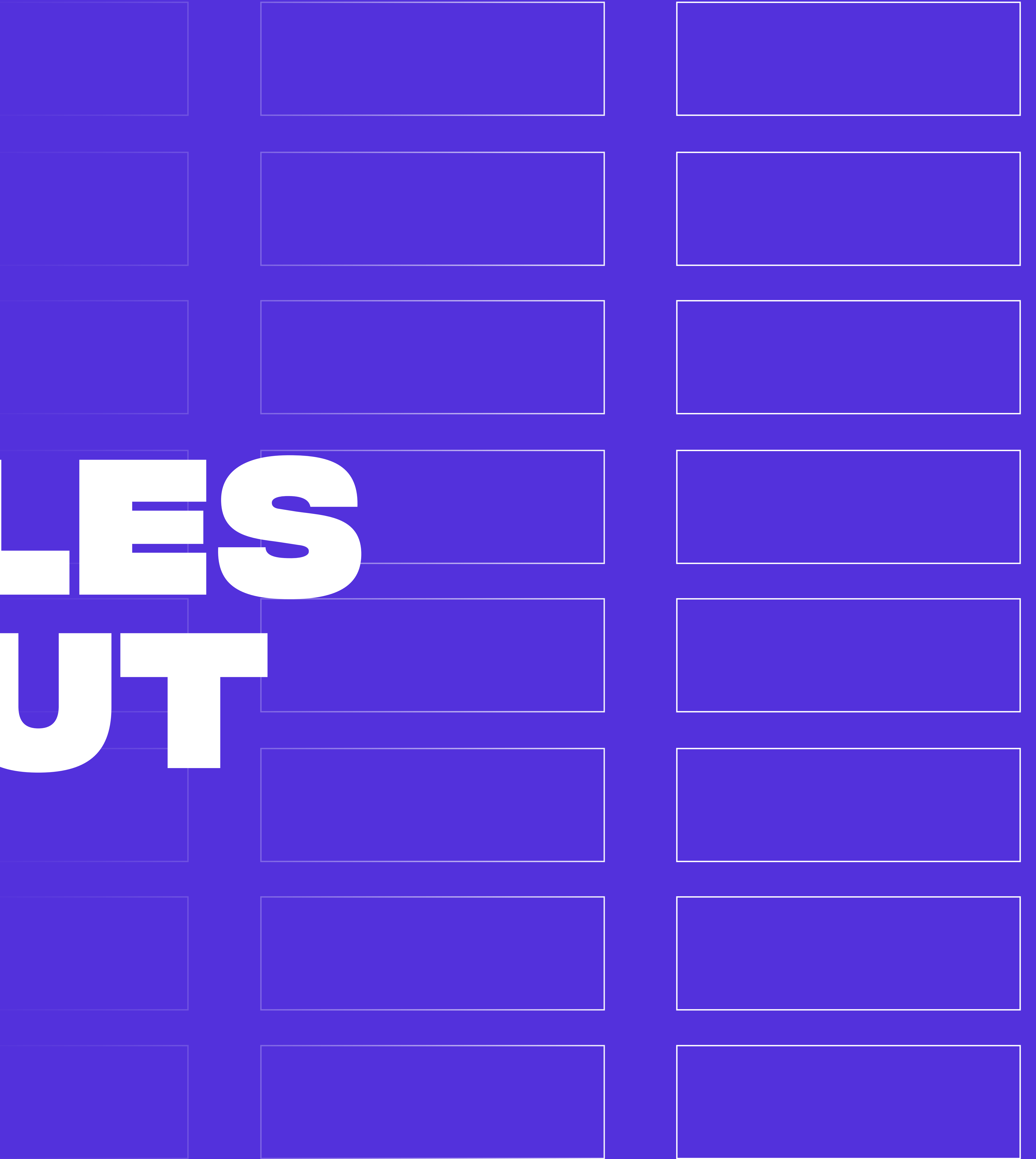




PRINCIPLES OF LAYOUT

Nine timeless concepts to elevate your designs



HELLO!

