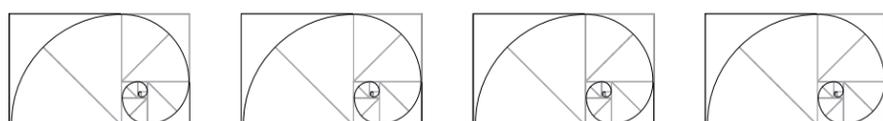


# The Good Page

By Barbara Kristaponis



There is something magical for me about making marks on a blank surface—lines, shapes, letterforms—the province also of stone cutters, typographers, sign makers, and the monks who meticulously gold-inked drop caps in the 1400s. And then there is the science involved in creating something on paper or screen that will convey a message to someone. Ah yes, the math of the golden section and Fibonacci spiral.

Often we think of graphic design as the means by which words can better convey meaning. By creating numbered lists in our instruction sheets, we create hierarchies of action. By grouping like things together in our agendas, we create nuggets of content. Writing is a visual thing. We see words. But, but of course, first we hear words.

To go deeper into all these word and design connections, we might read **Robert Bringhurst**, revered Canadian poet, typographer, linguist, cultural historian, and translator of works from Haida, Navajo, Greek, and Arabic. He wrote in *The Tree of Meaning: Language, Mind and Ecology*, that we should also consider gesture:

“Speech is just a special case of gesture: a half-hidden kind of gesture, producing an audible trace. Language begins when the mind hitches a ride on signals transmitted by the body and another mind receives (through the aid of another body, as a rule) at least some of what is sent.”<sup>1</sup>

To also read Bringhurst on typography is to follow a pathfinder through the world history of letter forms, glyphs, alphabets, and the geometry of design. Writers and designers could have no better oracle for the art and science of the page than **Bringhurst**, who wrote in his introduction to *The Elements of Typographic Style*:

“Writing systems vary, but a good page is not hard to recognize, whether it comes from Tang Dynasty China, the Egyptian New Kingdom or Renaissance Italy. The principles that unite these different schools of design are based on the structure and scale of the human body—the eye, the hand, and the forearm in particular—and on the invisible but no less real, no less demanding and no less sensuous anatomy of the human mind.”<sup>2</sup>

Like the rules for English grammar, the rubrics for designing good pages can be learned, and many people without formal design training are learning to lay out pages from the non-intimidating books by design instructor **Robin Williams**, whose explanation of the basic design principles (contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity) can be found in *The Non-Designers Design Book*.

“Contrast. The idea behind contrast is to avoid elements on the page that are merely similar. If the elements (type, color, size, line thickness, shape, space, etc.) are not the same, then make them very different. Contrast is often the most important visual attraction on a page—it’s what makes a reader look at the page in the first place.”<sup>3</sup>

As the arts, theater, dance, and music have disappeared from many American schools and so too from our parenting-homework help sessions, where will young people go for inspiration to make something beautiful and meaningful for readers? Where will they learn the “art” part of design? If we read **Ellen Lupton**, curator of contemporary

design at Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York City and director of the Graphic Design MFA program at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore, perhaps we would not worry so much.

“We are in a new phase of culture now, where people have direct access to powerful tools—not just design tools, but also to video, animation, music, podcasting and blogging. People are actively engaged with media production across the board, whether we like it or not. By encouraging the public to use design tools intelligently, we will ultimately increase the general understanding of professional work, as well as raise the level of design across society. My students’ book is one small contribution to a much bigger movement.”<sup>4</sup>

**Lupton** is for me the doyenne of non-Columbus-style<sup>5</sup> community-and-designer collaborations as well as my preferred spokesperson for the DIY (Design It Yourself or Do It Yourself) and Maker Movements.

The quote above is from a debate about the DIY movement between Lupton and **Steven Heller**, co-chair of the MFA Designer as Author Department at New York’s School of Visual Arts. The student book mentioned above is *D.I.Y.: Design It Yourself*, edited by **Lupton**.

If you are building your own website, designing your own business card, or constructing your own robot, you are part of this DIY movement, brought about by the recent recession, the rising value of the handmade, and other conditions to be eventually described by anthropologists and historians.

As we have seen that we can no longer buy all the beautiful glittery things we desire, we are beginning (again) to make things ourselves, and we are finding this very satisfying.

But what put it in us this desire for glittery things in the first place? Neuroscientists and cultural critics will have many more ideas about this. But I digress. The exuberance of the DIY movement and the possibilities for diversity of mind that this could foster makes me a fan. Of course, if everyone is designing everything, how will I earn a living? Something writers ponder as well. Saki Mafundikwa,

author of *Afrikan Alphabets*, and visionary who left a successful design career in New York to return to his home country Zimbabwe and open that country’s first school of graphic design and new media, has this advice for his students, that could hold true for all of us, no matter our art or craft or discipline:

“You wanna break the rules? Well, you gotta learn the rules first. Learn to draw like your life depends on it.”<sup>6</sup>

And since rule-breaking interests me a lot, I am drawing like my life depends on it.

“I’m not visual, so do I have to draw in this workshop? Yes I said yes you do. Yes.”<sup>7</sup>

## Credits

The style of this article owes much to Maria Popova’s blog *BrainPickings.com*.

The golden section illustration is from [www.johnwoodcockillustration.co.uk](http://www.johnwoodcockillustration.co.uk) via iStockPhoto, 2014.

Drop Cap “T” from public domain collection of illuminated letters. <http://karenswhimsy.com/illuminated-letters.shtm>.

## References

1. Bringhurst R. *The Tree of Meaning: Language, Mind, and Ecology*. CA: Counterpoint Press. 2008: 128.
2. Bringhurst R. *The Elements of Typographic Style* (3.2). Vancouver: Hartley & Marks. 2008: 10.
3. Williams R. *The Non-Designers Design Book*. Berkeley: Peachpit Press. 2008: 13.
4. Lupton E. The D.I.Y. Debate. AIGA: 1/24/06. <http://www.aiga.org/interior.aspx?pageid=3080&id=14067>. Accessed March 31, 2014.
5. The process where designers do *not* go into a neighborhood or country and seek to persuade the inhabitants to build houses, objects, etc. that the “columbophiles” have already designed for their community, city, country.
6. AIGA. Profile of Saki Mafundikwa. <http://www.aiga.org/design-journeys-saki-mafundikwa/>. Accessed March 31, 2014.
7. From private conversation before design workshop given by Kristaponis for medical writers and editors. AMWA National Conference 2011.

*Barbara Kristaponis is a freelance graphic designer working in New York City, formerly a senior medical editor (six years) at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.*

**Author contact:** [bkristaponis@gmail.com](mailto:bkristaponis@gmail.com).