

DESIGN RESEARCH · BRAND APPLICATION

The Non-Designer's Design Book, **applied.**

Robin Williams' four principles — contrast, repetition, alignment, proximity — explained, sourced, and rebuilt piece by piece with the Proper Sky brand system. Ends with a working redesign of our three LinkedIn banners.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Why a design book for non-designers

Robin Williams (the writer and teacher, not the actor) published *The Non-Designer's Design Book* in 1994 for one audience: people who have to produce pages — flyers, reports, cards, ads — without any design training. It became one of the best-selling design books ever written; the fourth edition (Peachpit Press, 2015) added a full section on typography. Three decades later it is still the standard recommendation for the people who make most of a company's day-to-day artifacts: marketers, founders, account managers, engineers.

The book opens with a story. Williams got a tree-identification guide as a gift, learned to recognize the Joshua tree — and then saw Joshua trees everywhere, including on her own street. They had been there all along; she could only see them once she could *name* them. Design works the same way: once you can name what is wrong with a page, you can fix it.

She names four things. Every page that looks “off” is usually breaking at least one; every clean page quietly obeys all four. Williams teaches them in the order proximity → alignment → repetition → contrast, then points out — deliberately — that the memorable acronym reads the other way: **C.R.A.P.** Every “after” in this report is built exclusively from the Proper Sky system: the six-token palette, Plus Jakarta Sans, the 8 / 15 / 44 / 60 radii, blue-tinted shadows, the swell. Good brand systems are the four principles, pre-decided and written down.

01 · PROXIMITY

Group related items together.

Physical closeness implies relationship. Space is information.

02 · ALIGNMENT

Nothing on the page is arbitrary.

Every element shares an invisible line with another element.

03 · REPETITION

Repeat the visual kit throughout.

Consistency becomes identity. Unity comes from reuse.

04 · CONTRAST

If it's not the same, make it very different.

Contrast creates hierarchy and pulls the eye in first.

Proximity

Items that belong together should sit together. Distance between things is a statement about their relationship.

Williams' rule is blunt: *"Group related items together."* When every line gets the same spacing, the reader works out the structure themselves. Group the lines and the structure is visible before anyone reads a word. It is the Gestalt principle of proximity — near things read as related, and whitespace, not boxes, makes the groups (Nielsen Norman Group, ref. 3). Her test: squint and count the visual units. More than three to five, keep grouping.

BEFORE

- Lunch & Learn ①
- Cybersecurity basics for growing teams ②
- Thursday, October 15 ③
- 12:00 noon ④
- Proper Sky HQ, Philadelphia ⑤
- Lunch provided ⑥
- RSVP by October 10 ⑦
- propersky.com ⑧

Eight lines, eight equal gaps, eight equal-weight items. Nothing says time and place belong together.

AFTER

LUNCH & LEARN ①

Cybersecurity basics for growing teams

WHEN & WHERE ②

Thursday, October 15 · 12:00 noon
Proper Sky HQ, Philadelphia · lunch provided

RSVP ③

By October 10 → propersky.com

Nothing added or reworded — eight items became three groups. Squint: you count three.

2×

The working ratio: the gap **between** groups is at least twice the gap **inside** a group — 3× on a dense page. Take space away from inside groups before adding it anywhere.

Watch for: equal spacing everywhere, double returns out of habit, content spread to fill the page, and headings floating equidistant between two paragraphs — a heading belongs to what it introduces.

Alignment

Every element shares an invisible line with something else on the page. One strong edge beats three weak ones.

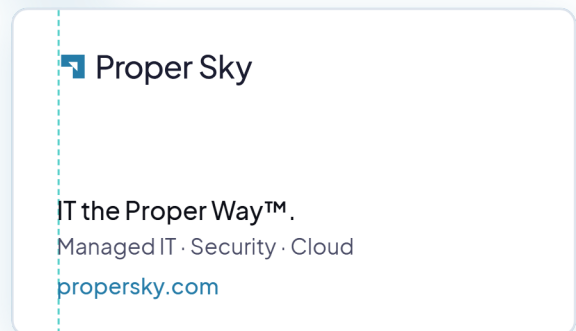
The book's statement: *"Nothing should be placed on the page arbitrarily. Every element should have some visual connection with another element on the page."* Readers never notice a clean alignment, but they instantly feel a broken one. Williams singles out the beginner's default — centering everything — as the main offender: two soft ragged edges and no line for the eye to travel down. Find one strong line and commit; mixing alignments is the real crime.