When you begin to learn design, it can be difficult to tell why a composition isn't working. You waste time dragging things around until it looks better, or resort to copying.

Learning the principles behind strong layouts can help you plan better and, if and when you get stuck, step back to evaluate methodically what needs to change.

Just as a musician learns their instrument in order to more effectively share their vision, these ideas are not intended to limit your creativity. Instead, they provide the opportunity for expression whilst allowing you to fulfil the design brief.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Each principle is introduced with a brief description of the concept, followed by an example.

If you really want your learning to stick, take one concept at a time and experiment with different ways of integrating it into your own layouts.

Remember that the examples are just one illustration of the principle. There are infinite variations! Think about each as a jumping off point for your own work.

The Principles

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Focal point

The centre of interest.

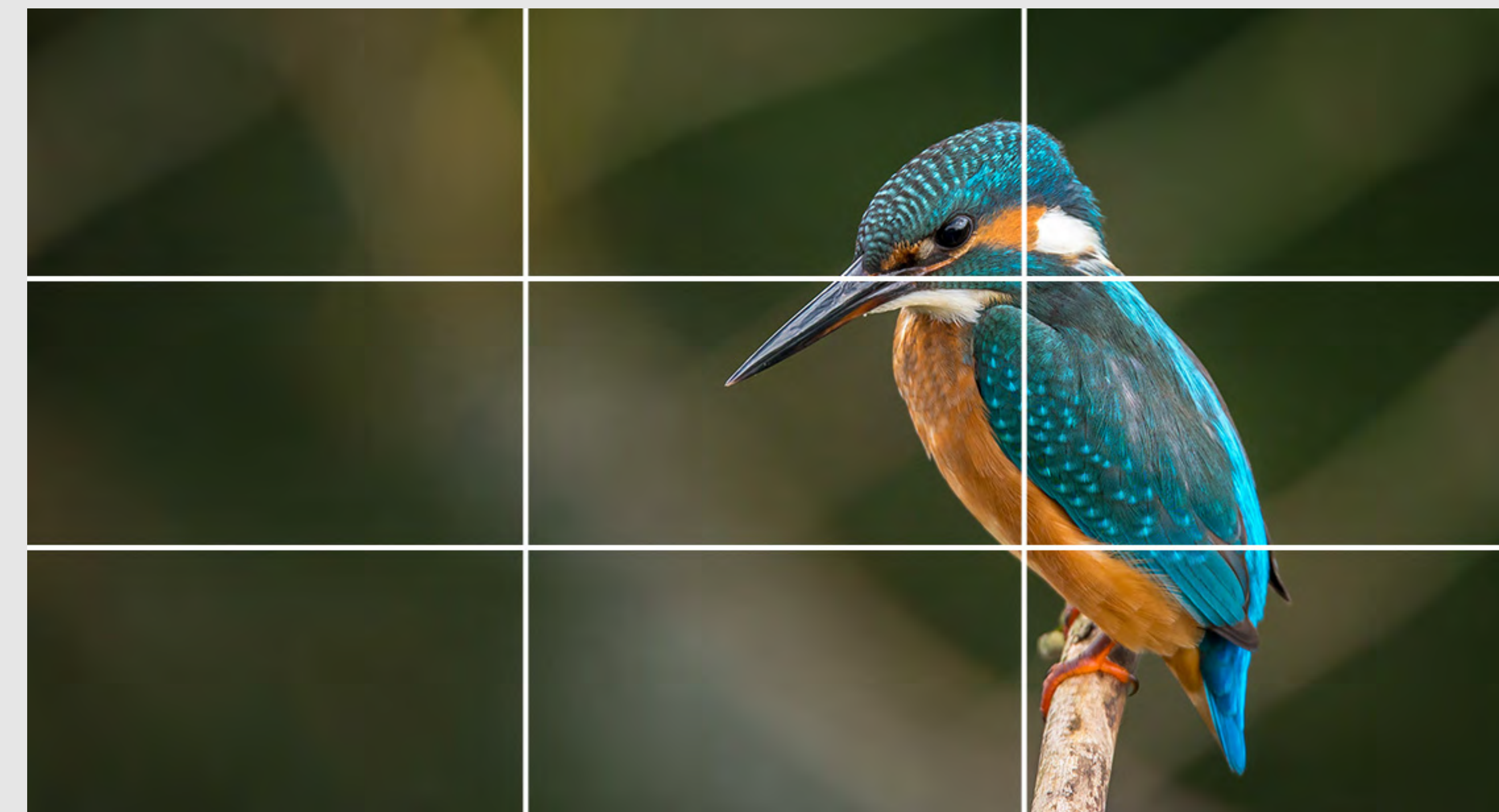
The location to which your eye is drawn
– where things meet or diverge.

