

Visual Communication Design Units 3 & 4

Chapter 2 — Visual language — elements, principles, Gestalt, type

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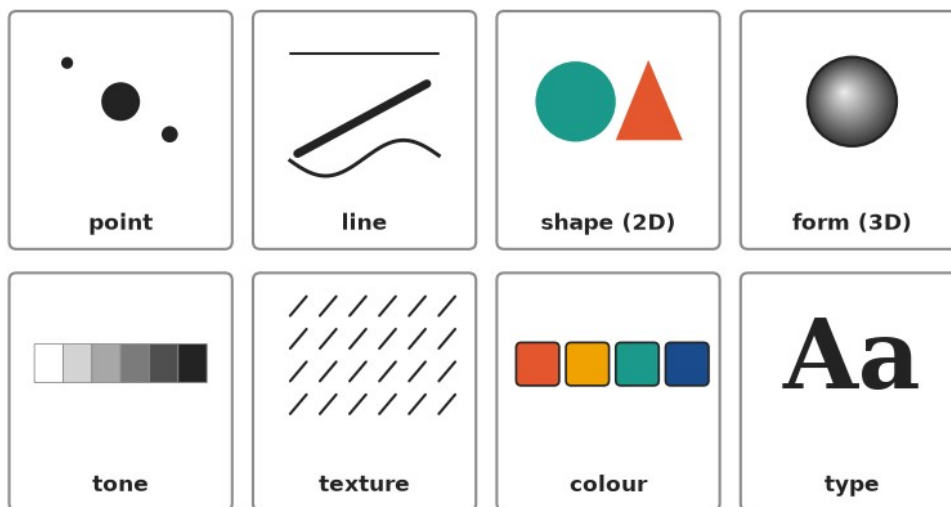
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Chapter 2 Visual language: elements, principles, Gestalt and type — 2A Design elements

Theory

The **design elements** are the components of visual language that designers use to communicate information and ideas (Study Design, Study Specifications p.16). VCE Visual Communication Design studies eight elements: **point, line, shape, form, tone, texture, colour** and **type**. They are the raw building blocks of every design. The way those blocks are *arranged* is the job of the **design principles** (subtopic 2B); the way the mind *groups* what it sees is described by the **Gestalt principles** (subtopic 2D). These are three separate vocabularies — keep them distinct.

Knowing the elements precisely does two things. It gives you the language to **analyse** a design in Section A — to name a choice and explain how it communicates (the skill you use in Chapter 8) — and it gives you the toolkit to **produce** a design in Section B.



Point. A point is a single mark or position in space — the smallest element. Its properties are position and size. A single point placed in a field becomes a **focal point** that the eye locks onto — note that *focal point* is itself one of the **Gestalt** principles (subtopic 2D), not an element. Many points can be massed to imply a line, build a **texture** or **tone** (stippling, half-tone dots), or repeat into a pattern. Expressively, one dot on an empty page carries all the attention, while a scatter of dots reads as a starry, busy or granular surface.

Line. A line is the path of a moving point — a mark with length and direction. Its properties are length, **direction** (horizontal, vertical, diagonal), **weight** (thick or thin) and **quality** (straight or curved, continuous or broken, hard or sketchy). Lines outline shapes, divide and organise space, connect elements and lead the eye along a visual path. Their expressive character carries feeling: horizontal lines feel calm and stable, verticals feel formal and strong, diagonals feel dynamic, and curved lines feel organic and gentle.

Shape. A shape is a **two-dimensional (2D)** enclosed area — it has height and width only. Its edge can be made by a line, or by a change of colour or tone. Shapes are either **geometric** (circle, square, triangle — regular, ordered, mechanical) or **organic / freeform** (irregular, soft, natural). The figures are **positive** shapes; the spaces around them are **negative** shapes. Geometric shapes feel precise and technological; organic shapes feel natural and friendly.

Form. A form is the **three-dimensional (3D)** counterpart of a shape — it has height, width **and depth**, so it has volume and mass. A form can be a real object (a bottle, a chair, a building) or the **illusion** of one created on a flat surface using drawing methods (isometric, perspective) and **rendering** (tone, light and shade). Form communicates solidity, weight and physical presence, and is central to the Objects and Environments fields.

SHAPE — two-dimensional

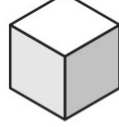
circle — height + width



square (flat)

FORM — three-dimensional

sphere — height, width + depth



cube (has volume)

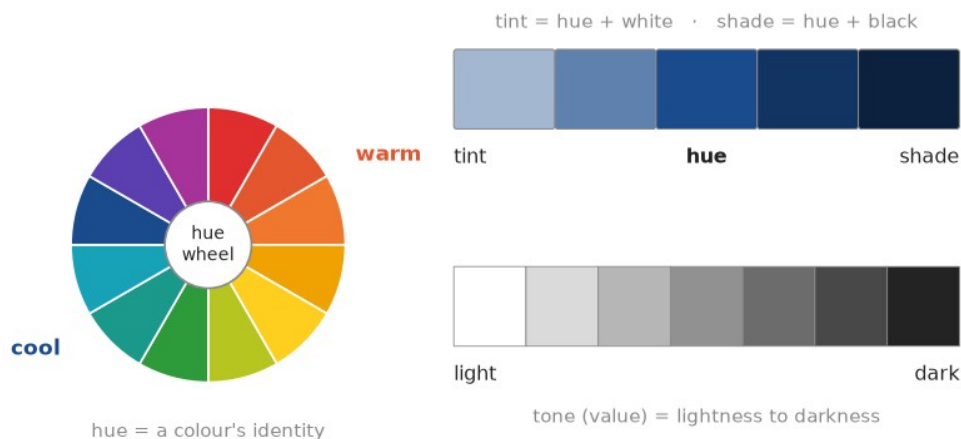
A flat printed design uses **SHAPE**; a physical object — or its rendered / perspective view — has **FORM**.

Watch-out — shape (2D) vs form (3D). The assessing panel reports recurring confusion between these two elements, particularly where a three-dimensional object is depicted. Use **shape** for the flat, two-dimensional, **unrendered** components of a design and **form** for anything three-dimensional. Do not say a bottle or a chair has “shape”; a physical object — or its rendered / perspective view — has **form**, because the drawing method and the rendering build the *illusion* of depth. The flat, solid cut-out parts of a design still have shape.

Tone. Tone (also called **value**) is the **lightness or darkness** of an area, running on a continuous scale from white through greys to black. Every colour also has a tonal value — yellow is naturally light in tone, navy naturally dark — quite apart from its hue. Tone does several jobs: it **models form** (a gradual light-to-dark gradient makes a shape look rounded — the basis of rendering with light, shade and shadow); it creates **depth**; it builds **contrast** and mood (high tonal contrast is bold and legible, close tones are subtle and calm); and it ranks information for **hierarchy**. A dark, low-key design feels heavy or dramatic; a light, high-key design feels open and airy.

Texture. Texture is the **surface quality** of an element — how a surface looks or feels. There are two kinds: **tactile (actual) texture**, a real physical surface you can feel (an embossed card, a woven fabric, a knurled grip); and **visual (implied) texture**, the illusion of a surface created with marks, pattern or photography on a flat page. Rough, hand-made textures feel natural, rustic or rugged; smooth, flat surfaces feel clean, modern and technological. Texture adds richness and can signal the material a product is made from.

Colour. Colour is produced by light and is the most immediately expressive element. It is described by three properties: **hue** — the colour’s identity or name (red, blue, green...); **tone / value** — how light or dark the colour is, where a **tint** is a hue mixed with white (lighter) and a **shade** is a hue mixed with black (darker); and **intensity / saturation** — how bright or dull it is. Hues group as **warm** (reds, oranges, yellows — they advance and feel energetic) or **cool** (blues, greens, purples — they recede and feel calm). Colours can be arranged for **harmony** (colours that sit comfortably together, such as neighbours on the wheel) or for **contrast** (opposites on the wheel, which create emphasis and vibrancy). Colour carries strong associations (green = natural, red = warning / energy) and sets mood faster than any other element.



Watch-out — be precise about colour. Do not blur the properties. **Hue** is the colour's name; **tone / value** is how light or dark it is (a **tint** adds white, a **shade** adds black); **intensity** is how bright or dull it is. "Warm/cool" and "harmony/contrast" describe *relationships* between colours. Naming the right property earns the mark; "nice colours" earns nothing.

Type. Type is the element of **letterforms** — text treated for its visual qualities, not only its literal words. As an element, type has size, weight, tonal colour, letter shape and spacing, and these choices give a design a voice: a heavy sans-serif in capitals feels loud and modern, while a light serif feels traditional and refined. Type can create a focal point, carry the hierarchy of a layout, or be used pictorially as image. The deeper **typographic conventions** — anatomy, classification, kerning, leading, tracking, legibility and readability — are the subject of subtopic 2C; here we treat type only as one of the eight elements.

The analytical move. To analyse an element in a design — the skill Section A rewards — do four things:

1. **Name** the specific element, using the Study Design term.
2. **Point to the evidence** — where it appears and its properties (e.g. "the thick diagonal line", "the warm amber accent", "the light-to-dark tonal gradient").
3. **Explain how it communicates** — a cause-and-effect chain to the aesthetic, mood or message, not a description.
4. **Tie it to the audience and purpose.**

Watch-out — analyse, don't just name. Saying an element makes something "pop" or "stand out" is the vague phrasing the panel repeatedly criticises. Explain the *mechanism* (why the diagonal creates movement, why the warm hue advances) and the *effect on communication*. Choose an element that genuinely appears in the example and is appropriate to its field.

Consider the original poster below for a fictional **ORRERY Community Star Party**. Several elements work together: the sky is a light-to-dark **tone** gradient; the stars are massed **points** that read as a texture, with one bright **focal point** (the warm lead star); thin **lines** join the constellation and a horizon line grounds the scene; the crescent moon is a flat **shape** (2D — not a form); a warm amber accent sits against the cool indigo (**colour**, a warm/cool contrast); and the **type** ranks the information from title to details. Together the elements build a *calm, wondrous night-time* character for a community astronomy audience.



Worked examples

Example 1 — scaffolded

Describe how the designer has used the element of **tone** in the ORRERY poster. (4 marks)

Working

Tone is the lightness-to-darkness of the design. In the poster the sky runs from a very dark indigo at the top to a lighter indigo near the horizon.

This gradual light-to-dark **tone** reads as a deep night sky and gives the flat poster a sense of depth.

Tone is also used for **contrast**: the light title sits against the dark ground, so it is read first.

The dark, low-key tone suits the calm, night-time character the poster is selling to a community audience.

Comment

Start by naming the element and pointing to the evidence (the tonal gradient), using the correct term.

Describe one job the element does — here, setting the night-time setting and suggesting depth.

Note a second job — tonal contrast organises the information (a second, distinct point for the marks).

Tie the tonal choice back to the aesthetic and the audience/purpose.

Example 2 — scaffolded

Distinguish between **shape** and **form**, and state which is present in the ORRERY moon. (4 marks)

Working

A **shape** is a two-dimensional enclosed area — it has height and width only.

A **form** is three-dimensional — it has height, width and depth, so it has volume.

The moon in the poster is drawn as a flat crescent of solid white — an enclosed area with height and width only, with no tonal modelling and no perspective — so it is a **shape**, not a form.

Even though a real moon is a sphere (a form), this depiction is left unrendered, so **shape** is the correct element.

Comment

Define shape precisely (2D).

Define form precisely (3D) — the two definitions must be congruent.

Apply the distinction to the example and commit to an answer, quoting the evidence that decides it.

Give the reason precisely. It is the *absence of rendering*, not simply the flat page, that makes this a shape — a rendered or perspective drawing on the same page would show **form**.

Example 3 — unscaffolded

Analyse how the designer has used the element of **point** in the ORRERY poster. (4 marks)

The designer uses **point** in three ways. First, the bright warm star high in the left of the sky is a single dominant point that becomes the **focal point**, catching the eye before anything else. Second, the many small white points scattered across the sky are massed into a **texture**, reading as a dense, starry night rather than as separate dots. Third, these points are spread across the whole sky at a consistent density rather than clustered in one place, which keeps the field even and the mood calm. Because a point is the smallest element, one enlarged, warm point can command all the attention while the tiny repeated points quietly build the setting — together communicating the wonder of a night sky to the poster’s community astronomy audience (4 marks: *element named; three distinct uses; effect linked to communication*).

Example 4 — unscaffolded

Analyse how the designer has combined **at least three** design elements in the ORRERY poster to communicate a calm, wondrous night-time aesthetic. (6 marks)

The poster builds a *calm, wondrous night-time* aesthetic by combining **tone, colour and type**. The **tone** runs from dark indigo at the top to a lighter band at the horizon; this low-key, gradual tone reads immediately as night and gives the flat design depth, setting a quiet, restful mood. Against that cool, dark field the designer places a single warm amber accent — the lead star and the sub-heading — so the **colour** works as a warm/cool contrast: because warm hues advance against cool ones, the amber glows like a real star and gives the calm scene a point of wonder. Finally, **type** organises the message: the large white “ORRERY” is read first, the letter-spaced “Community Star Party” second, and the small details last, so the calm mood is not lost to clutter. Because all three elements pull in the same direction — cool and dark for calm, one warm point for wonder, clear type for order — the design feels unified and communicates a gentle, inviting night event to a community audience (6 marks: *three elements named; each linked by a mechanism to the named aesthetic; shown working together for the audience*).

Practice questions

Scaffolded

Q1. Using the elements panel: (a) State what a design **element** is. (1 mark) (b) List the eight design elements. (2 marks) (c) Explain the difference between a design **element** and a design **principle**, giving one example of each. (2 marks)

Q2. The elements of **shape** and **form**: (a) Name the **two categories** that shapes fall into. (1 mark) (b) Explain what a **negative** shape is. (1 mark) (c) A designer draws the same chair twice: once as a flat black silhouette, and once in perspective with tonal rendering. **Distinguish** the element shown in each drawing. (2 marks)

Q3. Using the colour figure: (a) Explain what the **hue** of a colour is. (1 mark) (b) Distinguish a **tint** from a **shade**. (2 marks) (c) Name one **warm** and one **cool** hue, and state one effect of each. (2 marks)

Q4. The element of **tone**: (a) Define **tone**. (1 mark) (b) Describe two different jobs tone can do in a design. (2 marks) (c) Every colour also has a **tonal value**. Explain what this means, and name one hue that is naturally light in tone and one that is naturally dark. (2 marks)

Q5. The element of **type**: (a) Explain what it means to treat **type as a design element**. (2 marks) (b) Describe two visual properties of type that affect a design’s mood. (2 marks) (c) Give one example of how changing the type could change the feeling of a design. (1 mark)

Q6. Using the ORRERY poster: (a) Identify the element formed by the many small stars massed across the sky. (1 mark) (b) Describe how the designer has used **line** in the poster. (2 marks) (c) Identify one **geometric** and one **organic** shape in the poster, and describe the different character each gives the design. (2 marks)



Questions 7–12 refer to the original TARN insulated drink bottle shown above (an object designed for hikers), unless otherwise stated.

- Q7.** Analyse how the designer has used the element of **form** in the TARN bottle to communicate a solid, durable product. (3 marks)
- Q8.** Explain how **tone** has been used to make the flat drawing of the bottle read as a three-dimensional cylinder. (3 marks)
- Q9.** Distinguish between **tactile** and **visual** texture. Identify which appears on the TARN grip band and explain its effect on the user. (4 marks)
- Q10.** Analyse how the designer has used **colour** on the TARN bottle to signal its outdoor, hard-wearing qualities. (3 marks)
- Q11.** The bottle body is a cylinder and it carries a small triangular mountain mark. Distinguish the **form** from the **shape** in this object. (3 marks)
- Q12.** Analyse how **at least three** design elements combine to give the TARN bottle a rugged, outdoor aesthetic suited to hikers. (6 marks)
- Q13.** (ORRERY poster.) Analyse how the designer has used **line** and **point** — the horizon, the constellation lines and the star field — to organise the composition and create a sense of depth. (4 marks)
- Q14.** (ORRERY poster.) Evaluate the effectiveness of **colour** — the warm amber accent against the cool indigo — in drawing attention and setting the poster’s mood. (4 marks)
- Q15.** Compare how **type** has been used as an element in the ORRERY poster and on the TARN bottle. (4 marks)
- Q16.** Compare the use of **shape** in the ORRERY poster with the use of **form** in the TARN bottle, explaining why each element suits its design. (6 marks)
- Q17.** The element of **tone** is set to work differently in each artifact. **Compare** how tone has been used in the ORRERY poster with how it has been used on the TARN bottle, and explain what each use achieves for its audience. (6 marks)

Answers

Q1. (a) A basic component of visual language. (b) Point, line, shape, form, tone, texture, colour, type. (c) Element = a component (e.g. colour); principle = a convention for arranging elements (e.g. contrast). **Q2.** (a) Geometric and organic (freeform). (b) The shape of the space around or between the positive figures. (c) Silhouette = shape (flat, unrendered); perspective + rendered drawing = form (illusion of depth). See solutions. **Q3.** (a) The colour's identity/name. (b) Tint = hue + white (lighter); shade = hue + black (darker). (c) e.g. warm red = energy/warmth; cool blue = calm/distance. **Q4.** (a) The lightness–darkness (value) of an area. (b) e.g. model form; create contrast/hierarchy; suggest depth/mood (any two). (c) How light or dark a colour is on the white–black scale, apart from its hue; e.g. yellow = naturally light, navy = naturally dark. **Q5.** (a) Using the visual qualities of letterforms, not just their words. (b) e.g. weight and letter shape (serif/sans) — any two of size/weight/spacing/case. (c) See solutions. **Q6.** (a) Point (massed into texture/pattern). (b) See solutions. (c) Geometric = the crescent moon (regular, precise); organic = the hill silhouette (irregular, natural). See solutions. **Q7.** Form = the 3D cylinder; conveys solidity/robustness. See solutions. **Q8.** Light-to-dark tonal gradient across the width (highlight to shadow) makes it read as a cylinder. **Q9.** Tactile = real, felt; visual = illusion on a flat surface. The grip = tactile (knurled). See solutions. **Q10.** Muted steel + a strong accent cap → tough, outdoor, functional. See solutions. **Q11.** Form = the cylindrical bottle (3D); shape = the flat 2D triangular mark. **Q12–Q17.** See fully-worked solutions.

