Design Theory
Foreword

Aspiring designers often mire themselves in software tutorials and various technical “how-to’s” but this “how-to” is to help you start down the path of assessing what you’re creating and learning how to think about design. What this is not, however, is a set of rules set in stone that you can simply follow - they are concepts that are meant to be building blocks to help move you forward.

Design is a holistic process, and that process plays a role in projects from the silliest little banner ad to large scale multinational campaigns and beyond. You can probably sense that I’m hesitating to use the phrase “design thinking”, and that’s because it’s been mangled and overused by people who just wanted a term to elevate what is essentially project planning.

No, what design thinking really is, is utilizing spatial abstraction as the method to distill a huge number of complex facets of human interaction into such simple states that they can be inferred by the viewer without any explanation. They are, in fact, such common and regular associations, that they are sometimes imperceptible.

As an example, this is especially true for typographers who have been known to lament how often they are overlooked, even by other designers whose thinking about type begins and ends with whether or not they find a particular font appealing. Typography is the hidden science of design and quite possibly the world. We engage with text so often and in such an mundane way, that we can easily lose sight of how many distinct and complex elements live within type. The most appropriate analogy I can think of is that typography is to design as macro-photography is to landscape photography, a world within a world.

I love to tell young designers that your value does not rest in knowing a few different software applications, it is your ability to think like a designer that makes you one and ultimately, gives your skills value.

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Obviously, this booklet is free, but if you are so inclined or just want to say “thanks” you can buy me a cup of coffee or a beer on patreon here.
Negative Space & Foreground/Background

Negative space is the empty area between elements that offers a path for the eye to travel through. I’ve heard a great example for explaining it to non-designers, tell them to imagine a room and everything in it is an element (desk, chair, shelf, bed, couch, etc), if you had elements covering the entire room, you wouldn’t be able to walk through the space and it would be a cluttered mess. Same thing, but for eyes.

That’s the short of it and knowing just that much can actually serve you pretty well. But this isn’t about scratching the surface, this is about understanding the interplay of visual elements. Negative (or White) Space is relative - this is why the subheader for this section is Foreground/Background, because elements switch their roles and often occupy both foreground and background space functioning as negative space AND subjects/elements.

ex1
Here we have a page with a large section diagonally interrupted by a black shape. Great. Black shape is the foreground and current subject while the white page is the background and a void of negative space. But, wait, the black shape kind of feels like it’s empty negative space too!? How can both be considered empty spaces? This is where spatial abstraction comes in. Because we (humans) grow up experiencing stimuli and signifiers we anticipate and hold preconceived expectations of the purpose of a space.
Negative Space & Foreground/Background

ex2
A tree has been added, so what happened? The eye now more strongly considers the white area to be white space relative to the black area because a known and recognizable subject was placed on it with the same color.
Negative Space & Foreground/Background

ex3
Now text has been added and once again the dynamics have changed, the subject has shifted from the tree to the text - again this is due to a lifetime of human conditioning, text is important, it needs to be scanned for information, and it might be important information so your brain tells your eyes to hurry up and see if it needs to know something. It reads the text, realizes that it's nonsense and says, huh? Dots? Promptly ignores them and goes back to the tree.
And now you're lost in Mirkwood. Everything is wrong, what's going on why why why? Okay, there are A LOT of things happening right now, some of which we'll discuss in other sections of this booklet, but in order of importance human face > well known face > color > contrast > complexity. The brain parses human faces before all other information and this beings during infancy. It takes work to move a human face down the visual hierarchy.

While I would argue that the text is still technically the subject, it's quite difficult for Sir Ian McKellen's Gandalf face to fade into the background, in fact it's so overwhelming that it almost threatens the whole piece . . . but why doesn't it? The black area surrounding the text has officially become the negative space, and because the text is fairly spartan we retain balance. So if you go to a bookstore (what are those?) you will likely see a bunch of covers with a similar layering of face/image/illustration and an area for the title and author.
Negative Space & Foreground/Background

First off, I’ll talk more about how type becomes a design element in a later section, but this example demonstrates how leading, kerning, and tracking can influence the path of your viewer’s eye and how text utilizes negative space. It’s an extreme example, but it’s important to understand how powerful of a tool it is, and why grids exist.

