

Art Techniques Student's Guides

Mastering Composition & Visual Impact



**Curated by
Ms. Mila Vasconcelos**



Introduction:

Composition is the invisible hand that guides the viewer's eye across an artwork. It is not just about arranging shapes, but about creating rhythm, balance, and meaning. In IB Visual Arts, mastering composition allows you to amplify both technical skill and conceptual depth — ensuring that every detail contributes to the story you want to tell.



Image source: Altenew.com

Why Composition Matters



Image source: My Gallerist

- Directs the viewer's attention to what matters most.
- Creates movement and flow within the work.
- Enhances storytelling and emotional impact.
- Builds harmony or intentional tension.
- Shows assessors you have intentional control over your artistic choices.

Core Composition Techniques

Rule of Thirds – Divide the frame into thirds; place key elements along lines or intersections.

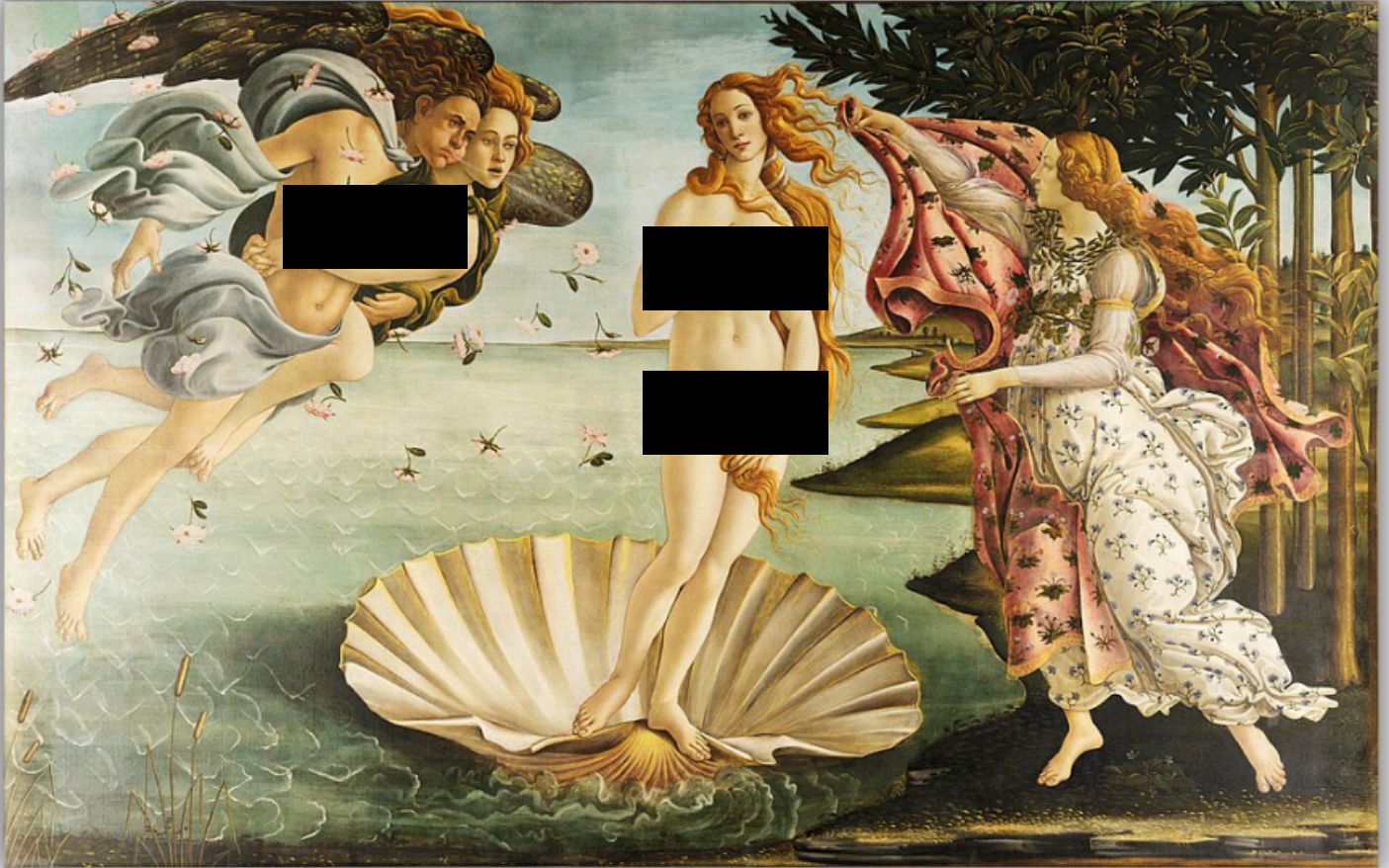


*Vincent van Gogh, The Starry Night, 1889, Oil on canvas, MoMA, New York.
The sky dominates the top two-thirds while the village sits in the lower third,
guiding the viewer naturally through the swirling movement of the composition.*

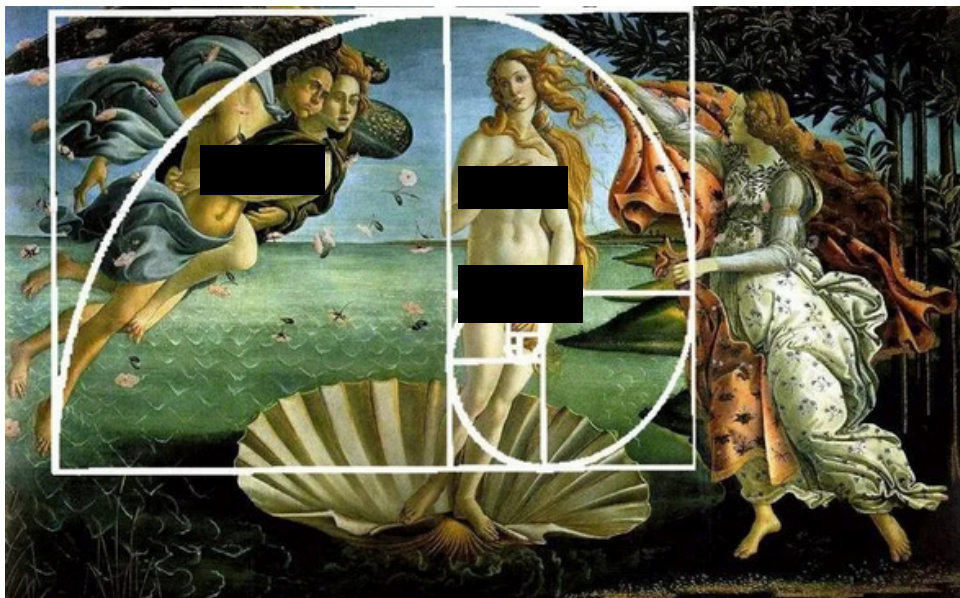


Core Composition Techniques

Golden Ratio / Spiral – Use natural spirals for harmony and flow.

