Essential Solutions for Page Design Problems

Randomly Placed Elements

by Jenifer Juris

Randomly placed elements are a design problem that can distract from the overall quality of your project. Learn why this is a design problem, solutions for fixing it, and how to use the one exception to the rule.

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This installment of Essential Solutions for Page Design Problems covers the design problem of randomly placed elements. It's one of the rules that most beginning scrapbookers make. When I started, I broke this rule, so we're all in good company. Before we get to the rest of the lesson, let me define randomly placed elements.

What are Randomly Placed Elements?

For most digital scrapbook pages, we have the basics of one or more photos, the title, journaling, and a date. In addition, we can add elements to add to the design of the page.


Randomly placed elements look like this visual example. They are placed away from the photos or the main design elements of the layout. They are out there on their own all by themselves, and they have no real reason to be there.

So now that you have a better idea of what I mean by randomly placed elements, let's look at why it's a design problem.

Design Problem: Randomly Placed Elements

Reason #1 Randomly Placed Elements are a Design Problem: they are a visual distraction that take the focus away from the main design.
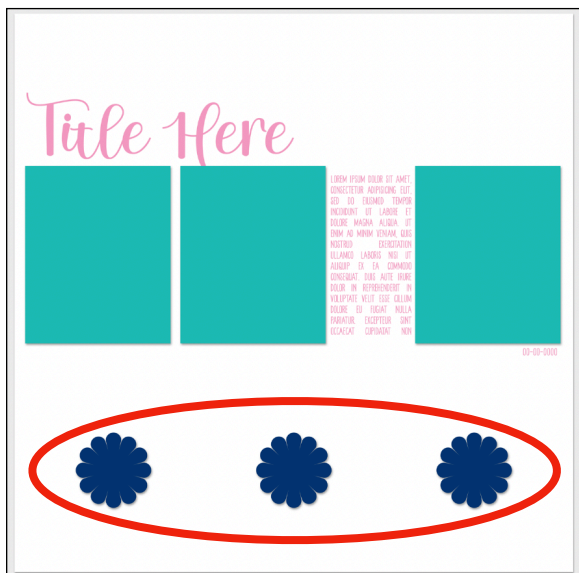
In this visual example, the three elements in the bottom portion of the page are competing or distracting my eye to look at them instead of looking at the photos. We always want the photos to be the focal point of the page, so anything we do that distracts from that is a design problem.

Reason #2 Randomly Placed Elements are a Design Problem: they interrupt the visual flow of the page.

When we first look at a scrapbook page, our eyes are always drawn to something first. Then we let the design draw our eyes around the page. Good design allows us to start with the photos, and flow from there. Here's a visual comparison.

