

Posters

Design Principles & Evaluation

Doug Foxgrover and Matt Ryan
December 7, 2010

Wednesday, December 8, 2010

Welcome & thanks for being here. We're excited to be here, because we think posters are great pedagogical tools.

Hands, please

Wednesday, December 8, 2010

A show of hands start out with...

1. Who in this room makes academic posters as part of their professional work?
2. Who in this room is in a discipline where posters are a common means of scholarly communication?
3. Who in this room is in a discipline that has historically been focused on visual study?
4. Who in this room has given or supported poster assignments?
5. (maybe?) For those who have worked with poster assignments, why do you give them? What do you think your students get out of them?

Very interesting! I think we understand this audience a little better now. (make an observation or two, perhaps)

What this workshop *is not*

Wednesday, December 8, 2010

We're not talking about aesthetics or making posters pretty

We're not talking about the mechanics of making posters or the tools for making posters

These are worthy goals, and they probably deserve their own workshops, but they are not what we are focusing on today.

So what the heck are we talking about?

What this workshop *is*

Wednesday, December 8, 2010

Our goals for this workshop are to...

1. Introduce a few design principles that we think are particularly applicable to poster design, and to connect them to the rhetorical considerations of goals, context, and audience.
2. Give you tools you can use to
 - a. help your students be more intentional in making design decisions
 - b. evaluate student work
3. To suggest a overall goal for poster makers: clearer, more effective communication

Rhetorical Considerations

Wednesday, December 8, 2010

- Consideration of subject
 - What is the primary idea or argument?
 - What ways can we imagine trying to convey this idea or argument in our chosen medium?
 - Possible answers for posters: Photos, Charts/Graphs, Timelines, Illustrations, Symbolic Representations (like physics diagrams), Plain Ol' Text/Words, Sections, Abstract, Introduction, Methods, Results, Conclusions, Further Reading, Next Steps, References, Title, Subtitle, Author(s), Data Sources, Date
 - Not every poster will have all these things (in fact, it would be a little crazy if it did!)
- Consideration of goals
 - What do we want to achieve?
 - Communicate your research
 - What is the effect of an effective work?
 - Have them brainstorm these, but make sure to suggest these if they aren't coming up with them:
 - People **understand** the information presented
 - People are prompted to **ask questions** & converse w/ presenter
 - People **remember** the poster & its message
 - ?
- Consideration of context
 - Under what circumstances will people encounter this work?
 - Possible answers: Poster fair, hanging in hallway, posted online, conference
 - How does this impact what the poster needs to do to be effective?
 - Possible answers: Quickly get subject and main point across, draw someone in from a distance, not take too long to digest
- Consideration of audience
 - Who will be reading/viewing/grading this work?
 - Students in discipline/not in discipline
 - Faculty in discipline/not in discipline
 - Writing associates/Writing portfolio reviewers
 - General public
 - Conference goers
 - How does this impact our choices if we wish to be effective?
 - provide enough context for someone unfamiliar with subject
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 - Do they have expectations about what will be on a poster that we should consider?
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 - How valuable is their time -- how much of their time and attention can we realistically assume we will have?

Rhetorical Considerations

Subject & Content

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Rhetorical Considerations

Subject & Content

Goals

Audience

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Rhetorical Considerations

Subject & Content

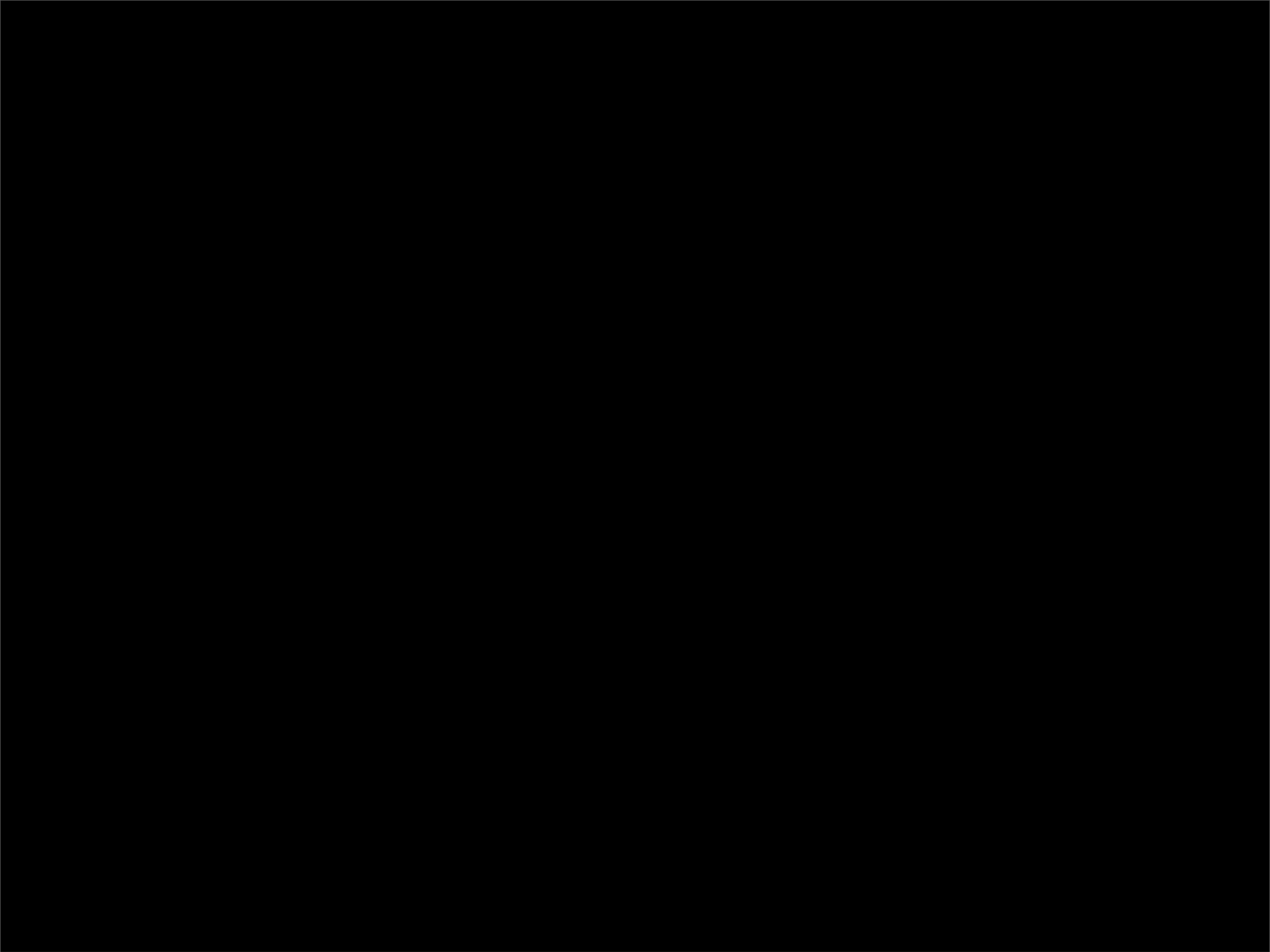
Goals

Audience

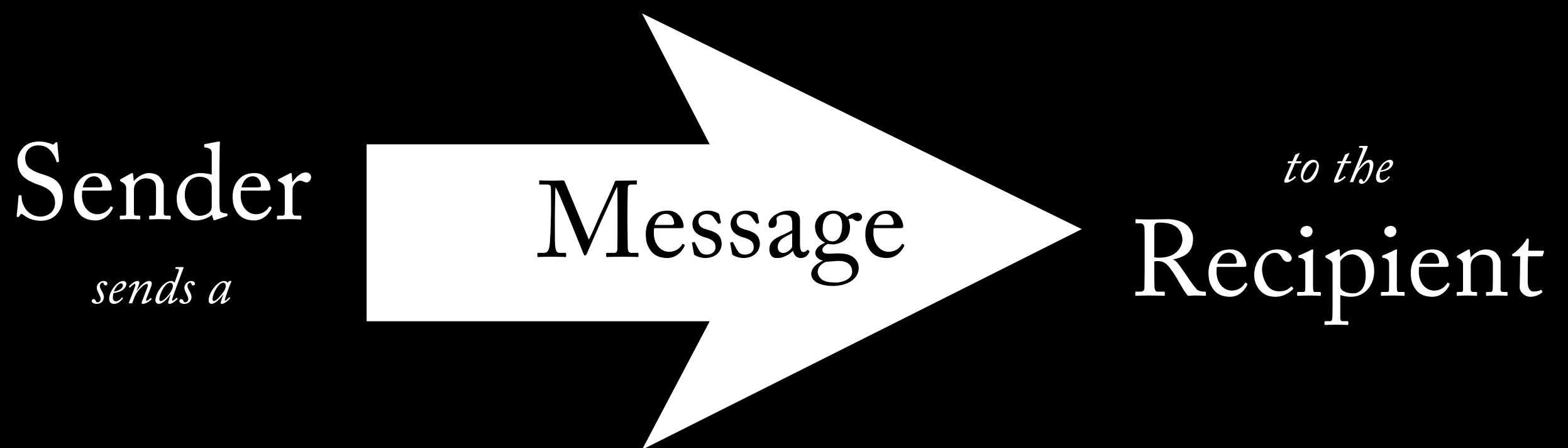
Context

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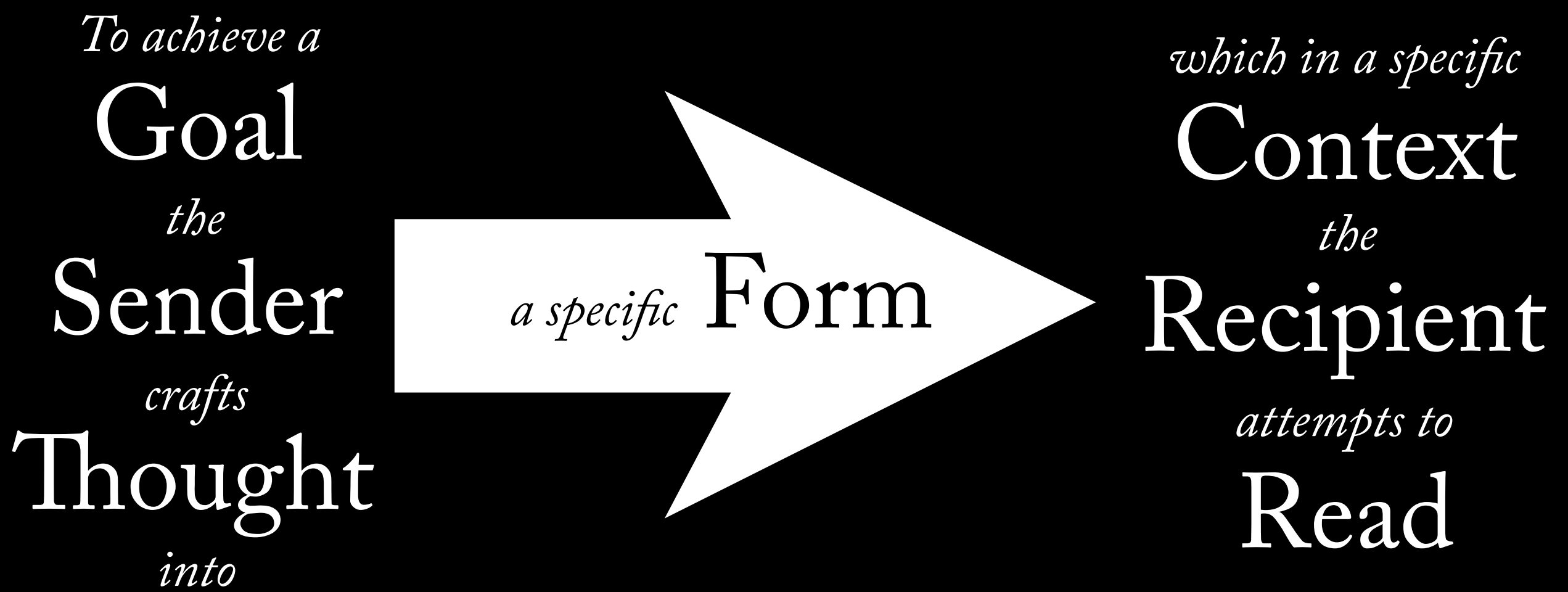


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This is the naive understanding of communication. As our discussion so far may have suggested, communication is not quite this simple.



