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Introduction

Drawing or painting a great piece of artwork takes time.

You could spend hours, maybe even days or weeks creating the best picture that you can.

Your goal is, or at least it should be, to make that image as visually engaging as possible.

I think that’s the purpose of any piece of art – to capture and to hold the viewer’s attention.

Yet the one thing that affects a picture’s interest level more than anything else is almost completely ignored, particularly by amateur artists. And that, of course, is composition.

I would suggest that most of us are only interested in thinking about what our picture’s content is going to be. Is it going to be a portrait and of whom? Is it going to be a landscape and of where?

But as any photographer will attest, it’s not the content that dictates whether you create something of interest – it’s the way that content is presented. The way content is presented makes all the difference.

You can take the most mundane subject matter in the world, and you can make it truly stunning with good compositional choices. Conversely, you can
take the Seven Wonders of the world, and make them look wonder-less with poor compositional choices.

Take a moment and think back to a time when you saw a photograph or another piece of art that really inspired you to get out your own pencils or paints.

You might not know why it inspired you so much, it’s not something you can put your finger on. It’s just a certain feeling that holds your gaze.

I guarantee that photo, or that piece of artwork, follows the principles of great composition.

These are the principles that we’re going to cover in this guide.

So what exactly is composition?

In a nutshell, composition is the way you arrange and present your subject matter in order to create a more pleasing and interesting image.

Now, you might say things like “interesting” and “pleasing” are completely subjective. What pleases me might grate on you. And that’s certainly true to a degree. However, there are a number of visual characteristics that trigger the same aesthetically pleasing response in all of us. It’s those characteristics that we want to exploit as artists.
Throughout this guide, we’re going to cover a wide range of compositional guidelines. While it might seem like there are a lot of them, they mostly come back to just one core principle – creating a strong focal point.

A strong focal point tells your viewer what the single, most important thing is in your picture, and then guides their eye back to it after they explore the rest of the image. Most compositional ‘rules’ are there to help you create a strong focal point.

Before moving on to the first lesson, let’s look at a few example images that I consider to be solid compositions – images that I think will hold and capture your imagination. No discussion at this stage, just have a look, then join me for lesson 1.
Image by Ben Waddams
www.benwaddams.com
Elements & Principles of Composition

The Elements of Composition are the characteristics that make up a drawing or painting. Examples of these include:

- The shape of objects in your drawing or painting
- The size of objects
- Directional lines or lead ins (we’ll come to those later)
- Colour
- Value (how light or dark a colour is)
- Texture

The Cake Baking Analogy

Think of the Elements of Composition as the individual ingredients in a recipe.

You can use those ingredients in lots of different combinations and quantities and create very different outcomes. Some of those outcomes will taste delicious, and some of them will be barely edible.

It’s not the ingredients themselves that are good or bad; it’s the way they’re used together that determines the final result.

If the Elements of Composition are the ingredients, then the Principles of Composition are recipes for those ingredients.

They tell you how to combine the elements into a pleasing outcome.
Here’s a quick example...

The Rule of Thirds is probably a principle you’ve already heard of already. It basically says to avoid placing the main focus of your image right in the middle of your picture - placing them to one side instead.

That’s a very simple recipe that gives you a good, predictable result. It’s like a recipe for baking a simple cake base.

Another principle is the Rule of Emphasis which is having one single focal point that is emphasized over and above everything else.

If you take your picture with a strong focal point a third of the way across, then include another equally dominant focal point on the other third, you’ve stuck to the Rule of Thirds, but you’ve broken the Rule of Emphasis.

That’s like taking your nice cake base and smothering it with watery, sour-tasting icing.
Just as you have to combine a number of different recipes to achieve a delicious overall cake, you have to combine a number of different Principles of Composition to achieve a great overall piece of art.

When you know how to confidently make a basic cake base, you could start to experiment with a couple of ingredients.

You would only add a dash of chilli after you know that it’s going to work well with the dark chocolate topping.

You can only experiment like that when you understand how the basic recipe works. It’s that old adage: – you have to first know the rules before you can break the rules.

“Learn the rules like a pro so you can break them like an artist.”
~ Pablo Picasso ~

Before we dive into some Elements and Principles of Composition, there’s one principle that deserves talking about right now. It’s the most important, and we’re going to cover it in the next lesson.
Key Takeaways

• The Elements of Composition are the characteristics that make up a drawing or painting such as the shape and size of objects, directional lines, colour, value, and texture.

• The Principles of Composition are the ways in which you combine the elements into a pleasing image such as the Rule of Thirds and the Rule of Emphasis.

• You have to first know the rules before you can break the rules.
The Focal Point

If you remember only one thing from this guide, it should be this:

**Every piece of artwork you create from now on should have a single focal point** - a point of interest that is emphasised over and above everything else in the picture.

Think of the focal point as your reason for creating a piece of art in the first place. What's the one thing about the subject that captures your imagination more than anything else? *That's* what you need to emphasise.

Yes, you can have other areas of interest within your picture, but they mustn’t compete with your focal point. If anything, they draw the viewer's attention back to it.

Here's an image where there isn't any focal point at all:
Your eyes do a quick scan of the above image, find that there's nothing of interest, and you move quickly on.

This image, on the other hand, has a clear focal point in the sunset. And while it's still a fairly simple picture, it's much more interesting than the first one:

![Sunset Image](image)

In next image, there are too many potential focal points, and they're all competing with each other:

![Field Image](image)
If I were to guess, I'd say the centre flower was supposed to be the main subject, but it's not emphasized nearly enough over the flowers surrounding it:
Compare that with the next image. The photographer has used something called depth of field to de-focus the blue bells in both the foreground and the background so that one clearly stands out as a focal point:

![Blue Bells](image)

While these examples are photographs as opposed to paintings, I know which ones would certainly make a more engaging piece of artwork.

Here’s another example...

If you want to make a lemon, tangerine, and a lime interesting, you’re going to have to get creative. And the following image certainly isn't that:
There are lots of things wrong with this composition, but the biggest issue for me is that there's no focal point. They all have equal weight, so I've got no idea where to start looking, and I've got nothing to go back to after I've explored around the image.

Here's an improvement. It's far from a mind-blowingly interesting composition, but it does capture and hold your attention more than the first example:
The photographer has used uniqueness to create a focal point. She knows that the shape and the surface of these three citrus fruits are all very similar, so there's no way you can differentiate them.

They're also three completely different colours. There isn't one that stands out from the other two surrounding it.

So what she has used is texture - the texture of the cut open lime - which is different than the other objects around it. If she'd have also cut the orange open on the right-hand side, you can imagine how straight away, the focal point would have been lost, because you'd no longer have one single unique element.

This idea of having a focal point is very well-known. It's probably something that you're already familiar with.