In this first example we've been studying, here's what good visual flow could look like. With the elements placed as you see them, the flow would start at these two photos with the cluster and it would wrap around the page in a circular design. This is good flow because nothing distracts my eye away from the focal point of the page.
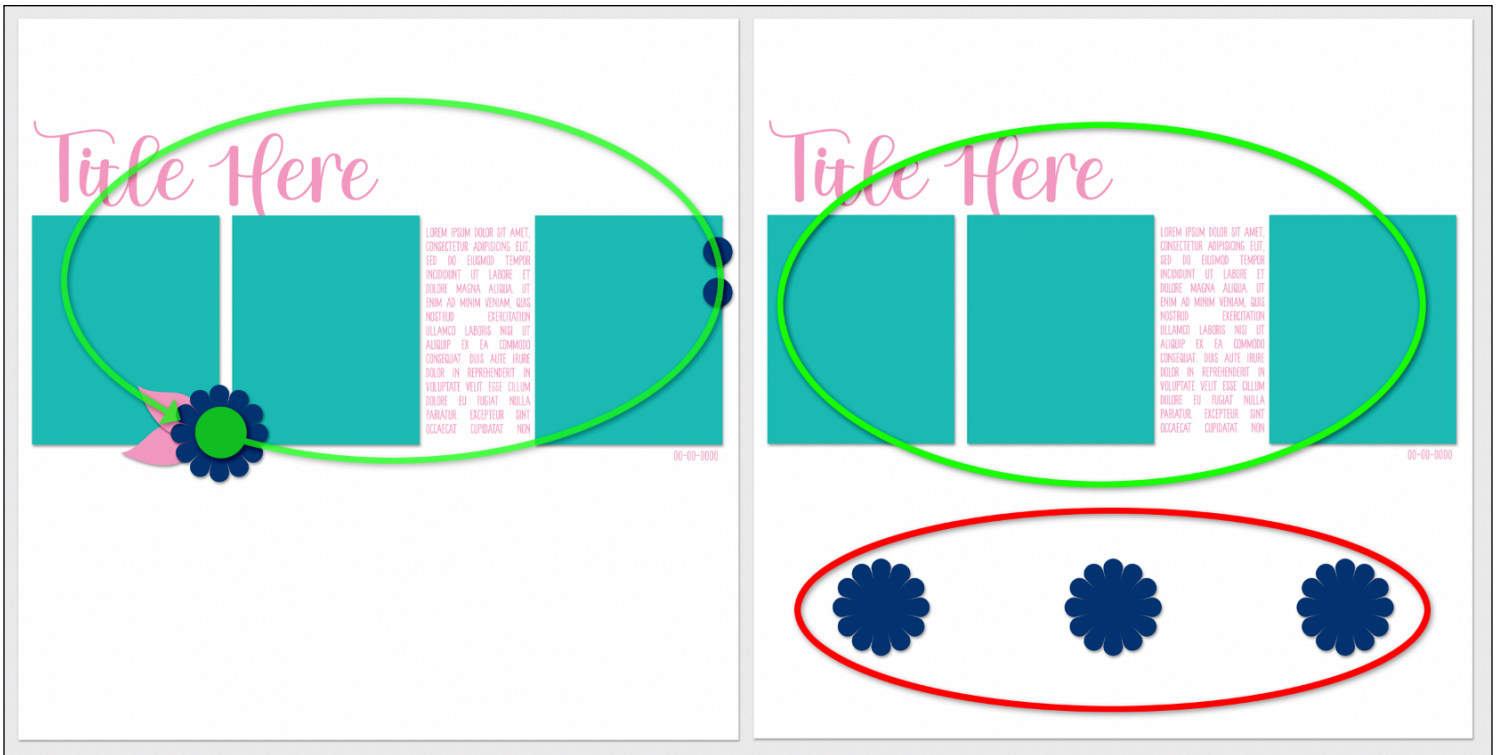
Now let's look at the same page with the random elements. Instead of having 1 pathway for our eyes to follow, we now have two competing pathways because the random elements are distracting away from the focal point. This is an example of bad visual flow.

Reasons for this Design Problem
#1. We're afraid of empty space or white space on our pages.

When a page has good visual flow, there's often going to be at least one area, large or small, that contains white space. But for some of us, we want to fill every space on the page because we're afraid it looks unfinished if we don't. In reality, this white space can help the page breathe or have room for our eyes to relax. It gives us a page that has less tension and makes us enjoy looking at it more.

#2. We love an element so much, we want to use it everywhere.

When I first started scrapbooking, using a favorite element all over a page was something I would have been guilty of doing. It's very distracting but in my mind, it was such a pretty element, I could never get enough. (LOL) Boy, was I wrong. But until I started to see that great-looking pages didn't do this, I had no idea it was hurting my overall design.

#3. We don't know what looks good. When I first started, I was just guessing at how to put a page together visually. I had no idea what I was doing.

Solutions for this Design Problem
1. When in doubt, placing an element or cluster of elements along an intersection or an edge is almost always going to work.

In this visual example, I've placed the main cluster of elements at the intersection of the two photos on the left side of the page.

I've also placed two small elements along the right edge of the rightmost photo.

I placed all of the type layers near enough to the focal point of the page to help reinforce the page design.

One Exception: The Document Edge
This solution also applies to document edges. For some of you, you might consider this the exception to the rule. You might see document edges as foreign boundaries that are to be avoided, and placing anything along them is a random placement since it's not part of the main design. But let me show you visually why this exception to the rule really isn't an exception.

Here's the same template with an additional cluster added to the lower right area of the page. Right now, this cluster is randomly placed. It's not horrible, but it is off by itself and creates a question as to why it's there. When our eyes question something, it takes away from the overall design of the page. This small cluster makes the bottom part of the page feel heavy and keeps distracting me away from the photos.

