

# Composition Tips

Guidelines for creating an interesting  
composition in your drawings.

*Marsha Devine*

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# What is “*composition*”?

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**Composition** refers to the organization, arrangement, and combination of objects within the borders of a drawing space. You want to bring the eyes of the viewer toward your center of interest within an aesthetically pleasing composition.

*Some elements of composition are:*

**Focal point:** A primary center of interest (or focus) in a drawing.

**Overlapping:** The visual separation of a drawing into foreground, middle ground, and distant space by overlapping (or layering) objects.

**Negative space:** The space within your drawing not occupied by a focal point, important subject, or area of interest.

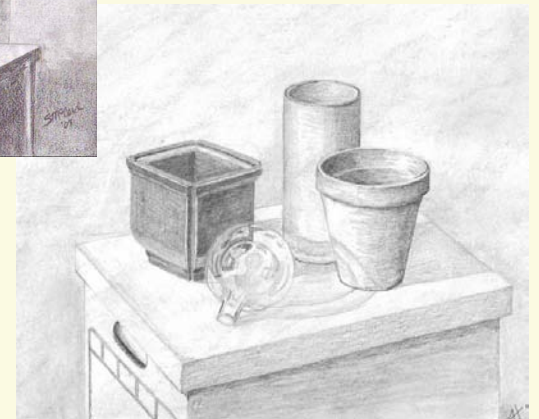
**Lines:** Navigation tools used to guide the viewer through the different elements of a drawing.

**Balance:** A stable arrangement of subjects within a composition.

# Focal Point

- Most compositions have one or maybe two main subjects that are the focal point(s) of the image. Always try to make sure there is some sort of relationship factor with the subjects that complement each other.
- Your center of focus on the **composition** is always better off-center and targeting the thirds marks are best. Known in art history class as “*The Golden Means*”, “*The Rule of Three*” or “*Magic Thirds*”, this technique dates back to the “old masters” of the Renaissance.

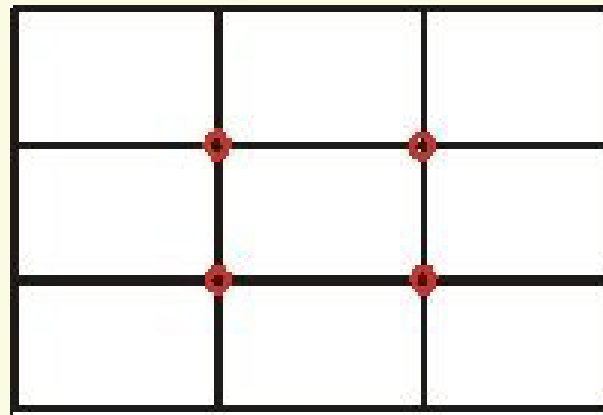
Flower in lower right echoes the flowers on rear left



# the Rule of Thirds?

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Quite simply, divide a canvas in thirds both horizontally and vertically, and place the focus of the painting either one third across or one third up or down the picture, or where the lines intersect (the red circles on the diagram).



**RULE OF THIRDS**

# Magic Thirds example...



“Surfboard Hercules”

- “Surfboard Hercules” uses “magic thirds”.
- Main character “the surfer” is positioned on
- The left third mark.
- His arms are crossed on the upper third. To balance the composition,
- The top and base of the surfboards line themselves with the upper and lower thirds.
- The tipped surfboard points to the right third mark
- The space between the left two sunbathers shows that negative space can be used effectively.
- The upper and lower right lines are the most important because most western cultures are taught to read left to right.
- Too many objects may confuse the viewer.

# Balance

**Symmetrical compositions** convey a sense of stability. In this example, a single large figure in the center is flanked by a smaller figure on either side. The shape of the artwork itself is also symmetrical—a vertical line bisecting the image would create two equal halves that are mirror images of one another.



*Madonna, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Saint Paul*

Bernardo Daddi,  
about 1330



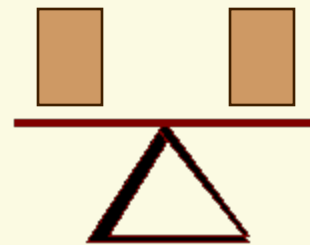
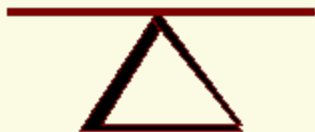
Wall Clock  
French, 1735–1740

**Asymmetrical compositions** often convey a sense of movement since the elements of the composition are unbalanced. In this example, the artist used organic forms to create a composition that mimics the movement of vines growing in an unordered fashion around the clock face.

# Symmetry & Balance

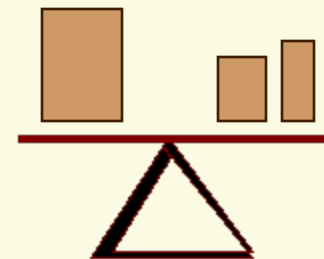
Just as a room would seem out of balance if all of the furniture were piled up on one side, a drawing must be balanced to be aesthetically pleasing. Regardless of their actual physical weight, large objects in a drawing seem heavier than small ones. By objectively viewing the elements in a drawing, you can learn to see their "perceptual weight."

