Principles of Design

Balance

Essential Question:
- How is balance created in a desktop published document?

Try walking a long distance with a 2 pound bag of rocks in one hand and a 10 pound bag of marbles in the other. After awhile you'll be wanting to shift your load around, putting a few marbles in the rock bag to balance your load, make it easier to walk.

For most of our reading our eyes and minds are most comfortable with evenly balanced layouts where the graphics don't overpower the text and the page doesn't seem to tilt to one side or the other.

Balance provides stability and structure to a design. Balance is an equal distribution of weight in the design by the placement of your elements. The elements don’t necessarily need to be of the same size. Balance can be achieved by placing a large element on one side of your design and several small elements on the other side.

Visual balance comes from arranging elements of design on the page so that no one section is heavier than the other. Or, a designer may intentionally throw elements out of balance to create tension or a certain mood.

Balance is an equal distribution of weight. In terms of graphics, this applies to visual weight. Each element on a layout has visual weight that is determined by its size, darkness or lightness, and thickness of lines. Color, value, mass, shape, and texture can be used as balancing elements.

The Principle of Balance
Primarily, there are three types of balance in page design:
- Symmetrical
- Asymmetrical
- Radial

Additionally, we'll discuss:
- the Rule of Thirds
- the Visual Center of a page
- the use of Grids

... as we examine each type of balance and how to achieve it.
Symmetrical balance
Symmetrical balance is easiest to see in perfectly centered compositions or those with mirror images. In a design with only two elements they would be almost identical or have nearly the same visual mass. If one element was replaced by a smaller one, it could throw the page out of symmetry. To reclaim perfect symmetrical balance you might need to add or subtract or rearrange the elements so that they evenly divide the page such as a centered alignment or one that divides the page in even segments (halves, quarters, etc.).

Symmetrical balance is achieved when the weight of the elements on both halves of the design is even, given a center line. Symmetrical balance can communicate strength and stability and is appropriate for traditional and conservative publications, presentations, and web sites.

When a design can be centered or evenly divided both vertically and horizontally it has the most complete symmetry possible. Symmetrical balance generally lends itself to more formal, orderly layouts. They often convey a sense of tranquility or familiarity or elegance or serious contemplation.
**Vertical Symmetry** – each vertical half (excluding text) of the brochure is a near mirror image of the other, emphasized with the reverse in colors. Even the perfectly centered text picks up the color reversal here. This symmetrically balanced layout is very formal in appearance.

**Vertical & Horizontal Symmetry** – this poster design divides the page into four equal sections. Although not mirror images the overall look is very symmetrical and balanced. Each of the line drawings are more or less centered within their section. The graphic (text and image) in the upper center of the page is the focal point tying all the parts together.
Asymmetrical Balance
Asymmetrical design is typically off-center or created with an odd or mismatched number of disparate elements. However, you can still have an interesting design without perfect symmetry.

Asymmetrical balance can imply contrast, variety, movement, surprise, and informality. It is appropriate for modern and entertaining publications, presentations, and web sites.

With asymmetrical balance you are evenly distributing the elements within the format which may mean balancing a large photo with several small graphics. Or, you can create tension by intentionally avoiding balance.

Uneven elements present us with more possibilities for arranging the page and creating interesting designs than perfectly symmetrical objects. Asymmetrical layouts are generally more dynamic and by intentionally ignoring balance the designer can create tension, express movement, or convey a mood such as anger, excitement, joy, or casual amusement.
Asymmetrical Balance – this page uses a 3 column format to create a neatly organized asymmetrical layout. The two columns of text are balanced by the blocks of color in the lower left topped by a large block of white space. In this case, because the white space is in a block shaped much like the text columns, it becomes an element of the design in its own right.

Asymmetrical/All Over Balance – it can't be neatly sliced in half like a symmetrical design but most of the elements have only small differences in shape and mass. This page achieves an overall balance by use of an underlying grid that spreads the many pieces out over the entire page, more or less evenly.
Asymmetrical Tension – like a wild, unruly garden, the elements of this brochure cover are barely contained on the page. The plants spring up primarily along the left side but with a few stems escaping and arching across the page. The text, although randomly placed, follows the lines of the plants keeping them anchored to the overall design. The off-balance design creates a sense of freedom and movement.
**Radial Balance**

On square and rectangular pages we generally place elements in orderly rows and columns. With radial designs the elements radiate from or swirl around in a circular or spiral path.

Parts of the design must still be arranged so that they are balanced across the width and length of the page unless you're intentionally aiming for a lack of balance.