Fully-worked solutions

Q1. (a) A design element is a basic component of visual language that designers use to communicate information and ideas. (b) Point, line, shape, form, tone, texture, colour and type. (c) A design **element** is a component — for example the **colour** of the lead star. A design **principle** is a convention for arranging elements — for example the **contrast** between the warm star and the cool sky. The elements are the parts; the principles are how the parts are put together (*1 mark each: element example + principle example*).

Q2. (a) Shapes are either **geometric** (regular, ordered, mechanical — the circle, square and triangle) or **organic / freeform** (irregular, soft and natural). (b) A **negative** shape is the shape of the space around or between the positive figures — the background areas the eye reads as shapes in their own right. (c) The silhouette shows **shape**: it is a flat, enclosed area with height and width only, and because it carries no modelling nothing in it suggests depth. The perspective, tonally rendered drawing shows **form**: the drawing method and the light-to-dark rendering create the *illusion* of height, width **and** depth, so the chair reads as a solid with volume even though the page itself is flat. Form is not restricted to real objects — a rendered or perspective depiction of a three-dimensional thing is analysed as form (*2 marks: each drawing correctly classified with its reason*).

Q3. (a) Hue is a colour's identity or name — red, blue, green and so on. (b) A **tint** is a hue mixed with white, making it lighter (e.g. pale blue); a **shade** is a hue mixed with black, making it darker (e.g. navy). (c) A warm hue such as red or orange feels energetic and advances toward the viewer; a cool hue such as blue or green feels calm and appears to recede (*2 marks: one warm + one cool with a correct effect each*).

Q4. (a) Tone (value) is the lightness or darkness of an area, from white through greys to black. (b) Any two of: modelling **form** through light and shade; creating **contrast** so key information is read first; establishing **hierarchy**; suggesting **depth**; or setting mood (dark = heavy/dramatic, light = open/airy). (c) Saying that every colour has a **tonal value** means that any hue can also be placed on the white-to-black scale according to how light or dark it is, quite separately from what colour it is. Yellow, for example, is naturally light in tone, while navy blue is naturally dark. This matters because two hues of the same tonal value will sit flat against one another however different their colours look, while a light hue against a dark one gives strong tonal contrast (*2 marks: tonal value explained + a naturally light and a naturally dark hue named*).

Q5. (a) Treating type as a design element means using the *visual* qualities of the letterforms — their size, weight, colour, letter shape and spacing — to contribute to the look and communication of the design, rather than only reading the words for their meaning. (b) Any two of: weight (a heavy weight feels bold, a light weight feels delicate); letter shape (a serif feels traditional, a sans-serif feels modern); case (capitals feel loud, lower case feels approachable); size or spacing. (c) For example, swapping a heavy capital sans-serif for a light lower-case serif would change a bold, modern feeling into a calm, traditional one (*1 mark for a valid example*).

Q6. (a) Point (the massed points read as texture and pattern). (b) The designer uses **line** for the horizon — the edge where the dark hill silhouette meets the sky — which grounds the scene and separates sky from land, and for the thin

lines that join the stars into a constellation and lead the eye between them; the type also sits on implied horizontal baselines that keep the message in ordered bands (2 marks: two uses of line). (c) The crescent moon is a **geometric** shape: it is built from circular arcs, so its edges are regular and precise, and that ordered, mechanical character suits the exactness of astronomy and keeps the sky feeling controlled and calm. The hill along the bottom is an **organic (freeform)** shape: its edge is irregular and softly undulating, so it reads as a real landform and grounds the scene with a relaxed, outdoor feeling. The pairing lets the poster feel precise and welcoming at the same time (2 marks: one geometric and one organic shape identified + the character of each described).

Q7. The TARN bottle is drawn as a three-dimensional **form** — a cylinder with visible volume rather than a flat outline. Because it has depth and mass, it reads as a solid, sturdy object that could be grabbed and knocked about, which communicates the durability a hiker needs. The rounded, weighty form therefore signals a robust, physical product (3 marks: form identified as 3-D + link to durability).

Q8. The designer grades the **tone** across the width of the body — lighter just left of centre, where the light appears to strike, and progressively darker toward both edges. This light-to-dark gradient is exactly how a rounded, lit surface behaves, so the eye reads the flat drawing as a curved **cylinder** rather than a flat rectangle. The tonal rendering (highlight → mid-tone → shadow) creates the illusion of three-dimensional form (3 marks: gradient described + curved-surface effect).

Q9. **Tactile texture** is a real, physical surface quality that can actually be felt; **visual texture** is the *illusion* of a surface created with marks or pattern on a flat page. The TARN grip band shows **tactile** texture — a ridged, knurled surface moulded into the bottle. Its effect is functional and communicative: it gives a hiker a secure, non-slip hold in wet or cold conditions, and it visually signals a rugged, outdoor product built for grip (4 marks: both terms defined + correct identification + effect).

Q10. The designer uses a muted, metallic steel-grey as the dominant **colour**, which reads as tough, utilitarian and hard-wearing — appropriate to an object made to survive the outdoors. A single stronger accent on the cap provides a functional point of contrast that helps the user locate the opening. The restrained, metallic palette therefore communicates the bottle's durable, no-nonsense outdoor qualities (3 marks: dominant colour + association + accent, tied to the product).

Q11. The **form** is the bottle itself — a three-dimensional cylinder with height, width and depth. The **shape** is the small triangular mountain mark printed on the body, which is a flat, two-dimensional figure with height and width only. So the same object contains a 3-D **form** (the vessel) and a 2-D **shape** (the graphic mark) (3 marks: form = cylinder (3D) + shape = flat mark (2D)).

Q12. The TARN bottle achieves a *rugged, outdoor* aesthetic by combining **form**, **texture** and **colour**. The three-dimensional **form** — a solid cylinder with real volume — makes the bottle look sturdy and able to take a knock, suiting a hiker's rough use. The tactile **texture** of the knurled grip band signals a secure, non-slip hold and reinforces the sense of a hard-wearing, functional object. The muted, metallic **colour** reads as tough and utilitarian, while the single accent cap keeps it practical rather than decorative. Because all three elements point the same way — solid form, gripping texture, hard-wearing colour — the bottle communicates a durable, trail-ready product to an active, outdoor audience (6 marks: three elements named; each linked by a mechanism to the rugged aesthetic and the audience).

Q13. The designer uses **line** and **point** to organise the ORRERY poster and build depth. The horizon **line** across the lower third separates the dark sky from the darker land and grounds the scene, giving the flat design a foreground and a distance. Fine **lines** join the scattered **points** into a constellation, leading the eye from star to star and toward the bright focal point. The massed small **points** of the star field sit “behind” the larger constellation stars, and because smaller points read as further away, they deepen the sense of a vast sky. Together, line organises the space while point creates texture and depth (4 marks: line for structure/depth + point for texture/depth, both analysed).

Q14. The **colour** is used effectively. Against the large field of cool, dark indigo, the designer places a single warm amber accent on the lead star and the sub-heading. Because warm hues advance while cool hues recede, this warm/cool contrast makes the amber appear to glow and pulls the eye straight to it, so attention lands exactly where the designer wants it. The overwhelmingly cool, dark palette also sets a calm, restful night-time mood. A limitation is that the amber sub-heading is small and, at a distance or in poor light, could be missed against the busy star field.

Overall, the disciplined cool-plus-one-warm scheme communicates the calm, wondrous mood and directs attention effectively, so the colour is used well (4 marks: *strength with mechanism + a limitation + judgement*).

Q15. In both designs **type** works as an element, but to different ends. In the ORRERY poster the type is a large, bold sans-serif in capitals (“ORRERY”) set in white against the dark sky; that scale and tonal contrast make it dominate the composition and create a clear focal point, with the smaller, letter-spaced amber sub-heading beneath it as the second layer, so type carries the hierarchy and gives the calm night scene a modern, ordered voice. On the TARN bottle the type is a small, bold sans-serif brand mark sitting on the body; here type acts as a compact identifier rather than the main event, and it is kept small so it labels the object without competing with its form. So both use a bold sans-serif for a plain, modern voice; the difference is scale and role — the poster runs type large and in high tonal contrast to lead the composition, whereas the bottle keeps it small and subordinate to the product (4 marks: *type in each + a congruent similarity and difference*).

Q16. Shape and form are the flat and the solid members of the same pair, and each artifact draws on the one its field calls for. The ORRERY poster is a printed **Message** whose imagery is drawn as solid, unrendered areas, so its components are **shapes** — the crescent moon and the hill silhouette are enclosed two-dimensional figures with height and width only, and shape is the right element for flat graphics that will be read at a glance. The TARN bottle is a physical **Object**, so its defining element is **form** — a three-dimensional cylinder with volume that a user will hold, and form is the right element for something that must feel solid and durable. The similarity is that each element is the natural building block of its field; the difference is dimensionality — shape (2-D) suits the unrendered poster graphics, form (3-D) suits the physical bottle. This is exactly why shape and form must not be confused (6 marks: *shape in the poster + form in the bottle, each justified by its field; a congruent two-sided comparison*.)

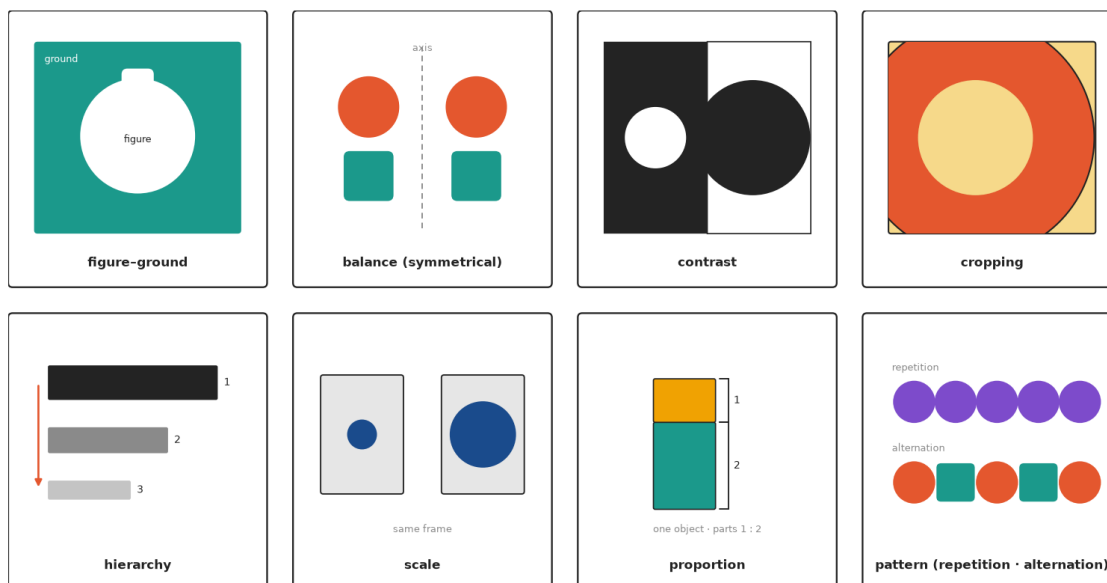
Q17. Both designers lean heavily on **tone**, but they set it to work in opposite directions. In the ORRERY poster tone is **atmospheric and organising**: the sky is graded from a very dark indigo at the top to a lighter indigo at the horizon, which reads immediately as the depth of a night sky, while the strong tonal contrast between the near-white title and the dark ground ranks the information so the event name is taken in first. Tone here never pretends the page is anything but flat — it supplies mood, a sense of distance and hierarchy for a community audience scanning a poster in passing. On the TARN bottle tone is **descriptive**: it is graded across the width of the body, lightest just left of centre where the light appears to strike and progressively darker toward both edges. That is how a curved, lit surface behaves, so the graded tone models the cylinder and makes the flat drawing read as a solid **form** with volume, telling a hiker what the object would be like to hold and how sturdy it is. The similarity is that each design uses a continuous light-to-dark gradient and uses tonal contrast to steer the eye; the difference is purpose — in the flat Message tone builds mood and hierarchy, while in the Object it builds the illusion of three dimensions. That second use is precisely what turns a flat area into a rendered form (6 marks: *tone described with evidence in each artifact; the job it does in each explained; a congruent two-sided comparison tied to each audience*).

Chapter 2 Visual language: elements, principles, Gestalt and type — 2B Design principles

Theory

Design principles are the conventions used to arrange and organise the design elements. Where an *element* is a component of visual language (point, line, shape, form, tone, texture, colour, type), a *principle* is the way those components are put together on the page, screen or object. In the examination (Section A) you are asked to *identify* a design principle in a supplied design example and *explain, discuss, analyse or evaluate* how it organises the elements to communicate to an audience or stakeholder — so the skill is to read a composition, not to make one.

The Study Design names exactly eight design principles: **figure–ground, balance, contrast, cropping, hierarchy, scale, proportion** and **pattern (repetition and alternation)**. For each principle, a strong response says three things: *what it is, how the designer has applied it* (with evidence from the example), and *its effect on the viewer* and the communication. The grid below shows one clear demonstration of each.



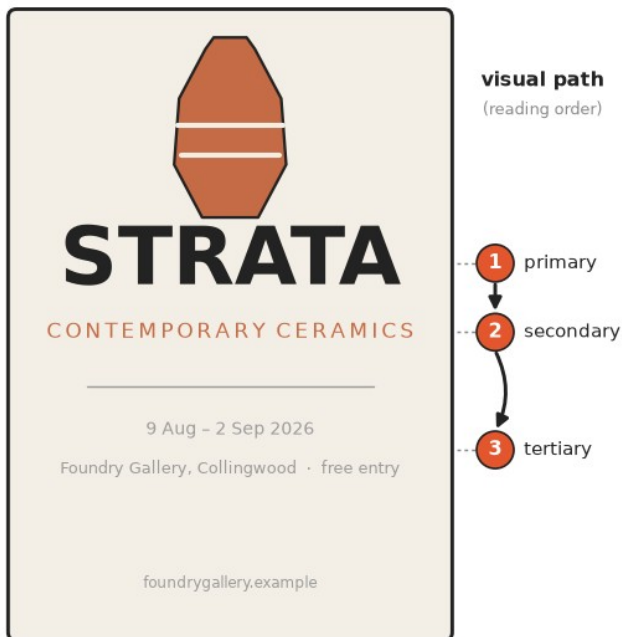
Figure–ground is the organisation of a composition into a *figure* (the shape or object the eye reads as the subject) and a *ground* (the background field around and behind it). A designer creates a clear figure–ground relationship using contrast of tone, colour or detail so the audience knows instantly what to look at. When figure and ground are made deliberately equal or interchangeable — so the eye can read either as the subject — the relationship becomes **reversible** (or *ambiguous*); this is used to create visual interest, wit or a hidden second image (as in the well-known “two-faces-or-a-vase” silhouette). A clear figure–ground separates the message from its background; a reversible one rewards a second look.

Balance is the distribution of visual weight in a composition. In **symmetrical** balance the elements are mirrored about a central axis, which feels stable, formal and calm. In **asymmetrical** balance elements of different size, tone or colour are arranged so their visual weights offset each other without mirroring, which feels dynamic, informal and contemporary. In **radial** balance elements are arranged around a central point, drawing the eye inward. A designer chooses the type of balance to set the mood and to steady or energise the layout.

Contrast is the juxtaposition of opposing qualities — light against dark, large against small, warm against cool, angular against rounded, plain against decorated. A designer uses contrast to create emphasis, to separate and rank information, and to add visual interest. Its effect is to make the contrasted element the focal point and to help the audience find the important information first.

