

Gestalt's Figure Ground Segregation

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When you look at the environment, you look at it as a whole picture, not separate parts. There are images in the environment that people are aware of in a particular moment, this would be the figure. Images people do not attend to or are not aware of make up the ground.

For example: The figure is what a person is concentrating on; for example, take your math homework. The homework paper would be the attended object, or the figure, in that situation. The ground would be everything else in that environment; the desk, the floor, etc. Another example could be papers or books on a desk. The papers and books would be the figures, and the surface of the desk would be the ground.

Some properties of figure ground:

- (1) Figures hold more memorable association than the ground.
- (2) Figures are seen as being in front of the ground.
- (3) The ground is seen as uniformed material and seems to extend behind the figure.
- (4) The contour separating the figure from the ground appears to belong to the figure. (Goldstein, pp. 156-159)

-There are no correct interpretations to what the figure is and what the ground is; it is the individual's choice. People have different memories and experiences that influence their perception of images.

-We have seen that meaningfulness can help determine which area we see as figure. If something has meaning to someone, it normally "jumps out" at them, is more noticeable, and will move their attention away from the environment around it. An example of this is when one looks at an environment, and if this person likes dogs, seeing a dog will attract their attention and it will become the figure. For most people images have different meanings and we can not tell why one perceives one image over another.

The influence of meaning and expectation on the perception of a figure is shown in the picture below. What do you see? (See the back of this sheet for the answer.)



If you had never seen this picture before, you might have had a hard time figuring out what it was: a Dalmatian dog sniffing the ground and walking toward the left. Look at the picture again -- the figure should now be more obvious. Once you see it, it's always easy to see.

A person may first see a vase with a white background or a person may see a black background with two white faces.



A person may see the black horses and knights or they may first see the white horses and knights.



A person may see a young woman looking away or an old woman.

Reversible figure-ground- The above examples are reversible illusions in which a person looks at a picture and there are two different ways to perceive the picture.