But knowing you need a single focal point is one thing, actually creating one that works is another thing entirely. I think what happens with a lot of artists is that they think that the focal point is obvious simply because of what it is. Take a look at this image:
It's obvious that the figure is supposed to be the main area of interest, that we look at first and we keep coming back to.

But the big mistake is to assume that a focal point is created only through its content - the fact it's a figure or a face, a house or a car.

Focal points aren't defined just by their content, they are defined also by their **characteristics** - those ingredients that we talked about earlier, like their tonal value, their colour and their texture.

In this painting, for example, the focal point is probably the camper van on the left-hand side.

![Image of painting](image)

It's a little bit far away, a bit too far to the left, and it looks like it's driving out of the picture, but I think you'll agree, this is what your eye is drawn to most.

However, the original image isn't black and white. This is the original image:
Now there's nothing inherently interesting about the green light as an object. Essentially, it's just a round blob. But because of its unique colour, and because there's lots of contrast between the bright green and the black box behind it, my eye is pulled very strongly towards it.

The problem I have now is that I don't know where I'm supposed to look. The camper van is more interesting as a subject matter, and it's the biggest object in the scene, but the artist is saying to me, "Look here! Look at this green blob!".

This image would work a lot better in my opinion, if the camper van drove off somewhere and there was just an impression maybe of some small parked vehicles on the left-hand side.

Here's another example:
The figure here is obviously the focal point, but the bright sun at the top of the image is too much of a competitor.

You can't gaze and appreciate the figure without the sun interfering with that gaze.

To be fair, the photographer doesn't have a lot of choice here. But as an artist, you do. You could choose to have the sun lower in the sky so that it backlit the figure.

That would help to create a very strong, single focal point.

So now, we're going to take a look at each of the elements of composition that I mentioned in the introduction. You'll use those ‘ingredients’ to increase or decrease the visual weight, or punch, of each part of a picture.

In particular though, we're going to apply those elements to the focal point to make sure it really stands out. What you should end up with is a kind of checklist that you can use for your next drawing or painting.
Every piece of artwork you create from now on should have a single, clear focal point.

A focal point is created through its content and its characteristics.

Common mistakes regarding focal points include: no focal point, competing focal points, and a focal point created through its content only.
SECTION 2
ELEMENTS OF COMPOSITION
Value & Contrast

Let's talk about the Elements of Composition. Now technically, there are quite a few of these, but I think you only need to remember five:

• Size
• Value and Contrast
• Colour
• Leading or Directional Lines
• Detail

I'm going to skip over the first one, size, because I think it's obvious. The bigger an object is in your drawing or painting, the more visual weight and importance it has.

So let's start by looking at value and contrast. If you've been through my Drawing Essentials course, you'll know how much I go on about the importance of value. Value and the way that you use it is going to have a huge impact on your artwork, more than anything else, in my opinion.

For the uninitiated, value simply means the lightness or darkness of a colour. From a compositional point of view, I want to focus on value contrast. We'll define value contrast as the amount of difference between light and dark objects that are next to each other.

So for example, the silhouette of a figure on the right has a high contrast with a very light, white background.

There's a lot of difference between the two values, so it's said to have high contrast.
This figure on the right, on the other hand, has a value that is closer to the background.

You can still distinguish it, but there's not as much difference between the two values, so it's said to have a low contrast.

The higher the contrast between an object and its immediate surroundings, the more that object will stand out, and the more your eye will be drawn to it.

This is one way that you can emphasise your focal point, by giving it high contrast. Let's take a look at some examples.

This artist has made heavy use of contrast to emphasise the flower head, and it works really well:
If we make this image black and white, you can clearly see the difference in values between the flower and its surroundings.

The next example is quite a busy painting, and being a nighttime scene, there's a real danger of creating multiple competing focal points, with all the various light sources that are in there:
But this image works so well because the artist has made sure that there's one area of bright light, larger, brighter and more dominant than any other.

And that area of light is alongside some really dark areas, to create that nice contrast:
Now there are other things going on in this image, which helps to strengthen the area as a focal point (we’ll come back to this image later on) but contrast definitely plays a big part.

In this image, you can see how a black background would make it really hard to distinguish the bottle.

![Image of wine bottle and glass](image)

A lighter background provides that contrast that helps the bottle and the glass stand out.

Now visualise that the entire background were the same light value that surrounds the bottle - it wouldn't have the same dramatic spotlight effect. The reason a spotlight effect is so attention-grabbing, is because it combines an area of very low contrast with an area of high contrast.

Now when I said earlier that it's not the content of the things that brings it attention, but the characteristics of the thing, there is one exception to that rule. And that's figures and faces.

As humans, we're hardwired to recognise people quickly. So whenever you add a figure or a face into your artwork, it will act as a natural pull. You can, however, strengthen that with contrast. Here's a good example of that:
If you defocus your eyes by squinting, you can see how the shape of the figure still stands out, even when it's not distinguishable as a figure. That's because it's surrounded on all sides by an area of high contrast.
It's a good rule of thumb to always have high contrast in your focal point. If you have other areas of high contrast outside of the focal point, that's not necessarily a bad thing, but it does mean you'll need to make use of additional elements – things that we're about to come onto – in order to emphasize the main point of interest, even further.

**Key Takeaways**

- The five major Elements of Composition are
  - Size
  - Value and Contrast
  - Colour
  - Leading / Directional Lines
  - Detail

- Value is the lightness or darkness of a colour. Value contrast is the amount of difference between light and dark objects next to each other.

- It's a good rule of thumb to always have high contrast in your focal point.
Colour

Let’s talk about colour, and specifically, how it affects the focal point.

You can draw more attention to your focal point by using:

• A greater variety of colours compared to the surrounding areas.
• Stronger hues, basically more vibrant colours compared to elsewhere on the picture.
• A colour that doesn't appear anywhere else on the image.

A simple example in the likes of which you'll have probably seen before is the odd one out:

![Image of apples with one red apple]
The red apple is a clear focal point simply because of its completely unique colour.

Now this isn't to say you should always use a completely unique colour in your focal point, or even give it really vibrant colours. You might want to create a picture that is more subtle than that overall. Like all of the elements that we'll cover in this section, colour is a characteristic to be aware of - one that you can either deliberately employ or one that you can deliberately ignore in favour of other compositional elements.

Colour tends to have its greatest impact on focal points when the image, overall, has a fairly neutral colour palette. The green traffic light from earlier (see right) is a really good example.

This is basically a monochrome painting with one other colour, and it stands out a mile.

Now contrast that with an image like the one on the following page, which makes use of a very vivid and varied colour palette:

As you'll see, you'd really struggle to be able to use colour anywhere to make something stand out:
The artist has had to rely on other principles of design to lead your eye to where she wants you to go. And in this case, it's the area of sunlight between the trees.

