



HIERARCHY IN TYPOGRAPHY: AN ANALYTICAL REVIEW OF VISUAL DOMINANCE IN POSTER AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Ajay Yadav
Assistant Professor
SVSU

ABSTRACT

A fundamental tenet of visual communication, typographic hierarchy establishes the structure, perception, and comprehension of information. It controls the visual superiority of textual components, directing the viewer's gaze through the content in a calculated order and affecting interpretation. This theoretical paper provides an analytical review of typographic hierarchy, synthesizing historical foundations and contemporary approaches to demonstrate how designers create and manipulate visual order in both poster (print) and digital media contexts. Utilizing classical typographic concepts from Jan Tschichold, Josef Müller-Brockmann, and Robert Bringhurst, alongside contemporary viewpoints from Ellen Lupton and Philip B. Meggs, the dialogue incorporates perceptual insights from Gestalt psychology and semiotics to elucidate the reasons behind the effectiveness of hierarchy in both visual and cognitive contexts.

In its examination of essential factors—scale, weight, color and contrast, spacing, placement, case and letterform, texture, and motion/interactivity—the review details how each one plays a role in creating visual emphasis and structuring content. The paper underscores both common principles and medium-specific challenges by juxtaposing the static, spatial strategies of posters with the dynamic, responsive capabilities of digital media. It also investigates the impact of reading behaviors—like scanning in digital contexts compared to more linear engagement with print—on hierarchical design decisions.

A practical analytical tool is proposed in the form of a conceptual model that maps typographic variables to attention functions—attract, organize, and clarify. The conclusion includes a checklist for practitioners, pedagogical recommendations for design education, and suggestions for future research, such as empirical testing using eye-tracking, cross-cultural studies, and

design focused on accessibility. This synthesis seeks to connect theory with practice, providing a straightforward, actionable framework for creating hierarchy across media.

INTRODUCTION

The arrangement of text and the manner in which viewers process and prioritize information are both influenced by typographic hierarchy, which is fundamental to effective visual communication. It serves as the visual roadmap of a design, establishing the sequence in which elements are noticed, read, and interpreted. This theoretical paper provides an analytical examination of typographic hierarchy, utilizing insights from historical foundations and contemporary practice to comprehend how designers create and manage visual dominance in both poster (print) and digital media contexts. Principles of order, proportion, and clarity were used by typographers and designers like Jan Tschichold, Josef Müller-Brockmann, and Robert Bringhurst to establish a foundation for comprehending hierarchy.¹ In modern contexts, theorists such as Ellen Lupton and Philip B. Meggs have broadened these concepts to encompass the fluid and interactive potential of digital typography.

This paper elucidates the reasons behind certain typographic treatments inherently attracting attention and generating meaning by incorporating perspectives from Gestalt psychology—especially concepts like proximity, similarity, and figure-ground relationships—and semiotic theory.² The analysis pinpoints crucial factors that affect hierarchy: scale, weight, color and contrast, spacing, placement, case and letterform, texture, and motion or interactivity. While each of these variables serves as a means to draw attention, arrange content, and elucidate meaning, their use differs according to the medium.

Posters usually establish hierarchy via static spatial configurations and strong visual contrasts, designed for viewing from afar and short attention spans. To achieve immediate impact, designers depend significantly on large-scale typography, high-contrast color schemes, and meticulous composition.³ In the realm of digital media, though, hierarchy is more fluid and influenced by responsive layouts, temporal sequencing, and interactive components like hover states or scrolling reveals. The challenge here is to adapt the hierarchy for various devices and screen sizes, all the while ensuring accessibility and usability.

Additionally, the article investigates the impact of reading behaviors on hierarchical choices. Posters, which are often looked at briefly, need a hierarchy that conveys meaning immediately. By contrast, digital media can accommodate both scanning behaviors—typical of web browsing—and deeper, more linear reading in specific contexts.⁴ Because of these differences,

¹ Hill, W. (2023). *Space as Language: The Properties of Typographic Space*. Cambridge University Press.

² 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.

³ Lupton, E. (2014). *Type on screen: A critical guide for designers, writers, developers, and students*. Chronicle Books.

⁴ Liu, Z. (2005). Reading behavior in the digital environment: Changes in reading behavior over the past ten years. *Journal of documentation*, 61(6), 700-712.

it is necessary to adopt strategies that are tailored to the specific context, even if the fundamental principles stay the same.

