Direction

The path that the viewer's eye traces as it moves around the ad is called the ad's direction. The same concept is sometimes called sequence referring to the order in which the viewer sees each element. A good designer consciously controls the viewer’s eye to a large degree. Line and color are two devices often used to control eye movement. When the same color appears in three different locations forming a triangular pattern, the viewer’s eye is likely to move in the same way.

A line is always easy for the eye to follow. It may be a linear graphic element or the contour of an element. It doesn’t need to be a straight line in order for the viewer’s eye to follow it.

The easiest eye path to follow is a vertical line from the top to the bottom of a page, but it can make for a boring arrangement of elements. Another familiar path is a Z which moves from left to right at the top, then diagonally back to the left, then left to right again at the bottom. That’s the way most newspaper pages are laid out. The viewer’s eye can even be persuaded to follow a contrived path such as the one created with type in the Budweiser ad below...but only if he or she is a fan of the product. Most people who see the ad would take in the large product image, then make a quick clockwise loop around the encircling small pictures.

To become sensitive to eye paths in ads, look at the ones on this page and think about what strikes you first as well as the order in which it is drawn to other elements. Were there any elements on which you had difficulty resting your eyes?
There is, however, one type of page arrangement that is almost always certain to create a direction or sequencing problem. When you position elements around the outside margins of the page or in the corners, the viewer’s eye must leap across large expanses of negative space to reach the positive ones. The ad at right illustrates the problem.

Both ads at left have small objects placed in the corners tending to draw your eye to the outside edge of the page. But, they have solved the problem with frames and large, brightly colored pictures that bring you back to the center. Even so, it’s harder to move your eye around these ads than the ones on the preceding page. You need to be very conscious of whether the viewer will be able to circulate among your elements comfortably and easily.