

Gestalt principles of perceptual organization

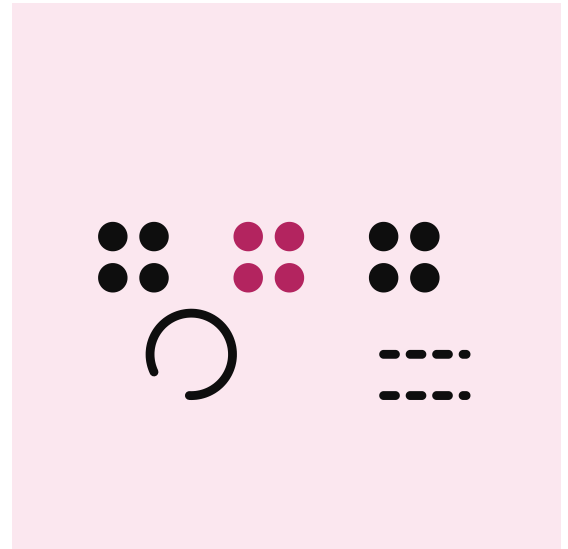
Rules by which perception groups what we see: things that are close, look alike, follow the same line or share an outline are seen as a whole.

In Spanish

Principios de la Gestalt

Origin

Wertheimer (1923); review by Wagemans et al. (2012)



What problem it addresses

Explains why a screen or a poster is understood at a glance or looks messy, even with the same elements.

An example

The same nine fields of a form, with different spacing.

All at the same distance

9 fields

Nine fields spread out evenly. **A long list.**

Grouped by proximity

Details

Address

Payment

The same fields in three groups, with more space between groups. **Three blocks that read on their own.**

No need to add headings or lines: distance is enough for the eye to form the groups.

Why it happens

1

.....

The eye doesn't look at each element separately:

2

... ..

it organizes them instantly by proximity, similarity and continuity,

3

and we see groups and figures before the pieces.

Applications in design

✓ Use it like this

Group with space before adding lines, boxes or headings.

✗ Avoid

Spacing everything evenly, related or not, or placing unrelated things close together.

👁 Don't fall for it

If everything looks alike, nothing stands out: save difference for what needs to be distinguished.

A century

What the research says

Later research on grouping and figure-ground relationships confirms and extends what Wertheimer proposed (Wagemans et al., 2012).

● ● ● **Solid evidence.** The principles describe tendencies, not exact laws: when several compete with each other, the outcome depends on the case.

Connections

Used in

■ Information design

■ UI design

■ Editorial design

■ Graphic design

Related to

■ Cognitive load

■ Von Restorff effect

■ Grid system

Authors and works

1923	Max Wertheimer	Described how we group dots and lines: by proximity, similarity, continuity or closure.
2012	Johan Wagemans et al.	Reviewed a century of research, including principles described after Wertheimer, such as common region.

Sources

Original sources

- Wertheimer, M. (1923). Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt II. Psychologische Forschung, 4, 301–350. [View source \(https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00410640\)](https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00410640)

Academic reviews

- Wagemans, J., Elder, J. H., Kubovy, M., Palmer, S. E., Peterson, M. A., Singh, M., & von der Heydt, R. (2012). A century of Gestalt psychology in visual perception: I. Perceptual grouping and figure–ground organization. Psychological Bulletin, 138(6), 1172–1217. [View source \(https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029333\)](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029333)

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