

Using the Grid

Grids: Consistency & Unity

tying elements together

by [Jacci Howard Bear](#)

For the most part, people prefer organized visual information

Newsletters, magazines, brochures, annual reports, web pages, digital interfaces, and e-books often have many visual elements: columns of text, headlines, photos, illustrations, pull-quotes, etc. Grids allow the designer to build page-to-page consistency into these documents.

Readers expect to find page numbers in the same location on each page. When all the text in a given article — even when it spans several pages — has a consistent look, including column width, it enhances readability. Readers often expect to find sidebars, informational text, and other oft-repeated elements in the same place from page to page.

A grid, used consistently on all pages of a multi-page document, makes it easier for the designer to provide the consistent look that readers often expect. A carefully conceived grid system also allows the designer to introduce variations without forsaking readability or consistency. It also speeds layout because it takes the guesswork and "look back to see what we did before" out of where to place elements from one page to the next.

The pages, below, are examples of how you might combine text and graphics in a 7-unit vertical grid (such as for a newsletter). Notice how page 1 (Figure 1) and 2 have a consistent (reversed) layout. Text columns are two-grid units wide. One grid unit provides an extra wide column of space separating the main text from the sidebar elements. Page 3 (right hand page of the 2 page spread, Figure 2) is quite different from the first two pages but if you look at the underlying grid structure (Figure 3) you'll see that all three pages use the same grid system.



FIGURE 1: left-hand page of newsletter with 7-unit vertical grid



FIGURE 2: two page spread of newsletter with 7-unit vertical grid

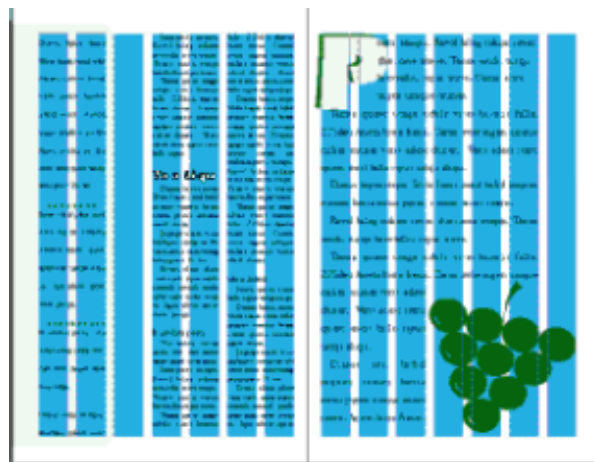


FIGURE 3: two page spread showing the underlying 7-unit vertical grid (blue)

Grids can unify a series of dissimilar documents

There are many ways to establish visual unity throughout a series of related pieces. You probably use your logo on all your marketing pieces. You may have color coded brochures for different aspects of your business. Grids are another way to bring unity and cohesiveness to a collection of brochures, sales sheets, display ads, spec sheets, and other elements of your marketing arsenal.

As we said in [part 1 of this series](#), "In a series of single, but related pieces (such as a series of posters or information sheets for a single ad campaign or single product line) a common grid can help unify the separate pieces." Let your grid help you place repeating elements in the same place from piece to piece. Let your grid provide a consistent guide for mixing graphics and text.

The informational sheets in Figure 4 have a common style for the headline treatments but don't all use the same number or size of graphics. The 3 unit grid (Figure 5) helps to unify these pieces. This is a fairly simple, straightforward example.



FIGURE 4: 3 informational sheets that share a common 3 unit grid



FIGURE 5: A three unit grid helps unify a series of information sheets containing varied elements

One grid, many designs

Grids have been accused of creating boring, static designs. It's not the fault of the grid. Used properly, grids can offer a variety of creative design options. Figure 6, below, shows how a 4x4 (16 unit) grid system takes on different lives using the same four graphic images and varying amounts of text.

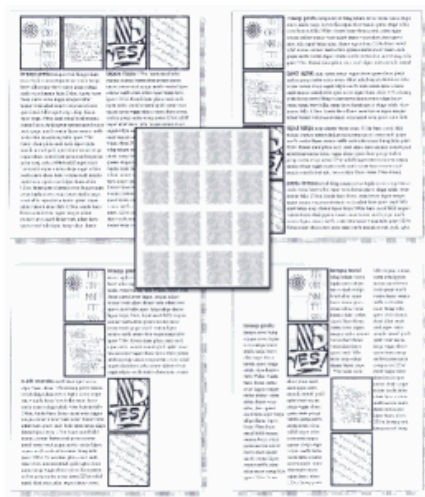


FIGURE 6: Just a few of the arrangement options using the same "boring" grid.

