Eye for Design: Using Grids: Thinking Inside the Box

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We are often told to "think outside the box," especially when we need to find innovative solutions to problems. But sometimes, a box or two . . . or six . . . or thirty-six can provide a good designer with a way to rein in the chaos often produced by the creative process. A network of "boxes" existing in systematic relation to one another forms a grid. The grid is a helpful tool that has been in use for centuries in the fields of art and design, and it is an essential part of the designer's toolbox.

Look around and you will see grids everywhere—in the steel and glass that form city skyscrapers to the bricks that comprise your house. You will notice it in the shape of your IKEA Expedit bookshelf or your closet organizing system. These square and rectangular-shaped containers, as well as the spaces in between and around them, all help to build a functional, organized space in your world.

In the two-dimensional realm, there are additional examples of the grid: a city map, the *New York Times* newspaper, your college or university's website, just to name a few. If you were to remove the text and images and draw lines around their sometimes invisible containers, you would very likely see evidence of a grid structure that makes these and other such mediums useable, or, that is to say, makes the content and overriding message clear and readable.

But you're not a newspaper publisher and you don't make bookshelves. So how can you use the grid? There are many circumstances—basically anytime you want to create a solid layout for websites, print designs, and even slides.

Tools, Tools Everywhere

Have you ever created a two-column MS Word document or applied the Align/Distribute options to an image or text box in PowerPoint? Perhaps you have entered data into a Google Docs Spreadsheet? Then you were using the built-in grid tools of those applications.

Arranging text and image objects into columns or a similarly uniform way is one basic use of the grid in design, and most software that allows one the ability to design usually has a grid option available. The grid is always there in the software tool, sitting on top of your actual design in your display. Oftentimes, it works in a behind-the-scenes fashion, but you can typically toggle the view to physically see the grid. For example, in recent Windows-based versions of MS Office, it can be found in the 'Arrange' group on the 'Page Layout' tab (Word) or in the 'Drawing' group on the 'Home' tab (PPT). It also shows up in other places (e.g., the 'Format' tab when you select an object in either Word or PPT) - confusing! Whether it is MS Office, professional

grade design software like Photoshop or simple, web-based software like Google Docs, the grid option is almost assuredly there—just use the software's Help menu to find it.

One-Column, Two-Column, Three-Column, More...

Once you know how to access the grid in your software, how do you use it? Well, keep it simple, but not too simple. The grid can function beyond being an instrument to ensure alignment and uniformity. In fact, there is ample opportunity to use it as a more integral part of your design. The grid is more than just an arrangement of evenly-spaced lines coming together at right-angles. Like any system, the grid actually has several structural components and as you begin planning your layout, you can strategically manipulate them to your advantage.

One such component is *columns*, or the vertical boxes that often will hold the main page content, such as images and text, but columns are not the only container type. There are also *modules*, the singular, repetitive cells that are consistently spaced to make up the grid cells. These can be combined to create columns, rows, or spatial zones. *Spatial zones* are strategic clusters of columns or modules that contain page content. Common spatial zones on a webpage, for example, are the header, footer and main content areas.

Not all grid components hold content. The *margins* and *gutters*, which are the spaces that separate the columns and

Various parts of a grid
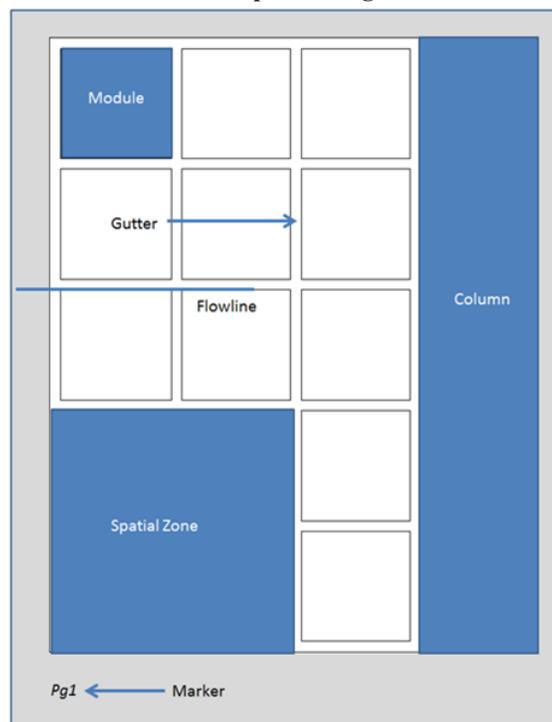
rows, are such examples, and some of the most elegant designs exploit this space between containers. Suppress any urge to always fill up the space. *Markers*, which are often contained in the margin, guide the reader through multi-page designs. *Flowlines* work like "invisible" lines that help a reader navigate across the page. It is important to remember the invisible elements of your design are as key as the ones you make manifest.

Configure It, Just a Little Bit

By understanding the parts of the grid, you can give distinct form to strategic areas of the grid to create a layout that will bring a pleasing order to your vision. One basic layout choice you will need to make is what sort of grid scheme you wish to employ. As it so often does in design, function will most likely dictate design form, and the grid scheme you choose depends on what will best serve your project. Some options include *multi-column*, *single-column*, and *modular grids* (Example 1).

Putting It Together

Think about the grid in relation to the text and images you choose to incorporate, as well as the other design elements that you are employing—space, line, movement, color, etc. It is imperative that you first articulate what it is you wish to accomplish with your design and how you wish to execute your overall message, which should be clear and readable. Look at the grids in your life for inspiration and solutions in your designs. Create some rough sketches of your layout and develop a rough layout scheme before you move the work to your computer. Have the basic content at the ready and deploy a grid structure in your design software to tighten up your design.