In the monochrome sketch below, the artist has used the colour red to great effect.

Those figures would still be an adequate focal point if they were in black and white because of their placement, because of the light surrounding them, and because the fact that they're figures, which we're naturally drawn to.

On top of this, the artist has chosen to create that extra emphasis through the use of colour:
In a similar sketch, he chose not to use colour and the figure on the bicycle is still the clear winner:

But imagine instead, he'd given the seated figure on the right a colourful jacket. That would throw the entire composition off completely because you'd now have two competing focal points:
Don't think that you have to stick to a monochrome palette to make use of colour in your focal points. This is an example from a watercolour lesson by Rob Dudley, and it has a variety of fairly vivid hues - blues, purples, greens and yellowy-greens:

You can see that the red sail is a clear focal point. The strong contrast with the white sparkle helps, for sure, but it's the red hue that has the biggest pull on our attention. If I make that a more neutral colour, the impact is suddenly lost and the painting, overall, is less engaging:
Look at the orange item circled in the photo below (I say item because I'm guessing it's a tangerine. But it looks more like the end of a carrot):

If I take that away, can you feel how your eyes are being drawn to the tangerine on the right?
That's because orange and red, in themselves, are very powerful, attention-grabbing colours. On top of that, by taking away the area of orange on the left, we've made the tangerine on the right more unique. And more unique means it gets more attention. This is a subtle difference and one that we'll look at again later on when we talk about balance.

The takeaway message from this is that any time that you use a colour that is particularly vivid, or that's very different from the rest of the colour palette, it's going to grab attention. So if it's used alone, make sure it's on the focal point.

**Key Takeaways**

- Draw more attention to your focal point by using a strong hue, or a unique colour.

- You don't have to stick to a monochrome palette to make use of colour in your focal point, but a very colourful overall image means you'll have to use other devices to make our focal point stand out.

- Any time that you use a colour that is particularly vivid, and it's different from the rest of the colour palette, make sure it's on the focal point.
Leading Lines

Very often, the best compositions make use of lines that subtly point towards the focal points. Actually, when they're pointed out they're not always that subtle.

Sometimes those lines can be so strong that whatever they point to becomes a focal point in and of itself, even if there's otherwise not much interest there.

Leading lines can be made by roads, tree lines, riverbanks, rows of houses, fences, and so on or they can be more subtle. The best way to understand them is to take a look at some examples.

The first and most obvious example of leading lines is in one point perspective:
If you're not sure about one, two and three point perspective, and what they relate to, take a look at the perspective section of my [Drawing Essentials Course](#).

In the image of the road, you've got strong lines either side of the picture and they all point towards the vanishing point. These lines are so strong and they have so much influence over the viewer’s eye, that your focal point needs to be within them.

If we place some figures outside of these lines for example (a natural focal point), this image is going to struggle compositionally. Those figures are going to feel out of place, and it's going to create a little bit of tension within the viewer.

![Road Image](image)

Compositionally, it's hard to go wrong with one point perspective. It usually always results in a compelling and strong composition.

This is why, in my opinion, the paintings by an artist called [Leonid Afremov](#) have become so well-known over the last few years.
Everyone talks about his vivid use of colours, and there's no doubt that they stand out for that reason. But he also makes heavy use of one point perspective, and he makes great use of leading lines to create striking compositions:

Here's another example of one point perspective from an ArtTutor lesson by Joanne Thomas:
Without those strong puddle lines, the house would still be the obvious focal point, but the long puddles leave you in no doubt as to where you should be looking.

This is another one point perspective example:

![Image of a painting with lines pointing to the focal point of the figures]

You can see how the artist has made sure that all of the dominant lines in this scene point directly to the focal point of the figures.

When you have figures that are in high contrast like they are here with the leading lines that point right at them, you're going to end up with a very strong composition.

Here's a great example where the artist has made use of the escalator rail to point out his focal points:
A lot of people may have chosen not to include that because it's not the most aesthetically pleasing thing in the world. But here it really does work as a powerful leading line.

Let's have a look at some more subtle examples.

Below is a very famous painting by Vermeer called the Milkmaid. The maid is the obvious focal point.

Notice how the line of the table points right to her and so do the lines on the window:

If the table had been positioned across the front of her or to one side running parallel with the window-wall, this painting might not have been as famous as it is, who knows.

The following drawing was part of a larger piece that I did for my wife's birthday a few years ago:
I was working from a reference photograph that I took with my phone, and as you probably know when you're trying to photograph any animal, you don't have a lot of control over composition.

The story here is the interaction between Karen and her horse Josie, and that's best described by the area where Karen and Josie's face are closest.

I got quite lucky here because there are some really helpful lines which draw the viewer's attention to the focal point:

The line of Josie's head makes a great leading line. The of the wooden wall also points to the focal point. In fact, you've almost got an arrow that points directly to the focal point.

Even the line along the top of the wooden board directs you to the focal point:
The last point that I want to make about leading lines is that they don't have to be physical lines or structures. They can be made from value or colour changes.

In the next painting, the artist could have chosen a more rounded, more diffuse shape for the patterns of light, but by using converging lines he's created those extra visual cues:
When you're composing your next drawing or painting, look to see whether there are any lines taking the eye towards the focal point. If not, can you manufacture some? And if there are lines that are pointed away from the focal point, can you lose them or at least soften them?

**Key Takeaways**

- Leading lines point towards the focal point and strength the fact it’s the focal point.
- Leading lines may be strong or obvious such as those made from roads, tree lines, riverbanks, rows of houses, fences, and so on.
- Leading lines may be subtle such as those made from value or colour changes.
Detail

So far, we've looked at value and contrast, colour, and leading lines as ways to intentionally highlight a focal point, or inadvertently bring too much attention to an area that's not the focal point.

I'd like to look quickly at a few more characteristics that you can manipulate in the same way.

The sharper and more detailed an area of your image is, the more the viewer's eye is going to be drawn to it. Photographers use something called depth of field, which is the distance where objects are in focus.

A narrow depth of field means that only a small part of the image is in focus, and everything else is defocused - either the background, foreground, or both.

Here, the foremost strawberry is in focus. It's in detail, it's crisp and sharp. That immediately gives it precedence, in the viewer's mind, over the other strawberry:
Does that make it a more interesting composition than two strawberries perfectly in focus? Well, I think it does, all other things being equal.

Here's a floral example:

![Flower Example](image)

If all of the flowers are in focus, this image doesn't work; you'd have too many distractions and too many objects competing for your attention. As it stands, you know which flower is the focal point.

There are things that you could do as an artist to improve on this by the way - maybe increasing the strength of values on the foremost flower while decreasing the values and softening the colours of the flowers behind it:
You'll often see a narrow depth of focus used for animals and portraits. You can imagine how distracting all of the background information would be in the image below if it wasn't so blurred:
In this portrait, the immediate foreground is de-focused and so is the background:

As an artist, you’d probably want to de-focus the background even more, and it certainly saves you painting dozens of branches and leaves if nothing else!

