

Alignment

The placement of elements such that edges line up along common rows or columns, or their bodies along a common center.

Elements in a design should be aligned with one or more other elements. This creates a sense of unity and cohesion, which contributes to the design's overall aesthetic and perceived stability. Alignment can also be a powerful means of leading a person through a design. For example, the rows and columns of a grid or table can be used to make explicit the relatedness of elements sharing those rows and columns, and to lead the eyes left-to-right and top-to-bottom accordingly. Edges of the design medium (e.g., edge of a page or screen) and the natural positions on the design medium (e.g., centerlines) should also be considered alignment elements.

¹ See, for example, *Elements of Graph Design* by Stephen M. Kosslyn, W. H. Freeman and Company, 1994, p. 172.

In paragraph text, left-aligned and right-aligned text blocks provide more powerful alignment cues than do center-aligned text blocks. The invisible column created by left-aligned and right-aligned text blocks presents a clear, visual cue against which other elements of the design can be aligned. Center-aligned text blocks, conversely, provide more visually ambiguous alignment cues, and can be difficult to connect with other elements. Justified text provides more alignment cues than unjustified text, and should be used in complex compositions with many elements.

Although alignment is generally defined in terms of rows and columns, more complex forms of alignment exist. In aligning elements along diagonals, for example, the relative angles between the invisible alignment paths should be 30 degrees or greater because separation of less than 30 degrees is too subtle and difficult to detect.¹ In spiral or circular alignments, it may be necessary to augment or highlight the alignment paths so that the alignment is perceptible; otherwise the elements may not seem to be placed according to any particular pattern. As with all such principles of this type, there are exceptions (e.g., the misalignment of elements to attract attention or create tension). However, these exceptions are rare, and alignment should be considered the general rule.

For most designs, align elements into rows and columns or along a centerline. When elements are not arranged in a row/column format, consider highlighting the alignment paths. Use left- or right-justified text to create the best alignment cues, and consider justified text for complex compositions.

See also Aesthetic-Usability Effect and Good Continuation.

