

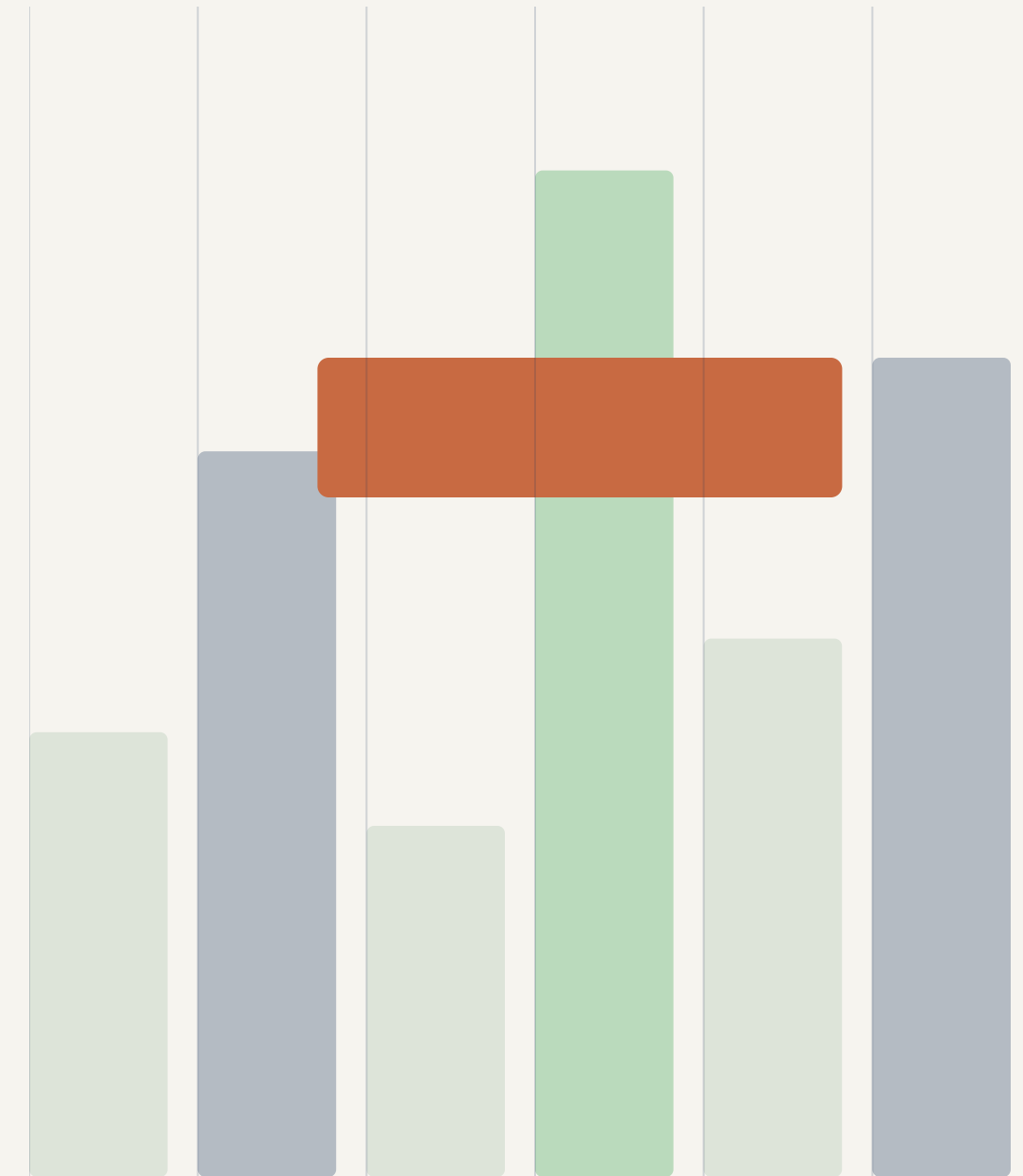
SESSION 4

Layout and Composition

Structure, Hierarchy and the Rules Worth Breaking

KEY IDEA

Layout is a **system of relationships**. Alignment establishes them, spacing strengthens them, grids repeat them, hierarchy decides which one you notice first.



SESSION 4

What You'll Be Able to Do

Five things you should be able to do by the end of the hour.

- ✓ Explain why **alignment and grouping** create relationships between elements, not just neatness.
- ✓ Use grid vocabulary, **margin, column, gutter, module, baseline grid**, to describe the structure under a layout.
- ✓ Tell an **evidence-based principle** from a popular myth, and say what the difference rests on.
- ✓ Explain how composition changes across **formats, platforms and screen sizes**.
- ✓ Critique a layout out loud using **hierarchy, alignment, grouping and exception**.

Why Does This Look Wrong?

Two versions of the same layout. Same type, same image, same button.

VERSION A

MARIAN CERAMICS STUDIO

Hand-Built Pottery Class

Six Tuesday evenings on the wheel, from centering to your first glazed bowl. Clay, tools and firing are included in the fee. No experience needed.

Reserve a seat

Tuesdays, 6 p.m. | Fine Arts Building, Room 104



VERSION B

MARIAN CERAMICS STUDIO

Hand-Built Pottery Class

Six Tuesday evenings on the wheel, from centering to your first glazed bowl. Clay, tools and firing are included in the fee. No experience needed.

Reserve a seat

Tuesdays, 6 p.m. | Fine Arts Building, Room 104



QUICK
DISCUSSION

Which one looks more finished, and what can you point at to prove it?

Nothing here is decoration. B breaks the **relationships** A sets up, and your eye is reading the contradiction.

