

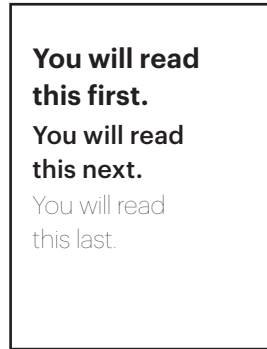
## Visual Hierarchy

As thinkers navigating a visual world, we rely on hidden structures, often subconsciously learned, to organize information. Whether you're trying to scan through a magazine or a website, browse a museum or a mall, or simply craft a well considered portfolio, you innately draw from your tool kit of **hierarchy**. Graphic designer, curator, and writer Ellen Lupton describes hierarchy as "the order of importance within a social group (such as the regiments of an army) or in a body of text (such as the sections and subsections of a book)."

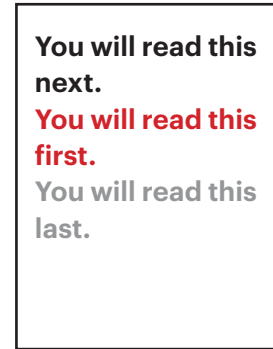
To communicate an idea clearly in your own work, it helps to have some fluency with ways of creating this order. This is not to say that you must adhere to a stultifying set of "hierarchy rules," but some consistency helps a work/project/text make sense. Even the most radical, loose, or experimental piece, as Lupton reminds us, "employs clear marks of separation to signal a change from one level to another." Designers and artists can benefit from learning and applying these six techniques for establishing hierarchy: **size, contrast, color, alignment, image, and space**:



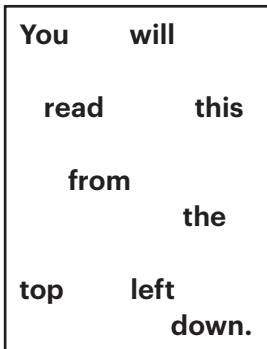
**Size** By adjusting the scale, you can draw attention to the largest piece of text or image first.



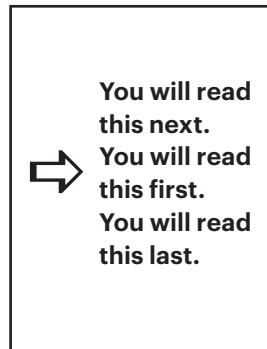
**Contrast** Changing the typeface or the weight of the type can emphasize the most important information.



**Color** Brighter or more saturated colors will create emphasis, whereas unsaturated colors will deemphasize content.



**Space** In languages of Latinate origin, the reader tends to scan the text from top left to bottom right, suggesting that the most important information comes first, at the top.



**Image** An arrow or other image can frame or index a key line of text. Our eyes tend to see the visually complex first.



**Alignment** By indenting or outdenting, you can distinguish an image or a line of text from the paragraph, which will draw the viewer's eye.

**Applying Hierarchy Techniques**

Deft combinations of the six tools outlined above can both efficiently and artfully emphasize information. However, try not to use more than two of these techniques to emphasize any one piece of information. Trust that your reader does not need you to double underline, bold, and circle something to understand that it's important. In fact, too many hierarchical techniques may confuse the reader.

Make choices that relate to your content, purpose, and desired voice. Consider the expectations of the medium, and whether it makes sense to meet them or break from them. Below are four different applications of the same content. Each demonstrates the distinctive effects hierarchical combinations might achieve in different media and contexts.

**Wall Text**



**Size/Space** Relying on only two techniques and limiting the contrast between type sizes, creates a consistent and minimalist voice that draws attention to the institution first.

**Catalogue**



**image/contrast/size/space** The colorful (and large) image pulls the eye to the left first, before we read the rest of the information. The spacing orders the text blocks.

**Poster**



**contrast/size/space** The distinctive typeface and size of the header contrasts with the sans serif type block. Here, the type feels illustrative, perhaps eliminating the need for an image.

**Website**



**image/contrast/size/space** Placing the large, colorful image at the top of the page signals to the reader to start there and work down. Centering the header text, as many websites do, calls on a familiar website format and makes it easier for readers to navigate.



Select a book, website, or other item of visual communication (like one of the New York Times Magazines at A&L). Look for all six of the hierarchy techniques and/or combinations.

- What information did the designer choose to emphasize?
- What elements support the hierarchy?
- How does this design suit the medium?
- How might the designer have more effectively conveyed (or shifted) their message?