# Taking the Mystery Out of Arranging Type
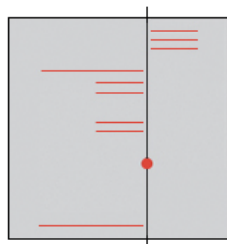
by Katherine Humphreys

Typography is everywhere! From billboards to letterhead, posters, logos, clothing, film, industrial design, mobile devices, and the Internet. The layout of type is an essential part of today's society. With so much type to lay out, many people get involved in designing these products. Some may find themselves at a loss as to how to approach type.

Kimberly Elam's book *Typographic Systems; Rules For Organizing Type* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2007) strips away a lot of this mystery.
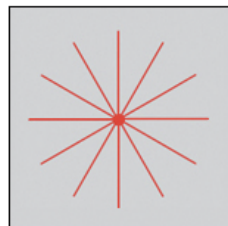
She breaks down type design into eight major variations: Axial, Radial, Dilatational, Random, Grid, Modular, Transitional and Bilateral. These systems provide a structure that designers can use to organize their compositions and make them coherent. Choosing one
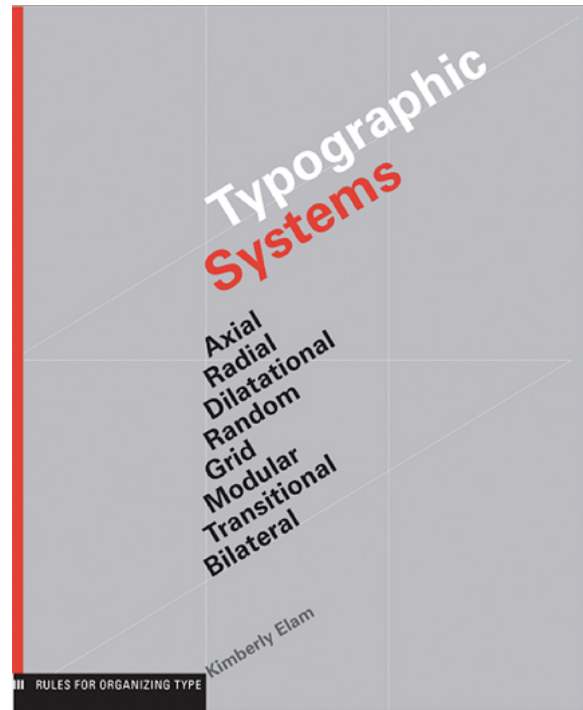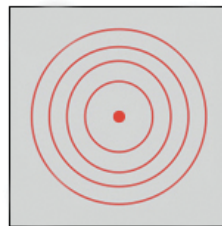
Typographic Systems; Rules For Organizing Type
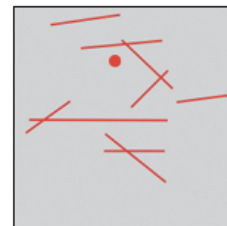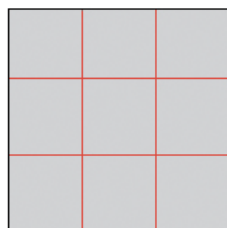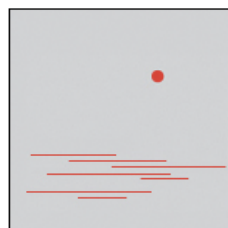*Below: Diagrams from the book*

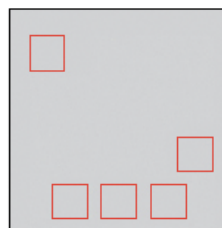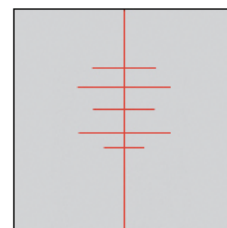**Axial**   **Radial**   **Dilational**   **Random**

Grid   **Modular**   **Transitional**   **Bilateral**

layout over another may have a profound effect on the piece's impact.