The paper proposes a conceptual model that maps typographic variables to three attention-guiding functions: attract (capturing initial attention through size, contrast, and motion), organize (structuring reading order via spacing, alignment, and grouping), and clarify (signalling importance and tone through typeface choice, weight, and case), in order to unify these insights. This model functions as a diagnostic tool for evaluating current designs as well as a planning framework for new endeavors.

The conclusion provides practical outcomes, including a checklist for practitioners to assess and improve their typographic hierarchy, pedagogical strategies for incorporating hierarchy principles into design education, and suggestions for future empirical research.⁵ Proposed avenues for research comprise studies employing eye tracking to gauge how well certain typographic treatments work, inquiries into hierarchical perception across cultures, and experiments centered on accessibility that target audiences with dyslexia or low vision. This paper seeks to offer designers, educators, and researchers a clear, actionable framework for comprehending and applying typographic hierarchy in both traditional and emerging media by connecting theory with practice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

With the groundwork for its systematic understanding being laid by early 20th-century modernists, the concept of typographic hierarchy has deep roots in the history of modern design. In *The New Typography* (1928), Jan Tschichold advocated for clarity and functional order, emphasizing the intentional use of scale, weight, and spatial arrangement to convey messages effectively.⁶ His support for asymmetry and grid-based alignment represented a departure from decorative traditions to rational, reader-centered design. Josef Müller-Brockmann built upon these principles by creating grid systems that converted hierarchy into a framework that was repeatable and based on mathematical precision.

Müller-Brockmann offered designers a structural tool for ensuring visual consistency and directing the viewer's gaze by standardizing spatial relationships. In *The Elements of Typographic Style*, Robert Bringhurst combined aesthetics, historical insight, and technical precision to create a set of lasting typographic practice rules.⁷ Ellen Lupton's recent works, especially *Thinking with Type*, have turned these theoretical foundations into practical guidance that is easy to understand for designers in both print and digital media.

⁵ Welhausen, C. A. (2018). Toward a topos of visual rhetoric: Teaching aesthetics through color and typography. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 48(2), 132-150.

⁶ McLean, R., Lupton, E., & Cohen, E. L. (1997). *Jan Tschichold: a life in typography*. Princeton Architectural Press.

⁷ Bringhurst, R., Bringhurst, R., & Bringhurst, R. (2008). *The Elements Of Typographic Style V3. Harmony*, 17, 25.

2.2 PERCEPTUAL AND SEMIOTIC BASES

The typographic hierarchy operates at the crossroads of semiotics and perceptual psychology. The grouping of typographic elements and the differentiation of focal points from supporting text by viewers are explained by Gestalt principles, including proximity, similarity, figure-ground, and continuation. Typography is framed as a system of signs within semiotic theory: type that is larger or heavier signifies greater importance; Urgency, attention, or emotional tone can be indicated by color choices that have a high contrast.⁸ Cognitive load theory adds to these viewpoints by highlighting how hierarchy diminishes mental effort, thereby facilitating faster information retrieval. Research on visual attention has shown that viewers depend on scan patterns and salience cues—like bold headings, color highlights, or spatial separation—to navigate layouts. Thanks to these semiotic and perceptual mechanisms, hierarchy serves as more than just an aesthetic device; it also provides cognitive assistance.

2.3 CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS

The evolution of typographic hierarchy in response to technological change is reflected in current scholarship and professional discourse. With variable typography, scaling and adaptation can respond to different devices while maintaining hierarchical relationships despite variations in viewport size. In the realm of digital media, microinteractions like hover states, scroll-based animations, and dynamic reveals add temporal layers to hierarchy, directing attention in a sequential manner as well as through spatial means. When making typographic decisions, it has become essential to take accessibility into account, such as adherence to WCAG standards regarding contrast and minimum type sizes.⁹ This is necessary for ensuring inclusivity in designs for both print and screens.

The shift from static print media to dynamic, interactive environments has broadened the designer's toolkit while also introducing limitations concerning usability, load time, and device variability.¹⁰ These developments indicate that although the basic tenets of typographic hierarchy remain unchanged, its application is continually adapting to new forms of communication, viewing circumstances, and user behaviors.

