

Ten design principles for effective photo display

1. Cutouts are active shapes.

Photos without sides will always be more active in visual design. If you use one, it should be the dominant. Using more than one on a page or spread creates visual disparity unless they are grouped together. Photos used as cutouts should be planned so the backgrounds (contextual information) aren't being indiscriminately removed. Context is visual meaning.

2. Visual redundancy is not interesting.

Variety is the spice of life. Too little attention is paid to the need for visual variety — the basic fundamental of good story-telling. Showing readers two pictures with similar or same content weakens the visual presentation. Visual redundancy can result from pictures shot from similar angles as well as pictures displayed in same or similar sizes and shapes.

3. Patterns need contrast in content and tonal value.

Pictures arranged in patterns—touching or fused together—become confused in meaning if the reader can't discern differences in the content. Make sure angles and tonal values help the pictures separate. Content here should also vary.

4. Small sized photos need tight cropping.

Currently trendy in yearbook design, the increased use of tiny pictures increases the number of pictures in the yearbook, but doesn't necessarily increase the quality of the picture content. Small pictures must be cropped very tight to an essential head or head/shoulders. "Busy" pictures — those packed with content and shot farther away — will never work used in these tiny sizes.

5. Use Photoshop with care.

Taking a columnist's head shot and applying extensive Photoshopping filters or effects is unnecessary and ineffective. Don't bring attention to pictures used for purposes of identification rather than those used for illustration. Photoshop should be used for simple contrast, brightness, burning and dodging unless you're creating illustrations.

6. Be careful with pictures cut into cookie cutter shapes.

Pictures without four sides are active in design, just as cutouts are. Keep in mind that cutting pictures into shapes (circles, diamonds, etc.) will require careful attention to content and simplicity in presentation.

7. Pages still need visual dominants.

We're still visual readers. You have a better chance of piquing a reader's interest with good, strong large images than with small ones. Picture size should vary on pages and spreads, as should picture shapes.

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8. Avoid boring pictures.

Spreads on student cars with pictures of cars shot in the parking lot will always be boring. There's no way to make that an interesting picture subject. Give photographers opportunities to shoot interesting assignments or to take assignments and make them more interesting.

9. Crop pictures to their strengths.

Nothing improves a good picture as much as cropping it to its strengths. If you're scanning pictures, practice using the cropping tool in Photoshop to see how pictures can be improved by tighter cropping. A huge problem with cropping results when pictures are forced to conform to spaces drawn on layouts. Design should be built from the strength of good pictures, not crammed into layout positions without regard to the picture content.

Make sure pictures are being scanned correctly, too. Pictures should not display with pixellated content in publications. Talk to your printer to learn how to scan correctly to correct these visual distractions.

10. Use a variety of picture forms for pacing.

Good picture content uses a variety of forms for display. Single images that tell effective stories work well if only one image can be used. But also consider the use of picture packages: two to three images showing different aspects of an event showing different content. Package the pictures together and maintain picture shape difference. Make sure one of the pictures is dominant.

Also consider picture stories: story-telling through visual form. Too often neglected in high school publications, picture stories are still a preferred method of telling stories visually. Photographers need to find stories worthy of telling. Stories need focus and development. A picture story traditionally has a beginning, middle and end, although the layout doesn't have to utilize the pictures sequentially. Brainstorm with photographers to come up with good story-telling picture stories. Then, give photographers time to shoot, edit and layout their stories.