Elements of Art

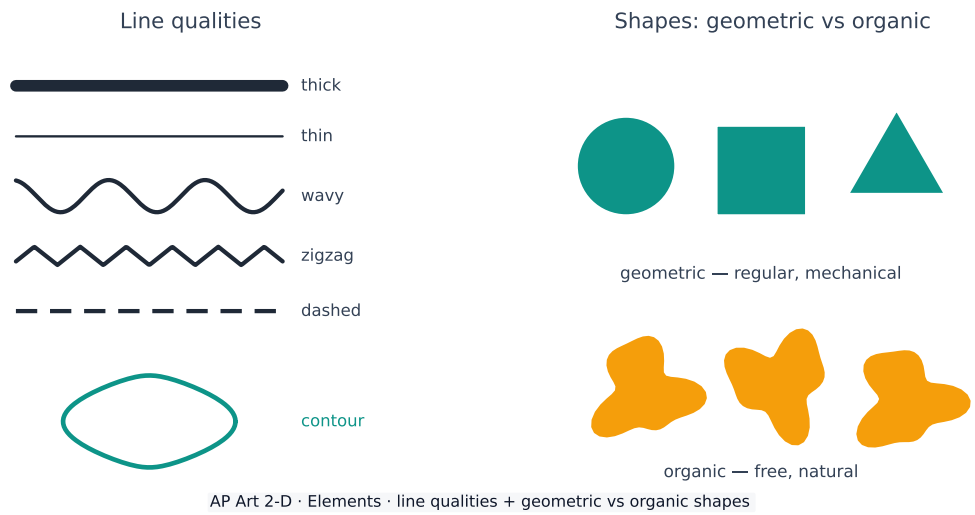
AP 2-D Art and Design

Line

The **elements of art** are the visual "building blocks" every artist uses. The first is **line** – a moving point that the eye follows.

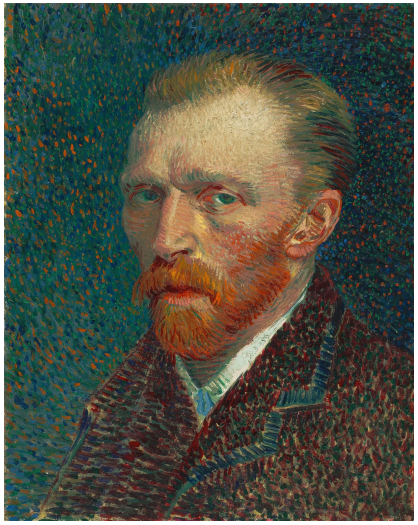
- A line has **length and direction**; it can be straight, curved, angular, or freeform.
- Lines have **quality**: thick or thin, smooth or rough, continuous or broken, dark or light.
- **Contour** lines trace the edges of a form; **gesture** lines capture movement quickly.
- **Implied lines** are not drawn but suggested – by a row of objects or a person's gaze.

Hokusai's The Great Wave off Kanagawa: bold curved outlines carry the eye along the wave, and the claw-like lines of foam create movement



Line varies in weight and character; shapes are either geometric (regular) or organic (natural)

Direction carries feeling: horizontal lines feel calm, vertical lines feel strong, and diagonal lines feel active. Artists use line to build shape, shade value (hatching), imply texture, and lead the viewer's eye.



Van Gogh's self-portrait: restless diagonal strokes behind calm horizontal shoulders – the same two directions doing opposite jobs in one picture

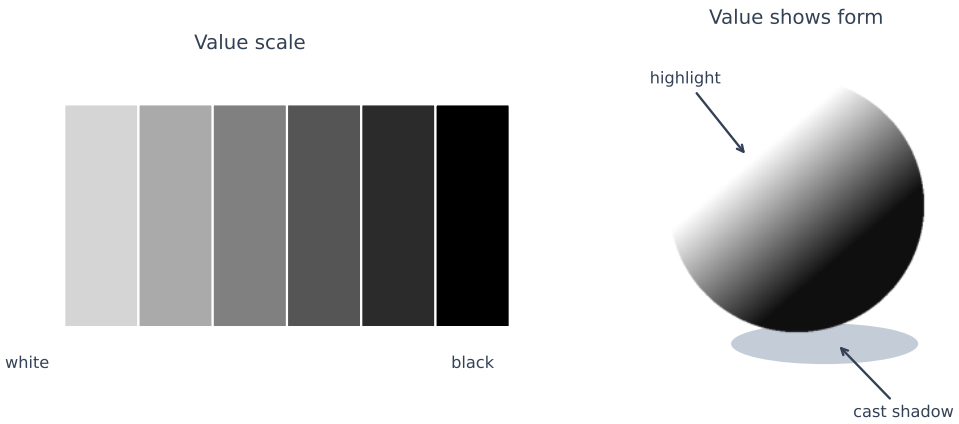
Shape and Form

A **shape** is a flat, enclosed area; a **form** has the illusion of three dimensions (height, width, and depth).

- **Geometric** shapes (circle, square, triangle) are regular and mechanical; **organic** shapes are free and natural.
- **Positive shape** is the object; **negative shape** is the empty space around and between objects – learning to see it makes drawing far more accurate.
- Form is created on a flat surface with **value** (shading), overlapping, and perspective.