Let's start with a newspaper read by millions every day: *USA Today*. The newspaper is a prime example of the Grid system. It's an eight column system that is subdivided as needed. Items can span two or more columns, as in the top article, "12 teams, 12 questions."

The *USA Today* website, found at http://www.usatoday.com, reflects the paper's design, with a four column Grid layout. The grid divides the page in half, using four columns on the left, while the text and images on the right are arranged in two columns.

The Grid is the type system that we are most used to seeing. From magazines to websites, this horizontal organization of type and information on a page is the most common. A standard, repeated, comfortable environment with consistent spacing satisfies our subconscious tendency to search for order. By making the reader feel safe, this design system conveys a sense of reliability.

USA Today
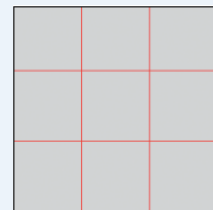
Grid system

Sherry Hutchinson

Newspapers rarely deviate from the grid format, with the exception of weekend editions and dramatic breaking news, whose designers can be more creative with the layout.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, designer Sherry Hutchinson created a layout called "Tax Tips" for a feature section of a newspaper using traditional illustration and design skills instead of a typographic system. The type in this layout is readable and arranged in such a way that it helps to move the viewer's eye along the page in a round motion, forcing you to meander over all of the elements of the illustration. Sometimes a system is not necessary,

and a designer with a good sense of composition and style can pull off a very effective type treatment.

Anywhere type is used, be it publishing, signage, packaging, television, or any other medium, the designer has to adapt her techniques to suit the medium. For example, a style that works just fine in a newspaper layout would not necessarily work on a poster. A newspaper is viewed at arms length, so its letter spacing can be as tight as you like and the words will still be legible.

On the other hand, a poster is usually viewed from a distance, which can make the type hard to read. Here, a little extra letter spacing helps viewers identify the individual characters.

The audience for the composition is also an important consideration. Will this poster be for a bank convention or a rock concert? Would a grid system be reassuring, or merely boring? Perhaps something more unusual would be appropriate?

Poster A — Phosphorescent Castanets

Grid system


Poster B — Machine Drum
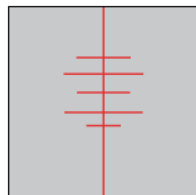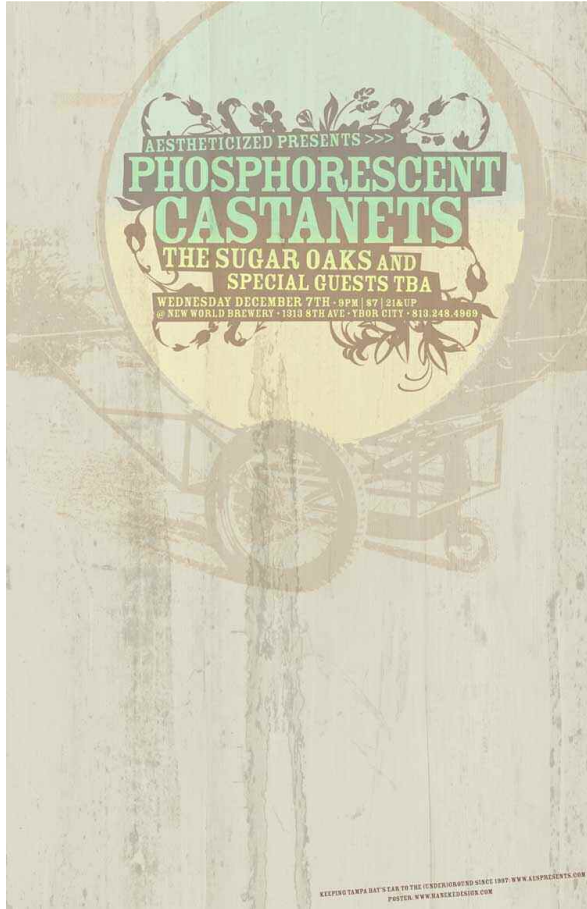
A.

