

Grids and structure

Typography reference 3/3

“The grid provides a rational basis upon which a set of recognisable and repeatable conventions can be arranged, enabling the reader to navigate the printed page.”

David Jury, *About Face*

This document outlines some of the basic ground rules for the design and use of grids. The main methods of dividing the page are a COLUMN GRID, or by using a MODULAR GRID. Other systems include the manuscript grid and the hierarchical grid.

The variety and potential of grid design (by combining elements of both column and modular grid) are limited only by the knowledge and creativity of the designer: grids can be as simple or as elaborate, as structured or as ‘unstructured’ as is required, with endless combinations of column and modular based structures possible.

COLUMN GRID

A column-based grid organises information (text / photo / illustration / graph etc) into vertical columns. This system is highly versatile and can be used to separate different kinds of information. For example, columns can be reserved just for running text, others for captions and imagery.

The width and number of columns will depend on the attributes of the content to be used within them, and also the size of the page. The aim is to find a width that accommodates the information comfortably, without compromising text

or image. For example, an A2 double page spread can easily accommodate an eight column grid, whereas an A4 double page spread may not function well with anything over four columns of content.

The versatility of grids allows columns to be used or ignored by the designer. For example, a document that is divided into eight columns may use the width of two of the columns for running text, one column for captions, and five for imagery.

MODULAR GRID

In its basic form, a modular grid is a column based structure with horizontal lines that

THE ANATOMY OF A GRID

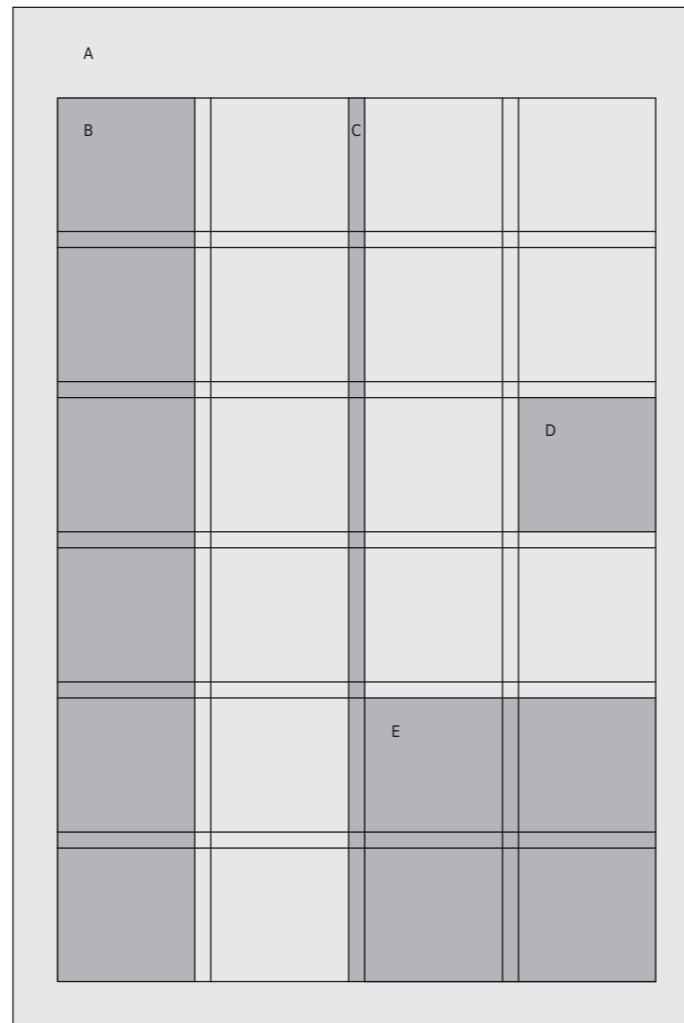
A
Margins: the negative space between the page edge and the main content. Margins can be used to great effect as areas of quiet contrast to visually ‘busy’ pages, or for marginal information such as page numbers or folios

B
Column: an area of vertical space assigned to text or image (or a combination of both). There can be any number of columns, sometimes all the same width, sometimes varying widths, for different levels of content

C
Gutter: the space between two columns / modules, which allows content to flow freely without confusing the reader

