“Directing someone else’s attention” is one definition of rhetoric—and this is a highly useful way to think about visual composition. The purpose of any visual layout is to persuade an audience to think or act in some particular way—which means that you are trying to get them to follow a line of thinking or responding that leads to the end you want.

You are trying to build, in other words, an ordered set of elements (alphabetic symbols, photographs, drawings, shapes, and so on) that your audience follows visually—and hence conceptually—to arrive at the points you want to make.

When you are making any kind of visual layout, you are working to draw your audience’s eyes—and hence their attention and thinking—through your ordered presentation so that they are persuaded by your ordering to take the action or think the thoughts you’re hoping they will.

This all means, then, that your visual compositions must be ordered: this all means, then, that, **one** your visual compositions must create a visual hierarchy that indicates to your audience what to look at first, what to look at second, what third, and so on...

This all means, then, too, that, **two** your visual compositions must look like a set of unified pieces.

So, **first**, you need to know about the visual principles of contrast and sameness.

Second, you need to know about the visual principle of repetition.
Over the next several pages, you will learn about how to use **contrast and sameness**, along with **repetition**, to build a clear **visual hierarchy** in any layout.

You will also get some practice in sketching out layouts that have visual hierarchy—and you will encounter the term “thumbnail,” which means a quickly sketched, reduced version of a layout. Because they are quick to produce and you can make many of them in a short about of time, designers make thumbnail sketches all the time, to help them quickly envision how a layout might (or might not!) work.
Contrast & Sameness

There are 6 sets of illustrations below. For each set, circle the illustration that has an element that stick out to your eyes.
I'm guessing that you circled a2, b1, c1, d2, e2, and x2. In each of those sets, one element is different from all the others in its set.

That is, in each one of those sets, there is one element that **contrasts** with all the other elements in the set.

The element contrasted because it had **a different size, shape, color, position, or level of abstraction** than all the other elements in the set. ("Level of abstraction" refers to what is going on in the "d" set: notice how the abstract shapes create a background against which the more “realistic” face can stand out.)

Contrast helps draw our attention to parts of visual compositions (although contrast needn't be a principle for visual composition alone: think of how musical composers play with contrasts of tone or rhythm to create aural interest, and how people composing written works will vary the voice or rhythm or word sound of what they write).

Contrast emphasizes certain parts of a composition, telling us to look there first or to pay particular attention to what has been made to stand out. (Look at how the contrast in kind of typeface, in size of typeface, and in weight of typeface draws your eyes to the words “contrasts” and “a different size, shape, color, or position” above.)

When you are composing, and wish to draw your audience's attention to a certain part of your composition, there is a very odd aspect of composition to which you must pay attention: **you can only create contrast when you also create sameness.**

Notice how, in the sets of elements on the previous page, one element stands out precisely because all the other elements look alike and are placed similarly.

**Elements can only stand out when the things around them blend into appearing all the same.**

This means that when you want to create contrast, you have to be very attentive to creating a background of sameness against which an element can stand out. This means also that you can’t make too many things different—or none of them will stand out...
For example, in the sets of elements below, does any one object stand out?

Each of the elements in these small compositions is different from each of the other elements—but not different enough to stand out...
Notice, however, that some simple changes can make one element stand out in these compositions:

(Note also how the changes, while simple, require you to make one element VERY different from the others... )

Write down all the strategies you can see at work in the compositions on these four pages for creating contrast with a series of elements... and keep your eyes open for other strategies as you look at visual compositions around you.

Be sure that, as you work on your own compositions, that you think consciously about the play of contrast and sameness you are creating.
There are 6 sets of illustrations below. For each set, circle the illustration that looks most ordered and unified to your eyes.

when George's grandmama was told that George had been as good as gold she promised in the afternoon to buy him an immense balloon and so she did but when it came it got into the candle flame...
I’m guessing that you circled a1, c2, f2, m2, s1, and y2. In each of those layouts, the elements are visually linked with each other. That is, in each of those thumbnail layouts, the each elements repeat something from the other elements.

Elements can repeat the size, shape, color, position, alignment, or level of abstraction of other elements. Notice that these are almost all the same qualities that can be used to create contrast.*

Repetition of the qualities of elements creates visual relationship between the elements. It’s like when you meet the sister of a friend and you can tell they are related because their faces look alike. It’s also like what you do when you are putting together an outfit: if you are wearing a shirt with red stripes in it, you might choose to wear red socks or carry a red handbag (depending on your taste in accessories.) (Think about how repetition functions in writing or speech-making, too: you show people you are staying on topic by using the same words and phrases and the same tone of voice throughout—except when you then use contrast to emphasize what you want people to remember.)

Repetition makes the elements of a layout look like they belong together. Repetition therefore helps make layouts look unified—and unified looking layouts do seem to appeal to people’s tastes these days.

*There are many more strategies for creating repetition than are mentioned here. Before you move on in reading these pages, go find a magazine, flip through it, and see if—through observation—you can list at least 10 more strategies for creating repetition.
using contrast & repetition to create
VISUAL HIERARCHY

There are 6 sets of illustrations below. For each set, circle the illustration that looks to you to have a clear visual path for your eye to follow. That is, in which of the two illustrations do you have no question which element you are to look at first, which second, and so on?

- z1 z2
- q1 q2
- w1 w2
- p1 p2
- f1 f2
- e1 e2
I’m guessing that you circled z2, q1, w2, p1, f1, and e2. In each of those thumbnails, you should be able easily to tell which element you are intended to look at first, which second, and so on.

In each of those layouts, in other words, there is a clear visual hierarchy: you can see almost immediately which elements are given the most visual weight and which the least.

Notice how contrast and repetition play off each other in those layouts to create clear visual paths. One element stands out the most, and then another element stands out a bit less, and so on. Contrast helps the elements stand out against a background of repetition, while the repetition helps the elements look like they belong together.

There are several other things to notice here:

- Look at how the element that first draws your attention is usually largest and darkest. When you are getting started building visual hierarchies, it is easiest to begin by making your contrasts very obvious.

- Look also at how the elements you are to see first are often in the top left or the top middle of the thumbnail. Because we have learned to read from top to bottom and left to right, the top left of a page is already a place where we are accustomed to start looking—or reading. You can use that to your advantage when you are trying to create a clear and unambiguous visual starting point on a page.

- Notice, too, how the use of “white space” helps to create both contrast and a visual path. The thumbnails that have lots of elements are the ones where it is hard to see any one element stand out and hence where it is hard to see a clear visual path. When there are fewer things to see, it is easier for us to give our attention to the elements that are present.
practice with building
contrast, repetition, 
& visual hierarchy

In each of the little thumbnail outlines below and on the next two pages, sketch (using pen or pencil—or both) little layouts. Use letter as well as abstract shapes. Be sure to try to use all the strategies described in the last pages for creating contrast, repetition, and visual hierarchy—and see if you can come up with some of your own.