To do this it helps to imagine a fulcrum or balance point at the bottom center of your sketch.

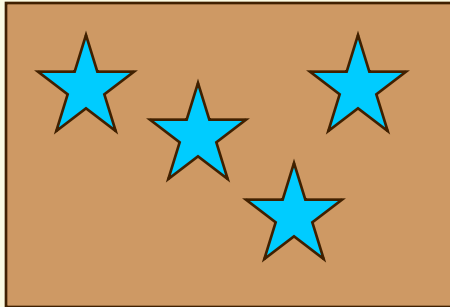


Symmetrical  
Balance

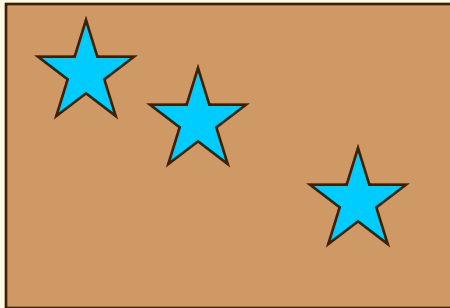
Asymmetrical  
Balance



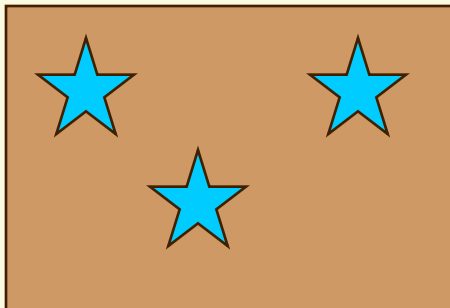
# Use an odd number of elements



With an even number of elements, such as in this basic composition, your eye automatically pairs up the stars, whether it's two left and two right or two top and two bottom.



The next two compositions, each with an odd number of elements, are more dynamic in terms of composition, because your brain can't pair up the elements.



3, 5, 7...



# Odd numbers add interest

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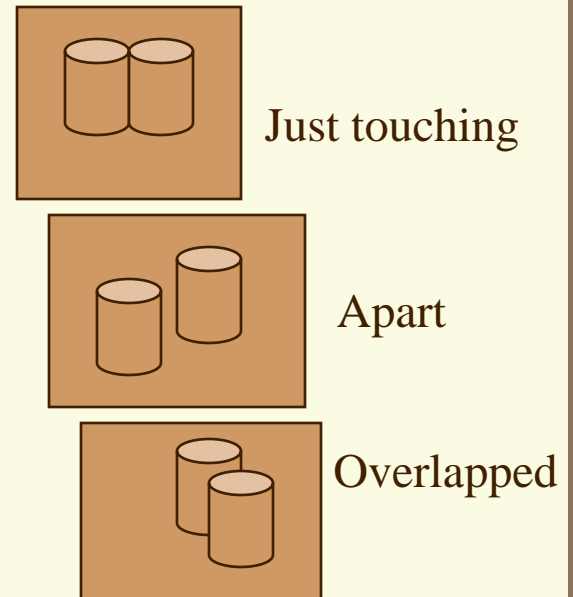
Two elements divide  
the composition