01

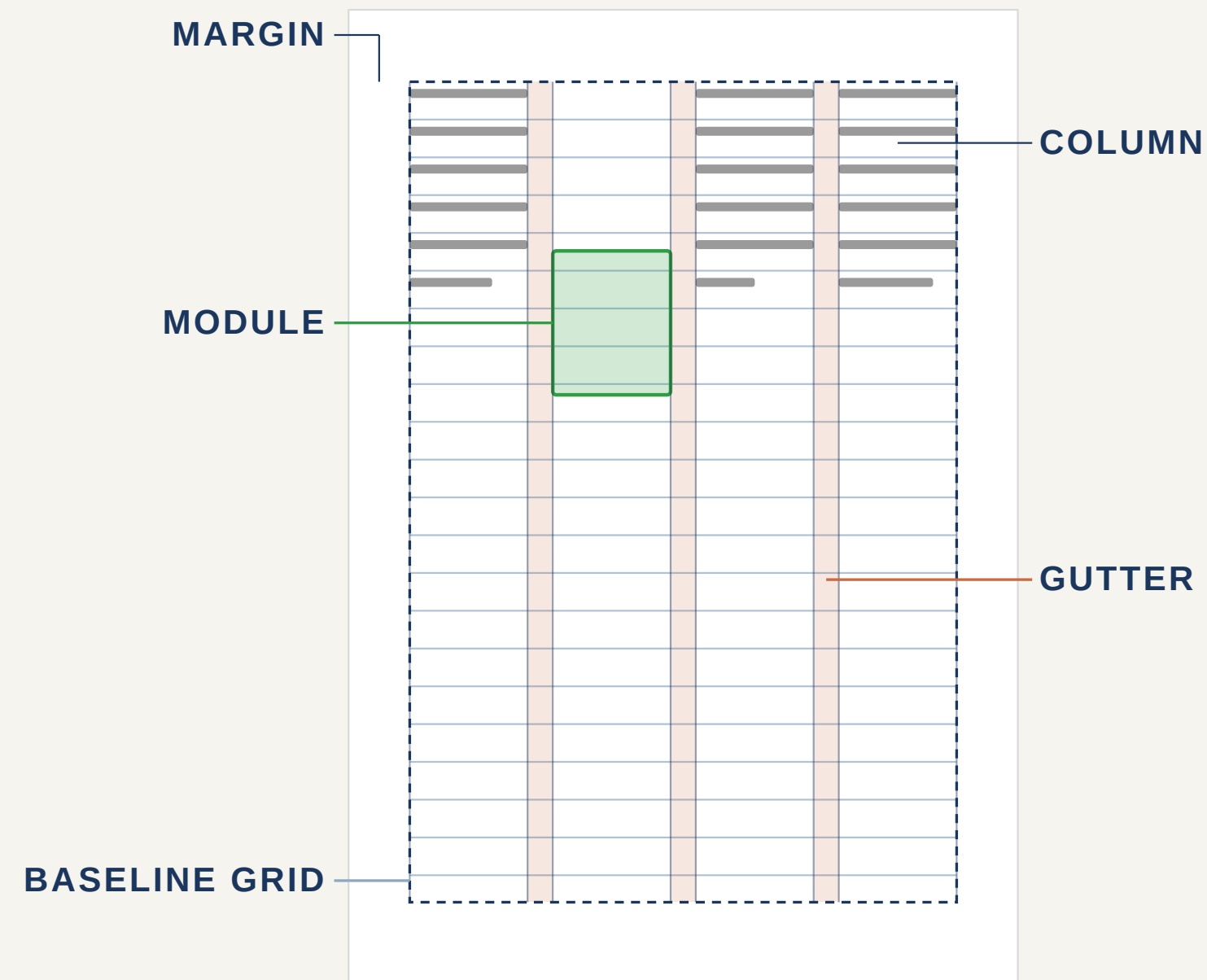
PART ONE

Structure



Grid Anatomy

Every layout in any medium is built from the same handful of parts. Learn the words first.



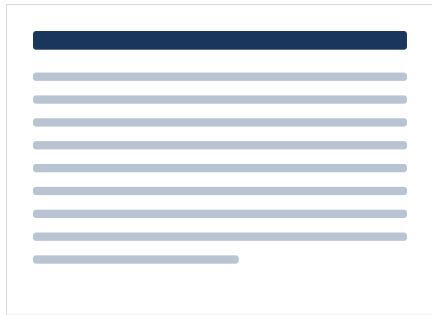
- **Margin.** Separates the composition from its outer boundary. It is not leftover paper; it defines where the active field starts.
- **Column and gutter.** Repeatable vertical placement zones, and the gaps that keep them reading as separate.
- **Module.** The unit formed where a row crosses a column. The backbone of cards, catalogs and dashboards.
- **Baseline grid.** Coordinates lines of type vertically, so text in one column lands on the same lines as text in the next.

ANCHOR

A strong, recurring coordinate that other elements key off of. Most layouts run on three or four of them.

Grid Families

Five structures. The question is never which is best, it is which one the content is actually shaped like.



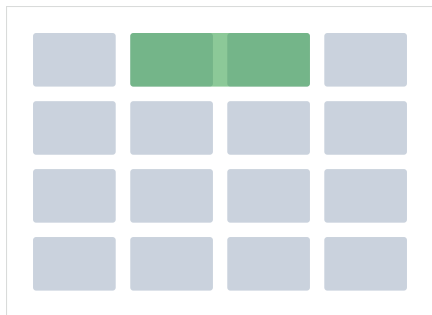
Manuscript

One dominant text region. Essays, reports, simple editorial. Continuity is the strength, monotony is the risk.



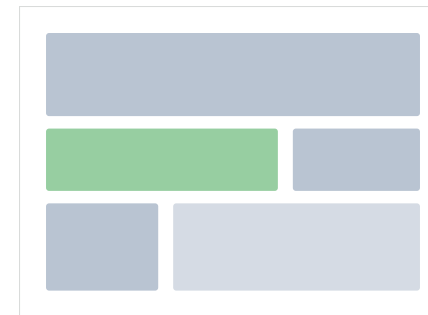
Multicolumn

Content can span one column, several, or all of them. Magazines, collateral, responsive interfaces.



Modular

Rows and columns make repeatable modules. Cards, catalogs, dashboards, campaign families.



Hierarchical

The structure answers to the content instead of repeating identical modules. Landing pages, asymmetrical layouts.



Compound

More than one structure in one composition. The feature runs on one grid while sidebars and captions run on another.

HOW TO CHOOSE

Ask how many kinds of content the page holds, and whether they repeat. One kind that repeats wants a module. Several kinds that do not want a hierarchy.

The Same Five, in Real Work

Same families, no sketches. The structure is still there, and now you have to find it.

MODULAR



A repeating image grid holds the left page while the right page runs full bleed.

No Man's Land, Pentagram

HIERARCHICAL



Nothing repeats. The structure answers to one name and one photograph.

No Man's Land, Pentagram

COMPOUND



Two structures, one spread. The text page and the image page are not on the same grid.

No Man's Land, Pentagram

MANUSCRIPT



One text region, one measure.

Kelmscott Press, 1892. Public domain

MULTICOLUMN



Six columns, nothing else.

Lake County Examiner, 1900. Public domain

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

Three of these five are spreads from one magazine, running on one twelve-column grid. The family is a decision about **this page**, not a decision about the publication. You will switch families inside a single project and that is normal.

Invisible Edges and Optical Alignment

A grid works when nobody can see it. So does a mistake.

MATHEMATICALLY ALIGNED

“Coordinates are evidence. Your eye is the final test.” A quotation mark carries almost no visual mass, so a paragraph that starts with one reads as indented even when the measurement says it is not.

OPTICALLY ALIGNED

“Coordinates are evidence. Your eye is the final test.” A quotation mark carries almost no visual mass, so a paragraph that starts with one reads as indented even when the measurement says it is not.

