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Figure and ground examples

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If you have a hard time distinguishing between figure and ground, activities such as jigsaw puzzles and optical illusions might help you hone these skills. The concept of figure-ground perception emerged out of the field of Gestalt psychology. According to the Gestalt approach, the whole is more (or different) than the sum of its parts. The term Gestalt itself comes from the German word meaning "form" or "shape." During the 1920s, a number of German psychologists including Max Wertheimer and Wolfgang Kohler began studying different principles of perception that govern how people make sense of an often disorderly world. Their work led to what is known as the Gestalt laws of perceptual organization. The Gestalt theory of perception proposes that people make sense of the world by taking separate and distinct elements and combining them into a unified whole. For example, if you look at shapes drawn on a piece of paper, your mind will likely group the shapes in terms of things such as similarity or proximity. Objects that are similar to one another tend to be grouped together. While the concept of figure-ground perception is an important principle in Gestalt psychology, it is usually not identified as one of the laws of perceptual organization. Figure-ground perception describes one of the most fundamental ways that we simplify a visual scene. When looking at a visual scene, people tend to look for ways to differentiate between the figure and the ground. Some ways that people accomplish this include: Blurriness: Have you ever noticed how objects in the foreground tend to be crisp and distinct while those in the background are blurry or hazy? We use this type of visual information to determine whether something is the figure (crisp) or the background (blurry). Contrast: The high contrast between objects can lead to the perception of figure and ground. The Rubin vase is one example. The vase is often depicted in white while the figures are black (or vice versa). The high contrast between the two helps us separate them into figure/ground.Size: We usually perceive large images as closer and small figures as being further off in the distance. Separation: When we see an object isolated from everything else in a visual scene, we are more likely to view that object as the figure versus the background. The "faces or vases" illustration is one of the most frequently cited demonstrations of figure-ground. What w see when we look at the faces or vases illusion depends on whether we see the white as the figure or the black as the figure. If you see the white as the figure, you perceive a vase. If you see the black as the figure, you see two faces in the profile. Most people are able to reverse their perceptions and switch back and forth between the vase and faces images. The artist M.C. Escher famously used this concept to create a number of fascinating figure-ground reversals. His elaborate drawings often include clever visuals that trick the eye and create fascinating figure-ground changes. Certain visual processing issues might make it hard to distinguish between figure and ground. This involves more than just struggling to switch how you see a tricky optical illusion. Some signs that you might notice include: Having a hard time finding images in "hidden picture" gamesStruggling to pick out words on a page or details in an imageProblems scanning a page of text to find informationDifficulty reading when the text seems very small or crammed onto the page Talk to your doctor if you think you might have a visual processing problem that affects your ability to distinguish between figure and ground. They can refer you to a specialist for further evaluation and treatment. Struggling with such skills might indicate a visual problem, but in some cases it might just mean that you need to strengthen your figure/ground perception skills. The good news is that there are plenty of intriguing activities to help boost your ability to spot hidden shapes and patterns in the world around you. Puzzles: If you like putting together puzzles, they can be a great way to get better at detecting figure/ground differences. Try starting with easier puzzles and gradually ramp up the complexity.Reading: If you are a reader, you can use your literary passion to boost your figure/ground perception skills. The next time you're devouring the latest viral BookTok recommendation, challenge yourself to pick specific words out of a page of text.Optical illusions: If you are looking for a fun and fascinating way to hone your skills, try spotting the hidden shapes or images in optical illusions. Some of these involve learning how to shift your focus to switch between figure and ground, which can be an intriguing challengeGet outside: Spending time in nature can help you practice those figure/ground skills in real-world settings. Pay attention to the sights and sounds around you and notice the objects that may be camouflaged among the leaves, grass, and other foliage you encounter.Play photographer: Whether snapping images on your phone or learning to use a DSLR camera, practicing your photography skills can be a great way to hone your ability to distinguish figure from ground. Feel free to adapt your practice to your interests and hobbies. Reading comic books, playing video games, or using mindfulness coloring books can also be a way to practice your figure/ground perception skills. Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy. Wagemans J, Elder JH, Kubovy M, et al. A century of Gestalt psychology in visual perception: I. Perceptual grouping and figure-ground organization. *Psychol Bull.* 2012;138(6):1172-217. doi:10.1037/a0029333 Marini F, Marzi CA. Gestalt perceptual organization of visual stimuli captures attention automatically: Electrophysiological evidence. *Front Hum Neurosci.* 2016;10:446. doi:10.3389/fnhum.2016.00446 Van de Cruys S, Wagemans J. Putting reward in art: A tentative prediction error account of visual art. *Ipception.* 2011;2(9):1035-1062. doi:10.1068/i0466aap Piazzalunga C, Dui LG, Termine C, Bortolozzo M, Matteucci M, Ferrante S. Investigating visual perception impairments through serious games and eye tracking to anticipate handwriting difficulties. *Sensors (Basel).