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Photo by John Munson; licensed under Creative Commons BY/NC/ND 2.0

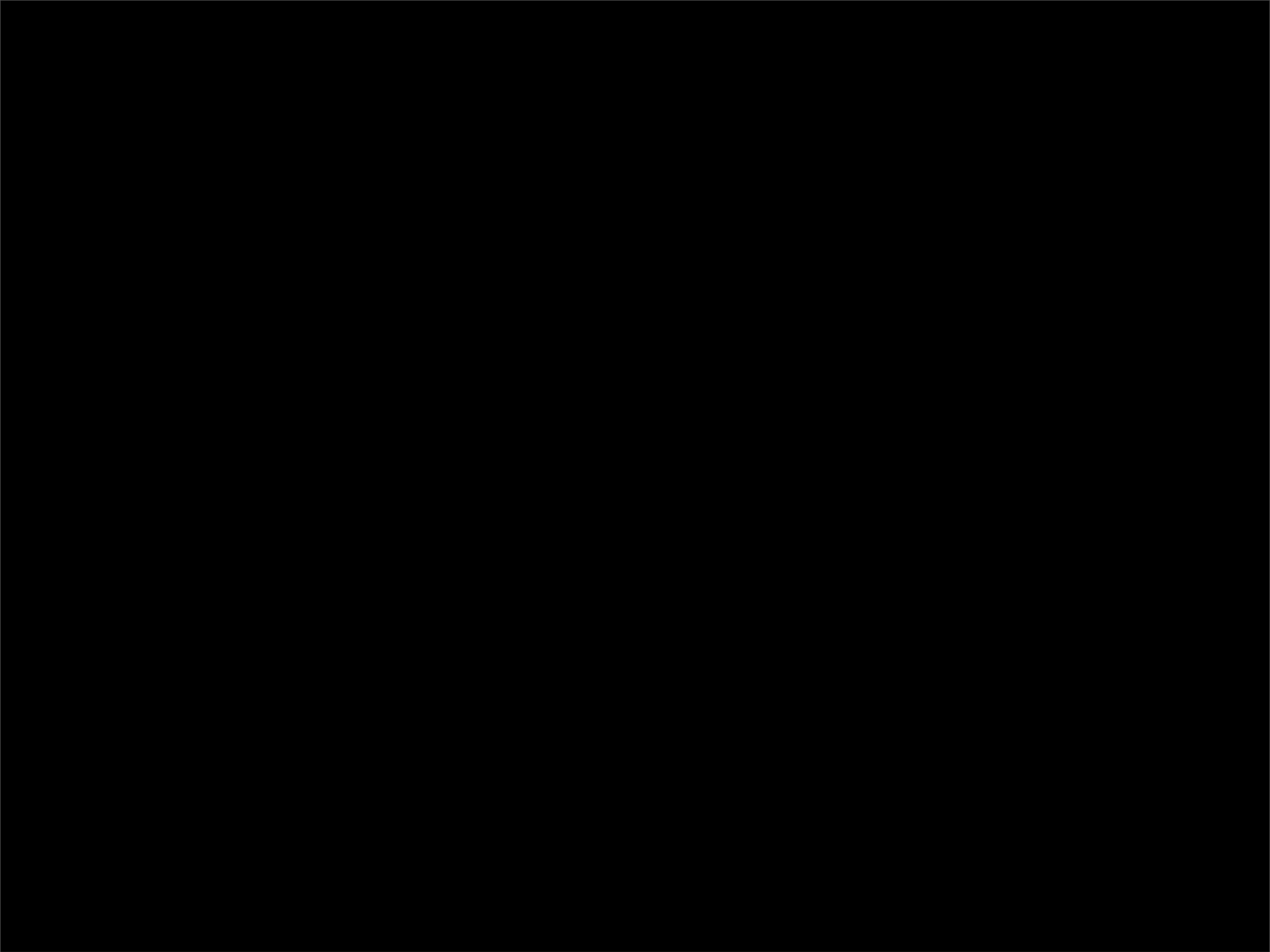
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So. We've got some people who are attempting, given their knowledge, context, etc., to build meaning out of the artifacts put before them.

which
Recipient
attempts to read
in a given Context

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One thing we know from experience is that] people will seek to find meaning in anything visible on the poster, and will try to incorporate it somehow into their interpretation. In recognition of this, poster-makers should try to be intentional about every visible element, its' placement, color, etc., as people will read the poster *as if* those decisions were all intentional.



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Four Principles { Proximity Alignment Contrast Utility

*Parts of this design principles system borrowed from
Robin Williams' The Non-Designer's Design Book*

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We'll introduce four fundamental design principles today.

We could give you a laundry list of 50 do's and don'ts that are specific to posters. We're not, although Doug has a good list in your packet. Instead, we're going to be focusing on just four very basic principles that are broadly applicable to designed work in general, and then showing how they apply to posters.

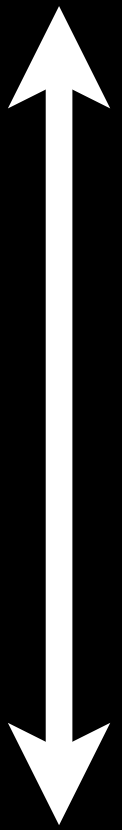
As we talk about these principles, they may seem very commonsense to you. This is good. We hope you'll see that these simple, commonsense ways of looking can have surprisingly powerful use in creating and evaluating designed work.

Collectively, these principles provide tools for making visible the structure of your evidence and arguments.

Layout = 2-D Structure

Papers

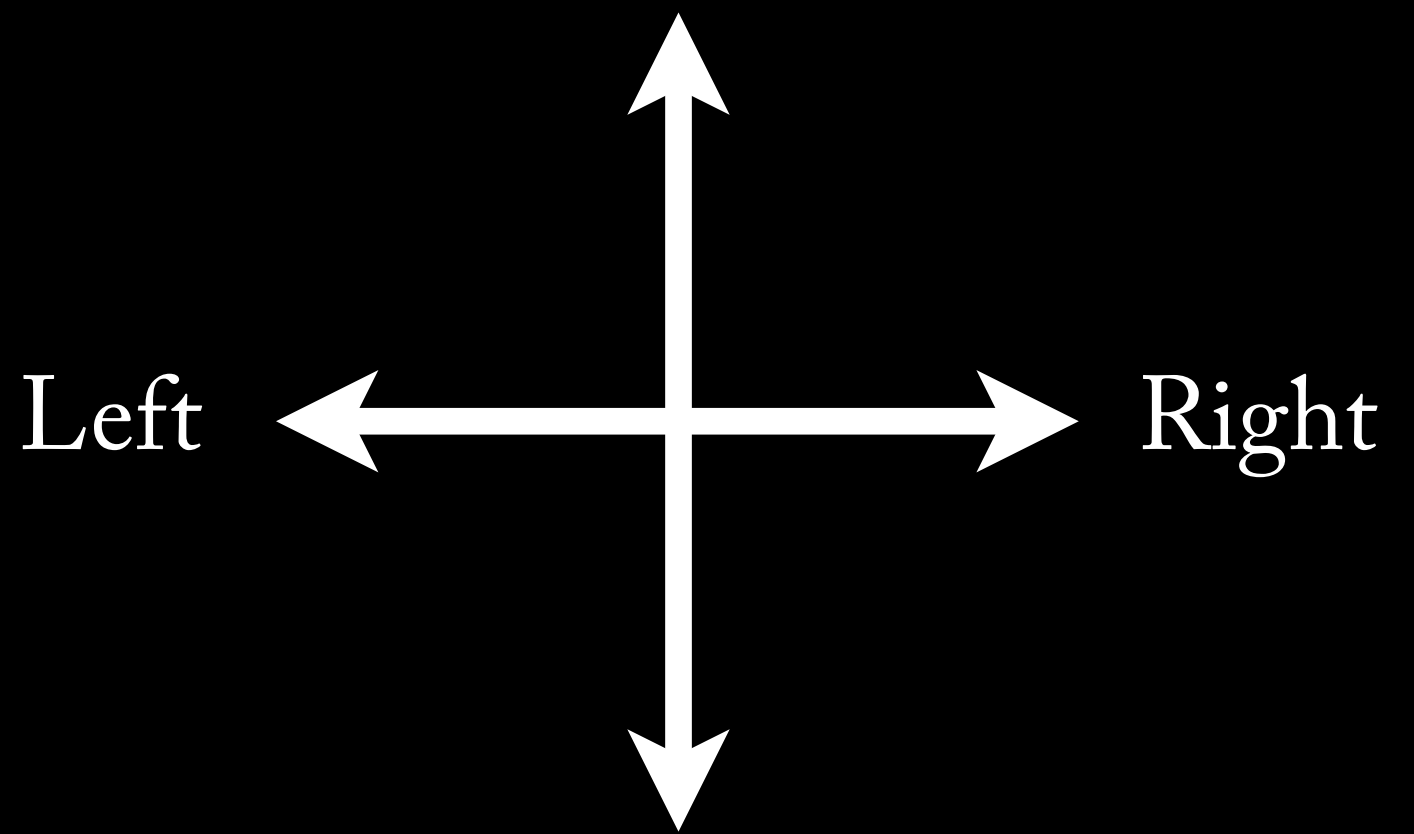
Before



After

Posters

Above



Right

Below

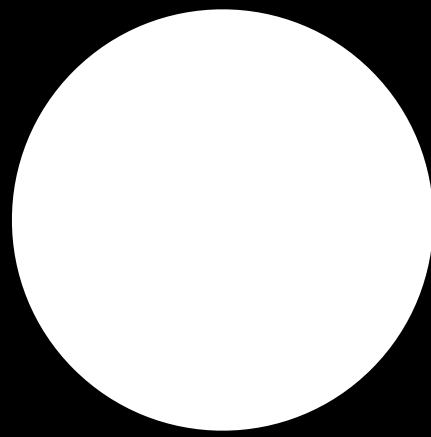
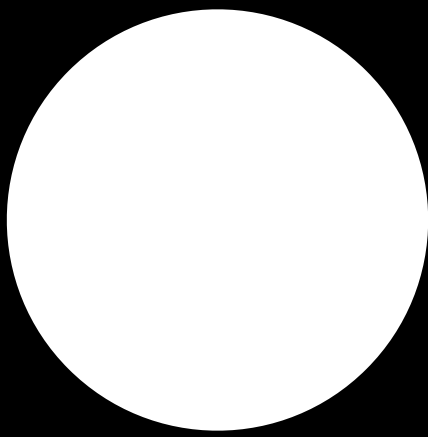
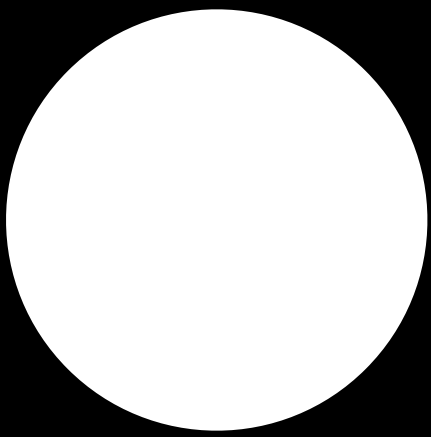
Left

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Layout is the primary way we visually structure a piece of design. It is analogous to the way we structure written papers. But while we organize the sections of papers linearly, we organize the information on a poster in two-dimensional space.

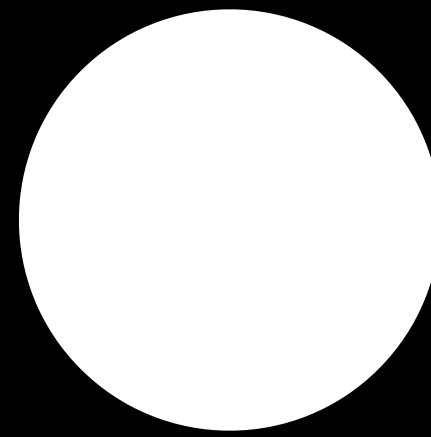
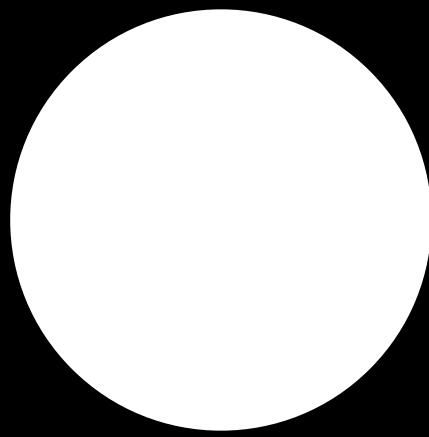
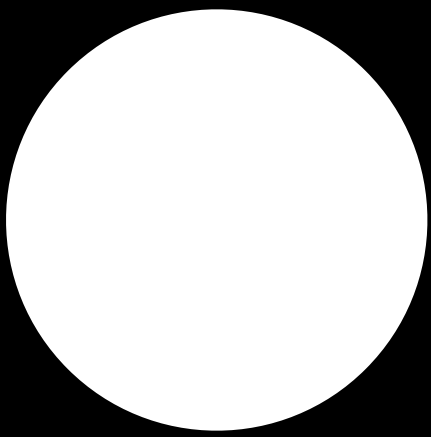
Proximity

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Here we have three elements. (click) Move one over, and we still have three elements -- but now we have two groups of elements as well.