BEFORE



Centered card: two ragged edges, decorative tildes doing the work spacing should do.

AFTER



One flush-left rail (dashed) carries logo, tagline, services, URL. The right side is quiet on purpose.

IN THE PROPER SKY SYSTEM

Flush-left is the house alignment — headings, body, CTAs on one rail; centered type is a decision, reserved for symmetric moments. The 12-column grid and 1460px container exist so surfaces inherit their lines. Logo placement is a rule: clear space equal to the height of the "P", snapped to the layout edge, the same corner every time.

Watch for: centering as a default, more than one alignment per surface, and elements "almost" on a shared edge — a few pixels off reads as a mistake, not a choice.

Repetition

Repeat some aspect of the design through the whole piece. Consistency is what makes many pages read as one brand.

Williams frames it as turning consistency into a device: *“Repeat some aspect of the design throughout the entire piece.”* The repeated element can be anything — a weight, a rule, a color, a spatial relationship. Repetition binds a multi-page document into one object; across artifacts it is simply another word for **brand**. Her caution runs the other way too: repeat with intent, not monotony.

BEFORE



SECURITY!

Locked down, always.



Our people

Humans who answer.



GROWTH

Plans that scale.

Three cards, three radii, three shadows, three fonts' worth of styling. Each “designed” from scratch.

AFTER



SECURITY

Locked down, always.



PEOPLE

Humans who answer.



GROWTH

Plans that scale.

One treatment, repeated: 15px radius, blue-tinted shadow, eyebrow + line, brand icons. Reads as a system.

THE PROPER SKY REPETITION KIT

Plus Jakarta Sans, only

Six-token palette

Radii 8 / 15 / 44 / 60

Blue-tinted shadows

Eyebrow device

The swell corner

Multi-tone icons

Glossy blue CTA

Watch for: one-off styling invented for a single slide or post, mixed corner radii, neutral gray shadows, and a second typeface sneaking in through a template.

Contrast

If two items are not exactly the same, make them very different. Contrast pulls the eye to the page — and tells it where to start.

The most quoted line in the book: “If two items are not exactly the same, then make them different. Really different.” Two headlines at 40px and 46px look like a mistake; 17px body under a 46px headline looks like a decision. The eye lands on the strongest contrast first, so whatever contrasts most is, functionally, your message. The failure mode has a name too: “Don’t be a wimp.”

BEFORE

Quarterly Business Review

Prepared for your organization

Q3 2026 · Proper Sky

Gray on gray, three near-identical sizes, everything centered: nothing invites the eye anywhere.

AFTER

QUARTERLY BUSINESS REVIEW

Q3 2026

Prepared for your organization · Proper Sky

Navy field, white display type at 3x the meta size, one teal spike. The eye knows where to land.

Color contrast, measured against the brand palette

Combination	Ratio	Verdict
Navy on White	18.9 : 1	AAA — the default body pairing
Navy on Cloud Gray	17.4 : 1	AAA — soft section bands
White on Trust Blue	4.7 : 1	AA — buttons, links, 18px+ headings
Tertiary Dark on Teal	8.4 : 1	AAA — the canonical teal pairing
White on Teal	2.0 : 1	Fails — never for text

Watch for: two sizes within ~20% of each other, gray on gray, an accent used so often it stops being one, and emphasis stacking. “Don’t be a wimp” has a floor: 4.5 : 1 for body text.

