



Graphic Design Fundamentals

The Elements & Principles — A Beginner's Guide

Line · Shape · Colour · Texture | Contrast · Balance · Symmetry · Alignment



What We'll Cover

Every design is built from a handful of visual building blocks and a set of rules for arranging them. We'll define each one, then look at two worked examples.

THE ELEMENTS

- Line — marks that connect and direct
- Shape — enclosed areas of space
- Colour — hue, value and temperature
- Texture — the feel of a surface

THE PRINCIPLES

- Contrast — difference that draws the eye
- Balance — even distribution of weight
- Symmetry — mirrored arrangement
- Alignment — sharing a common edge



PART ONE

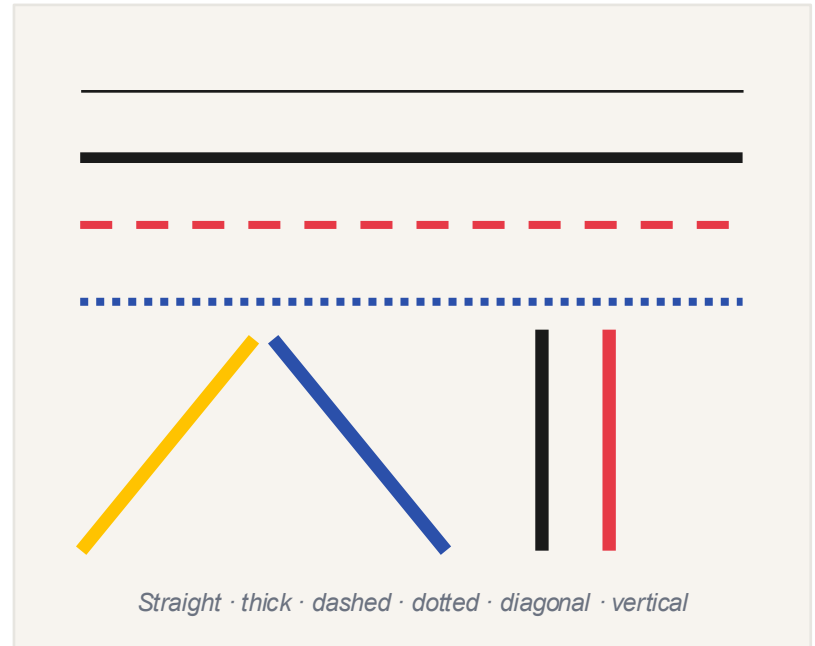
The Elements



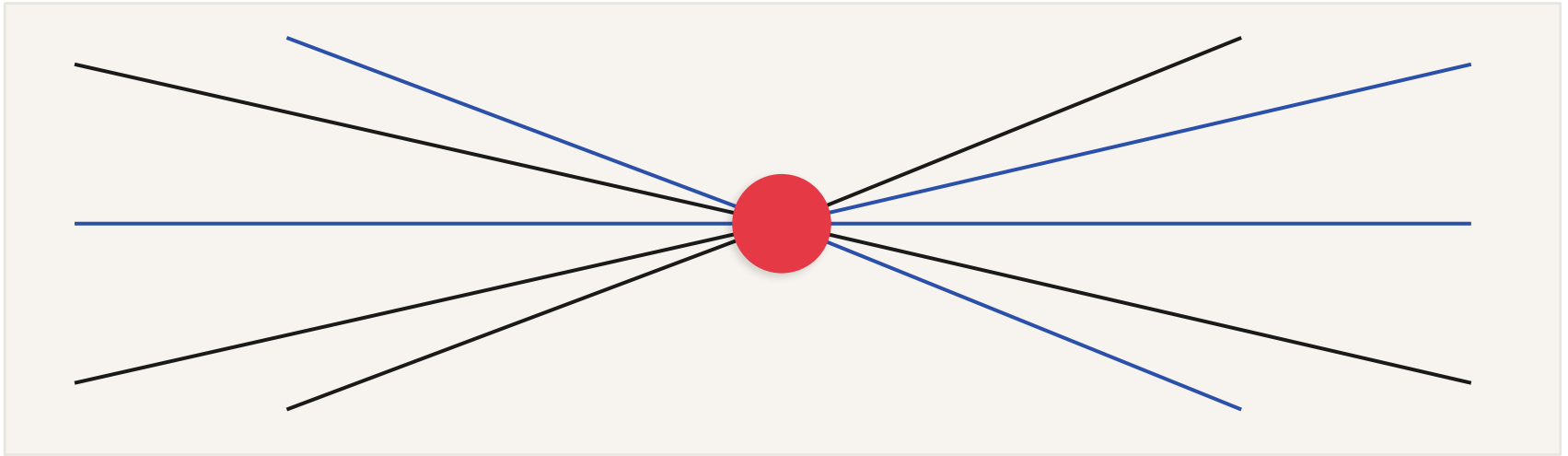
Line

A line is a mark whose length dominates its width. Lines connect points, guide the eye, describe edges and split space into regions.

- Direction — horizontal calms, diagonal energises
- Weight — thick lines feel bold, thin ones delicate
- Quality — straight, curved, dashed or sketchy

