

LISA GRAHAM

basics of

# DESIGN

layout & typography  
for beginners

SECOND EDITION

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**Basics of Design: Layout and Typography  
for Beginners, Second Edition**  
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# part one

# Design & brain.com Layout Basics

The first part of this book deals specifically with the basics of page design and layout: what happens before you start to design; identification of the design principles and their impact on a page's layout; the power of color; and discussion of the different types of images and when it is appropriate to use them. To clarify the design principles, I've broken them into separate chapters explaining what they are, how they can improve a page design, and why you should use more than one design principle at a time. In addition, I've sprinkled each chapter with a variety of visual examples to help illustrate the concepts presented.

Keep in mind that even though I've broken the design principles into separate chapters, they are rarely used separately. In selected figures, all of the design principles interacting within a page layout are identified to clarify your understanding of their impact. The power of the design principles to improve a page's layout is magnified when they are thoughtfully combined.

# Chapter 1

## Before You Begin to Design

### OBJECTIVES

- Learn how to define your design project.
- Consider the importance of identifying your audience.
- Appreciate the importance of tailoring your project to appeal to your audience.
- Gain a basic awareness of copywriting and its use in page design.
- Survey design principles to boost understanding.
- Become familiar with the design process.
- Achieve a working familiarity with basic design elements and process terminology.

Many beginners just start to arrange images and text on the page before defining exactly what they want to say. Before you invest your valuable time and effort on a design, it helps to have a purpose and a plan firmly in mind. You will need to know four things before you begin to design:

1. What you want to say (the purpose)
2. Who you want to hear your message (the audience)
3. The kind of page **format** (the size, shape, and function of a page) you want your audience to view your message on
4. A basic knowledge of design principles

Knowing these four things will streamline your design efforts. The faster you can finish one task, the faster you can move on to another project.

## DECIDE WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY

Knowing the purpose of a page will help you decide what you want to say and how you want to say it. Ask yourself, what exactly is it that you want to communicate, and what is your intent? Is it to inform, educate, entertain, persuade, sell, direct, provide an experience, or serve as a reference? As you can imagine, the words and images on a page intended to entertain may be quite different from those on a page intended as a reference.

What you want (or need) to say will help you determine how many **visual elements**—the individual elements on the page such as lines, type, and images—you need to arrange in your design. It helps to know exactly what words you want to use on the page to convey your message (Figure 1-1). The amount of those words and

**COPY FOR SLEEPY OWL HOLLOW TRAVEL AD**

**HEADLINE:** The Bass Never Sleep at Sleepy Owl Hollow

**AD TEXT COPY:** Yes, it's true, the bass are always biting in the beautiful blue Ozark Mountain lakes. Here at Sleepy Owl Hollow Fishing Lodge, we have the most active fish alive—they almost jump out of the lake into your frying pan. My Great-Granny Hannah eats fresh fish every day by simply catching the flying fritters out of the air with her fishing net.

And those are the fast ones. Just think what you could do on a sleepy summer day with a well-baited line.

Visit Sleepy Owl Hollow Fishing Lodge.  
We'll tell Great-Granny Hannah to fry you up a mess of fish.

**CONTACT INFO:** Sleepy Owl Hollow Fishing Lodge  
1-555-555-BASS

**Figure 1-1** Writing the copy information before trying to design the page will clarify your goals and let you know just how much text you need to work into your design.



