

Essential Solutions for Page Design Problems

Adding a Drop Shadow to Flat Elements

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Learn the very basics about drop shadows and why flat objects shouldn't have them.

In this installment of Essential Solutions for Page Design Problems, we are going to look at the design problem of drop shadows added to flat elements. Before we get into the design problem, let's make sure we are all on the same page by looking at a few definitions.

Definition #1: Drop Shadow

A drop shadow is something we can place behind any object to give it dimension.

In this example, here is the same flower shown both with and without a drop shadow. This soft gray shadow is what gives the flower dimension and makes it look like it's popping off of the slide.



Definition #2: Flat Element

In digital scrapbooking, there are two basic kinds of items we can put on our digital scrapbook pages. One category is dimensional. The other is flat. Flat elements are items that would be completely flat against the paper behind them.

Here are some visual examples of dimensional objects. Flowers, buttons, ribbons, frames, etc - all of these are something that would have a drop shadow in real life if you put them on an actual paper scrapbook page.



Here are some visual examples of flat objects. Paint, type, complex masks, and grunge are a few examples of flat elements. These would not have a drop shadow if you were putting them on an actual paper scrapbook page. They rest flat against the paper with no room for a shadow, which is why they are called flat elements.



So now that we are all on the same page in regard to drop shadows, and flat versus dimensional objects, let's look at the design problem.

Design Problem:

The design problem is putting a drop shadow under a flat element.

Causes for why we may be tempted to do this can vary. Sometimes, we are trying to make our type more readable. Sometimes, we're having so much fun with drop shadows that we want to add them to everything. Whatever the cause, it's not a good idea, and here's why.

Why?

Placing a drop shadow behind a flat element is a design problem because in real life, there is no space between the flat element and the paper. So there's no room for a drop shadow.

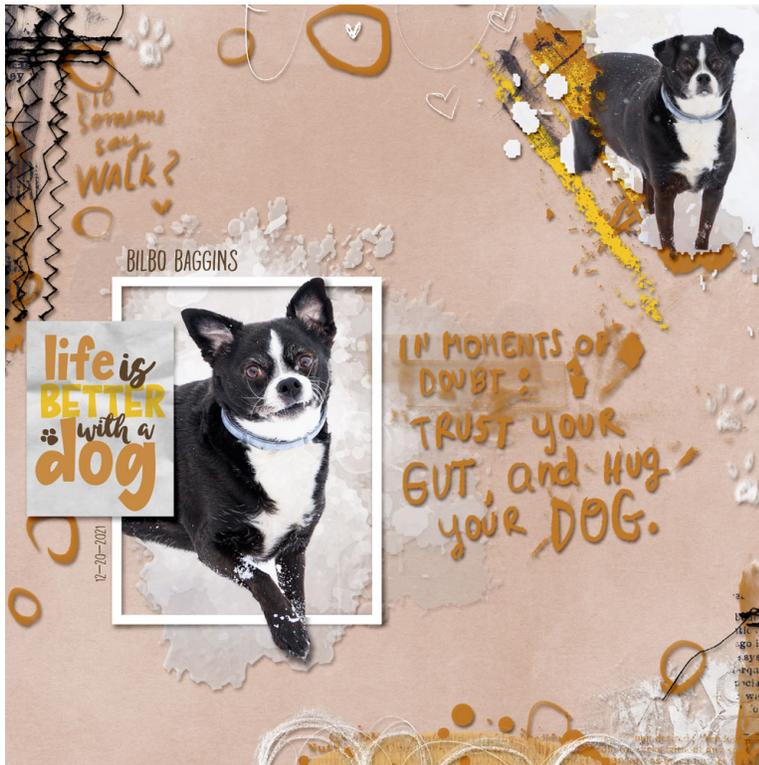
Our minds know that a brushstroke or a typed phrase could never float off the paper and have a shadow. So when we add a drop shadow to digital items that shouldn't have one, it confuses our brains. And any time something on our scrapbook pages confuses our brains, it lowers the visual quality of the layout.

Here's my one solution for this design problem.

**DON'T PUT DROP SHADOWS
UNDER FLAT ELEMENTS.**

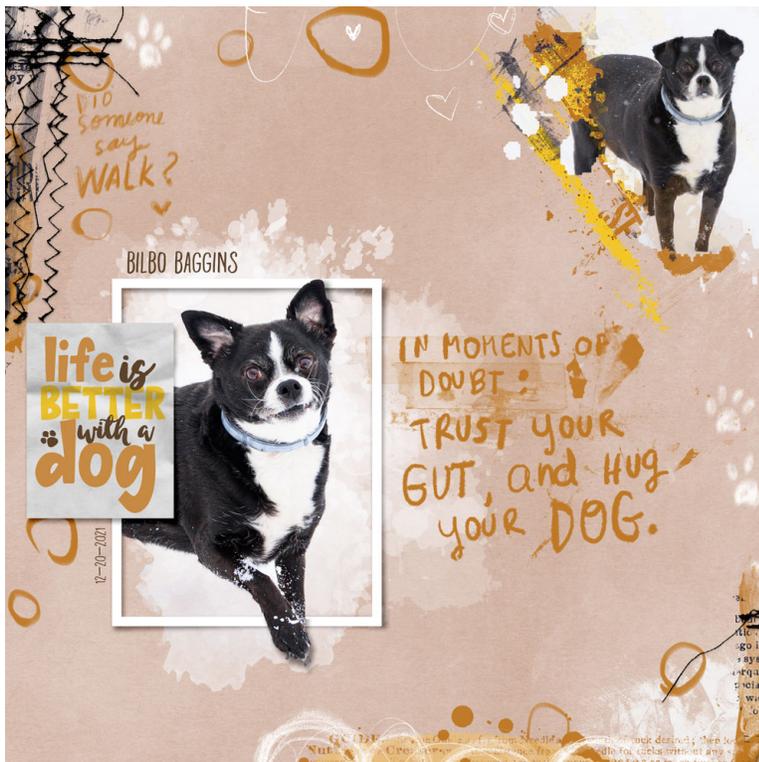
Let's take a look at a digital scrapbook page where I've used a complex mask, some brushstrokes, and some type, as well as some dimensional elements. And let's see how the page looks when I add drop shadows to the flat elements.

