



How to **look real**

Set the stage with authentic visual cues.

Continued ▶

How to look real

Before designing, check out the party! Here's how to transform a dull layout into an energetic expression of the real event.

The Kentucky Mine Summer Concert Series in the Sierra Nevada mountains is low-budget entertainment under the stars. From a small stage beneath 150-foot pines, the rousing sounds of bluegrass, balladeers and folk singers mingle with the sweet fragrance of summer in the forest. It's a great time.



Problem is, the Web banner promoting all this conveys

none of it. It's well-crafted and tidy (right), but that's what's wrong. Its neat lines and smooth surfaces project no energy, no musicality and no sense of place. That's because the designer was thinking *layout* and missed the *event*. Here's how to get all of that good stuff in.

Before



Where's the party?

The black hat hints at the country-western theme of the summer concerts, but nothing's *happening*; the lines are too straight, the type is too static and the space is too empty to convey the rollicking, banjo-twanging, foot-stomping energy of the real thing.



It was designed “by the book”

The designer of this ad was unfamiliar with the event and so made a common mistake—he designed from his *imagination*. Such results will almost always look artificial.

Reversed type is inauthentic. Old printing was always dark on light.

Before



Sleek and smooth country?

The “before” is crafted well enough. It has a focal point, harmonious colors, consistent use of type, and things are neatly aligned. But the result is lifeless. That’s because it doesn’t express the subject. Smooth surfaces and straight lines, for example, are elements of urban boardrooms (left), not the mountain out-

doors (above). The banner mixes other visual signals:

- Color fields are flat and smooth.
- Top bar is mechanical, and its type is reversed.
- Color palette is made up, not based on the real scene.
- The real outdoors has rocks, trees, wooden buildings, wagon wheels and dirt, all gritty, weathered and rough.
- Old-West printing had no fancy reverses.
- Old paper has color and texture.

Inauthentic elements

- Positive-negative color fields
- Straight edges and sharp corners
- Contemporary color palette

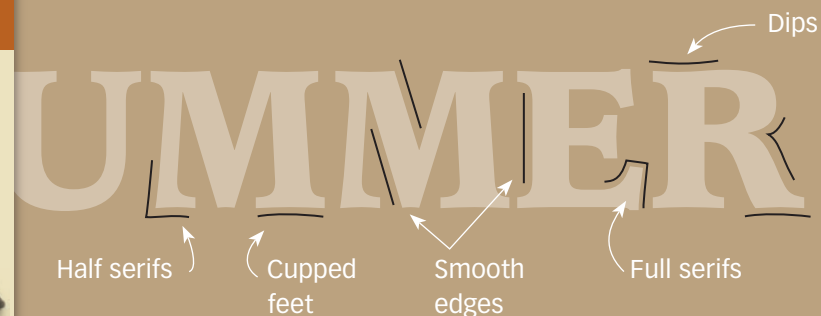




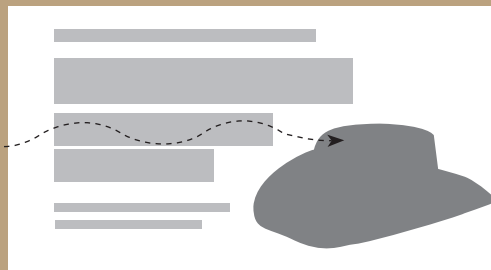
The type is static, and the space is too passive

Usherwood Black has designed-in quirks, but the effect looks polished and synthetic. The black hat has no owner, and music is nowhere in sight.

Before



Where's the music? The hat is the focal point, and the "read breeze"—our natural left-to-right drift across a page—reinforces its position (the eye moves towards it), but it's a passive image that conveys neither forest nor music nor party. The result is a disconnect between image and message.



(Above) Quirky ITC Usherwood Black is an appealing type choice for several reasons, one of which are the unique half serifs on its M's and N's. Although its characters are full of the irregularities one might see in old, wooden type, the edges are sharp and its overall line strong and uniform. The result: Usherwood looks designed and not authentically old.