# KISS

*Keep It Simple, Self*

**Figure 1-2** A suggested motto for design (and maybe even life).

## TIP

Identifying your audience will help you determine what sort of images and graphics will best appeal to that audience. A target audience of science fiction lovers might find photographs of planets and space technology interesting and appealing, whereas a target audience of avid gardeners might not. Pick your images to both enhance your message and to attract your reader's attention.

the message will affect how you design your page layout. **Layout** is the design and placement of visual elements on a page. I recommend that you write down, or ask your boss to write down, if he is the one “requesting” the design, the exact words, phrases, or sentences on a sheet of paper before you start to design the project. This way you know exactly what you want and need to say and have concrete goals. If you are not a professional copywriter, I have included in this chapter a few copywriting hints to get you started. Perhaps the best advice, however, is to try to keep the message short and simple. As you might imagine, the more stuff you try to put in your layout, the more complicated the task will be. My personal motto in writing text or designing layouts is “KISS” or Keep It Simple, Stupid (in your case, “Sandy,” “Sam,” “Sassy,” or “Self”) (Figure 1-2).

## DECIDE WHO YOUR AUDIENCE IS

The more you know about your audience, the better equipped you are to attract their attention and communicate your message. Knowing more about your audience's demographics (age, gender, education, occupation, income, marital status, and so on), will help you target your audience and speak to them in a voice they will understand. For instance, if you are hosting a New Year's Eve party, you would design the invitation one way if the guests were your closest friends (Figure 1-3), and in a totally different way if the guests were your boss, your boss's boss, and the CEO of the company (Figure 1-4).

When you are defining who your audience is and how you can best visually speak to them, try to put yourself in their shoes. Try to design pages that appeal to their “what's in it for me” instincts. If your design has no perceived immediate value or takes a long time to read, your audience may lack the motivation to read your message, and the message will, metaphorically, fall on deaf ears.



**Figure 1-3** A playful, informal invitation to a party.



**Figure 1-4** Centered alignment and script type convey an impression of sophistication.



## PICK A DESIGN FORMAT

Knowing who your audience is will also help you determine the best format in which to communicate with them. The format you choose will influence how much information you should put within the space, as well as the size and shape of the page you will work in. These considerations have obvious implications for how you will place elements on the page, and, therefore, how the final piece will look. For instance, if you have to communicate a message to a large group of people at a public event, a poster or a banner may be a good choice. Because posters or banners are large size formats, they have a lot of space to work within, but because they are meant to be viewed at a distance, all type and images should be very big to be readable from far away. With these formats, large, simple type and images work best (Figure 1-5). In contrast, if you wish to communicate to individuals on a one-by-one basis, you may want to try a newspaper ad, flyer, or some other small format. The physical size of the page is smaller, but because most people view these formats at approximately arm's length, you can place more information within them (Figure 1-6).

These are just a few considerations to keep in mind when designing for certain formats. Part 3 in this book focuses on a number of common design formats. You can glance through that section to quickly gain an understanding of what some of the special considerations are for each format and how these considerations may affect your designs.

6'



**Figure 1-5** Simple messages and large type work best in banner designs. Try to limit the word count in banners to six words or less.



**Figure 1-6** Sample newspaper advertisement. Newspaper ads can contain more information than a banner because they are viewed at a closer distance.

## A List of Design Formats

As stated earlier, the term, format, refers to the size, shape, and function of a design. Format is not limited to two-dimensional paper projects exclusively but also applies to three-dimensional and four-dimensional designs such as product designs, box designs, web design, video graphics, multimedia, and so on. The following is a partial list of design formats you might encounter daily:

- business cards, envelopes, letterheads
- newsletters, brochures, magazines
- posters and banners
- CD booklets, DVD packaging, videotape labels

- software manuals, boxes, disk labels
- annual reports, stock reports, financial statements
- book jackets
- desk calendars, wall calendars
- billboards
- souvenir postcards, bumper stickers
- shopping bags, store signs
- sales flyers of all types
- newspaper ads, telephone book ads
- promotional t-shirts, baseball caps

### HINTS FOR EFFECTIVE COPYWRITING

Unless you are a professional writer, writing effective copy can be an intimidating task that even professional writers sometimes find scary. The term, **copy**, refers to all the words in a message, including the headlines, subheads, captions, and body text. As with many tasks, the overall project will seem less intimidating if you break it down into several smaller, more achievable steps.