Bad Example:



This page has a few dimensional elements such as the white frame, the paper word art tag, and some string. This also has quite a few flat elements. There are multiple brushstrokes or paint strokes, painted words, ink strokes and drawings, as well as complex masks that I clipped my photos to. In this wrong example, I've added a drop shadow to every single element to show you why this Design Problem can quickly become a distraction. In real life, painted strokes can't hover over the top of a paper. Neither can painted words or hand-drawn hearts. My eyes are distracted by the shadows my brain knows shouldn't be there.

Good Example:

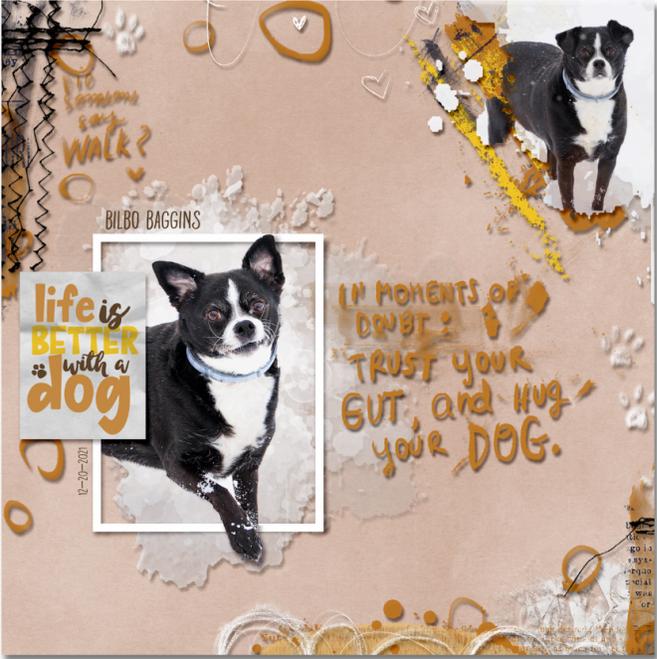


Here's the page after removing all the drop shadows from the flat elements. Man, when I see the corrected version, my mind relaxes. Everything is as it should be and my brain can now allow me to just enjoy this cute scrapbook page I made of my sweet dog.

And just to drive it home, here's the before and after side by side. It makes such a difference.

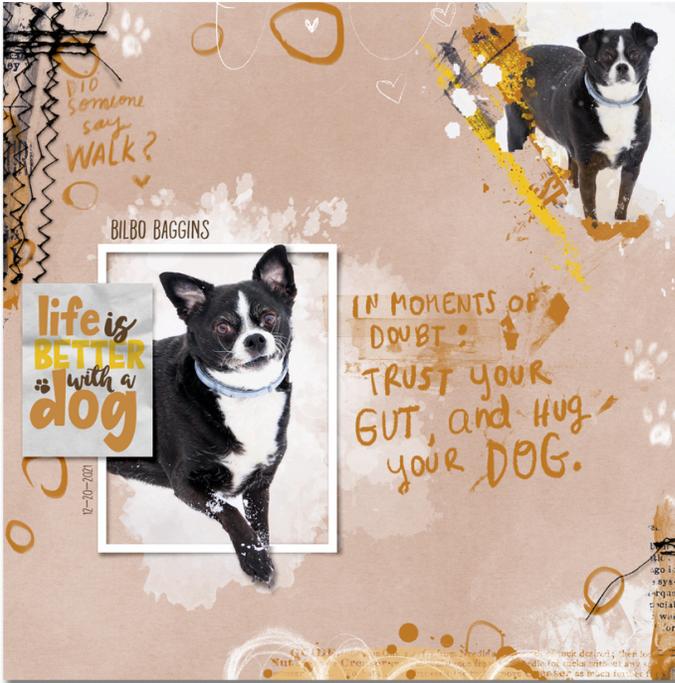


So to recap, adding a drop shadow to a flat element is a design problem because it causes visual confusion, which lowers the quality of our pages.



DESIGN PROBLEM:
ADDING A DROP SHADOW TO ANY FLAT ELEMENT CAUSES VISUAL CONFUSION.

The only real solution here is to never put a drop shadow under a flat element.



SOLUTION:
DON'T PUT DROP SHADOWS
UNDER FLAT ELEMENTS.

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