

# The Principles of Design

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LEVEL 2

## What are the principles of design?

- They are basic rules/guidelines that help an artist communicate a message more effectively to a viewer.
- In sort, they are shortcuts to more effective visual communication.
- These principles can be broken down into seven areas of focus:
  1. Unity
  2. Contrast
  3. Balance
  4. Emphasis
  5. Proportion
  6. Rhythm
  7. Movement

# Basic Composition

In order to understand the Principles we need to make sure we understand the key parts that make for strong design

# Basic Composition Terms to Know

Composition: The arrangement of "stuff" within a work of art, Like the elements of art.

Visual Message: the "Big Idea" the artist wants people to "read" in their artwork

Focal Point: The main area of interest in a work of art; when used effectively it acts like an opening paragraph or "thesis statement". It should be the "Big Idea" behind the visual message.

Picture Plane: the area the artwork is occupying. Ex: edge to edge of the paper or canvas the image is on, or the area a sculpture is occupying.

Magic Diamond: a tool artist use to help with strong Focal Point placement and avoid weak placement.

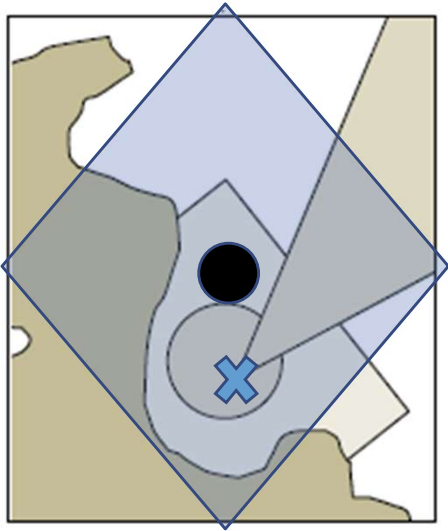
Rule of Thirds: a tool artists use to help check for Variety (increase visual interest) in a work of art- it helps

Strong Composition: more effectively and efficiently communicates the artists visual message and intent and actively engages and holds the audience's attention.

Weak Composition: artwork less engaging to the audience, message may be mixed, confused, or lacking all together. It's not bad but not as effective as it could be- (see avoiding the Nevers' for mor info).

# Basic Composition continued...

## THE MAGIC DIMOND



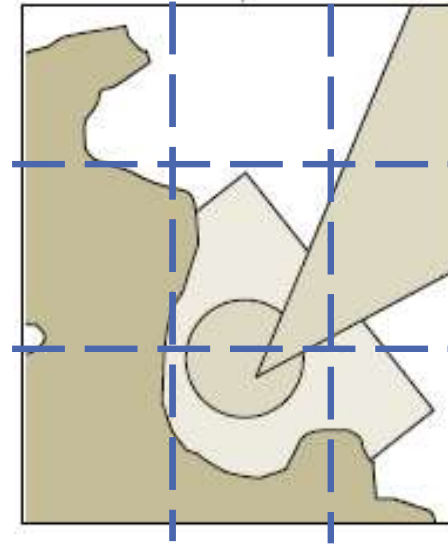
Helps with *focal point placement*. Basically anywhere in the orange is strong placement.

Weak compositions have focal points in the center or corners. They're not bad exactly they just communicate very specific ideas. Those specific ideas are very difficult to go beyond.

For example if you put the focal point in the center, viewers tend to get stuck and don't see the rest of the artwork. It gives a feeling of confrontation- the "in-your-face-factor".

*Basically be mindful of your focal point placement!*

## THE RULE OF 3RDS



Helps with *checking for variety*.

For a dynamic composition each square should have different amounts of "activity". Some square may be blank; others may have lots of different content. Basically you don't want everything to be the same or similar.

How it works:

In your mind divide the picture plain into thirds vertically and horizontally.

The amount of visual activity (aka stuff = shape, colors, lines ect), should be different between the squares in the Rule of 3<sup>rd</sup>'s Grid, avoid them being similar.

Example: some squares have all white; all dark gray; some of all colors; some of the triangle, some of the circle, square, and organic shape; but none of them have the same balance of all those parts.

## Basic Composition

### “The Never’s”

These are more like rules: sure there may be exceptions or even a time and a place to break them. However, it takes a lot of work to understand what those exceptions are and even when you break them for a good reason you still might end up in jail or in the case of making art- have a weaker composition.

#### Avoid the “obvious”:

- ◊ Why? You will get board fast, usually most simple and common idea instead of your best, and all your work will start to look the same- it’s not bad but gets boring.
- ◊ Quick fixes: invest a little more time and effort in the beginning before starting your project- force your self to find a more unique and personally engaging response, try out 6+ more compositions with thumbnail sketches.