Rule of thirds

The 'rule of thirds' is a well-known approach.

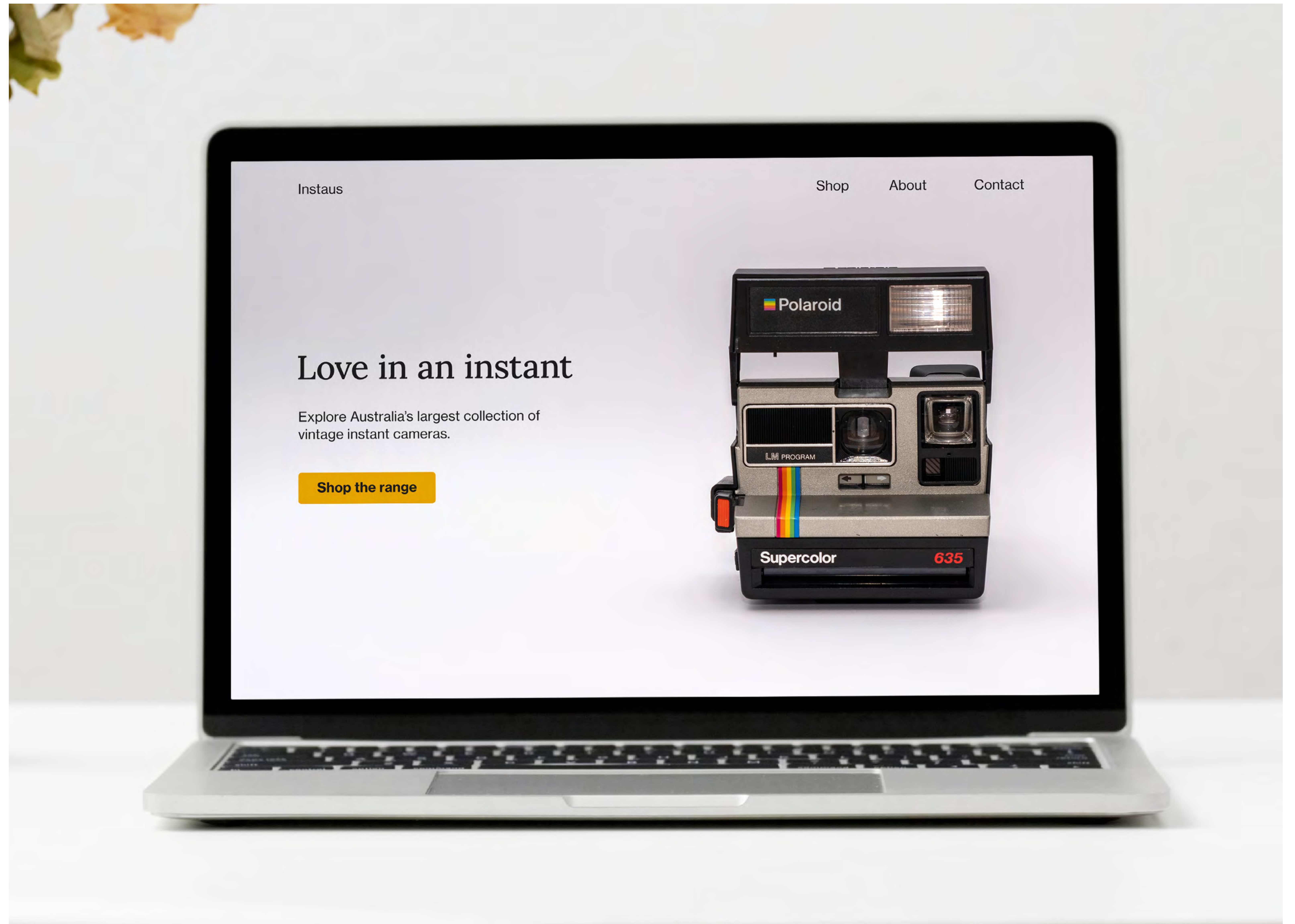
Commonly introduced to photography beginners, it involves dividing in the canvas into three equal horizontal and/or vertical sections and then placing the subject along these imaginary grid lines.