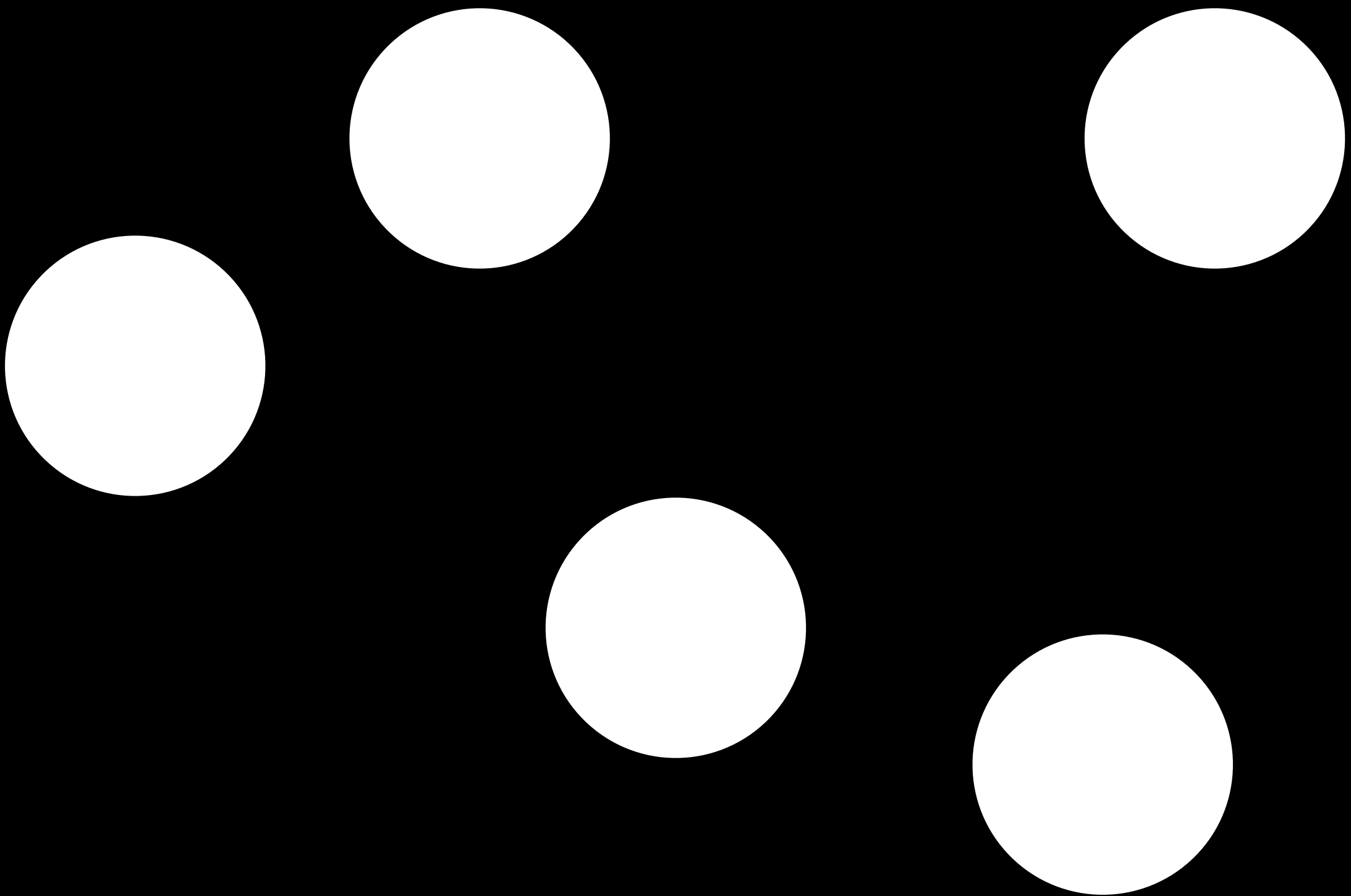
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Alignment

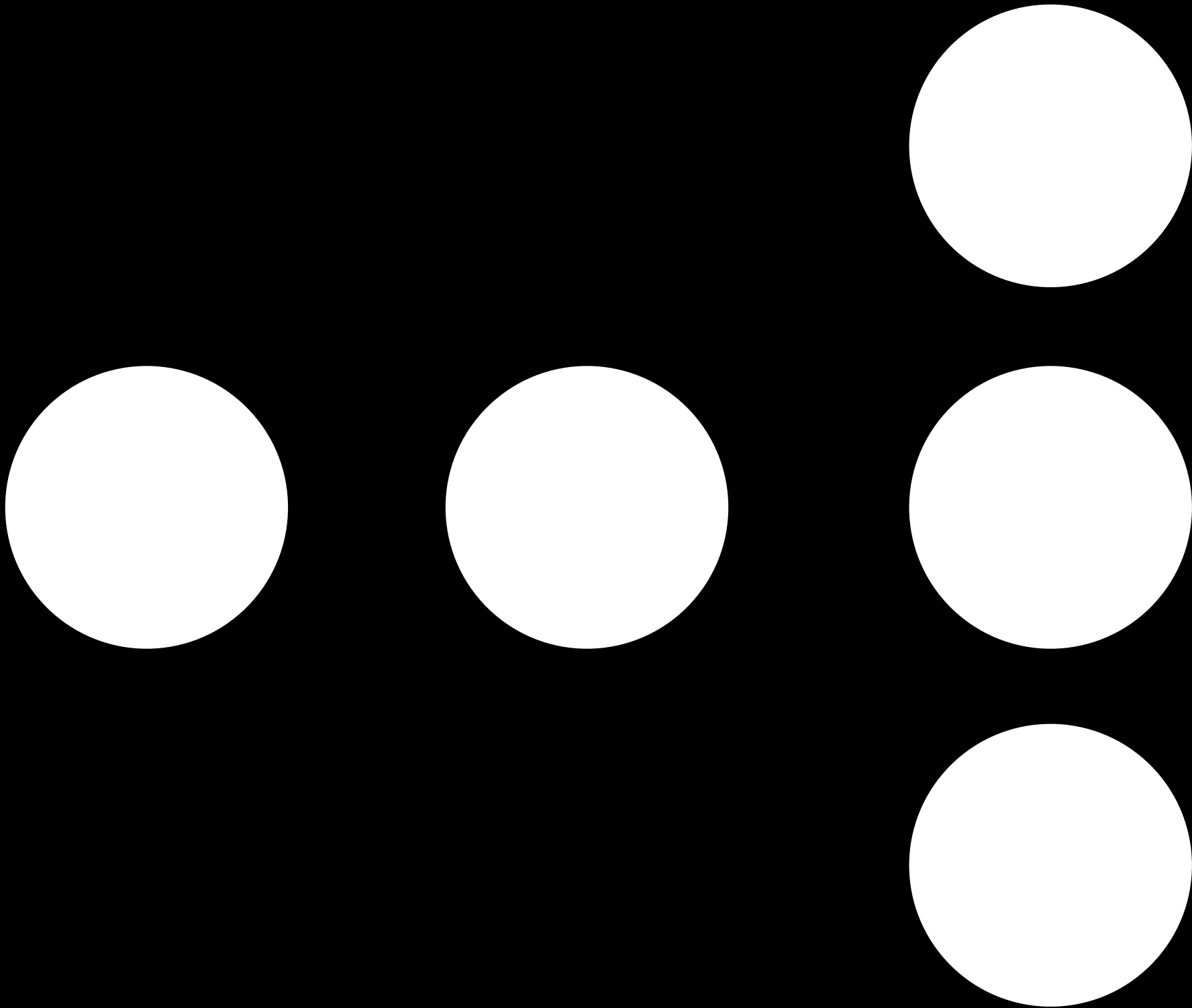
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By aligning elements with each other, we put them in definite relationships.



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When elements are not aligned, the suggestion is that these elements have arbitrary or undefined relationships with each other. (click) When they are aligned, they appear to have definite relationships with each other, and we can start to interpret the nature of those relationships.