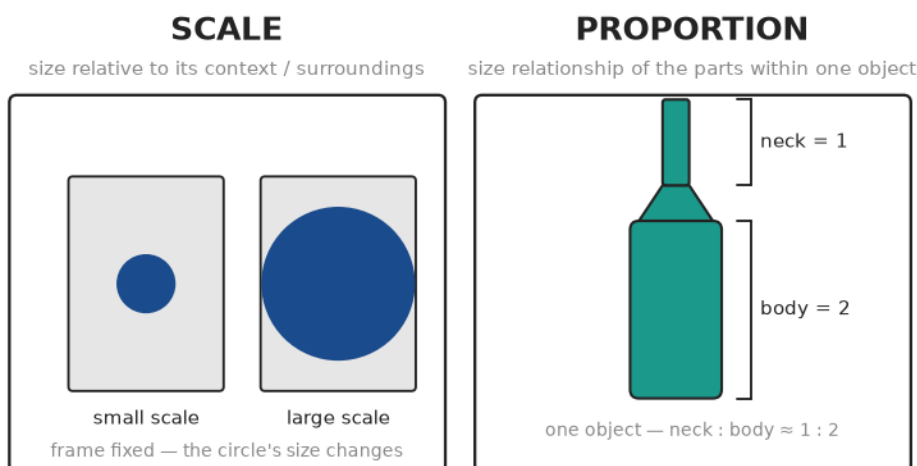
Cropping is the trimming of an image or element by the edge of the frame (or by a mask) so that part of it sits outside the composition. A designer crops to focus attention on a chosen part of a subject, to enlarge and dramatise it, to create a dynamic, informal feeling, or to imply that the subject continues beyond the frame. Its effect is to draw the viewer in close and to direct the eye to what has been kept.

Hierarchy is the arrangement of elements to show their order of importance, ranked as **primary, secondary and tertiary**. A designer builds hierarchy with scale, tonal contrast, position, colour, weight and surrounding space, so that the most important element is seen first and the eye then travels along a **visual path** through the secondary and tertiary layers in the intended reading order. Its effect is to let the audience absorb the message quickly and in the right sequence.



In the original *STRATA* exhibition poster above, the title *STRATA* is **primary** (largest scale, strongest tonal contrast against the pale ground); the line *contemporary ceramics* is **secondary** (smaller, letter-spaced, terracotta); and the dates, venue and web address are **tertiary** (smallest, and set in a light grey so they sit lowest in tonal contrast against the ground). The eye travels top-to-bottom along the numbered visual path — 1 → 2 → 3. A common assessor criticism is stopping at the single most dominant element: a full analysis of hierarchy names all three layers and describes the visual path between them.

Scale is the size of an element *relative to its context* — to the other elements, to the format, or to the viewer. Increasing the scale of an element gives it dominance and signals importance; sudden shifts in scale create drama and impact. **Proportion** is different: it is the size *relationship between the parts within one object or composition* (part-to-part and part-to-whole). Pleasing, harmonious proportion feels balanced and resolved, while deliberately distorted proportion can signal that something is oversized, playful or wrong. The figure below disambiguates the pair, because students frequently confuse them.



Read the difference this way: **scale compares one thing to another thing** (the same circle is small or large *relative to its frame*), while **proportion compares the parts of the same one thing** (the neck of the bottle relates to its body as roughly 1 : 2). Change the size of an element against a fixed context — or change the context around an element of fixed size — and either way you have changed its *scale*; change the internal ratios of the one object and you have changed its *proportion*.

Pattern is the regular, repeated arrangement of a motif. In **repetition** the same element or motif is repeated at regular intervals. In **alternation** two or more motifs are arranged in a regular, predictable sequence (for example A B A B). A designer uses pattern to create unity, rhythm, decoration, texture or a sense of movement. Its effect is to tie a design together and to lead the eye across it — but pattern is only present where a motif genuinely repeats or alternates.

Watch-out — a design principle is not a Gestalt principle. Elements, design principles and Gestalt principles are three different vocabularies and are frequently muddled. An *element* is a component (colour, type...); a *design principle* is a convention for arranging elements (hierarchy, contrast...); a *Gestalt* principle (proximity, similarity, closure, continuity, common fate, focal point...) describes how the mind perceives and groups what it sees — that is subtopic 2D. Note that **figure-ground is listed as BOTH a design principle and a Gestalt principle** in the study specifications: treat it as a *design principle* when you mean the designer’s compositional choice to separate subject from background, and as a *Gestalt* principle when you mean the viewer’s automatic perception of a subject against a field. Identify which you are discussing and stay with it.

Watch-out — scale is not proportion. Scale is size *relative to context* (this logo is large on the billboard); proportion is the size relationship *between the parts of one object* (the head to the body). A common error is to identify “scale” and then discuss proportion, or the reverse. Name the one you mean and keep the discussion to it.

Watch-out — read the whole hierarchy. Do not stop at the single dominant element. Name the primary, *secondary* and *tertiary* layers and describe the visual path (reading order) the designer has created across the whole composition.

Watch-out — do not invent pattern. Pattern is a principle that is often claimed where there is no evidence for it. Only discuss pattern where a motif actually repeats (repetition) or two motifs actually alternate (alternation). If nothing repeats, choose a principle that is genuinely present.

Watch-out — explain the function, do not say “it pops”. Phrases such as “it stands out” or “it pops” earn no marks. State the *mechanism* (what the principle does to the elements) and the *effect* (what the viewer then reads and does), and link it to the purpose or stakeholder.

Worked examples

Example 1 — scaffolded

Analyse how the designer has used the principle of **hierarchy** to organise the STRATA poster and guide the viewer. (4 marks)

Working	Comment
The designer has ranked the information into three layers of hierarchy — primary, secondary and tertiary.	“Analyse” hierarchy: begin by stating that the elements are ordered, not just that one is biggest.
Primary is the title <i>STRATA</i> , made dominant by its large scale and strong tonal contrast against the pale ground, so it is read first.	Name the primary layer AND the means used to make it primary (scale + contrast), with evidence.
Secondary is <i>contemporary ceramics</i> — smaller, letter-spaced and terracotta — telling the viewer what the show is; tertiary is the dates, venue and web address, smallest and lowest in contrast.	Extend beyond the dominant element to the secondary and tertiary layers — this is where weaker responses stop.
These decreasing steps of scale and contrast create a top-to-bottom visual path , so a passer-by reads <i>name</i> → <i>what</i> → <i>when/where</i> in that order, communicating the event efficiently.	Describe the visual path and tie the hierarchy to the communication (the reading order), earning the analysis marks.

Example 2 — scaffolded

*Distinguish between the principles of **scale** and **proportion**, with reference to the objects shown. (4 marks)*

Working	Comment
Scale is the size of an element relative to its context — to other elements, the format or the viewer. In the left panel the <i>same</i> circle is small in one frame and large in the other; because the frame (the context) is unchanged, what has changed is its scale .	“Distinguish” needs a clear definition of each term before any comparison. Give the evidence for scale: a comparison of one thing to another thing.
Proportion is the size relationship between the <i>parts within one object</i> . In the right panel the bottle’s neck relates to its body as about 1 : 2 — a relationship inside a single object.	Define proportion and show it is internal to one object (part-to-part / part-to-whole).
So scale compares one element to something outside it, while proportion compares the parts of one element to each other — the same object can keep its proportion while its scale changes.	Draw the distinction out explicitly (the marking point): different reference — external vs internal.

Example 3 — unscaffolded

Identify one design principle used in the HARBOUR MAKERS FAIR poster and explain how it helps communicate to the fair’s audience. (4 marks)

The designer has used the principle of **figure–ground**. The dark lighthouse is the **figure** and the pale, cropped sun and open sky form the **ground** behind it. Because the near-black lighthouse contrasts strongly in tone with the light ground, the audience reads the coastal motif instantly and without effort. This clear figure–ground separation lets a busy passer-by grasp the seaside, harbour-side character of the fair at a glance, communicating the event’s theme quickly to the families and locals it is aimed at.

Example 4 — unscaffolded

*Analyse how the principles of **balance** and **contrast** have been used to organise the HARBOUR MAKERS FAIR poster and communicate its character to the audience. (6 marks)*

The poster is organised by **symmetrical balance**: the lighthouse, the cropped sun, the bunting and the centred type are all arranged about a single vertical axis, so the left and right halves mirror each other. This even, stable balance gives the fair a wholesome, welcoming and trustworthy character, suited to a community event for families. Working with it, **contrast** ranks and enlivens the composition: the strong tonal contrast of the near-black lighthouse against the pale sun makes the motif the focal point, while the warm coral and cool teal of the alternating bunting add colour contrast that reads as festive. Contrast is also used typographically — the large, heavy **HARBOUR** against the small, light-weight details line creates a clear entry point. The two principles pull in the same direction: symmetry steadies the layout while contrast directs the eye and adds energy, so the design communicates a friendly, festive, seaside fair to its local audience.

Practice questions

Scaffolded

Q1. Using the STRATA poster: (a) Explain the difference between a design **element** and a design **principle**. (2 marks) (b) Name one design element and one design principle the designer has used in the poster, and state the evidence for each. (3 marks) (c) Explain why *closure* could not be given as an answer to part (b). (2 marks)

Q2. Using the HARBOUR MAKERS FAIR poster: (a) Define **figure–ground** as a design principle. (1 mark) (b) Name the design element the designer has relied on to separate the figure from the ground. (1 mark) (c) Explain what is meant by a **reversible** (ambiguous) figure–ground relationship, and state why this poster’s figure–ground is not reversible. (3 marks)

Q3. Using the principles grid: (a) State the feature of the arrangement in the “balance” cell that makes the balance symmetrical. (1 mark) (b) Name one other type of balance and describe how it is arranged. (2 marks) (c) Explain the effect that symmetrical balance has on a viewer. (2 marks)

Q4. Using the HARBOUR MAKERS FAIR poster: (a) Identify one clear example of **contrast**. (1 mark) (b) Name the design element(s) involved in that contrast. (1 mark) (c) Explain the effect of the contrast on the viewer, without using the words “stand out” or “pop”. (2 marks)

Q5. Using the principles grid: (a) Distinguish between **repetition** and **alternation**. (2 marks) (b) Describe the sequence of motifs shown in the alternation row of the “pattern” cell. (2 marks) (c) Explain what must be present in a design before **pattern** can be claimed as a principle. (2 marks)

Q6. Using the HARBOUR MAKERS FAIR poster: (a) Define the principle of **cropping**. (1 mark) (b) Name the edge of the frame that does the cropping in this poster. (1 mark) (c) Explain why the row of bunting is **not** an example of cropping, even though it runs almost the full width of the poster. (2 marks)

Un scaffolded



Questions 7–17 refer to the HARBOUR MAKERS FAIR poster shown above, unless otherwise stated.

Q7. Analyse how **cropping** has been used in the poster and describe its effect on the viewer. (4 marks)

Q8. Analyse how **pattern** (repetition and alternation) has been used in the poster. (4 marks)

Q9. Explain how **scale** has been used to communicate the importance of information in the poster. (3 marks)

Q10. Describe the **proportion** of the lighthouse’s parts and explain its effect. (3 marks)

Q11. Analyse the **hierarchy** of the poster, identifying the primary, secondary and tertiary layers and describing the visual path. (6 marks)

Q12. Name the type of **balance** used in the poster and evaluate its effectiveness for the event’s audience. (4 marks)

Q13. The poster is to be pasted on a hoarding and read from across a busy street. Evaluate the effectiveness of the poster’s **contrast** for a viewer at that distance. (4 marks)

Q14. Explain the difference between **figure–ground** used as a *design principle* and figure–ground used as a *Gestalt principle*, referring to the poster. (3 marks)

Q15. The lighthouse's parts are drawn in a believable **proportion**. Explain how the poster's communication would change if the designer deliberately distorted that proportion — for example, by drawing the lantern room as tall as the tower beneath it. (4 marks)

Q16. Compare how **hierarchy** has been used in the STRATA poster and in the HARBOUR MAKERS FAIR poster. (6 marks)

Q17. Analyse how the designer has combined **at least two** design principles, *other than hierarchy*, to organise the design elements of the STRATA poster, create a named character and communicate to its audience. (6 marks)

Answers

Q1. (a) An element is a component of visual language; a principle is a convention for arranging elements. (b) e.g. element = colour (the terracotta vessel); principle = symmetrical balance (all elements centred on one axis). (c) *Closure* is a Gestalt principle, not a design principle. **Q2.** (a) The organisation of a design into a figure (subject) and a ground (background). (b) Tone. (c) See solutions. **Q3.** (a) The elements are mirrored about the central axis. (b) Asymmetrical or radial (see solutions). (c) See solutions. **Q4.** (a) e.g. dark lighthouse vs pale sun; or heavy *HARBOUR* vs light-weight details; or coral vs teal bunting. (b) Tone/colour/type. (c) See solutions. **Q5.** (a) Repetition = one motif repeated; alternation = two+ motifs in a regular sequence. (b) Circle, square, circle, square, circle — coral and teal in an A B A B A sequence. (c) See solutions. **Q6.** (a) Trimming an element by the frame edge so part sits outside the composition. (b) The top edge. (c) See solutions. **Q7–Q17.** See fully-worked solutions.

Fully-worked solutions

Q1. (a) A design **element** is a component of visual language — point, line, shape, form, tone, texture, colour or type. A design **principle** is a convention for arranging and organising those components on the page, screen or object. In short, elements are what is on the page; principles are how it has been put together (*2 marks: both defined and the relationship between them made clear*). (b) Element — **colour**: the warm terracotta of the vessel and of the *contemporary ceramics* line. Principle — **symmetrical balance**: the vessel, title, subtitle, rule and details are all centred on one vertical axis so the left and right halves mirror each other. (Accept any correct pairing with evidence, e.g. element = type, principle = scale or figure–ground.) (*3 marks: one element named, one principle named, evidence given*). (c) *Closure* is a **Gestalt** principle — it describes how the viewer’s mind completes an incomplete shape — not a convention the designer uses to arrange elements. Elements, design principles and Gestalt principles are three separate vocabularies, and only the eight design principles named in the study specifications can answer part (b) (*2 marks: closure identified as Gestalt + the vocabularies kept distinct*).

Q2. (a) Figure–ground is the organisation of a composition into a *figure* (the shape the eye reads as the subject) and a *ground* (the background field behind it). (b) **Tone** (accept tone and colour). (c) In a reversible or ambiguous figure–ground the figure and ground are made roughly equal or interchangeable, so the eye can read either as the subject (as in the classic vase-or-two-faces silhouette); a designer uses it to create wit, visual interest or a hidden second image. This poster’s figure–ground is not reversible because the near-black lighthouse is far darker than everything around it and its silhouette is a self-contained shape, so the pale sun and sky can only ever be read as the field behind it (*3 marks: reversibility defined + why a designer uses it + the poster judged against that test*).

Q3. (a) The elements are mirrored about the central vertical axis — each shape on one side of the axis has an identical partner at the same distance on the other side. (b) *Asymmetrical* balance arranges elements of different size, tone or colour so their visual weights offset each other without mirroring; *radial* balance arranges elements around a central point (accept either). (c) Symmetrical balance mirrors the elements about a central axis, which the viewer reads as stable, formal and calm — it steadies the composition and can feel ordered and trustworthy (*2 marks: mechanism + effect on the viewer*).

Q4. (a) The near-black lighthouse against the pale sun (accept the heavy *HARBOUR* against the small, light-weight detail line, or the coral against the teal bunting). (b) Tone (and colour); for the bunting example, colour; for the type example, type — the contrast is one of weight and size, not tone, since both lines are printed in the same ink. (c) The strong difference in tone makes the lighthouse the focal point and gives the eye a clear place to begin, so the coastal theme is read first and the layout feels ordered; the viewer therefore grasps the fair’s character immediately (*2 marks: names the effect and the viewer outcome without vague “stands out” language*).

Q5. (a) In repetition the *same* motif is repeated at regular intervals; in alternation *two or more* motifs are arranged in a regular, predictable sequence (A B A B). (b) The row runs circle, square, circle, square, circle — a coral circle and a teal square taking turns in a regular A B A B A sequence, so both the shape and the colour change from one motif to the next. (c) A designer can only claim pattern where a motif genuinely recurs: either the *same* motif repeated at regular intervals, or *two or more* motifs taking turns in a predictable sequence. If nothing actually repeats or alternates, the claim has no evidence and a principle that is genuinely present should be chosen instead (*2 marks: the evidence test stated for both forms*).

Q6. (a) Cropping is the trimming of an image or element by the edge of the frame (or a mask) so part of it sits outside the composition. (b) The top edge. (c) The bunting is not cropped because nothing has been cut away by the frame: the

string and every triangle sit complete inside the composition, with paper visible at both ends. Running close to an edge is not cropping — cropping requires part of the element to fall outside the frame (2 marks: the definition applied to the boundary case).

Q7. The designer has **cropped** the sun: the large pale disc is trimmed by the **top** edge of the frame, so its upper arc falls outside the composition and the sun meets the top of the poster as a straight cut across roughly half the poster's width. Cropping the sun in this way enlarges it into a simple, glowing backdrop rather than a small complete circle, and implies that it continues beyond the poster, which gives an open, outdoor, seaside feeling. Because the sun is reduced to a plain ground, the cropping also pushes the lighthouse forward as the clear figure and keeps attention on the coastal motif (4 marks: cropping identified with evidence + at least two effects — enlargement/implied continuation and focus).