Concord, conflict, contrast

The second half of the book applies the same logic to type. Typefaces fall into rough families — oldstyle serifs, moderns, slab serifs, sans serifs, scripts, decoratives — and every pairing lands in one of three buckets: **concord** (one family, quiet and unified), **conflict** (two faces of similar structure — a choice or a copy-paste accident?), and **contrast** (clearly different families with different jobs). The rule of thumb: combine faces from clearly different families, or don't combine at all. Concord and contrast both work. Conflict never does.

CONCORD — SAFE

MANAGED IT

Quarterly service review

March window · Client A

All twelve endpoints completed a successful restore test.

One family doing every role. Calm, formal, hard to get wrong. The Proper Sky standard.

CONFLICT — AVOID

MANAGED IT

Quarterly service review

March window · Client A

All twelve endpoints completed a successful restore test.

Two similar serifs (Georgia over Times). Look for what's *similar*: too much — it reads as a mistake.

CONTRAST — STRONG

MANAGED IT

Quarterly service review

March window · Client A

All twelve endpoints completed a successful restore test.

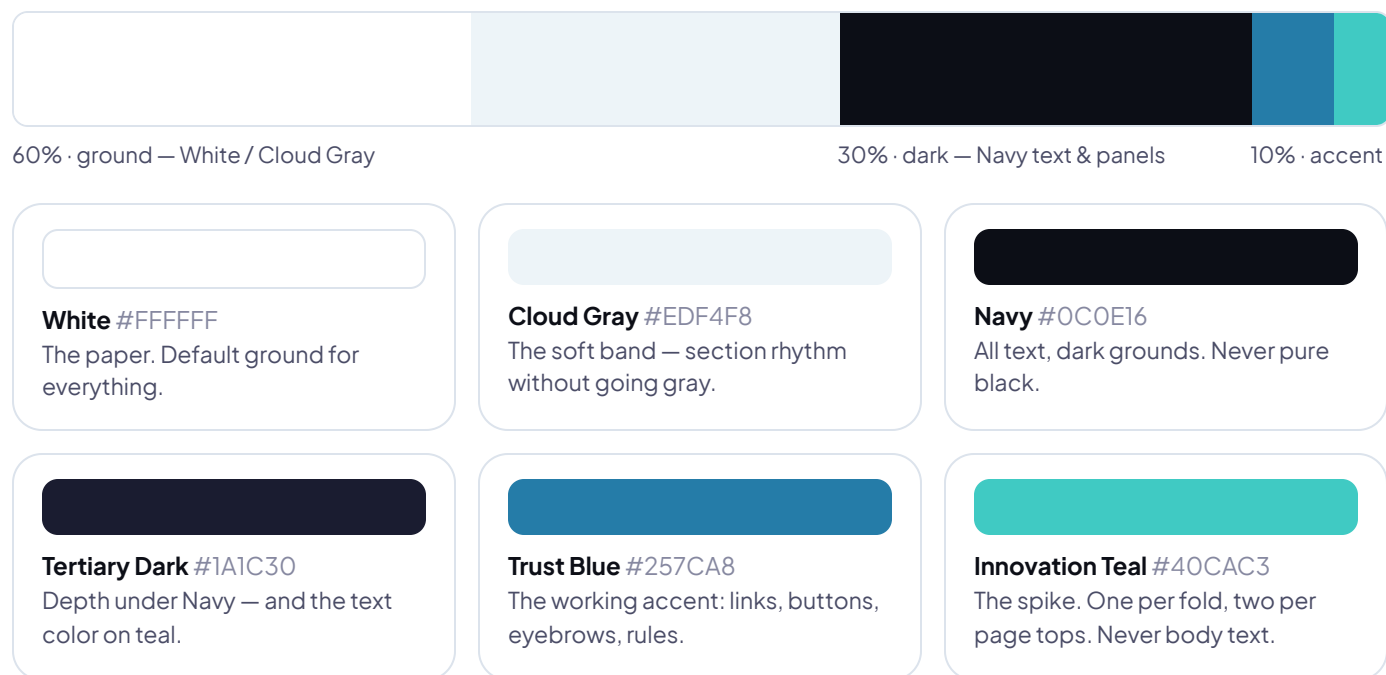
A bold serif display over a small sans body — size, weight and structure move at once. Clearly deliberate.