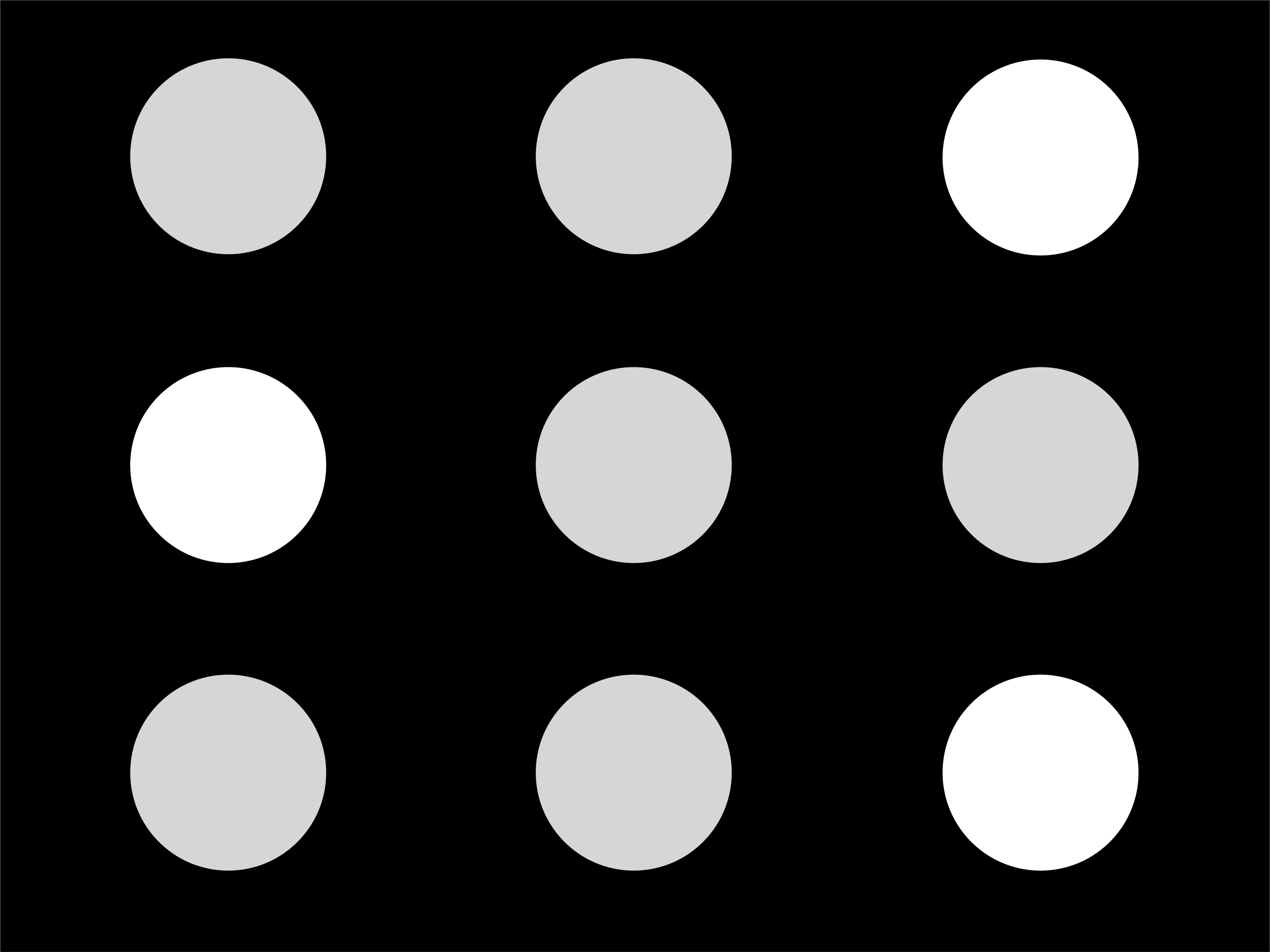


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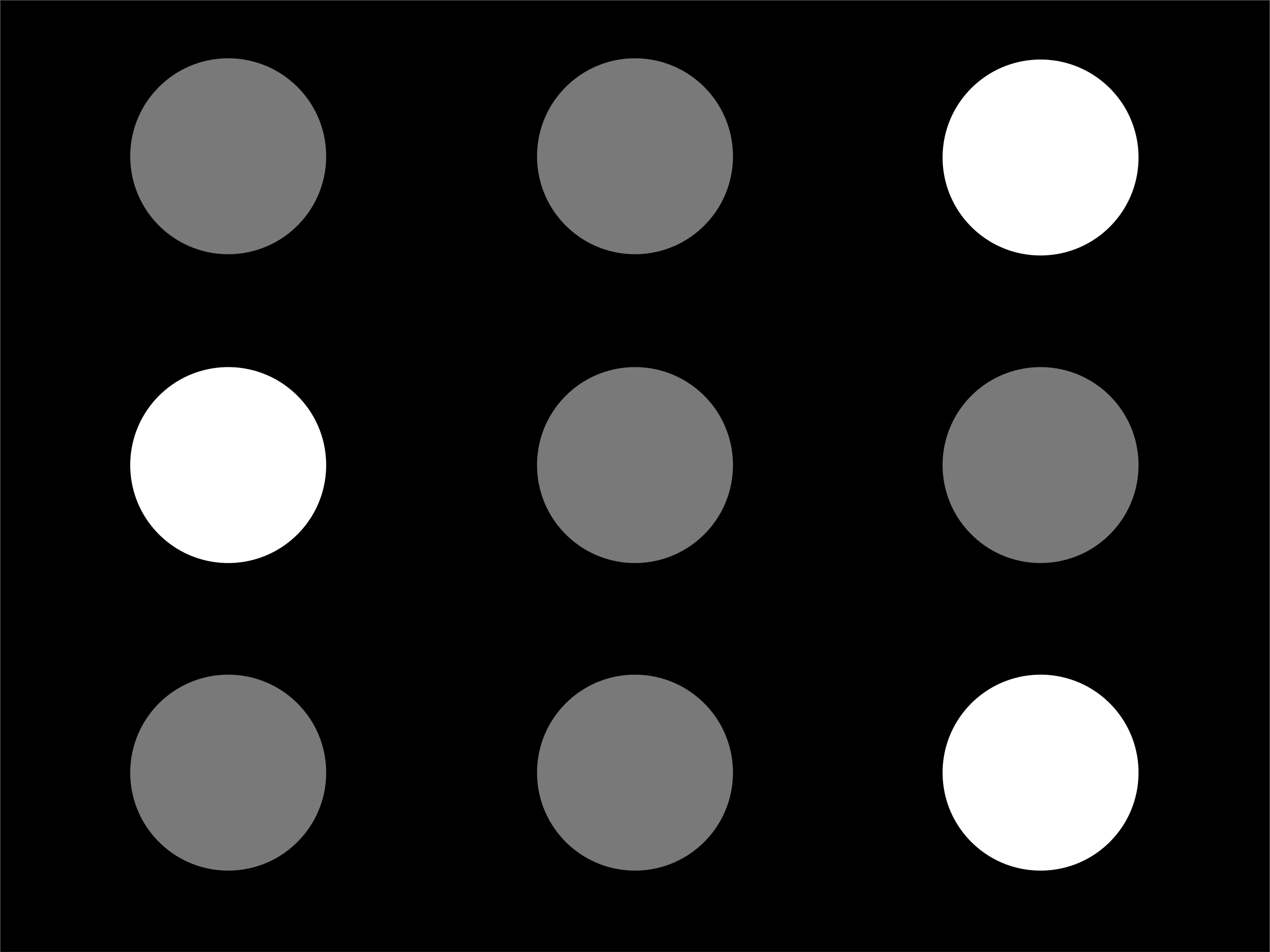
Contrast

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There's a pattern here, but you probably would not notice it at first.



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If we increase the contrast, this pattern is much more discernible





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Legibility is the quality of being easy to read.

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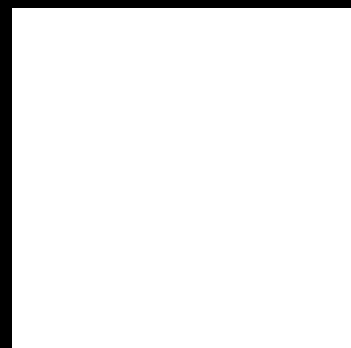
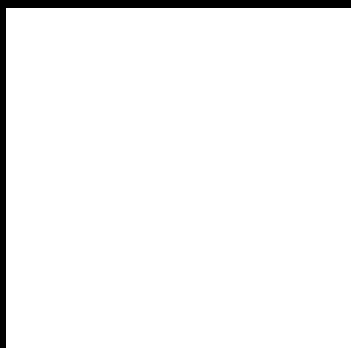
Legibility is the quality of being easy to read.

Definition adapted from Tracy, Walter: *Letters of Credit* (2003)

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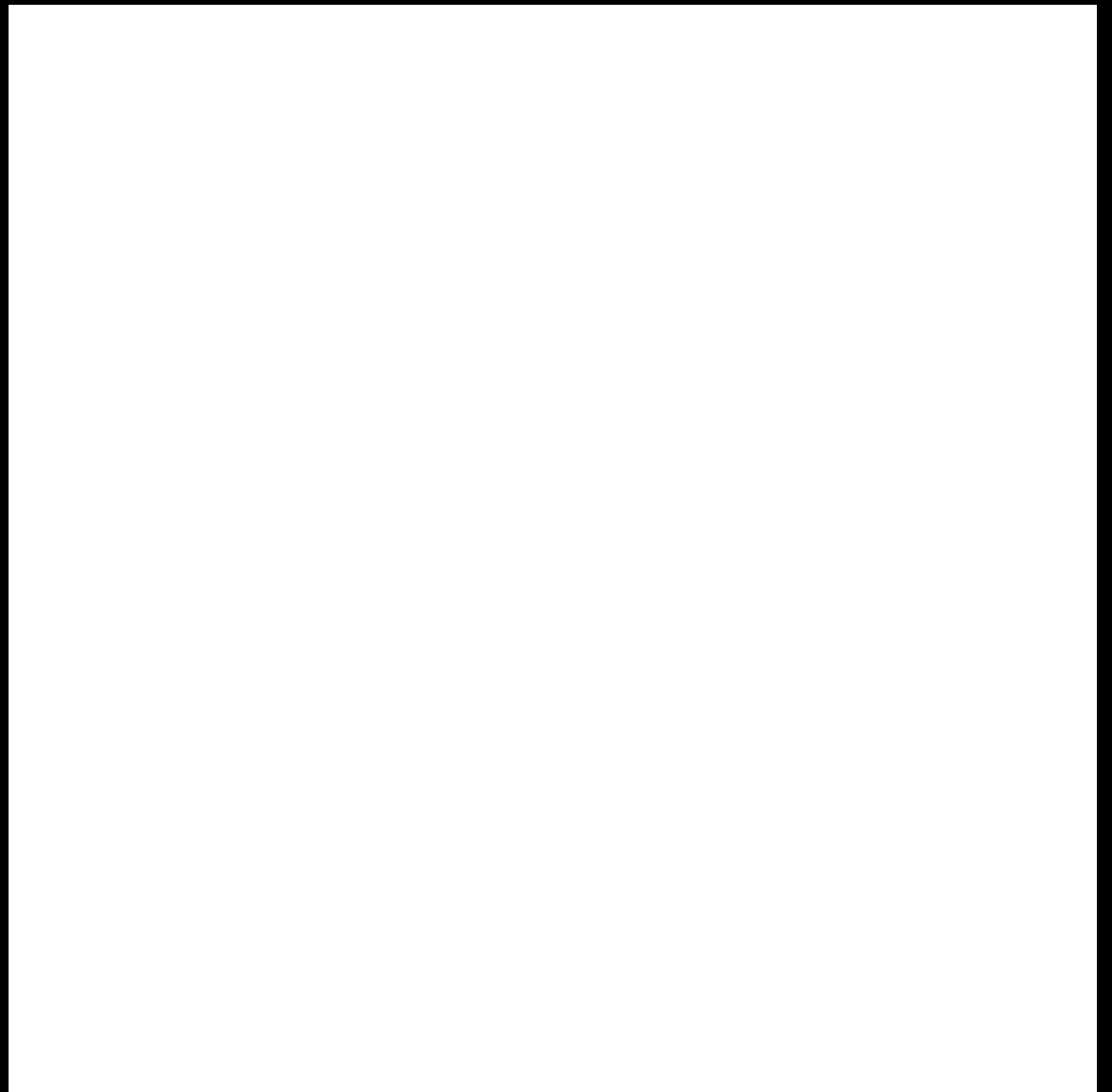
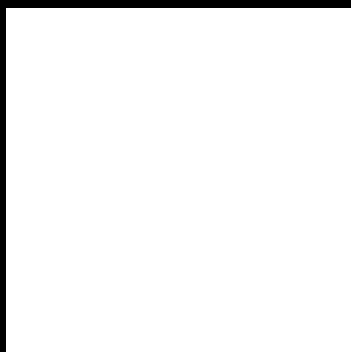
...and it is strongly affected by contrast.

Sometimes when poster-makers try to make their work more eye-catching they make the poster less legible. These are not mutually exclusive properties, but it can require some effort to achieve both.



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Contrast in scale impacts our understanding of relative importance. These elements seem equally important...



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While now we are emphasizing one element as more important than the other.

You can use scale contrast to shout the things you want to shout, and whisper the things you want to whisper.

You can also use it to layer the level of detail for viewers, giving them the broad overview at 20 feet away, a greater richness at 5 feet away, and minor supportive details at 2 feet away from your poster.

Utility

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A poster only has so much space, and its reader only has so much time. If we want to maximize the space and time we have, we can prune elements that are redundant or unnecessary.



You can over-design just as you can over-write.

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And modern tools make it easy



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And modern tools make it easy

*Perfection is achieved not when there
is nothing more to add, but when
there is nothing left to take away.*

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

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The little prince-iple?

Pithy, but there is a pithier formulation...

Omit needless words.

Strunk & White

Wednesday, December 8, 2010

This only needs a minor shift to apply to design.

Omit needless elements.

Strunk & White

Four Principles { Proximity Alignment Contrast Utility

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To recap, that's proximity, alignment, contrast, and unity.

Opportunity for a question or two...

We're going to move on now. Let's use a concrete example of how these principles might be applied to a specific poster.



Carleton’s Economics Department Delivers the Liberal Arts

By John Doe ’11

History

The early effort to found a separate department of economics took from 1917 to 1920. Already in 1920 four men were appointed to professorships in economics (Headley & Jarchow, 1966). As time has gone by the economics department, which is run by ten full-time faculty members, has developed greatly. Now 20 different economics courses are offered, with an average class size of around 20 students. Over the past couple of years the economics department has consistently been one of the biggest departments at Carleton with 40 to 50 majors graduating each year (Carleton College, 2010).

Faculty and Staff

Professor Stephen Strand is the current chair of the economics department. He earned a PhD at Vanderbilt University, and he specializes in regulatory economics. Strand's recent research has centered on pricing models of spatial monopoly and competition. He is very active within the department. For example, he has co-directed an off-campus program in Paris and has taught an interdisciplinary course with the political science department (Carleton College, 2010).



(Stephen Strand, 2010)

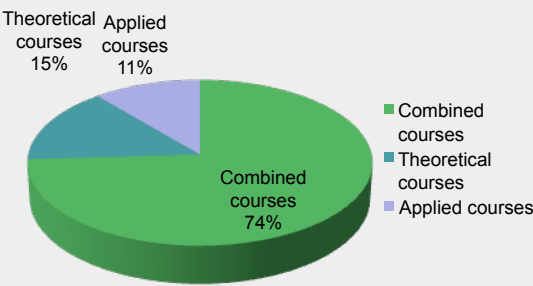


The Economics Department at Carleton College consists of ten full-time and two visiting faculty members with varying backgrounds who teach and conduct research on a broad range of topics.

(Econ Teachers, 2010)

Curriculum

The curriculum is both theoretical and applied.



The economics department currently delivers 27 courses of which the core theoretical courses are “Intermediate Price Theory” and “Intermediate Macroeconomics.” “Econometrics” and both the “Managerial Economics” courses are examples of applied courses. The great majority of the courses are not just theoretical or only applied, but they try to combine and find a good balance between theory and practice (Strand, 2010).

Off Campus Studies

Since 1983, Carleton’s economics department has sponsored a very popular off campus program at Cambridge University, England. Every year during the summer, about 24 students study the British economy and learn about the culture. the students can earn a total of 18 credits, 14 of these count towards the major.

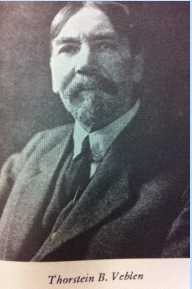


(Carleton seminar in Cambridge, 2010)

The subject matter covers the industrial revolution, the contemporary British economy, and the history of economic thought. Even though the seminar focuses primarily on economics, it is open to all Carleton students (Carleton College, 2010)

Thorstein Veblen

Thorstein Veblen is Carleton’s most famous alumnus, and was the founder of the “institutionalists” school of economics. At Carleton he was a rebellious, yet highly intelligent, student. His most famous book is *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, which is still in print and widely read. Veblen’s work left a lasting mark on economics (Carleton, 2007, Famous Carleton Economists section Thorstein Veblen).

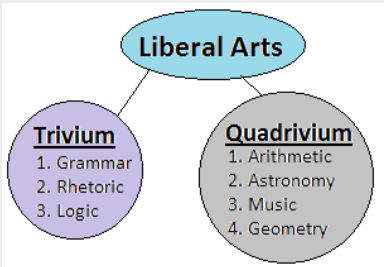


(Carleton College, 2010)

Liberal Arts

The current chair of the economics department, Stephen Strand, said: “We deliver the Liberal Arts in a couple of ways: many of the faculty members take a historical approach and they draw on examples from different cultures. Also many work in interdisciplinary studies like political sciences, ethics, and humanities. We are not teaching hardcore economics courses, but a wide range of courses with interdisciplinary features” (Strand, 2010).

