

Gestalt: Figure/Ground

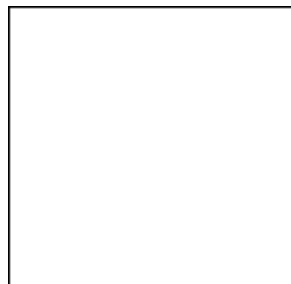
by Michael Fulks

Are there rules for design?

Early this century, German and Austrian psychologists developed a school of thought known as *Gestalt*, a German word meaning "shape." It was their goal to learn how the mind perceived and processed visual input based upon pattern seeking. The result was a theory of principles, supposedly free from subjective aesthetic bias, that artists have been able to use to present visual information - whether it be the printed page, painting, or photography. This theory is called "*Gestalt theory*," and although it may use unfamiliar names or titles, these principles will be familiar to most photographers. *Gestalt* is not design, but knowing the visual principles of *Gestalt* and their corollaries will give you a valuable design toolbox. This is the fifth article in a series. (See <http://www.apogeephoto.com/mag1-6/mag2-5mf1.shtml> <http://www.apogeephoto.com/mag1-6/mag2-4closure.shtml> <http://www.apogeephoto.com/mag1-6/mag2-3mf.shtml> <http://www.apogeephoto.com/mag2-6/mag2-6continuity.shtml> for earlier articles.)

Figure/Ground

The principle of figure/ground is one of the most basic laws of perception and one that is used extensively to help us design our photographs. In its basic sense, it refers to our ability to separate elements based upon contrast--that is, dark and light, black and white. In this discussion, we'll expand this definition from one of simple biological perception to one that includes abstract concepts such as subject/background and positive/negative space.



You'll have trouble seeing this albino elk during a recent snow storm...

...but you can see him now, because there is sufficient contrast for your eye to perceive him against the background. This is a simple use of the principle of figure/ground.





In photography, we expand the concept to include color and content, not simply black and white values. In this picture, the pelicans stand out against the background because of different colors and because we recognize they're separate from the water. This separation is achieved by throwing the background out of focus and excluding anything that might confuse the eye.

Similar to balancing negative and positive space in achieving a pleasing composition, we can also balance the two elements of figure and ground to help us create a successful image.



Often our identification of the figure is helped by its position within the image. Most often, the figure is in the foreground--like the pelicans above or this boy fishing.

Sometimes the figure/ground distinction is blurred on purpose. What do you see in the image on the right? Faces? Or a chalice? When the figure and ground are equally balanced, we can be confused by the result.





This ambiguity can become a "figure/ground flip." Sometimes, we can deliberately create an image in which the most obvious choice for the figure (it's readily recognizable in the foreground) is not really the subject. In this picture, the subject of the photo is the light and clouds--not the father and child fishing.

Throwing the figure/ground relationship off balance has various repercussions which can create interest



in your photograph. In this photo, the ground overwhelming the figure helps reinforce the feeling of isolation and loneliness.



The opposite can create a feeling of intimacy.

The concepts of figure/ground have a strong similarity to those of positive/negative space. You can learn more about using positive and negative spaces in composition by checking out these articles. <http://www.apogeephoto.com/mag1-3/mag1-3mf1.shtml>
<http://www.apogeephoto.com/mag1-3/mag1-3mf2.shtml>
<http://www.apogeephoto.com/mag1-5/mag1-5mf.shtml>

Our next Gestalt article will be "Isomorphic Correspondence."