SIX AXES, AND THE HOUSE RULES

Contrast type on **size, weight, structure, form, direction, color** — move two or three at once rather than nudging one. Jump at least 1.5x per hierarchy level, 2x for the main heading, and give the darkest value to the thing you most want read. Proper Sky is a single-family system (concord by default): the ladder jumps 52 / 46 / 30 / 18, Medium carries headings, Regular carries body, Bold marks highlights — never more than two weights per page — and the tracked-caps eyebrow contrasts by form.

Color: one accent, one job

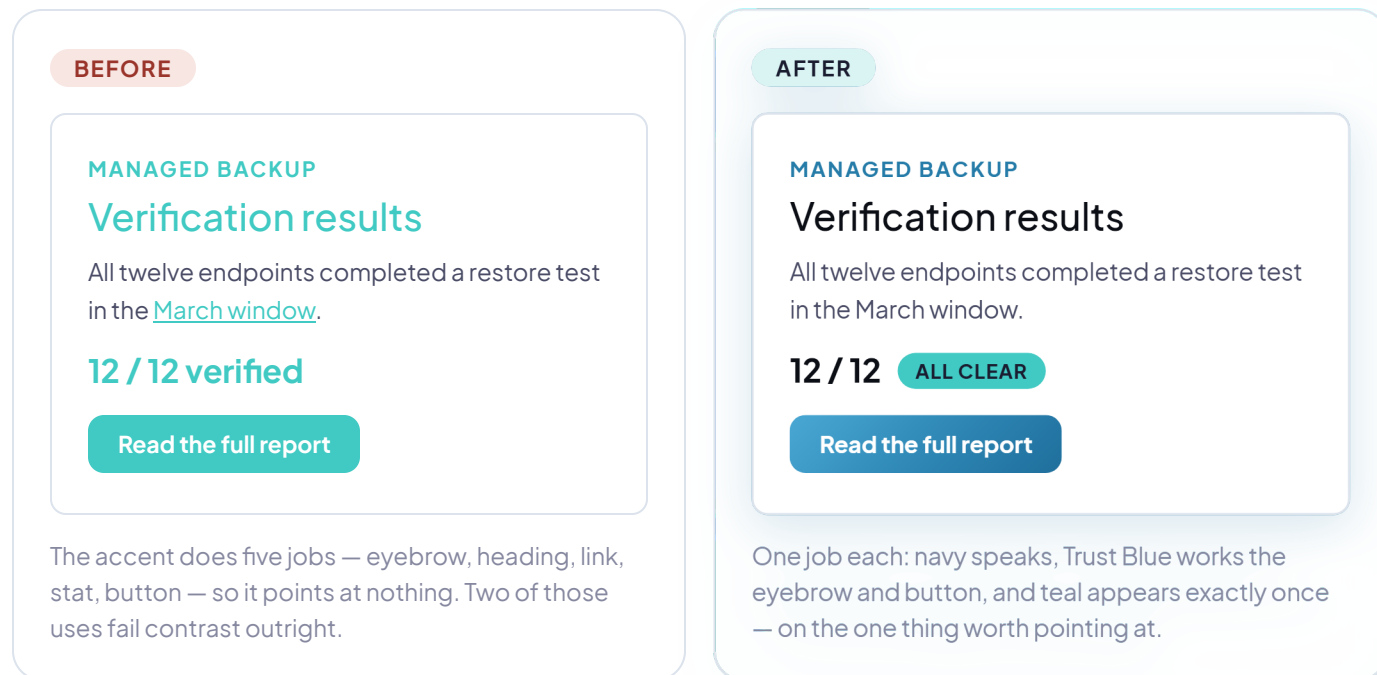
The book closes its design half with color: the wheel, complements, shades and tints. Useful vocabulary — but the failure Williams is guarding against isn't an ugly hue. It's color with no job. A fixed palette removes the decision, and ratio matters more than which colors you picked: roughly **60% neutral ground, 30% dark carrying the text, 10% accent** doing the pointing.