Q8. Pattern appears in two forms. There is **repetition** in the row of identically shaped triangular bunting flags and in the repeated horizontal stripes banding the lighthouse tower; the same motif recurs at regular intervals. There is **alternation** in the bunting's colours, which run coral–teal–coral–teal in a regular A B sequence. Together the repetition and alternation create rhythm and a decorative, festive unity across the top of the poster, tying the illustration together and leading the eye from side to side. The pattern suits a lively community fair (4 marks: both repetition and alternation identified with evidence + their effect; credit for not over-claiming pattern elsewhere).

Q9. Scale — size relative to context — has been used to rank the information. The title *HARBOUR* is set at a much larger scale than any other text, so relative to the rest of the poster it dominates and is read as the most important element; the event details are at a small scale, signalling that they are supporting information. The large-scale lighthouse likewise dominates the illustration. The scale differences therefore tell the audience what matters most and in what order (3 marks: scale defined as relative size + linked to importance/communication).

Q10. The lighthouse is drawn with a tall, tapering tower that is roughly two-to-three times the height of the small lantern room and roof stacked on top — a stable, believable **proportion** of parts within the one object. This resolved, familiar proportion makes the lighthouse read instantly as a lighthouse and feels balanced and trustworthy, reinforcing the wholesome coastal character of the fair (3 marks: proportion described as the relationship between the parts of one object + its effect).

Q11. The poster is organised by a clear three-layer **hierarchy**. The **primary** element is the title *HARBOUR*, made dominant by its large scale and heavy, dark weight against the pale panel, so it is read first. The **secondary** element is the letter-spaced *MAKERS FAIR* in coral, smaller and lighter in tone, telling the audience what the event is. The **tertiary** element is the details line (*Sat 18 Oct · Pier 7 · 9 am – 4 pm · free*), set at the smallest scale and the lightest weight, giving the practical information. Here the ranking is carried by scale, weight and colour rather than by a steady fall in tone — the details line is still printed in full-strength ink, so it is small rather than faint. Above the type, the lighthouse illustration acts as an entry image. This steady drop in scale, reinforced first by the change of colour and then by the drop in weight, creates a top-to-bottom **visual path**: illustration → *HARBOUR* → *MAKERS FAIR* → details, so the audience reads *what it looks like* → *its name* → *what it is* → *when and where* in that order. The analysis extends beyond the single dominant title to name every layer and the path between them (6 marks: all three layers with the means used, plus the visual path and reading order).

Q12. The poster uses **symmetrical balance**. A single vertical axis runs down through the lighthouse, and everything else is either centred on that axis or mirrored across it — including the bunting, whose colours run outward from the middle flag in matching order on each side. This is effective for the event's audience because a mirrored layout is instantly readable — there is only one place for the eye to begin and one direction to travel — which suits parents and locals scanning a noticeboard for a few seconds, and its evenness signals an organised, well-run event they can bring children to. A limitation is that strict symmetry can feel static or predictable, lacking the energy an asymmetrical layout could give; however, for a local fair aimed at families the reassuring, settled feeling is appropriate, so the balance is used effectively (4 marks: type named + strength + limitation + judgement tied to the audience).

Q13. At street distance the poster's **contrast** works well for its two most important jobs. The near-black lighthouse against the pale sun is the largest area of strong tonal contrast on the sheet, and broad areas of tonal difference survive distance better than fine detail does, so the coastal motif still reads as the focal point from across the road. The same is true of the large, heavy *HARBOUR*, which is near-black on white and holds its shape. The limitation is the *MAKERS FAIR* line: coral on a white panel is a much narrower tonal contrast than black on white, so the very line that carries the event's name is the first to grey out and recede at distance — a viewer may read *HARBOUR* and the lighthouse but

not what the event actually is. (The details line loses legibility too, but through its small **scale**, not through weak contrast — it is printed in the same full-strength ink as the title.) Overall the contrast is effective for attracting attention and delivering the theme at distance, but darkening the secondary line would be needed for the name to travel as far (4 marks: *strengths and a limitation, both tied to contrast specifically, plus a judgement for the stated viewing condition*).

Q14. As a **design principle**, figure–ground is the designer’s compositional choice to separate a subject from its background — here, deliberately placing the dark lighthouse as the figure against the pale sun and sky as the ground, using tonal contrast to do so. As a **Gestalt principle**, figure–ground describes the *viewer’s* automatic perception — the mind’s tendency to organise what it sees into a subject standing in front of a background field, which is why we instantly perceive the lighthouse as sitting in front of the sky. The design principle is what the designer *did*; the Gestalt principle is how the viewer *perceives* it (3 marks: *designer’s compositional choice vs viewer’s perceptual organisation, with the poster as evidence*).

Q15. Proportion is the size relationship between the parts within one object, so distorting it changes the internal ratio of tower to lantern room while the lighthouse’s overall scale on the poster stays the same. As drawn, the tower dominates the lantern room and roof in the ratio a viewer expects of a lighthouse, so the motif is recognised at a glance. If the lantern room were drawn as tall as the tower, that ratio would be broken: the lighthouse would read as top-heavy and cartoon-like, and the viewer would have to work harder to identify it at all. The character communicated would shift from settled and dependable to playful, exaggerated or even faintly comic — which could suit a children’s event but works against the calm, community feeling this poster is aiming for. Distorted proportion is therefore a deliberate signal, not an error, and must be matched to the message (4 marks: *proportion defined as internal ratio + the effect of distorting it + the change in what is communicated to the audience*).

Q16. Both posters use a clear three-layer **hierarchy** in which scale does most of the ranking, and both lead the eye along a top-to-bottom visual path, so each communicates its essentials quickly. In *STRATA*, the primary title is supported by a secondary descriptor and tertiary details, and the ranking is reinforced by a steady fall in tone — black title, terracotta subtitle, light grey details — giving a calm, refined feel created by generous space and restrained contrast, suited to a gallery audience. In *HARBOUR*, the same three-layer structure is used but the support comes from weight and colour rather than a falling tone, with an illustration as an entry image, giving a louder, more festive path suited to a family fair. So the two share the same hierarchical *method* (primary → secondary → tertiary, led by scale) but apply it to opposite characters — refined versus festive (6 marks: *congruent two-sided comparison — a similarity in method and a difference in character, with evidence from each*).

Q17. The *STRATA* poster combines **symmetrical balance**, **figure–ground** and **scale** to create a *calm, refined and contemporary* character suited to a gallery audience. **Symmetrical balance** centres every element — the vessel, the title, the letter-spaced subtitle, the rule and the details — on a single vertical axis, so the two halves mirror each other; the layout is still and formal, and the generous margins of warm paper left around that axis make the poster feel unhurried and considered rather than busy. **Figure–ground** presents the terracotta vessel as a single clean silhouette against an uninterrupted pale ground, with no background detail competing for attention; the audience reads “ceramics” from the shape alone before reading a word, and the emptiness of the ground is itself part of the refinement. **Scale** then sets the vessel and the title as the two large forms and keeps everything else small, so the poster speaks with only two loud voices instead of many. All three choices work toward one end — symmetry steadies the layout, a clean figure–ground simplifies what has to be read, and restrained scale keeps the rest of the field quiet — so the design elements are organised into a composed, gallery-like whole that tells a contemporary-art audience this is a serious, well-curated exhibition (6 marks: *at least two principles shown working together toward a single named character and the audience, with evidence*).

Chapter 2 Visual language: elements, principles, Gestalt and type — 2C Typographic conventions

Theory

Type is one of the eight **design elements** (2A). **Typographic conventions** are the established practices designers follow when they *set* that type — the anatomy they name, the classifications they choose between, and the way they space, rank and align letters and words to communicate. In the examination you analyse how a designer’s **type choices** communicate tone, aesthetic and information to an audience, so this subtopic goes deeper than “type is an element”: it is about *how* type is made to work.

Type anatomy. Designers describe letterforms with a shared vocabulary. The horizontal reference lines are the **baseline** (the line the letters sit on), the **x-height** (the height of the main body of a lowercase letter, i.e. the top of a lowercase *x*), the **cap height** (the height of a capital), the **ascender line** (reached by the rising strokes of letters such as *b, d, h, k, l*) and the **descender line** (reached by the falling strokes of *g, j, p, q, y*). The x-height always sits well below the cap height, and in most typefaces the ascender line rises only a little above it — comparing those heights is how designers describe a typeface’s proportions. Within a letter, the **stem** is its main stroke, the **serif** is the small finishing foot at the end of a stroke, and the **counter** is the enclosed or partly enclosed space a stroke wraps around (the hole in *o, e, a*, or the space inside the bowl of *R*).

Type anatomy — the parts of a letterform



Type classification. Typefaces are grouped into families whose shared features carry conventional **connotations** — associations an audience reads almost automatically. Naming the classification and the feature that creates the connotation is the analytical move.

Quarto

serif

feet on the strokes · traditional · trusted · editorial

Corvus

sans-serif

no feet, even strokes · modern · clean · on-screen

Rosalind

script

flowing, joined strokes · personal · elegant

VOLTAGE

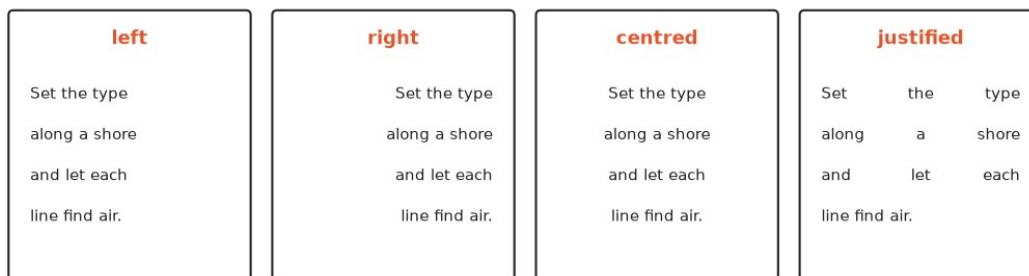
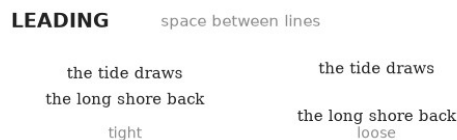
display / decorative

sheared, sliced letterforms · headlines only

- **Serif** — small feet on the strokes; reads as *traditional, established, trusted, editorial*; long used for printed body text.
- **Sans-serif** — no feet, even stroke weight; reads as *modern, clean, neutral*; the common choice on screens.
- **Script** — flowing, joined strokes that imitate handwriting; reads as *personal, elegant, decorative*; used for accents, not running text.
- **Display / decorative** — highly stylised and distinctive; reads as *expressive, attention-grabbing*; designed for headlines and logos only, never for body text.

Legibility and readability are not the same thing. **Legibility** is how easily one character can be told apart from another — a property of the *typeface's design* (clear counters, distinct letterforms). **Readability** is how easily a *block of text* can be read and understood — a property of how the type is *set* (size, leading, line length, tracking, case, alignment and contrast). A very legible typeface can still be set with poor readability: for example, a clear sans-serif set in ALL CAPITALS, too tightly leaded and fully justified, is legible letter-by-letter but tiring to read as a paragraph.

Typographic hierarchy. Just as the design **principle** of hierarchy (2B) ranks *all* the visual information as primary, secondary and tertiary, a designer builds that ranking *within the type itself* using five typographic tools: **size**, **weight** (light → bold), **case** (UPPER / lower / Small Caps), **colour**, and **space / position**. These cues tell the eye what to read first and create the reading order.



Spacing conventions. Three different controls govern the space around type, and the examiner expects the exact terms:

- **Kerning** — adjusting the space between one **specific pair** of letters (such as *A* and *V*, or *To*) so the gaps look even.
- **Tracking** (letter-spacing) — the **uniform** spacing applied across a whole word or run. Loose tracking feels airy, spacious or premium; tight tracking feels dense and urgent.
- **Leading** — the vertical space **between lines** of type. Generous leading opens a paragraph and aids readability; too little crowds the lines together.

Alignment — one of the settings that governs readability. Alignment is not a separate convention in its own right; it is one of the *setting* choices listed above, and it decides how comfortably a block of type reads as well as what tone it carries. **Left-aligned** (ragged right) keeps word spacing even and gives the eye a reliable starting edge, so it is the most readable choice for long text. **Right-aligned** (ragged left) makes the eye hunt for the start of each new line, so it suits short captions rather than blocks. **Centred** loses the fixed edge on both sides and tires a reader over a long passage, but its symmetry reads as formal and still. **Justified** is flush on both edges for a neat block (as in newspapers) but can open uneven word gaps and vertical “rivers” of white, especially in a narrow column.

Type communicates tone and aesthetic. Every typographic decision — classification, weight, case, spacing, alignment — contributes to a design’s aesthetic in exactly the way colour and shape do (see 8A). A strong analysis *names the tone or aesthetic* (calm, authoritative, playful, premium, energetic...) and shows *how* the specific type feature builds it, with evidence from the example.

Watch-out — **legibility** ≠ **readability**. Legibility is about telling the *letters* apart (the typeface); readability is about the ease of reading *running text* (the setting). Use the right term for the right idea; a legible typeface can still be set with poor readability.

Watch-out — **name the tone, then show the mechanism**. “The typeface suits the design” earns no analysis marks. State *which* tone or aesthetic the type creates and explain *how* the feature (serifs, heavy weight, loose tracking...) produces it.

Watch-out — **keep the spacing terms exact**. Kerning adjusts one *pair*; tracking spaces a whole *run*; leading is the space *between lines*. Do not use “spacing” as a catch-all.

Watch-out — **typographic hierarchy is built with type tools.** The *principle* of hierarchy (2B) is the ranking; typographic hierarchy is how type creates it — through size, weight, case, colour and space. Do not confuse either with a **Gestalt** principle (2D).

Worked examples

Example 1 — scaffolded

Using the *TIDEWATER* layout, analyse how the designer has used typographic hierarchy to communicate the event information to the audience. (4 marks)

Working	Comment
The designer ranks the information into three levels — the event name <i>TIDEWATER</i> is primary , <i>FOLK MUSIC WEEKEND</i> is secondary , and the date/venue line is tertiary .	Begin by identifying the layers of hierarchy (primary/secondary/tertiary), not just the biggest word.
Primary is set largest, bold and in CAPS ; secondary is smaller, in a contrasting colour and letter-spaced; tertiary is small, light and grey.	Name the <i>typographic tools</i> used (size, weight, case, colour, space) — this is what makes it <i>typographic</i> hierarchy.
The size and weight contrast makes the eye read the event name first, then step down to what it is, then to when and where.	Explain the effect: the tools create a clear reading order / visual path.
So the audience takes in “who → what → when/where” at a glance, communicating the essential event information quickly on a poster.	Tie the analysis back to the audience and the purpose to earn the analysis marks.

Example 2 — scaffolded

Distinguish between legibility and readability, and evaluate the tertiary line of the *TIDEWATER* layout against each. (5 marks)

Working	Comment
Legibility is how easily individual characters are told apart (a property of the typeface); readability is how easily a block of text is read (a property of how it is set).	A “distinguish” answer needs both sides defined and clearly separated.
The tertiary line uses a clean sans-serif with open counters and clearly differentiated letterforms, so each character is legible .	Apply the first term to the evidence — legibility is a claim about the <i>letterforms</i> .
Its readability is helped by the short line length and the generous space above it, but held back by its small size, light weight and low tonal contrast (grey on a pale ground), so a viewer must come close to read it comfortably.	An “evaluate” needs a strength <i>and</i> a limitation. Note that every factor named here is a <i>setting</i> choice, not a letterform one.
Overall , the line is legible, and readable enough for the job it has to do: it carries detail a viewer only needs once the poster has drawn them in, so the designer has reasonably traded readability at a distance for a quiet tertiary level.	Close with a judgement referenced to the line’s role — an evaluate is not finished until you have judged.

Example 3 — unscaffolded

Explain how a designer’s choice between a serif and a sans-serif typeface can change the tone of a brand wordmark. (4 marks)

Choosing a **serif** typeface sets a *traditional, established, trustworthy* tone: the small feet on the strokes carry long associations with printed books and institutions, so a serif wordmark makes a brand feel heritage-based and dependable. Choosing a **sans-serif** instead sets a *modern, clean, neutral* tone: the absence of serifs and the even stroke weight feel contemporary and efficient, which suits a technology or lifestyle brand and reads clearly on screens.

Because the two classifications carry opposite connotations, the same brand name can be made to feel either long-established or up-to-the-minute purely through the typeface, showing how type choices communicate tone.

Example 4 — unscaffolded

Analyse how the designer has combined typographic conventions to create a unified aesthetic in the TIDEWATER poster. (6 marks)

The TIDEWATER poster has a *clean, contemporary, open-air* aesthetic, built through several typographic conventions working together. The **classification** is a bold **sans-serif**, whose even, unfussy strokes read as modern and uncomplicated — fitting for an outdoor community event. **Typographic hierarchy** ranks the type into three clear layers using size, weight and case, so the layout feels ordered rather than busy. The secondary line is **letter-spaced** (loose **tracking**), which adds an airy, unhurried quality that matches a relaxed weekend festival, while generous **space** around each layer keeps the composition calm. Every line is **centred** on a single vertical axis, so the symmetrical, consistent alignment reinforces the tidy, accessible feel. Because classification, hierarchy, tracking and spacing all pull toward the same *clean, open* tone, the type does more than label the event — it *characterises* it, communicating an easy, welcoming weekend to a broad local audience (6 marks: several conventions named, each linked by a mechanism to one named aesthetic and the audience).