Grids: Order Out of Chaos invisible structures; when and why to use them

by [Jacci Howard Bear](#)

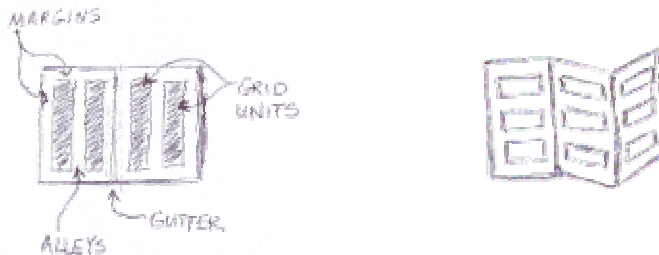
Think of the grid as a plan -- a plan for your page layout

Many of the pages that you see everyday have a grid. You may not see it but it is there, holding up the design, establishing structure, guiding the page elements.

A grid is an invisible structure used to guide the placement of elements on your page. Grids don't appear on the printed piece but their influence may be evident in the widths of column texts, the uniformity of space around photographs, or the consistent placement of repeating elements from page to page in a magazine. They are a series of guidelines that determine the margins of the piece, space between page elements (headlines, body text, photographs, etc.), and let you know where to put things on the blank page.

Before deciding when, why, and how to use a grid you need to know the elements of the grid and how to create it. While it is invisible in the final printed piece, you'll need to be able to see it during page construction.

In your page layout, you've probably set margins. These margins often show up as light solid or dashed lines on the screen. These top, bottom, left, and right margins create a box in the middle of your page. Stop there and you have a single unit grid. Further divide the page into uniform parts and you've created a multiple unit grid. You can create a visible grid to aid in page layout using the guidelines feature of your page layout software or by drawing lines or boxes that you place on a non-printing layer of your publication. Often you can "pull" a guideline from the rulers on the sides of page and place them where you want them.



Margins

Margins define the outside boundary of your page. They frame the content of your pages. Margins may not be equal all around (but are normally consistent from page to page or panel to panel). In most programs you would set the margins when you define the page dimensions (format). You can also adjust the margins "on the fly" by moving the guides on screen (in some programs).

Alleys

When you divide the interior space of your page into uniform parts the white space between units are alleys. Depending on how you've set up your grid the alleys may run horizontally, vertically, or both directions on your page. In some designs this would translate to the white space or "gutter" between columns of text.

Gutters

In a two page or two panel spread, the gutter is the inside margin. It's the space on either side of the fold. In some page layout programs the space between two columns of text is sometimes called the "gutter" as well.

Grid Units

Grid units are the primary locations on your page where you will place text and images. They determine **placement** not necessarily **size**. That is, if you have a graphic image that is larger than your grid unit, it doesn't mean you can't use it. You would use your grid units to help resize the photograph -- ideally to fill 1, 2, 3 or more grid units and then to place that image on your page.

Grids provide visual organization

Grids have different uses and may not be appropriate for all situations or all designers. Publications such as magazines and newsletters almost always require a grid. It provides page to page continuity. It also helps speed production because the designer doesn't have to "start from scratch" laying out and designing each page of the publication.

In a series of single, but related pieces (such as a series of posters or information sheets for a single ad campaign or single product line) a common grid can help unify the separate pieces.

In a single piece that has many disparate elements (blocks of text, headlines, photographs, drawings) a grid can help organize these elements on the page.

Grids: Flexible Options choosing the right grid

by [Jacci Howard Bear](#)



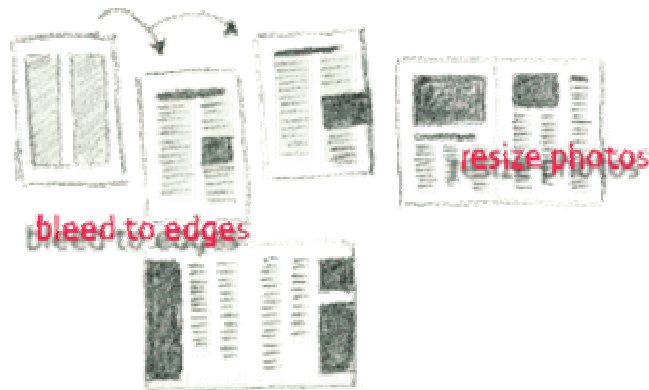
Choose a grid based on the content and adjust content based on the grid

The right grid offers the designer flexibility without overwhelming them with possibilities. The right grid also enhances organization and makes it easy for the viewer or reader to understand the content.

