

A DESIGN IN

# FIGUREGROUND

The visual technique is excellent, but this bold logotype is curiously weak. Here's what's wrong and what to do about it . . .

## It's a matter of shape

### FIGURE-GROUND

**Ground** is your paper, canvas, screen, T-shirt, refrigerator door, whatever. It's what you draw on.

**Figure** is what you draw. The lighter of the two will appear to recede. Most of your imagemaking is figure on ground—signing your name, for example.

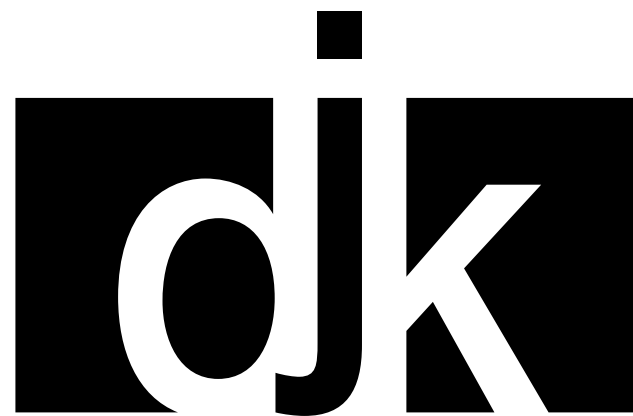
Reversing the values brings the ground forward, which normally makes it apparent how BIG the ground actually is. Big and now dark, too, the ground engulfs the figure.

Exaggerating the *scale* difference alters perception again; most viewers will see this as a white spot atop a black square.

The classic figure-ground effect occurs when figure defines ground, and vice-versa. Do you see the faces? The chalice? Both?

Today, class, David Knight of Miami, Florida, has bravely offered his logo for our critique. With his three initials set in lowercase Helvetica Roman in the black-on-white-on-black technique of figure-ground, he's quick to add that his design was an experiment. The idea was to convey a "traditional, corporate image" for his design business.

He knew that a good logo is bold, simple and memorable, and that it must communicate quickly and unambiguously. And his logo almost achieves that. It's bold, all right, and has an arresting quality to it; the viewer wants to look at it. That's what's cool about figure-ground, where one shape defines another; you create a visual puzzle. You can read the letters, too; they're clear, if a little plain. But something isn't quite right; the logo has no *sticking* power. We're about to discover why not.



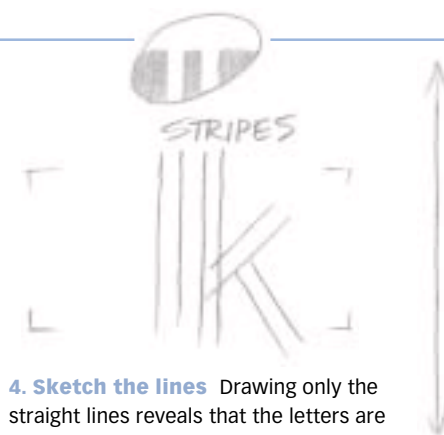
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Have you designed a good logo? **Take this test.** Glance at the logo for a few moments, then look away. What do you remember? Shape? Line? Color? This gives you quickly and easily its primary message, dominant image and the first impression. Try it with a friend.



**3. Sketch the letters** The **d** and **k** are well defined, but where's the **j**? Only its dot and tiny curl let us know it exists; remove them, and it's *gone*.

**The problem with the j** The **j** relies on an itty bitty bit of visual information—just its dot and tiny curl—to telegraph its existence. What's fun about such details is that they often provoke a double-take; the viewer *looks again*. What weakens the effect in this case is a law of perception: Our eyes connect *similarities*. The only other black element is the rectangle, whose mass overwhelms the fragile **j**.



**4. Sketch the lines** Drawing only the straight lines reveals that the letters are skinny, mere stripes. Worse, they're white, which recedes. Skinny, recessive lines have no chance of survival running cross-grain to a massive black rectangle. The two can coexist in a design, but not as equals.



**6. Sketch the center** The center is the strongest point of any visual field, so always ask what's happening in the center. Here, right in the middle where you want it, the interior spaces reveal more good news—the letters have outstanding definition. Though mostly white air, it's obvious what they are. Clearly the descriptive heart of this image, this is a major clue toward the solution to this logo.

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DESIGN

The interior is so descriptive. In fact, let's take a break and try something. How does the sketch itself work as a logo? It hits a lot of artistic targets. It uses only the best of the letters (the parts that communicate) and nothing more. It's balanced, stable and it has that puzzle-solving *intrigue*. In pencil form it conveys artistry, and the sense that David is a designer who *works*. Clients value that. Centered above his name, it bespeaks traditional and corporate. And it's memorable. All good for so early in the project. But it's not bold, nor especially simple, and it has some serious versatility problems. For one, it's gray, and can't be anything else, so it'd always need halftone reproduction. Two, it relies on its pencilness for its value, but at low resolution, that would go away. Three, it has fine detail, which would conflict with material around it.