* 2023;23(4):1765. doi:10.3390/s23041765 Michigan Occupational Therapy Association. Assessment and Intervention of Visual Perception and Cognitive Following Brain Injury and the Impact on Everyday Functioning, a term used to describe things that relate to the principle that says perceptions have 2 parts. The first is the figure and the second is the background. When we see an image, our minds race towards understanding what is presented in front of us and one of the ways we do this is through figure-ground perception, the organization of visual information or visual selection in the brain. This refers to the way in which our brains automatically separate the visual field (or image) into two components: the foreground (the "figure") and the background (the "ground"). The figure is typically the object or objects that we perceive as being in the forefront of our visual field, while the ground is the background against which the figure is perceived. The figure is usually perceived as more prominent or important than the ground, which serves as a kind of visual backdrop. Some of the ways we distinguish between figure and ground include: Blurriness: Where the figure is clear while the background is blurry. Size: Here the figure is larger and therefore easier to see while everything else is smaller and seems distant. Contrast: A high contrast between the figure and the ground makes it easy for us to differentiate the two and focus on either. Separation: We are able to separate or isolate the figure from everything else and easily see the figure rather than the background. This concept is often used in the field of Gestalt psychology, which studies how humans perceive and interpret visual information. According to Gestalt psychologists, our brains organize visual stimuli into coherent patterns, and the figure-ground relationship is one of the fundamental ways in which we do this. The way that our brains perceive the figure-ground relationship can have a significant impact on our interpretation of the visual scene. For example, if we see a person walking against a plain background, we are likely to perceive the person as the figure and the background as the ground. However, if the person is walking against a busy background, such as a crowded street, our perception of the figure-ground relationship may be more ambiguous, and we may have to work harder to distinguish between the figure and the ground. Most of the things we see are cluttered, and without figure-ground perception it is impossible to filter out the relevant and useful information. Figure-ground perception allows us to locate the precise useful information despite the clutter and 'noise' that surrounds it. More specifically, this perception is important in Object recognition: By separating objects from their background, our brains can more easily recognize and identify objects in our environment. Visual attention: Figure-ground perception helps direct our attention to the most important parts of a visual scene. Depth perception: By analyzing the relationship between objects and their backgrounds, our brains can create a sense of depth, importance and perspective. Visual aesthetics: Figure-ground relationships can play an important role in visual aesthetics. Not a day goes by that we don't use the figure-ground perception in real life. One good example is your ability to read this article. You are able to focus on specific words/letters and ignore the rest so that you get meaning. Other everyday examples include: Solving puzzles. The ability to look for the correct piece in a pile of many pieces. Finding specific words in a dictionary or a long list of words. Finding matching socks in a pile of socks. Sorting or pairing similar shapes or colors from a pile. Another classic example is The Rubin Vase which was drawn by Edgar Rubin, a Danish psychologist. The image is of a black vase between two face profiles. The color contrast in this image calls for the role of perspective as one is able to see two 'different' images based on what they focus on. Figure-ground perception refers to the tendency of the visual system to simplify a scene into the main object we are looking at (the figure) and everything else that forms the background (or ground). The concept of figure-ground perception is often illustrated with the classic "faces or vases" illusion, also known as the Rubin vase. Depending on whether you see the black or the white as the figure, you may see either two faces in profile (meaning you perceive the dark color as the figure) or a vase in the center (indicating you see the white color as the figure). Figure/ground refers to how we perceive objects to differentiate the main thing we are looking at from its background. We utilize different perceptual clues to help us do this, including blurriness, contrast, size differences, and separation between the figure and background. 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Pay attention to the sights and sounds around you and notice the objects that may be camouflaged among the leaves, grass, and other foliage you encounter.Play photographer: Whether snapping images on your phone or learning to use a DSLR camera, practicing your photography skills can be a great way to hone your ability to distinguish figure from ground. Feel free to adapt your practice to your interests and hobbies. Reading comic books, playing video games, or using mindfulness coloring books can also be a way to practice your figure/ground perception skills. Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy. Wagemans J, Elder JH, Kubovy M, et al. A century of Gestalt psychology in visual perception: I. Perceptual grouping and figure-ground organization. *Psychol Bull.* 2012;138(6):1172-217. doi:10.1037/a0029333 Marini F, Marzi CA. Gestalt perceptual organization of visual stimuli captures attention automatically: Electrophysiological evidence. *Front Hum Neurosci.* 2016;10:446. doi:10.3389/fnhum.2016.00446 Van de Cruys S, Wagemans J. Putting reward in art: A tentative prediction error account of visual art. *Ipception.* 2011;2(9):1035-1062. doi:10.1068/i0466aap Piazzalunga C, Dui LG, Termine C, Bortolozzo M, Matteucci M, Ferrante S. Investigating visual perception impairments through serious games and eye tracking to anticipate handwriting difficulties. *Sensors (Basel).