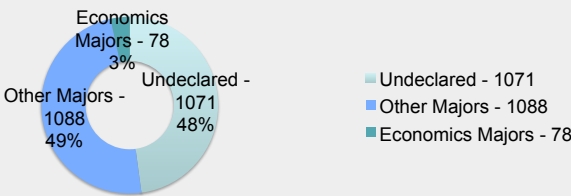
Former chair of the economics department, Bob Will, said: “One needs mathematics, geometry, Newtonian laws, and calculus to be able to do good economics. On the other end, if you are going to do useful econ, one has to know how it is applied in the world around you. Economics is in the middle of social issues, power concerns, and politics” (Will, 2010).



Economics PhD productivity relative to institutional size	
Swarthmore College	#1
Grinnell College	#2
Carleton College	#3
Williams College	#4
Agnes Scott College	#5
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	#6
Harvard University	#7
University of Chicago	#8
Princeton University	#9
Yale University	#10

(Higher Education Data Sharing [HEDS], 2006)

Proportional Number of Econ Majors



(Carleton College Directory, 2010)

After Carleton

Carleton econ grads often go to highly renowned graduate schools such as Harvard, Yale School of Management, MIT, and Wharton. In fact, something very characteristic about Carleton’s economics graduates is that about 65% of them return to some sort of higher education within five to seven years after graduation. (Strand, 2010) According to the Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) *Weighted Baccalaureate Origins Study*, Carleton College ranks 6th among all U.S. institutions in PhD productivity relative to institutional size. Carleton College ranks particularly high in the production of economists, namely 3rd (Higher Education Data Sharing [HEDS], 2006).

List of References

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Wednesday, December 8, 2010


This one was made by a student in Carol Rutz’s A&I seminar. It’s a pretty good poster, but we’d like to demonstrate how these principles, when applied, can improve even a decent poster.

I want to emphasize that there is no magic going on here. I worked almost entirely in Powerpoint to do this work, and I am such a Powerpoint novice that I didn’t even remember how to start a slideshow yesterday.

I also want to note that in real life, the author of the poster would be simultaneously working on improving the text, graphs, photos, and other content as they are working on the design of the poster; this example is artificial in that without knowing the author’s goals we can’t.

Let’s start with proximity.

Overall our poster uses the principle of proximity pretty well. Generally, information that is related is proximate, and unrelated information is not. There is one area where that is not the case.



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(Econ Teachers, 2010)

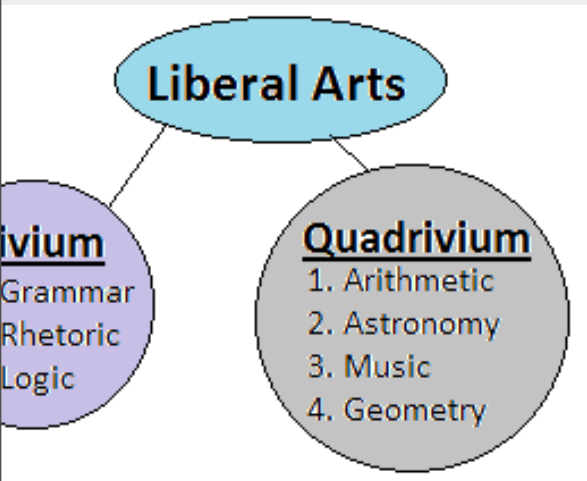
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Liberal Arts

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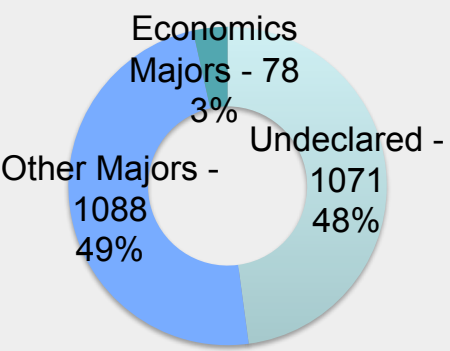


Economics PhD productivity relative to institutional size

Swarthmore College	#1
Grinnell College	#2
Carleton College	#3
Williams College	#4
Agnes Scott College	#5
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	#6
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Yale University	#10

(Higher Education Data Sharing [HEDS], 2006)

Proportional Number of Econ Majors



■ Undeclared - 1071
■ Other Majors - 1088
■ Economics Majors - 78

(Carleton College Directory, 2010)

After Carleton

Carleton econ grads often go to high schools such as Harvard, Yale School of Man fact, something very characteristic of graduates is that about 65% of them receive education within five to seven years. According to the Higher Education *Baccalaureate Origins Study*, Carleton is one of the top U.S. institutions in PhD productivity. Carleton College ranks particularly well among economists, namely 3rd (Higher Education Data Sharing, 2006).


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Wednesday, December 8, 2010

Both this graph and this table don’t appear to be grouped with any of the sections; they are just floating around. What section do they belong to? What arguments do these pieces of evidence support? It’s not obvious though visual inspection. I’m not sure what to do about this yet, but maybe one of the other principles will help us.

Also, the label on this graph is closer to the references section that it is to the graph, which means we have to work harder to understand what it pertains to.



with varying backgrounds who teach and conduct research on a broad range of topics.

(Econ Teachers, 2010)

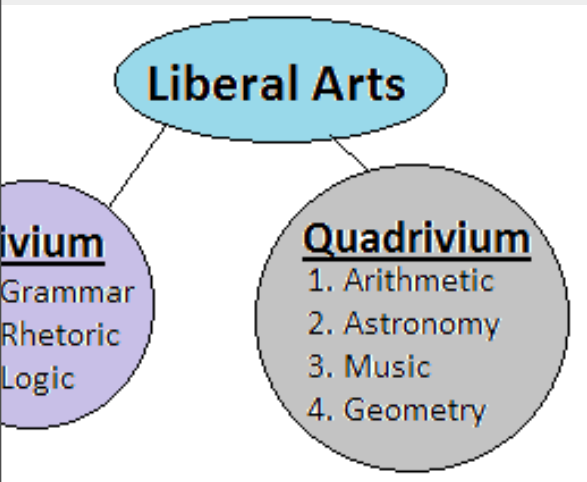
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Liberal Arts

Quadrivium

1. Arithmetic
2. Astronomy
3. Music
4. Geometry

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Wednesday, December 8, 2010

That’s better.



Carleton’s Economics Department Delivers the Liberal Arts

By John Doe ’11

History

The early effort to found a separate department of economics took from 1917 to 1920. Already in 1920 four men were appointed to professorships in economics (Headley & Jarchow, 1966). As time has gone by the economics department, which is run by ten full-time faculty members, has developed greatly. Now 20 different economics courses are offered, with an average class size of around 20 students. Over the past couple of years the economics department has consistently been one of the biggest departments at Carleton with 40 to 50 majors graduating each year (Carleton College, 2010).

Faculty and Staff

Professor Stephen Strand is the current chair of the economics department. He earned a PhD at Vanderbilt University, and he specializes in regulatory economics. Strand's recent research has centered on pricing models of spatial monopoly and competition. He is very active within the department. For example, he has co-directed an off-campus program in Paris and has taught an interdisciplinary course with the political science department (Carleton College, 2010).



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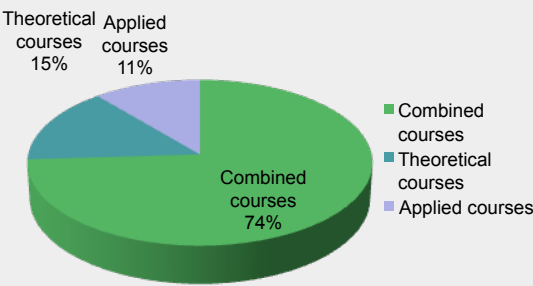


The Economics Department at Carleton College consists of ten full-time and two visiting faculty members with varying backgrounds who teach and conduct research on a broad range of topics.

(Econ Teachers, 2010)

Curriculum

The curriculum is both theoretical and applied.



The economics department currently delivers 27 courses of which the core theoretical courses are “Intermediate Price Theory” and “Intermediate Macroeconomics.” “Econometrics” and both the “Managerial Economics” courses are examples of applied courses. The great majority of the courses are not just theoretical or only applied, but they try to combine and find a good balance between theory and practice (Strand, 2010).

Off Campus Studies

Since 1983, Carleton’s economics department has sponsored a very popular off campus program at Cambridge University, England. Every year during the summer, about 24 students study the British economy and learn about the culture. the students can earn a total of 18 credits, 14 of these count towards the major.

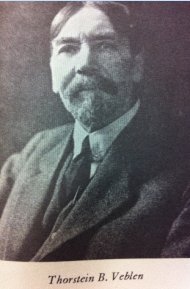


(Carleton seminar in Cambridge, 2010)

The subject matter covers the industrial revolution, the contemporary British economy, and the history of economic thought. Even though the seminar focuses primarily on economics, it is open to all Carleton students (Carleton College, 2010)

Thorstein Veblen

Thorstein Veblen is Carleton’s most famous alumnus, and was the founder of the “institutionalists” school of economics. At Carleton he was a rebellious, yet highly intelligent, student. His most famous book is *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, which is still in print and widely read. Veblen’s work left a lasting mark on economics (Carleton, 2007, Famous Carleton Economists section Thorstein Veblen).

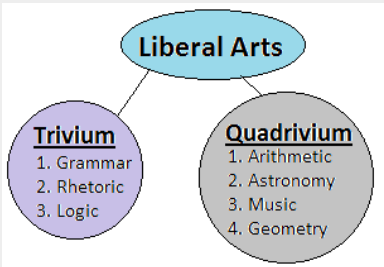


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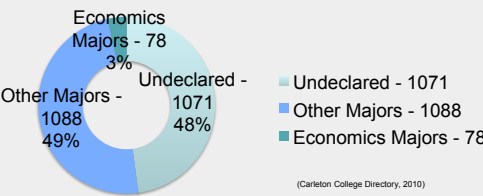
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Proportional Number of Econ Majors



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Let’s move on to alignment.

This student has done a decent job of using alignment to organize the poster. In general, the sections are not only vertically aligned, but also horizontally aligned. This is parallel construction in the visual realm!

Our eyes are acutely sensitive to small differences in alignment, however, so to eliminate ambiguity it’s best if elements are either precisely aligned or clearly not aligned. We could improve this poster by nudging these headings into precise alignment (click)



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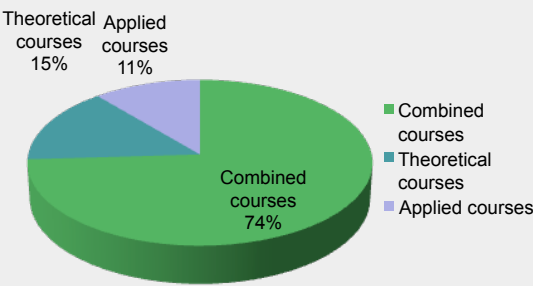


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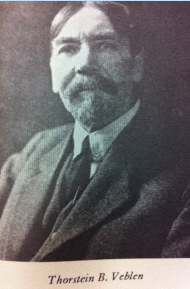


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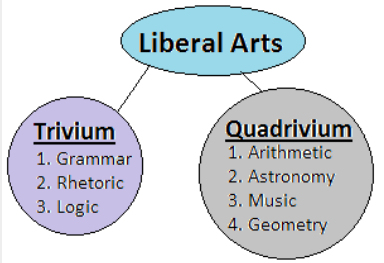


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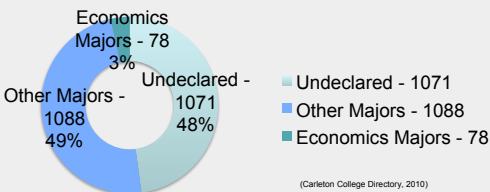
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Economics PhD productivity relative to institutional size	
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(Higher Education Data Sharing [HEDS], 2006)

Proportional Number of Econ Majors



(Carleton College Directory, 2010)

After Carleton

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with each other and with the section boxes. (perhaps repeat to show clearly)