Let's keep looking, but now we're onto the answer. Without the rectangle, the image is strong—well defined, focused, tightly packaged. The solution seems obvious—get rid of that rectangle! But that leaves a problem to solve: When the rectangle goes away, the **j** goes away, too.



**7. Reset the type** We've seen that the letter shapes are excellent. We've also seen that the rectangle is a weakening force. What to do? Get rid of the rectangle and solve the **j** problem. Here, the extensive range of Helvetica will help. Helvetica Roman, the original type, is part of a big family that includes Helvetica Neue (NOY-uh; it means new) Extended Heavy, shown above. Its lines are pure and modern, and its **j** is vigorous. Note how much mass its letters have compared to the skinny originals. This mass creates real gravity that pulls your eye directly into the descriptive center.

## Glance, then look away. What do you remember?



**1. Make a tissue** What's wrong with this image? Right off the bat, we can't tell. The place to begin—no kidding; this is easiest—is with a pencil. Cover the logo with tracing paper and, one by one, sketch *parts*—shapes, lines, insides, outsides, and so on—big parts first, then small parts. Why? Because as a whole, all you see is the forest, but the problem is in the trees. Sketching reveals the trees.



**2. Sketch the shape** The glance test? This is what we most remembered. And it's clear right away—this isn't always the case—why this logo's having trouble. The dominant image is a massive, dark rectangle (two rectangles, really, but the dot is overwhelming). Ordinary and nondescript, it is a *noncommunicating* element.



An object's **shape** is its principal identifier. Most people can identify most objects by shape alone. A lively, descriptive shape, therefore, is valuable in a logo. Think for a moment of Nike's swoosh or McDonald's arches. Now look again at the block. It's just common, with nothing to allure or remind.



The rectangle has a horizontal ratio of 2:1, more panoramic than a movie screen (16:9). This moves the eye outward; it scans back and forth. What you want in a logo is the opposite: to bring the viewer's eye to the center.



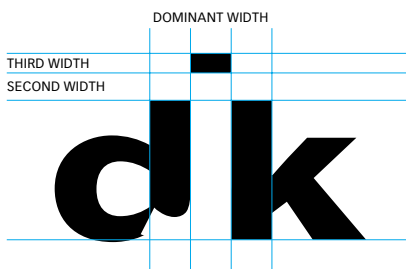
**5. Sketch the letter shapes** Here we find some good news. The letters form a lively shape that's *visually descriptive*—it's so descriptive that you could probably guess this image with no further definition. Note all three basic shapes: circle, rectangle and triangles.



Silhouetted against the background in its original configuration, however, the story is different. The letter shape seems the same, but only at a glance. What's interesting is that if you didn't already know it, you probably couldn't identify this image. The rectangle weakens the definition.



**White space is not empty space** You'd think that figure and ground would be interchangeable; after all, not a line is different, right? But figure and ground are different, and this example illustrates why. In positive (above left), the image is simple; two white triangles describe the k. In negative, however, the same space becomes a crazy shape of many angles and corners, most of which point away from the k. The descriptive white is gone. This is a weaker image. *White space is not empty space. It is active and working.*



**8. Simplify** Sliding the **j** up to the baseline and coloring it white clues us to its strength but leaves a few small problems. The curve of the **j** vanishes into white, and the horizontal shape of its dot looks oddly weak above the ascender line. Grid lines reveal why: It's a third width. With simple, strong lines dominating the image, that's one too many. *A single line, shape or dimension repeated is stronger than a bunch of different ones.*



**9. Simplify more** Filling in black behind the **j** restores its curve. But the junction of **d** and **j** is complicated, a fussy shape (inset) full of tiny points, passages and detail foreign to the simplicity of the letters. Adjusting the . . .



corners of the **j** corrects it easily. Result? A beautifully simple image that reads at a glance and works even without the dot. Its clarity hits every target. It's good at big sizes and small, high resolution and low, black & white, as well as color, it's visually interesting and "traditionally" low-key.



**10. Put the dot back** Remember: repetition of line and shape. The new dot is a perfect circle—the ideal counterpoint to the square shapes—the same width as the letters. David's full name set beneath is in the identical typeface (repetition) but all caps (contrast). How far beneath the logo should it go? About the height of the type (repetition).



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**ALL FIXED** The dead weight is now gone; the mass and focal point are in the center, taking full advantage of the three letters' natural visual descriptiveness. The finished logo does what David set out to do; create a visually interesting, traditionally conservative image using the technique of figure-ground. The dot in red is like a cherry on the cake and adds a note of informality appropriate for an independent designer. What's important is that the logo works without it; the dot hasn't been added to prop up a weak design. Of the variations on this page, the most sophisticated and "corporate" is the one with no dot.