You can create the same narrow depth of field effect very easily in your artwork by keeping the background loose and de-focused. One of our tutors, Glynis Barnes-Mellish, is brilliant at this.

You can see in the painting to the right, how she’s allowed the water colour paint to bleed, creating very soft, loose backdrops behind the portraits.

The sharp contrast with the crisp detail of the figure really does help them to stand out. Here’s a couple more from Glynis:
Hollywood does the same thing for its actors. Some of the most iconic scenes in cinema make heavy use of a de-focused background to bring an almost hero-like status to its central character.
Here's another great example from our tutor-artist Ben Waddams.

Now, you can take this concept of detail and lack thereof a step further as an artist by keeping the outer parts of your painting very loose and almost unfinished.

John Singer Sargent was a master at this.

You can see from some of his work below that in each case the most amount of detail is in the face, the focal point, and the further away from the focal point that he gets, the looser and the sketchier the marks become:
Glynis Barnes-Mellish has taken the same approach with this piece to the right.

I think it's so much more interesting and striking compared to if Glynis had painted the whole thing in the same amount of detail.

Generally, you want your focal point to be the most detailed part of the picture. That's a rule of thumb because sometimes your focal point can have very little detail.

Here's an example below. These figures from the earlier image have less detail than most of the rest of the image, but the fact that they have so little detail and texture is a differentiating factor, which is what helps make them unique, and again that helps them stand out:
So, that's the main four **elements** of composition that I want to talk about. There are a number of others but I think that these four have the most impact and they're the most under your control. They are:

• Value and contrast  
• Colour  
• Leading lines  
• Detail  

**Key Takeaways**

• The sharper and more detailed an area of your image is, the more the viewer’s eye is going to be drawn to it.

• Using the depth of field technique, the artist can draw attention to the focal point.

• Generally, you want your focal point to be the most detailed part of the picture, but sometimes your focal point can have very little detail.
SECTION 3
PRINCIPLES OF COMPOSITION
Chaos & Order

In section one, we said that the elements of composition are the building blocks, or the ingredients if you like, that you can play around with to create different types of composition.

In section two, we then looked at four of these elements and applied them to the focal point, to make sure that the focal point stands out against everything else in the picture.

In this section, we'll look at the organising principles to put in all of those elements together to create an overall successful composition. The purpose of these organising principles is to create order out of potential chaos.

Chaos without any form of structure is really displeasing to the eye. It's hard to make sense of. It's hard to determine the point of the story that the artist or photographer is trying to tell.

The opposite of chaos of course, is order.

Order, generally speaking, is more pleasing than randomness. It gives you something to think about, and it suggests a story behind the composition.
But of course, there's a caveat. Too much order becomes boring. By definition, the strictest of order has no focal point because so nothing is allowed to stand out too much.

The red paperclips are an example of perfect order... and a very boring image!

If we disrupt the order slightly and add a focal point, the image suddenly becomes more interesting.

But, you could argue that this is still too uniform. So let's give it slightly less order by moving the green paperclip away from the middle.

You get the idea. You need some order and structure in your composition, but not too much.

How you go about creating this balance between chaos and order is what we're going to look at throughout the rest of the section. We're going to look at a number of well-known organising principles that will help you avoid creating too much chaos and too much uniformity.

First off is one that you may well have heard of before. It's called the rule of thirds. But even if you have, please don't skip the next chapter because there are some important points that I want to make about why and when the rule of thirds should be broken.
Chaos without any form of structure is really displeasing to the eye.

Generally speaking, order is more pleasing than randomness. But by definition, the strictest of order has no focal point,

You need some order and structure in your composition, but not too much.

**Key Takeaways**
The Rule of Thirds

Before we go any further, let's scrap the term 'rule' of thirds, and replace it with the 'principle' of thirds.

There are great compositions that don't conform to the principle of thirds, and there are poor compositions that do conform to the principle of thirds. So it's not a rule. It's a guideline that can work well, so long as other elements within your drawing or painting aren't neglected.

If you're not sure what the principle of thirds is, it's very simple.

You divide your canvas into three equal sections, horizontally and vertically.

The suggestion is that it's better to place points of interest (your focal point) on or near these lines, especially at the points where the lines intersect.
This goes back to the idea of too much order and uniformity.

Placing things in the centre can (not always though!) make things less interesting.

Let's look at an example. We can take this image and we can move it to one side so that the sailboat is on a third:

Then we can move it down so that the horizon isn't splitting the frame in two:
This has a more comfortable and more balanced feel to it compared to the original.

We can do the same with this bird. The original photo is very central, so let's move it to one side, a third from the left:

Then let's move it down so that the bird's eye is on the horizontal third:
The issues that I and a lot of people have with the principle of thirds, especially because it's usually stated as a rule, is that it can:

1. Lead you to become a slave to thirds and,
2. Sometimes feel a little bit boring and clichéd.

Let's look at some examples for becoming a slave to thirds, and why it's not always the best choice. This image both uses and ignores thirds:
The water line is a third of the way up, but the droplet is right in the middle.

Now, let's flip that, and centre it horizontally, so the waterline splits the image in two, but use the principle of thirds for the focal point, the water droplet:

Now I don’t know about you, but I don't think that this is as captivating. I think it's better when the focal point is right in the middle.

And here's an opposite example. The focal point of this image is the yellow flower centre. It's right in the middle of the horizontal axis, but it's on a vertical third:
Again, if I flip that around so that the focal point is now a third of the way up, but it's central, I don't think this works as well as the original image:
What’s causing this? Well, the reason is to do with symmetry.

Going back to the first image, the area around the droplet is very symmetrical:

The water droplet is right in the middle of the ripples, so placing it to the left or right interferes with that symmetry. We like looking at symmetrical objects. If you disrupt that by placing a very symmetrical object over to one side, it causes unease.

Now, conversely, the flower isn't symmetrical. You've got the stalk that's going off to one side, and then you've got the mass of other flowers down to the right:
So it does feel better over to one side.

The example that you'll see a lot amongst a number of photography instructors is the Taj Mahal. The symmetry of this majestic building means that any other shot other than straight down the middle rarely works:
And what about this doorway?

I can't imagine that placing it to one side would create the same drama and tension. The story is all about the door and what's behind it. It's symmetrical, and it works so much better by placing it right in the middle.

Portraits are another example where the principle of thirds can work really well on some occasions and is inferior on others.

Here's an example of it working really well. The eye, the focal point, is lined up pretty much exactly on the intersection of thirds:
While you could argue the overall pose is central in the frame, I think this would still work well if she were placed over to the left:
These portraits, on the other hand, are very symmetrical, and work better by ignoring the rule of thirds and placing them right in the middle:

They are both very symmetrical and balanced poses.