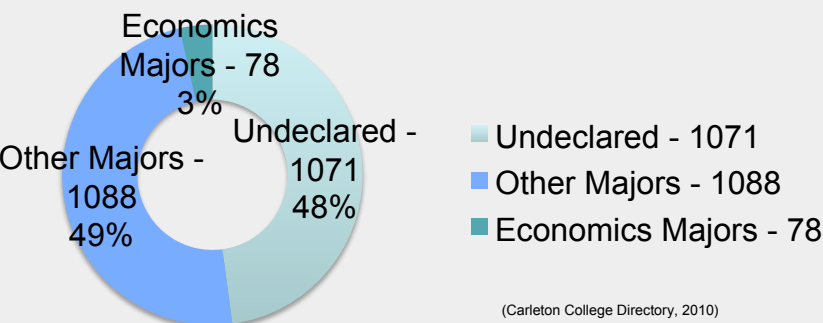
After Carleton

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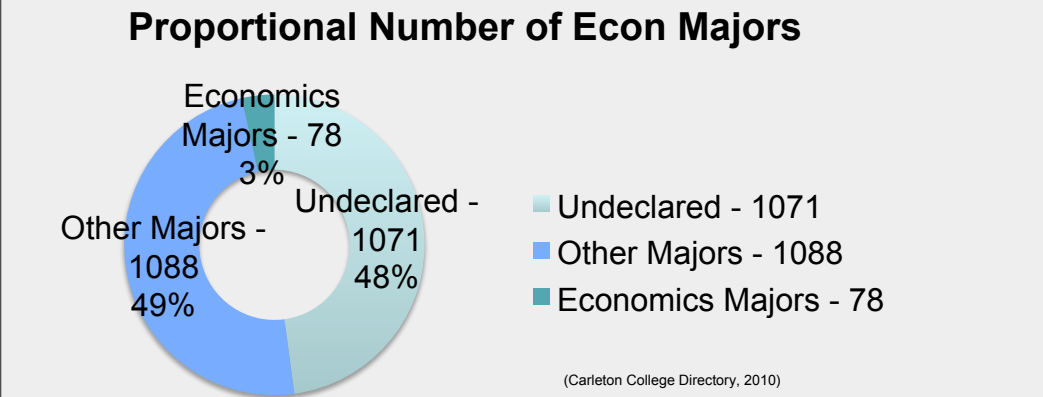
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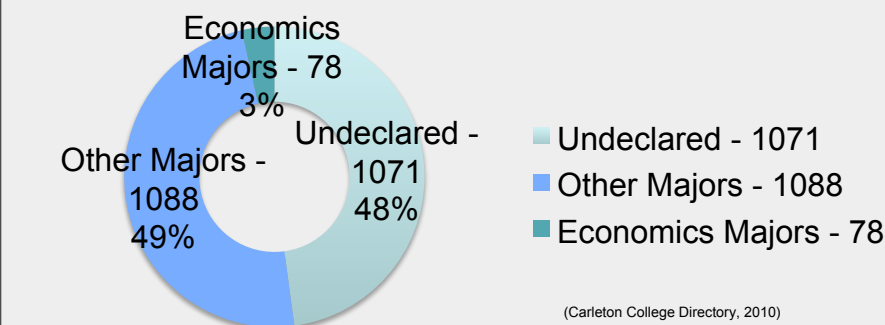
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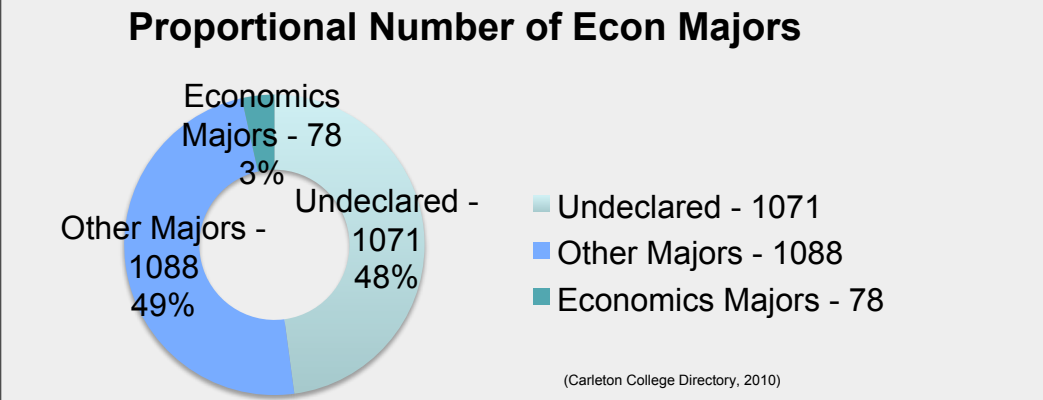
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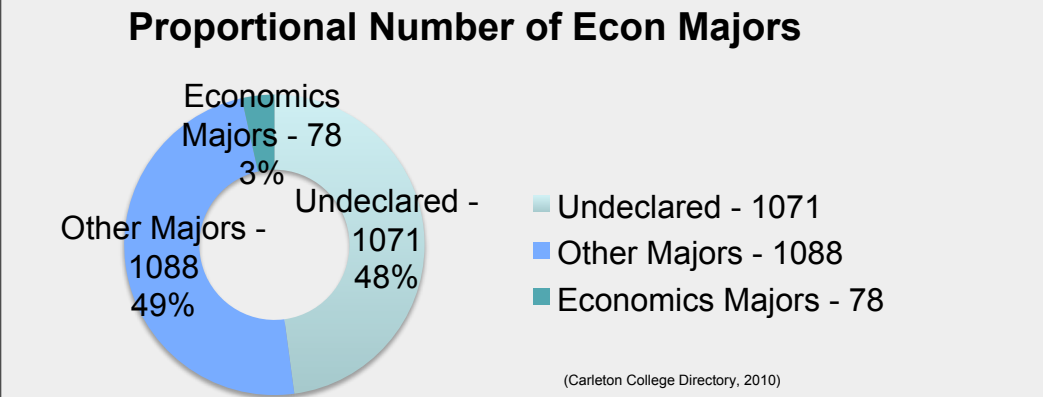
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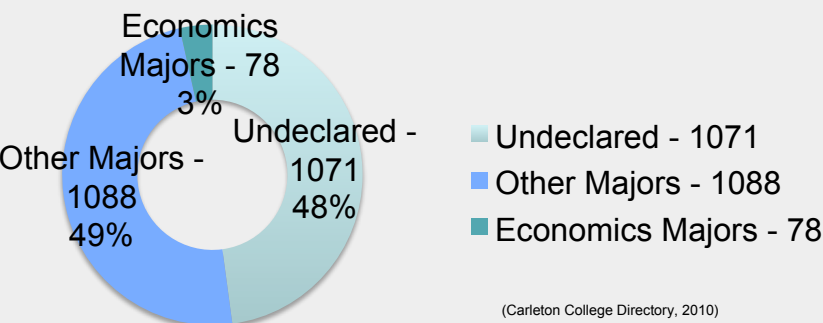
After Carleton

Economics PhD productivity relative to institutional size	
Carleton College	#1
Yale College	#2
MIT College	#3
Harvard College	#4
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Massachusetts Institute of Technology	#6
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Data Sharing [HEDS], 2006)

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Carleton’s Economics Department Delivers the Liberal Arts

By John Doe ’11

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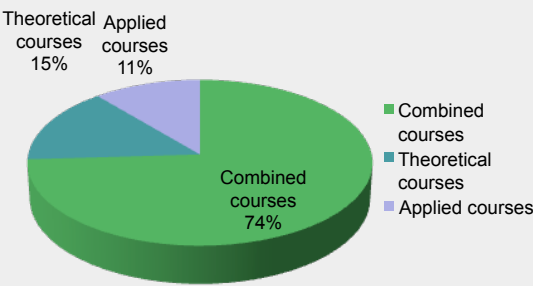


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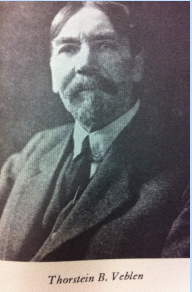


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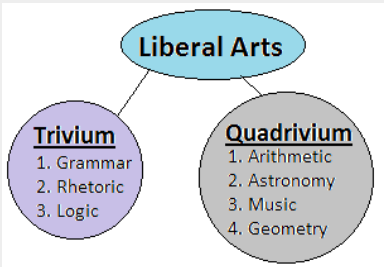


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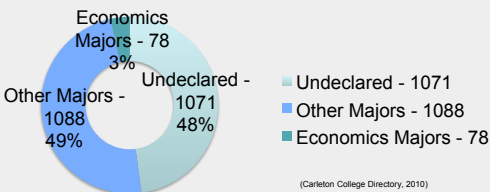


Economics PhD productivity relative to institutional size

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Wednesday, December 8, 2010

Now we’ll consider contrast.

There are some areas this poster uses contrast effectively. The blue areas at the top and left create a clear contrast between the title and the history section, on the one hand, and the rest of the poster. The section headings are larger than the rest of the text, which helps them stand out as important.

Overall, however, this poster suffers in a number of places from insufficient contrast, which makes it hard to “read,” particularly at a distance.

The headings don’t really stand out very well. (click)



Carleton’s Economics Department Delivers the Liberal Arts

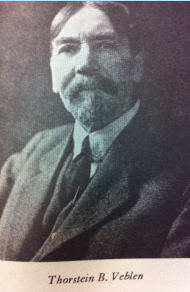
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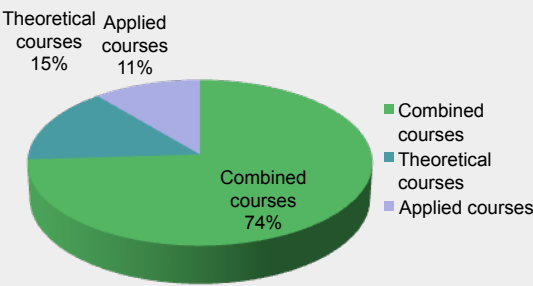


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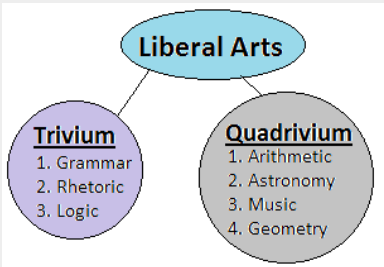
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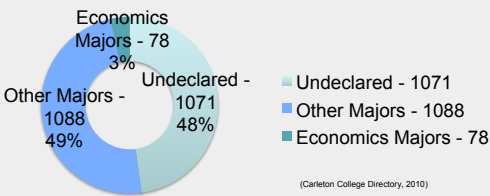


Economics PhD productivity relative to institutional size

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Making the headings bolder increases the contrast with the rest of the text, helping them stand out more clearly.



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(Stephen Strand, 2010)



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Wednesday, December 8, 2010

The Carleton seal in the corner doesn't have enough contrast to be read easily. You might have to peer at it to make it out, only to discover that it is mostly a decorative element. (click)



Carle

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A couple minutes in photoshop or iphoto can fix that. (click)



Carleton’s Economics Department Delivers the Liberal Arts

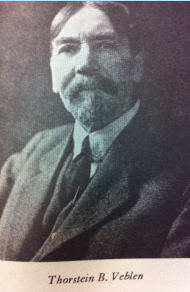
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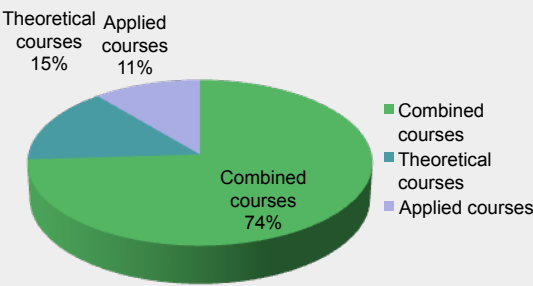


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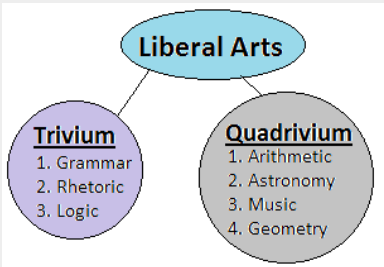
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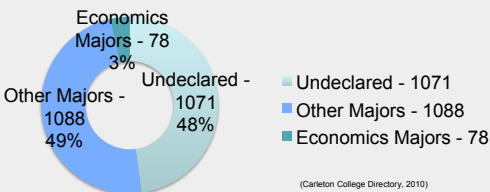


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The title of the poster doesn’t contrast very strongly with the rest of the poster. We need this to work in a crowded, chaotic poster session. It can’t get much bigger with the current arrangement, so let’s be creative. (click)



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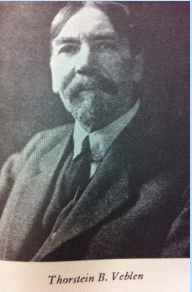
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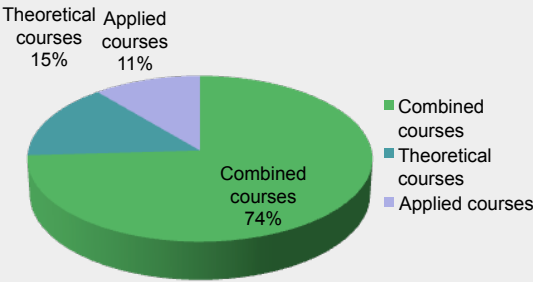


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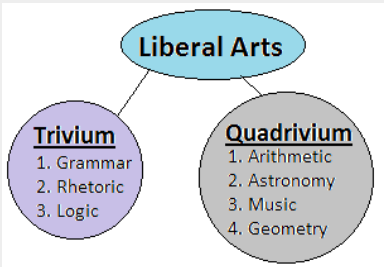
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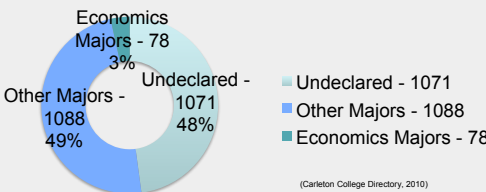


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Note that we’ve aligned it with the left and right edges of the columns below, and that we’ve maintained contrast between the title and subtitle through weight and color rather than size.

All right; what’s left? Utility.