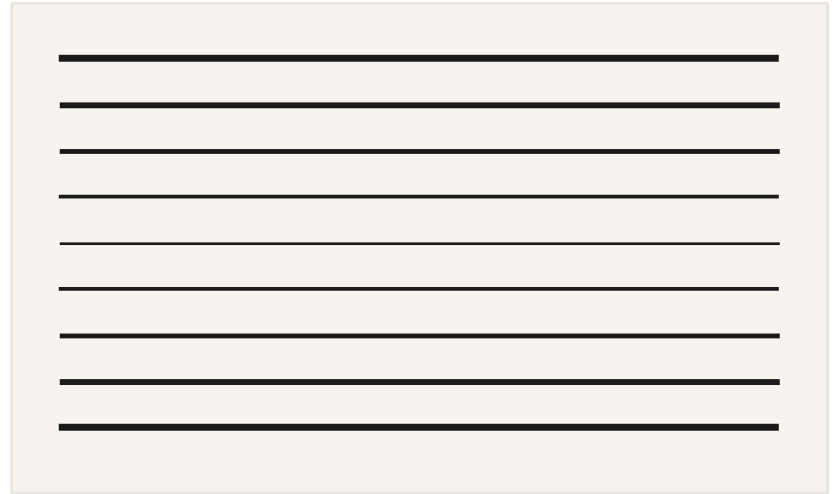
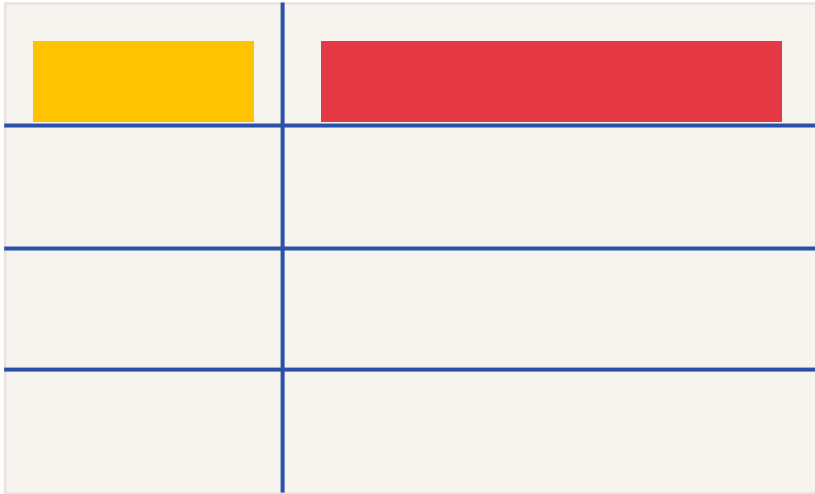


Line — Directs the Eye



Leading lines. Every line converges on one point, so the viewer's eye is pulled straight to the red focal element.

Line — Divides & Organises

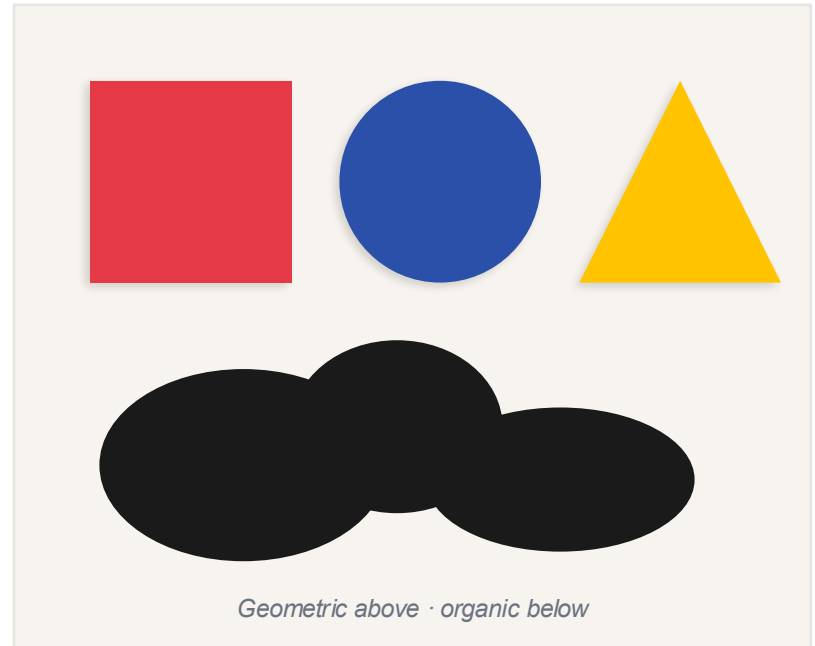


Structure from line. Left: lines carve a page into a usable grid. Right: repeated contour lines build rhythm and an implied surface.

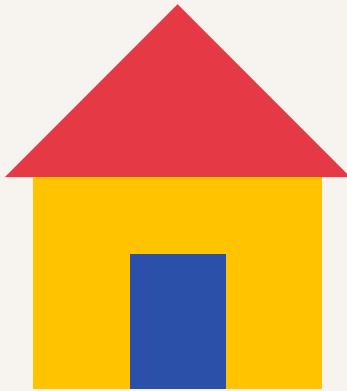
Shape

A shape is a flat, enclosed area created when a line meets itself or colours meet. Shapes read as objects long before we notice detail.

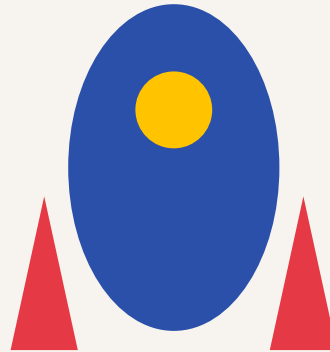
- Geometric — circles, squares, triangles; precise and stable
- Organic — free, curved forms that feel natural
- Positive & negative — the object and the space around it



Shape — Building with Geometry



House



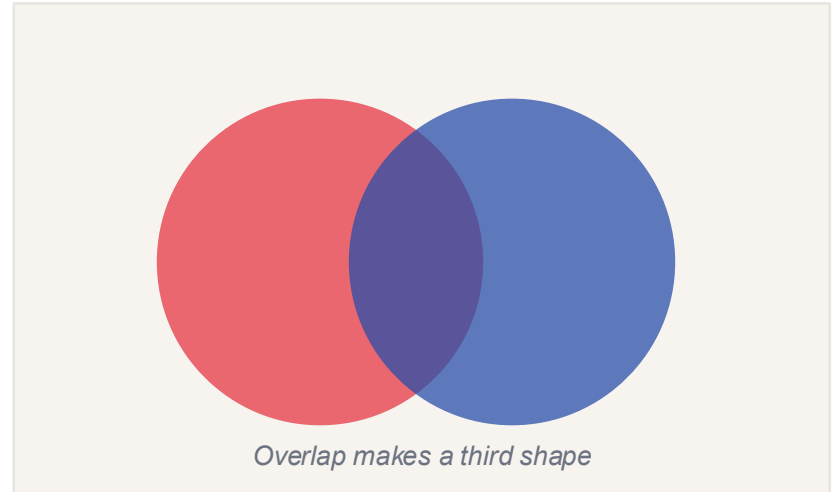
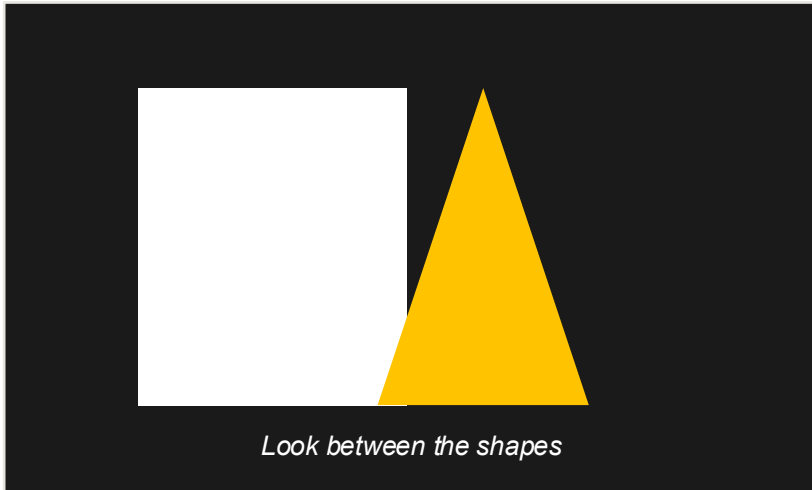
Rocket