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**Radial** – here we have an example of radial balance in a rectangular space. The year represents the center of the design with the subtle color sections radiating from that center. The calendar month grids and their corresponding astrological symbols are arrayed around the year in a circular fashion.
Radial – colors and text radiate out from the apple in the middle of this CD cover design. The effect is almost one of spiraling down into the center of the apple. The apple itself looks nearly symmetrical but the curving text and the outlines edging off the page to the top and right throws it all slightly off-balance.
Rule of Thirds, Visual Center, Grids
Underlying most of the layouts on the previous pages are three related aspects of page layout and balance. These are layout principles that help the designer achieve arrangements with visual balance.

Rule of Thirds and Balance
The rule of thirds says that most designs can be made more interesting by visually dividing the page into thirds vertically and/or horizontally and placing our most important elements within those thirds. Take this concept a step further, especially in photographic composition, by dividing the page into thirds both vertically and horizontally and placing your most important elements at one or more of the four intersections of those lines.
Look at these previous balance examples and see how the rule of thirds is utilized.

In this vertically symmetrical layout the headline appears in the upper third of the page, the logo in the middle third, and the supporting descriptive text in the lower third. The most important information is in that lower third and anchors the page.

This asymmetrical layout has most elements in the upper third and leftmost third of the page with the main focal point being around the intersection of the topmost and leftmost dividing lines.
**Visual Center and Balance**

Placing important elements or the focal point of the design within the visual center of a piece is another design trick. The visual center is slightly to the right of and above the actual center of a page.

See how the focal or center point of each of these designs actually falls in the visual center of the page.

It's easy to see the actual center, it's where the four box corners meet. But the focus is on the earth.
In this calendar, the months emanate from the year located front and (visual) center.

**Grids and Balance**
Roughly dividing a page into thirds or finding the visual center are relatively easy and you don't usually have to be exact to achieve your goals. However, constructing the underlying structure of a piece is a bit more complicated – but essential for most designs. Most balanced designs (and even unbalanced ones) rely on a grid. This invisible structure (visible while working in your page layout program) helps ensure that you place all the elements in the right location to achieve balance as well as to help with continuity and consistency of design.

Grids can be simple or complex depending on the needs of the design and the designer. Sometimes the use of a grid is obvious.

Grids are an important tool in page layout and desktop publishing.
This asymmetrically balanced design uses a simple three column grid to ensure that each text column is the same width and that it is balanced by the nearly empty column on the left. The grid also dictates the margins and ensures that the page number and header appear in the same place on each page.

A 5x5 grid keeps this design in line. The grid is obvious along the bottom (each square equals one grid square in this layout) but it is invisibly keeping all those random letters in order in the middle.
To create balance:
- Repeat a specific shape at regular intervals, either horizontally or vertically.
- Center elements on a page.
- Put several small visuals in one area to balance a large image or block of text.
- Use one or two odd shapes and make the rest regular shapes.
- Lighten a text-heavy piece with a bright, colorful visual.
- Leave plenty of white space around large blocks of text or dark photographs.
- Offset a large, dark photograph or illustration with several smaller pieces of text, each surrounded by a lot of white space.

You can create balance with the three elements – text block, graphic, and vertical text. In the first example, they appear to be just random elements with no unity or balance. In the second example, the text block and the graphic are resized to bring them closer together and to better balance each other. To tie the elements together, move them closer together – resizing helps accomplish this. Notice that the graphic (one of the marbles) slightly overlaps the box, unifying the two elements. Reversing the word "BALANCE" out of the blue box also adds more contrast to the composition. The increased leading in the text block redistributes the white space in a more balanced way.
Do
In your document titled Principles of Design, make a title called Balance. Answer the following questions.

1. Define Balance.

2. What is visual balance?

3. How is balance created in a desktop published document?

4. List and describe the three types of balance. Be specific in your descriptions.
   - Symmetrical balance
   - Asymmetrical balance
   - Radial

5. Explain the rule of thirds.

6. Where is the visual center of a page located?

7. What does using a grid help to ensure?

8. List seven things used to create balance. (Such as Center elements on a page)

Team Assignment
Find one example of each of the following and tell where you found it; i.e.,
I found Symmetrical Balance in the National Geographic March 2008 issue page 79.
a. Perfect or near perfect symmetry. How is the symmetry achieved – is it through mirror images, identical placement, or with pieces that are very similar in look and feel?

b. Asymmetrical balance. How does the balance contribute to the mood of each piece? Is it dynamic? Does it appear to move in a certain direction or vibrate on the page?

c. Radial balance. It may be harder to find examples. Look to elements within other layouts such as graphic illustrations and logos that use a radial balance.

d. Does the piece radiate from a central point or does it have a spiral effect? Does the design pull you in or send you out to the edges of the piece?

e. Locate the visual center of several different pieces. How many designs put a key piece of information or focal point in this area?

f. Can you 'see' the underlying grid in your samples? Find an example that appears to use a very simple grid. Find one that appears to use a more complex grid. In each case, how does the use of a grid help the designer achieve a balanced design?