Grids are always recommended, but usually without much explanation beyond “it organizes stuff and makes it look neat” - and again, you can get by with a superficial understanding. However, understanding that grids create channels of travel via negative space unlocks the grid for you. Modulate and direct travel, emphasize and diminish, balance and create tension - negative space is the foundation of layout design.
Negative Space & Foreground/Background

Here we have layers of negative space, why this matters is because people learning design (particularly those of you who are self taught) might have only heard about the concept at a surface level and I see it a lot. The idea that negative space is only the area occupying the main background area of a piece. So this example serves to highlight how negative space exists in all areas between elements. First we have the copy, just a couple lines of text which essentially exist within their own imaginary boundary lines (remember a world within a world), here I decreased the leading so that they’re almost touching thereby reducing the negative space between them to almost nothing and further unifying them as an element. It makes their position within the black box more stark. Then you have the black box functioning as negative space around the text.

But the black box is a subject compared to the outlined boxes behind it. However, its negative space is interrupted by the smaller box on the bottom right corner which becomes its own subject relative to the larger outlined box. And just to create that extra confusion, both outlined boxes are a unified subject relative to the page as a whole. You need to consider the negative space for every element you add to a piece, not just the background. Almost everything is a background to something else.
Alrighty, I put a bird on it. The birds while part of the background, seem to have their own negative space, so they’re not part of the background? There’s also the couple of birds overlapping the small outlined box creating another visual conundrum. Even though I’m using black and white, this is an impact of color, or more precisely of contrast between colors.
Negative Space & Foreground/Background

ex7 cont.
Dropping that color down to almost white and taking out the errant birds creates a true patterned background which recedes and functions as unified negative space again.

Conclusion

So we’ve taken a look at the building blocks of negative space, from here it’s a matter of experimenting and keeping these things in mind as you build on them. As you introduce more complex elements (illustrations / photographs) you need to be able to maintain a mental map of what element lives where within the whole.
Balance & Tension

Balance is often conflated with symmetry, but if you think about balance in terms of weight (much like balancing a scale) it’s easier to make sense of it. What is trickier, is getting a feel for balance because there’s no real way to measure. It’s similar to optically aligning items (like round letters at the edge of a sentence).

Tension is different from balance; balance is something that is typically desired whereas tension is a tool that is employed when a situation calls for it. So what is it exactly? Well, tension is something that the eye generally wants to avoid and is distressing to look at for one reason or another. Wait, why would I want to do that? Aren’t I supposed to make it easier for viewers to consume content? Okay, so like many things we use in design, tension is a tool meant to direct (or in this case, divert) the user’s attention. Super common examples: “The fine print.” or ingredients labels. Someone might say that they’re tiny so that they fit, but they’re truly tiny to dissuade people from reading them. Fine print is almost indecipherable, even when it’s just a couple lines, this is using the tension created by difficult to read type point in order to make the eye ignore it and move along. We’ll get to how to use this, but first, time for balance examples.

ex1
In this lazy fox example we can see everything is just somewhat off, just a bit floaty. What’s happening here is that the heavy weight type on top is actually pushing the rest of the content down while threatening to float away. This is a neat thing to know, if you want something to feel lighter, leave the bottom more sparse. But if you want something to feel grounded and weighty, make the bottom third of the page heavier. Right now it’s floaty and pulling left, but let’s fix that.
Balance & Tension

That’s it. It stopped pulling left and everything feels solid on the page. The small paragraphs of text were unable to anchor the page due to the size and weight of the header text on the top left. There are other solutions however, so let’s go through some of those.
Balance & Tension

ex3
Here you can see that it took quite a bit more text to balance out the header than simply using a block. This is really important to understand as being frugal with page real estate gives you more freedom to adapt other elements and allows you to accommodate more inevitable requests from a client.
Balance & Tension

Color is such a strong tool, however, be warned (we’ll discuss in detail in the color section) that as you add more colors to a piece, the less effective each individual bit of color becomes. This 1pt red line pulls to the right really hard despite its size. Not only that, but it allows your brain to fill in the gaps and create a box around the text that isn’t actually there which gives it imaginary weight.
Balance & Tension

ex5

Last one, we can go on with a huge number of variations, but this will be the last one just to balance (I hate puns so much) example 3. It took twice as much text to balance it vertically, but horizontally is a completely different beast. By widening the paragraphs it pulls to the right as the page feels fuller, your eye travels down from the header and hits the text right away and pulls you to the right, but because it’s a thinner text element vertically, it doesn’t lock your eye there and doesn’t feel overly heavy so your eye travels back to the left to the dots and completes its journey.