Face

Simple parts, clear objects. Three or four basic geometric shapes are enough to read as a house, a rocket and a face.

Shape — Positive & Negative

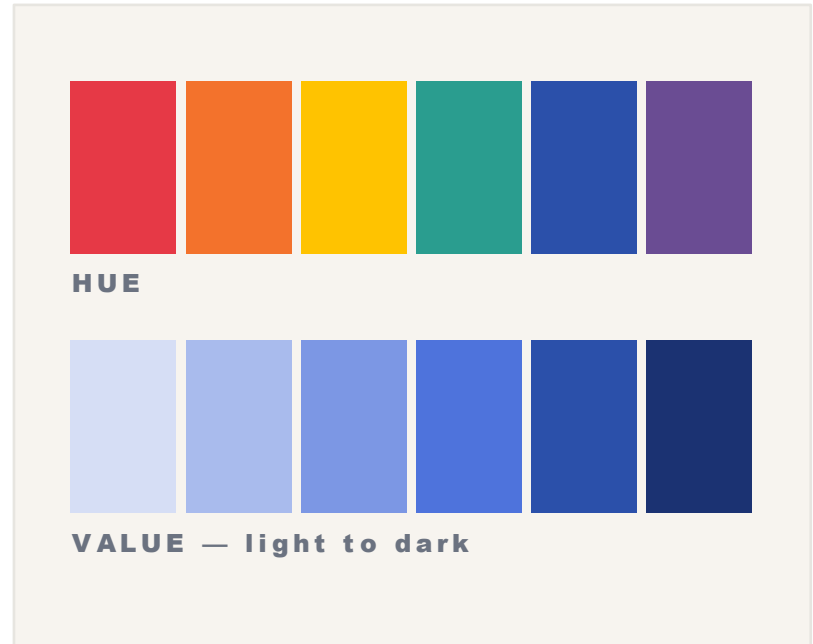


The space counts too. Left: the gap forms an arrow. Right: two overlapping discs create a new lens-shaped positive area.

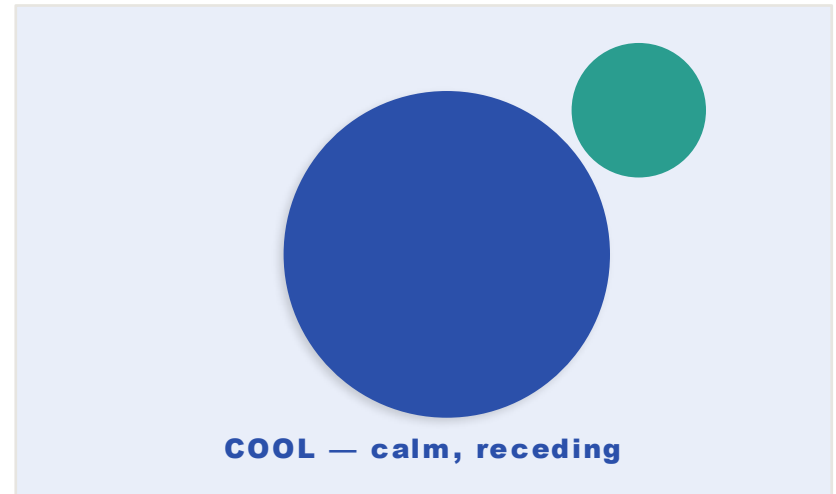
Colour

Colour is light our eyes read as hue. It sets mood, signals meaning and builds hierarchy faster than any other element.

- Hue — the colour's name: red, blue, green
- Value — how light or dark it is
- Saturation — how vivid or muted it appears
- Temperature — warm advances, cool recedes

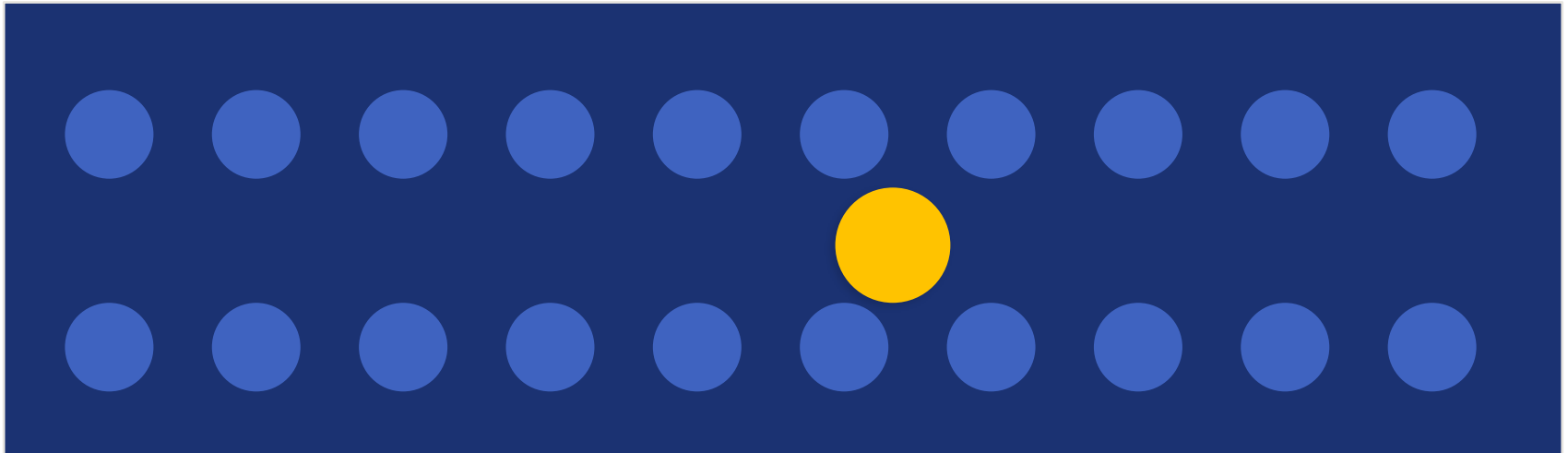


Colour — Warm vs Cool



Temperature sets mood. The same circle feels lively in warm reds and calm in cool blues — before a single word is read.