With a small change in placement that moves it to the document edge, we're no longer visually confused. We see this small cluster along the document edge and it's now part of the design, instead of an afterthought. It helps balance out the large title to the top left of the photos without feeling too heavy and pulling our eyes down and away from the photos or the focal point.
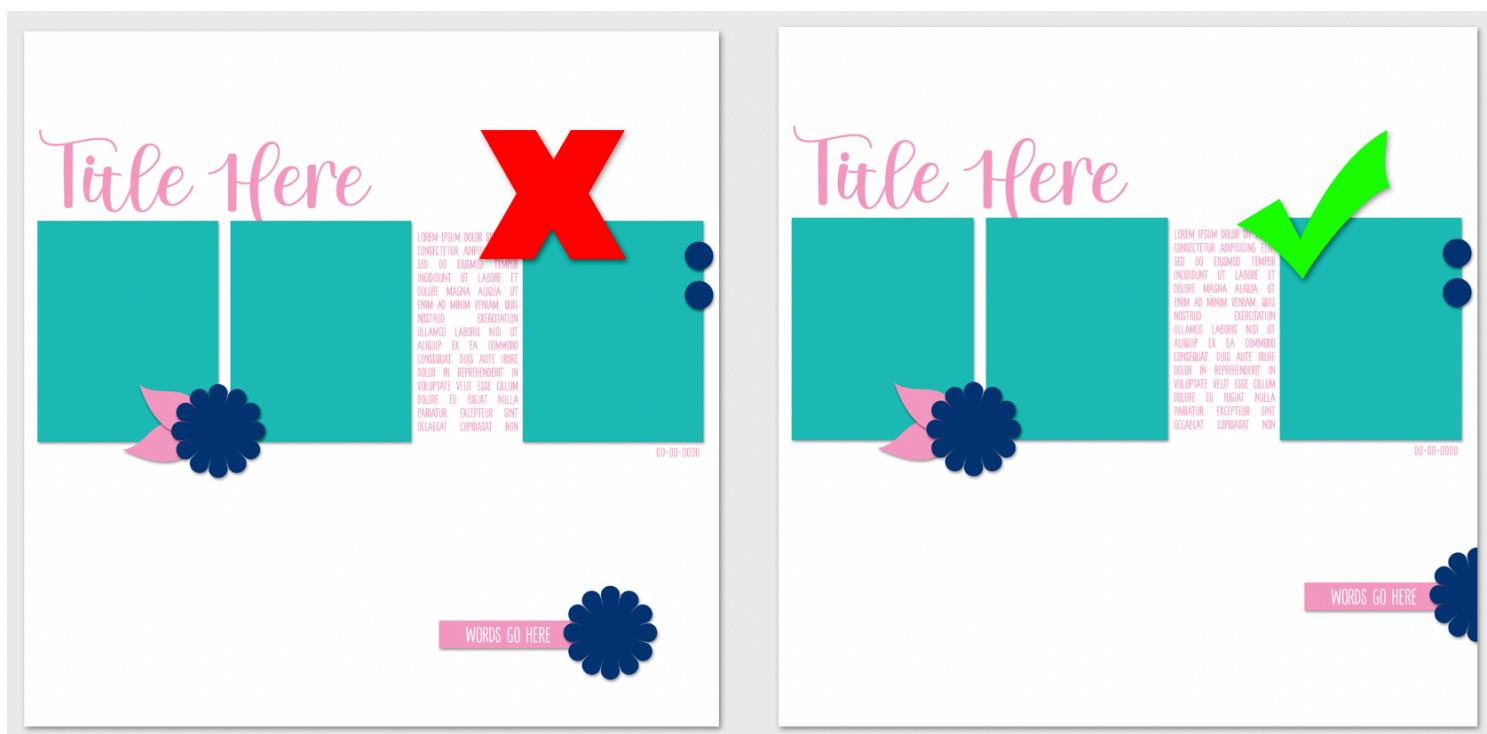
Solutions Continued

2. Keep it Simple. A simple page is better than a bad page, every single time.

It's okay if your layout only has one or two elements. You don't have to fill every space or load your page with huge clusters. You can, but I recommend keeping it simple until you have more experience and are more comfortable with good element placement. Most often, some of my favorite pages are the ones with very little on them.

3. If you need extra help learning more about page design, take a class.

Design Beautiful Pages is a class we offer here at Digital Scrapper, and it covers so much more than I can cover in a quick design problem video. I highly recommend you check it out if you feel like you need extra help. Learning new things is always worth it, especially when it pays off and you feel confident and love how your pages look.