The first step in copywriting is to figure out what you want to accomplish with the copy. Are you selling something? Are you buying something? Are you providing information? Is it an invitation? Is it a call to action? Is it a special fund-raising event? Asking yourself what you hope to accomplish with the message will help you define the project's mission. While you're asking questions, write down all the project goals you can think of. Don't worry about proper grammar at this point: just write down any snippet of information that comes to mind. Try not to edit yourself at this stage—you're brainstorming. For now, just write.

Step 2 involves the making of another list, this time a list of "what's in it for the reader." Readers, in general, are canny folks, who are unlikely to continue reading your message unless you can make it clear how

your message will benefit them. Ask yourself why a reader would be interested in looking at your message. What are the special features in your message? How do they benefit your reader? List the features and benefits of your message even if you know them by heart. Writing down benefits will help you organize your thoughts and further define the project's goals. It's best at this stage to just jot down a features and benefits list without worrying about perfect grammar. You'll edit later. Features and benefits lists don't have to be formal, but don't assume that readers will already know why the special features of your message are important to them. Spell it out. Take a look at the following list for examples of features and benefits.

**Feature:** We deliver office supplies 24 hours a day.

**Benefit:** So the reader doesn't have to take the time away from a pressing deadline to run errands for staples.

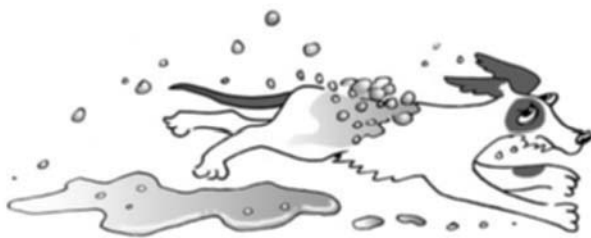
**Feature:** We groom your pet(s).

**Benefit:** So you don't have to chase a soapy Fido around your house because he resents cleanliness and refuses to stay in the bathtub (Figure 1-7).

**Feature:** We remove tattoos. No questions asked.

**Benefit:** Removal of now-inappropriate tattoos. No smarty pants comments or verbal speculation about the circumstances involved in the choice and placement of the tattoo—the ultimate in discretion.

Step 3 in the copywriting process involves organizing your information. Organizing your information will help you focus and gather scattered thoughts into a coherent pattern. A common organizational tool is an outline. Start your outline by gathering together the most



**Figure 1-7** Fido avoiding personal cleanliness!

important information from your lists and placing them as headings in an outline. Once you have major headings in place, you can fill in more details, either from your lists or from new ideas that arise naturally during the outline-developing process. Don't get into too much detail, you're only forming the skeleton of your copy—you'll flesh it out in step 4.

In step 4, your main goal is to flesh out your outline. Don't obsess over perfect grammar (yes, you'll eventually focus on grammar in step 6), just write. If you can't think of something to say under a particular outline heading, move on to the next one. It's okay to jump around if you have to. The point of this step is to get some words onto the paper so that later you can have something to work with and to push around. If you find that the outline isn't working quite as well as you'd hoped, don't be afraid to change it. Try to write as you'd speak—write as if you were having a conversation with someone. Formal writing usually just sounds stiff, and unless you're writing for stuffy academic presses, your text will be easier to write and easier for your audience to read if you keep it simple. When writing during this stage, it's okay to at first produce garbage; getting your ideas down in print will help you refine your ideas. A full trashcan isn't necessarily a sign of failure (Figure 1-8). If your trashcan resembles the one on this page, however, find a moment to take out the trash!