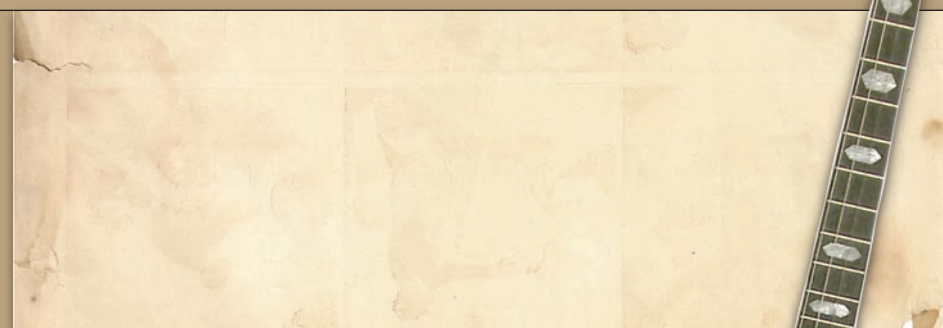
It's time to start over

To convey the real event, we need *authentic visual cues*—real objects, real colors, real textures. And because it's a party, we need something surprising—less space.

Before



After



Space, texture, object

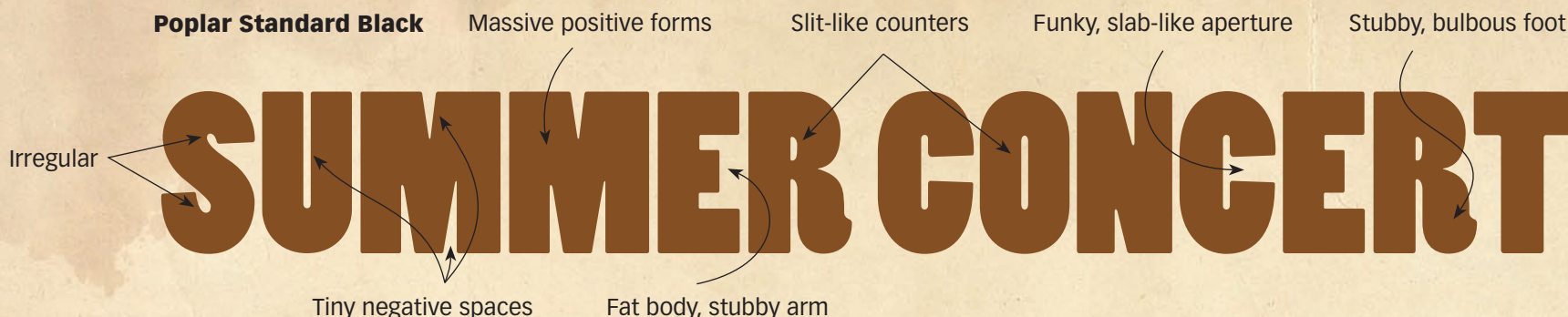
- A small room jammed with people makes a party; a big, empty room does not. So the first step is to get rid of the excess space. Shrink the banner size, in this case to 65%.
- Lose the "smooth." A backdrop of weathered parchment adds texture, dimension and ambiance.
- Lose the hat. A banjo (right) instantly conveys not only music but a particular flavor of music.





The perfect rustic types

The correct typefaces will look real, not designed, like they've been around since the gold rush. And to really crowd the room, the headline typeface must be *massive*.



Poplar is a recent design based on an 1830s original. It's massive and powerful because it has almost no interior white space, and it's quirky like old wooden type would be—uneven, unrefined, irregular. Its only drawback: at small sizes (left), its density makes it hard to read.

Use the eyedropper.



Authentic colors come from the real world. Left, earth tones complement the paper and express the event perfectly.



What goes with brown? Analogous (adjacent) colors always harmonize; here, brick red adds heat.

Rosewood Fill (above) makes an excellent companion typeface for use in small sizes. Like Poplar, it has quirky letters of unpredictable width, odd serifs, stubby arms (E and F) and irregular stroke weights. The difference: It has lots of open space, which is why it's readable when small.



High-energy composition

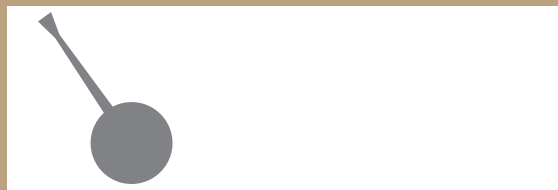
With background and image in hand—the event is beginning to look real—it’s time to arrange the space for *party energy*. To do this, think *mass*, *silhouette* and *angle*.

After



Angles convey energy Angles are inherently unstable, which makes them ideal for conveying tension and excitement. Also, the nearer something is, the more presence it exerts. So what we want to do here is place the banjo at an angle and as close to the viewer (big) as possible, leaving just enough room to squeeze in the words.