INVISIBLE EDGE

When several objects begin at the same coordinate, you see a boundary that was never drawn. Guides and grids do not print, and they do not have to.

- Adobe treats grids, guides and baselines as **nonprinting** structure. The relationship survives; the line does not.
- Optical Margin Alignment lets punctuation hang outside the margin so the **perceived** edge stays clean.

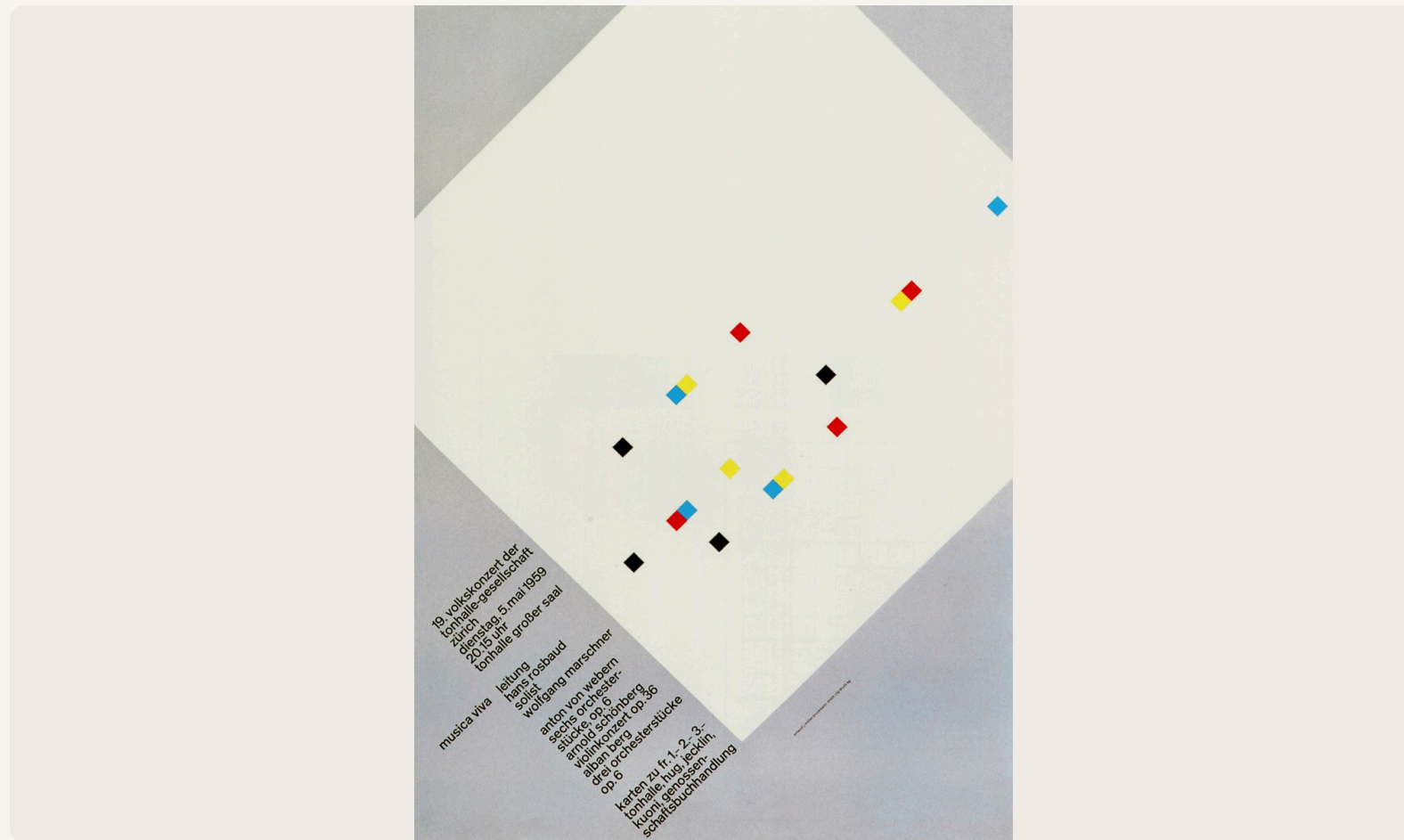
THE CAUTION

Your eye is the final test, and that is not a license for arbitrary nudging. If you move something optically, you should be able to say which imbalance you were correcting.

What a Grid Actually Does

Sixty-eight years apart, and the same idea underneath.