**Figure 1-8** Try out many different design ideas. A full trashcan isn't necessarily a sign of failure!

After you have fleshed out the details of your outline, then you're ready for step 5—the dreaded editing stage. Reread what you've written, with an eye for clarity, spelling, grammar, and relevance. Whenever possible, cut out any material that is unnecessary, duplicative, or downright irrelevant. Longer does not always mean better. If you are using a word processing program on a computer, make sure to run a spell check and grammar check. Always proofread the copy to catch any mistakes the spell check may not catch, such as the inappropriate use of "their" instead of "there" and so on. If you're not using a computer, try reading your copy into a recorder. Often, hearing your copy helps identify stiff passages or rambling sentences. Whenever possible, put the text down for a day or so before looking at it again. A rested mind often brings fresh perspective to a project.

The primary advantage of juggling the hats of copywriter, editor, and designer is that you have the opportunity to control exactly the elements that go onto your page. You can expand or condense pas-

sages of text to better integrate with graphics. You can set points you think need to be highlighted into bulleted lists to add visual emphasis (Figure 1-9). You can sprinkle in liberal amounts of headings and sub-heads to provide visual interest and to assist the reader in gaining a quick overview of the entire page (Figure 1-10). Writing copy and designing the page are often more difficult than anticipated by beginners or even professional writers, for that matter. But along with the hassle of wearing multiple hats is the advantage that you have a lot more control over the final look and feel of the page. You'll be able to better plan the entire project and have the opportunity to massage the message to fit your graphic ideas. A word of warning, however: don't procrastinate. It always takes longer to both write and design than to write or design alone. Waiting until the last minute to write and design will make you crazy!

- **Bulleted lists help readers see important information quickly.** Condense important information into bulleted lists.
- **Bold important information in bulleted lists.**
- **Don't mix bullet characters in the same list** (for example, a check mark with a bullet). Lists with mixed bullet characters often appear unorganized.

**Figure 1-9 (Above)** Bulleted lists are a great way to emphasize important points. These lists look best when the bullets “hang” to the left of the words. A “hanging” bullet catches the reader's eye and naturally leads him into the text.

**Figure 1-10 (Right)** This figure uses a prominent head and subheads to help make the document's structure clear and to add visual interest.

## Financial Outlooks

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### President's Message

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### Financial Statement

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## QUICK GUIDE TO DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Streamlining your design effort involves some forethought and planning, as well as an idea of what kind of design principles you may later be able to employ within your layouts. Once you know what the design principles are, and how to apply them, you can consciously use them to improve your designs. Although the next six chapters explain each design principle along with visual examples of how to use them, I will briefly define them here so you can survey them all at one time.

### Emphasis

The principle of **emphasis** states that the most important element on the page should be the most prominent, the second most important element should be second to the most prominent, and so on. For example, headline type, as the element that summarizes what the rest of the information is about, is often the biggest and boldest type. Emphasizing the most important elements provides a foundation that you can build the rest of the layout on and is the quickest way to draw attention to your message.

The principle of emphasis works hand in hand with the principle of contrast. The primary focus of emphasis is the intellectual analysis of your message to determine which words and phrases and graphics are the most important and, therefore, should be the most visually prominent. After identification of the important meat of your message, then you'll vigorously apply the principle of contrast to really visually highlight those important words or phrases or graphics.

### Contrast

Variety, it has been said, is the spice of life. The principle of **contrast** states that visual elements on a page should look distinctly different from one another. It is used to add visual variety to your layouts and to keep everything on the page from looking alike. Contrast takes up where emphasis leaves off by really stressing the visual difference between words and phrases and graphics.

## Balance

The principle of **balance** is concerned with the distribution of visual elements on a page in order to achieve a pleasing and clear layout. The idea behind balance is to avoid clumping elements in one location on the page, which can result in one section of the page looking overloaded or busy. An important component of balance is learning how to group important information together in a logical way. Items that are related should be placed close together. Once you start to group information together, you will need to counterbalance it on another part of the page with another element or group of information.

## Alignment

The fastest way to make your pages look organized is to visually connect, to align, elements on the page with other elements on the page. **Alignment** is the visual connection among words, graphics, images, shapes, and lines on a page when their edges or axes line up with each other. You can quickly build the principle of alignment in your pages by lining up, for example, the top of a picture with the top of a headline. Often it is the subtle lack of alignment in a beginner's page that makes the pages seem somewhat disorganized. When beginners start to visually connect elements on the page, the pages suddenly seem much cleaner and organized and have a stronger working balance.