Bilateral system

Designer Jody Haneke uses a variety of type systems to create unique, engaging, and beautiful posters.

Poster A employs the Bilateral system, with its type arranged symmetrically across a center line. The typeface, the color palette, and the oldfangled photograph in the background produce an atmosphere that is slightly quirky, but friendly. The composition makes the user come in close to see what is going on.
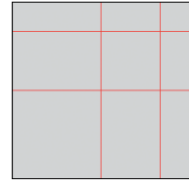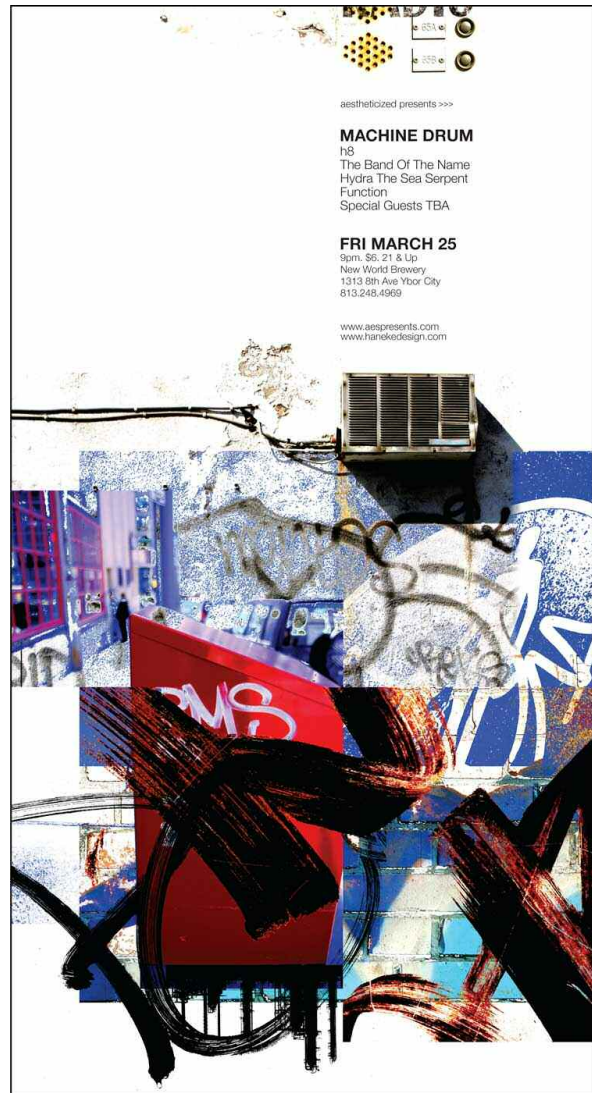
Poster B appears at first to be a simple grid, but the dynamic graffiti imagery introduces a striking contrast. The left justified type in a straight line crashes into the bold city elements. Textures and strong abstract letterforms in the graffiti create tension.

Poster C also employs a grid, but this time the type is a larger, rounded font. By setting the grid at an angle, this composition suggests a departure from the normal. The variation in type size creates an organic feeling, which is heightened by the red and brown tones picked up from the wooden figures.
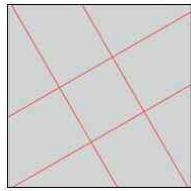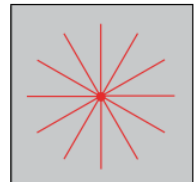

C.