1957

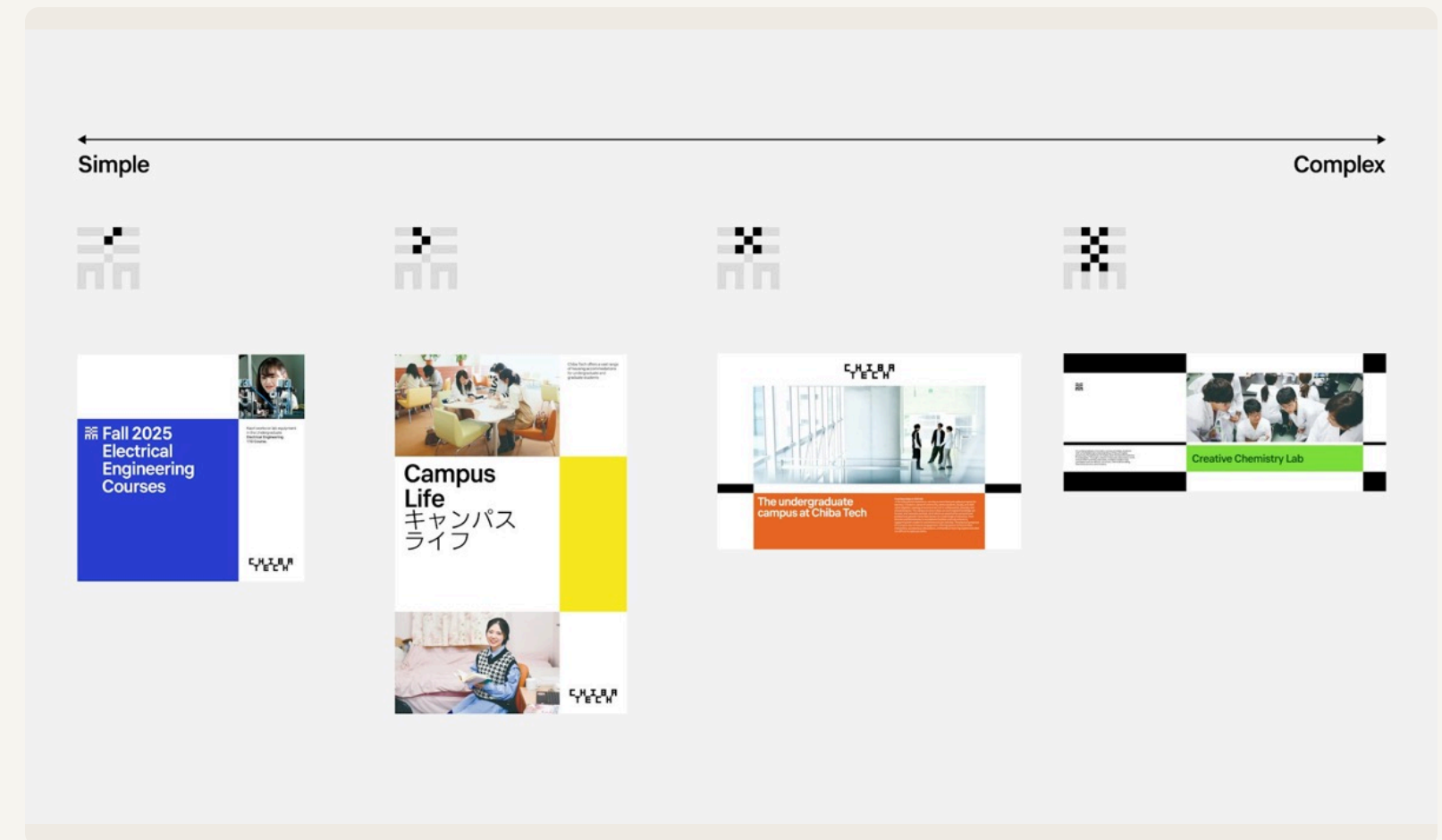


Josef Müller-Brockmann, **Musica Viva**, 1957. Every square, every angle and the block of type are placed on one modular system.

Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

- Before the reveal: can you find the structure with the guides switched off?

2025



Pentagram, **Chiba Tech**, 2025. The checker character is the grid: stretch it and it generates the whole layout, simple to complex.

Source: Pentagram project page

A grid is a **relationship generator**, not a cage.

SCENARIO

Think Like a Marketer

You're reviewing a client flyer before it goes to print. Its logo, its headline and its button each sit at a slightly different left edge, off by a few pixels each. The client says it looks fine and does not want to pay for another revision round. What is actually happening, and what do you tell them?



01:30

CLICK TO START

ANSWER

Think Like a Marketer

- There is rarely one fix, but the diagnosis is clear. The near misses set up **competing structural cues**: the eye infers a shared edge from most of the elements, then the outliers read as errors rather than decisions.
- So there are two defensible moves. Align all three to a shared edge, or make the offset **large and consistent enough** to read as a relationship on purpose.
- What you are selling the client is not tidiness. It is that a viewer who cannot resolve the structure spends attention on the layout instead of on the offer.

Hierarchy in Action

Pentagram’s 2024 *Scientific American* redesign: a structured template for the pages that recur, and a departure from it on the features.



The **department page**. A template built to be recognized, issue after issue.

Source: Pentagram, Scientific American 2024



The **feature opener**. The same magazine, deliberately off the template.

Source: Pentagram, Scientific American 2024

WHAT A DESIGNER CAN ACTUALLY TURN UP OR DOWN

- Scale
- Position
- Weight
- Contrast
- Color
- Spacing
- Image dominance
- Isolation

Hierarchy is not what is biggest. It is the order in which a composition makes information **compete for attention**, and a rule you have taught the reader is the only thing that makes an exception legible.

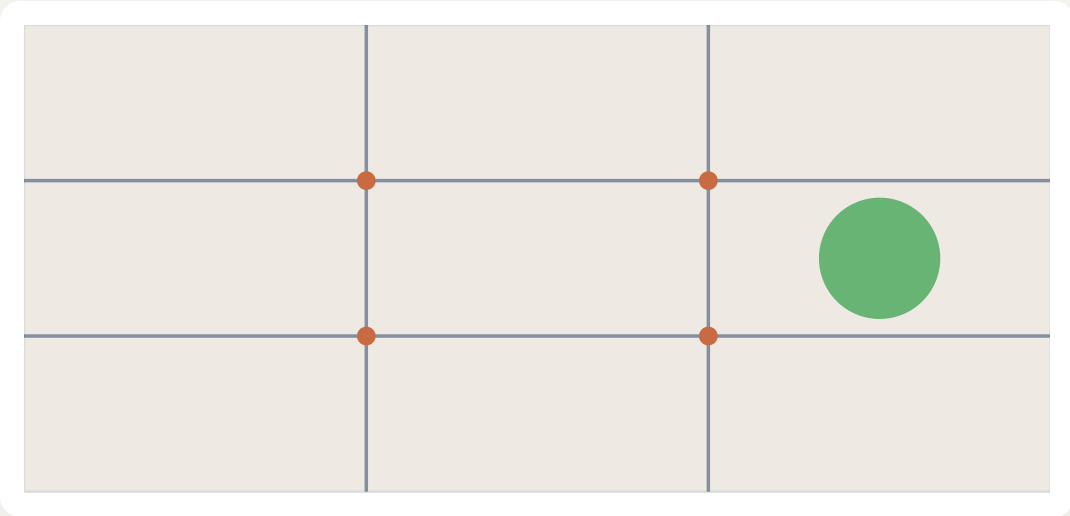
PART TWO

Rules and Myths

Rules That Aren't Laws

Keep what each one is good for. Drop the claim underneath it.

RULE OF THIRDS



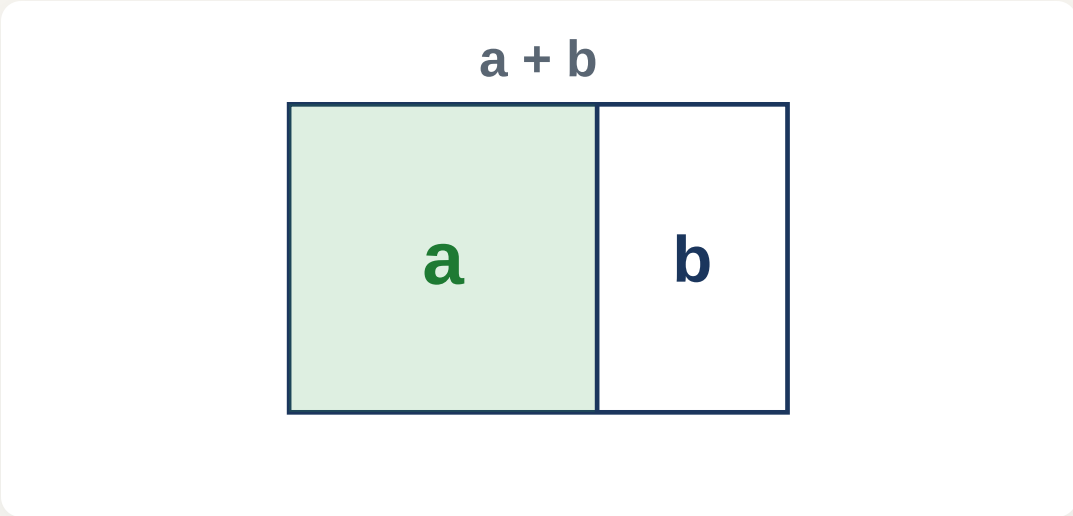
WHAT HOLDS UP

A fast scaffold for distributing focal points and negative space. It predates photography: John Thomas Smith described it in 1797.