## Repetition

**Repetition** is the principle that states that repeating lines, shapes, images, colors, textures, and other visual elements within a page helps establish a unified, cohesive design. Repetition, if used carefully, also adds a sense of controlled sophistication to the design. Too much repetition, on the other hand, quickly clutters up the page.

## Flow

**Flow** is the visual and verbal path of movement that a viewer's eye follows through a page or sequence of pages. Effective use of the prin-



principle of flow demands purposeful arrangement of visual elements in the page layout to control the way the viewer's eye scans through the design. Placement of text should take into account that readers in Western cultures tend to read from left to right and top to bottom. Placement of images should take advantage of this tendency. You can use this principle to present information in a controlled order to the viewer.

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE DESIGN PROCESS

Although it is beyond the scope of this book to detail the entire design process from first initial idea all the way through a finished piece, Figure 1-11 depicts a lighthearted view of the design process. In all seriousness, professional graphic designers proceed through a number of steps before arriving at a finished design. The first step, after receiving a design project assignment, is to research the problem. The following questions are asked at this stage:

- What are the goals? Are there multiple goals? If so, what is their order of importance?
- Who is the audience? Does the audience have any special interests? What are the audience's demographics (age, sex, income, geographical area, etc.)?
- Are there any limits or constraints on the format, time, and budget?
- What kind of page designs did other people create when presented with a similar problem? Of course, you do not want to plagiarize other people's page designs, but looking at other people's page layouts can help you identify what works and what to avoid in your own work.

The second step in the design process is to generate as many ideas as possible through thumbnail sketches. **Thumbnail** sketches are small, quick, exploratory sketches. They are the visual proof of the thinking and analyzing process. They don't have to be pretty or refined, but they must be legible to someone other than yourself. If they are too rough and look like chicken scratches, your ideas won't come across to your colleagues or your boss. And frankly, who wants to look like all they produce are chicken scratches?

