

# The Meaning of Shapes: Developing Visual Grammar

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## The Meaning Of Shapes: Developing Visual Grammar

There are truly an endless variety of shapes and combination of shapes, each communicating its own meaning and message. Often the meaning behind shapes is cultural (a red octagon as a stop sign), particularly as shapes are combined. We'll confine ourselves to a discussion of some basic geometric shapes here and I'll provide some links to more detailed sources of shape meaning beyond the basics.



### Circles

Circles have no beginning or end. They represent the eternal whole and in every culture are an archetypical form representing the sun, the earth, the moon, the universe, and other celestial objects between. Circles are used to suggest familiar objects such as wheels, balls, many kinds of fruit. They suggested well-roundedness and completeness.

Circles have free movement. They can roll. Shading and lines can enhance this sense of movement in circles. Circles are graceful and their curves are seen as feminine. They are warm, comforting and give a sense of sensuality and love. Their movement suggests energy and power. Their completeness suggests the infinite, unity, and harmony.

Circles protect, they endure, they restrict. They confine what's within and keep things out. They offer safety and connection. Circles suggests community, integrity, and perfection.

Because they are less common in design they work well to attract attention, provide emphasis, and set things apart

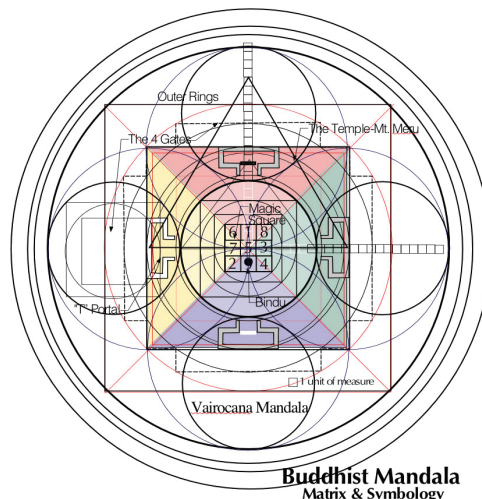
## Rectangles and Squares

Squares and rectangles are stable. They're familiar and trusted shapes and suggest honesty. They have right angles and represent order, mathematics, rationality, and formality. They are seen as earth-bound. Rectangles are the most common geometric shape encountered. The majority of text we read is set in rectangles or squares.

Squares and rectangles suggest conformity, peacefulness, solidity, security, and equality. Their familiarity and stability, along with their commonness can seem boring. They are generally not attention getters, but can be tilted to add an unexpected twist. Think of web pages that tilts framed images to help them stand out.

Every element on a web page is defined by a rectangle according to the css box model. Web pages are rectangles made up of smaller rectangles and squares.

In Buddhist symbolism a square (earthbound) inside a circle (eternal whole) represents the relationship between the human and the divine.



# Triangles

Triangles can be stable when sitting on their base or unstable when not. They represent dynamic tension, action, and aggression. Triangles have energy and power and their stable/unstable dynamic can suggest either conflict or steady strength. They are balanced and can be a symbol for law, science, and religion.

Triangles can direct movement based which way they point. They can be used to suggest familiar themes like pyramids, arrows and, pennants. Spiritually they represent the religious trinity. They can suggest self-discovery and revelation.

The strength of triangles suggests masculinity. Their dynamic nature make them better suited to a growing high tech company than a stable financial institution when designing a logo. Triangles can be used to convey progression, direction, and purpose.



## Spirals

Spirals are expressions of creativity. They are often found in the natural growth pattern of many organisms and suggest the process of growth and evolution. Spirals convey ideas of fertility, birth, death, expansion, and transformation. They are cycles of time, life, and the seasons and are a common shape in religious and mystical symbolism.

Spirals move in either direction and represent returning to the same point on life's journey with new levels of understanding. They represent trust during change, the release of energy and maintaining flexibility through transformation.

Clockwise spirals represent projection of an intention and counterclockwise spirals the fulfillment of an intention. Double spirals can be used to symbolize opposing forces.



## Crosses

Crosses symbolize spirituality and healing. They are seen as the meeting place of divine energies. The 4 points of a cross represent self, nature, wisdom, and higher power or being. Crosses suggest transition, balance, faith, unity, temperance, hope, and life.

They represent relationships and synthesis and a need for connection to something, whether that something is group, individual, self, or project related..

As with lines vertical shapes are seen as strong and horizontal shapes are seen as peaceful. Most everything said about vertical and horizontal lines can be said about vertical and horizontal shapes.



Curved shapes offer rhythm and movement, happiness, pleasure and generosity. They are seen as more feminine than sharp shapes which offer energy, violence and, anger. Sharp shapes are lively and youthful and are seen as more masculine.

## Using Shapes

We use shapes to add and sustain interest in a design. Shapes of different visual weight can be used to create focal points in a design and direct the flow of a design. Shapes organize elements by separating some and connecting others.

## Creating depth with shapes

Shapes can be used to convey depth by varying their size and position within a design. Larger shapes will appear closer and smaller shapes will appear further away. Shapes that are located lower in a design will seem closer and those higher up further away. Overlapping shapes is another way to create a sense of one in front of the other to add depth to your design.



The larger circle moves  
the the foreground, while  
the smaller circle recedes  
to the background



The lower circle moves  
the the foreground, while  
the higher circle recedes  
to the background



The smaller, higher  
circle moves to the  
foreground, since it  
overlaps the larger  
circle

Shapes that lean toward a protagonist appear to be blocking or stopping progress. Shapes leaning away from the protagonist give the impression of aiding progress by opening up space.

Try to keep background shapes simple and large. Being large can help attract attention and simplicity can put the focus back to the foreground.

Try to use few shapes where possible. Don't use 3 or 4 shapes to communicate when one shape will do.

Try to limit the number and size of shapes where possible for clarity in conveying your message

Additional Resources for the Meaning of Shapes

The Meaning of Shape

Simple Symbol Meaning

Symbols and their Meaning

About Symbols

The Psychology of Forms