Colour — Complementary Pop

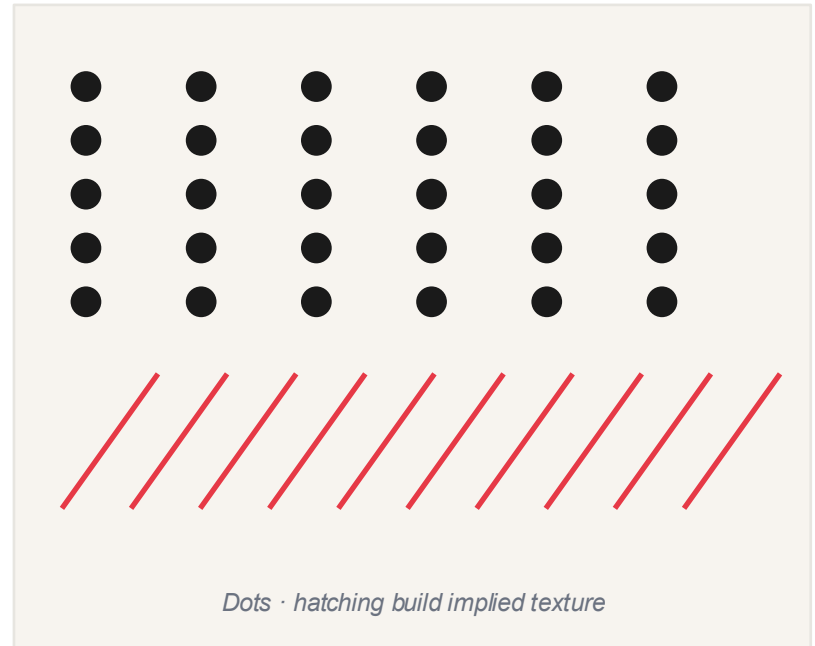


Opposites amplify. A warm accent set against its cool opposite grabs attention instantly — the basis of every good call-to-action.

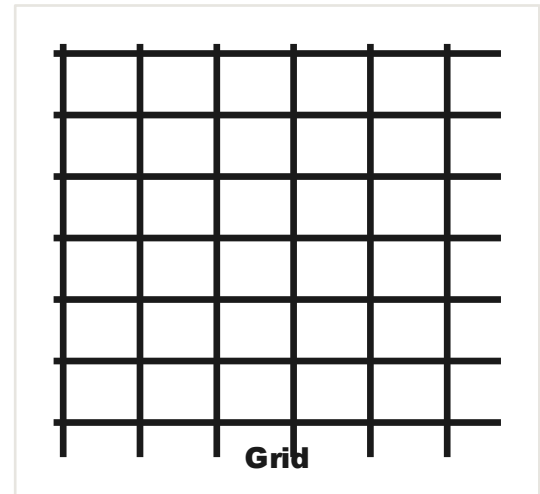
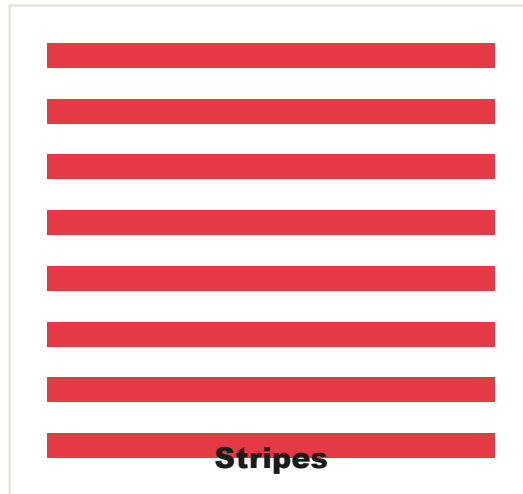
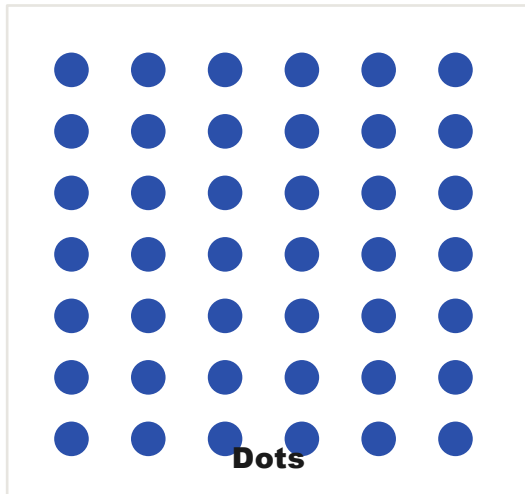
Texture

Texture is the surface quality of a design — how rough, smooth, soft or dense it looks. On screen it is usually implied through pattern and repetition.