Value

Value is the lightness or darkness of a tone – the single most powerful tool for showing three-dimensional form.



value (light–dark) models form: highlight, midtone, core shadow, cast shadow

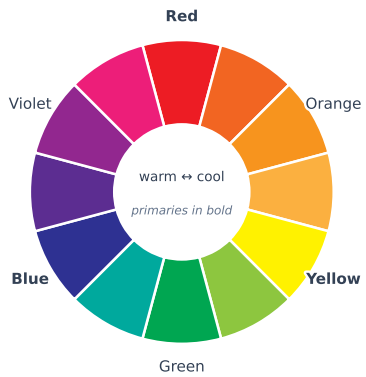
A value scale steps evenly from white to black; strong value contrast creates drama and a focal point

- A **value scale** runs from white through greys to black.
- Light on a form has a **highlight**, **midtones**, a **core shadow**, **reflected light**, and a **cast shadow**.
- **Chiaroscuro** is the bold use of light and dark to model form. Squinting removes colour and helps you judge value.

Joseph Wright's A Philosopher Lecturing on the Orrery: one hidden light in the centre creates strong value contrast (chiaroscuro), lifting each face out of the dark

Color

Colour is light reflected from a surface. It has three properties and follows the logic of the **colour wheel**.



primaries mix to secondaries · complements sit opposite (high contrast)

Primary colours mix to secondary and tertiary hues; complementary colours sit opposite each other

- Colour's three properties: **hue** (its name), **value** (light/dark), and **saturation** (dull to vivid).
- **Primary** (red, yellow, blue) mix to make **secondary** and **tertiary** colours.
- **Complementary** colours sit opposite on the wheel: placed side by side they intensify each other, but **mixed** together they **neutralise** into a dull grey-brown. **Analogous** colours sit next to each other and harmonise.
- **Warm** colours (red, orange, yellow) advance; **cool** colours (blue, green, violet) recede. A **tint** adds white, a **shade** adds black.

Van Gogh's Sunflowers is built almost entirely from warm yellows and oranges, an analogous colour scheme that feels bright and unified

Texture

Texture is the surface quality of a work – how it feels, or how it appears to feel.

- **Actual (tactile) texture** can be physically touched (thick paint, collage, rough paper).
- **Implied (visual) texture** is the illusion of a surface, made with marks, value, and pattern.
- Techniques include stippling, hatching, **impasto** (thick paint), and dry-brush. Contrasting smooth and rough areas adds interest and can direct the eye.

Woven denim close-up: texture is the surface quality you can see or feel – actual or implied

Space

Space is the area within, around, and between the parts of a work, including the illusion of depth on a flat surface.

- **Positive space** is filled by the subject; **negative space** is the empty area around it.
- Depth is created with **overlapping**, size, placement, and detail.
- A scene organises into three depth planes: **foreground** (nearest), **middle ground**, and **background** (farthest). The nearest plane usually carries the most detail and contrast, the farthest the least.
- **Linear perspective** uses a horizon line and **vanishing point** so parallel lines converge; **atmospheric perspective** makes distant things paler, bluer, and less detailed.
- The **format** and **cropping** of the picture plane shape how the space is read.

Worked example (applying the concept). Asked to describe how **line** creates meaning in a portrait, a strong answer names the element, its quality, and its effect: *"The artist uses thick, jagged diagonal lines in the background, and their restless, active direction makes the calm horizontal lines of the sitter's shoulders feel even more still."* Naming the element **and** linking it to a feeling is what portfolio written evidence and analysis questions both reward.

Exam tips

- Name the **element** precisely – line, shape or form, **value**, colour, texture, space – in any analysis.
- Justify how **form** is modelled with a **value scale** and a single light source.
- Read the **colour wheel**: identify **complementary** versus **analogous** schemes and warm or cool temperature.
- Separate **shape** (2-D) from **form** (3-D) and **actual** from **implied texture**.
- Explain depth with **overlap**, size, **linear perspective**, and **atmospheric perspective**.

Vocabulary card meanings

line: A thin mark that can run straight or curve. Contour: The outer edge that describes a shape. gesture: A quick drawing that catches movement rather than detail. Implied lines: Edges the eye follows even though no stroke is drawn there. form: A solid shape, or the illusion of volume on a flat surface. organic: A shape that looks grown, with a curved outline or a jagged one. negative shape: The empty area around an object, which can itself form a design. midtones: The greys or colours between the lightest and darkest values. core shadow: The dark band on the side of a form turned away from the light. The paired Chinese term names the boundary where the light stops. Colour: What the eye reads as hue, lightness, and intensity on a surface. colour wheel: A circle that arranges hues so relationships among them are easy to see. hue: The name of a colour, such as red or blue, apart from how light or dark it is. Primary: In one colour system, the starting hues of that system, often three, which a different system may mix from other hues. secondary: A hue made by mixing two of the basic hues. neutralise: To dull a hue by mixing in its opposite on the wheel. Analogous: Hues that sit next to each other and therefore look related. Warm: Hues such as red and orange, often felt as energetic. cool: Hues such as blue and green, often felt as calm. Actual (tactile) texture: A surface you could feel with your fingers, not only see. impasto: Paint laid on so thickly that the strokes stand up. overlapping: Placing one shape in front of another so depth is suggested. foreground: The part of a picture that seems nearest to the viewer. middle ground: The zone of a picture between what is nearest and what is farthest. background: The part of a picture that seems farthest away.