This simple, but effective PowerPoint slide (Example 2) promoting library services makes an impact, thanks to the use of a simple grid system. The main content area of the page takes up two varying sized columns: one for a skewed image and another for the accompanying text. The spatial zone at the bottom is made manifest by the red background and works to divide the space from content above as well as highlight the "resources + services" text.

Once you have established your own "box," feel free to experiment and play in and around it. Exploring the tension between the rules of your grid and breaking those rules can

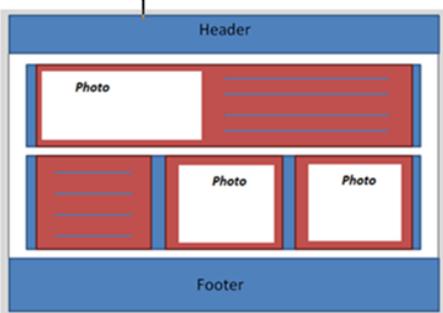Example 2: PowerPoint Slide

Example 3: Multi-layered design
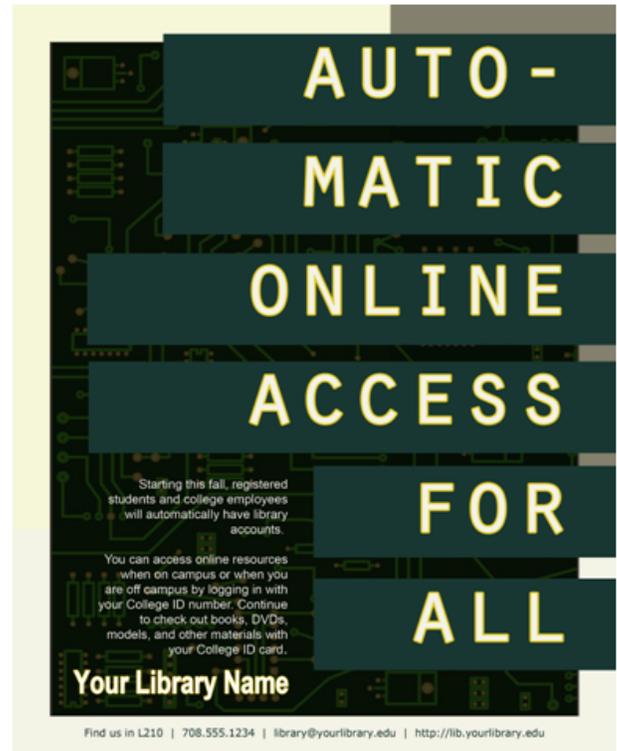
often produce innovative design efforts. If you are comfortable with developing more visually complex layouts, try adding layers to enhance your design. Example 3 is a multi-

Example 1: Multi-column, single-column and modular grids

discuss the idea of search boxes to "refine" a results list. Explore ProQuest and find the limiters are on the right. The intent here is not to get them to memorize a list of vendor quirks, but to understand that there are compatible features in most tools if you look for them.

I finish by telling students again that there's nothing wrong with the process of typing some stuff in a search box, hitting the button, and getting back a semi-random list of results. I do suggest that they could make it better, faster, less frustrating by applying some tool savvy and critical thinking. Everyone wins, and is hopefully less stressed about how to perform a "complicated" library search. They now have a simple, but sophisticated approach that works not just in Google, but anywhere, and they are better searchers for it.

layered design that uses an overlapping, two-column grid scheme on the main layer. It also sports big, bold text in visible grid boxes that suggest the form fields of a web log-in page. All the text is right-aligned and features spatial zones that break the right-side margin.

In her monograph *The Grid Book*, art historian Hannah Higgins states, " . . . grids are endowed with a most human contradiction: a vigorous free spirit and a propensity to control." While we may associate the grid with control and order, clearly, it can provide a way to free our creativity. A good designer practices **both** inside, and outside, of the box thinking.

Editor's Note: *Google recently changed the way it displays search results, which are reflected in the article (essentially, they moved some advanced tools to the top that were formerly on the left). More details:* https://plus.google.com/+google/posts/FkDZdfkXRrA

students' learning and their preferences, has in part led to a more fruitful conversation.

Lastly, this project helpfully highlighted several support needs that GVSU's new instruction program might fill, such as pragmatic concerns like developing an intranet tool for instruction data or a template for reporting our instruction statistics. GVSU's librarians can now speak with the voice of experience by providing a case in point. This dialog has helped engender a strong, shared interest in student evaluations and a tested foundation that can be built upon by our new Head of Instructional Services, putting GVSU that much closer to an articulated and shared practice of teaching within the library.

All of this happened, and will continue to move forward, thanks to a grassroots effort started by a small group of librarians. We encourage others to not wait for an explicit administrative mandate or be concerned about not having the authority to compel participation from their colleagues—by approaching a project in a thoughtful way and gradually building consensus, there is a great deal that can be accomplished.

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Figure 1

Library Instruction Evaluation

1. Is this your first library instruction session?   YES   NO

   If no, about how much of today's session repeated content from previous sessions?
   None   1   2   3   4   5   All

2. What year in school are you?   1   2   3   4   5+   GRAD

3. From the following list, please identify the first (1), second (2), and third (3) most useful elements of today's presentation:

   ____ [LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1]
   ____ [LEARNING OBJECTIVE 2]
   ____ [LEARNING OBJECTIVE 3]
   ____ [LEARNING OBJECTIVE 4]

4. Is there anything you wish we had spent more time on?

5. On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being highest) how useful do you think this session will be as you do the research required for this course?

   Least   1   2   3   4   5   Most

6. How else could the library improve this session?

   THANK YOU! Your comments help us improve student learning.