D
Module: individual unit of space within the grid

E
Spacial zone: groups of modules that together form distinct areas of the page



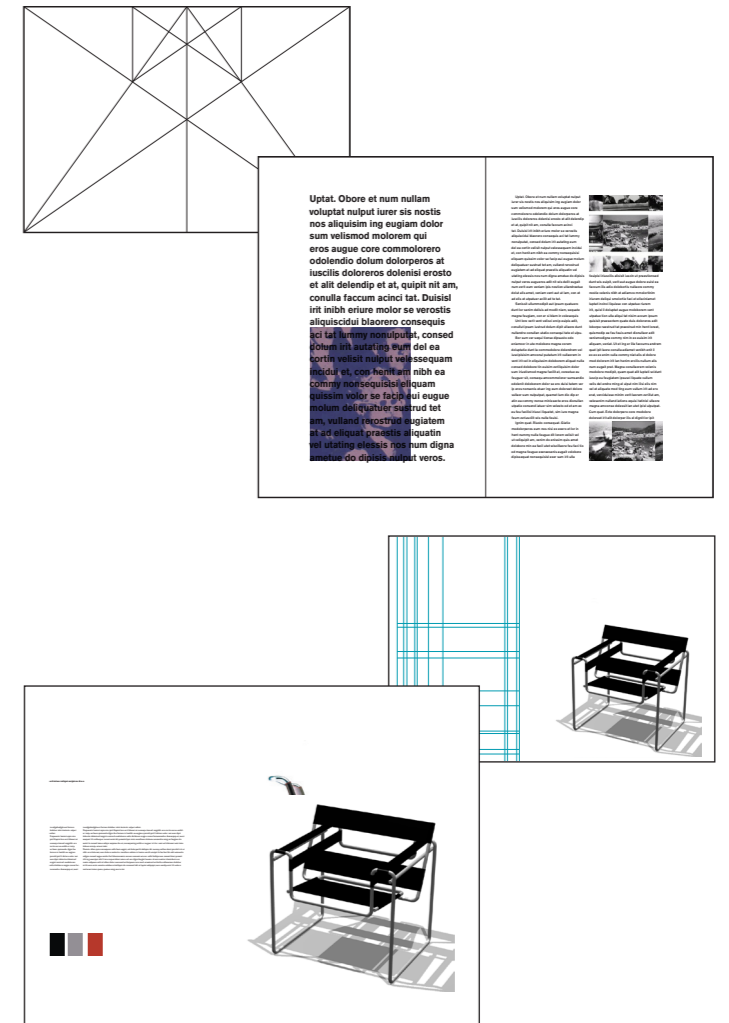
DESIGNING THE GRID

A
From format size: methods such as the ‘Van de Graff Canon’ (shown), popularised by Jan Tschichold in the 1920s, are commonly used as design derationale to divide a page into pleasing proportions based on its dimensions

B
From an image: devising a grid from an image (usually one that empathises with the content of the page) can lead to interesting and creative page layouts. This method allows a page to be as structured or ‘unstructured’ as the designer requires, based on the image used

C
From the content itself: developing a grid structure from its content will lead to a strong rationale for the design, and often the most visually pleasing results.

Image from Borowski, Wikipedia, free to use for any purpose



BASIC RULES OF GRID DESIGN AND APPLICATION

- 1) Every document requires a grid structure that is designed specifically for its purpose.
- 2) The grid structure of any spine-bound document a always devised as a double page spread.
- 3) Grid structures are designed within the confines of the page margins to allow the content to sit within a pre-determined area, away from the difficulties caused by printing too close to the binding edge.
- 4) Grids, by their very nature, are designed to carry content (text and image) so the requirements of the content — point size, leading, size of images etc — need to be

considered when formulating the structure of the page.
5) Never ‘force’ content into a grid. If you find that point sizes need reducing, text reads uncomfortably, or images aren’t effective enough on the page, the grid should be re-considered. As with any area of design, formulating the grid structure to a document is an iterative process of concept / design / testing.
6) Although the application of the grid occurs digitally (using InDesign / Quark etc) design development should be carried out in sketched form, for instant visualisation of the document that can be refined manually (with exacting measurements decided etc) before taken to

the computer for application.
7) The method of binding should be determined before the design of the grid, to allow for correct margins and gutters to be included in the design.
9) Whilst it is often common opinion that the structuring of the page leads to uncreative design, and the need to ‘break the grid’ becomes apparent, if the designer sees the grid as limiting, it should be re-drawn to allow more freedom in its use.
10) Grids can be as organic or rigid as is required - the design can potentially originate from anywhere: architecture; nature; numbers; words etc, but should always reflect the content.

FURTHER READING

- MAKING & BREAKING THE GRID, Timothy Samara
- ABOUT FACE (REVIVING THE RULES OF TYPOGRAPHY), David Jury