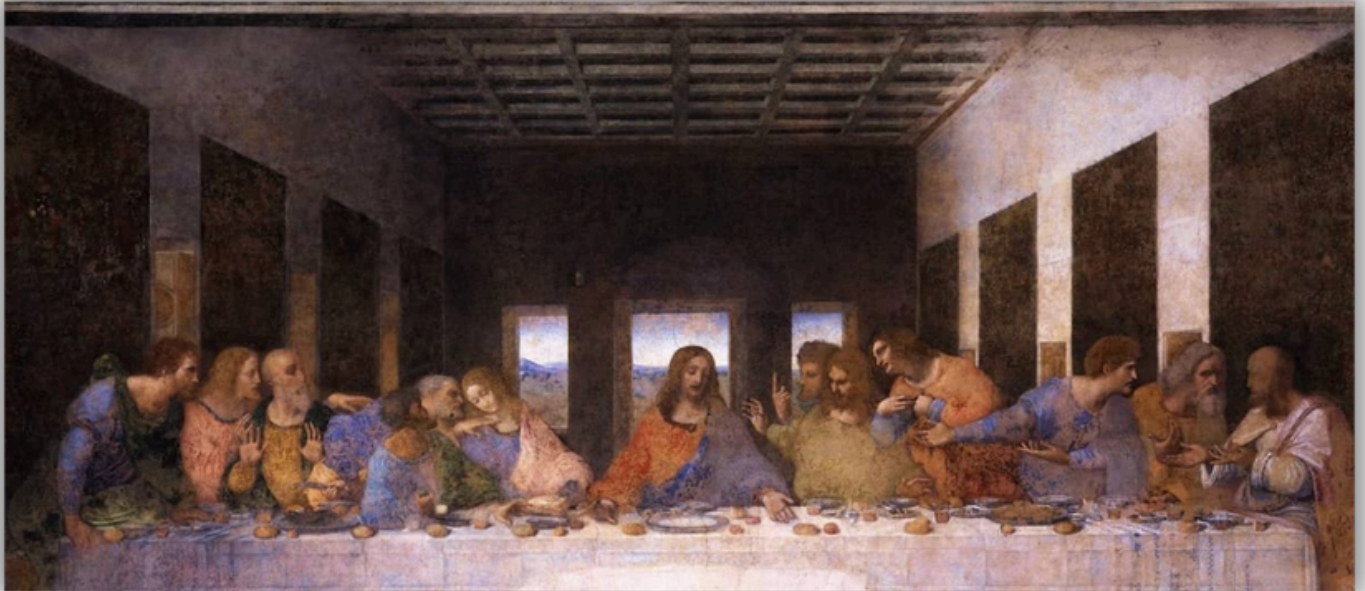


*Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, c. 1485, Tempera on canvas, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.
The spiral of Venus's body and flowing hair aligns beautifully with the golden ratio,
creating harmony and natural balance.*

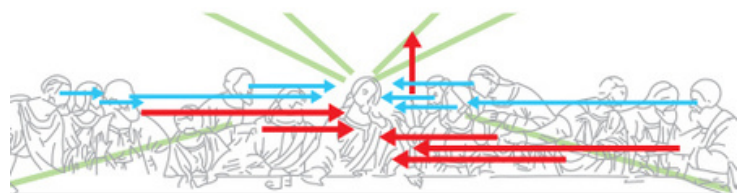
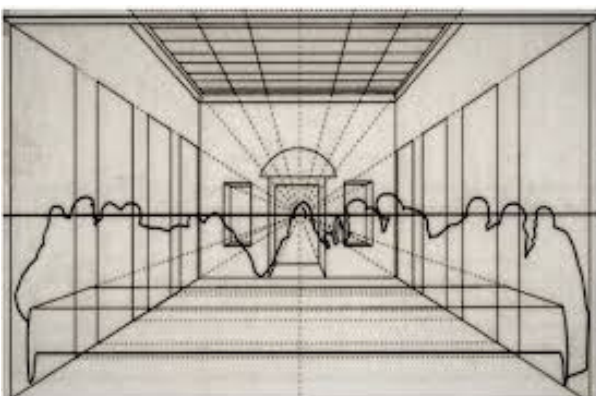
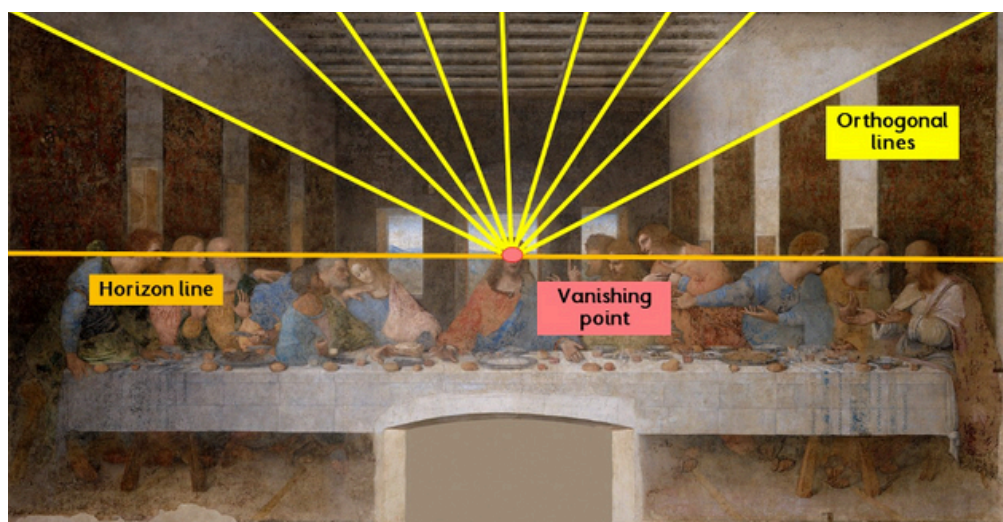


Core Composition Techniques

Leading Lines – Roads, rivers, limbs, or brushstrokes that guide the viewer's eye.



