

# Poster Composition and Layout

When you're ready to compose, or layout, your poster, this is the time to pull out a sketchpad and pencil and have your notes about specific elements at hand. While you can try out various compositions on your computer, the sketching method is actually faster and more productive. Make thumbnails, or miniature layouts where you can fit a number of layouts on a page and begin to compare them to each other. The first thing you need to consider is the poster size. While some organisations usually will define the poster size for you, in some instances you might be free to roam among some standard print sizes. You need to consider who will print the poster and whether they might have some restrictions as well. Some print houses won't print anything above 24" x36". Other print houses have made a specialty out of the larger movie poster sizes, up to 50" x 76".

The layout for a poster at any given size can be horizontal or vertical, and sometimes square. The horizontal style was popular during the mid-twentieth century and it was revived recently, as it mimics a TV or movie screen. The vertical choice is more popular, as it can be posted just about anywhere, from supports like bulletin boards to telephone poles. Additionally, the vertical layout is easier to read for the rushing passer-by.

The following layout options pertain to vertical layouts, but you can also translate them to horizontal layouts as needed, and you can also translate them to larger or smaller sizes.

**NOTE:** One main reason why you would want to work in vector graphics for a poster design is that you can work small, thereby saving computer resources. Once you've finalized the design you can enlarge the piece to fit the dimensions. Be sure to keep the dimensions proportional when you work at a reduced size, otherwise you'll mess up your design when you enlarge it to the correct dimensions. Remember to make sure that any bitmaps (photos etc) are of a size and quality that suits the final output.



## Grid Layout

The Grid Layout is similar to a table layout in Web design. This is where you divide the ground into equal sized rectangles or squares. These blocks and their tangent points represent areas where you want to place your elements. For example, a simple quadrant layout can help you to centre the point of interest and then you can add other elements that create a more asymmetrical layout:



The poster to the left shows the two movie stars placed equidistant from the middle vertical line. They're also both facing toward the centre line at about a 45 degree angle. This angle echoes the sky above the horizontal line and the bowling alley lanes below that horizontal line. All the darker elements – in this case a bowling alley – are placed below the horizontal line, and the lightest element in this poster – a white light – is placed behind John Goodman exactly on that horizontal halfway point.

The poster to the right displays the stars in a circle that symbolizes a golf course hole. They're placed smack-dab in the middle of this poster, and other elements are placed almost equally both above and below the horizontal line. The only elements that deny this poster a symmetrical layout are the golf flag and the landscape that's evident above the horizontal line.

Another way to use the quadrants would be to place one or more elements within one or all four quadrants. This layout has been used often to represent the four seasons.

A more complicated grid layout would divide the quadrant even further:



The two examples shown above are examples of a more complex grid layout. Note that the type in both images is a little larger or set a little above the grid line space. The AC/DC heading, for example, extends down beyond the topmost gridline and the images are more or less centred along the grid lines rather than sitting right on top of them.

In the Green Day poster, the title is a little above centre and this is a good practice. If the title was dead-on centre, the title would look like it was falling off the page, or it would make the top half of the poster look top-heavy. And, while the images in this poster aren't sitting perfectly on the grid lines, the grid provides a guide as to how the elements could be placed. Study this poster to see how the images lie along the grid lines, and how the elements also fall within certain grid spaces.

## Rule of Thirds Layout

The rule of thirds represents a refined and classic grid layout. This rule states that an image can be divided into nine equal parts by two equally-spaced horizontal lines and two equally-spaced vertical lines. The four points formed by the intersections of these lines can be used to focus on your main elements, or the boxes formed by the lines can provide the spaces for your elements:



Here we have both a current and a vintage poster to show that this layout has been used for a long time. In the poster to the left, the faces of the stars are placed within the rectangles created by the gridlines. The fourth face, the skull, is split almost in half by the bottom horizontal line. Notice that Dep's face placement is similar to the ACDC headline – his face extends down beyond the topmost horizontal line. This size adds balance to the overall layout and makes Dep's face prominent among all the elements.

The Vogue layout is created exactly along the rule of thirds grid lines. The top and bottom grids fit within and across the top and bottom rectangles. The yellow-clad figure is almost centred along the left vertical grid line, and her activity – looking at herself in a mirror – is contained within the two top middle rectangles.