You can apply this to layouts too...



Here the dominant element is the camera. A clear focal point which has been placed in the right third of the frame.

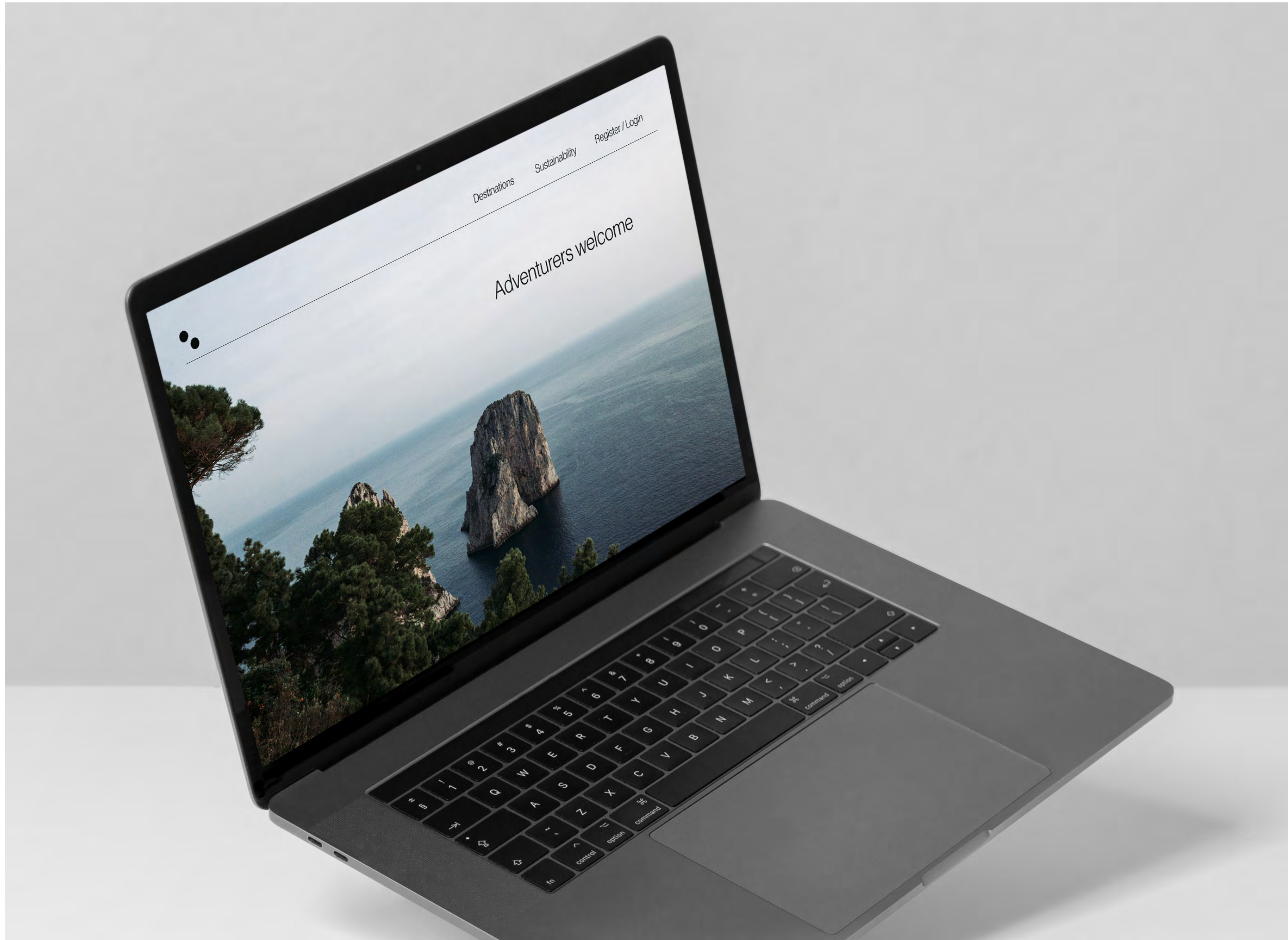
This example also makes judicious use of the next layout principle...