Practice questions

Scaffolded

Q1. Using the type-anatomy diagram: (a) Name the part of a letter labelled as the enclosed space within the bowl of the *R*. (1 mark) (b) Distinguish between **x-height** and **cap height**. (2 marks) (c) State which type classification has the small “feet” shown as serifs. (1 mark)

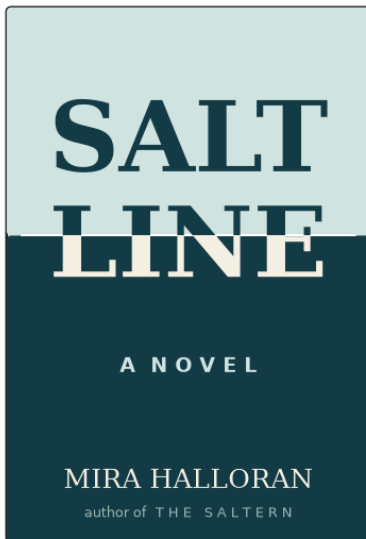
Q2. Using the classification specimens: (a) Name the classification of *Quarto* and of *VOLTAGE*. (2 marks) (b) State one connotation each classification brings. (2 marks) (c) Explain which of the two is more appropriate for a page of body text, and why. (2 marks)

Q3. Legibility and readability: (a) Define **legibility** and **readability**. (2 marks) (b) Identify one factor that affects each. (2 marks) (c) Explain why a highly legible typeface can still be set with poor readability. (2 marks)

Q4. Using the TIDEWATER layout: (a) Explain what would happen to the poster’s reading order if the date-and-venue line were set at the same size and weight as the event name. (3 marks) (b) Describe one change to **space** alone — leaving size, weight, case and colour untouched — that would strengthen the separation between the secondary and tertiary levels. (2 marks)

Q5. Spacing conventions: (a) Define **Kerning**, **tracking** and **leading**. (3 marks) (b) State which one adjusts the space between a single pair of letters. (1 mark) (c) Describe the effect loose **tracking** can have on the tone of a heading. (2 marks)

Q6. Alignment and readability: (a) Explain why **left-aligned** (ragged right) setting is the most readable choice for a long passage of body text. (2 marks) (b) Describe one readability problem that **justified** setting can create in a narrow column. (2 marks) (c) State which alignment gives a block of type a symmetrical, formal character. (1 mark)



Questions 7–15 refer to the original SALT LINE novel cover shown above, unless otherwise stated.

Q7. Analyse how the **classification** of the title type and one other typographic convention support the mood of the SALT LINE cover. (4 marks)

Q8. Analyse how the designer's use of **tracking** on the cover contributes both to its tone and to its typographic hierarchy. (4 marks)

Q9. Evaluate the effectiveness of the **typographic hierarchy** on the cover in guiding a shopper who is scanning a shelf. (4 marks)

Q10. With reference to the cover, distinguish between the **legibility** of the title and the **readability** of the smaller author and byline lines. (4 marks)

Q11. Using the vocabulary of type **anatomy**, describe two features of the SALT LINE title's letterforms and explain how each supports the classification you would give that type. (4 marks)

Q12. Compare the type treatment of the SALT LINE cover with that of the TIDEWATER layout, referring to classification and at least one other convention in each. (6 marks)

Q13. The publisher will also print the title at poster size for a shop window. Explain why **kerning** becomes more important at that size, and how **leading** would affect the readability of a paragraph of blurb set beneath it. (3 marks)

Q14. Evaluate how effectively the designer's type choices communicate the novel's genre and mood to its intended reader, referring to at least two typographic decisions. (6 marks)

Q15. Analyse how **type** (a design element) works together with **one design principle** to create the aesthetic of the SALT LINE cover. (4 marks)

Q16. A community library is planning a printed poster for a *Winter Reading Circle* for adult readers. Name the tone you would give the poster, then justify your choice of type **classification**, your three-level **typographic hierarchy** and one **spacing** decision against that tone and audience. (6 marks)

Answers

Q1. (a) The counter. (b) x-height = height of the lowercase body; cap height = height of a capital (taller). (c) Serif. **Q2.** (a) *Quarto* = serif; *VOLTAGE* = display/decorative. (b) Serif = traditional/trusted; display = expressive/attention-grabbing. (c) Serif — see solutions. **Q3.** (a) Legibility = telling characters apart; readability = ease of reading running text. (b) Legibility → typeface design; readability → the setting (size/leading/etc.). (c) See solutions. **Q4.** (a) The levels would flatten and the poster would lose its single entry point — see solutions. (b) e.g. open the vertical space between the secondary and tertiary lines — see solutions. **Q5.** (a) See solutions. (b) Kerning. (c) See solutions. **Q6.** (a) Even word spacing + a consistent left edge — see solutions. (b) Uneven word gaps and vertical “rivers” — see solutions. (c) Centred. **Q7–Q16.** See fully-worked solutions.

Fully-worked solutions

Q1. (a) The **counter** — the enclosed space within the letter. (b) The **x-height** is the height of the main body of a lowercase letter (the top of a lowercase *x*); the **cap height** is the height of a capital letter from the baseline. The cap height is taller than the x-height (2 marks: both defined and distinguished). (c) The **serif** classification.

Q2. (a) *Quarto* is a **serif** typeface; *VOLTAGE* is a **display / decorative** typeface. (b) Serif connotes *traditional, established, trustworthy* (accept editorial); display connotes *expressive, distinctive, attention-grabbing*. (c) The **serif** is more appropriate for body text: its even, familiar letterforms and finishing strokes support comfortable **readability** over many lines, whereas a display face is designed for short headlines and becomes tiring and hard to read as a paragraph (2 marks: choice + readability reasoning).

Q3. (a) **Legibility** is how easily individual characters can be distinguished from one another; **readability** is how easily a block of text can be read and understood. (b) Legibility depends on the **typeface’s design** (clear counters, distinct letterforms); readability depends on how the type is **set** (size, leading, line length, tracking, case, alignment, contrast). (c) A typeface can have very clear, distinct letters (high legibility) yet be set in a way that makes reading hard — for example all capitals, very tight leading and full justification — so the *paragraph* is uncomfortable to read even though each *letter* is clear (2 marks: the two ideas separated and linked to an example).

Q4. (a) A typographic hierarchy works by *difference*: the eye ranks the levels by how far each one stands out from the next. If the date-and-venue line matched the event name in size and weight, those two levels would compete for the first read, so the poster would lose its single clear entry point. A viewer would have to read the whole layout to work out what the event is even called, and the “who → what → when/where” order the designer built would flatten into one undifferentiated block (3 marks: the cause — lost contrast between levels — traced through to the effect on the reading order). (b) Open up the **vertical space** between the secondary line and the tertiary line. With a clear gap the two stop reading as one group and separate into two distinct levels, so the ranking still holds even though their size, weight, case and colour are untouched (2 marks: a space change named + its effect on the ranking).

Q5. (a) **Kerning** = adjusting the space between one specific pair of letters so the gaps look even; **tracking** = the uniform letter-spacing applied across a whole word or run; **leading** = the vertical space between lines of type (3 marks: one each). (b) **Kerning**. (c) Loose tracking spreads the letters apart, giving a heading an *airy, spacious, premium or calm* quality; it slows the eye and can feel elegant or understated (whereas tight tracking feels dense and urgent) (2 marks).

Q6. (a) In left-aligned setting the word spacing stays **even** on every line, and the flush left edge gives the eye a reliable starting point, so the return sweep from the end of one line to the beginning of the next is quick and accurate — both of which keep a long passage comfortable to read (2 marks: two reasons, each tied to the act of reading). (b) To make both edges flush, justified setting has to stretch the word spaces on each line; in a narrow column there are few words to absorb that stretch, so the gaps become large and uneven, and they can line up down the block as vertical “rivers” of white that pull the eye downward instead of along the line (2 marks: the mechanism + its effect on readability). (c) **Centred** alignment.

Q7. The SALT LINE title is set in a heavy **serif** classification, whose weight and finishing strokes read as *literary and substantial*, signalling serious fiction rather than a light read. The second convention is the **colour** applied to that type — one of the five tools of typographic hierarchy: the title’s colour changes exactly where it crosses the horizon, so the same words read dark against the pale sky above and pale against the deep sea below. Because the change lands on the letterforms themselves, the lower half of the title appears to stand in the water, tying the type to the seascape. Together the traditional serif and the colour split build a *cold, coastal, literary* mood, communicating the novel’s setting and

tone before a word is read (4 marks: classification + one convention, each linked by a mechanism to the named mood).

Q8. The designer has set the two supporting lines with markedly **loose tracking** and left the two name lines at normal tracking, and that contrast does two jobs at once. *Tonally*, spreading *A NOVEL* and the byline into thin, widely spaced bands makes them read as unhurried and understated rather than insistent; loose tracking on small capitals feels quiet, spacious and considered, which matches the still, literary character the cover is after. *Hierarchically*, the same choice keeps those lines subordinate: letter-spacing dilutes a short line into an even band with no strong word shapes, so the eye registers it as texture and moves on, leaving the normally tracked title and author name to hold the primary and secondary positions. The tracking therefore sets the mood and protects the ranking at the same time (4 marks: the tracking located in the evidence, with its effect on both the named tone and the hierarchy).

Q9. The hierarchy is effective for shelf scanning. The title *SALT LINE* is **primary** — much the largest and boldest type on the cover, running across most of its width — so a browsing reader registers the book's name first. The author's name *MIRA HALLORAN* is **secondary**: it is the next largest line and is set in the cover's palest tone, which is what a reader hunting for a known author needs next. *A NOVEL* and the byline are **tertiary** — small, letter-spaced and lower in tone — read only on closer inspection. That ranking lets a shopper absorb "title → author → the rest" in the second or two they spend per book. A limitation is that the tertiary level is **split**: *A NOVEL* sits directly beneath the title, well above the author's name, so position and size pull against each other and a scanning eye can be caught by the least useful line before it reaches the author. **Overall**, the size and tonal ranking still delivers the two things that matter at shelf distance quickly and in the right order, so the hierarchy is used effectively (4 marks: layers identified, judgement, a limitation).

Q10. The title has high **legibility**: the letters are very large and boldly formed, so each character is easy to distinguish even though the colour splits across them. The author line *MIRA HALLORAN* and the byline are a different question of **readability**: they are much smaller and set on a dark ground, so although the letterforms are clear, the *reading* of these lines depends on their size and contrast, and the tiny letter-spaced byline is the least readable element. In short, the title is legible *and* readable at a glance, while the byline is legible up close but low in readability from a distance (4 marks: the two terms applied correctly to the two parts).

Q11. First, every stroke of the title ends in a **serif** — a small finishing foot, clearly visible at the top and bottom of the *L*, the *T* and the *E*. Serifs are the defining feature of the **serif** classification, so the letterforms are themselves the evidence for naming it, and they carry that classification's printed-book, traditional connotation. Second, the strokes are *modulated* — thick and thin within the same letter — while the **stems** stay heavy: the *S* swells through its curve and thins at each terminal, and the stems of the *E* and the *L* are noticeably weightier than their arms. That thick-to-thin variation belongs to a serif face rather than to a sans-serif, whose strokes hold an even weight throughout, and the weight of the stems makes the title feel substantial rather than delicate. Read together, the serifs and the modulated strokes place the title firmly in the **serif** classification and give it the solid, literary character the cover depends on (4 marks: two anatomy features named and located, each linked to the classification).

Q12. Both covers use type as the main carrier of tone, but to opposite ends. *SALT LINE* uses a heavy **serif** classification, a **colour** change that splits the title where it crosses the horizon, and quiet, centred spacing to build a *cold, literary* mood. *TIDEWATER* uses a bold **sans-serif** classification with clear **typographic hierarchy** and loose **tracking** on its secondary line to build a *clean, contemporary, open-air* mood. The similarity is that each design sets a definite tone through classification plus a second convention; the difference is direction — *SALT LINE* is traditional and atmospheric, *TIDEWATER* is modern and functional — and each is appropriate to its purpose (a novel versus an event poster) (6 marks: classification + one more convention in each, congruent two-sided comparison, similarity and difference).

Q13. **Kerning** adjusts the space between one specific pair of letters. At cover size an awkward pair — the *L* beside the *T* at the end of *SALT*, or the *L* beside the *I* in *LINE* — is only a slight unevenness, but enlarging the title to poster size enlarges the fault with it, so a gap that was barely noticeable becomes an obvious hole that breaks the word into pieces and undoes the title's solidity. Display-size type is therefore kerned pair by pair rather than left at the typeface's default spacing. **Leading** is the vertical space between lines, and it governs how a paragraph of blurb beneath the title reads as a *block*: too little and the lines crowd, so the eye catches the wrong line on its return sweep; opening the leading gives each line its own band and lets the reader move down the paragraph comfortably (3 marks: kerning tied to display size + leading tied to the readability of running text).

Q14. The type communicates the genre and mood effectively. First, the heavy **serif** classification of the title signals serious literary fiction: the finishing strokes and thick stems read as printed, traditional and substantial, which is exactly the shelf signal a reader of atmospheric fiction scans for. Second, the **colour** applied to that type changes at the horizon, so the title reads dark against the pale sky and pale against the deep sea; because the shift lands on the letterforms, the words appear to stand in the water and place the story on a cold coast before the blurb is read. The clear **hierarchy** (title → author → the small supporting lines) then lets that reader take in the essentials at a glance on a crowded shelf. A limitation is the byline: it is the smallest line on the cover, letter-spaced across its whole width and set in the most muted tone the designer uses, so “author of THE SALTTERN” is the first thing to drop out at shelf distance — and that is the one line that would recruit a returning reader. **Overall**, because the classification, the colour treatment and the hierarchy all reinforce a cold, coastal, literary identity for the intended reader, the type choices communicate the genre and mood effectively (6 marks: two+ decisions analysed, audience/genre link, a limitation, an overall judgement).

Q15. On the SALT LINE cover the element of **type** works with the principle of **contrast** to build the *cold, coastal* aesthetic. The title’s colour changes where it crosses the horizon, and the strong tonal **contrast** held in both halves — dark letters on the pale sky above, pale letters on the deep sea below — is what makes that change read as a waterline rather than a printing accident, so the lower letters appear to stand in the sea. Because the type and the tonal contrast pull in the same direction, the type is not merely legible but atmospheric, communicating a still, maritime mood to the reader (4 marks: type element + one principle shown working together toward the named aesthetic).

Q16. (Model — one of several defensible answers.) The tone I would give the poster is *warm, calm and bookish*.

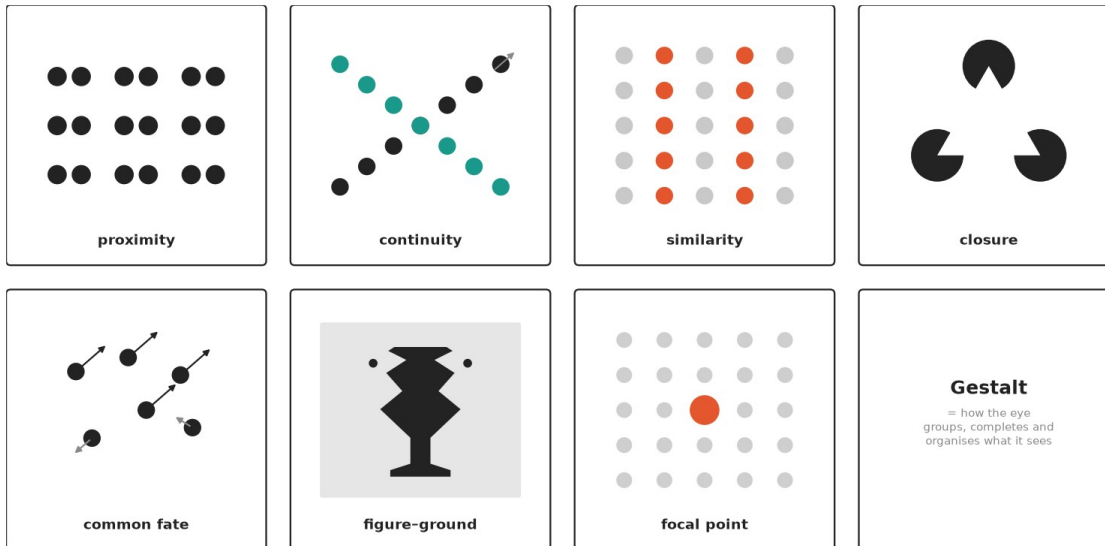
Classification: a **serif** face for the event name, because the small finishing feet carry long associations with printed books and reading itself, so an adult audience reads “books” from the letterforms before reading the words; a display face would shout and a sans-serif would make the poster feel like a timetable rather than a reading room.

Typographic hierarchy: *WINTER READING CIRCLE* is primary — largest and in capitals, so it is legible from across the foyer; a line naming what it actually is (“a fortnightly book group”) is secondary, noticeably smaller and in a quieter tone; the meeting times, venue and contact details are tertiary, smallest and lightest. Ranking the three levels by size and tone means a passer-by takes in the event, then its nature, then the practical detail, in that order. **Spacing:** generous **leading** on the tertiary block, because that is the part a reader will stand and actually read; opening the lines stops the eye losing its place in small type and reinforces the unhurried feeling the rest of the poster sets up. Every decision therefore pulls toward the same warm, calm, bookish tone for an adult reading audience (6 marks: a named tone, plus classification, a three-level hierarchy and a spacing decision, each justified against that tone and the audience).