OVERSTATED

That the intersections are where important things belong. Adobe's own guide calls it a guideline and shows photographers ignoring it on purpose.

GOLDEN RATIO



PHI ≈ 1.618

Divide a length so the whole is to the larger part as the larger part is to the smaller. The mathematics is not in dispute.

OVERSTATED

That people universally prefer golden rectangles, and that the Parthenon was secretly built on phi. Experiments keep failing to find the preference; historians dispute the building.

RULE OF ODDS



WHAT HOLDS UP

Three objects let you build a centre with two supports, which is a useful structure to have on hand.

OVERSTATED

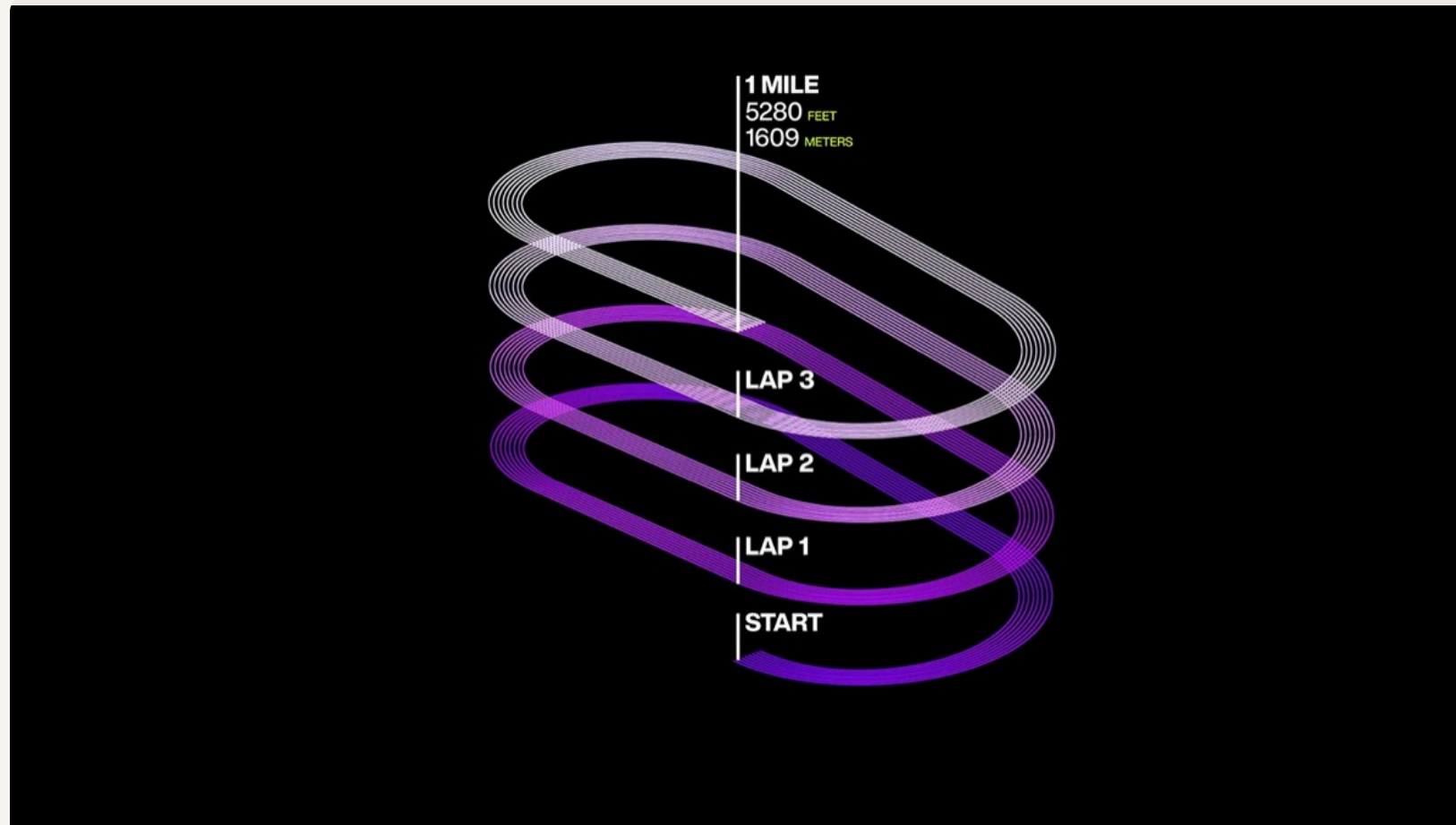
That odd groupings are inherently more pleasing. Woods, Michel and Spence tested this at scale in 2016 and found no consistent preference.

QUICK
DISCUSSION

Which of these three have you been told the most, and who told you?