These three solutions do not encompass everything there is to say about element placement but they are a good start.

Visual Example
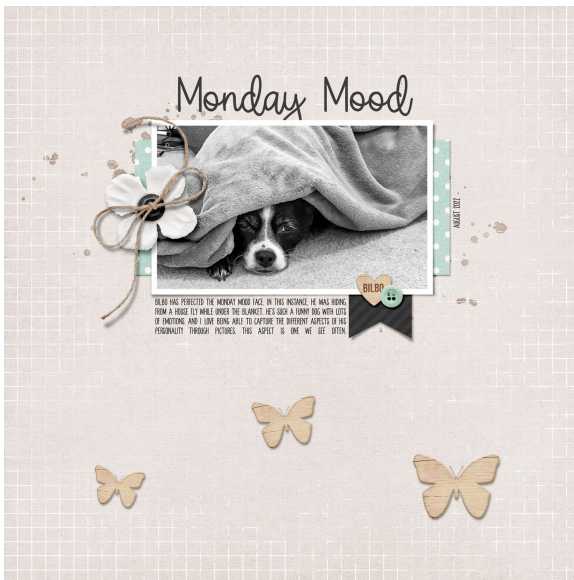
Here's a scrapbook page I made featuring my most recent picture of Bilbo. He was hiding from a house fly and I thought his face perfectly captured the mood of a Monday. In this example, I have placed 3 wooden butterflies along the bottom portion of the page. I placed them like this because not only is this something I see people do on a regular basis, I know it's something I did when I first started digital scrapbooking. These three butterflies really distract my eye from the focal point of the page, which centers around the photo of my dog.

Here's my page now that I've removed the random elements. Instead of having three random butterflies take up space below the photo, I placed a small cluster of word art paper strips and a wooden heart along the bottom edge of the document. This keeps my eyes focused on the main photo cluster first. Then my eyes are drawn down to the additional elements below. My eyes are no longer distracted by random elements that are off by themselves, so I am no longer confused and my page is more visually pleasing because of it.

With the design problem next to the design solution, it's even easier to see that white space or empty space is ok. It gives your eyes a break and keeps the page from being overwhelming. The solution page shows that properly placed elements will enhance the photos on your page, instead of distracting from them.
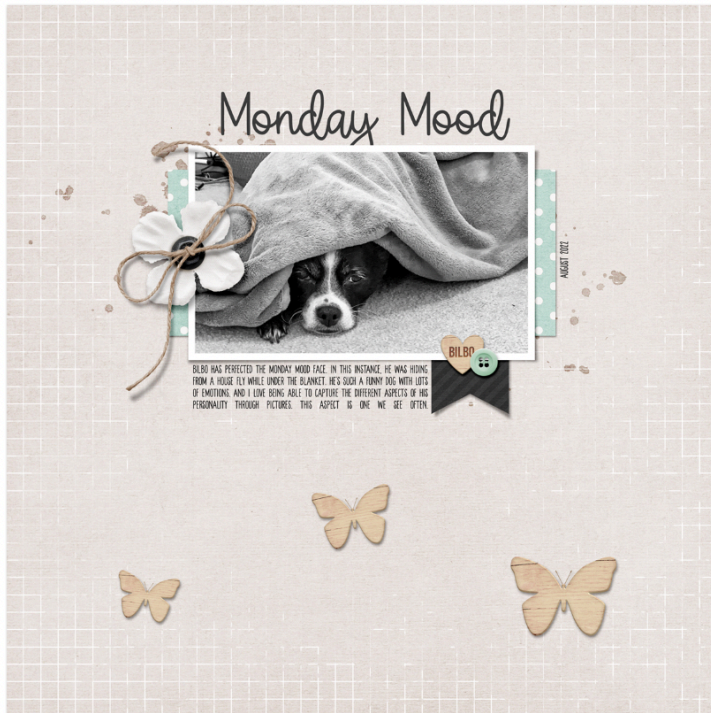
We went from having 2 visual flows to having 1 visual flow, and that's why the solution page is more pleasing visually. No competition, just complementing.

So to recap, the design problem is placing elements randomly in order to fill space.

The solution is to place elements along intersections and edges, keep things simple, or take a class on page design to help advance your skills.

Credits:
Page & Photo: Jenifer Juris
Kit: Simple Joys by Anita Designs
Fonts: Sugar Rush, Euphoria Sans, Bebas Neue Pro