White space

Just as music needs dynamics (loud and quiet), layouts need white space.

“White space” means quiet areas of visual rest which give your other elements room to breathe.



White space does not have to be completely empty. The photograph fills the entire background but the quiet areas of sea and sky offset the cliffs and trees.

The layout makes use of the clear space afforded by the photograph, placing the navigation and headline here with white space around them i.e. not too close to the cliffs.

Hierarchy

Give priority to the most important elements.

This helps orient your reader and lead them along the journey.

Headlines tend to be more prominent than body copy. Imagery can either take centre-stage or blend into the background depending on your intention.

As this is a photo essay, the dramatic imagery is most prominent.

The headline is significantly more dominant than the byline, body copy, and caption.



Grouping

Instead of spacing elements out evenly, gather things that belong together.

This helps the reader make sense of the information.



The poster had a prominent headline – the artist name. The practical information is grouped together at the bottom. Then separated into two further groups: the ticketing information on the right, and the “when and where” on the left.

Scale

Employ large contrasts in size to add drama.

Try huge headlines, small captions, or full bleed images next to layouts with lots of white space.

A dramatic difference in point sizes produces a dramatic effect. This is both graphically pleasing and arrests the users attention whilst scrolling through this site.

Which leads into our next principle...

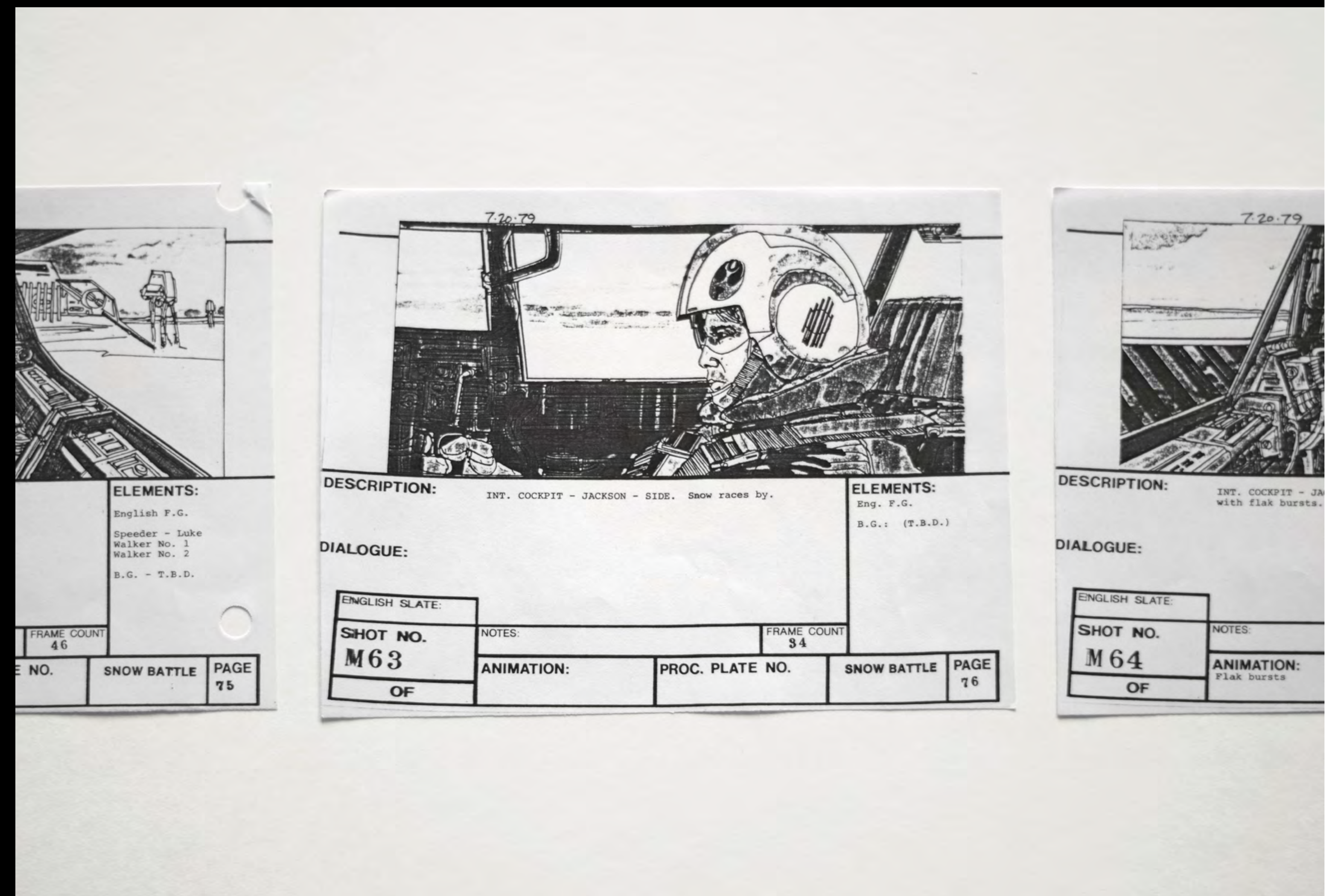


Sequence

A video editor understands the power of sequence.

Web Designers should think similarly about a user scrolling down a page. Panels shouldn't be considered in isolation but as part of a sequence which creates a cinematic experience.

Flicking through a well-designed coffee table book produces a similar effect as the layout "moves around" whilst leafing through.