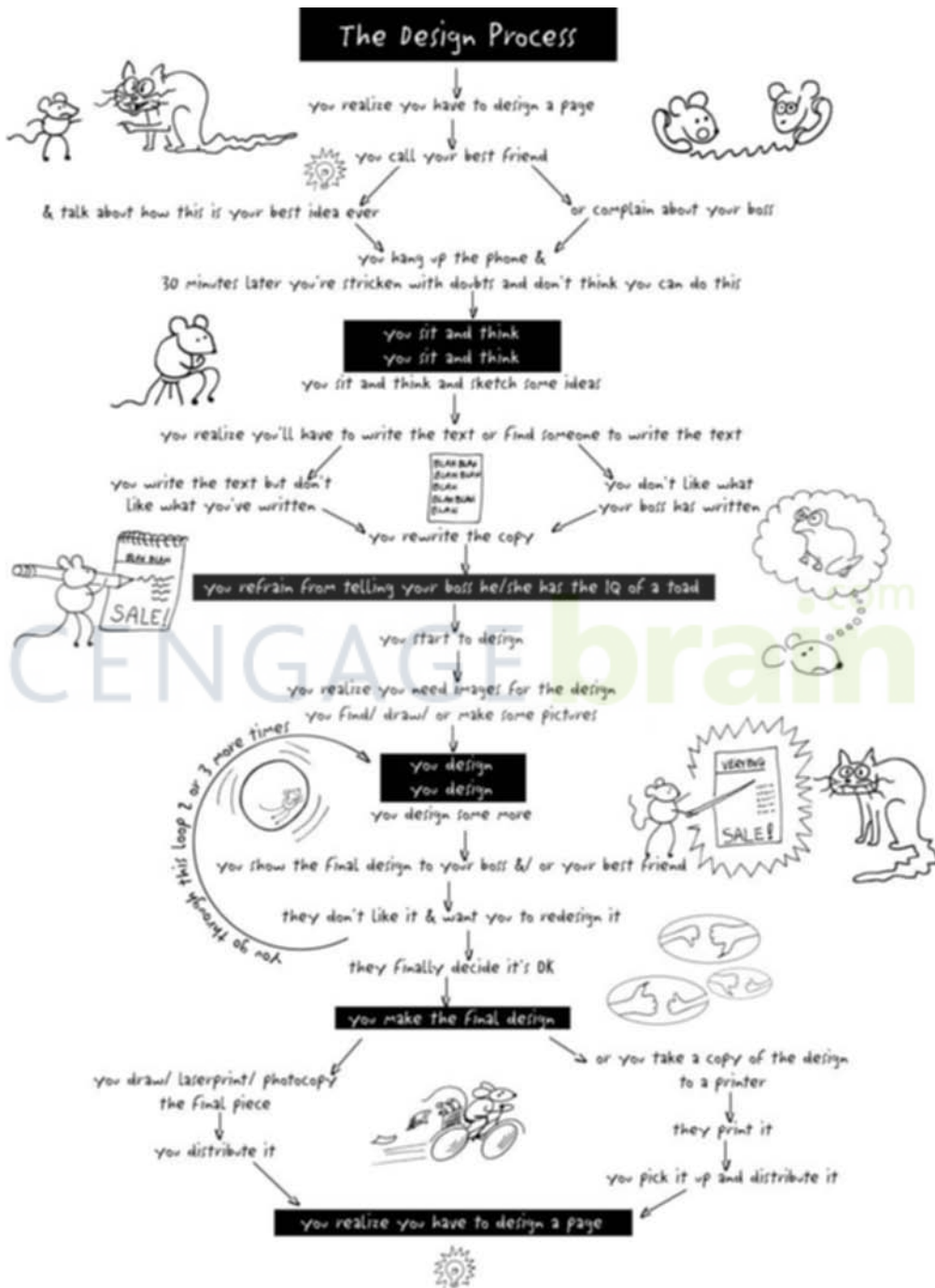


Figure 1-11 A playful peek at the design process.

Once you have a body of thumbnail sketches on the page, you can pick and choose pieces and parts from them, which, if needed, may be recombined into better thumbnails (Figure 1-12).

Many beginner page designers are tempted to shortchange this step, but it is vital for the long-term development of creative muscles. Exerting the mind and exercising creativity are like exercising any



**Figure 1-12** Sample thumbnail sketches. They aren't pretty, but they can help you try out lots of different ideas quickly. These were done with a felt-tip marker on the back of waste inkjet printer paper.

muscle in the body. In order to get stronger, faster, and more powerful, the mind, like the body, must be exercised. Thumbnails are an essential step of the design process: the more you do, the stronger your creativity will become, and the more visually interesting your pages.

The third stage of the design process is to select two or three of the stronger thumbnails and develop them into roughs. A rough is a half-size or full-size version of an original thumbnail, with an eye toward refining the layout, typography, placement, and overall concept. The purpose of working up two or three roughs is to provide a small group from which you may select the best visual solution to proceed onto the next stage, the comprehensive.

A **comprehensive**, called simply “comps,” is the artwork presented to the client for review (Figure 1-13). It is common practice to present several comps to the client for review. There is a designer’s version of Murphy’s law that might be phrased this way: “The client will always pick the weakest design (i.e., the one you hate).” Avoid this situation by allowing ample time to construct a variety of good comps for the client. Projects usually take longer to complete than you think,

**TIP**

Eventually if you choose design as your profession, interviewers may want to see a presentation of the complete design process (thumbnails, roughs, and comprehensives) for a project. They are the visual proof of your thinking process and clearly show how much you can “push” a design *and* your own creativity.