An odd number,  
such as three, is  
more interesting

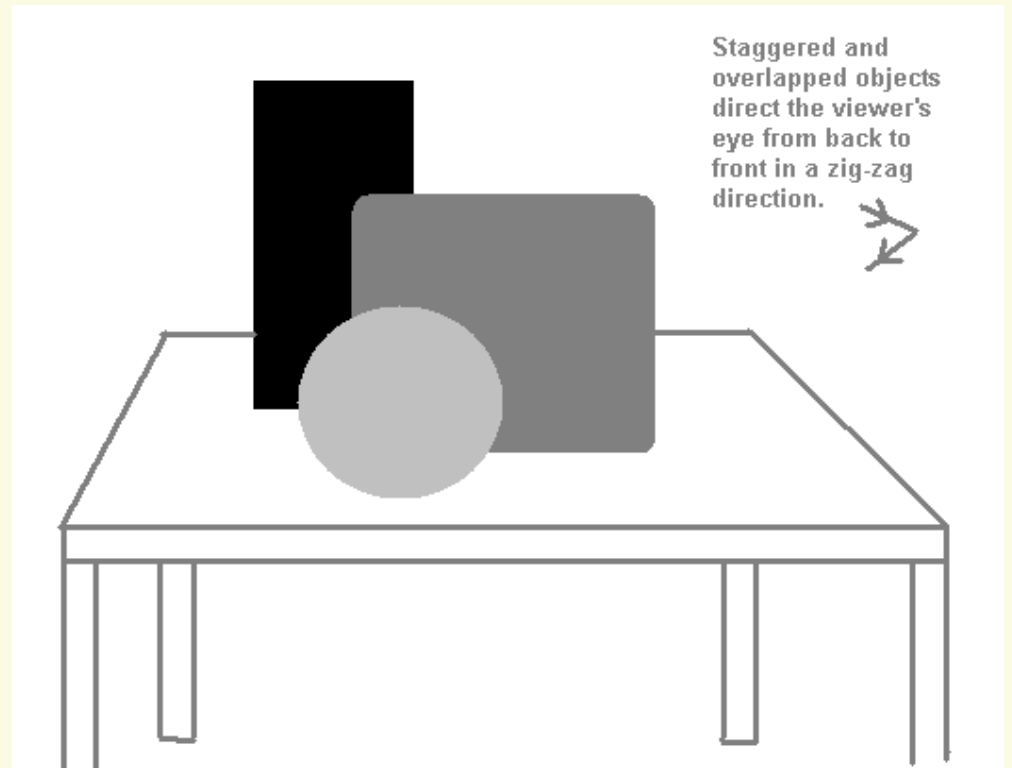
# Placing elements

- Varying the space between the elements in your composition, the angles they lie at, and their sizes makes a painting more interesting.
- Elements must either be definitely apart or definitely overlapped. “Just Touching” distracts the viewer’s eye from moving around the composition.
- Create unity by repeating shapes, lines, textures, and/or values



# Overlapping

*Overlapping* objects, or placing some objects over (or in front of) others, unifies a drawing, enhances depth of field, and creates an aesthetically pleasing composition.



# “Grounds”

Add depth by using details in the foreground, middle ground, and background in your composition.



Background

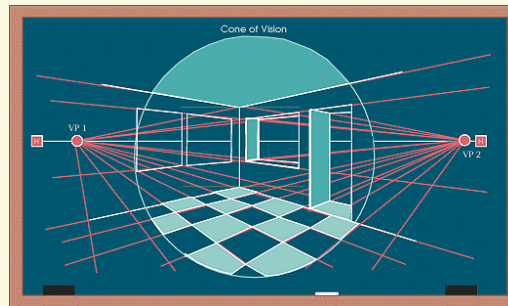
Middle Ground

Foreground



# Perspective

Perspective adds depth and realism to your drawings & designs.



# Space

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## **Positive and negative space**

The relationship of positive to negative space can greatly affect the impact of a work of art.

In this drawing, the man and his shadow occupy the positive space, while the white space surrounding him is the negative space. The disproportionate amount of negative space accentuates the figure's vulnerability and isolation.



*He Can No Longer at the Age of 98*

Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes,  
1819–1823

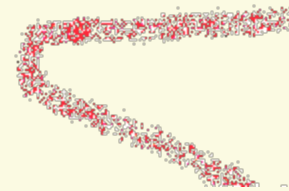
# Lines / Leading Lines

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- The line or direction the viewer's eye takes to go through the picture. The objects or forms within the picture should lead the eye to the focal point.
- When art is viewed, most people will begin in the bottom left corner, and continue through the picture to the right.
- A good composition will not allow the viewer to keep going right, all the way off the page. The viewer should be led back into the painting in a flowing motion.



Note that this famous painting has an embedded pattern that leads the eye through the painting.



# Leading lines

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**Effective *leading lines* can invite and encourage the viewer to enter the drawing space, explore the focal point, and linger to investigate the composition.**

Representational drawings that include realistic three-dimensional subjects can use *implied lines* to strengthen a composition.

This means lines that are not really there, but are formed (or implied) by the edges of the shapes of the objects in your drawing.



In a representational drawing, leading lines are usually implied, rather than actual. For example, in a realistic landscape drawing, a leading line can be a pathway, a river, a row of trees, or a fence. When properly rendered, the eye follows this line (or lines) directly into and through the drawing.

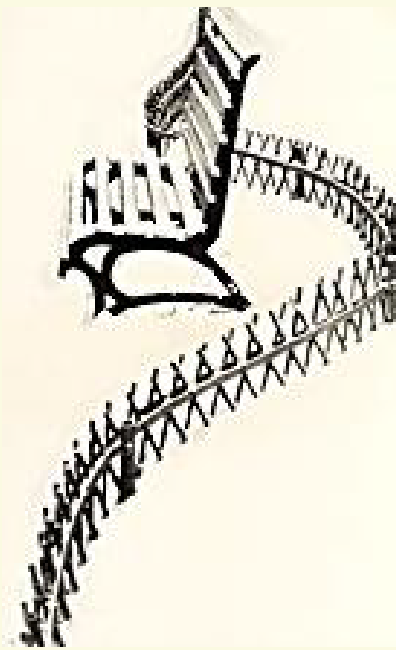


# Use lines to create moods

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**Lines create emotions and moods in your compositions.**

- Curved lines reflect beauty, gentleness, and calmness.
- Horizontal lines create stability, peace, and serenity.
- Vertical lines reflect strength, grandeur, and dignity.
- Diagonal lines offer a sense of movement and power.



“S” curve

# More...

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- Examples on Wet Canvas

<http://www.wetcanvas.com/ArtSchool/Composition/UsingIt/>

- More links on About.com

[http://drawsketch.about.com/od/composition/Drawing\\_Composition.htm](http://drawsketch.about.com/od/composition/Drawing_Composition.htm)

- Definitions and example of the Principles of Composition

<http://acadies-art.sparrowzworld.net/principal-of-art.html>