And for the portrait to the right, although you might argue that the tipped hat makes it asymmetrical, the lips (which are the true focal point) are a perfect circle.

The photographer has placed them slap bang in the middle of the image, and it really works:
And then to finish up, here are two examples where the principle of using thirds has been deliberately broken in order to capture a more interesting and dramatic scene.

The first one is all about the dramatic sky, and the thin strip of landscape helps to tell that story.

In the second photo, the focal point is the eyes, which would normally be placed a third from the top of the frame, not right at the bottom.

They key, if you're going to break the principle of thirds like this, is to break it very obviously so that it looks deliberate.

To sum up, the rule of thirds isn't a rule. It's a principle that works well most of the time, but can very often be broken with even better results.

The principle of thirds is usually a safe bet. You're not going to create a really bad composition if you stick to it, but it can also feel a little bit boring and clichéd.
When you've got a lot of symmetry, it can often work better to place things centrally on your paper or your canvas.

Portraits can often work well in the centre of the frame as well, especially when you're looking or acting directly at the camera. Figure poses that are symmetrical work well centrally too.

Finally, if you're going to break the rule of thirds, such as a low or high horizon line, make it extreme, so that it looks obvious.

### Key Takeaways

- The rule of thirds isn't a rule; it's a principle that works well most of the time, but can very often be broken with even better results.

- The principle of thirds is usually a safe bet, but it can also feel a little bit boring and clichéd.

- If you're going to break the rule of thirds, such as a low or high horizon line, make it obvious.
The Golden Ratio

In this lesson, we're going to convert the golden ratio, also known as the golden section, or the golden mean. In a nutshell, when things are in a proportion that matches the golden ratio, they're said to be more aesthetically pleasing.

Now, before we go into any detail, it's worth noting that opinion over the golden ratio is certainly divided – not so much whether the golden ratio exists, or whether even it was used in very famous works of art and architecture (it was), but whether it actually has any real effect on desirability.

In other words, do we, as human beings, find things that are proportioned according to the golden ratio, more pleasing than things that aren't?

We're going to cover what the golden ratio is, how it's been used in the past, and then how you can use it in your own artwork going forward, if you choose to.

There is some mathematics involved, unfortunately. I'll do my best to keep it practical and to avoid sending you to sleep!
The golden ratio is a number, and it has lots of decimal places. For practical purposes, it's usually written as 1.618.

Every explanation of the golden ratio is accompanied by a diagram like this:

Essentially what this diagram shows, is that if you take the total length of the line (the red bit plus the green bit) it's 1.618 times larger than just the red bit.

- Let's say the total length of the line is 20cm.
- The red portion is 12.36cm
- The total length of 20cm, divided by 12.36cm (the length of the red bit) is 1.618.
- Then you can take just the red bit, and that's going be 1.618 times bigger than the green bit.

Now, I don't know about you, but even if you are following along with the numbers, it's hard to visualise how this has any practical kind of use or purpose. As an artist, I think you're going to find it easier to appreciate something called the golden rectangle.
Let's draw a rectangle that has a shape, or a ratio, that conforms to the golden ratio. All that means is that its length is going to be 1.618 times greater than its height.

To do that, you start by drawing a square, a perfect square. Let's use the red line that we looked at earlier to make it a square.

The length of the red line was 12.36cm, and then let's add the green line on the end. The red line was 1.618 times bigger than the green line, so that's 7.64cm for the green line (12.36 divided by 1.618):

What we now have is a rectangle that is 20cm long and 12.36cm high. Twenty, again divided by 12.36, is the golden ratio of 1.618.

This is a perfect golden ratio rectangle, but it doesn't quite end there.

This rectangle on the end can now be split up in the same way. If we take the height, 12.36, and divide it by 1.618, we get 7.64, and that makes a perfect square and a rectangle again, just like the first time:
And then in this smaller rectangle, you can make a perfect square and a rectangle.

And then again and again...
And if you could draw small enough, you could go on and on for as long as you like.

You can imagine how you could divide your canvas up like this. The theory is that you can position different elements according to the different sections made by one or more of the golden rectangles.

If you connect all of these points within the rectangle, you'll get the golden spiral, or a Pythagoras's spiral, which is probably something that you've seen before as well.
Some people claim that various pieces of famous art and architecture have deliberately used, in part at least, the golden ratio.

Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, for example:
The Parthenon in Rome:

Even some modern day designs like the Apple and Google logos are said to be based on the golden ratio, at least that's what some people claim:

If you're interested in seeing more examples and a much more detailed analysis of the golden ratio in both art and architecture, have a look at the website www.goldennumber.net.
The author does a great job of arguing for the existence of the golden ratio. If it's something that you're interested in, it's worth taking a look.

Let's just go back to the golden rectangle for a moment. You can use golden rectangles to create points of interest on your canvas.

Here's one golden rectangle with the square on the right:

Now let's add another line to create a square on the left:
Now let's split this into a smaller golden rectangles:

What you've got now is four points of interest, and placing objects on these points supposedly makes magic happen.

A similar but easier technique is to draw lines from one corner of your golden rectangle to another, and then find the midpoints on those lines:
Are you noticing anything familiar here? These are looking a lot like the principle of thirds to me!

As I said in the beginning of this chapter, opinion over the golden ratio is mixed, and you'll find critics who say that it's ridiculous, and then others who'll say that the critics are ridiculous for dismissing something that was used by the likes of Leonardo da Vinci.

Here's my own view, for what it's worth...

I personally think the golden ratio has very little on practical value for most artists, most of the time. I say that because there are so many different elements that make up a good painting and good composition, that even if there is inherent truth to the 1.618 ratio, it's going to have little to no impact in the context of everything else.

I also struggle to believe that placing an object according to a ratio of 1.618, or even 1.6, will have any greater impact than if it's placed at 1.5 or 1.7.

**In other words, I think the majority of the aesthetics come from an off-centre, approximate placement, which is much easier for you to remember with the Principle of Thirds!**
Plenty of people will say that I'm being far too dismissive, and outside of drawing and painting (logo design, website design, package design and so on), maybe I might have a different opinion.

However, for traditional art with so many variables involved, I don't think the golden ratio makes a difference. There are other aspects of composition that we're covering in this guide that are going to have a greater impact on your final outcome.

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**Key Takeaways**

- The golden ratio is a number, and it's usually written as 1.618.
- When things are in a proportion that matches the golden ratio, they're said to be more aesthetically pleasing.
- Opinions are divided on whether or not it actually has any real effect on desirability.
- M own opinion is to forget about the Golden Ratio and remember the Principle of Thirds.
Breathing Space

When you're drawing or painting predominantly a single object, and you place that object according the principle of thirds (or golden ratio for the believers), then you want to incorporate plenty of breathing space.