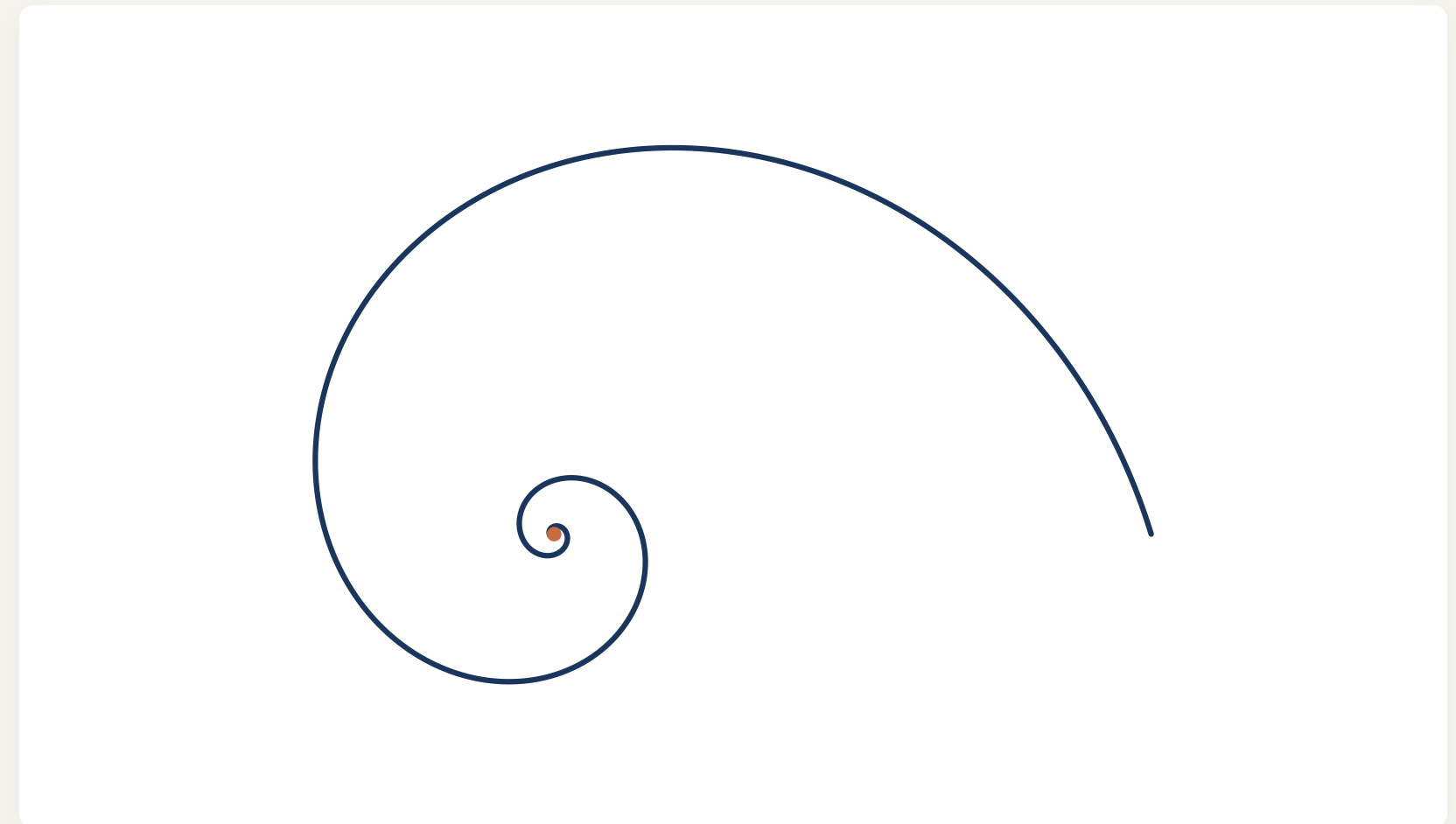
Is This the Golden Ratio?

Pentagram's 2025 Breaking4 system for Nike, and an actual golden spiral.



DOCUMENTED CONCEPT

Nike **Breaking4**, Pentagram, 2025. The spiral refers to a mile and four laps. The animation carries speed, distance, effort and apparel technology.



MATHEMATICAL CONSTRUCTION

A logarithmic spiral whose radius multiplies by **1.618** every quarter turn. Plotted here, not traced off anything.

Visual resemblance is not evidence of intent. **This looks like phi** is an observation; **this was designed with phi** is a claim that needs a source.

SCENARIO

Think Like a Marketer

A client insists their new logo has to be built on the golden ratio because, in their words, it's scientifically proven to be the most beautiful proportion. Using what we just covered, how do you respond without simply telling them they're wrong?



01:30

CLICK TO START

ANSWER

Think Like a Marketer

- Start with what is true. Phi is a real, well defined ratio, and some designers do use it deliberately as a proportional system. **Le Corbusier's Modulor** is the documented case.
- Then separate the two claims. The mathematics is solid; the claim that people **prefer** it is mixed to negative in experiment, and most famous phi examples are overlays fitted after the fact.
- Then give them somewhere to go: offer to **test a few proportions** against their actual audience rather than assuming one ratio arrives with special power.

How People Actually Scan

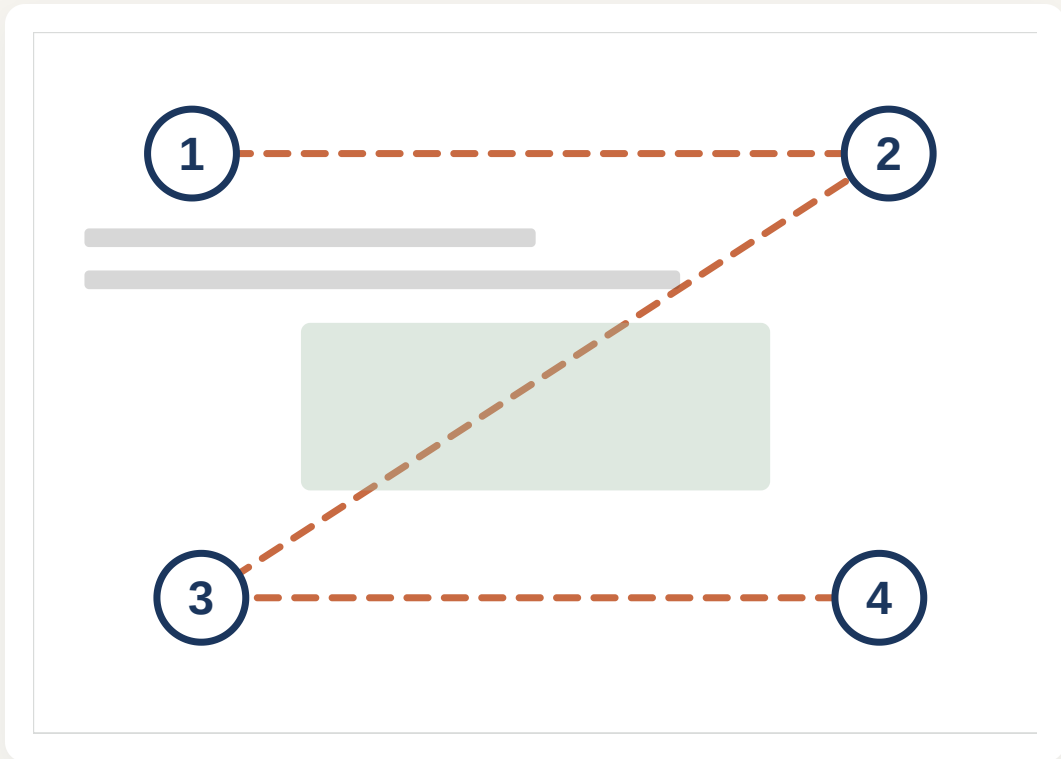
One of these came out of an eye tracker. The other came out of design blogs.

F-PATTERN MEASURED



Nielsen Norman Group’s own eye-tracking heatmaps. 232 users, thousands of pages. Red is where people looked most. Nobody drew the F; it fell out of the data.