- Actual — real, touchable (paper, fabric)
- Implied — the illusion of surface via pattern
- Adds depth, warmth and tactile interest

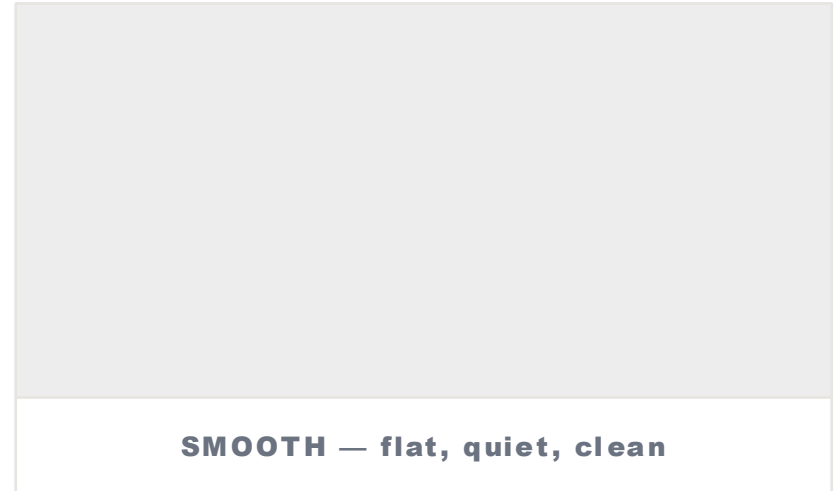


Texture — Pattern as Surface



Repetition reads as texture. The same small mark, tiled across an area, turns flat colour into a surface with a distinct feel.

Texture — Rough vs Smooth



Texture carries feeling. A dense, speckled surface feels gritty and energetic; a flat, even fill feels calm, modern and premium.



PART TWO

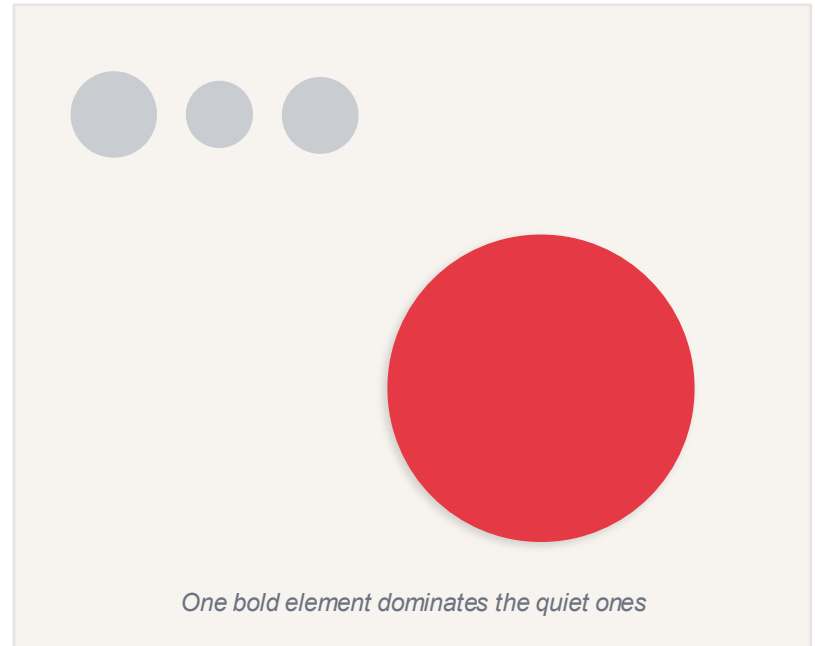
The Principles



Contrast

Contrast is a clear difference between elements — in size, colour, value or shape. It creates emphasis, guides the eye and stops a design feeling flat.

- Draws attention to what matters most
- Builds hierarchy — big/bold reads first
- Improves legibility: dark text on light ground



Contrast — Size & Weight

BIG

small supporting detail
small supporting detail
small supporting detail

Scale creates hierarchy. A large, heavy word beside small text tells the eye exactly what to read first.

Contrast — Light & Dark



Aa

Low contrast — strains the eye



Aa

High contrast — instantly clear

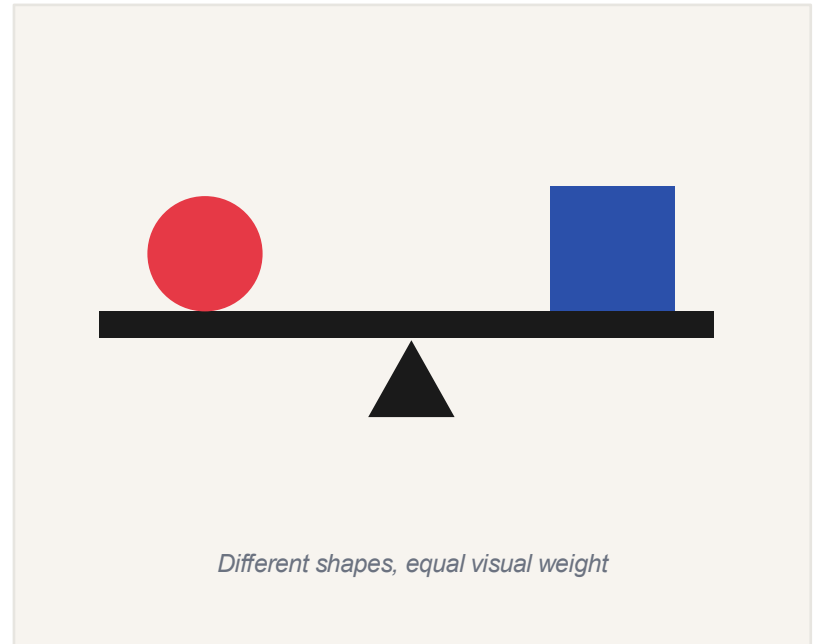
Value gap drives legibility. Pale grey on white barely registers; bright type on black is effortless to read from across a room.