Tiny



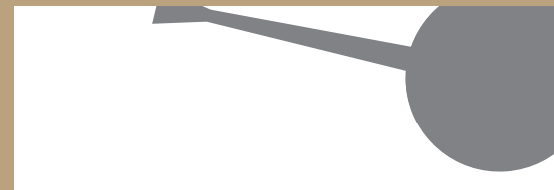
To quickly find the right size, think in extremes. Here, the tiny banjo fits the space without cropping, but it’s indistinct and lacks energy.

Giant



Giant size is daring and has in-your-face presence, but in this case it’s too big—it would put the focus on the banjo, not the event.

Just right



A fuller silhouette at the angle it’s played is just right. Tension is amplified by its midair position facing back against the flow of the ad.



Add the words

Make the type as big as possible, leaving only enough room for the modulation and pauses of real speech. You want the words to make some noise!

After



Type should never just be *placed*, no matter how neatly. Type is living speech made visible. As you add the words, use differences in typeface, size, color and position to mimic natural speech, which modulates from high to low, loud to soft, and includes pauses. But crowd it by removing excess space from between words and lines.

**KENTUCKY MINE AMPHITHEATER
SUMMER CONCERT SERIES
EVERY FRIDAY, 8 P.M. JULY 1
THRU AUGUST 5**

Massive presence Set in one size and style, the words are impossible to miss but unnatural. Without differences in size and style, there is no voice modulation or hierarchy of information.

**KENTUCKY MINE AMPHITHEATER
SUMMER CONCERT SERIES**

Clear hierarchy Simple size difference separates two thoughts. Because of its importance, the smaller line has the higher position. Long lines, though, are skinny and lose impact.

**KENTUCKY MINE AMPHITHEATER
SUMMER CONCERT
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Squeeze in the rest Wrapped line regains its weight. Dates and times are stacked tightly in a more readable typeface and shoved into the open space, resulting in a massive block.



Finish and repeat

Foot stompin' fun!—a character line—completes the energetic setting. The final task is to repeat the process in smaller ads of different proportions.

After



576 x 190 px



190 x 95 px



144 x 235 px

FOOT STOMPIN' FUN!

Foot stompin' fun! is a character line set to match the dates and times; the two similar blocks now “bookend” the main copy. Colored black, the small Kentucky Mine Amphitheater gains strength against the larger words in brown. The T tucked just beneath the banjo amplifies the depth.

Design a campaign Different venues require different formats. Key to repeating the ad in other sizes and shapes is to “dance with the gal what brung ya”—this is not the place for a new design or different graphics. Repeat the parchment, banjo, typefaces, colors and the “crowded room” layout. Retain the colors and hierarchies. Focus on look and feel instead of slavishly repeating measurements. For example, you want the banjo big and at an angle, the type massive, the space full. Note that to fit the space, the banjo has had to move around. Here you can see that “playing” position (top) conveys more energy than the upright, “resting” position (left).



Article resources



2a
1a
1b

6 7

2b

4a

8 SUMMER CONCERT SERIES

3



4b



4c



4d



4e



4f



4g



5

Typefaces

1 (a-b) [Poplar Std Black](#) | a) 25/48.5 pt, b) 65.25/48.5 pt

2 (a-b) [Rosewood Std Fill](#) | a) 18/48.5 pt, b) 25/21 pt

3 [ITC Usherwood Black](#)

Images

4 (a-g) [iStockphoto.com](#) | [a](#) [b](#) [c](#) [d](#) [e](#) [f](#) [g](#)

5 David John and the Comstock Cowboys
www.comstockcowboys.com

Colors

6 C0 M65 Y100 K75

7 C20 M90 Y100 K10

8 C25 M15 Y60 K30



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Before & After has been sharing its practical approach to graphic design since 1990. Because our modern world has made designers of us all (ready or not), Before & After is dedicated to making graphic design understandable, useful and even fun for everyone.