Balance has many solutions, and that’s good, because it’s what you want most of the time. The key things to remember about balance are that you have to feel the weight of each element and how hard it’s pushing on the other elements; and how strongly an element attracts your eye (pulling) in any given direction. So as you design pay attention to these invisible forces, the layout and negative space are what give the eye room to travel, while the balance is what tells your eye where to stay when it gets there and where to go next. It’s a bit like a traffic cop, go here, go there, but if the lane is close (no negative space) you have gridlock.
Balance & Tension

I want to talk about two things in this first tension example. First, text that is too similar to its background color is both hard to read, and also creates strong tension. Even though there is such an amazingly powerful innate need to read from the top left (in the western world) in an “F” pattern, the grey on white text pushes you immediately to the right where you have a little paragraph to read. Second, in 2015 grey text on white was a prominent design trend, even Apple used it on their website. Please use trends carefully. I implore you to always focus on good design.

If you’re worried about appearing boring or passe, don’t. Good design never goes out of style. Trends can and do flip, but more importantly, they don’t always follow solid design principles - it’s up to you to know better. Last thing about trends is that unless you’re at the forefront of the trend, you’re part of the herd that’s following the trend, by the time they’ve been noticed by blogs and magazines, they’re already in full swing. Nothing can make your work look dated faster, than using a trend that’s recently passed.
Alright, let’s unpack this one. I used some negative terms to describe tension at the beginning of this section, but when you’re using a tool that fights your eye’s natural inclinations you can harness it to do your bidding. In this example I first reduced the leading in the header to sculpt the text into a carrying a diagonal line, I used different shades of grey to accelerate the speed of eye movement.

The goal is to throw your eye across the page to the cut-off ampersand in the bottom right, but because your eye gets there and is told to “go away, nothing sensible here” it zips over to the dots and then back to the top where it’s looped right back down to the bottom right so it’s essentially created a loop because there’s nothing that stops your eye.
Balance & Tension

ex8
You eye stops now. So that’s how tension works. It’s a double edged sword. If you do it wrong, your viewer’s eye can get lost or stuck in a loop. Or simply make something difficult to look at (harsh, grating color combinations).

Conclusion

Tension is a great tool and all you need to accomplish it is to have one or more elements behaving badly, but make sure you wield this tool correctly because you can easily ruin the functionality of your work by implementing it incorrectly. Balance is your bread and butter, it’s what most clients want because they’re not trying to impress people with some unusual or avant garde idea, then just want their audience to quickly consume their content and hopefully follow a call to action. Master balance through practice, and remember to gauge how heavy elements feel and if/where they’re pulling your eye.
Color Theory: Impact & Tone

Color theory is a bit of a paradox in that it’s typically taught highlighting complementary, supplementary, and a variety of color pairings from primary through tertiary and beyond; but “good color use” is not the same as good design. I hate to make it seem like we have such a singular focus, but truly design is about solving a problem and that problem is summed up as, creating enough effective signifiers so as to communicate a given amount of desired information to an audience.

It is important to learn the fundamental rules of color theory in order to break the rules, but it’s one of the few areas of design that almost immediately gets thrown out. This is why I want to talk about Impact and Tone when using colors. Colors quickly fall in and out of favor as they are one of the most common “trend” items - people/organizations constantly want to differentiate themselves from another and so the color wheel is constantly under attack in search of something new and fresh, so while I urge you to learn the “rules” first, the real value of color comes from its ability to impact messaging and create tone.