PRINCIPLE 02

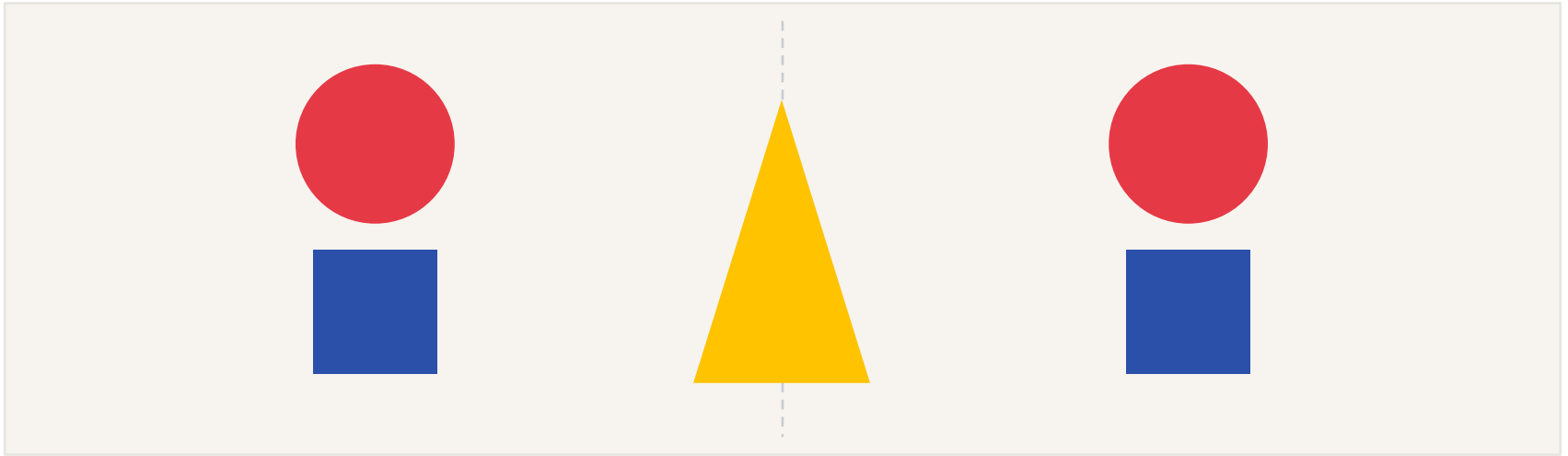
Balance

Balance is the even distribution of visual weight so no part of the design feels heavier than the rest. It can be symmetrical or asymmetrical.

- Symmetrical — mirrored, formal, stable
- Asymmetrical — different elements, equal weight
- Radial — weight spreads from a centre

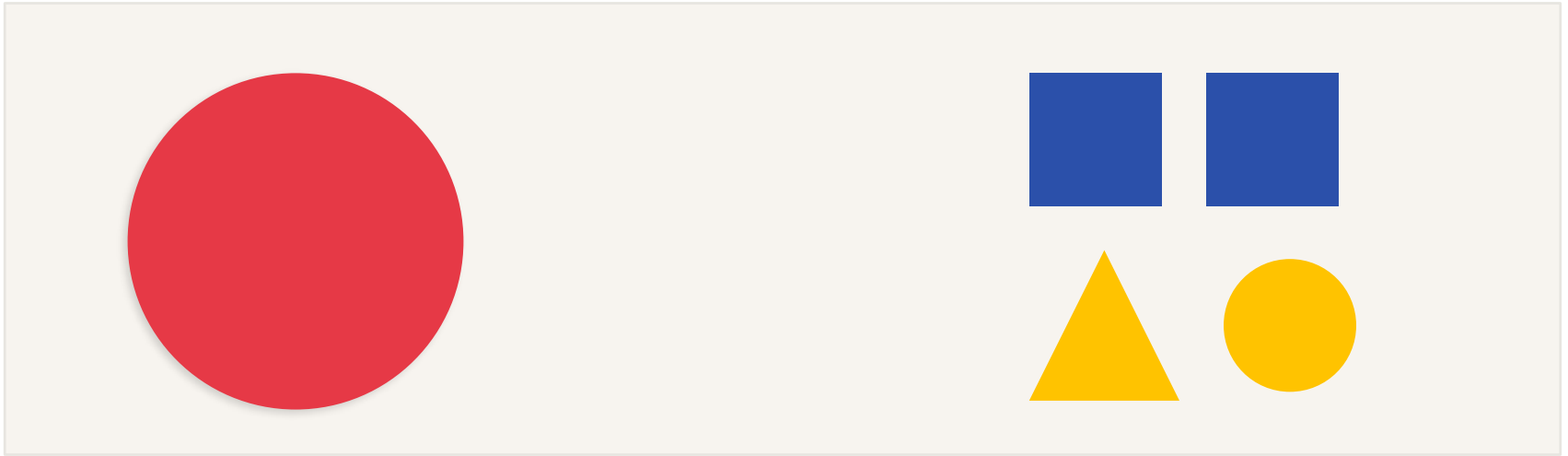


Balance — Symmetrical



Mirror image. Left and right sides match across a central axis — formal, calm and dependable, like a classic logo lock-up.

Balance — Asymmetrical

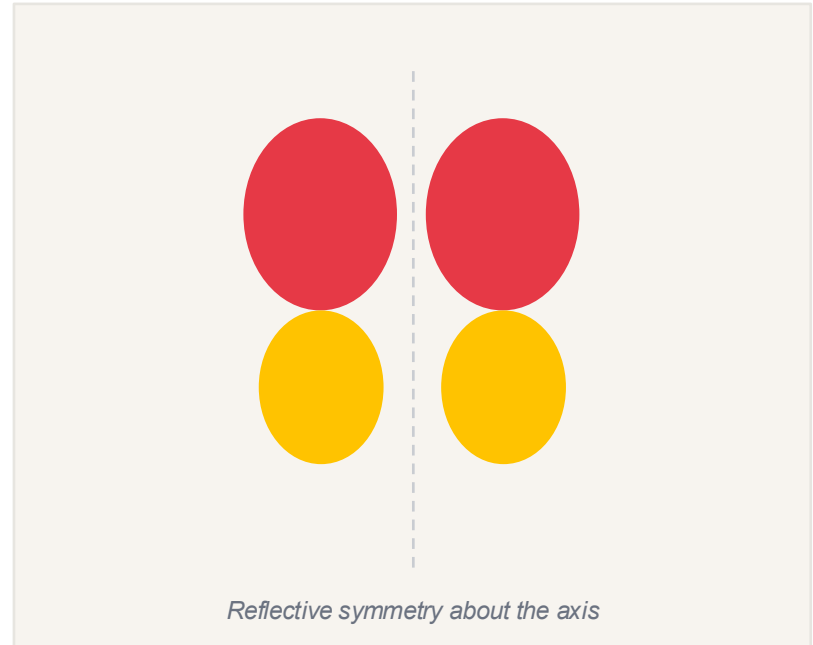


Different, yet even. One large shape on the left is counter-weighted by a cluster of smaller shapes on the right — dynamic but stable.

