

Composition guidelines (for a variety of subjects)

There are no hard and fast rules to composition, it's a real learning curve and something you slowly develop the more you draw and paint. So after you've grasped the basic ideas about what works and what doesn't, don't be afraid to experiment. You can try doing some small sketches in boxes, called thumbnails, to try out different arrangements of elements.

So put some thought into it before you start. And when you've decided on a composition, check it as you're drawing and at the end – the angle of a bank of trees, or the angle of a leaf could make all the difference to the whole painting. (Taking your own photographs for any purposes really helps develop compositional skills).

The type of subject can often heavily influence your composition through its shape or nature for eg

A moorland cottage has to be seen to be with some expansive space of moorland around it.

A stem of honeysuckle should show the growth, the twisting and turning of the flowers, so sprawling would be best, perhaps showing a paired plant/structure it habitually entwines itself around.

Objects on a table should be thoughtfully placed to show their relationships, or to explore them with the 'roving eye'.

And consider what they are placed on – use of a tablecloth, plain or patterned surface?

Animals and people are best shown in relation to their environment in some way.

Choosing your format

landscape (horizontal) or **portrait** (vertical) or **square**, or an 'in and out and around' the subject with an uneven painted or shaded perimeter - a **vignetted effect** (still within a rectangular or square shape)

Choose your components carefully and think about how you want to arrange them or what you want to be the focal point. So if it's a landscape from a photograph, ideally this should happen when you're pressing the shutter, or when looking through a window-mount viewfinder if painting *en plein air*.

Decide what to leave in and what to leave out - a general rule for all subjects for picture clarity.

Cut your paper or choose your pad size so that its slightly larger than the composition to be drawn. Don't just tell yourself you'll crop to suit later eg cut your paper so the flower you've painted too near the left is made more central – it doesn't develop your composition skills and makes for a lazy approach. So only crop afterwards as an emergency measure to make the best of a good bit of painting.

The rule of two thirds –for the dividing horizon line which breaks up the space in your painting (Can also be the relative surface area taken up by the main subject if no horizon is involved). The horizon line is best placed along the upper two thirds of the height of your format (or the lower third if the upper two thirds demands attention eg a big moody sky, sunset). So this rule dictates never dividing the picture height exactly in half. This rule can also be applied to some extent for the vertical components.

Viewpoint – refers to the angle of sight. You may be in a low body position looking up (low viewpoint) or a high body position looking down (high viewpoint) or you may be in a central eye level position. Sometimes extremes of high and low are used for dramatic effect eg a high viewpoint straight down onto a table top, as in diagram 27, with fully flattened perspective. Whichever viewpoint you choose, a common mistake is not to get close enough to your subject and not to consider any foreground interest.

Leading the eye into the picture

Consider ways this can be done to arrive at the focal point, where the eye comes to rest:-

Using line

In a landscape you could use the converging lines of a road/ river/ footpath/ field boundaries merging in the distance to lead directly to, or meander towards, the focal point – those distant hills, that farm building. This gives depth and perspective. Other features should support the focal point, not detract.

Using changes in scale, where forms become smaller nearer the horizon or further back into the picture, leading the eye to the focal point (eg the trees in diagram 4, the banded forms in 17). Some foreground interest can give the viewer something to look at before they journey to the focal point.

'The roving eye' is often used in Still lifes, where the eye is invited to move from object to object and the spaces in-between them, to explore, rather than to arrive anywhere too soon. Many florals can be the like this too, inviting the eye to explore the different structures rather than to arrive at a specific focal point.

Always consider the viewer. They want to enjoy looking into a picture. They want to be guided in to find things of interest, not be disappointed when they get there. They don't want to be confused or put off by jarring and competing elements in a composition eg one simple example would be forms the same size placed directly opposite each other, as in diagrams 12, 15, 26.

Weight

Weight refers to the relative size of some components to others. Its common to have larger objects at the bottom of the composition to give the picture some 'weight' eg diagram 18. But in more abstract work the weight can be near the top. Aspects of weight very much depend on the subject at hand.

So your drawing should ideally be as carefully worked out as possible. Minor changes can be done in a more complex composition later on, but don't just cross your fingers and hope for the best, or think to yourself 'Oh I'll just cut that off afterwards', or 'the mount will hide that'. If the composition is good, you'll feel much better through the painting of it, instead of having the irritation and distraction of continually seeing the parts you don't like.

(The exception to this rule could be if you were painting a seasonal collection of plants, which you might have to do one by one as the plants are acquired or found. But even then, the main large scale forms should be painted first.)

Use of a mirror – holding your drawing in front of a mirror, so you see the mirror image of it, can be helpful in deciding whether you have a nice balance of forms. For some reason problem sections can really show up this way, usually confirming what you suspect already.

Use of colour

This can visually support a composition by painting foreground features in warmer tones (more yellow, red) and background features in cooler tones (more blue, grey, or thin tints of any colour). This is using aerial perspective which is how colour is affected when travelling through air particles, and can go some way towards fixing problems Eg in diagram 26, the flower on the left could be painted in warm colours, the one on the right in cool colours – the effect? The flower on the left would look closer to the viewer, the one on the right further back, so at least they wouldn't appear to be in the same plane. Just small colour adjustments adding yellow or blue to the relevant colour mixes can have marked visual effects. Making background leaves more blue is an easy way to give depth to a floral composition.

Keyword summary of composition elements to remember:

Viewpoint, focal point, line and shape, scale, foreground, background, perspective, weight and volume, balance, harmony, colour, lighting, texture, tone.