VECTOR BASIC TRAINING

A SYSTEMATIC CREATIVE PROCESS FOR BUILDING PRECISION VECTOR ARTWORK

DEVELOPED & WRITTEN BY ILLUSTRATIVE DESIGNER
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No one's work is perfect when it hits the page. As you collaborate with others during your career, they'll no doubt point out problems in your work that you're blind to. Don't take offense; it's important to absorb all forms of feedback so you can learn, grow, and become the best you can possibly be.

The fact that you're reading this book shows that you're ready to accept this sort of input, and that's a good sign. In time, being your own art director will become second nature.

Avoid Visual Tension

Shape, and thereby form, is important when creating vector artwork. But how a shape relates to another shape within any given design context is of equal or even greater importance. You might produce a well-crafted and precise shape, but if it's not well balanced with other shapes in a composition, it won't stand up aesthetically. I define this type of problematic shape relationship as visual tension.

Look at **FIGURE 8.10**. Where does your eye automatically go when you look at these shapes? Your eye will probably return to the area circled in red in **FIGURE 8.11** because that's where visual tension exists.
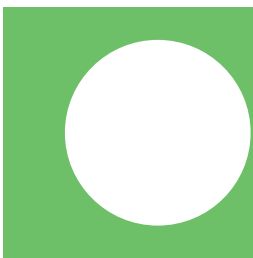
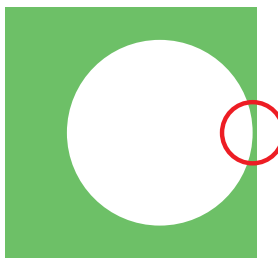**FIGURE 8.10** Look at this graphic and let your eye naturally go where it wants to go.

FIGURE 8.11 If you're like most people, your eye zeroed in on the location circled in red. The white circle is too close to the edge of the square. Visual tension exists because the relationship between the square and circle is unbalanced.
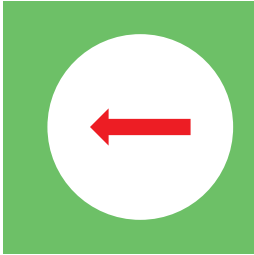
FIGURE 8.12 You can remove the visual tension by moving the circle further away from the square's edge, adding balance to the relationship.
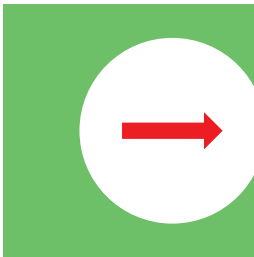

FIGURE 8.13 You can also remove the visual tension by moving the circle past the square's edge so it clearly overlaps it and improves the shape relationship.

The tension comes from the circle being too close to the edge of the green square. It unintentionally draws your eye to that area. To remedy this, you have to either move the circle further away from the edge, as shown in **FIGURE 8.12**, or move the circle past the edge, as shown in **FIGURE 8.13**. These are the fundamental design decisions you'll make every day as a designer.

Most successful designers are expert manipulators, practiced in the art of using composition to visually guide the viewer's eye through a design or to focus attention on a specific location within a given context. You want the viewer to give purposeful attention to important content and not be distracted by unnecessary elements or poor design decisions.

Bad design, in general, is riddled with visual tension. The more areas of visual tension within a graphic, the greater the risk of compromising the intended visual communication. It's crucial, as a self-art director, to recognize and remove visual tension from your artwork. And, as with anything, the first step in solving a problem is recognizing that you have one.

Recognize Visual Tension

Before jumping into a real-world project that contains visual tension, let's take a look at a common graphic that everyone is familiar with: the American flag. I think it's safe to say we've all seen this motif enough that we could spot anything in it that's not quite right.

If you look at **FIGURE 8.14**, you'll see a normal flag and one with a lot of visual tension. Your challenge is to pinpoint all 22 areas of visual tension in this graphic. Some problems are obvious, while others are much more subtle. In **FIGURE 8.15**, it may seem at first that all the issues have been remedied, but look more closely.