What’s extraneous on this poster? Let’s see if the sections are still readable if we replace these dashed boxes with a grid of light lines, going from 8 elements to three.



Carleton’s Economics Department Delivers the Liberal Arts

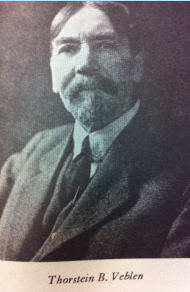
By John Doe ’11

History

The early effort to found a separate department of economics took from 1917 to 1920. Already in 1920 four men were appointed to professorships in economics (Headley & Jarchow, 1966). As time has gone by the economics department, which is run by ten full-time faculty members, has developed greatly. Now 20 different economics courses are offered, with an average class size of around 20 students. Over the past couple of years the economics department has consistently been one of the biggest departments at Carleton with 40 to 50 majors graduating each year (Carleton College, 2010).

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(Carleton College, 2010)

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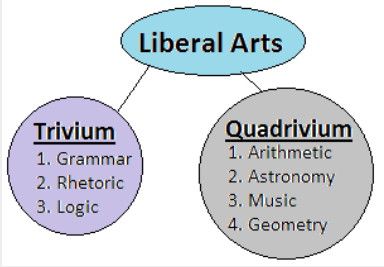
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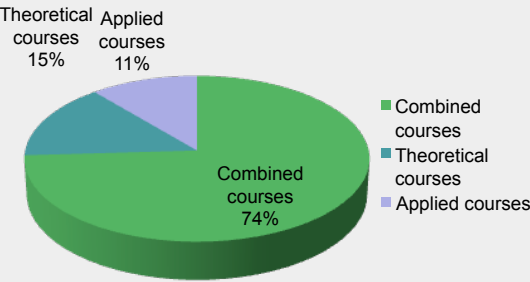
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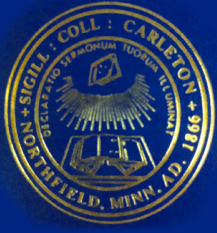
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Because the student did a good job of using proximity and alignment, the sections still seem well-defined to me without the boxes.

Perhaps these heavy black lines are also unnecessary. Let’s see.



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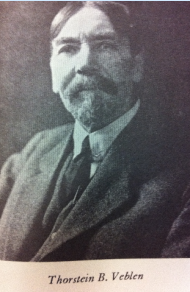
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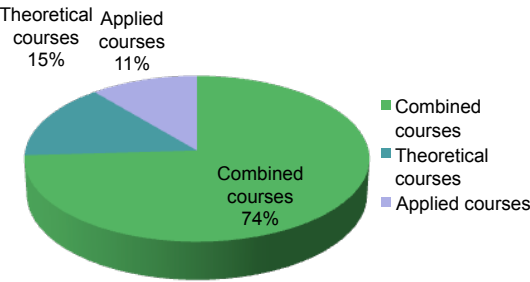


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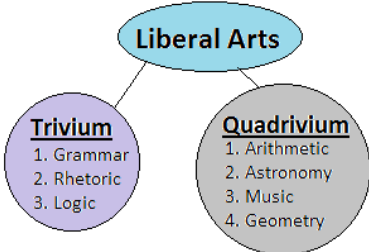
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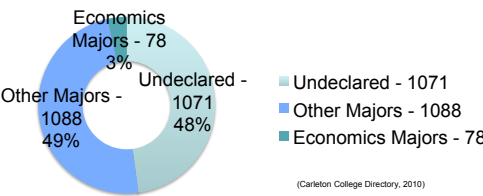
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Williams College	#4
Agnes Scott College	#5
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	#6
Harvard University	#7
University of Chicago	#8
Princeton University	#9
Yale University	#10

(Higher Education Data Sharing [HEDS], 2006)

Proportional Number of Econ Majors



(Carleton College Directory, 2010)

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I think the color does a good enough job on its own.

These changes are a good example of Tufte’s principle of least noticeable difference. We can only take in so many things competing for our attention; if not everything is screaming for attention it makes it that much easier to pay attention to the things that are genuinely important.


There are a few more places this poster can benefit from a utilitarian analysis.

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I'm not sure what purpose the lines and underlines have here, so let's see what happens when we take them off.

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(Stephen Strand, 2010)



(Econ Teachers, 2010)

Theoretical courses 15%


Applied courses 11%

Combined courses 74%

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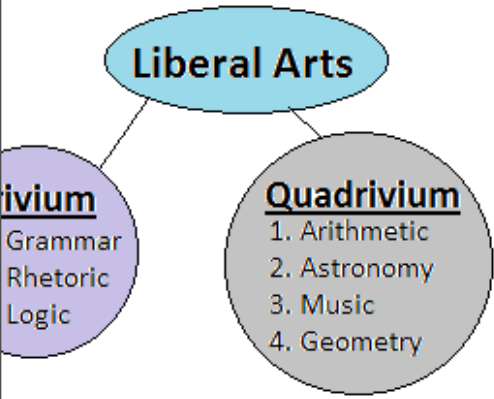


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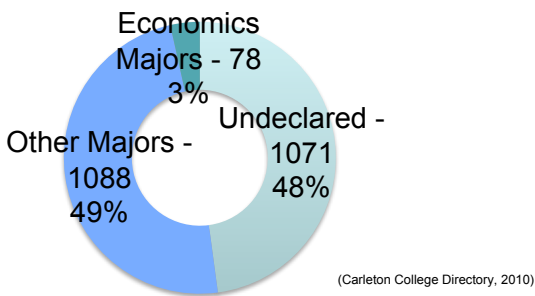
The diagram shows a central blue oval labeled "Liberal Arts". It is connected to two circles. On the left is a purple circle labeled "Trivium" containing "Grammar", "Rhetoric", and "Logic". On the right is a grey circle labeled "Quadrivium" containing a numbered list: "1. Arithmetic", "2. Astronomy", "3. Music", and "4. Geometry".

Economics PhD productivity relative to institutional size

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(Higher Education Data Sharing [HEDS], 2006)

Proportional Number of Econ Majors



The donut chart is divided into three segments: a small teal segment for "Economics Majors - 78" (3%), a large blue segment for "Other Majors - 1088" (49%), and a large light blue segment for "Undeclared - 1071" (48%).

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Let’s move the rankings over so they are easier to associate with the schools.

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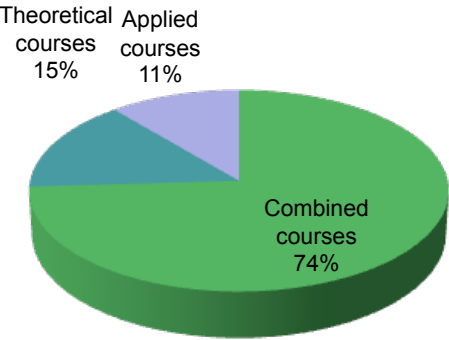


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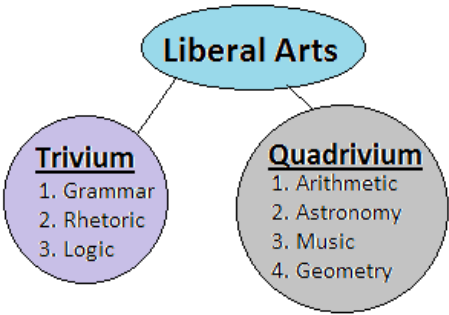
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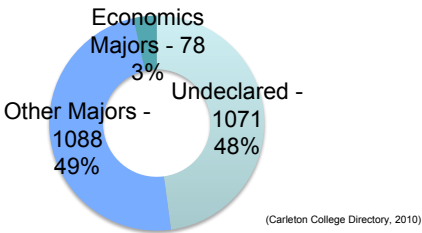


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Now we are still faced with the proximity problem from earlier. Can we make it clearer which sections this evidence pertains to?

My best guess is that the PhD productivity table belongs with the After Carleton section, and the Proportional Majors graph belongs with the Liberal Arts section. Now that we’ve pruned unnecessary elements, we have room to make that happen. I’ll move this one to the Liberal Arts...

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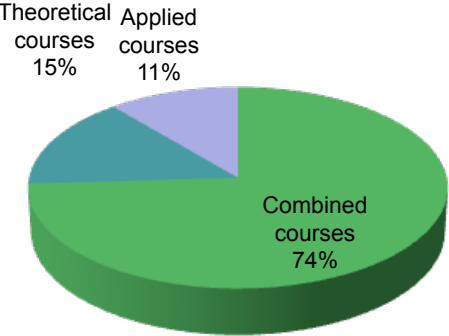


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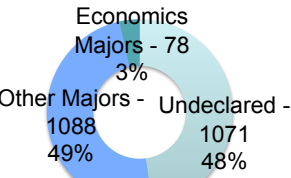
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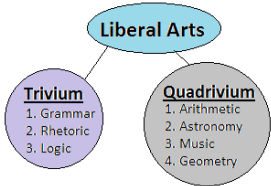
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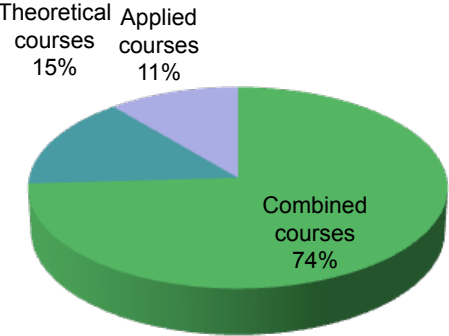


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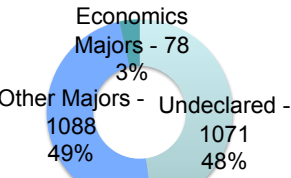
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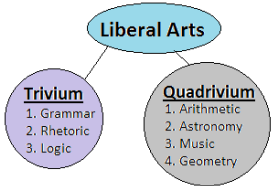
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Wednesday, December 8, 2010

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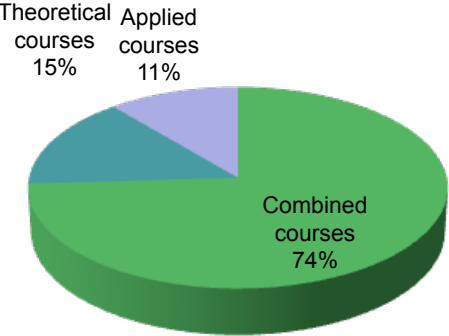


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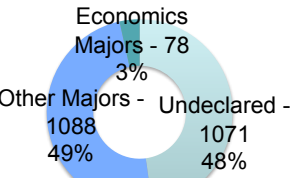
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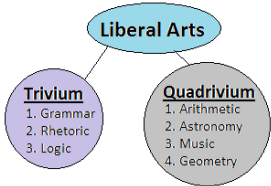
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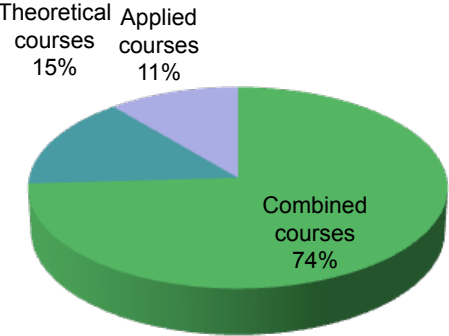


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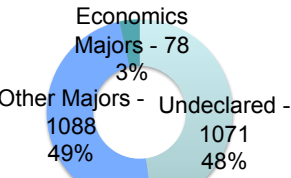
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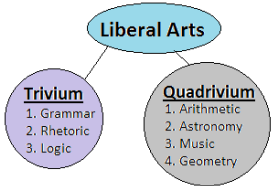
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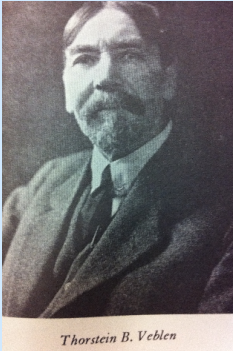
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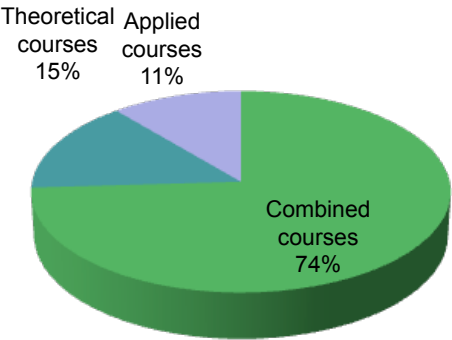


