

Figure/Ground Relationships

Figure/ground is the most fundamental organizational principle of 2-dimensional design. It is also referred to as positive and negative space. This principle involves the viewer's *perception* of the design, and is crucial to shaping a strong design. Whenever we look at a mark on a page we see it as an object on a background. This distinction is fundamental. An object (figure) is only visible to the extent that it is seen as separate from its background (ground). We are able to recognize and read words on a page because we organize letters into a figure lying on a ground.

There are three types of figure/ground relationships:

Stable – Each object or shape is perceived in an *unchanging relationship* of object against background. Usually an unrelieved silhouetting of shapes which is usually not the most interesting spatial solution.



Reversible – Figure and ground can be focused on *equally*. What was initially ground becomes figure. Because we cannot simultaneously perceive both images as figure, we keep switching. Many logos utilize this type of figure/ground relationship.



Ambiguous – This figure/ground relationship is where the designer intentionally *confuses* the perception of positive and negative shapes. These designs include puzzle pictures, where one figure may turn out to be made up of another, or of several different pictures. The works of M.C. Escher are the best examples of this relationship.



Here are some conditions under which one area appears as figure and another as ground:

- The enclosed or surrounded area tends to be seen as figure; the surrounding, unbounded one as ground. The relationship between the object (figure) and the edge of the design space (ground) determines the figure ground relationship
- Convex shapes are more easily seen as figure than concave. Objects with more volume tend to be seen as figure.
- Simplicity (especially symmetry) is usually seen as figure.
- Familiarity causes a shape to become figure. As we focus on it, it becomes figure while the surroundings become ground.
- In a horizontally divided design, the lower half usually becomes ground.
- The smaller the object, the more likely it will become figure.
- Black shapes tend to be seen as figure before white shapes

CLOSURE – This is a method that can be used to create a reversible figure/ground relationship. Closure is based on the principle that familiar shapes are more readily seen as complete than incomplete. When the eye completes a line or curve in order to form a familiar shape, closure has occurred. This method is often used in trademark symbols.

REMEMBER: At its best, design becomes inseparable from communication, form becomes content.