Provenance: these are the six canonical tokens of the Proper Sky design system (colors_and_type.css), built from the 2024 Brand Guidelines and reconciled against probersky.com. “Cloud Gray” is the current name for the token the older PDF called *Light Gray*; Trust Blue was *Dark Blue*, Innovation Teal was *Aqua*. Same values, current names.

The ratio, ignored and applied

When the accent color means “look here” in one place, decoration in another, and a category in a third, it stops pointing at anything. The same card, twice:



Watch for: the accent doing three unrelated jobs, teal used as text (2.0 : 1 on white — see the table in Principle 04), and new colors invented per artifact. If one number is worth memorizing: 60 / 30 / 10.

CASE STUDY

The LinkedIn banners, rebuilt

Three existing banners (1584×396, the personal-profile format), rebuilt with the four principles — copy untouched. One decision drives all three: a single flush-left rail carries logo → tagline-eyebrow → headline → action on every banner, and the right half belongs to imagery. That skeleton, repeated, makes three different banners read as one brand.

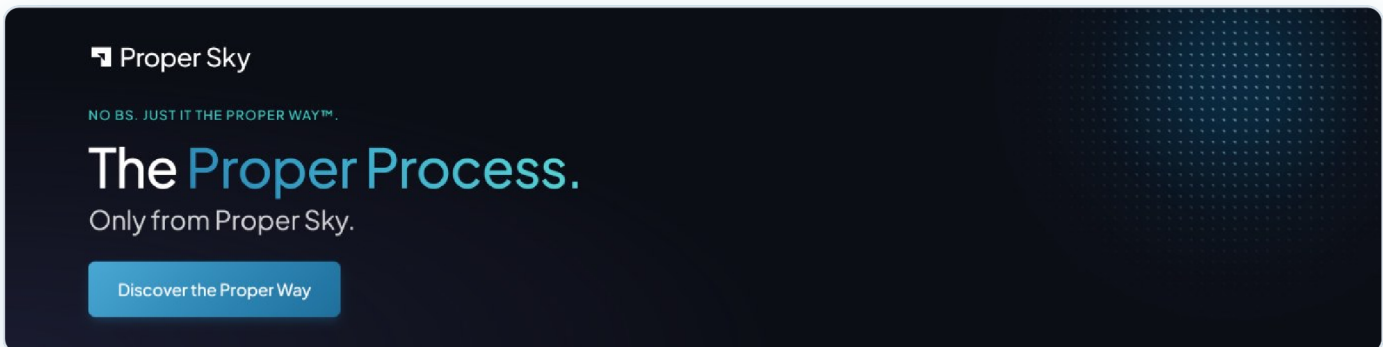
Banner 01 — type only

BEFORE



Three alignments compete — logo top-left, CTA floating top-center, headline centered — and the CTA comes *before* the message it belongs to. The two headline lines are the same size: similar, not different. The dot texture repeats noise, not identity.

