sets the path: the essentials first, the details after.

Applications in design

✓ Use it like this

Before composing, decide what should be seen first, second, and third, and give each level a different contrast.

✗ Avoid

Making everything stand out: if every element shouts, none is heard.

Don't fall for it

Squint or look at the piece very small: whatever is still visible is what really leads.

3 → 29 ms

One feature 

Two features 

What the research says

Extra time for each added item to find a target that differs in a single feature, such as color, versus one that combines two features (Treisman and Gelade, 1980).

●●● **Solid evidence.** Outside the lab, position matters too: on phone interfaces, gaze went mostly to the top left, and color and size mattered less than expected (Leiva et al., 2020).

Connections

Used in

- Poster design
- Typography

Related to

- F-shaped reading pattern
- Gestalt principles of perceptual organization
- Grid system

Authors and works

1980	**Anne Treisman and Garry Gelade**	Showed that an object differing in a single feature is found almost instantly, no matter how many others surround it.
2015	**Ellen Lupton and Jennifer Cole Phillips**	Explained hierarchy as one of the visual fundamentals of the craft, alongside scale, color, and the grid.
2020	**Luis A. Leiva et al.**	Used eye tracking to measure where people look on phone interfaces: position, text, and images mattered more than color or size.

Sources

Original sources

- Treisman, A. M., & Gelade, G. (1980). A feature-integration theory of attention. Cognitive Psychology, 12(1), 97–136. View source (https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285(80)90005-5)
- Leiva, L. A., Xue, Y., Bansal, A., Tavakoli, H. R., Köroğlu, T., Du, J., Dayama, N. R., & Oulasvirta, A. (2020). Understanding visual saliency in mobile user interfaces. In Proceedings of the 22nd International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices and Services (MobileHCI '20). ACM. View source (https://doi.org/10.1145/3379503.3403557)

Secondary sources

- Lupton, E., & Phillips, J. C. (2015). Graphic design: The new basics (2nd ed. revisada y ampliada). Princeton Architectural Press. View source (https://papress.com/products/graphic-design-the-new-basics-revised-second-edition-paperback)

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