Chapter 2 Visual language: elements, principles, Gestalt and type — 2D Gestalt principles of visual perception

Theory

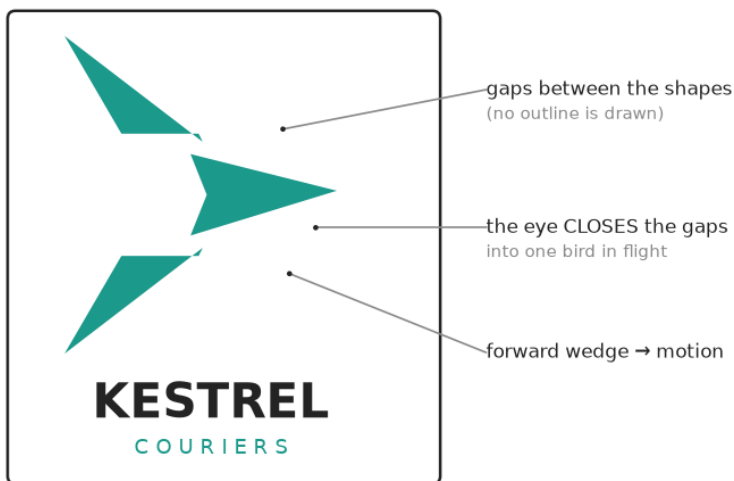
Gestalt principles describe how the mind typically perceives, interprets and organises visual information as it attempts to unify and make sense of complex imagery. Where the design *elements* are the components a design is made of, and the design *principles* are the conventions a designer uses to arrange them, the Gestalt principles are about the **viewer** — the automatic ways our perception groups, completes and simplifies what it sees. In VCE Visual Communication Design the Gestalt principles are **proximity, continuity, similarity, closure, common fate, figure-ground and focal point**.



The seven principles, each shown above:

- **Proximity** — elements placed close together are perceived as one group. Spacing alone can gather scattered marks into clusters, so designers use nearness to show which items belong together.
- **Continuity** — the eye follows a continuous line, edge or curve and reads elements along it as related. Where two paths cross, we see them passing *through* one another rather than breaking.
- **Similarity** — elements that share a quality (colour, shape, size, orientation) are grouped as alike, even when they are the same distance apart as everything else.
- **Closure** — when a familiar shape is incomplete, the mind supplies the missing edges and reads it as whole. This lets a designer imply a shape with only a few marks.
- **Common fate** — elements that move, point or change *together* (the same direction, the same animation) are perceived as a single unit.
- **Figure-ground** — perception separates a scene into a solid *figure* and the *ground* behind it. Some images are reversible (the classic vase / two-faces), where the eye can flip which region is the figure.
- **Focal point** — one element that stands out from its surroundings becomes the point the eye is drawn to first, organising the order in which the design is read.

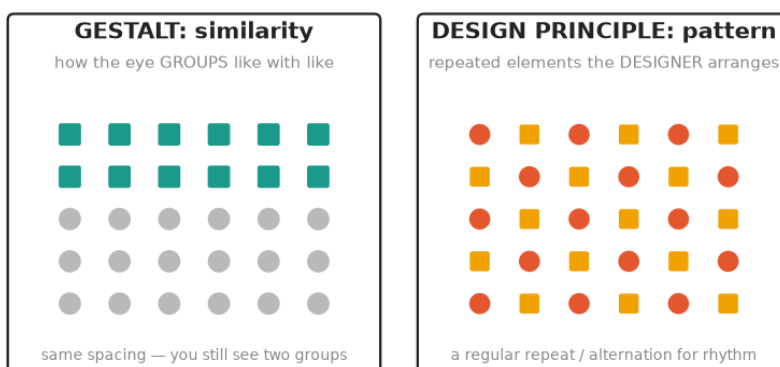
How designers use them. The Gestalt principles are practical tools, not just curiosities. Designers use **proximity** and **similarity** to *group* related information (menu items, form fields, a family of icons); **continuity** and a clear **focal point** to *guide attention* and set a visual path; **closure** and **figure-ground** to build economical, memorable **logos and symbols** that imply a shape with minimal marks. The KESTREL Couriers mark below is built entirely on closure.



Closure — three separate shapes with gaps; the mind completes them into a single, memorable bird.

Keeping three vocabularies apart. This is the single most common error the examiners report. A design **element** (point, line, shape, form, tone, texture, colour, type) is a *component*; a design **principle** (figure–ground, balance, contrast, cropping, hierarchy, scale, proportion, pattern) is a *convention for arranging* those components; a **Gestalt** principle (proximity, continuity, similarity, closure, common fate, figure–ground, focal point) is *how the mind perceives* the result. In an answer you must name the right kind of thing for the question asked.

The figure below sharpens the distinction most often muddled — the Gestalt principle of **similarity** against the design principle of **pattern**. Both involve repeated, alike shapes, but similarity is a fact about *perception* (how your eye groups them) while pattern is a *composition* the designer lays down for rhythm and surface.



Both use repeated shapes — but similarity is how you PERCEIVE them; pattern is how the designer ARRANGES them.

The figure–ground overlap. Notice that *figure–ground* appears in **both** the list of design principles and the list of Gestalt principles. As a **design principle** it is the designer’s device of separating a subject from its background (often through contrast of tone or colour). As a **Gestalt principle** it is the mind’s automatic tendency to read one region as the figure and the rest as ground — including the reversible, ambiguous case. Same term, two lenses: a compositional *device* versus a perceptual *tendency*. A question will make clear which is meant; answer in the matching vocabulary.

Watch-out — Gestalt ≠ elements/principles. The most-reported mistake is naming a Gestalt principle and then discussing a design element or design principle instead. Decide which of the three lists the term comes from and stay in that vocabulary.

Watch-out — name it, then discuss it. In 2025, responses that wrote only “a Gestalt principle” or “Gestalt” without naming *which* one scored zero. Always name the specific principle (proximity, closure...) and then discuss *how it is used* in the example, with evidence.

Watch-out — figure–ground sits in two lists. Do not treat the Gestalt (perceptual) use and the design-principle (compositional) use as the same thing. Say which one the question is asking about.

Watch-out — proximity vs similarity. Proximity groups by *nearness* (spacing); similarity groups by *likeness* (shared colour/shape/size). Do not use one name for the other.

Watch-out — continuity is not “consistency”. In 2024 assessors reported continuity being “mistakenly discussed as a consistent aspect across products rather than as a means to interpret movement or direction within a composition”, and listed “consistency” as an irrelevant term; in 2025, students who named continuity frequently discussed *similarity* instead. Continuity must be argued from a line, edge, curve or alignment that carries the eye in a **direction within the composition** — never from the fact that one typeface, colour or style is used throughout.

Worked examples

Example 1 — scaffolded

Identify the Gestalt principle the KESTREL Couriers mark relies on, and discuss how the designer has used it. (4 marks)

Working	Comment
Gestalt principle: closure.	NAME the specific principle first — “a Gestalt principle” on its own earns nothing (2025 report).
The mark is drawn as three separate shapes — an upper wing, a lower wing and a forward body — with clear gaps between them and no continuous outline.	Point to the evidence in the example that triggers the principle.
Because the mind completes familiar contours, the viewer’s eye “closes” the gaps and reads the three shapes as one whole bird in flight.	Explain the perceptual mechanism — what the mind <i>does</i> . This is the “discuss how it is used”.
The result is a simple, distinctive and memorable mark, and the forward-pointing body suggests speed — appropriate for a courier brand.	Tie the principle back to the communication and purpose to reach full marks.

Example 2 — scaffolded

The term figure–ground appears in both the list of design principles and the list of Gestalt principles. Distinguish between a design element, a design principle and a Gestalt principle, and explain the two uses of figure–ground. (4 marks)

Working	Comment
A design element is a component of visual language — point, line, shape, form, tone, texture, colour or type (e.g. the <i>shape</i> of the bird).	Element = the “stuff” the design is made from.
A design principle is a convention for arranging elements — figure–ground, balance, contrast, cropping, hierarchy, scale, proportion, pattern (e.g. the <i>balance</i> of the two wings).	Principle = how the designer organises the elements.
A Gestalt principle describes how the <i>mind</i> organises what it sees — proximity, continuity, similarity, closure, common fate, figure–ground, focal point (e.g. <i>closure</i> completing the bird).	Gestalt = the viewer’s perception, not a component or an arrangement.
Figure–ground as a design principle = the designer’s device of separating the subject (figure) from its background (ground), usually by contrast. Figure–ground as a Gestalt principle = the mind’s automatic tendency to see one region as the figure and the rest as ground — sometimes reversibly, as in a vase / two-faces image.	The overlap: same words, two lenses — a compositional <i>device</i> versus a perceptual <i>tendency</i> . Keeping the three vocabularies distinct is the most-reported trap.

Example 3 — unscaffolded

*With reference to the similarity / pattern comparison shown above, distinguish between the Gestalt principle of **similarity** and the design principle of **pattern**. (6 marks)*

Both panels begin from the same raw material — repeated, alike shapes set out at even spacing — but the two terms belong to different vocabularies and answer different questions. **Similarity is a Gestalt principle**, a fact about *perception*. In the left panel nothing has been moved closer together: the marks sit on one regular grid, yet the two rows of teal squares are read as one group and the three rows of grey circles as another. The grouping is produced entirely by the viewer's mind sorting like with like, on shape and colour alone. **Pattern is a design principle**, a convention the designer applies to arrange elements — in the study design's terms, repetition and alternation. In the right panel the designer has laid coral circles and amber squares down in a strict alternating repeat; what that achieves is rhythm and a decorated surface, not a judgement by the viewer about which marks belong together.

The difference is one of ownership. Similarity belongs to the **viewer** and explains how a design is *read* — which items are taken to be a set. Pattern belongs to the **designer** and explains how the design was *composed* — how a motif was distributed across the surface. That difference decides how each should be written about: an answer on similarity describes what the audience perceives (“the teal marks are read as one category”), while an answer on pattern describes what the designer arranged (“the motif alternates across the surface to create rhythm”). Because both start from repeated shapes, it is easy to name one and then discuss the other — the single most-reported error in this part of the course (6 marks: *each term placed in its correct list and defined, evidence taken from both panels, and the perception-versus-composition difference drawn out on both sides*).

Example 4 — unscaffolded

*Explain how the Gestalt principle of **continuity** organises visual information within a composition, and why using the same typeface and colours consistently across a design is **not** an example of continuity. (4 marks)*

Continuity works on *direction*. When elements sit along a line, edge or curve — either an actual stroke or an implied one made by aligning items on a common edge or baseline — the eye follows that path and reads whatever lies along it as connected and ordered. In the continuity cell of the grid two dotted lines cross, yet the eye keeps travelling along each straight path rather than stopping at the crossing or turning onto the other line. The two paths are also given different colours, which is *similarity* helping the reader tell them apart — but strip the colour out and the two lines still hold, because it is the shared **direction** that makes each string of dots read as one continuous element. That is the test: continuity is doing the work when direction is doing the grouping. A designer uses it to set a reading order — align a column of items on one left edge, or curve a rule through a layout, and the viewer is carried from the first item to the last without having to search for what comes next.

Using one typeface and one palette throughout a design is **consistency** of styling. That is a repeated *likeness*, which is closer to the Gestalt principle of similarity or to the design principle of pattern, and it says nothing about a path through the composition — so it cannot organise the order in which the work is read. Continuity must always be argued from a line, edge or alignment that carries the eye in a direction *within* the composition; a response that only shows the styling is the same everywhere has not discussed continuity at all (4 marks: *the directional mechanism of continuity explained with evidence, and the “consistency” misreading identified and corrected*).

Practice questions

Scaffolded

Q1. Using the grid of the seven Gestalt principles: (a) In one sentence, state what the Gestalt principles describe. (1 mark) (b) In the **closure** cell, describe what your eye perceives and why. (2 marks) (c) In the **proximity** cell, explain how the spacing creates groups. (2 marks)

Q2. Using the KESTREL Couriers mark: (a) Name the Gestalt principle the mark relies on. (1 mark) (b) Name one design **element** and one design **principle** also present in the mark. (2 marks) (c) In one sentence, state why closure belongs to the Gestalt list rather than to the list of design principles. (1 mark)

Q3. The term figure–ground appears in two of the three vocabularies (design elements, design principles, Gestalt principles). (a) Name the two lists it belongs to. (1 mark) (b) Reversible images — the classic vase / two-faces — are

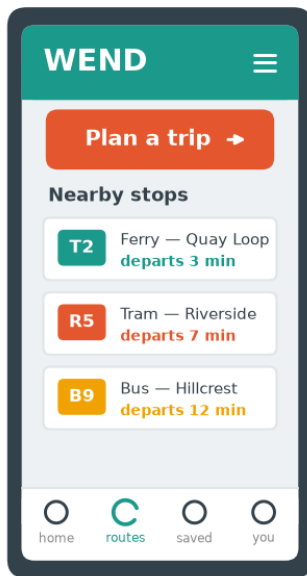
used to demonstrate figure–ground as a **Gestalt** principle. Explain what happens perceptually in such an image. (2 marks)

Q4. Distinguish between **proximity** and **similarity**, stating what groups the elements in each. (2 marks)

Q5. The **focal point** cell and the **similarity** cell of the grid are built on the same even field of dots. (a) State what makes the single coral disc in the focal point cell stand out. (1 mark) (b) Explain why the coral dots in the **similarity** cell do *not* create a focal point. (2 marks)

Q6. (a) Define the Gestalt principle of **common fate**. (1 mark) (b) Describe one way a designer could use common fate in a design. (2 marks)

Unscaffolded



WEND transit app — home screen

Questions 7–15 refer to the WEND city-transit app home screen shown above, unless otherwise stated.

Q7. Identify the Gestalt principle the designer has used to group the contents of each route card, and discuss how it helps the user. (4 marks)

Q8. Explain how the Gestalt principle of **similarity** has been used in the route badges to communicate to the user. (3 marks)

Q9. Discuss how the designer has created a single **focal point** on the screen and the effect this has on the user. (4 marks)

Q10. The route cards are read as figures against the background. Explain the Gestalt principle at work, and describe how the designer has made each card separate from its ground. (4 marks)

Q11. The “routes” icon in the tab bar is drawn as a loop with a gap. Name the Gestalt principle this relies on and describe how it works. (3 marks)

Q12. Explain how **continuity** helps the user scan the list of nearby stops. (3 marks)

Q13. Define **common fate** and describe how it could operate in the WEND app once the screen is animated. (3 marks)

Q14. Analyse how **two** Gestalt principles work together to organise the WEND screen for the user. (6 marks)

Q15. Name one design **element**, one design **principle** and one **Gestalt** principle used on the WEND screen, and explain the difference between the three. (3 marks)

Q16. Choose either the KESTREL Couriers mark or the WEND app. Analyse how **one** Gestalt principle has been used to communicate to the intended audience, naming the principle and then discussing its use. (6 marks)

Answers

Q1. (a) How the mind perceives, interprets and organises visual information to make sense of it. (b) A complete triangle, though none is drawn — the mind closes the gaps between the notched discs (closure). (c) Marks that are closer together are read as one group; the grid forms three clusters purely from spacing. **Q2.** (a) Closure. (b) Element = shape (accept line/colour); principle = balance (accept contrast). (c) Because it names how the *viewer perceives* the marks, not a convention the designer uses to *arrange* them. **Q3.** (a) The design principles and the Gestalt principles (not the elements). (b) One contour serves both regions, so either can be taken as the figure; the mind can hold only one reading at a time and flips between them. See solutions. **Q4.** Proximity groups by *nearness* (spacing); similarity groups by *likeness* (shared colour/shape/size). **Q5.** (a) It is the only disc that differs — larger and warm coral among small, uniform grey dots. (b) The coral is repeated across two whole columns and is the same size as everything else, so it groups (similarity) instead of singling one element out. **Q6.** (a) Elements that move, point or change together are perceived as one group. (b) e.g. items that slide/animate in the same direction, or arrows/forms sharing one direction, read as a unit. **Q7.** Proximity. **Q8.** Colour-coded, identical badges read as a set. **Q9.** Focal point: the one large block of warm colour, isolated, on a pale grey and cool teal screen. **Q10.** Figure–ground: the eye sorts figures from ground; a tonal step, a fine border, rounded corners and surrounding space separate each card. **Q11.** Closure. **Q12.** Shared left edge/even spacing forms an implied line. **Q13.** Departures animating together group by common fate. **Q14.** Any two principles, shown working together. **Q15.** Element/principle/Gestalt kept distinct. **Q16.** See fully-worked solutions.

Fully-worked solutions

Q1. (a) The Gestalt principles describe how the mind typically perceives, interprets and organises visual information as it attempts to unify and make sense of what it sees. (b) In the closure cell three discs each have a notch cut toward the centre; although no triangle is drawn, the mind completes the missing edges and a bright triangle appears — this is **closure**. (c) In the proximity cell the dots are evenly formed but the spacing leaves wider gaps between three pairs of columns, so the eye reads three separate clusters; **proximity** groups by nearness (2 marks: *perception named + why*).