Z-PATTERN DRAWN



There is no heatmap to put here. This is the diagram design blogs draw, and no comparable eye-tracking study stands behind it. That asymmetry is the point of the slide.

AND THREE MORE

- **Layer cake:** scanning headings and skipping the prose between them.
- **Spotted:** hunting for one distinctive element, a price, a name, a link.
- **Commitment:** actually reading, which is what most pages claim to want.

NN/g’s own later work warns against designing toward the F. It shows up when hierarchy is weak, so it is a **symptom**, not a target.

Find the Invisible Grid

- 1 In pairs, study the layout for two minutes with every guide removed.
- 2 On your own, sketch where the alignment lines, the columns and the dominant axis are.
- 3 Compare sketches with your partner, and say how confident you are, before the reveal.

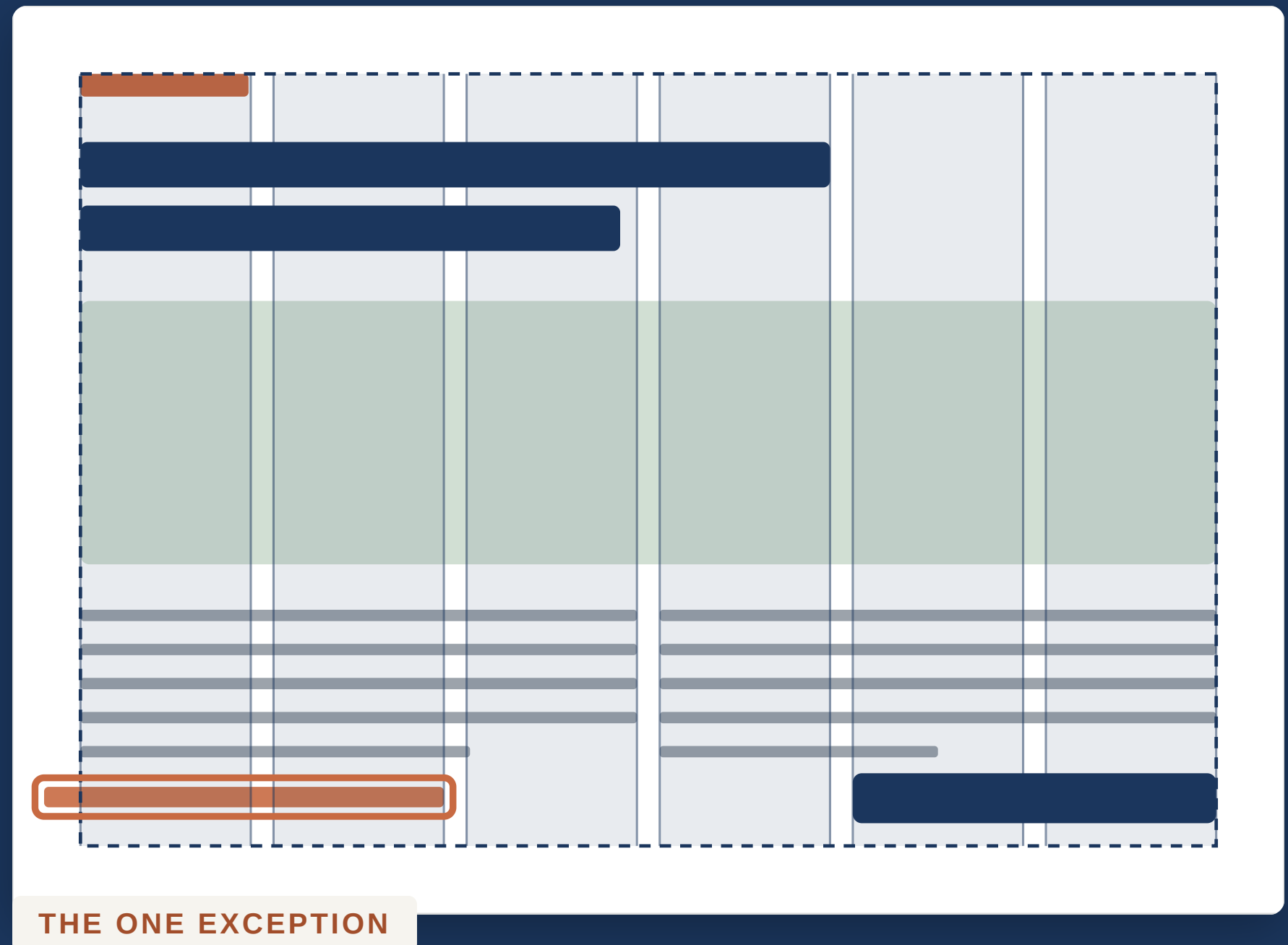
PROMPT

Where is the structure hiding, and how sure are you before anyone shows you?



05:00

CLICK TO START



PART THREE

Breaking It

—

Breaking the Grid on Purpose

Swiss discipline and what came after it. The question is not which one uses a grid.



Josef Müller-Brockmann, **beethoven**, 1955. Geometric, predictable, and the structure is the surface.

CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons



April Greiman, **Does It Make Sense?**, Design Quarterly 133, 1986. The whole 32-page issue, printed as one six-foot fold-out.

Source: aprilgreiman.com; Walker Art Center

The real question: did she **remove** structure, or change the **kind** of structure?

A grid only becomes worth breaking once a viewer can **detect** the rule being broken. Pentagram loosened *No Man's Land* in its second issue and kept it legible.

SCENARIO

Think Like a Marketer

Your analytics show that visitors are reading only the first few words of every paragraph on your product page, in a rough F shape. Your manager sees this and says, good, let's design every page to fit an F from now on. What is the problem with that response?



01:30

CLICK TO START

ANSWER

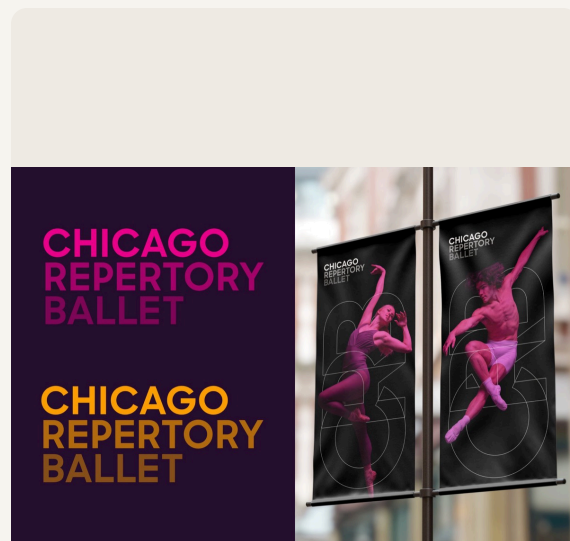
Think Like a Marketer

- The F describes behavior under **weak hierarchy**. It is not a design target, and NN/g's own later research says so directly.
- If people are reading fragments, the fix is stronger headings, better formatted content and clearer hierarchy, not shrinking the page to match the shape people are currently forced to scan in.
- The manager is treating a **symptom as a goal**. Ask what the page would look like if people read it, then design that.