Grid system
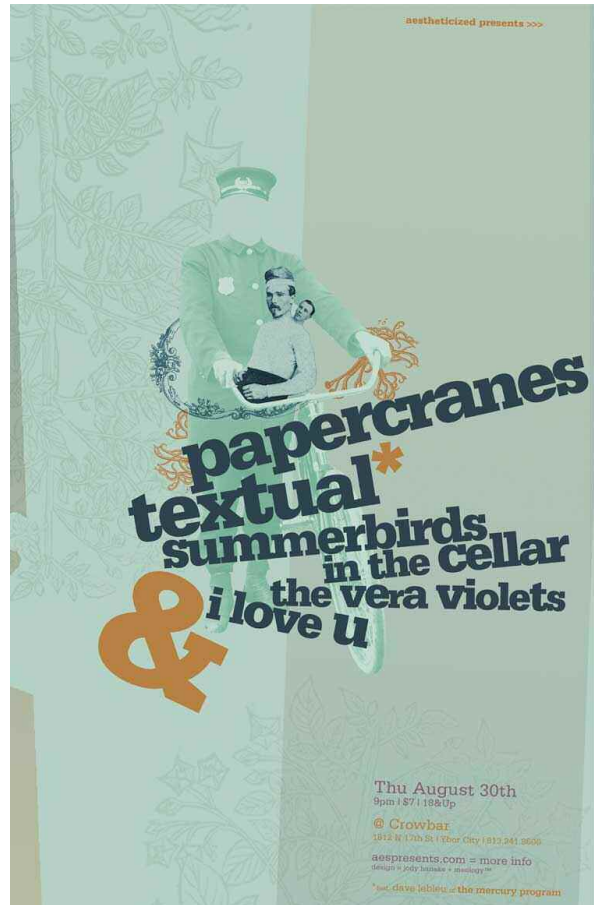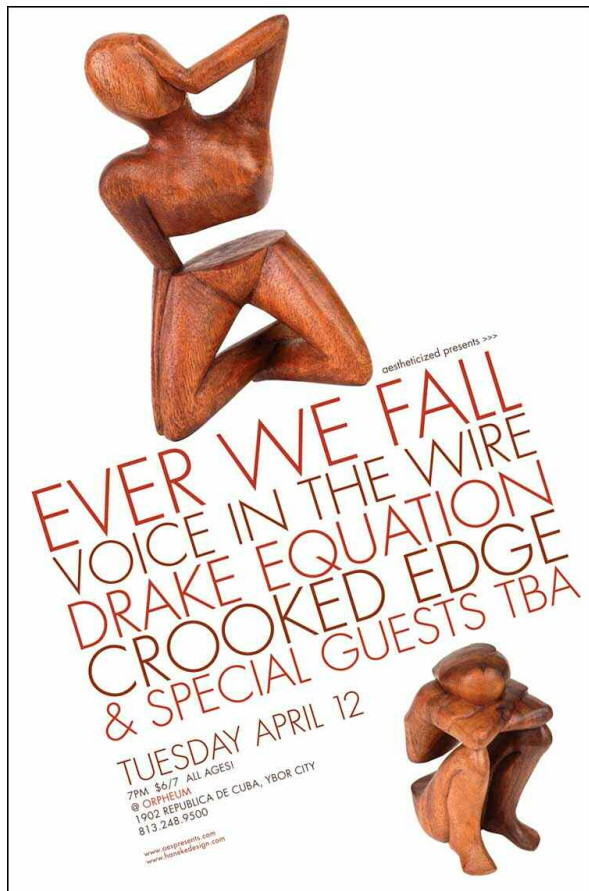
D.

Radial system

Poster D uses the Radial type system. The text appears to be orbiting an invisible subject. The free-flowing arrangement reflects the lofty words "papercranes" and "summerbirds." The large ampersand acts as a weight, pinning the text to one spot. The type appears to emerge from a dreamlike background and spread its wings.

Hopefully these few examples have inspired you with a feeling for the range of typographic systems at your disposal. Each system has some inherent expressive qualities, but as our distinctive grid examples show, there is plenty of room to express yourself within even the tightest system. As you learn to recognize these systems, you will see them in the type all around you, and before long, you'll be exploring them in your own compositions.

Katherine Humphreys is an educator and graphic artist living in the Tampa Bay area. She teaches at various schools, including: The Art Institute Online, Ringling College of Art and Design and St. Petersburg College.

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