Alignment

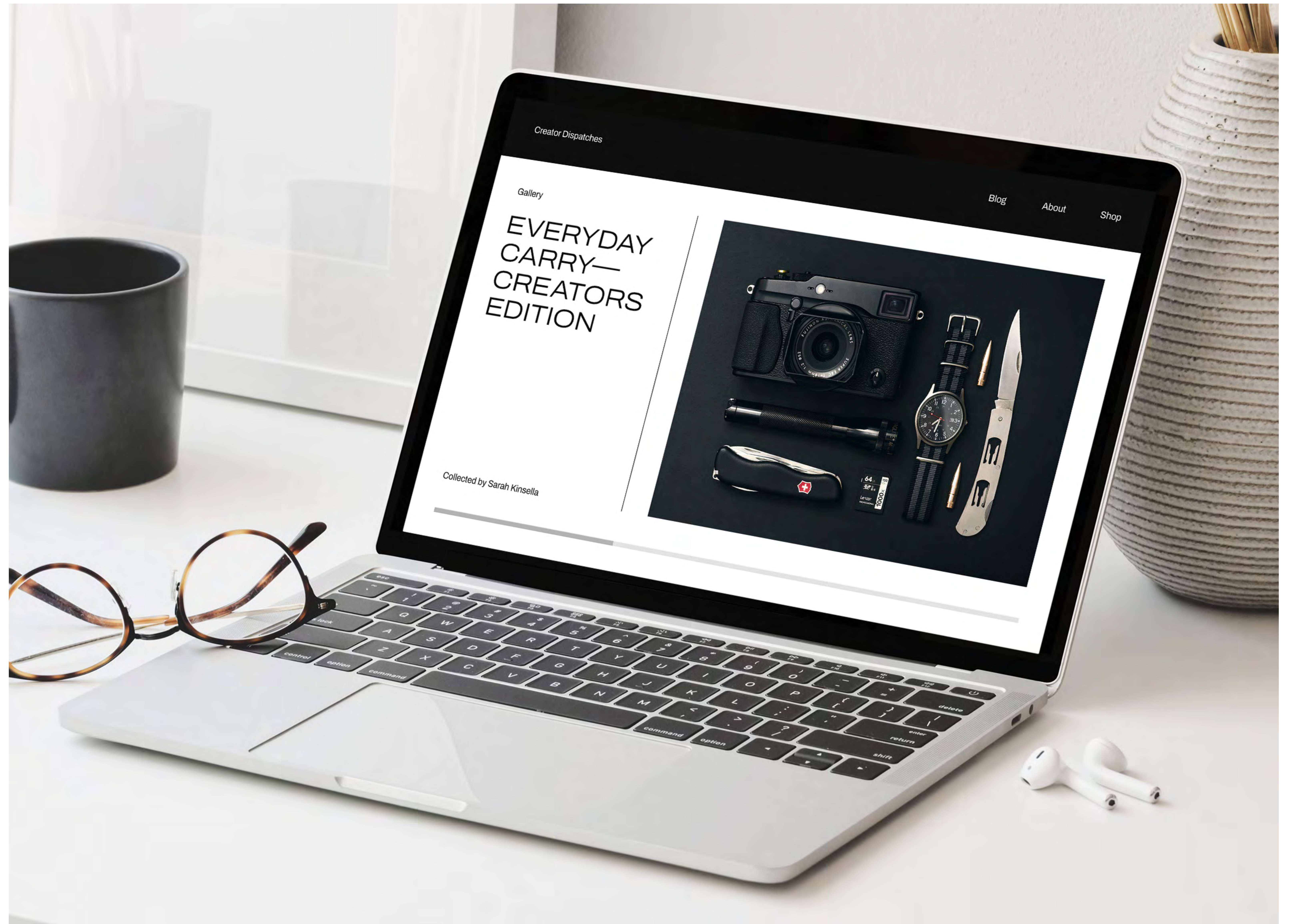
Be deliberate with vertical axes.

Be attentive to horizontal baselines too.

Responsive layouts on the web represent a challenge, and each screen size should be catered for and checked carefully. Seemingly random alignment looks amateurish.

Type is flush-left and aligned along the left axis. The columns are emphasised by a thin black vertical rule.

Care has also been taken with vertical alignment with the author's name aligned to the bottom of the column, emphasising the horizontal layout.