3. TYPOGRAPHIC VARIABLES THAT CREATE HIERARCHY

A typographic hierarchy arises from a combination of manageable variables that together influence visual prominence and direct the reader's navigation through the material. While these

⁸ Mehta, H., & Yadav, P. (2023). Word and Image Typography as Means of Visual Communication. *Innovation in Visual Arts*.

⁹ Alajarmeh, N. (2022). The extent of mobile accessibility coverage in WCAG 2.1: sufficiency of success criteria and appropriateness of relevant conformance levels pertaining to accessibility problems encountered by users who are visually impaired. *Universal Access in the Information Society*, 21(2), 507-532.

¹⁰ Tidwell, J. (2010). *Designing interfaces: Patterns for effective interaction design*. " O'Reilly Media, Inc.".

variables work individually, they also interact in a synergistic manner. This necessitates that designers strike a balance between visual impact, readability, and context.¹¹

3.1 SCALE (SIZE)

Scale continues to be the most direct and influential sign of significance. Type commands attention when it is larger, often used for primary headlines or key calls-to-action. In the realm of poster design, attention is drawn from afar and an immediate focal point is established through dramatic shifts in scale.¹² In digital contexts, scale must responsively adjust to different viewport sizes, balancing prominence with usability and avoiding excessive scrolling or visual imbalance.

3.2 WEIGHT (STROKE THICKNESS) AND STYLE (ITALIC, CONDENSED)

Weight enhances visual density, with bold shapes serving as anchors that stabilize the layout and indicate emphasis. Styles such as italics, condensed, or extended add tonal variation without changing size, serving as secondary emphasis or conveying nuance in meaning.

3.3 COLOR AND TONAL CONTRAST

The contrast of color—considering both hue and luminance—has an impact on legibility and perceptual salience.¹³ High-contrast combinations like black on white capture attention, and saturated colors are more prominent than muted shades. In digital environments, color indicates interactivity—seen in hyperlinks and actionable buttons—thereby augmenting the visual hierarchy with a functional dimension.

3.4 SPACING (LEADING, TRACKING, KERNING) AND PROXIMITY

Rhythm and grouping are controlled by spacing. Close leading or tracking can imply urgency or density, whereas ample spacing suggests openness and tranquility. Proximity arranges related items into perceptual units, facilitating “chunking” in information processing and strengthening hierarchical relationships.¹⁴

3.5 PLACEMENT AND SPATIAL HIERARCHY

The order of reading is affected by position. In cultures that read from left to right, placing content in the top-left corner is given precedence as the starting point, whereas centered arrangements convey a sense of formality and accentuation. Asymmetric positioning can disturb expectations and highlight particular components through visual tension.

¹¹ Watzman, S., & Re, M. (2007). Visual design: Principles for usable interfaces: everything is designed: Why we should think before doing. In *The human-computer interaction handbook* (pp. 355-380). CRC Press.

¹² Iskin, R. E. (2014). *The Poster: Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s–1900s*. Dartmouth College Press.

¹³ Ko, Y. H. (2017). The effects of luminance contrast, colour combinations, font, and search time on brand icon legibility. *Applied ergonomics*, 65, 33-40.

¹⁴ Subedi, V. (2024). Influence of concept or semantic relation of items in remembering perceptual details.

3.6 CASE, LETTERFORM, AND TYPEFACE CHOICE

Text in all capitals conveys a sense of urgency or authority, but at longer lengths it becomes less readable.¹⁵ Categories of typeface—serif vs. sans-serif, humanist vs. geometric—convey tone and indicate complexity or simplicity. The typeface's personality thus serves as a semantic indicator of hierarchy.

3.7 TEXTURE AND BACKGROUND INTERACTION

When combined with decorative or low-contrast letterforms, typography can serve as a visual texture.¹⁶ Interactions between text and background images—typical in posters and hero banners—necessitate careful contrast management to ensure legibility while achieving visual integration.

3.8 MOTION AND INTERACTIVITY (DIGITAL-SPECIFIC)

In digital media, the unfolding of hierarchy over time is facilitated by motion sequences, transitions, and interactive states. Micro-interactions like hover effects direct attention, sustain engagement, and signal functionality, introducing a temporal dimension that static print lacks.