#### Avoid the “Sticker Effect”

- ◊ Why? Shows lack of Unity in Design, No direction for viewer
- ◊ Quick Fix: Add stuff to visually connect stuff together (have stuff overlap or run off the edge).

#### Don’t Crowd Stuff (especially the Focal Point and Picture Plane Edges)

- ◊ Also includes never line stuff up around the edges of the Picture Plane.
- ◊ Why ?it shows lack of planning because everything looks and feels cramped, it cuts out important information when artwork is matted and framed, It’s an obvious beginner bad habit.
- ◊ Quick Fixes: Be more Mindful for the start about “Working on the Page” and the placement of everything in your composition, block in main shapes for all stuff in your composition before adding details, Start blocking with your Focal Point in mind first and make sure your other stuff is re-enforcing it instead of obscuring it.

#### Never Ever Bullseye Stuff (placing stuff too close to the middle of your picture plane)

- ◊ Why? It’s another beginner mistake: it creates too much balance and usually communicates a feeling of being “confrontational” with your audience, Eliminates any movement for your composition because your eye get stuck in the middle. Anything too centralized will become your focal Point –even if that wasn’t your intent, it’s just what happens.

P.O.D: Unity

# Unity

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What you need to know about unity...

-Unity in art describes how all the parts of a work of artwork together as a whole.

-When all elements agree, a design is considered "unified".

-Harmony is a synonym for Unity.

-Another way of understanding it is by asking an important question:

- How well do these things relate to each other in a work of art:
  - Elements of Art
  - Visual Message (aka "Big Idea", "Visual Story")
  - The Composition
  - Other Principles of Design
  - Media
  - Art Style
  - Cultural and Historical Influences

Granted artists don't always present or think about those things all the time or maybe not even all at once. However the more you are actively thinking of how those things impact your design is the sign of a more accomplished artist. It's what sets the beginners from advanced students. Everyone will be at different places from each other. Don't feel like you must know all those things all at once.

## Short Cuts to Creating Unity

1. Focus on aligning 2 things: *the Elements of Art* and your *Visual Message*
  - Your visual message is the anchor that all your other design choices (elements of art) hook into.
2. Start thinking about Unity at the beginning, *BEFORE* you start creating your work of art!
  - Why? It's hard to fix later in the process. Making art is like building a house, if you try to put up walls before you build the foundation they might not fit- sure you might be able to fix it but it will take a lot longer and it probably won't ever be as strong if you had just sucked it up and spent a little more time planning.
3. Be mindful of Variety!
  - Variety adds some visual interest and when done well can even add some interesting layers to your "Big Message"



# Short Cut to Unity #1

Example of Elements of Art and Message Alignment  
using Van Gogh's "Starry Night"

1. His Visual Message aka "Big Idea":
  - What the *experience* of looking at the night sky is really like" at least to him
2. His Anchor Element choices:
  - Color: Blue and Orange because those are the most common colors you will see in the dark, they also contrast nicely literally and is also another way to show the contrast between the sky and the ground. Those were also colors he liked to use in a lot of his work in general.
  - Texture: use texture to express the idea of the wind and how it flows as well as the effect of looking at the Milky Way (keep in mind when he painted it there wasn't as much light or air pollution and could easily see it- look up NASA photos for what it looks like in remote places today).



# Master Level of Unity...

Other ways he creates Unity with all the E.o.A.

1. Texture- uses repetitive line pattern to create a consistent texture throughout the piece but uses color and direction to add variety
2. Line- uses the same paint brush to help create uniformity with the line thickness and size. Also aligns them to create implied lines and shapes to create a sense of movement.
3. Shape- uses repetition of circular shapes in the sky and more geometric shapes on the land but adds variety by changing up the size and organization of placement- more regular in the city and irregular in the sky.
4. Form- Adds contrast between the sky and ground by making the objects on the ground look more like geometric forms and the objects in the sky like flat shapes.
5. Value- creates elongated lines in the composition by how he uses value: the large tree (the organic form in the foreground) grows vertically; and the light-yellow clouds cut across horizontally to provide enough contrast to better see the mountains in the background.
6. Space- He creates depth of field by overlapping the shapes of the buildings and having them get smaller as they go back to help establish a sense of space. The big tree in the front helps establish the foreground as well.
7. Color- Uses a simple color pallet of complimentary colors: Blue and orange to help build the unity through out the piece. He also adds more variety to the colors by changing up the values and working with analogous colors to add more depth to his color choices.

Overall his work shows not just how the Elements relate to his Big idea, he's also thinking about how he expresses his own ideas and experiences of looking at the night sky. One thing you may not realize unless you look at photos, he actually painted this from direct observation, at night, looking out over the town at night. It is more abstract in some places than others but is capturing what he's looking at.