By single subjects, this could be a figure study, a portrait, an animal portrait, or even a floral. If we go back to some of the images that we looked at earlier, you'll see what I mean.

In this image the bird is on the left and is looking to the right:

So the right hand side needs plenty of quiet breathing space. Whenever your subject is facing or looking one way, you want to place the breathing space to the side the subject is facing.
If we place this bird on the right so that it was looking out of the picture, it doesn't work compositionally:

It's a similar idea with this flower:

It has a natural lean to the left therefore, we want to place it on the right side of the frame. There's plenty of uncluttered breathing space on the left-hand side.
If the left hand side was very busy, maybe filled with other flowers or details, then it's going to detract from the emphasis of the main flower:

The next photograph is an example of filling the frame, which is something that we're going to come on to shortly. I think a lot of artists would choose this composition or maybe a little bit further out so that the little boy's entire head is in the frame.

But his gaze out to the right, or his left, is naturally where our eyes are led to. So, this composition would work well with some breathing space to the right:
Can you see how that suddenly feels less cramped? That's not just because we've added space. You can have your subject fill the entire frame and it not feel cramped. It's because we've added space where the viewer's eyes want to go.

Here's a similar example from one of Glynis Barnes-Mellish's lessons on Art Tutor. Although this young man is looking straight at the camera, his shoulders and his body position are facing to the right so it works better to add breathing space to the right:
Just to show that a little bit clearer, here's how it looks without that space and you can see how much more cramped it feels without that breathing space:

And, depending on the gaze, if it's a person or animal, you can actually add a lot of breathing space without detracting from the overall impact.

In fact, sometimes, more empty space can add more interest because it heightens the interest on the central subject.

The next image is a good case and point. It doesn't work nearly as well, in my opinion, with a close crop.
The insect in this photo is walking into the space of the image so there's plenty of negative space all around, especially to the left. It's the negative space in this composition that makes it so striking:

Here's one that's a little less obvious.

There's no gaze or such here, but the green leaf sticking out on the right leads our eyes that way.

If there were another similar leaf on the left-hand side then it would make these flowers more symmetrical and that would lend itself to a more central position. There's plenty of breathing space on the right and anything other than defocused variations in the background colour and detail would detract from the composition overall.
The next floral works well positioned in the centre:

You might argue that it's leaning to the right so, therefore, it would work with more breathing space to the right.

And, I'd agree. I think it would work well that way. This is one of those many examples where there's more than one good choice compositionally.

But would you agree, whether it's placed to centrally or to one side, that without placing all this breathing space around it, if we crop it down, it's not as aesthetically pleasing and impactful?

And just as an aside, the breathing space here isn't just a plain, flat colour, it's got a fair amount of texture and interest, certainly compared to some of the previous examples that we've looked at.

The key is the amount of contrast between the background breathing space and the flower head itself. The more detail you've got in your background, or in your breathing space, the more contrast you need with your focal point.
Breathing space works with landscapes as well. This old stone building on the horizon is a definite focal point, and there's plenty of breathing space to the left:

Now, compare that to this image:
Painting in the big tree might be true to the scene, but compositionally, it's way too cramped.

Another point to bear in mind, is that whenever you are depicting movement, it's a good idea to allow plenty of breathing space around the moving object, which is usually going to be your focal point.

Have a look at this pastel piece by Rebecca de Mendonça. It's called Fuga. You can see there's plenty of space around the perimeter which allow moving characters to breathe. A closer crop really doesn't work as well:

Next up is a cityscape at night and it's painted in oils. There's lots of movement going on, lots of details in the centre of the image.

At first glance, you might think there's not a lot of breathing space. But if you squint to really defocus your eyes, what you'll be able to see is the artist has created a vignette effect by keeping the value of the outer edges very dark and the detail very sparse:
In actual fact, almost half the surface area of this canvas, is actually acting as breathing space. It works so much better than if the high detail and the high colour had been carried right to the edges of the canvas.

So, in summary, breathing space and areas of quiet are really important in a good composition because they help to bring the focus back to your focal point.

Generally speaking, the more detailed and intricate your focal point is, or the more objects of interest you have, the quieter your breathing space should be. And by quiet, I mean less detail, fewer marks, fewer variations in colour and value.

Let's now look at a principle of composition that goes perfectly with breathing space, and that's the principle of balance.
Breathing space and areas of quiet, help to bring the viewer’s focus back to the focal point.

If your subject is facing or looking to the right (or left), you want to add breathing space to the right (or left) of the subject.

The more detail you’ve got in your background or breathing space, the more contrast you need with your focal point.

The more detail there is in your focal point, the quieter your breathing space should be.
Balance

I've used the term visual weight quite a number of times in this guide, and you should be more familiar now with how to increase (or decrease) the visual weight of an object or an area within your piece of art:

- Add more contrast.
- Use a unique and vivid colour.
- Use detail, and so on.

Just as you can balance physical weights on a set of scales or a seesaw, you can also balance visual weights in your artwork. The seesaw analogy is really good way to think about balance.

The two shapes here are the same size and an equal distance from the pivot, or the fulcrum, of the seesaw:

This seesaw is said to be balanced.

Now, if one of the shapes was larger and by implication, heavier, then the seesaw is going to become unbalanced:
If the shapes were the same size and the same weight again but one was closer to the fulcrum than the other, then the seesaw is going to become unbalanced again:

![Unbalanced Seesaw](image)

It's going to tip down to the left.

When you have the same shapes, the same weights and they are equally spaced, you get what's called a symmetrical balance:

![Symmetrical Balance](image)
A classic example of this is The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci. It's a very obvious example of symmetrical balance:

Symmetry has its place as we've already discussed, but you can also create balance through asymmetry. You do that by placing larger and heavier objects closer to the fulcrum, or in the case of a canvas, closer to the centre.
It's this kind of asymmetrical balance that you're probably going to be using most of the time in your artwork. Let's take a look at some examples.

This seascape by Becky Samuelson, which I have modified, is clearly unbalanced:

You've got the large area of interest on the left (circled in red). Then you've got lots of very quiet breathing space over on the right. If this was a seesaw, it would tip sharply down and to the left.

Let's look at the original:
The placement of the foreground boat makes it much more balanced overall.

There's still plenty of breathing space all around, but it's no longer unbalanced.

Now, you might be thinking, hang on a minute, you've got a large object on the far left and you've got a smaller object towards the centre. The equivalent seesaw is going to look something like this:

To be balanced, it should be other the way around. It should be like this:
But when we're balancing a design, a piece of artwork, it's not just the size of an object that affects its visual weight, it's other things like detail, contrast, colour and so on.