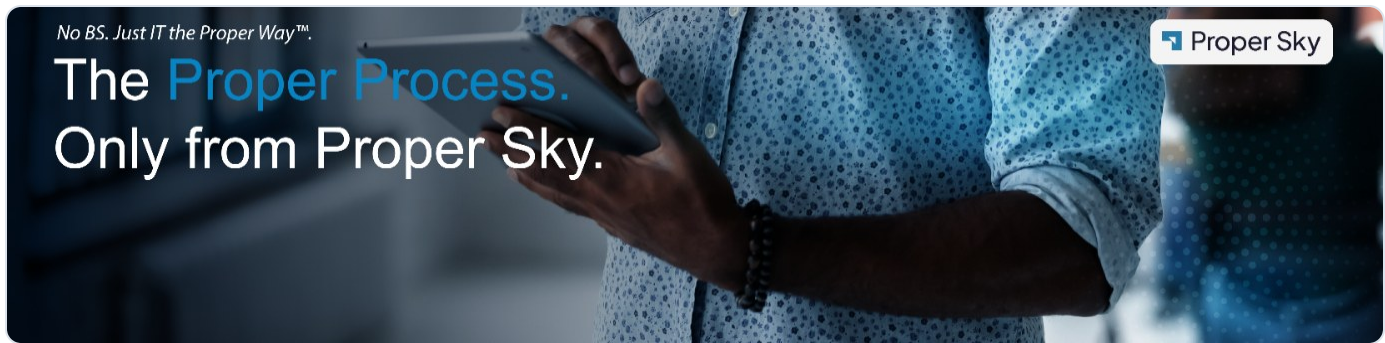
AFTER



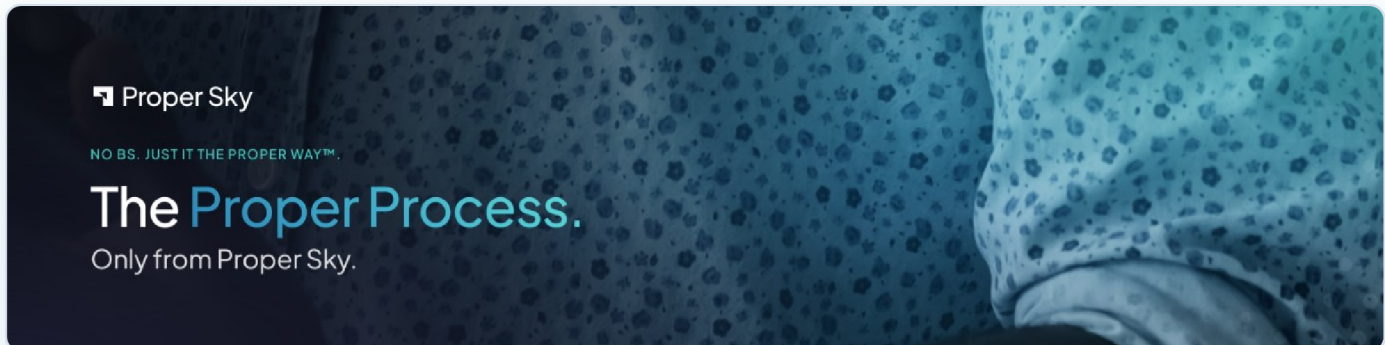
One rail (alignment). Tagline sits with its headline, CTA stands apart (proximity). Headline dominates at twice the sub-line's size, one glossy CTA on a calm field (contrast). The swell corner and gradient span come from the kit (repetition).