**Figure 1-13** A simple comprehensive. This comp was constructed on a Macintosh computer using Adobe Illustrator and printed to an inkjet printer to show to the client.

whether you are a beginning or an advanced designer. For those designers presenting work to a client for approval, a comp is necessary and must have a high degree of polish.

In the situation where you are the client, you may be able to gloss over this step, instead constructing a full-scale rough to gain adequate insight into the strengths and weaknesses of your design. In the situation, however, where a client must approve a project, the comp must have a high degree of polish—as close to a final printed piece as possible. Graphic designers use a variety of techniques to construct a comp, including photographs, tight drawings and illustrations, silkscreens, computer-generated type, or entirely computer-created designs.

For design students working on class projects, the comp is often the last stage of the design process. For individuals needing to produce multiple copies of a page design, however, the design process continues. Projects requiring a small number of copies, such as a single banner or a few flyers, may be hand drawn, laser printed, photocopied, or printed in full color on a digital printer. Projects that are to be produced in large quantities are best printed commercially, requiring the design be made ready for printing either through construction of camera-ready artwork or prepress digital files.

This is the final, and a very complicated, stage of the design process. There are quite a number of books that detail the techniques of taking projects to press; it is beyond the scope of this book to discuss these techniques. Entire books have been written about preparing projects to go to press through either camera-ready artwork or prepress digital file methods. If you are interested in more information about this step, consult Chapter 13, Tools and Resources, for suggested books.

In general, however, preparing a page design for printing is usually done either through the creation of traditional camera-ready artwork or through the careful preparation of digital files using desktop publishing software. To send a job to press through traditional mechanicals involves converting the design into black and white prints. All of the headlines and copy must be set in the appropriate size and typefaces, and the size and position of photographs and illus-

trations precisely detailed. Type, rule lines, and images all must be exactly placed and pasted in position on the board with no room for error. Ink colors must be specified, and for every color of ink used in the design, a separate overlay must be prepared. This method is used less and less nowadays because it has been largely rendered obsolete by the capabilities of desktop publishing software. Fewer and fewer printing companies support this method. I mention it here mostly for the historical perspective.

The more common method of preparing a page design for press is the creation of digital prepress files. To send a job to press via digital files involves the careful creation of files using desktop publishing and illustration software such as QuarkXPress, Adobe InDesign, Macromedia FreeHand, and Adobe Illustrator (to name a few programs). Digital files must contain images and type precisely placed with all ink colors specified.

It is this point of the design process that the selection of a printer occurs. Projects are often “bid” to two or three printers in order to estimate costs. The final choice of printer, however, should not rest exclusively on the cheapest bid but also on the overall quality and deadline orientation of the printer. Request to view samples of jobs they have printed. Try to pick a printer who will take the time to talk to you—try to establish a working rapport, because printers are excellent sources of practical real-world production knowledge. Pick their brains.

## SUMMARY

For the visual beginner, confronting a blank page that you need to fill with your design can be an intimidating task. You can make this task easier and more achievable by planning. Before attempting to fill the page, you need to know what your message is, who your intended audience is, and what format you can use to best reach them, and possess a basic knowledge of the six design principles. The better prepared and knowledgeable you are, the easier it will be for you to create good-looking and easy-to-read pages.

## MINI QUIZ #1

The following questions are a mix of short answer and fill-in-the-blank questions. Fill in the blanks with the words in the following list.

formats

thumbnail

roughs

comprehensive or comp

1. Billboards, posters, flyers, store banners, brochures, magazines, and business cards are all examples of different kinds of page \_\_\_\_\_.
2. List the six design principles.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ sketches are small, quick exploratory drawings that serve as a fast way to visually record your initial ideas on paper.
4. Designers take the stronger thumbnail sketches and develop them into \_\_\_\_\_ to better refine the layout, typography, placement, and overall concept.
5. The final polished artwork presented to a client is called a \_\_\_\_\_.