4. POSTER VS. DIGITAL MEDIA: AFFORDANCES, CONSTRAINTS, AND STRATEGIES

Typographic hierarchy manifests differently across media because the physical and perceptual conditions of engagement vary. Understanding these distinctions is essential for adapting strategies without compromising communicative intent.

4.1 POSTER (PRINT) CONTEXT

Posters are mainly found in public areas where viewers engage peripherally, often with short gaze durations. This requires a visual effect that can draw the eye immediately from afar. To guarantee that text can be easily read and stands out, designers usually make use of large fonts, heavy font weights, and strong contrast. Because print has a single, unchanging composition, it allows for exact management of spatial relationships, typographic texture, and figure-ground dynamics. The tactile and reflective properties of materials—like paper stock, ink saturation, embossing, and varnish—can enhance sensory richness and reinforce hierarchy. Since posters are static, it is necessary to embed all hierarchical cues spatially; it is impossible to arrange events in a sequence.¹⁷

Common strategies encompass using oversized display type for the primary message, organizing secondary information tightly in descending scale, and carefully integrating type with imagery to create a unified visual field.

¹⁵ DuBay, W. H. (2007). *Smart Language: Readers, Readability, and the Grading of Text*.

¹⁶ Cochell, R. (2020). Easily Read, Easily Forgotten: Reassessing the Effects of Visual Difficulties and Multi-Modality in Educational Text Design.

¹⁷ Eldesouky, D. F. B. (2013). Visual hierarchy and mind motion in advertising design. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 2(2), 148-162.

4.2 DIGITAL MEDIA CONTEXT

Digital platforms create flexible and adaptive environments. Because viewports range from desktop monitors to mobile screens, responsive typographic systems that maintain hierarchy while scaling proportionally are essential.¹⁸ With interactivity, time becomes a design dimension; animations, scroll reveals, and transitions enable the hierarchy to emerge in sequence, dynamically directing attention. A key element is user agency—navigation tends to be non-linear, meaning that hierarchy needs to indicate both informational and functional priorities through affordances such as clickable buttons, hover states, and focus highlights.¹⁹ Design decisions are shaped by accessibility guidelines, especially the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), which require adequate color contrast, minimum text sizes, and clear focus indicators.²⁰ Typical digital strategies comprise modular card-based designs, progressive disclosure to handle cognitive load, prominent hero sections for key messaging, and animated calls-to-action (CTAs) that keep users engaged.

4.3 HYBRID AND SOCIAL MEDIA CONSIDERATIONS

The merging of print and digital contexts—like posters designed for Instagram feeds, Twitter banners, or digital billboards—requires cross-platform consideration.²¹ It is essential that the hierarchy endures changes in format, ensuring it remains clear in both extensive installations and small thumbnail previews. Motion, whether in the form of short video loops or animated GIFs, can enhance traditional typographic variables, but it needs to be balanced with platform-specific limitations such as autoplay constraints or compression artifacts. To guarantee that the main message stays visually dominant across different media, designers frequently create parallel versions—one tailored for tactile, fixed-scale impact and another for flexible, responsive display.

5. CONCEPTUAL MODEL: MAPPING TYPOGRAPHIC VARIABLES TO ATTENTION FUNCTIONS

The model structures typographic hierarchy into three main functions that guide attention: Attract, Organize, and Clarify.

Attract entails seizing initial attention via elements that stand out visually, such as scale, contrast in brightness, saturated colors, careful positioning, and—especially online—movement.²² These components operate during the initial instants of perception, attracting attention prior to the onset of conscious reading.

Organize pertains to arranging the order of reading. Designers accomplish this through spatial grouping, consistent spacing systems (such as leading and tracking), typographic scale

¹⁸ Dutson, P. (2014). *Responsive mobile design: Designing for every device*. Addison-Wesley Professional.

¹⁹ Baldrica-Franklin, G. (2022). *Storytelling in Online Atlases* (Doctoral dissertation).

²⁰ Caldwell, B., Cooper, M., Reid, L. G., Vanderheiden, G., Chisholm, W., Slatin, J., & White, J. (2008). Web content accessibility guidelines (WCAG) 2.0. *WWW Consortium (W3C)*, 290(1-34), 5-12.

²¹ Rogers, R. (2017). Digital methods for cross-platform analysis. *The SAGE handbook of social media*, 91-110.

