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Design fumbles:
obeying the principles

You need to learn the rules before you can break them. In design, six basic principles guide all decisions. Learn them. Know when to break them. And understand that even within these parameters, you still may cause a few fumbles to happen.

Line

In design, *line* can be literal. It can point to vertical lines, horizontal lines or zig-zags. It can also refer to the line your eye follows when it hits the page. The most common pattern your eye follows is the "F" shape. Your eye naturally starts in the top left corner of a page, then moves across, then back, then down, and so on until it hits the bottom left corner. That's why designers place logos in the bottom left corner of print advertisements.

The biggest design fumble is using line, either figuratively or literally, to drag the eye's focus around the page without purpose. Think of the path you want your audience to take, and make sure it's paved well.

Colour

When applying colour to your work, be mindful of the space you want to exist in. Bold and bright? Sombre and melancholic? Two factors determine the role that colour plays in your work: colour theory and colour psychology.

We all learn the basics of colour theory in our pre-school days. Yellow, red, blue— these are primary colours. Later, we learn that secondary colours blend the primaries (blue + yellow = green) and tertiary colours blend the secondaries (green + yellow = gross).

Colour psychology is more profound. It's about how people react to them. Blue represents clarity. Red communicates fury. Purple means the client will hate it.

Colour can be fumbled in a number of ways. Playing favourites is one. Using too much of one colour always reduces impact. Ignoring cultural sensitivities is another. In China, white represents death.

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Shape

Shape is the vehicle for size, colour and overall direction. Think of shape as literally as possible, about how you can use forms effectively. Think about a bottle of Coke. It has those curves, right? That's a perfect example of the power of shape.

Shapes can be both organic and structured. The Coke bottle is the perfect blend of organic curves and firm structure. Fumbles happen when you use too much of one or the other. Too much structure makes a piece too rigid; too little makes the piece unfocused.

Value

Put the emphasis where it matters most. Hierarchy is a tough practice, but getting it right means your audience will hear you loud and clear in the order you intend. Headline, subhead, body copy, call-out. Apply the same principle you do for your typography to the actual shapes on the page. Where do you want the focus to be?

The biggest fumble when it comes to value are four words every designer loves to hear: "Make the logo bigger." A logo doesn't need to take up the entire page to have presence. In fact, brands are most effective when value is distributed properly on a page.

Space

Speaking of oversized logos, give your content breathing room. A little bit of white space can go a long way. We discussed paving a nice path for the eye. This is your chance to widen the lane and do some landscaping.

The fumble here is obvious: cramming as much into your design as possible. A best practice? Remove element after element until the piece is no longer effective. Then build back up until you find a sweet spot.

Texture

When you hand over a business card to someone, texture is real. It has presence. When designing for the page, texture is flat. It can be noise or gradients or how the elements are stacked to provide depth and a sense of tactility. Texture enforces the tone of your deign.

Going overboard with texture is a fumble. Remember the dust and scratches of the early 90s? Yeah, no one wants to see that again.

These principles will take your concepts from good to great. Learn them. Use them responsibly. And when necessary, ignore them.