I would suggest that the foreground boat, even though it's smaller, is visually stronger and heavier than the group of fairly nondescript buildings. Why? because it's more detailed, there's greater contrast, it's surrounded by lots of calm breathing space.

Remember, balance is composition is not just about the actual size of things. It's the visual weight that's the most important thing.

Here's another example of a painting that I've modified to look unbalanced (left image). The artist, Veronique Oodian, added light artefacts to create an area of interest without imposing too much on the focal point (right image). The result is something that is much more balanced. We could take this example from Veronique, and apply it to a photograph from an earlier lesson...
If you remember, I changed the following photo so it was less central:

The dandelion clocks on the right hand side help to balance the scene without detracting from the central subject, but I think we can improve this slightly.

If I go back to the original, the dandelion clock circled is quite prominent.
In the cropped variation, it's still just about showing, and it's a little bit distracting. Because we have artistic license, we can easily move that to a different location. From a balance point of view, it would work well on the opposite point of interest to the focal point:

[Image]

Here's another photo from an earlier lesson that I cropped to give it a more pleasing composition:
What you may have noticed though, is that the boat is now sailing out of the picture. I can fix that by cropping the other way.

The issue that I have now is that I've lost the mountains in the background which were helping to create some sense of balance.

As an artist painting this scene, I would put those mountains back in, but to the left.

I could also move the line of sunlight on the waves just a touch further to the left as well, for a bit more balance.

Now, in terms of placement we can go back to the principle of thirds and use those four points of interest.

If your focal point is on one of these points then placing a counter balance on the opposite points can work very well:
The above image is another good example where it's not just physical size that determines the weight. Although the tree is much larger than the figure, the figure is what our eyes are drawn to.

It doesn't have to be an object that you use as your counter balance either.

You can create an area of visual weight in a more abstract way like the artist has done in the next image, with a colour that is different to the rest of the palette:

![Image of a painting with a tree and a figure with a unique purple color]

The cool purple is unique in relation to the warm reds and browns elsewhere. So it has a bit more visual weight compared to if it was a mid-brown. That helps to balance out the tree.

Here's an example where the artist has used the shadow of the bicycle to counter balance the main focal point:
Notice how the bicycle itself is closer to the centre – the fulcrum in our seesaw analogy. And the lighter weight, the shadow, is further to the outside edge.

If you swap that around - so the bicycle being close to the edge and the shadow being closer to the centre - you can see how that composition would become unbalanced.

A final example is where the artist has used nothing more than basically a splurge of colour to create the counter balance. The red in the upper right and lower left helps to balance the central rose.
Balancing your composition isn't an exact science, so don't fret over the precise positions and sizes.

Just keep the seesaw analogy in the back of your mind as you construct your drawing or painting, and ask yourself whether or not there are any large voids where you can add something of interest to act as a counter balance.

**Key Takeaways**

- Balance can be created through symmetry or asymmetry.
- Visual weight is the most important aspect to creating balance.
- Balancing your composition is not an exact science. Keep the seesaw analogy in your mind as you construct your drawing or painting.
Filling The Frame

In beginner photography, there is a maxim that you'll hear quite a lot:

Get closer.

Getting close to your subject can often be the best way to show a subject off in its best light. It can remove those distracting details that get caught up in the background.

Taking this idea of getting closer to the extreme is called filling the frame. It means that you take the edges of your subject right to the edges of your canvas and beyond.

Here's an example - a coloured pencil piece by ArtTutor artist Jonathan Newey:
Here's another one, also by Jonathan:

You can see that the edges of the cat's face go beyond the edges of the paper. Jonathan has completely filled the frame with his subject.

This portrait photo (left) that uses the same principle. And an image by Jane Lazenby (right) uses cropping to create a unique composition:
Filling the frame does several things.

• It leaves your viewer in no doubt what your central subject is. It stops you from adding unnecessary stuff in the background that's going to detract from your main subject.
• It allows you to show detail and texture that your viewer wouldn't otherwise see. There's a lot of interest in detail and texture.
• It also creates drama and intensity. Things closer to us tend to have greater emotional impact.

Now, I know what you're thinking: this is in direct contradiction to breathing space. Well, not really. Because the view is so obviously zoomed-in, the viewer doesn't expect there to be empty space around the subject.

So this image of the cat doesn't feel cramped and awkward in the same way that this landscape from earlier does:

The landscape is neither one thing nor the other. It's neither breathing space, nor filling the frame.
Here is a portrait with a fairly standard composition (image on the left):

It's not bad, but there are some distracting features in the background.

By cropping this quite closely to fill the frame, I think this would make a much more captivating drawing or painting.

It's not just animal or human portraits that can benefit from filling the frame either.

This floral was created by artist Joanne Thomas with Brusho. There's something just a bit more imaginative than simply showing the entire flower nicely centred, with equal space all around:
Let's take a fairly uninteresting composition of daisies:
Now let's get closer to create a focal point, and add a little bit more interest:

Let's get closer again and really fill the frame to see if that creates even more interest and impact:
What I really like about filling the frame and getting really close up, is that you start to notice interest in subjects that, otherwise, you might find unappealing.

This particular image of an old car doesn't really inspire me. It's not a subject that's close to my heart:

![Old Car](image)

But a close crop and filling the frame really does inspire me to get out the pens, pencils or paint:
Here's an important question...

How do you decide whether to fill the frame, or take a step back and include more of the scene?

Well, it all comes back to the story that you want to tell.

If you need to capture more of the scene to tell your story, then that's what you do. If the story (and the beauty) is in the detail, then consider filling the frame.

Let's go through a step-by-step example I think will make it a bit clearer.

What story is the following image trying to tell? It doesn't have to be profound or complicated, and there's more than one right answer:
Well, we can't see anything of the craftsman, so it's not about him as an individual. I would say it's more about the interaction between the mallet and the chisel, and the effect that it has on the wood. That's what my attention is drawn to.

If that's the story then I think it would be better served by filling the frame, or at least moving in quite a bit closer.

Something like the following image tells me more about that interaction between mallet, chisel and wood:
I could even take inspiration from Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam and leave the slightest of gaps between the mallet head and the chisel, in anticipation of them connecting!
What if the story you want to tell is more about the individual craftsman? Well now, I have to take a step back.

This tells more of a story about the person, doesn't it? It looks more like the kind of drawing or painting that you'd give to the person that features in it.

The composition ticks the principle of thirds box. And there's plenty of breathing space on the right. Being pedantic, you might say he's hammering out of the scene, so he'd be better on the right-hand side.

On the downside, there's not enough contrast on the focal point, and the light area over in the bottom right-hand corner is too dominant.

But my main issue with this composition, being about the craftsman, is that he isn't big enough. This is starting to become more about the workshop and someone (anyone) working within it.
Imagine if the photographer was just a little bit further back - so she captures more of the workshop behind the man. Can you visualise how that balance between workshop and individual would become even more craftsman-generic? It would be even less about a specific individual, and more about any craftsman working in any workshop.