## Circular or Oval Layout

This layout takes the viewer's eye around the picture, and it often uses elements that are – you guessed it – circular. But, since the poster is often rectangular, the circle is often an oval.



In the poster at top left, the type along the top follows the circular layout and mimics the shape of the hamburger. Often, the poster that contains a circular layout uses type along a horizontal straight line at the bottom. In the poster at top right, the elements are contained within a circle and within an oval.

## The “Z” Layout

The “Z” layout is a popular design layout borrowed from advertising. In most print advertisements, the elements that must be included in the ad are the headline and the company name and the logo. These elements are often placed at the top and bottom of an ad, where the logo provides a stopping point for the eye and leads it back into the page. Think “Zorro.”



The two movie posters above show the “Z” layout. Both contain headlines that lead the eye from left to right across the top of the poster. In the Harry Potter poster to left, the diagonal line that leads the eye to the bottom left of the poster is more difficult to discern than the diagonal line created by Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh in the “Gone With the Wind” poster, but the line is there in the diagonal shadows. The designer for the Potter poster created enough of a diagonal shadow line to lead the eye from bottom right back into Harry Potter’s silhouetted image. Brilliant.

In both posters, the bottom of the “Z” is used for pertinent movie information.

## Horizon Line Layout

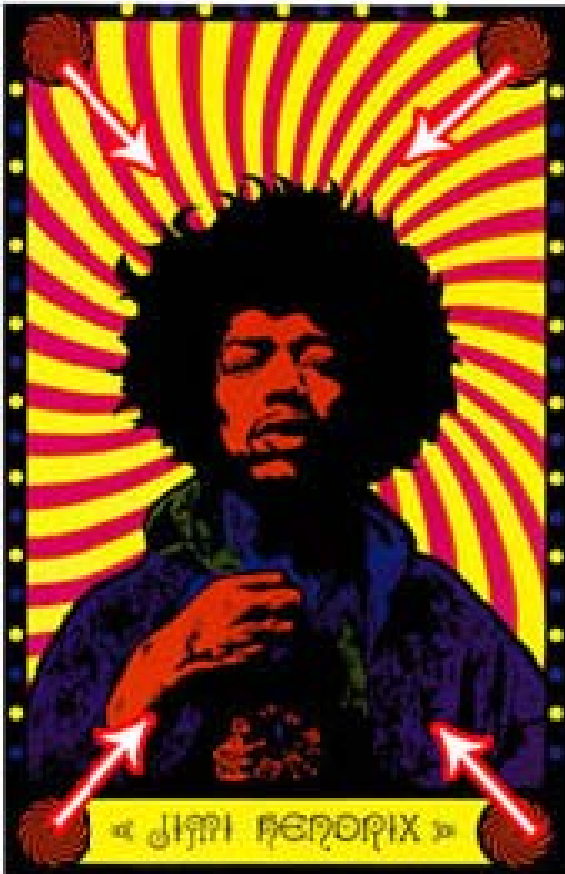
This layout, while touted by some as a valid layout, usually follows a grid. The two posters that I used as examples in the quadrant grid layout, for instance, provide perfect samples to validate this reasoning:



The horizon line in the poster at top left is just beneath the horizontal grid. In the right poster, the horizon line lies halfway between the horizontal grid and the top of the poster. Although the “Horizon Line” layout is somewhat moot, you can use it to create an asymmetrical design in an otherwise symmetrical layout.

## Perspective Layout, or Vanishing Point Layout

This type of layout uses perspective to create a focal point for a specific element. You can place that important element in one of three places: 1) in front of or at the vanishing point; 2) use the elements to create the perspective; 3) opposite the vanishing point. This layout can help you to also define the importance of various elements within your poster, as seen in the examples below:

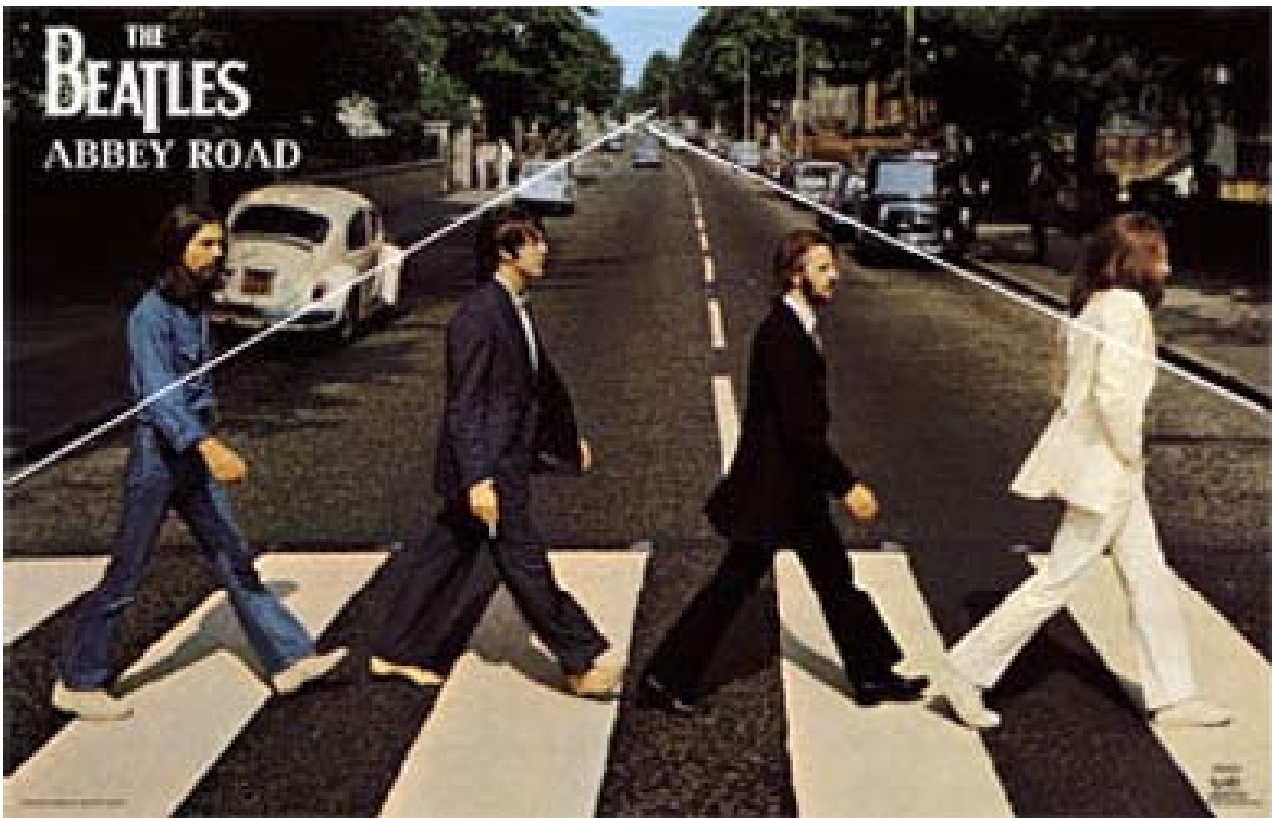


The two posters above show the main element, the face, in front of the vanishing point.





Spiderman and Eragon have become part of the perspective. Spiderman is placed on a one-point perspective angle, and the folks in Eragon have been used to create a two-point perspective angle.



In this famous Beatles poster, the Beatles have been placed at the opposite end of the vanishing point. Although the point was to make all Beatles members equal with equal size and spacing, several elements create John Lennon as the focal point if not the leadership role. First, he's in front of the group; secondly, he wears white, which makes him stand out.

## Combo Layouts

You might have noticed as you looked at the layouts above that some posters fit into more than one compositional rule. This is a habit that many graphic designers develop to help them determine where to place elements when all else fails.

For instance, the “Pirates of the Caribbean” poster could also be defined as a circular layout. The “Deluxe Hamburger” poster could also fit into the Vanishing Point, or Perspective Layout. The Vogue layout could also be defined by a simple grid.

As you begin to place elements in your poster, see if your layout can fit two or more compositional rules. If so, then you’ve created a more complex and pleasing layout for the viewer as you place elements in positions that demand more or less attention.

## Conclusion

The elements and principles of design are part and parcel of your poster design. Line, shape, direction, size (of your elements), texture, colour, value, balance, repetition, contrast, harmony, and unity are some of the most important tools that you can use to create your poster design.