There’s a lot of color psychology surrounding whether a specific color is associated with one thing or another depending on sociocultural norms and that is NOT what I’ll be talking about here. Impact in this booklet is referring to the actual impact it has on the design and what that means for the viewer. And for tone, I will NOT be talking about the emotional value of color, but rather how the tone affects user interaction.
Color Theory: Impact & Tone

ex1
Two little paragraphs, one with a black line and one with a light blue line. It should be fairly obvious how strongly the eye gravitates towards the paragraph on the right and how much friction is created by that blue line. It really holds the eye there. Two things are happening here, one is that the colored line overrides the black line on the left, the other is that by this point in the booklet you have internalized my red dots as something that’s just a given. Your eye was expecting them and they don’t retain color related impact anymore. This is important to keep in mind when employing color, repetition reduces impact.

Think of decorations in your home, let’s say you put up a colorful picture or painting on a wall, it’s brilliant and really stands out to you for a while, but eventually it fades into the background, your brain tells your eye, “you know it’s there move on.” and it just becomes part of the mental map of your home. This is needed so that you can notice things that have changed. Same thing happened here, after seeing and knowing the dots would be present they’re just part of the examples now and serve only as visual anchors for the purpose of balancing.
Color Theory: Impact & Tone

ex2
Just one paragraph this time, but the blue line gained some weight! It draws a lot more attention now doesn’t it? But is that a good thing? The intensity of the thin blue line was strong enough in example one to attract and keep the eye there for a bit; however the thicker blue line doesn't just get your eye’s attention, it actually distracts from the paragraph. Many clients think “I REALLY want to draw attention to this very important area, make it bigger! Brighter! Bolder!, etc”, but once you cross a threshold you actually start to distract from what you want to highlight and shift attention to an element. It creates a spiral of competition in which the client keeps asking for everything else to become increasingly noticeable in order to have importance against all the other elements.
Color Theory: Impact & Tone

ex3
The line is now a box. The text is effectively dead. The box is so powerful that it’s actually changed the entire composition of the page, everything needs to be redesigned to accommodate it.
That was a quick redesign! Color is a slippery beast and this is why learning color theory fundamentals helps to inform how you can use color for impact. A complimentary color thrown onto the background changed the dynamic and took away a great deal of the light blue box’s power because now it’s trying as hard as it can to balance out the massive influx of orange, and getting lost in its attempt. This gives power back to the black text, especially the header text on top which has just gained a huge amount of relevance due to its weight. Black and white are so common together that even a heavy header doesn’t carry much value beyond what it is. But when a colored background is introduced is transitions from “hey I’m just text” to “maybe I’m kind of an element/object of my own”. Let’s keep exploring.
And back to thin blue line. Why does this thin line get more attention now and what happened to the whole complimentary color thing? This goes back to the idea of intensity, and the intensity of a color is inverse to how much of it there is. That’s somewhat counterintuitive, but the background is a pretty strong orange, yet it’s fine. That’s because the human brain is fascinating in how it interprets and reads things. Because the orange spans the entire page the brain immediately says, “that’s in the back, therefore background, therefore negative space, therefore not as important.”
This is something you’re probably familiar with and one of the great ways to use color for impact and that’s to signify new sections. The three header lines haven’t changed, but now they’re labeled by a dot at the end of each line. The brain also loves classification. Humans classify everything because it’s part of how we’re able to maintain order of countless structures and hierarchies ranging from types of chairs to fruit to jets and so on ad infinitum.

Now your eye stops at each line and associates that color with that line, so if this example were to become a magazine, you could simply put that color dot at the top of a page and a person would expect that page to contain information related to its given association. In review, color creates impact through intensity, differentiation, size, and classification. On to tone.
Tone is controlled by the amount of "grey" (a codeword for gradations of black when thinking about tone) in a color. This is another one of those soft tools that allows you to direct the eye by leveraging contrast. In our first tone example here, the brown color has decreased the amount of contrast in the header area so those big bold letters have been diminished, while the bright blue box really jumps out at you. Even the red dots have been given a new lease on life. Knowing now what we know about impact how can we employ tone to create hierarchies in information? Let’s see in the next example.
Color Theory: Impact & Tone

Our last example for tone since it is just an augment to impact. Now we have four paragraphs of equal weight text, but two of them feel more important than the others. Top left and bottom right, right? The lines are darker brown than the brown lines of the top right and bottom left causing your eye to prioritize those. You may be noticing that you’re spending just a bit more time on the bottom right, and that’s because that line is a single shade darker than the top left line. That is the power of tone. It carves paths for the eye much like negative space. This is why you might see an illustration that may feel like it’s packed and there is no “negative space” but it still works, and that’s because color tone creates those dynamic pathways that help lead the eye.
Minimalism, Contextualism, and Synergy