That's not a bad thing, but it doesn't match the story that we want to tell.

Here's a composition that does capture the individual, and the concentration on his craft:

And my favourite for this story is this composition...
If this gentleman was a relative of mine, and I were drawing or painting a picture to capture him, this is the kind of composition that I would choose.

I'll leave you with one more very obvious example.

Here's a portrait that fills a lot of the frame and is a nice, pleasing composition:
You would never choose this composition for this particular lady because it's misses the story entirely:
Key Takeaways

• Getting close to your subject can often be the best way to show it off in its best light and removing those distracting details that get caught up in the background.

• Filling the frame means that you take the edges of your subject right to the edges of your canvas and beyond.

• This is not in direct contradiction to breathing space because the view is so obviously zoomed-in, the viewer doesn't expect there to be empty space around the subject.
Vantage Point

Vantage point is the position that you assume for your viewer when you make a piece of art. The simplest way to think about this is to think about when you take photographs.

Most of the time, you probably stand up, you're holding the camera around eye level, which is somewhere between five and six feet off the ground, depending on how tall you are.

That's one vantage point, and it's the one that most people take photos from and subsequently recreate in their artwork.

Breaking away from this stereotypical point of view can create a lot of extra interest and theatre in your drawing and paintings. Let's go through a few reference photographs that I think are much more interesting than they might otherwise have been, because of the vantage point that the photographer took.
Hopefully these photos will give you some ideas for either picking out reference photographs for yourself, or better still, taking your own and then adapting them to make a great drawing or painting.

To the right is an example of getting down on the same level as your subject. It works great for florals and you can see how it gives a completely different feel to simply standing up and then pointing the camera down:

It also works great for pets as well. When most people photograph a pet, they do it from an owner’s high up, domineering perspective.

But when you get down to their level, it creates more of a portrait.

It maybe even humanises them a little bit more as well, which, at the end of the day, is what any loving pet owner tends to do with their pets.
Now here's one that I think is a great example of how the vantage point makes the shot:

If you take this from a standing position, or from any other position, it's going be fairly boring.
Here's another great example to the right. The photographer is slightly below the subject, and probably lying face down in the snow.

Look at the foreshortening that's created between the foot and the rest of the body. It's really exaggerated, and that means it's interesting.

If you're able to get below your subject and look up, you'll create what's called a worm's eye vantage point.

With some subject like skyscrapers, for example, it's pretty easy. Here's one of a tree where the photographer has got right in close, placed herself on the ground, and then pointed up. And it gives a completely different feel to the composition:
Here's another floral. You can see how getting down on the ground and pointing up slightly, getting below the flower, almost creates an epic, heroic feel to the subject matter, even though it's just a flower:

I think this next one is fantastic. Look at the leading lines made by the grass and daisies and even the clouds:
Now opposite of the worm's eye view is the bird's-eye view.

To the left is another brilliant photo, probably taken by standing on a ladder, with lots of foreshortening going on.

Look at the size of the little boy's shoes compared to his head and his glasses. This is a welcome break from a standard, front-on portrait:

Here's a variation on that, with no perspective going on. Imagine doing a portrait of somebody that you know from this vantage point. It would make a great change from that three-quarter, front-on pose of somebody sitting in a chair, looking into the camera:
The next time you're taking a photograph, whether it's for a potential piece of artwork or not, think about the vantage point.

Can you get down low? Can you get up high? Can you give your viewer a different perspective than what they get every day from everyone else?

**Key Takeaways**

- Vantage point is the position that you assume for your viewer when you make a piece of art.

- Eye level is the most common vantage point, and breaking away from this stereotypical point of view can create a lot of extra interest and theatre in your artwork.

- Consider giving your viewer a different perspective, such as worm's eye view which is below the subject, or bird's eye view
Well, we've come to the end of the guide. I want to finish up by showing you an example of how you should take every opportunity to use your artistic license to create better compositions.

You're not limited by reality in the way that a photographer is, so if you just make carbon copies of photos, you're really missing a trick, especially, if the photo isn't great to start with.

The photo to the right, I think you'll agree, is very ordinary.

There's no clear focal point. The two women walking away are the closest and the largest figures, so your eye gets drawn to those maybe. But there are so many other figures competing for your attention.

Overall, it's uninspiring, and if you copy this like-for-like, you're going end up with an uninspiring piece of art.

Here is a watercolour sketch from artist Joanne Thomas, which was created from this photo:
You can see right away how much more visually appealing it is. Granted, part of that has to do with the colour palette - it's more vibrant, and it's more harmonious. But let's look at how Joanne has tailored this scene compositionally.

First and foremost, there's a much clearer point of interest. It's now around the two ladies (white and red shirt) walking into the picture.

Joanne has removed many of the competing figures. She's muted the man in the pink shirt to the left. There's no detail on his face of any of the faces in the distance.

She's also placed the figures on a third. They're not central like they are in the photo. They're walking into the scene with their bodies angled to the right, so they're placed on the left hand side of the painting. Our eyes tend to follow that directional cue.
What about other elements that we've talked about in this course that help to make a focal point stand out? Well, the main woman's hair has a strong value and contrast with the background:

Look at the area of light on top of the lady's head next to her, in contrast with the store in the background. That isn't an accident.

What's the most vibrant, standout hue in this painting? It's the woman's red shirt, helping to flag this as a clear focal point. Instead of dark jeans and a dark top on the lady to the left, Joanne has created more interest and more contrast by choosing a white top.
Now look at the darkest darks. They're all clustered around a central area. On the photograph, the darkest darks are scattered all over.

Joanne has also made clever use of leading lines by adding a very simple impression of a building on the right hand side. She's turned a portrait aspect ratio into a landscape aspect ratio.

We don't know what's there in the photograph, but what Joanne has imagined is certainly not complicated. There's no detail, but it acts as a great compositional line for your eye to move into the scene.

Finally, look at the vignette effect of the final painting. There's more detail around the central area, gradually becoming looser and more impressionistic around the outer edges.

The final result is one that bears little resemblance aesthetically to the reference photo, but still captures the essence of the place.

This is a great example of how you can take a compositionally challenged photograph, and really make it work as a piece of art, using artistic license, and an understanding of compositional principles.
I hope you’ve found this guide useful. I hope it will inspire and empower you to start thinking about the composition of your artwork before you start instead of it being an afterthought.

As ever, I look forward to seeing your results in the ArtTutor Gallery or our Facebook page.

### About the Author

Phil Davies is the co-founder of ArtTutor and delivers several of the drawing courses on the site. He studied art at school and briefly at college but is largely self-taught.

[You can see a list of Phil’s course here](#)