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For presentation format

[Print: \(Specify pages 1–11\)](#)



Print

Format: Landscape
Page Size: Fit to Page

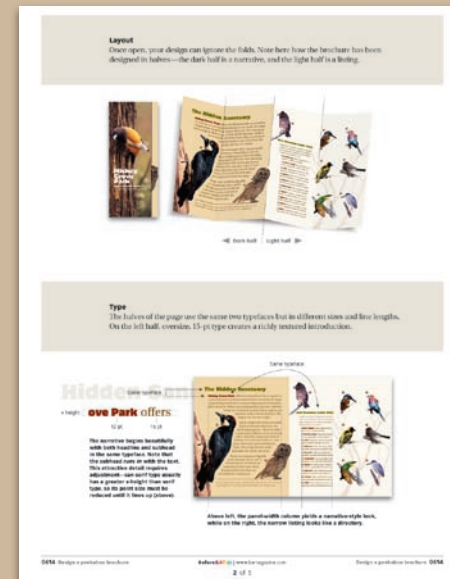


Save

Presentation format or
Paper-saver format

For paper-saver format

[Print: \(Specify pages 13–18\)](#)





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in the Sierra Nevada mountains is low-budget entertainment under the stars. From a small stage beneath 150-foot pines, the rousing

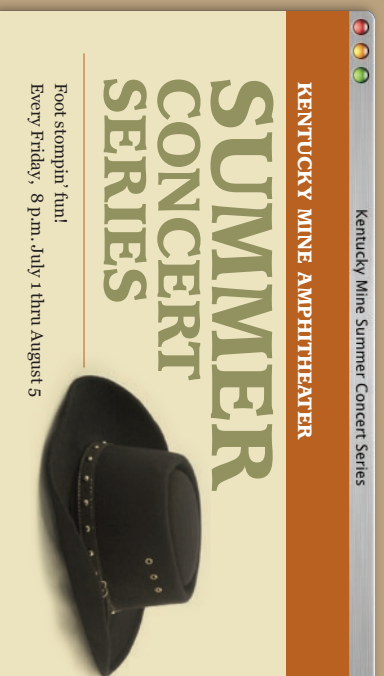
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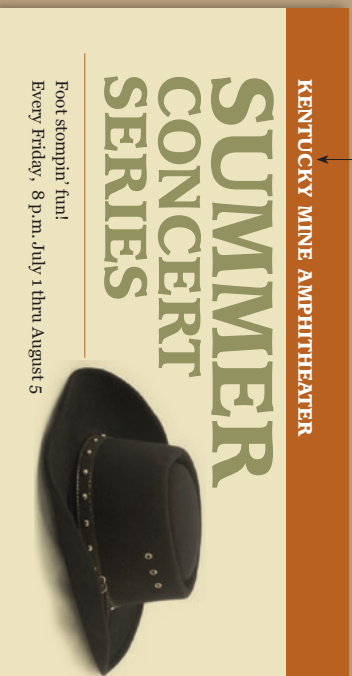
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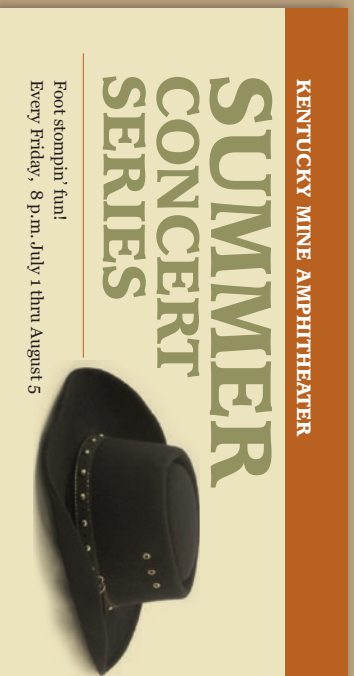
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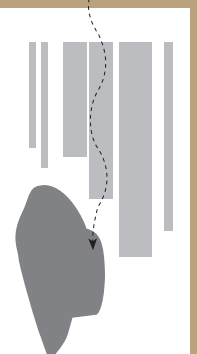
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Poplar Standard Black Massive positive forms Silt-like counters Funky, slab-like aperture Stubby, bulbous foot

Irregular

Tiny negative spaces Fat body, stubby arm

KENTUCKY

SUMMER CONCERT

EVERY FRIDAY

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Giant



Just right



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Article resources



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- 2 (a–b)** [Rosewood Std Fill](#) | a) 18/48.5 pt, b) 25/21 pt
- 3** [ITC Usherwood Black](#)

Colors

- 6** [C0 M65 Y100 K75](#)
- 7** [C20 M90 Y100 K10](#)
- 8** [C25 M15 Y60 K30](#)

Images

- 4 (a–g)** [iStockphoto.com](#) | [a](#) [b](#) [c](#) [d](#) [e](#) [f](#) [g](#)
- 5** David John and the Comstock Cowboys
[www.comstockcowboys.com](#)

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