We’re going to start with an example in this section. Here we have four pages, which one is minimalist? They all are. And what’s more, they are all equally minimal. Now that that’s out there, let’s get to why minimalism is a design concept despite being an entire school of design thought. Minimalism is one of the most misused terms in design, many confuse it with “lots of negative space” or with flat design. Neither are true. Simply put, minimalism is just paring down elements until only the essential elements remain. In the example provided, they each have a single element, the word “minimalism” it’s essential because it says exactly what we’re talking about it, nothing more and nothing less, it is quite literally, the point.
Minimalism, Contextualism, and Synergy

Minimalism is also an entire school of thought, but it’s almost never given credit as a design tool.
To illustrate why it’s a tool we have to do something like this. If I had presented the shape-filled box with the work “minimalism” in it, it would have not been minimalist, and that element, in fact, is NOT minimalist. However, the piece as a whole leans towards minimalism because now we’re looking at two essential elements - a header and body text with only two extraneous elements (the shape-filled box). What’s the other? The color red. It’s not necessary and therefore not reductive enough to be minimalist.

While I could go through more examples, they all point to the same thing, that minimalism is just about eliminating elements until only the necessary remain, and that people often misinterpret simple or empty with “minimal” even they are not the same thing. Any one element can be minimal even while everything else is covered with elements. Minimalism is a tool that can be applied at an individual scale or to an entire piece.
Minimalism, Contextualism, and Synergy

Contextualism

Contextualism is having one item that would make no sense on its own without a context to give it meaning relative to a whole. This example looks at a few things jumbled together. We have a flat design email icon with a label on a gradient background (not uncommon to find something like this) opposite a simply drawn mailbox. Which is minimal? If you said the mailbox, then yes, you are correct. It is a single element. One mailbox. It could be argued that the red flag is a second element, but because a black blobby shape could be construed as something else (maybe a hammer) the flag gives it context and it is immediately identifiable as a mailbox . . . in the USA. That’s another layer of contextual relevance. This is only a mailbox to people who have seen these types of mailboxes. So one element, two contexts to keep in mind.

The other mail icon might be called minimalist, but really it’s just flat. It has a gradient background which pretty much kills its chances at minimalism, it has an envelope and a label. So three elements. Would it work without the word? Yes. And that's because of built in sociocultural context. We are so used to this type of icon symbolizing mail, which in the digital space is automatically know to be referring to email. This is an example of context working in your favor.

However! If either of these pieces were to be used on a website, what happens? The context changes and the mail icon piece becomes more minimalist than the mailbox! Why!? Because context of course! It’s a lighter element to deal with on a page full of other elements and an easier one to explain. It’s labeled, it’s known within the context of the digital landscape throughout the world, and it doesn’t draw unnecessary attention. The mailbox, despite being a minimalist element on its own, suddenly becomes an illustration rather an element signifying “email” and the brain gives it a different value.

It’s more intrusive and heavier. You’d have to build an entire context around it to make it recede back to element status.

So to recap, flat enveloped on background with label is not minimalist as its own element, but is minimal relative to a whole known context - while the mailbox is minimalist on its own, but asks for too much context when incorporated with other elements.
Minimalism, Contextualism, and Synergy

Synergy

ex4

Now we can finally explain synergy. By itself it’s a very difficult term to discuss in terms of design, but now that we’ve given it context, it’s pretty easy to understand - basically, it’s using elements to give each other context. Here’s an example for a flower shop, shocking in how directionless it is. We’ve got a logo of some sort, what the shop sells, and a picture of flowers. Let’s add some elements that inform the viewer and create a context.
Now we can assume that “Flower Shop” is not telling us what the store sells, but that it’s the actual name of the store and that the logo is derived from the name. There’s an immediate connection and it serves to create the groundwork for a brand identity. Next we see that the green shop name text wasn’t just to indicate greenery, but that it’s also working to evoke a sense of fun and maybe twee style as the bright pastels show us who the store wants to be. The pink rectangle on the bottom, despite being a flat rectangle, is now a space for the flowers to sit as the color matches the vase and gives it a sense of foreground/background space. The little shadow helps to enhance the effect by anchoring the vase.

