

Part 4

In the final part of our series on the art of typography we'll be looking at how best to use grids as a device for aiding and enhancing typography. A member of the International Society of Typographic Designers (ISTD) and Senior Lecturer at the University of Brighton, Gavin Ambrose explores some of the possibilities the grid can offer...

Typography, the grid and keeping things simple

In the fourth and final part of the ISTD's series on typography skills, Gavin Ambrose explores how designers can use grids to enhance their design skills.

Gavin Ambrose MISTD

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Photo: Tomika Terry

STARTS (needs to be circa 800 words)

In writing this article I have to confess, as a student of design I didn't have much time for grids. I perceived them as being restrictive and counter to the aspirations of an emerging designer. As a practicing designer however, I quickly learned the benefits they offer and the hidden beauty they can contain.

Since the fourteenth century the basis of the grid has changed little. Early religious texts contain text set in vertical columns, punctuated by images and embellished with drop capitals and marginalia (additional text annotations) – much like modern-day publications, and indeed this magazine. A grid can be used on a single design, for example a poster, or over a series of pages, for example a book.

INSERT graphical_house.jpg

CAPTION:

The grid is there to be adhered to, but also broken. Design agency Graphical House demonstrate with finesse how a simple set of elements, carefully placed, can be engaging, dynamic and elegant.

What is a grid

In simple terms a grid is a structure for the arrangement of text and image on a page or screen. Much like scaffolding on a building, this is formed primarily of vertical (A) and horizontal (B) guides that create columns for text and images. Additional 'hanging lines' (C) set key positioning points for text and images to align to, much like the alignment of paintings in a gallery setting. Inter-column space, or gutters (D) dictate the amount of breathing, or white space around text and images. The use of both vertical and horizontal lines creates patterns or fields, often called modules (E) that can be populated by text and images.

There are two main structures for a basic grid layout. A symmetrical approach (F), where each page is a mirror copy of the opposite page, or an asymmetrical approach (G), favoured by modernist designers, that is arguably more active, with the basic grid structure implying horizontal movement and pace.

Additionally, text and images can be placed on angles, traditionally at either 45 degrees (H) or a combination of 60 and 30 degrees.

Finally, to effectively work with a grid type and images need to have a relationship to a baseline grid (I), which effectively anchors items. Text can be 'cross-aligned', with varying type sizes occupying, some or all of the lines of the baseline grid. For example, if you have a 12pt baseline grid, the default typesize and leading configurations of 10pt on 12pt leading, 20pt on 24pt leading and 40pt on 48pt leading will all fit to the same grid, cross-aligning and bringing a sense of structure to a design as the human-eye looks to find order and pattern.

INSERT images A-J

Why use grids

The grid should be used to aid the placement, order, hierarchy and structure of design elements, be it for the printed page, online or even environmental applications.

Many designers have actively embraced the grid as part of their practice; not only as a **tool** for design (*where* does one place an item of text or image), but also as a mechanic for **design thinking** (*why* does one place the said item). The grid should be seen as part of the process of how we design, and not simply as a tool for desktop publishing. International Typographic Style (often called Swiss) originated in the 1920s in Germany, Russia and the Netherlands and rising to fame during the 1950s in Switzerland. Protagonists such as Josef Müller-Brockmann, consolidated some of these theories into a manifesto, an extract of which is shown below:

- the will to systematize, to clarify
- the will to penetrate to the essentials, to concentrate
- the will to cultivate objectivity instead of subjectivity
- the will to rationalize the creative and technical production processes

As Brockmann indicates, the grid is a tool for thought, to systemize, to clarify and

to reduce content to its essentials.

INSERT TRIBORO image

CAPTION:

Design agency Triboro's *Paper of Record* project shows playful embracement of the grid, while not being afraid to add personality, pace and typographic celebration.

Using and breaking grids

Bob Gill in his classic reference book, *Graphic Design as a Second Language* proposes the question 'Have you ever seen autumn leaves, after they have fallen to the ground, arrange themselves in a boring composition? I Haven't. What about pigeons stopping in a pavement square? Do they arrange themselves in a boring layout?'

Gill's observation is correct, the world is an incredibly interesting and diverse place, and the potential danger with a grid, or system is that it can mediate spontaneous creativity and indeed the element of 'chance'. Therefore a grid should be seen as a guide, not an absolute rule. The grid is a structure, a vessel to hold content, but having the courage to break that restriction will often result in more dynamic and creative work.

INSERT SEA images

CAPTION: Design agency SEA's work for Monotype celebrates different typographic configurations on a rigid grid, bringing a tone-of-voice to the brand that is conversational and engaging.

Measurement and proportion

Arguably the most confusing element of designing a grid is understanding that you are often dealing with two sets of measurements that don't naturally belong together. Point size and leading is generally set in points, as is the baseline grid. However, most publications, and indeed printing presses predominantly use millimetres. For this reason, programs such as InDesign, have seemingly odd default settings. For example, margins by default are set at 12.7mm with a gutter measurement of 4.233mm. If you were to convert these to the points system you get a much more logical set of values, 30pt margins with a 12pt gutter. For this reason, when initially designing a grid, it is worth giving extra consideration to how you make these two systems compatible. One approach is to create a grid that has a border to compensate for the irregular measurement, leaving you with a text block in the centre that has a rationale points measurement. Alternatively, a page size should be used that is built around a logical division of points.

Grids in practice

In practice grids offer designers an underpinning structure to their work, essentially taking the 'guess-work' out of design. If carefully considered these can have the

spontaneity of falling autumn leaves or pigeons mentioned earlier by Bob Gill, while implying a sense of order and hierarchy. Arguably the best design work occurs when there is a certain amount of tension between control and freedom. Having a sound understanding of grids and editorial structure, while retaining artistic, more intuitive flair is where truly great work is created.

INSERT DESIGN BOLGET images

CAPTION: In practice a controlled grid can offer a sense of pace and personality. Copenhagen based Designbolaget's work in the cultural and arts sector celebrates typographic 'honesty' through the use of simple controlled grids and the confident use of typography.

ENDS

BOXOUT (5x 50 words, 250 words total)

'5 rules'

A grid should make things easier

A good grid will make the placement of text and images more logical, easier and in turn quicker. If you find it isn't doing this then the grid is probably not right for the job.

A grid should be liberating – not restrictive

A grid can help to liberate the way you design but should in no way be perceived as restrictive. Follow the grid, but don't be afraid to break it, after all rules are there to be broken!

There is no 'master' grid

There is no grid that is right for every job – there is however a grid that will help with nearly every design task. Content comes first in design, so build a grid that is right for the content, rather than trying to shoe-horn content into an inappropriate grid structure.

Measure twice cut once

There is a famous saying when cutting wood or other materials that you should measure twice and cut once. Grids are no different, invest your time in developing, trialling and experimenting with a grid before committing to an entire job.

KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid)

This principle states that most systems work best if they are kept simple, and grids are no exception. Strip away unnecessary guides and measurements so you begin to think in proportion and form, rather than 'chasing' numbers and detail.