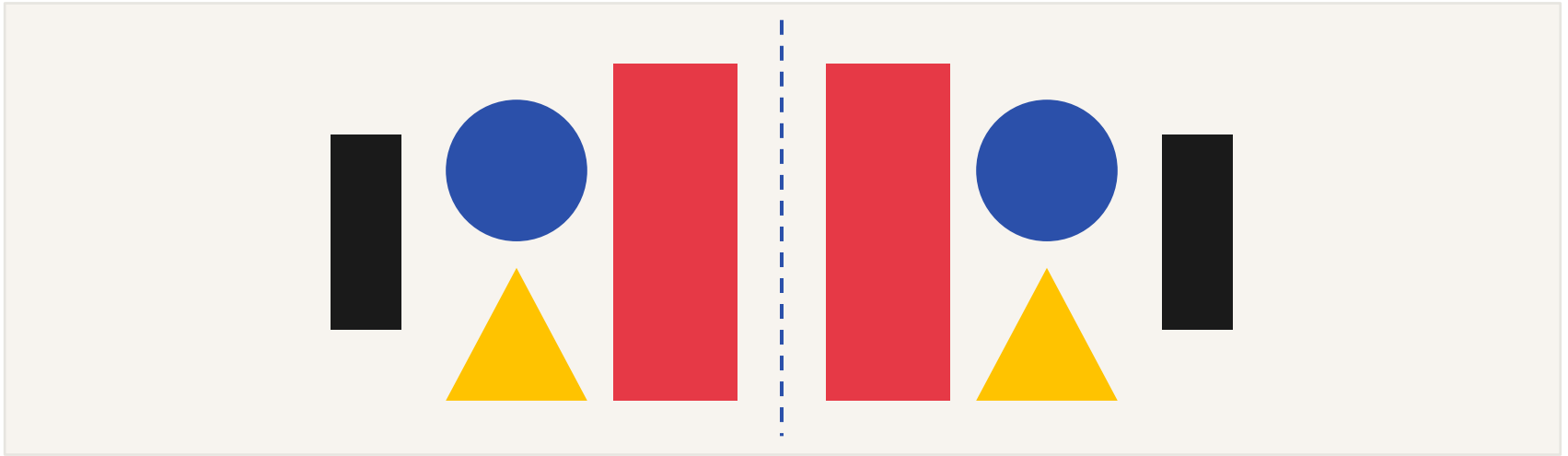
Symmetry

Symmetry is an exact correspondence of form on either side of an axis or around a centre. It signals order, harmony and trust.

- Reflective — a mirror across a line
- Radial — repeats around a central point
- Translational — repeats at set intervals

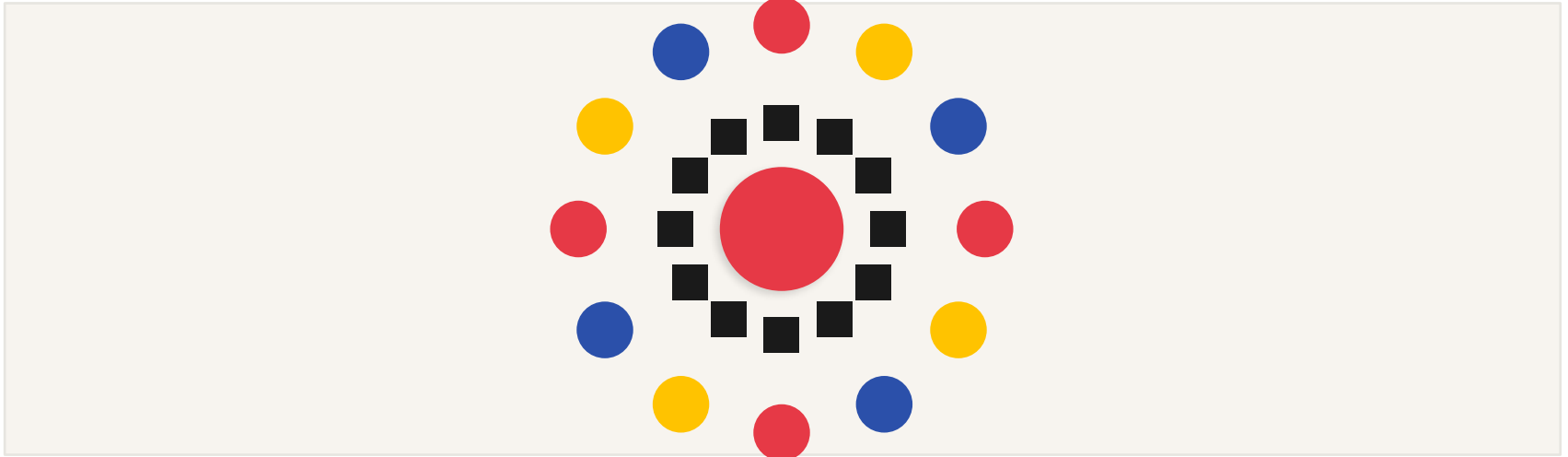


Symmetry — Reflective



A true mirror. Whatever appears on one side of the axis is repeated exactly, reversed, on the other — the most formal kind of order.

Symmetry — Radial

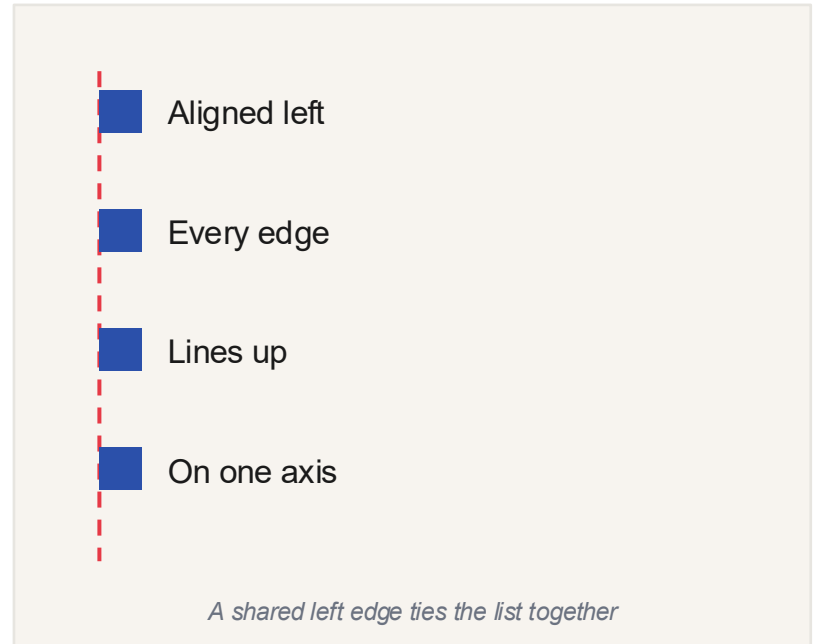


Order around a centre. Identical elements rotate around a single point at equal angles — think snowflakes, mandalas and wheel logos.