Banner 02 — photo, dark

BEFORE



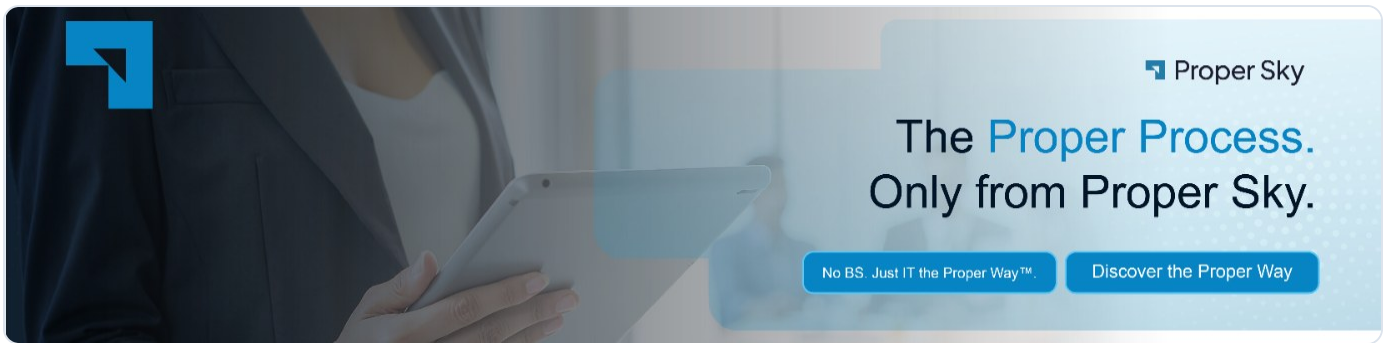
AFTER



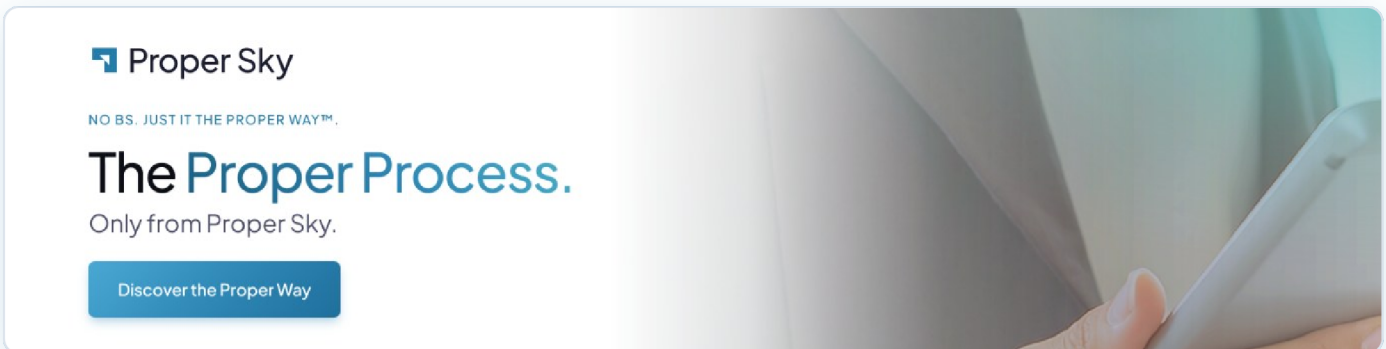
Before: the headline sits on a busy photo with weak value contrast, and the logo pill opens a second alignment edge. After: the brand's navy diagonal wash protects the text side while the photo stays bright on the right (contrast); logo joins the rail (alignment); the tagline becomes a proper eyebrow (proximity).

Banner 03 — light

BEFORE



AFTER



Before: a tagline dressed as a button competes with the real CTA, the brand appears twice, and a white haze flattens the whole photo. After: the hero wash inverted — white-to-imagery with the teal glow kept, natural color restored, text in the quiet zone (contrast, repetition, proximity, alignment).

Copy note: "The Proper Process" is kept verbatim from the originals; the V/TO-canonical process name is CIF® — worth reconciling before these ship. Keep critical content out of the lower-left corner of any LinkedIn banner — the profile photo overlaps it.

The four questions to ask any draft

PROXIMITY

Squint. How many things do you count?

More than three to five: group related items until the structure is visible.

ALIGNMENT

Can you draw the line every element sits on?

Find one strong edge and commit. Centering is a decision, not a default.

REPETITION

Would page five recognize page one?

Reuse the kit — type, radii, shadows, eyebrows — instead of inventing per page.

CONTRAST

Where does the eye land first? On purpose?

If two things differ, make them very different. Don't be a wimp.

References

1. Williams, Robin. *The Non-Designer's Design Book: Design and Typographic Principles for the Visual Novice*, 4th edition. Peachpit Press, 2015.
2. Shen, Zhenghui. "Robin Williams' Four Basic Design Principles for Non-Designers." Wiredcraft — wiredcraft.com/blog/robin-williams-four-basic-design-principles-for-non-designers
3. "Proximity Principle in Visual Design." Nielsen Norman Group — nngroup.com/articles/gestalt-proximity
4. "5 Principles of Visual Design in UX." Nielsen Norman Group — nngroup.com/articles/principles-visual-design
5. "Book: The Non-Designer's Design Book — Fantastic Basic Design Principles." The Clarity Editor, 2021 — theclarityeditor.com
6. Proper Sky Brand Guidelines 2024 and the Proper Sky design-system README (internal); visual tokens reconciled against propersky.com.



IT the Proper Way™.

From Philadelphia with love. 

Set in Plus Jakarta Sans. Built entirely from the Proper Sky token sheet: the six-token palette, canonical radii, blue-tinted shadows, and the swell motif.