Q2. (a) **Closure.** (b) A design **element** present is *shape* (the flat wing and body shapes); accept *line* or *colour*. A design **principle** present is *balance* (the symmetry of the two wings); accept *contrast*. (c) Because closure names how the **viewer’s mind perceives** the marks — completing them into a bird — rather than a convention the **designer uses to arrange** elements (1 mark).

Q3. (a) Figure–ground appears in the list of **design principles** and in the list of **Gestalt principles**; it is not a design element. (b) In a reversible image one contour does double duty: it is at once the edge of the dark region and the edge of the light region beside it, and the image gives the viewer no reason to prefer either. Perception must still assign one region as the solid **figure** and the rest as the **ground** behind it, so it settles on one reading — a vase — and can then flip to the other — two profiles facing each other. Only one reading is available at a time; the two cannot be held together. The flip shows that the division into figure and ground is supplied by the *viewer*, not fixed in the image (2 marks: *the shared contour/ambiguity + the flip explained as the mind assigning figure and ground*).

Q4. **Proximity** groups elements by *nearness* — things placed close together are read as belonging together, regardless of what they look like. **Similarity** groups elements by *likeness* — things that share a colour, shape, size or orientation are read as a set, even when they are spaced the same as everything around them. In short, proximity is about *position*; similarity is about *appearance* (2 marks: *both defined and clearly separated*).

Q5. (a) It is the only mark in the cell that is different: it is both larger and a warm coral, while every other dot is small and the same neutral grey. (b) The coral in the similarity cell is *shared* — ten dots, filling two whole columns, at exactly the same size as the grey ones. A difference that repeats is read as a **category**: the mind gathers the like marks into one group (similarity) and attention is spread evenly across the set. A focal point works the other way round; it needs **one** element to differ from everything around it so the eye has a single place to land and a starting point for reading the design. The coral columns therefore organise the field into groups without giving it a point of emphasis (2 marks: *repeated difference = grouping, not emphasis + what a focal point requires instead*).

Q6. (a) **Common fate**: elements that move, point or change together — in the same direction or with the same animation — are perceived as a single group. (b) A designer could animate a set of items so they slide onto the screen together (read as one group), or, in a still image, orient a set of arrows or forms in the same direction so they are grouped by their shared “motion”; the four up-right arrows in the grid demonstration read as one cluster for this reason (2 marks: *a valid application, explained*).

Q7. The designer has used **proximity**. Within each card the badge, the service name and the “departs in” time are placed close together, while a clear band of white space separates each card from the next. Because the mind groups nearby elements, the user reads each card as one self-contained stop rather than as loose pieces of text, and can take in the screen as three discrete options at a glance. This makes the interface quick and intuitive to scan — the goal of an interactive experience (4 marks: principle NAMED; grouping mechanism; benefit to the user).

Q8. Similarity has been used by giving every route a badge of the same rounded shape and size and colour-coding it by mode — teal for ferry, coral for tram, amber for bus. Because the mind groups like-with-like, the user quickly learns that a colour stands for a type of service and can pick out, say, all ferries by their teal badges without reading the labels. Similarity therefore lets the app communicate category by appearance, speeding recognition for a commuter in a hurry (3 marks: similarity as colour/shape coding + the communication benefit).

Q9. The designer has created a single **focal point** in the coral “Plan a trip” button. It is the one large block of warm, saturated colour on a screen that is otherwise pale grey, white and cool teal; the only other warm notes are the small tram and bus badges and their departure lines, all a fraction of its size. That warm-against-cool hue contrast makes the button advance from everything around it. It is also isolated — it sits on its own between the header band and the “Nearby stops” label, with nothing at its scale competing — and it is the only element drawn as a button, with a bold reversed label and a forward arrow marking it as something to tap. Because a strongly contrasting, isolated element is seen first, the user’s eye lands on the button before the list, so the primary action registers before anything is read. The effect is to remove hesitation about where to start and make the app’s core task obvious — an appropriate way to guide a new user (4 marks: how the focal point is made to stand out, with evidence from the screen + its effect on the user’s attention/behaviour).

Q10. The Gestalt principle at work is **figure–ground**: perception automatically sorts a scene into solid *figures* and the *ground* they sit on, so the cards are taken as objects lying in front of the screen rather than as part of it, and the eye locks onto each as a thing it could choose. The designer has made that reading almost unavoidable. Each card is a white panel set on the pale grey field of the screen, so a step in tone marks where the card ends and the background begins; a fine border traces that edge; the corners are rounded, so the shape reads as a discrete tile rather than a division of the page; and an even band of empty space is left above and below each card so nothing bridges one to the next. The user therefore perceives three separate objects to choose between rather than a continuous block of text (4 marks: figure–ground named and explained as perception + the specific visual means that produce the separation).

Q11. The “routes” icon relies on **closure**. It is drawn as a circular loop with a gap in it, yet the mind completes the missing arc and reads a full, closed loop. This lets the icon suggest a continuous route/loop with an economical, open mark, and it reads clearly even at the small size of a tab-bar icon (3 marks: closure NAMED + how the gap is completed + why it suits the icon).

Q12. Continuity helps scanning because the route cards share a common left edge and an even vertical rhythm, forming an implied straight line down the screen. The eye follows this continuous line from the top card to the next without having to search, so the user can run down the list of nearby stops quickly and in order. Continuity therefore turns three separate cards into one smooth reading path (3 marks: continuity as an implied line/alignment + the scanning benefit).

Q13. Common fate is the tendency to perceive elements that move or change together as a single group. In the WEND app it would operate once the screen is animated: for example, if the departure times all counted down and the cards refreshed or slid upward together as a service departs, the user would read the moving cards as one connected list rather than as unrelated items, reinforcing that they belong to the same “nearby stops” group (3 marks: common fate defined + a plausible animated application).

Q14. (Model, using focal point and figure–ground.) Two Gestalt principles work together to organise the WEND screen. **Figure–ground** separates content from chrome: the white route cards read as figures on the grey ground, and the teal header reads as a distinct band, so the user perceives clear zones rather than a flat wash of information. Within that structure, a single **focal point** — the high-contrast coral “Plan a trip” button — captures the eye first and sets the entry point. Acting together, figure–ground tells the user *what the pieces are* and the focal point tells them *where to begin*, so the screen is both legible and directed. Because each principle does a different organising job, the interface feels ordered and easy to use (6 marks: two principles NAMED, each with a mechanism, shown working together on the same screen).

Q15. A design **element** on the screen is *colour* (for example the coral of the button) — a component of visual language. A design **principle** is *hierarchy* (or *contrast*) — the convention by which the designer ranks the button above the cards and the cards above the tab bar. A **Gestalt** principle is *similarity* (or *proximity/focal point*) — the way the user’s mind groups the colour-coded badges as a set. The three differ because an element is a *component*, a principle is an *arrangement* the designer imposes, and a Gestalt principle is a *perception* in the viewer (3 marks: one correct example of each, with the distinction stated).

Q16. (Model, using the WEND app home screen. A response on the KESTREL mark would name closure and argue it the way Example 1 does.) The WEND home screen communicates with its audience — commuters glancing at a phone while moving — chiefly through the Gestalt principle of **similarity**. Similarity is applied across the whole interface as a rule of sameness: the three route cards are identical in size, shape and internal layout; every mode badge is the same rounded rectangle at the same size; the four tab icons are drawn at the same small scale and even spacing along one row. Because the mind groups like with like, the audience takes each of these as one kind of thing — a set of nearby services, a set of places to navigate to — and so grasps the structure of the screen before reading any of it. For a user with a few seconds to spare, seeing *what kind of information sits where* without having to read it is the communication that matters most.

Holding the badges geometrically identical also does analytical work. With shape and size fixed, **colour** is the only variable left free, so hue alone is able to carry the meaning “ferry”, “tram” or “bus”, repeated in the departure line beneath each name. Similarity is what turns a decorative colour into a code the audience can learn once and then read faster than the label.

Most importantly, similarity communicates by being **broken**. Because almost everything conforms, the two elements that do not — the coral “Plan a trip” button, and the single teal tab in a row of otherwise neutral ones — are read at once as exceptional: one as the action to take, the other as where the user currently is. An exception can only signify if the rule behind it is strong, so the screen’s insistent likeness is doing two jobs: it groups the ordinary and it makes the important visible. Measured against the purpose of a transit app — helping a commuter decide in seconds — similarity carries most of the communication (6 marks: principle NAMED, its perceptual mechanism explained, and its use tied to communicating with the intended audience and purpose).

Topic Test 1 — The design process and visual language

Reading time: 5 minutes • Writing time: 45 minutes • Total 40 marks

Materials: pens, pencils, coloured pencils, fineliners (0.6 mm or less), eraser, ruler, set squares, protractor, compasses, circle and ellipse templates. No technology and no notes.

Section A — 5 questions — **24 marks**. **Section B** — 3 questions — **16 marks**.

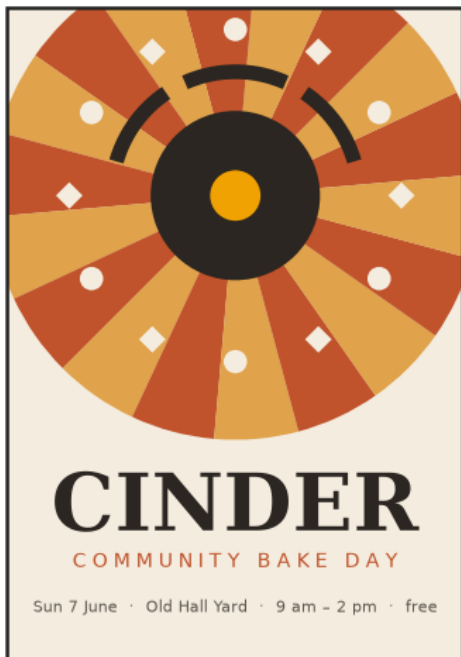
Refer to the **Resource Sheet** on the following page. All questions must be answered.

This topic test mirrors the structure, timing and materials of the VCAA examination. It is an original ClassBasics paper; no VCAA question is reproduced.

Topic Test 1 — Resource Sheet

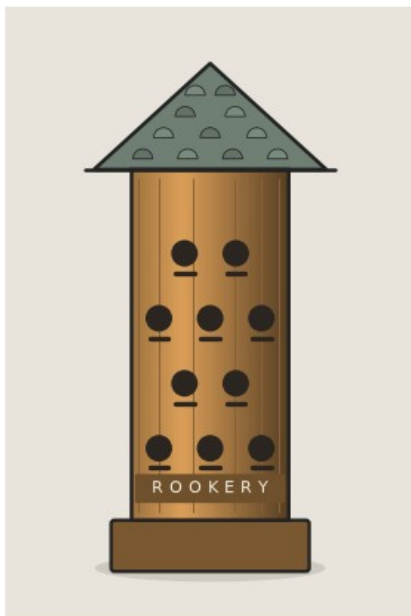
Use these two design examples to answer Section A. Each example is an original ClassBasics artifact created for this paper.

Design example 1 — Messages



CINDER — poster for a community wood-fired bake day, 2026.

Design example 2 — Objects



ROOKERY — free-standing communal nesting tower for a wetland reserve, 2026.

Section A

Instructions for Section A: Answer all questions in the spaces provided. In Questions 1, 2 and 5, tick the box of the ONE design example you have chosen and refer to it throughout your response. Questions 3 and 4 tell you what to refer to and carry no tick line.

Question 1 (4 marks)

Tick the design example you have chosen:

☐ CINDER (Messages) ☐ ROOKERY (Objects)

- a. Identify one Gestalt principle of visual perception used in the design example you selected. 1 mark
- b. Discuss how the designer has used this Gestalt principle to organise what the viewer sees. 3 marks

Question 2 (4 marks)

Tick the design example you have chosen:

☐ CINDER (Messages) ☐ ROOKERY (Objects)

- a. Identify the dominant design element in the design example you selected. 1 mark
- b. Evaluate the effectiveness of this design element in communicating to the audience of that design example. 3 marks

Question 3 (6 marks)

Question 3 refers to **CINDER** only. There is no choice of design example in this question.

- a. Name the type classification the designer has used for the title CINDER, and state one connotation it carries for the audience. 2 marks
- b. Analyse how the designer has used typographic hierarchy to communicate the event information to a passer-by. 4 marks

Question 4 (4 marks)

Question 4 refers to the folio note below, written by the designer of ROOKERY. It does not refer to the imagery on the Resource Sheet.

Week 2 — 40 quick sketches pinned across the studio wall. Nothing ruled out, nothing crossed off.

Week 3 — scored every sketch against the four criteria in the brief. Kept the timber-tower direction and drew that one up two ways for the reserve manager to react to.

- a. Name the mode of thinking the designer used in Week 2 and the mode of thinking used in Week 3. 2 marks
- b. Explain why the designer moved from one mode of thinking to the other at this point in the VCD design process. 2 marks

Question 5 (6 marks)

Tick the design example you have chosen:

☐ CINDER (Messages) ☐ ROOKERY (Objects)

Analyse how the designer has used **one design element** and **one design principle** to support the aesthetic decisions in the design example you selected. Name the specific aesthetic in your response. 6 marks

Section B

Instructions for Section B: Answer all questions in the spaces provided. You may use any of the drawing methods and media permitted in this test. The communication need is given to you in this test, so there is no field to tick.

The design problem

MANTEL is a volunteer-run community cinema. It screens one film a month, free of charge, in a converted hall, and it needs to announce the screenings to the surrounding streets.

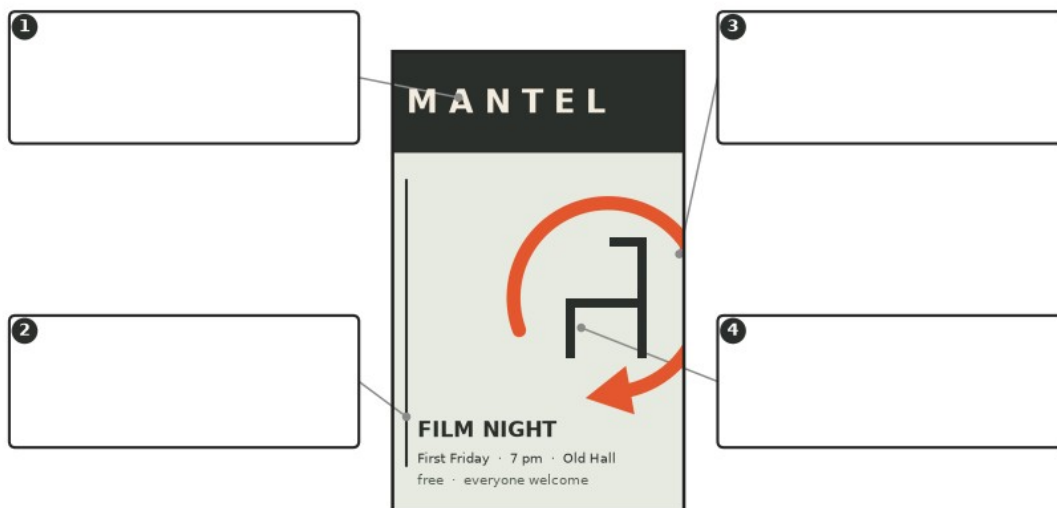
Design criteria

The design solution must:

- be read and understood at 3 m by a passer-by on foot
- communicate that the screening is free and that anyone may come
- reflect MANTEL's character as a small, volunteer-run cinema in a hall
- reproduce in **two colours** on MANTEL's own pale recycled poster stock

Communication need — Messages: a poster for the hall window and the surrounding streets.

The designer has generated a range of design ideas and has selected one of them to develop. **Design concept A**, developed from that selected idea, is shown below, printed in charcoal and coral on the pale recycled stock.



Design concept A — MANTEL film night poster

Question 6 (8 marks)

Write **four** annotations on Design concept A in the numbered boxes provided. Each annotation must:

- name **one design element** or **one design principle** the designer has used;
- state where it is used in the concept; and
- explain the effect it has on the audience.

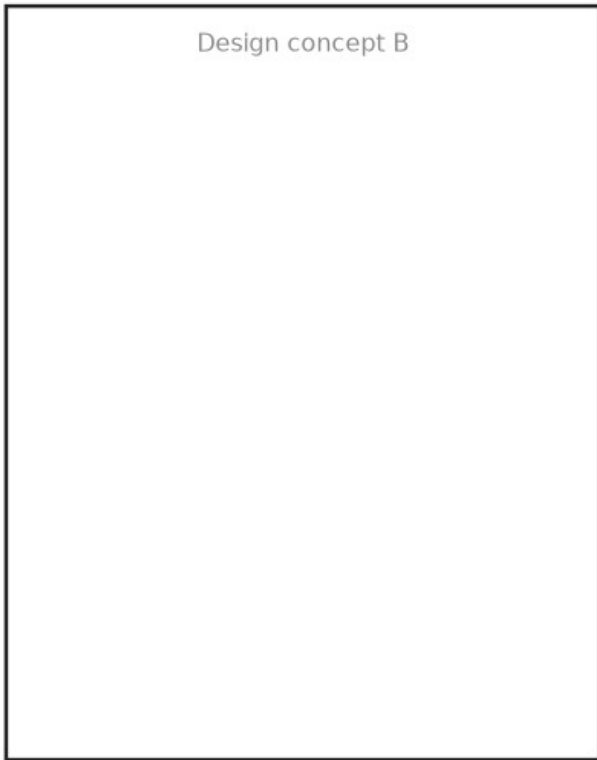
Across your four annotations you must name at least **two** design elements and at least **two** design principles.