* 2023;23(4):1765. doi:10.3390/s23041765 Michigan Occupational Therapy Association. Assessment and Intervention of Visual Perception and Cognitive Following Brain Injury and the Impact on Everyday Functioning, Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation . No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Gestalt therapy and its founders owe a further debt of gratitude to the gestalt psychologists for their development of the principle of figure and ground (Wertheimer, 1925; Koffka, 1935), that is central to gestalt therapy theory. So what is this concept of figure and ground? In essence the figure is what surfaces for you at any given moment. In this moment as you read this book it could be the words on this page, or a memory, a smell, a fleeting awareness of tightness in your body. Your ground is your entire experience of the world from your early upbringing, your embodied cultural beliefs, your education, what you had for lunch - your entire experience of your world to date including your imaginings for the future. It is your background that shapes the emerging figure and your background that gives meaning to that emerging figure. For example, if your ground includes an upbringing marked by inconsistent levels of support you may experience a challenging situation such as joining a new social club as predominantly anxiety provoking, whereas if you were well supported and have internalised this support you may feel more excitement than anxiety at the prospect of meeting new people. Figure and ground are forever shifting with new figures constantly emerging from the ground of your experience. Picture yourself watching a film at the cinema. The image that you gaze upon on the screen is the figure whilst the ground is everything that surrounds that image; the less prominent images on the screen, the screen itself, the cinema, the person sitting beside you, your journey to the cinema, what happened to you earlier in the day, your life outside, your relationships, the whole of your history, your cultural background. All of this forms the ground of your experience from which you create your figure from the image on the screen. Your ground will shape how you form that figure. As the film unfolds a couple on the screen embrace and kiss. Your fascination in the film may subside as sadness surfaces as a new figure emerges from your ground of a past relationship, or this may trigger thoughts that there is too much gratuitous sex on view nowadays or maybe embarrassment, with such reaction stemming from the ground of your parents' prudish attitudes. Then the person next to you starts crunching popcorn. A new figure of irritation or a craving for food may emerge, or this person may just form another part of your ground that does not emerge to become particularly figural, falling immediately into your ground as your figure of interest shifts back to the screen. Many fine examples of the concept of figure and ground have been illustrated visually through diagrammatic examples (see below). However, I urge the reader to bear in mind that in gestalt figure and ground is used to describe any process of experiencing, not merely visual. The concept has often been illustrated by the depiction of a vase and two face profiles (Figure 5.1) known as the Rubin vase, although many such illustrations are available. Figures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3 show the relationship between figure and ground. One image cannot exist without the other and in all three examples only one image can be figural at any moment whilst the other forms the ground. A figure cannot form without ground and more than one figure cannot exist at the same time. The process of figure formation is of particular interest to gestalt therapists in terms of what figure the individual selects and how it is chosen. In other words, how does this person make sense of their world at this moment in time (and then the next moment and then the next moment) ? The figure emerges from an undifferentiated background of experience out of which focused needs and interest surface. In a healthy process of figure formation these needs and interests will emerge with clarity and sharpness, stimulating energy. It will be a fluid process that will be updated in response to changing situations. Figure and ground 1 7 Figure 5.1 Rubin's vase Figure 5.2 Columns/figures Figure 5.3 Old woman/young woman When the process of figure formation becomes rigidified or habitual, relating to a past environment rather than the here and now, awareness of the novel is diminished or closed. Consequently, the person does not integrate new experience. As outlined in relating to our environment competing needs rise and fall originating from either an internal experience or external stimuli. Take a moment to look back at the different figures that have emerged in the time you have been reading. In certain states such as acute anxiety figure formation is rapid and poorly differentiated from the ground from which it emerges. Assimilation of experience does not take place. One blurred figure follows another as flitting attention leads to a cluttering of incomplete gestalts. Contact with the environment is diminished - breathing becomes shallow and rapid, negative thoughts and projected fantasies race, the whole bodily system speeds up. The person's failure to form clearly differentiated figures leads to them responding primarily from an internal pole increasing their sense of isolation. Conversely, in a healthy process the emerging figure will be the dominant need at that moment and will be well defined standing out from the background, what is referred to as good form. We could think of the difference as watching television with a damaged aerial and watching a television in high definition. Much of what a gestalt therapist does is to facilitate the sharpening of the figure that emerges from an undifferentiated ground, but when doing so we need to pay attention to the structure of the client's ground. Just as a building, no matter how aesthetically pleasing, will be vulnerable without solid foundations, so too a new way of relating to the world can soon show cracks if built on unsupported relational ground. AWARENESS AND