As a designer, you may sometimes intentionally mess up a graphic to achieve a certain look and feel. In that context, visual tension is thrown out the window. But that's the exception, not the rule. So, unless the genre specifically calls for a style that's loose, random, or chaotic in its composition, you should be mindful that visual tension is a negative attribute within a design.
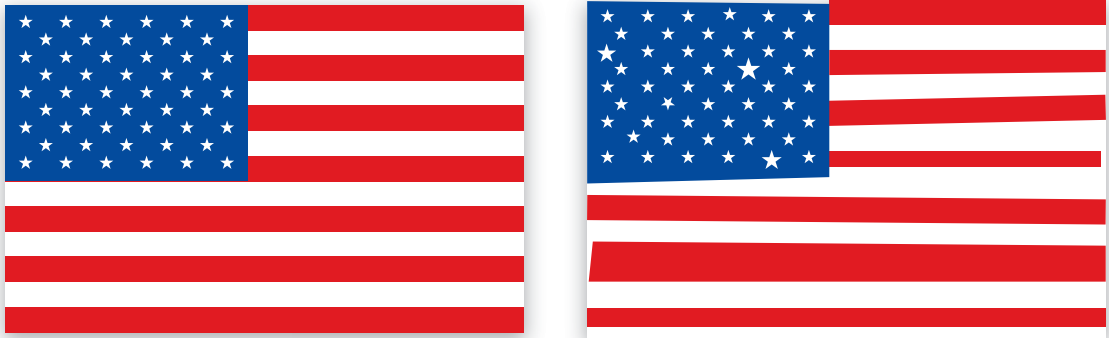
FIGURE 8.14 There are a total of 22 areas of visual tension in the right flag graphic. Compare this with the left flag and see whether you can find all the areas where elements are distorted or positioned or scaled incorrectly.
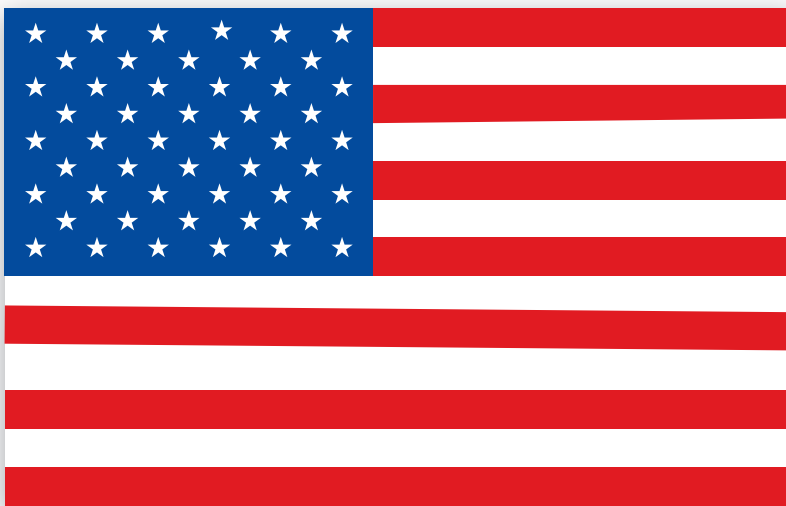

FIGURE 8.15 In this version of the flag graphic, I've corrected 19 of the 22 areas of visual tension. But three areas of subtle tension remain. Can you pinpoint them?

The flag samples demonstrate that visual tension can be both overt and subtle. The latter is obviously harder to spot, so you'll really need to train your eye to detect it.

Let's walk through a project in which I isolated several instances of visual tension so you can see how I resolved them.

FIGURE 8.16 The logotype contains numerous areas of visual tension.

When I added the various outlines to this hand-lettered logotype, it caused a lot of visual tension (**FIGURE 8.16**). Look closely and you'll see the following:

A. The descender of the "K" is too thin.

B. The "U" is sitting on the edge of the "K."

C. The "S" is touching the edge of the "U."

D. The "S" is obstructing too much of the "U."

E. There's too much space between the "S" and the "K."

F. Both arms of the "K" are too thin.

G. The "K" should overlap the "O."

H. The exclamation mark is too thin and short.

Visual tension can be caused by any sort of poorly handled shape relationship. Any time your eye is pulled toward an unintended area, it's a safe bet that there's some form of visual tension within the design.

Once I'd identified the areas of visual tension, I was able to fix them (**FIGURE 8.17**). Notice how I also fixed the awkward slivers of negative space created by the outlines surrounding the "U" and "S." When I added a bear character, I paid very close attention so as not to create new areas of visual tension (**FIGURE 8.18**).

FIGURE 8.17 Compare the before and after of this logotype. I removed all areas of visual tension as shown in the bottom sample to improve the readability of the design. Spotting visual tension may seem a bit foreign at first, but over time you'll be able to spot these problems quickly.

FIGURE 8.18 The final vector artwork used on packaging for a line of kid's snacks.

Full-Tilt Creative Boogie

If creativity has an antithesis, it has to be complacency.

To grow as a creative person, it's essential to leave your comfort zone, take design risks, apply new methods like the fresh eyes effect, and eliminate visual tension. All of this will help you develop new styles for yourself and your clients.

Realize that when you do these things, you're bound to fail, but those failures only add to your growth as a creative professional. You simply can't improve without trying and failing. So use T.N.T. (Try New Things) to blow up your creative norm.

Remember, art directing yourself means you need to be your own worst critic. Don't settle for good enough. Keep your creative standard high and relentlessly pursue design excellence so it becomes your natural creative penchant.

Resist taking the easy road toward design stagnation. Instead, stir up your creative juices and eventually you'll be doing the full-tilt creative boogie!