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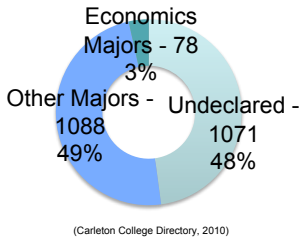
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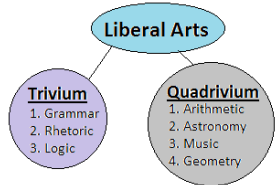
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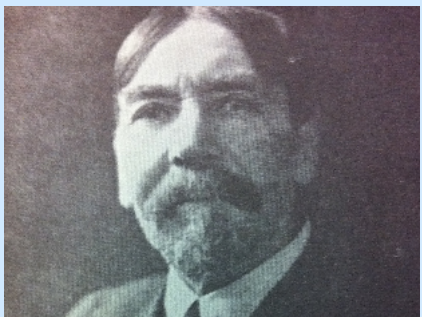
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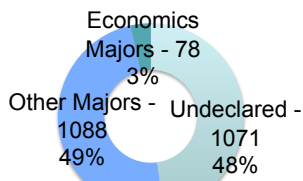
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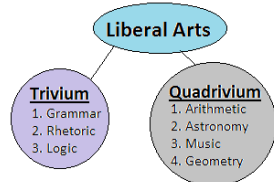
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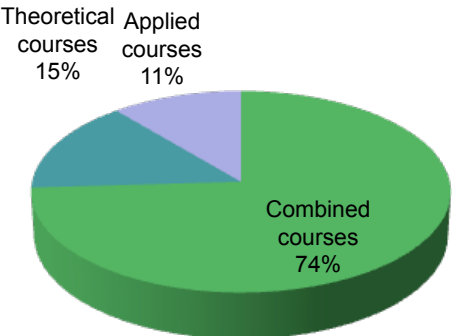


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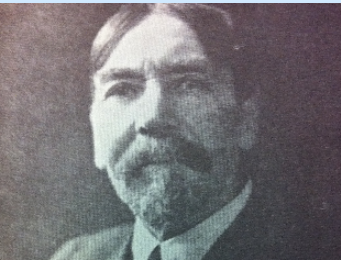
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By John Doe ’11

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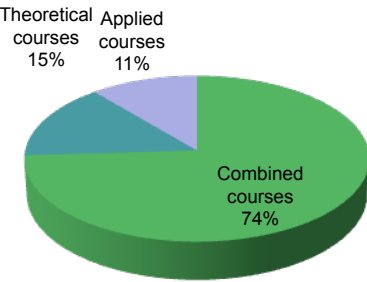


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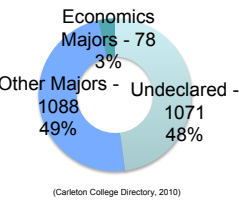
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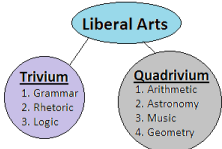
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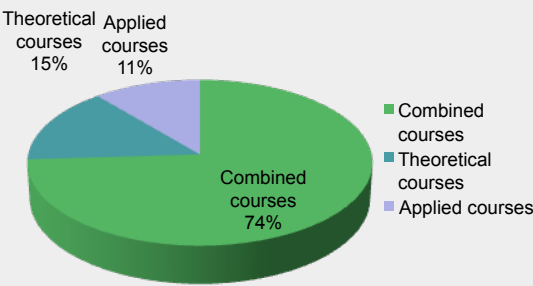


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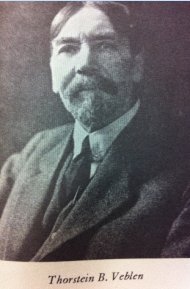


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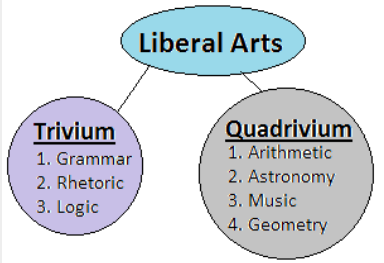


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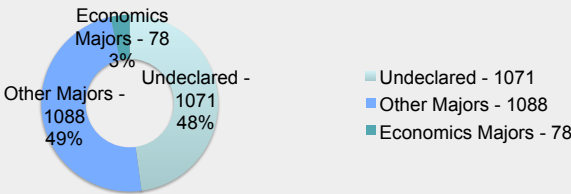
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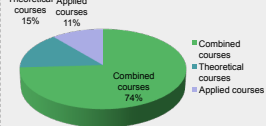
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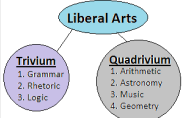


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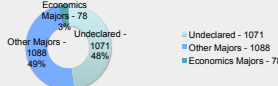


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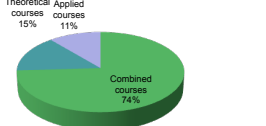
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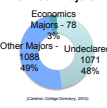
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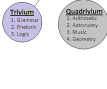
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Wednesday, December 8, 2010

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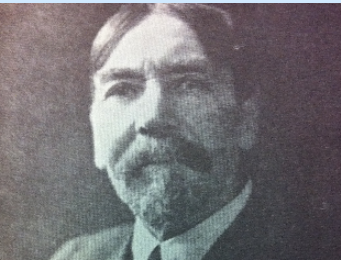
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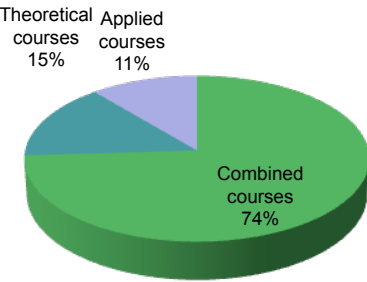


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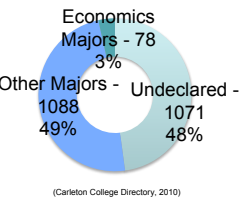
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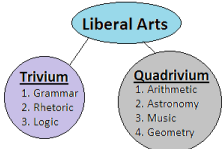
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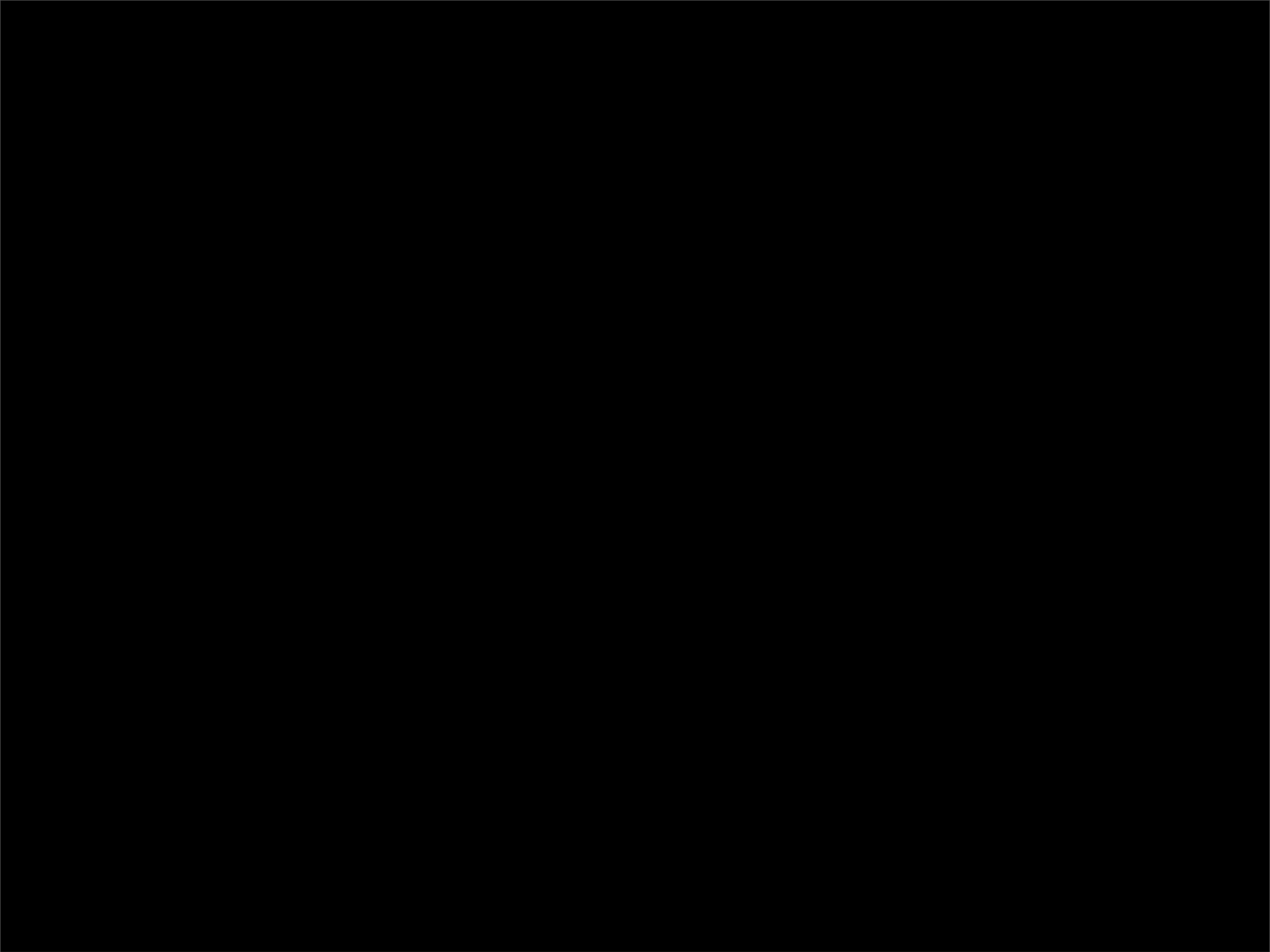
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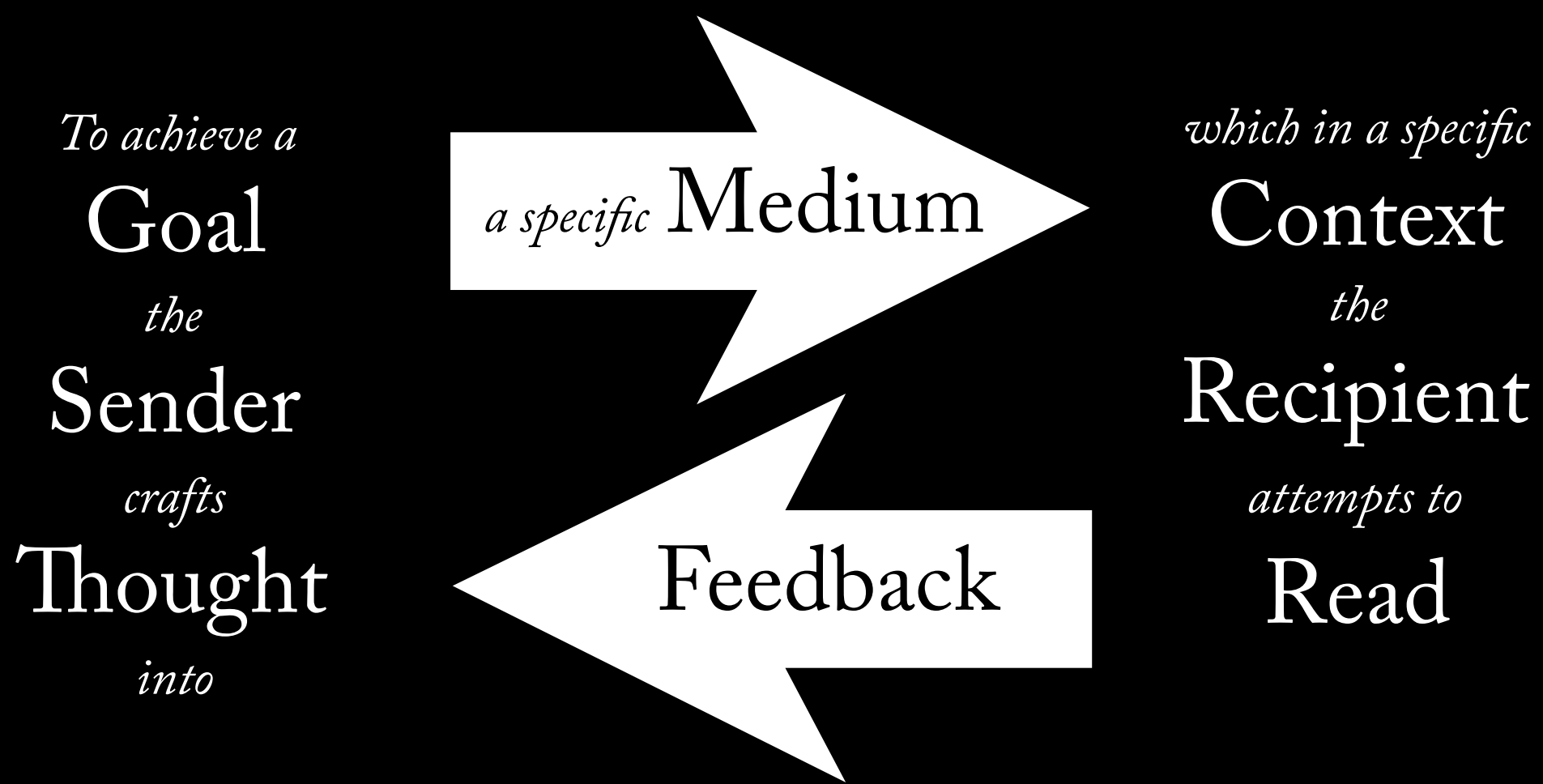
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into



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