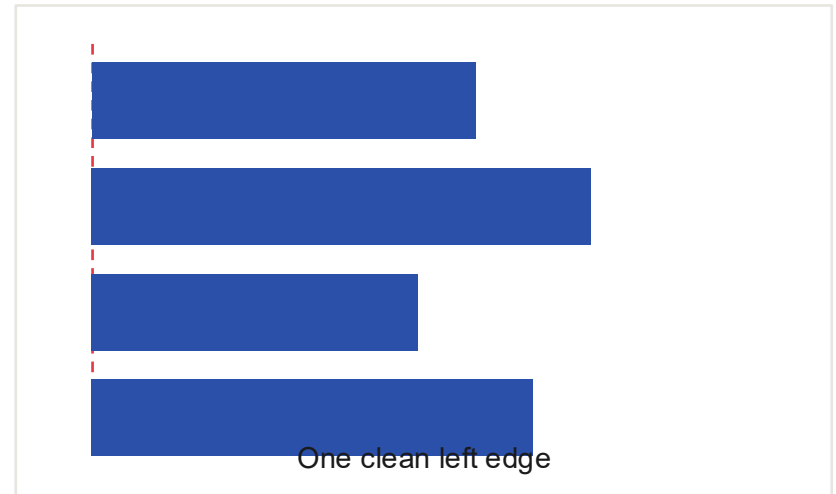
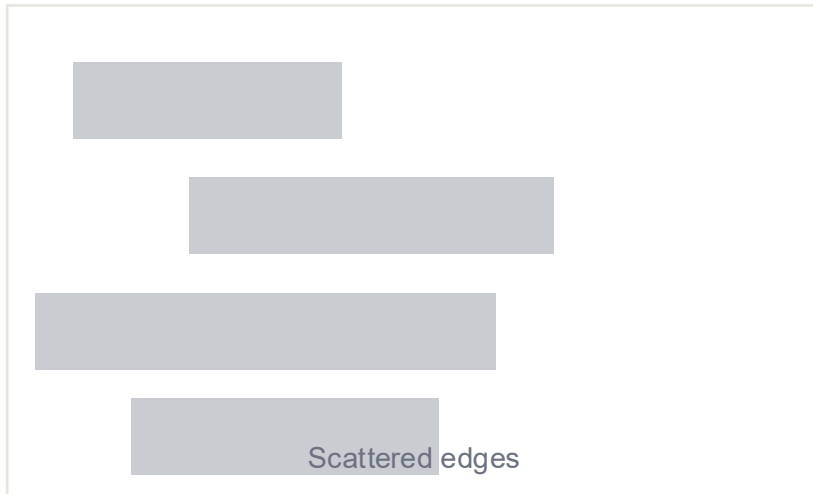
Alignment

Alignment means placing elements so their edges or centres line up on shared invisible lines. It makes a layout feel tidy, connected and intentional.

- Creates clean, invisible grid lines
- Connects elements that aren't touching
- Removes the 'random' look of stray edges

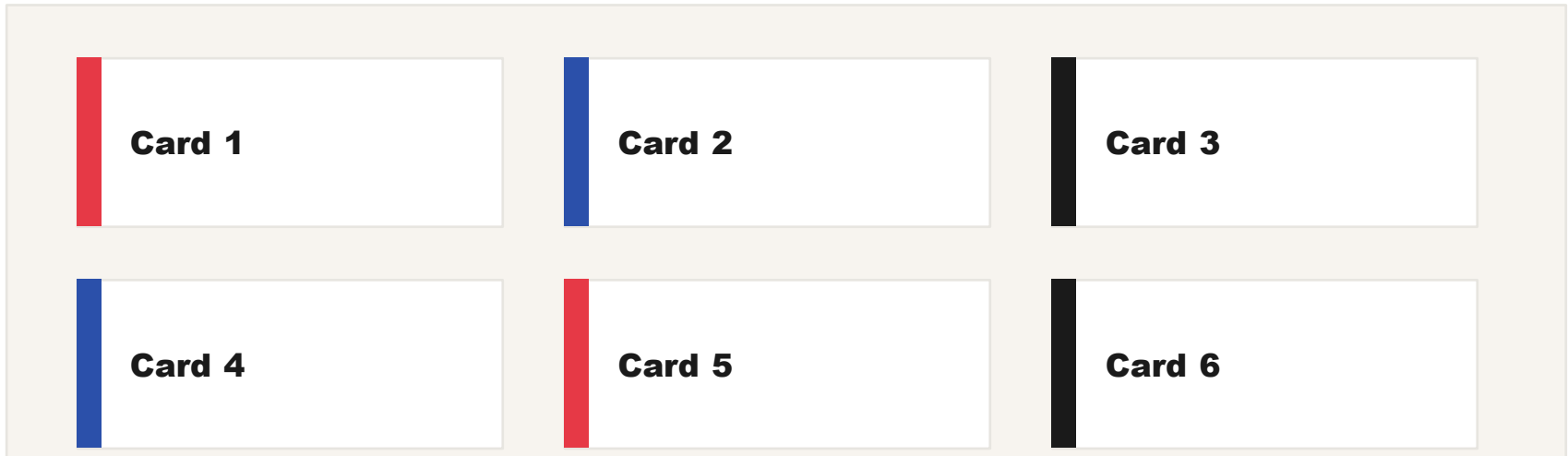


Alignment — Edges Line Up



Share an edge. Left: stray, uneven starts look accidental. Right: a single left edge instantly reads as organised and deliberate.

Alignment — Grid Order



Rows and columns. Aligning cards to a shared grid gives equal spacing and matching edges — the backbone of clean page layout.

Putting It All Together

- Elements are your raw materials — line, shape, colour and texture.
- Principles are how you arrange them — contrast, balance, symmetry and alignment.
- Strong design starts with the elements and is held together by the principles.