²² Webster, J. G. (2014). *The marketplace of attention: How audiences take shape in a digital age*. MIT press.

hierarchies, and grid-based alignments. Whether the medium is linear (like a poster) or interactive (like digital), these tools help direct the viewer through the content in a logical or persuasive sequence.²³

Clarify provides semantic significance and functional affordances. The choice of typeface, weight, case, and interactive states (hover, focus, pressed) communicate significance beyond the content itself, suggesting importance, urgency, or interactivity.²⁴ Clarification guarantees that after attention has been captured, the viewer comprehends how to interpret or respond to the information.

The model operates on a diagnostic basis: in every design, the function of each typographic variable should be analyzed. Misalignments, like headings that are large yet lack sufficient contrast and do not draw attention, or calls-to-action that are excessively animated and cause distraction without providing clarity, can be pinpointed and rectified.

6. ANALYSIS: HOW HIERARCHY OPERATES IN VIEWER EXPERIENCE

6.1 VISUAL SEARCH AND SCAN PATTERNS

Viewers typically scan instead of reading in order. Studies on visual cognition suggest that pre-attentive cues such as size, contrast, and placement can seize attention in a matter of milliseconds. These cues enhance primary messages, whereas secondary typographic signals (such as changes in weight and spacing) direct further exploration.

6.2 COGNITIVE LOAD AND LEGIBILITY

An effective hierarchy reduces cognitive load by grouping related elements and guiding the eye along a clear path.²⁵ Stylistic extremes or excessive contrast—like ultra-condensed headlines or too much tracking—can impede decoding and compromise clarity. To achieve a balance between expressiveness and legibility, it is essential to adhere to accessibility standards, which encompass sufficient color contrast and minimum text sizes.

6.3 SEMIOTIC LAYERS AND TONE

In addition to hierarchy, typographic variables express tone. Typeface classifications suggest cultural and stylistic associations: geometric sans-serifs bring to mind minimalism and modernity; High-contrast serifs exude a feeling of tradition and authority.²⁶

²³ Kim, T. (2013). *Coded visualization: the rhetoric and aesthetics of data-based cultural interface* (Doctoral dissertation, Georgia Institute of Technology).

²⁴ Chauhan, H. (Ed.). (2023). *The Power of Visuals: Innovations in Communication Design*. Inkbound Publishers.

²⁵ Clark, R. C., Nguyen, F., & Sweller, J. (2011). *Efficiency in learning: Evidence-based guidelines to manage cognitive load*. John Wiley & Sons.

²⁶ Skoog, J. (2022). *Contrast: Intro to Design Psychology (and Reference)*. Jeremy Skoog.

7. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This review draws together insights from design theory, cognitive psychology, and semiotics, but it is still theoretical in nature. To validate and refine its propositions, empirical research is necessary. Proposed paths include:

- Experiments using eye tracking that assess the comparative impact of size, color, and weight on attention capture in both print and mobile contexts.
- A/B testing for interactive components (e.g., animated vs. static calls-to-action) to assess click-through rates and effects on comprehension.
- Studies across cultures that investigate the influence of reading direction (left-to-right vs. right-to-left) and typographic traditions on the perception of hierarchy.
- Experiments centered on accessibility that assess understanding for groups with dyslexia or low vision across different hierarchical treatments.²⁷

8. CONCLUSION

The typographic hierarchy is still a fundamental tactical resource for guiding focus, structuring data, and strengthening significance. Designers can create communication that is visually engaging and functionally effective by skillfully manipulating variables such as scale, weight, contrast, spacing, placement, and when applicable motion.

While posters and digital media are based on the same fundamental principles, the distinct affordances and constraints of each medium influence hierarchical strategy. The Attract–Organize–Clarify model suggested here provides a useful diagnostic framework for analysis as well as creation. It will be crucial to conduct future empirical research, particularly in the areas of responsive and accessibility-centered design, in order to validate and broaden these theoretical findings. This will help ensure that typographic hierarchy continues to be an adaptable and inclusive practice as media landscapes evolve.

9. REFERENCES

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²⁷ Dunne, C. (2024). *Design strategies and dyslexia: Improving the accessibility of course material for third-level students with dyslexia* (Doctoral dissertation, Institute of Art, Design+ Technology).

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