Design Systems, Not Single Designs

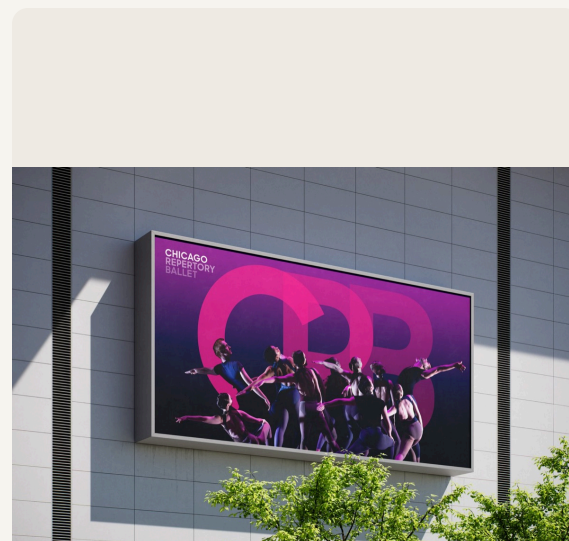
Marketing design almost never means one perfect poster. It means a family of compositions that stay recognizable as one thing.

ONE SYSTEM, THREE CANVASES



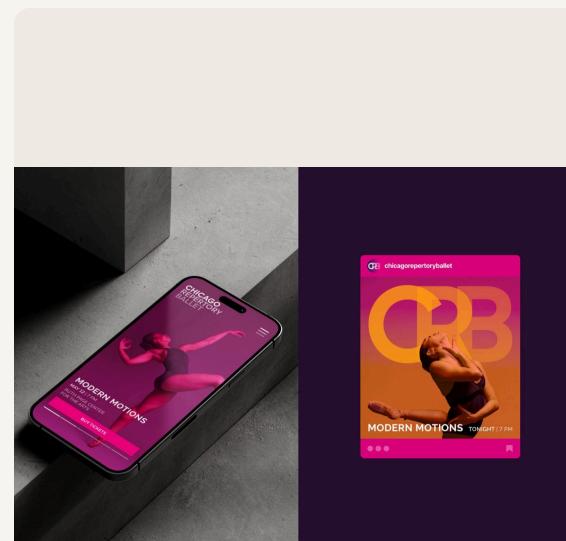
Street posters

Span for Chicago Repertory Ballet



Billboard

Span, identity and campaign, 2024



Phone and program

Span, identity and campaign, 2024

The monogram survives every one of these, and almost nothing else does. Ask what has to stay constant across a wall, a phone and a printed program, and what is allowed to recompose.

ONE SYSTEM, TWO THOUSAND PRODUCTS



Target **up&up** with COLLINS, 2024. The studio's own diagram of the range, cool shelf to warm shelf.

Source: COLLINS case study

One package tells you nothing. Twenty on a shelf show the actual problem: staying **recognizable without becoming identical**.

Controlled Destruction

- 1 Start from the same clean, gridded layout. Agree on exactly **three** rules to break.
- 2 Each break has to buy you one thing: emphasis, movement, tension, hierarchy, or a stronger relationship between image and type.
- 3 Be ready to finish this sentence for each one: *we broke this relationship because...*

PROMPT

Which of your three violations earned its place, and which one would you cut if you could keep only two?

07:00

CLICK TO START

WHAT YOU'RE STARTING FROM



The diagram shows a clean, gridded layout. It includes a small orange bar at the top left, a long dark blue bar below it, and another dark blue bar to its right. A large light green rectangle occupies the middle section. Below this, there are several horizontal grey lines of varying lengths, some on the left and some on the right, suggesting a structured text or image arrangement. At the bottom, there are more horizontal bars, including an orange one on the left and a dark blue one on the right.

JUDGE EACH BREAK AGAINST THESE

- Can you still infer the structure underneath?
- Is the hierarchy still readable?
- Do your three exceptions relate to each other?
- Is most of the system still holding?

SCENARIO

Think Like a Marketer

You've built a clean, gridded Instagram carousel for a client. It's technically correct, and next to the competitors' work it feels flat and forgettable. Using everything from today, what is one thing you would change on purpose, and how would you defend it?



01:30

CLICK TO START

ANSWER

Think Like a Marketer

- There is no single right answer. Strong ones name a **specific relationship already established** in the carousel, a shared edge, a column, a spacing rhythm, then break exactly that one.
- The defense to the client sounds like *I broke this relationship because it buys emphasis*, or movement, or tension, or hierarchy. It does not sound like *it looked boring*.
- A carousel gives you one more thing to work with: the swipe. A shape that leaves one slide and arrives on the next makes the reader's own gesture part of the layout.

Layout Is a System of Relationships

Four verbs. Everything today was one of them.

Alignment **establishes** relationships between separate elements.

Spacing **strengthens** them, and tells you which ones are close.

Grids **repeat** them, so the reader learns the rule without being told.

Hierarchy **prioritizes** them, and decides which one you notice first.

Breaking a grid means something only once there is a relationship there to break.

Before your next layout, ask two things: **what relationship am I establishing**, and **what happens if I change it?**

Sources and Additional Reading

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- Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Wim Crouwel materials
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- MoMA collection entries for Wolfgang Weingart’s *Typographic Process* and *Das Schweizer Plakat*
- Pentagram project pages: Chiba Institute of Technology, *Scientific American*, Nike Breaking4, *No Man’s Land*
- AIGA Design Teaching Resource, “Single-Frame Concert Poster,” 2019
- Span, *Modern Motions* 2024 for Chicago Repertory Ballet; COLLINS, Target up&up

PLATFORM AND SOFTWARE DOCUMENTATION

- Adobe, rule-of-thirds photography guide
- Adobe, Optical Margin Alignment and baseline grid documentation
- MDN, “Responsive Web Design”; Meta for Business, Reels creative guidance

IF YOU READ THREE THINGS

Nielsen’s 2006 study and NN/g’s own later correction to it, one after the other. Then Lupton, which is the book to own for this course.

IMAGE CREDITS Müller-Brockmann posters, Kelmscott Press page and Lake County Examiner via Wikimedia Commons. Chiba Tech, *Scientific American*, Breaking4 and *No Man’s Land* via Pentagram. *Does It Make Sense?* via aprilgreiman.com. Chicago Repertory Ballet via Span; up&up via COLLINS. Heatmaps © Nielsen Norman Group. Pottery photograph by Hummam Sheikh Ali, CC BY-SA 4.0.