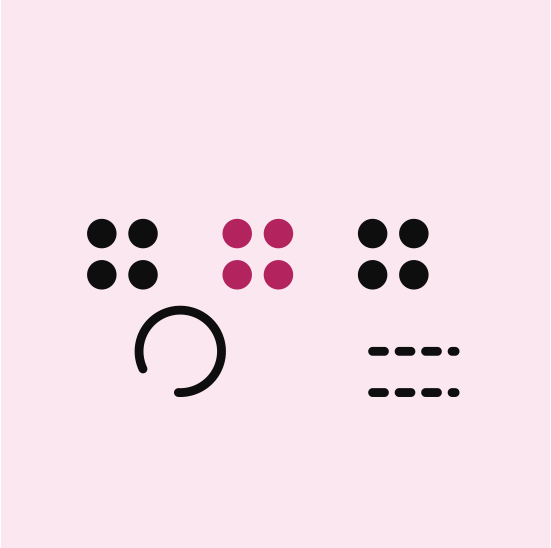
Theory

Gestalt principles of perceptual organization

Rules by which perception groups what we see: things that are close, look alike, follow the same line or share an outline are seen as a whole.



In Spanish
Principios de la Gestalt

Origin
Wertheimer (1923); review by Wagemans et al. (2012)

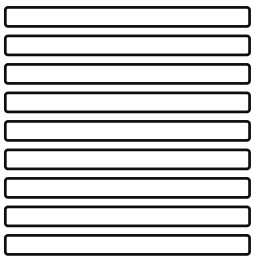
What problem it addresses

Explains why a screen or a poster is understood at a glance or looks messy, even with the same elements.

An example

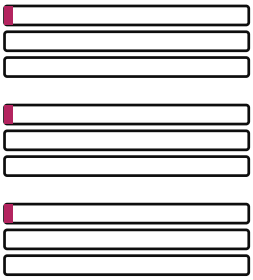
The same nine fields of a form, with different spacing.

All at the same distance



Nine fields spread out evenly. **A long list.**

Grouped by proximity



The same fields in three groups, with more space between groups. **Three blocks that read on their own.**

No need to add headings or lines: distance is enough for the eye to form the groups.

Why it happens

1

The eye doesn't look at each element separately:

2

it organizes them instantly by proximity, similarity and continuity,

3

and we see groups and figures before the pieces.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Group with space before adding lines, boxes or headings.

Avoid

Spacing everything evenly, related or not, or placing unrelated things close together.

Don't fall for it

If everything looks alike, nothing stands out: save difference for what needs to be distinguished.

A century

What the research says

Later research on grouping and figure-ground relationships confirms and extends what Wertheimer proposed (Wagemans et al., 2012).

Solid evidence. The principles describe tendencies, not exact laws: when several compete with each other, the outcome depends on the case.

Connections

Used in

- Information design
- UI design
- Editorial design
- Graphic design

Related to

- Cognitive load
- Von Restorff effect
- Interaction of color
- Visual hierarchy
- Grid system

Authors and works

1923	**Max Wertheimer**	Described how we group dots and lines: by proximity, similarity, continuity or closure.
2012	**Johan Wagemans et al.**	Reviewed a century of research, including principles described after Wertheimer, such as common region.

Sources

Original sources

- Wertheimer, M. (1923). Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt II. Psychologische Forschung, 4, 301–350. View source (https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00410640)

Academic reviews

- Wagemans, J., Elder, J. H., Kubovy, M., Palmer, S. E., Peterson, M. A., Singh, M., & von der Heydt, R. (2012). A century of Gestalt psychology in visual perception: I. Perceptual grouping and figure–ground organization. Psychological Bulletin, 138(6), 1172–1217. View source (https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029333)

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