If you have an element and client asks you, “why is that there?” And your best answer is, “because design” then that element doesn’t need to be there. That doesn’t mean the piece doesn’t need an element there to balance it, but it does mean that the element being used has no context within the piece or the brand as a whole. Either use it to help provide context to another element or use another element to give it context, then you’ve created self reinforcing synergy and can explain exactly why it works.
Typography as Design Element
and Font Diptychs & Triptychs

This section is not going to talk about custom made type or elaborate typefaces, this is actually about manipulating type through tracking, leading, color, and scale to transform it into a design element. It’s pretty straight forward so I’ll just put it all on one page and then talk about it.

Font Diptychs & Triptychs

One of, if not the most common problems young designers have is pairing fonts. “Can you suggest some fonts that would work here?” . . . Yes, but also no. There are a bazillion fonts out there and it takes time to properly discover a voice that matches the client or their organization. You can find good enough fonts to meet your needs without too much trouble, but to find the goldilocks font for someone takes time and money.

Here’s how to think about type - the body font is the voice, the header font is the manner in which they speak, and accent fonts are whispers and gestures. The voice is what you’re going to engage with the bulk of the time, this is where you should start the font selection process. People love to pick header fonts because they’re fun and big and get all the attention. Don’t do that because it makes the search for an appropriate body font more difficult. Find the voice first. Make sure it’s clear, legible, and is representative of the client/organization.
Typography as Design Element
and Font Diptychs & Triptychs

On its face it seems like something people wouldn’t screw up, but type is one of the most incorrectly used tools, particularly by new designers. There is always a threshold below which something looks “wrong” or accidental, but once you cross it it becomes purposeful and impactful. There is no rule where “this happens at X” for this, it’s relative to all the other concepts I’ve talked about. When does a big font cross over from being obnoxious to a design element? At which font weight does that big font work as a big font? Which shade of color allows it to become similar enough to the background so that it functions as design? How far does the tracking need to be set in order to make it look intended rather than a mistake? There is no hard and fast answer to any of these. Because the eye wants to read text you have to make the brain understand that this text isn’t just for reading, but that it exists in a state in which it’s meant to create an effect first and read second (if at all).
Typography as Design Element
and Font Diptychs & Triptychs

Before I talk about header/accent fonts and how to pair, I have to make this aside about serif’s. I hear it all the time, “no one wants serifs anymore” and that’s partially due to designers who are bad at picking fonts and because no one is explaining to these client's that they’re not all silicon valley start-ups whose default is to just use Helvetica because it’s the only font they’ve heard of and know that designers like it and it'll match their rounded buttons and look like 99% of every other start-up. What people really mean when they say they don’t like serifs is that they don’t want to look old or like they’re using Times New Roman like they had to when they were writing essays in high school. Typographers work hard to make new typefaces, look for something different if you can.

Okay, onto headers (the manner in which an organization speaks) and how to start the pairing process. Header font needs to be distinct and have a manner-of-speaking, are they soft spoken, bubbly, authoritative, wise, do they have an accent, a drawl, etc etc, just speak with your clients and learn what it is they or their organization represents and how that thing might sound if it were a person having a conversation with you. Then it’s time to take your selection and see how it matches the body. See if you can find some commonality between them. Maybe they have similar x-heights, or similar widths, or they share a certain type of roundness, or they both write the letter ‘g’ in a funky but similar way, maybe the apertures are similar, whatever. Look for commonalities.
Typography as Design Element
and Font Diptychs & Triptychs

Triptych fonts are not bad, nor are they off limits. If you look around you’ll find examples of triptychs, The New Yorker uses three fonts for example, sans serif as accent, famous New Yorker font for headers, and some Garamond-esque font for the boy.

So the question is how to find that whisper/gesture font? Here’s a fake blog page, it doesn’t appear to be a real site at the time of this writing, I’ve used three fonts - body = Rockwell Regular (slab serif), header = Haettenschweiler Regular with 9 tracking, accent = Europa Light. Rockwell has this weightyness to it, even at regular weight, and the slab serif makes it nice and chunky, so Haettenschweiler which is normally difficult to pair because it’s so condensed and has such a high x-height found a nice partner because of that weight and chunkiness. It works for a tip-style blog in which the author wants to be commanding while talking about gear and machinery.

