

Principles of Design

AP 2-D Art and Design ■ Topic 2

AP 2-D Art and Design



What we will cover

- 1 Balance
- 2 Emphasis & focal point
- 3 Contrast
- 4 Movement & rhythm
- 5 Pattern & repetition
- 6 Proportion & scale
- 7 Unity & variety
- 8 Composition

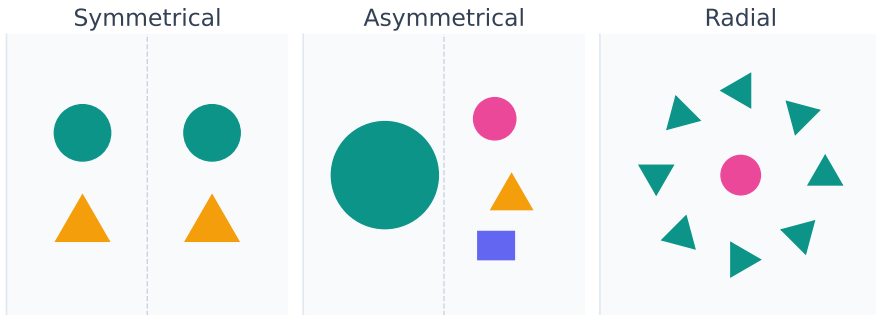


Balance – the distribution of visual weight

The **principles of design** are the rules for **arranging** the elements. The first is **balance** .

Visual weight depends on size, colour, value and position – a **small bright** shape can balance a **large dull** one.

Balance – the distribution of visual weight, in detail



AP Art 2-D · Principles · symmetrical, asymmetrical, radial balance

symmetrical, asymmetrical and radial

The **principles of design** are the rules for **arranging** the elements – and **balance** is the first of them.

Three kinds of balance

- **Symmetrical** – mirrors a central axis; calm and orderly
- **Asymmetrical** – equal visual weight; dynamic
- **Radial** – arranged around a central point

Justify balance through visual weight, not just symmetry.



Balance of light, mass and interest across the plane

Balance, and how the eye is carried

Symmetrical (formal) balance

Symmetrical (formal) balance: the halves mirror. Stable, calm, and formal – which is why institutions are drawn this way.

Asymmetrical (informal) balance

Asymmetrical (informal) balance: unlike elements balanced by visual weight – a small dark shape against a large pale one. More dynamic.

Continuity

Continuity: edges and implied lines that carry the eye from one element to the next without a break.

Progressive rhythm

A **progressive** rhythm repeats an element while changing it a little each time – growing, rotating, fading.

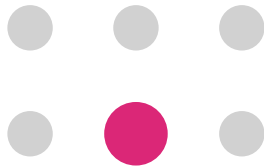
Radial balance is the third kind: elements arranged around a centre, as in a rose window or a mandala.



Emphasis and the focal point

Emphasis makes one part stand out – the **focal point**, where the eye is drawn **first**.

- created through **contrast**: size, colour, value, isolation, placement
- leading lines and the rule of thirds place it well
- **subordination** keeps other areas **quieter** so it leads



one element differs $\Rightarrow$ the eye lands there

Contrast

Contrast is the **difference** between elements – it creates energy, variety and readability. It can be of value (light/dark), colour (complementary), shape, texture or size.

Strong contrast **attracts attention** and defines a focal point

Low contrast **unifies** and calms

Value and size contrast create a clear **visual hierarchy** – what the viewer reads first, second, third.



Movement and rhythm

Movement leads the eye **through** a work; **rhythm** is the repetition that creates a visual **beat**.

Repetition **with variation** keeps rhythm interesting rather than monotonous.



Movement and rhythm lead the eye through the work

Pattern and repetition

Repetition reuses an element; a **pattern** arranges it in a **predictable** way.

- repetition of shape, colour or line builds **unity** and rhythm
- a pattern is a repeated **motif** – regular (a grid) or irregular



Repetition builds pattern and visual rhythm

Too much repetition feels **monotonous** – vary the scale or colour.



Proportion and scale

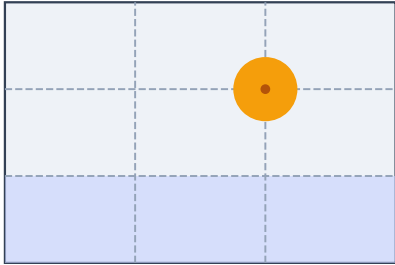
Proportion compares the sizes of **parts within** a work (head to body);
scale is size **relative to something else**.

Hierarchical scale makes the **most important** element the largest.

Exaggerated or distorted proportion can **express emotion**. The **golden ratio** is a historic guide to pleasing proportions.

The rule of thirds places key elements

Rule of thirds



focal point sits on a third-line intersection

composition hierarchy: larger / higher-contrast shapes read as more important

Hierarchical scale



largest = most important

The rule of thirds places key elements on the third-lines; hierarchical scale makes the important element largest

Unity with variety

Unity

from repetition, **proximity** (grouping), a limited palette

Variety

difference that **prevents monotony**

The best works achieve unity **with** variety – **order that still surprises**.

Harmony comes from similar elements.
Name the **unifying device** and the **source of interest**.



Composition – arranging it all

Composition is how the elements and principles are arranged within the **picture plane** .

- the **format** (portrait, landscape, square) shapes the design
- the **rule of thirds** places key elements on the third-lines
- **cropping** decides what is cut – changing emphasis and tension

A strong composition unifies the elements **and** creates a clear focal point – exactly what the 2-D portfolio is judged on.

Worked example – writing about a principle

“Explain the *balance* in this composition.”

*“The large dark shape on the left is balanced by three small bright shapes on the right – this is **asymmetrical balance**, which gives the piece visual weight on both sides while keeping it dynamic rather than static.”*

A full answer names the **principle**, points to **specific evidence** in the work, **and** states the **effect on the viewer**.

Balance



Leonardo's Vitruvian Man: the figure is drawn with near-perfect symmetry about a central vertical axis, and the surrounding circle gives it radial balance too

Exam tips

- For every work, state which **principle** organises it – balance, emphasis, contrast, movement, or unity.
- Justify **balance** through **visual weight**, not just symmetry.
- Ensure one clear **focal point**, and name the **emphasis** technique that creates it.
- Aim for **unity with variety** – name the unifying device and the source of interest.
- Plan **composition** with the **rule of thirds** and thumbnails before committing.



Topic 2 – key takeaways

1

Balance

symmetrical, asymmetrical, radial
– argue from visual weight

2

Emphasis

contrast makes one focal point;
subordination keeps the rest quiet

3

Rhythm

repetition with variation; pattern
repeats a motif

4

Unity

unity WITH variety; plan with the
rule of thirds

Check yourself

- 1 A small bright shape balances a large dull one. Which balance?
- 2 What keeps non-focal areas quiet?
- 3 What is the difference between proportion and scale?
- 4 Name the composition tool that uses third-lines.

Answers 1. asymmetrical 2. subordination 3. proportion is within the work; scale is relative to something else 4. the rule of thirds