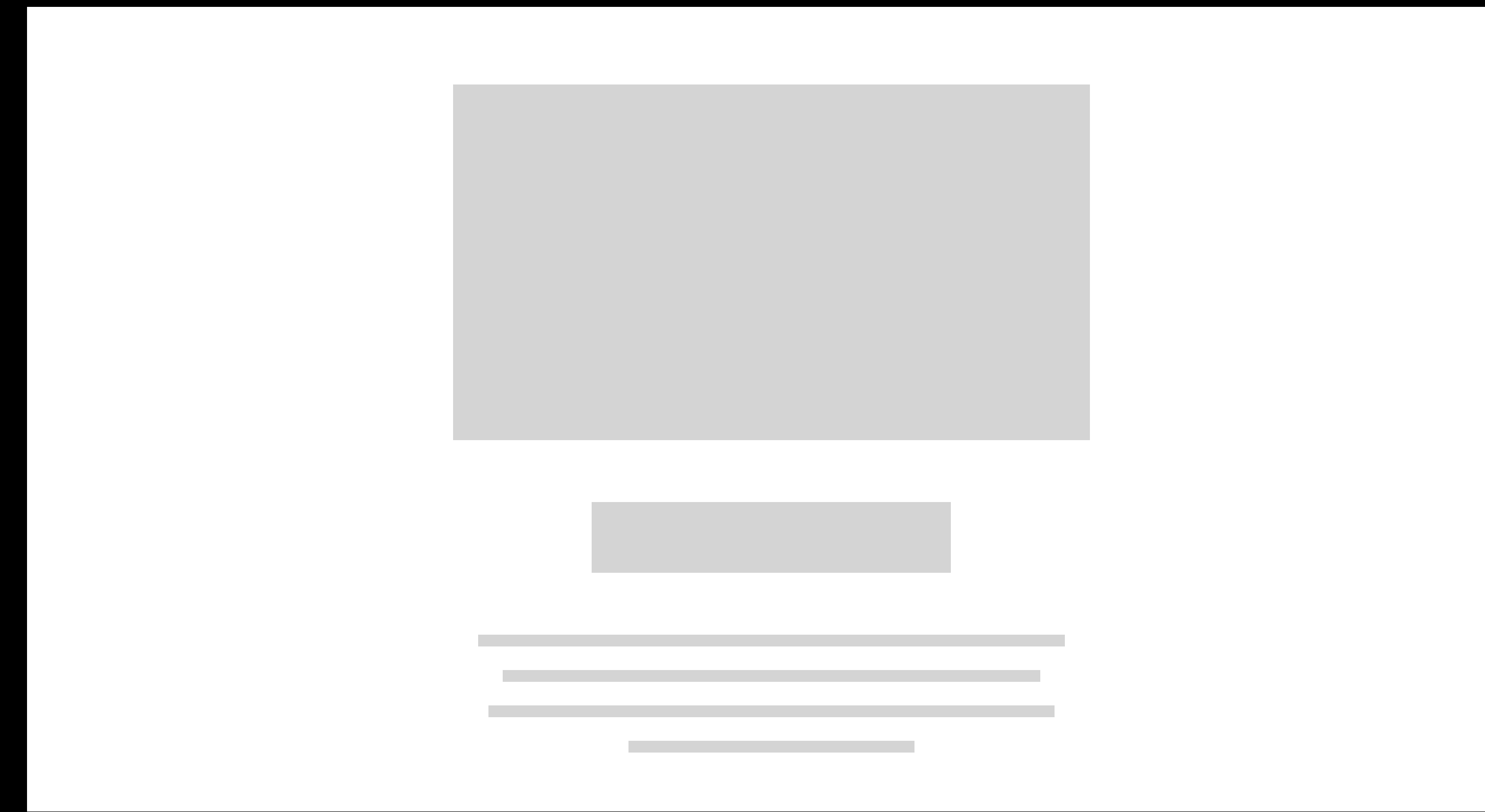


Balance

Symmetry is often employed because it is the easiest way of achieving balance. Centre alignment is suitable for certain formats and can work for very short sections of text.

However, text flush-left should be the default. It is much easier to read and preferable graphically as the rag is only on one side.

Asymmetrical layouts are more flexible and often look more elegant. Simply use counterbalancing elements to distribute the visual “weight”.





The composition of this photo essay is more visually interesting than one with all images the same size. It has been arranged very deliberately to achieve balance.

The model on the right hand page is looking in to the layout and is placed slightly to the right of centre within the frame.

Her gaze is in the direction of the top image on the left page. The bottom left image balances the composition across the spread by adding visual weight to this area.

This layout was created using our final principle...

Grids

Command of the grid allows you to achieve all of the above.

It is the most useful tool for the designer wishing to produce an effective layout. The structure produces order and conveys confidence.



Grids

Print (or “fixed” layouts) allow the designer to set margins and use rows in a standardised manner which is difficult to achieve in a responsive design.

If a whole page is in view, the bottom margin should be larger than the top. When these margins are the same height it appears as if the layout is falling down off the page.



Every module in a grid does not need to be filled – it is usually preferable to leave some empty.



This creates white space and can help you achieve a balanced asymmetrical layout.

**THAT'S
ALL FOLKS...**

Once you become familiar with these principles you'll start to see them everywhere. Train your eye by analysing photography, artwork, and architecture – as well as graphic design – thinking about the effect the layout has on you.

It takes both guidance and years of experience to become a master of layout, but hopefully the suggestions here help you to build your confidence and begin to work faster.

As you progress, ensure that you're making intentional, not arbitrary, decisions.

If you enjoyed this free resource, let us know!

OR IS IT?...

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HAPPY DESIGNING!



Written and designed by Matt Brunton

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