And now The Prestige, the third font. It doesn’t have much, if anything in common, with the others so why doesn’t it bother anyone? Because it doesn’t get in the way. It doesn’t introduce its own voice, it’s not butting in, it doesn’t feel schizophrenic. It’s exceedingly neutral. “But what if your body font is neutral?”

Balance. Yes, you can spice up the accent font. There are no strict rules here, remember, these are just conceptual tools to help aid your design process. The more you learn how to see and think like a designer, the more flexible these tools become.
The Visual Significance of Three

This is a distillation of the rule of odds (which is still valuable to know). The rule of odds basically states that having an odd number of areas of interest creates more visual interest than even numbers. The reason I find the number three to be the most significant odd number in design is due to it being so prominent in so many facets of life. When you write a list, you usually go item one, item two, and item three. Photographers use the rule of thirds for composition, plays have three acts, song choruses are usually repeated three times, renaissance painters strove to create pyramidal shaped compositions with three areas of interest, equilateral triangles, the golden ratio, odom's construction, the radical center is the power point of three radical circles, three primary colors, it takes three to make a trend, and a whole host of mystical stuff that I don't particularly care about beyond the fact that it's a culturally significant number and our brain likes it (1), which means our eyes like it (2), which means I like because I can use it to accomplish my goals (3).
Developing a Critical Eye

Perhaps the most important thing you can do as a designer is to develop and hone an editorial/critical eye. This comes more naturally to some than others, it might start out as being able to identify when something is “good” in a broad sense, sometimes people think of it as “good taste” but those are really just the surface of it. I’m not saying that you’ll be able to dodge bullets, I’m trying to tell you that when you’re ready, you won’t have to. I’m sitting here with something like 12 pages of design theory and it might seem like a lot of things to have to keep track of, but the more you practice the easier it’ll be to see these until you reach a point where you just see it all.

And nowhere is this more important, than with your own work. You need to be able to look at something you’ve done, and know every potential issue that may be raised. A new designer might look at what they’ve done and say, “This is awesome! Everyone will love it for sure! I’m really proud of myself.” And then they’re gutted when someone points out where they fell short. That’s because they haven’t developed that critical eye, they can’t see it yet. So as you work through a project start taking note of decisions you’ve made and what type of reaction it might illicit. “I chose this color because of reasons x, y, z. - but someone might not like this color because of reason q.” It’s like playing chess against unknown variables where your “opponent” may just flip the table over on their turn.

I’m not going to lie, this is a difficult skill to build by yourself if you’re self teaching. It requires you to be really self aware and honest with yourself. People who have formally studied a creative field have the benefit of having been through a ringer of critiques - taking multiple classes which each can have multiple critiques each week where you’ll get feedback from 10-30 people, means getting picked apart from a ton of viewpoints followed by formal criticism from the instructor. If you have access to such a group, it’s worth using them as a sounding board and absorbing as much criticism as you can.

- You can start by evaluating technical aspects of what you create. Is it balanced, does my eye move throughout, do my choices make sense with the project requirements?
- Spend time at museums or looking at “well known and respected” members of the industry. NOT behance or dribbble, those are places where anyone (who might be clueless) can post.
- Learn to distance yourself from your work. You can love it later, but before you do, see how hard you can tear it apart.
- Ask and answer honestly, “is there something I can improve on this?” If yes, then why can’t you? (time?, skill?, lazy?, etc).
- Think of yourself as the client. If you paid someone to create this and they hand it to you for your organization would you be happy to put it up against your competitors with your name on it? If not, what’s holding it back?
- If you’ve asked for critiques of your work on multiple occasions and you keep hearing similar issues, are you able to identify that trend and then fix that deficiency?
- Are you trying to run before you can walk? I see this all the time. Someone follows a tutorial and now thinks that’s their skill level. Be honest with yourself because the only person you’ll screw over is yourself if aren’t.
- Lastly, don’t give up. Take those gut punches, cry if you have to - we all know what it’s like to create something, you put a piece of yourself into it and it stings when people hate it. It’s okay. Let it hurt and use that to drive you to do better.