# Short Cut #2 Start thinking about Unity from the beginning (Design Thinking)

## The Grocery List Example

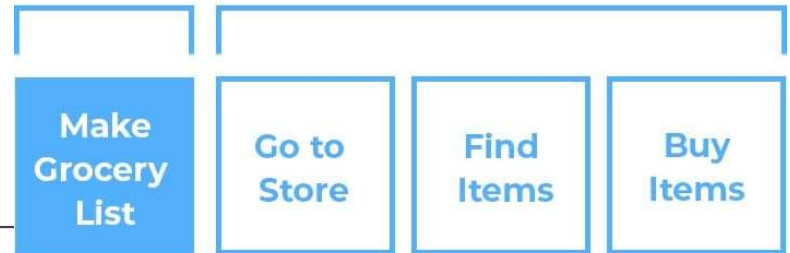
Creating a list for groceries is a simple task – You find the recipes you want to make for the week, then write down all the ingredients you need to buy.

This is the first step in your overall “grocery shopping experience.” For many, this step is somewhat removed from the steps that follow. As a result, we end up with grocery lists that look something like this:

At first glance, you might think there is nothing wrong with this list. It serves its purpose in communicating the ingredients you need to buy. However, let’s take a look at it from a design perspective and spot the issue.

Planning

Grocery Shopping



### Groceries

Eggs  
Bread  
Green Peppers  
Cheese  
Bacon  
Buns  
Milk  
Cucumbers  
Hot Dogs  
Mustard  
Romaine

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This simple list appears to have all the right parts to effectively communicate which groceries you need to pick up from the store. We can even see how all of the Principles of Design are demonstrated in this one simple example.

- Balance – Visual weight distributed evenly down the page.
- Alignment – A list format that's easy to scan.
- Hierarchy – A heading with list items below.
- Emphasis – Larger font size on the heading.
- Proportion – Smaller font size on the list items.
- White Space – Space around and between the text.
- Repetition – The size and color of each list item.
- Movement – The eye moves top to bottom as intended.
- Contrast – Dark text on the white background.

### But what about Unity?

One could argue that the design of this list is unified because it demonstrates all the other Principles of Design. Each list item shares a common thread: they are all groceries.

However, if we examine the relationships between each of these list items, we might stop and ask *"what do cucumbers and milk have in common?"*

# A Closer Look

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## Groceries

Eggs  
Bread  
Green Peppers  
Cheese  
Bacon  
Buns  
Milk  
Cucumbers  
Hot Dogs  
Mustard  
Romaine

Unity is a *measure of how well each element of your design works together.*

This would suggest that a design can be very unified, somewhat unified, or not unified at all.

Our grocery list example above is somewhat unified. It gets the job done, but it's still not the most effective design.

Despite having all the Principles in Design demonstrated in our grocery list, the end result is a poor design because we didn't consider "The Big Picture" first.

# Starting with “The Big Picture”



## Groceries

### Vegetables

Green Peppers  
Cucumbers  
Romaine

### Carbs

Bread  
Buns

### Proteins

Eggs  
Bacon  
Hot Dogs

### Dairy

Cheese  
Milk

Before we head out to buy our groceries, we might stop and ask ourselves a few questions:

- What role does this grocery list play in my overall shopping experience?
- What kind of shopping experience would I like to have?
- How can I better communicate this information to myself?

By thinking in these broader terms, we're able to achieve unity from the very beginning. You're no longer designing a simple grocery list, you're using design to improve your entire shopping experience.

From the big picture perspective, you can consider the store's layout, which isles you'll need to visit, and the order those isles appear. With this new information, you can redesign your grocery list to look something like this:

The result is a greater sense of unity and an improved shopping experience. By taking a little bit more of time and effort to "design" your grocery list in this way, you save much more time and effort in the end as you get in and out of the grocery store more efficiently.

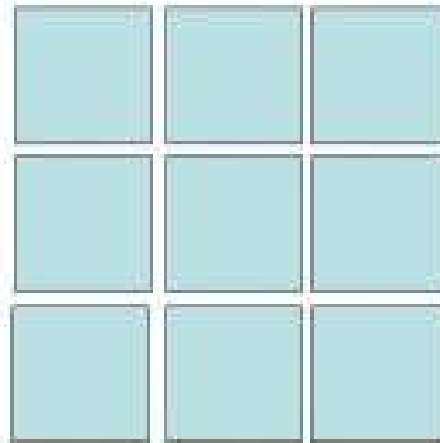
Big picture thinking is where good design begins.

# Short Cut #3

## Be Mindful of Variety

Having uniformity through out the design is good but can be boring. That's where Variety comes in. Adding a little variety is good but too much will break up the unity. The trick is to create a balance between them

- Same shape, size, tone and texture



- Same shape, tone, texture. interest created by varying size and position

