

Figure/Ground

The form of an object is not more important than the form of the space surrounding it. All things exist in interaction with other things.

In music, are the separations between notes less important than the notes themselves? Malcolm Grear

Figure/ground relationships shape visual perception. A figure (form) is always seen in relation to what surrounds it (ground, or background)—letters to a page, a building to its site, a sculpture to the space within it and around it, the subject of a photograph to its setting, and so on. A black shape on a black field is not visible; without separation and contrast, form disappears.

People are accustomed to seeing the background as passive and unimportant in relation to a dominant subject. Yet visual artists quickly become attuned to the spaces around and between elements, discovering their power to shape experience and become active forms in their own right.

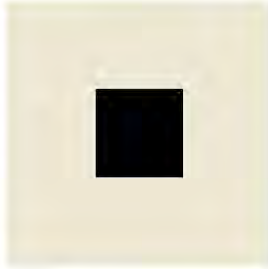
Graphic designers often seek a balance between figure and ground, using this relationship to bring energy and order to form and space. They build contrasts between form and counterform in order to construct icons, illustrations, logos, compositions, and patterns that stimulate the eye. Creating figure/ground tension or ambiguity adds visual energy to an image or mark. Even subtle ambiguity can invigorate the end result and shift its direction and impact.

Figure/ground, also known as positive and negative space, is at work in all facets of graphic design. In the design of logotypes and symbols, the distillation of complex meaning into simplified but significant form often thrives on the taut reciprocity of figure and ground. In posters, layouts, and screen designs, what is left out frames and balances what is built in. Similarly, in time-based media, including multipage books, the insertion and distribution of space across time affects perception and pacing.

The ability to create and evaluate effective figure/ground tension is an essential skill for graphic designers. Train your eye to carve out white space as you compose with forms. Learn to massage the positive and negative areas as you adjust the scale of images and typography. Look at the shapes each element makes and see if the edges frame a void that is equally appealing. Notice how as the value of a text block becomes darker, its shape becomes more defined when composed with other elements.

Recognizing the potency of the ground, designers strive to reveal its constructive necessity. Working with figure/ground relationships gives designers the power to create—and destroy—form.

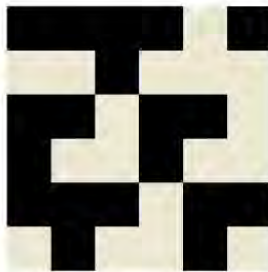
Figure Sky These photographs use urban buildings to frame letterforms. The empty sky becomes the dominant figure, and the buildings become the background that makes them visible. Lisa Rienermann, University of Essen, Germany.



Stable



Reversible



Ambiguous

Stable, Reversible, Ambiguous

A stable figure/ground relationship exists when a form or figure stands clearly apart from its background. Most photography functions according to this principle, where someone or something is featured within a setting.

Reversible figure/ground occurs when positive and negative elements attract our attention equally and alternately, coming forward, then receding, as our eye perceives one first as dominant and next as subordinate. Reversible figure ground motifs can be seen in the ceramics, weaving, and crafts of cultures around the globe.

Images and compositions featuring ambiguous figure/ground challenge the viewer to find a focal point. Figure is enmeshed with ground, carrying the viewer's eye in and around the surface with no discernable assignment of dominance. The Cubist paintings of Picasso mobilize this ambiguity.

Interwoven Space

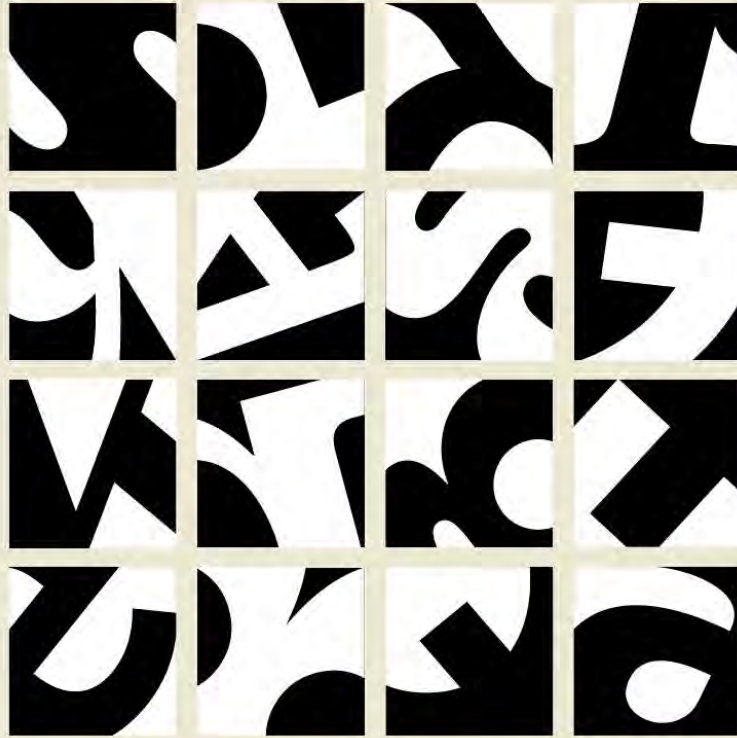
Designers, illustrators, and photographers often play with figure/ground relationships to add interest and intrigue to their work. Unlike conventional depictions where subjects are centered and framed against a background, active figure/ground conditions churn and interweave form and space, creating tension and ambiguity.



Form and Counterform Sculpture—like buildings in a landscape—displaces space, creating an active interplay between the form and void around it. Here, the distilled shapes and taut tension pay homage to Henry Moore, with whom this artist studied in the 1930s. Reuben Kramer, 1937. Photographed by Dan Meyers.



Figure Inside of Figure This poster reveals its subject at second glance. One head takes form as the void inside the other. The tension between figure and ground acquires an ominous energy. Joanna Górska and Jerzy Skakun, Homework.



Letterform Abstraction In this introduction to letterform anatomy, students examined the forms and counterforms of the alphabet in many font variations, eventually isolating just enough of each letter to hint at its identity. Each student sought to strike a balance between positive and negative space.
Typography I, Jennifer Cole Phillips, faculty



Optical Interplay This mark for Vanderbilt University employs a strong contrast between rigid form and organic counterform. The elegant oak leaf alternately sinks back, allowing the letterform to read, and comes forward, connoting growth, strength, and beauty. *Malcolm Gear, Malcolm Gear Designers.*