Four annotations, 2 marks each.

8 marks

Question 7 (5 marks)

Develop the **same design idea** into a second concept, **Design concept B**. Draw concept B in the space below, changing at least **two** design elements or design principles. Label the two changes you have made, naming the element or principle you have changed.



Design concept B

Design concept B, drawn and labelled.

5 marks

Question 8 (3 marks)

State which of your two concepts you would develop into the final design solution, and justify your choice by referring to **two** of the design criteria.

3 marks

Topic Test 1 — Answers and marking guide

Marking guide

Question	Marks	What is being assessed
1a	1	Names one Gestalt principle from the study-design list; only the first principle named is marked
1b	3	Evidence from the chosen example + the perceptual mechanism + the effect on what the viewer reads
2a	1	Names the dominant design element; only the first element named is marked
2b	3	A strength with a mechanism + a limitation + an overall judgement, tied to the audience
3a	2	Type classification named (1) + one connotation it carries (1)
3b	4	All three hierarchy layers + the typographic tools used + the reading order and its purpose
4a	2	Divergent (Week 2) and convergent (Week 3), correctly matched
4b	2	A cause-and-effect chain explaining why the process must narrow after it has widened
5	6	The specific aesthetic NAMED + one element + one principle + the mechanism + audience/purpose
6	8	Four annotations × 2 marks (element/principle named and located, 1; effect on the audience, 1); at least two elements and two principles across the four
7	5	The same idea recognisably developed (3) + two changes drawn and correctly named as elements or principles (2)
8	3	A clear choice (1) + a justification against each of two named criteria (2)
	40	Section A 24 + Section B 16

Question 1

a. (CINDER) Similarity. Accept **proximity, closure, focal point** or **figure–ground**, provided the response then discusses the principle it named. **(ROOKERY) Proximity.** Accept **similarity, continuity** or **figure–ground**. (1 mark — only the first principle named is marked; “a Gestalt principle” without naming one earns nothing.)

b. (Model, using CINDER and similarity.) Twelve small cream marks are set at even intervals in a ring around the oven mouth. Although they alternate between a disc and a diamond, every mark shares the same scale and the same cream hue, and the mind groups elements that are alike. The viewer therefore reads them not as twelve separate marks but as one continuous ring of embers encircling the centre. Because that ring closes around the dark oven mouth, it

holds the eye on the mouth and delivers it to the single amber ember, so the viewer's attention arrives where the designer intends it to.

(Model, using ROOKERY and proximity.) The ten entry holes are placed close together in a staggered field across the middle of the timber column, with plain, unbroken timber surface around the group. Because the mind groups elements by nearness, the viewer reads the holes as one dense colony rather than as separate openings, which communicates at a glance that the tower houses many birds together. The generous plain surface around the group also separates it from the shingled cap and the name band, so the object is read as three clear parts.

(3 marks: the principle applied to evidence in the chosen example; the perceptual mechanism — what the mind does; the effect on what the viewer reads or where the eye goes. Do NOT accept a design element or a design principle discussed in place of the Gestalt principle named.)

Question 2

a. (CINDER) Type — accept **colour** or **shape**. **(ROOKERY) Form** — accept **texture** or **colour**. *(1 mark — only the first element named is marked.)*

b. (Model, using CINDER and type.) Type is used effectively. The title CINDER is set in a heavy serif at a far larger size than anything else on the poster and in near-black on a cream ground, so a passer-by reads the name of the event first and from a distance. The two lines beneath it then step down in size and weight, so the audience picks up what the event is and when it is on without having to search. A limitation is that the terracotta secondary line sits fairly close in tone to the cream ground, so at distance or in low light the words *community bake day* could be lost, leaving only the name. Overall, because the type ranks the message clearly and the essential information is carried at the largest sizes, the element is used effectively for a poster that must work on a street.

(Model, using ROOKERY and form.) Form is used effectively. The tower is drawn as a genuine three-dimensional cylinder — tone is graded from a light band on the left round to dark edges on both sides — so it reads as a solid, weighty object with real volume rather than a flat panel. That solidity tells a reserve visitor immediately that the tower is a permanent, sturdy structure that will survive outdoors, and the tall vertical form reads at a distance across open wetland. A limitation is that the form is simple and undifferentiated, so nothing about it explains its purpose; the small entry holes, rather than the form itself, do that work. Overall the form communicates permanence and shelter effectively, so the element is used well.

(3 marks: a strength explained by a mechanism, a limitation, and an overall judgement tied to the audience. A response that only describes the element, or that says it “stands out”, does not evaluate.)

Question 3

a. The title CINDER is set in a **serif** typeface (a heavy slab-serif is an acceptable answer). One connotation: it reads as **traditional, established and hand-made** — accept trustworthy, crafted or editorial. This suits a wood-fired bake day, where the appeal is to an old, hand-made craft *(1 mark for the classification + 1 mark for a connotation that follows from it)*.

b. The designer has ranked the type into three layers. **Primary** is the title *CINDER*: the largest size, the heaviest weight, set in capitals and in near-black charcoal against the cream ground, so it has both the greatest scale and the strongest tonal contrast and is read first. **Secondary** is *COMMUNITY BAKE DAY*: much smaller, lighter, letter-spaced with loose tracking and set in terracotta, so it is clearly subordinate to the title but still separated from what follows by its colour and its spacing. **Tertiary** is the details line — the date, the venue, the times and *free* — smallest of all, set in a plain dark grey with no letter-spacing, so although it stays legible up close it carries the least visual weight of the three and is read last. The typographic tools doing the ranking are therefore **size, weight, case, colour and space**. The result is a top-to-bottom visual path: the passer-by is taken from the focal ember and the burst down to the name, then to what the event is, then to when and where it is. In the few seconds a passer-by gives a poster, they read *who* → *what* → *when and where* in that order, which is exactly what a promotional poster on a street needs to achieve *(4 marks: all three layers named; at least two typographic tools identified; the reading order described; the purpose linked to the audience. A response that stops at “CINDER is the biggest” does not analyse the hierarchy)*.

Question 4

a. Week 2 = **divergent** thinking. Week 3 = **convergent** thinking *(1 mark each)*.

b. The designer moved from divergent to convergent thinking because the two modes do different jobs at different points in the process. In Week 2 the designer was in the **Develop** phase, where the aim is *quantity*: judgement is suspended so that a broad range of imaginative options is generated and a strong direction is not thrown out before it can be seen. But a wall of forty sketches is not a design — to make progress the designer must narrow. Convergent thinking in Week 3 supplies that narrowing: the options are compared analytically against the **design criteria** in the brief, and the idea with the most potential is selected and refined — here into two concepts of the one timber-tower idea for feedback. Without diverging first there would be too few options to choose between; without converging there would be no decision (2 marks: the function of each mode, joined by a because/so chain. Credit the point that the designer developed ONE idea into TWO concepts rather than two separate ideas).

Question 5

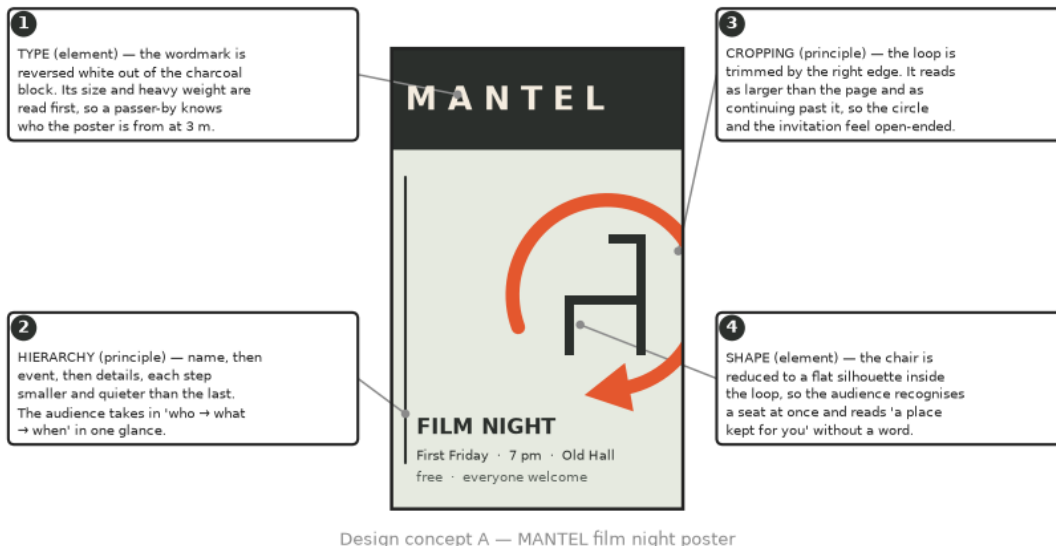
(Model, using CINDER.) CINDER has a **warm, hand-made, communal** aesthetic. The designer has used the **element of colour** with the **principle of balance**, specifically radial balance. The palette is a narrow band of warm earth hues — terracotta and ochre wedges, cream marks and a single amber ember — set against a charcoal centre. Because warm hues carry strong associations with fire, clay and baked bread, and because the whole range is warm rather than mixed with cool hues, the poster feels like heat and hearth before a word is read. That warmth is then organised by **radial balance**: the wedges, the ring of ember marks, the broken arch and the amber ember are all arranged about one central point, so visual weight is distributed evenly about that one centre and the eye is drawn inward rather than across. The two choices reinforce one another — the composition behaves like the thing it is advertising, a community gathering around a fire, with everything turned toward one warm centre. For a local audience being invited to a neighbourhood bake day, the aesthetic communicates warmth, craft and gathering, which is precisely the promise of the event.

(Model, using ROOKERY.) ROOKERY has a **natural, crafted, sheltering** aesthetic. The designer has used the **element of texture** with the **principle of proportion**. Visual texture appears twice: fine grain lines run the length of the timber column, and the cap is built from four rows of small overlapping shingles. Because these surfaces read as timber and hand-cut shingle rather than as moulded plastic, the object is understood as made from natural material and by hand, which suits a wetland reserve. Proportion then settles it: the broad, low shingled cap is roughly one third of the height of the column beneath it and overhangs it on both sides, and the column in turn sits on a wider plinth. That stepping of widths is the proportion of a shelter — heavy roof, protected body, firm footing — so the object reads as a safe place to nest. Together the natural texture and the sheltering proportion communicate care for wildlife to reserve visitors, and signal that the structure belongs to its landscape.

(6 marks: the specific aesthetic NAMED; one design element identified with evidence; one design principle identified with evidence; a mechanism explaining how each builds that aesthetic; the two shown working together; the link to audience and purpose. Accept any element and any principle genuinely present in the chosen example, provided the aesthetic is named and the analysis — not description — is sustained. “It supports the aesthetic” earns no analysis marks.)

Question 6

Model annotations for Design concept A are shown below; the wording expected is given in full after the figure.

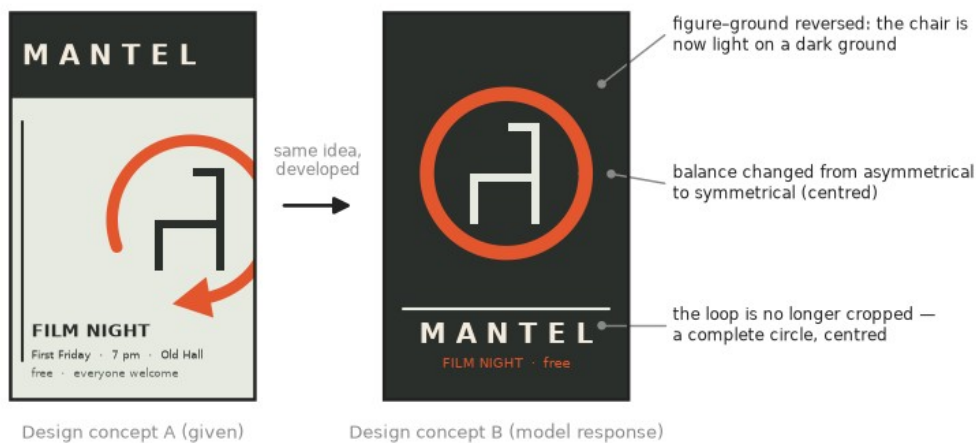


1. **Type (element)** — the wordmark *MANTEL* is reversed white out of the charcoal block across the top of the poster. Its large size and heavy weight make it the highest-contrast thing on the format, so a passer-by on the far side of the street reads who the poster is from before anything else.
2. **Hierarchy (principle)** — the information is ranked in three layers: the name, then *FILM NIGHT*, then the day, time, venue and *free*, each step smaller and quieter than the one above it. The audience takes in *who* → *what* → *when* in a single glance rather than having to hunt for the message.
3. **Cropping (principle)** — the coral loop is trimmed by the right edge of the format. Cropping makes the loop read as larger than the page and as continuing past it, so the circle — and with it the invitation — feels open-ended rather than closed off.
4. **Shape (element)** — the chair is reduced to a flat, two-dimensional silhouette in the centre of the loop. Because the silhouette keeps only the outline that identifies a chair, the audience recognises a seat at once and at a distance, so the poster offers “a place kept for you” without using a word.

Other creditworthy annotations include: **contrast** (the near-black block against the pale ground gives the eye an entry point); **figure-ground** (the dark chair reads as the figure on the pale ground); **asymmetrical balance** (the heavy block top, the mark right of centre and the type bottom left are offset rather than mirrored); **colour** (a single warm coral accent against charcoal and pale sage marks the one idea the designer wants remembered); **line** (the vertical rule down the left margin aligns the type and holds the lower half of the layout together); **scale** (the mark is enlarged to dominate the middle of the format).

(8 marks: 2 marks per annotation — 1 for naming a design element or design principle that is genuinely present and saying where it is used, 1 for a specific effect on the audience. Award the second mark only for an effect, not for a restatement: “it stands out” or “it looks good” earns nothing. If fewer than two elements or fewer than two design principles are named across the four annotations, the annotations that break the rule can earn the first mark only. Gestalt principles named in place of an element or a design principle do not satisfy the requirement, although a correct Gestalt observation added on top of a valid annotation should not be penalised.)

Question 7



(Model.) Design concept B keeps the **same design idea** — the chair mark held inside a coral loop, with the MANTEL wordmark and the screening details — and changes three decisions:

- **Figure-ground reversed.** The whole format is now charcoal and the chair is reversed out of it in pale sage, so the figure is light on a dark ground instead of dark on a light one. The two tones are the ones concept A already used, but the mark is now the largest light shape in an unbroken dark field, which gives it more presence at 3 m.
- **Balance changed from asymmetrical to symmetrical.** The mark is centred and the wordmark and details are centred beneath it, so the two halves of the poster mirror each other. The layout reads as calmer and more formal than concept A.
- **Cropping removed.** The loop is now a complete circle rather than one trimmed by the edge, so the chair sits plainly inside a closed ring rather than in a shape that runs off the page.

(5 marks: 3 marks for a drawn concept that is recognisably a development of the SAME idea — the chair, the loop and the wordmark all still present — and that is resolved enough to be read as a poster, not a thumbnail; 2 marks for two changes that are drawn AND labelled with the correct name of the design element or design principle changed. A response that draws an unrelated second idea, rather than a second concept of the same idea, cannot earn the first three marks — this is the “one idea into two concepts” rule. Accept any two genuine changes: colour, scale, contrast, pattern, cropping, balance, figure-ground, hierarchy, type, shape and line are all available in this concept.)

Question 8

(Model, choosing concept B.) I would develop **concept B** into the final design solution. Against the first criterion — *read and understood at 3 m* — concept B is stronger, because the whole format is now a single charcoal field with the chair reversed out of it as the largest light shape, so the poster reads as one bold block of tone instead of splitting into a dark band above a pale field the way concept A does, and nothing else on the format competes with the mark further down the street. Against the third criterion — *reflect MANTEL’s character as a small, volunteer-run cinema in a hall* — the single ordinary hall chair, now centred and framed by a complete circle, reads plainly as one seat set out for one person, which says “small and volunteer-run” more directly than concept A’s off-centre arrangement. Concept B also still meets the two-colour criterion, since it uses only charcoal and coral on the recycled stock.

(A response choosing concept A is equally creditworthy: concept A serves the second criterion better, because it states both halves of that criterion — “free” and “everyone welcome” — whereas concept B keeps “free” but drops “everyone welcome”, so the invitation to anyone is never put into words; concept A’s asymmetrical layout also carries the day, time and venue, which concept B leaves out. 3 marks: 1 mark for a clear, stated choice; 1 mark for each of two justifications, each naming a design criterion and giving a reason drawn from the concepts themselves. Justifications based on personal taste — “I like it better” — earn nothing, which is the point the convergent-thinking strategies make.)