

Gutenberg Diagram

A diagram that describes the general pattern followed by the eyes when looking at evenly distributed, homogeneous information.¹

The Gutenberg diagram divides a display medium into four quadrants: the *primary optical area* at the top left, the *terminal area* at the bottom right, the *strong fallow area* at the top right, and the *weak fallow area* at the bottom left. According to the diagram, Western readers naturally begin at the primary optical area and move across and down the display medium in a series of sweeps to the terminal area. Each sweep begins along an *axis of orientation*—a horizontal line created by aligned elements, text lines, or explicit segments—and proceeds in a left-to-right direction. The strong and weak fallow areas lie outside this path and receive minimal attention unless visually emphasized. The tendency to follow this path is metaphorically attributed to *reading gravity*—the left-right, top-bottom habit formed from reading.²

Designs that follow the diagram work in harmony with reading gravity, and return readers to a logical axis of orientation, purportedly improving reading rhythm and comprehension. For example, a layout following the Gutenberg diagram would place key elements at the top left (e.g., headline), middle (e.g., image), and bottom right (e.g., contact information). Though designs based directly or indirectly on the Gutenberg diagram are widespread, there is little empirical evidence that it contributes to improved reading rates or comprehension.

The Gutenberg diagram is likely only predictive of eye movement for heavy text information, evenly distributed and homogeneous information, and blank pages or displays. In all other cases, the weight of the elements of the design in concert with their layout and composition will direct eye movements. For example, if a newspaper has a very heavy headline and photograph in its center, the center will be the primary optical area. Familiarity with the information and medium also influences eye movements. For example, a person who regularly views information presented in a consistent way is more likely to first look at areas that are often changing (e.g., new top stories) than areas that are the same (e.g., the title of a newspaper).

Consider the Gutenberg diagram to assist in layout and composition when the elements are evenly distributed and homogeneous, or the design contains heavy use of text. Otherwise, use the weight and composition of elements to lead the eye.

See also Alignment, Entry Point, Progressive Disclosure, and Serial Position Effects.

¹ Also known as the *Gutenberg rule* and the *Z pattern of processing*.

² The seminal work on the Gutenberg diagram is attributed to the typographer Edmund Arnold, who is said to have developed the concept in the 1950s. See, for example, *Type & Layout: How Typography and Design Can Get Your Message Across or Get in the Way*, by Colin Wheildon, Strathmoor Press, 1995.

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Side Effect
Insurer's Tactic:
If You Get Sick,
The Premium Rises
American Medical's Practice
of Price Gouging
Bills Lives of Customers

Will Big Firms Follow Suit?

By Carol Tice

Health care firms are raising

their premiums

and rates

for sick patients

and those

with chronic

conditions.

It's a tactic

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