There are no right or wrong grids, simply grids that are more suitable for different content and design objectives. Of course that doesn't help you much when you're staring at a blank page and a deadline. Here are some "thinking points" to help you plan your grid and your design.

- **Content or Page Elements.**

Is the page layout heavy on text or heavy on graphics? Will there be many headlines, rules, illustrations, pull-quotes?



- **Text.**

Look at both amount of text and how it is broken down — long articles, lots of short articles, a mix of long and short articles. How many subheads? Will you use eyebrows, decks, initial caps, and other visual cues?

- **Photos and Illustrations.**

Are there similarities in the type of illustrations or size of photos? Can photos be grouped by size or type? Are there a lot of rectangular elements or many irregularly shaped elements?

- **Complexity.**

Generally the larger the number of grid units (and the smaller the individual units) the more

design options are available. However, too many options can destroy the underlying unity that the grid provides.

So, which grid is best? Here are some guidelines (remember, I said *guidelines* not rules).

- Lots of text with few graphics — such as a book with long chapters and few or no illustrations — can use a simpler grid. 1 - 3 units, perhaps.
- A newsletter, brochure, or magazine with many photographs usually requires a grid with many smaller units to give more possibilities for placing and sizing the photographs.
- Newsletters, because they generally have more text, often use a columnar grid.
 - 1, 2, and 3 column grids are common. Each can accommodate lots of text, especially long articles.
 - 4 or more columns offer greater flexibility for publications with text, photos, and other graphic elements and a mix of long and short articles.
 - Grids based on an even number of grid columns can suffer from too much symmetry if text and graphics are confined to individual or double grid columns throughout.
 - Newsletters don't have to be tied to columnar grids. A newsletter consisting of mostly small articles or "news briefs" and photos could use a 6(2x3), 9(3x3), or 12(3x4) unit grid of rectangular or square units quite nicely.

Grids don't have to limit design

Grids *can* feel stifling. But they needn't be.

1. Layouts based on grids are not appropriate in all cases.
2. Grids should fit the mix of elements rather than forcing elements to fit the grid.

Elements on your page do not have to be confined to individual grid units. In a five-column grid, 5 narrow columns of text can be hard to read. Try two columns of text, each spanning two grid units with an empty grid unit for accents, photos, breathing room, or adjacent caps. ([see previous feature on Finetuning Initial Caps](#))

Resize photos to fill 2-3 or more grid units. You don't have to always fill the entire grid unit either. Fill 2 1/2 grid units with a photo, leaving some extra white space.

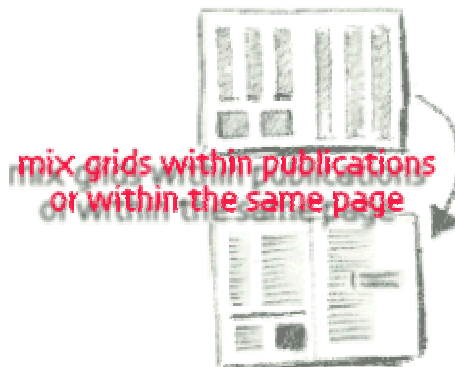
Gutters and margins are not off-limits. Bleed photos off the edge of the page. You don't have to fill every little grid unit. The odd column in a 5 or 7 column newsletter grid can offer extra "thumb space" along the outer edges. There are many ways to add white space to your designs — leaving some grid units open is one way.



If one grid is good, two could be better

Some publications use mixed grids. A different grid than what is used through much of the publication might be appropriate to present content that varies greatly from the rest of the pages. It is also okay to mix grid systems within the same page.

- A text heavy newsletter might group all photos and illustrations on a single page. The text pages can use a simple grid. The multiple photos might require a more complex arrangement.
- Use two different grids to differentiate sidebar or secondary items from primary articles.
- Mix long and short articles in the same publication using a different grid for each. Or use different grids for feature material and regular recurring departments.



As with any grid system, use it consistently. Let content guide your design and make your grid a partner in your page layout — not a dictator.

This series is only an introduction. But if it has helped you to understand the basics of design grids, given you ideas, or inspired you to find out more — then it's done just what I intended.