Leonardo da Vinci, The Last Supper, 1495-1498, Fresco, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan. Architectural perspective lines converge toward Christ, directing the viewer's eye straight to the focal point.



Core Composition Techniques

Framing – Using natural or constructed borders to highlight your subject.



Johannes Vermeer, Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window, 1657-1659, Oil on canvas, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden. The window frame and curtain create a natural border that focuses attention on the figure.



After a 2021 restoration, Johannes Vermeer's Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window is now viewed with the angel, or more accurately, the figure of Cupid. For over 250 years, the painting of Cupid on the back wall was covered by another artist and was not seen as part of Vermeer's original work.

Core Composition Techniques

Symmetry – Balanced structured work to create a mood.



Taj Mahal, 1632-1648, Mughal architecture, Agra, India.

Perfect architectural symmetry embodies spiritual and cultural ideals of harmony and eternity.



Core Composition Techniques

Asymmetry - intentionally off-balance creation to highlight different aspects of the compositions.



Edgar Degas, *The Dance Class*, 1874, Oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figures are clustered off to one side, leaving open space that balances tension and liveliness.

Core Composition Techniques

Negative Space – Using emptiness to give weight to the subject.

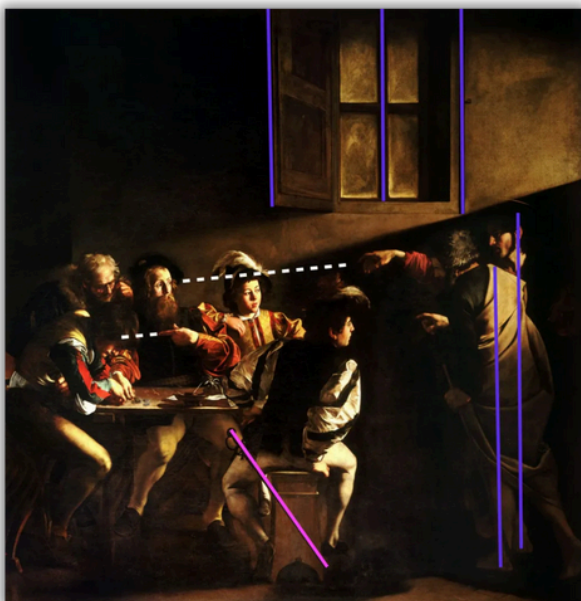


Henri Matisse, La Gerbe (The Sheaf), 1953, Gouache on paper, cut and pasted, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).

This late cut-out is full of dynamic plant-like forms in bright colors against a white background. The negative space between the shapes is just as important as the forms themselves, creating rhythm and visual balance.

Core Composition Techniques

Contrast & Focal Point – Strong light/dark, color, or scale shifts to draw attention.



Caravaggio, The Calling of Saint Matthew, 1599–1600, Oil on canvas, Contarelli Chapel, Rome. Strong chiaroscuro contrast directs immediate focus on the central figures, emphasizing the drama of the moment.

Core Composition Techniques

Depth & Overlap – Layering elements to create visual impact and storytelling.



Raphael, The School of Athens, 1509–1511, Fresco, Vatican Museums, Rome. Overlapping figures, architectural perspective, and receding arches create depth and intellectual grandeur.

Composition in Storytelling

Ask yourself:

- *What do I want the viewer to notice first?*
- *How do I want the eye to travel across the piece?*
- *Is my composition harmonious, chaotic, or dynamic – and why?*
- *How does placement reflect the meaning of my work?*

Elements Of Composition In Art



Unity



Balance



Movement



Rhythm



Focus



Contrast



Pattern



Proportion

ThoughtCo.

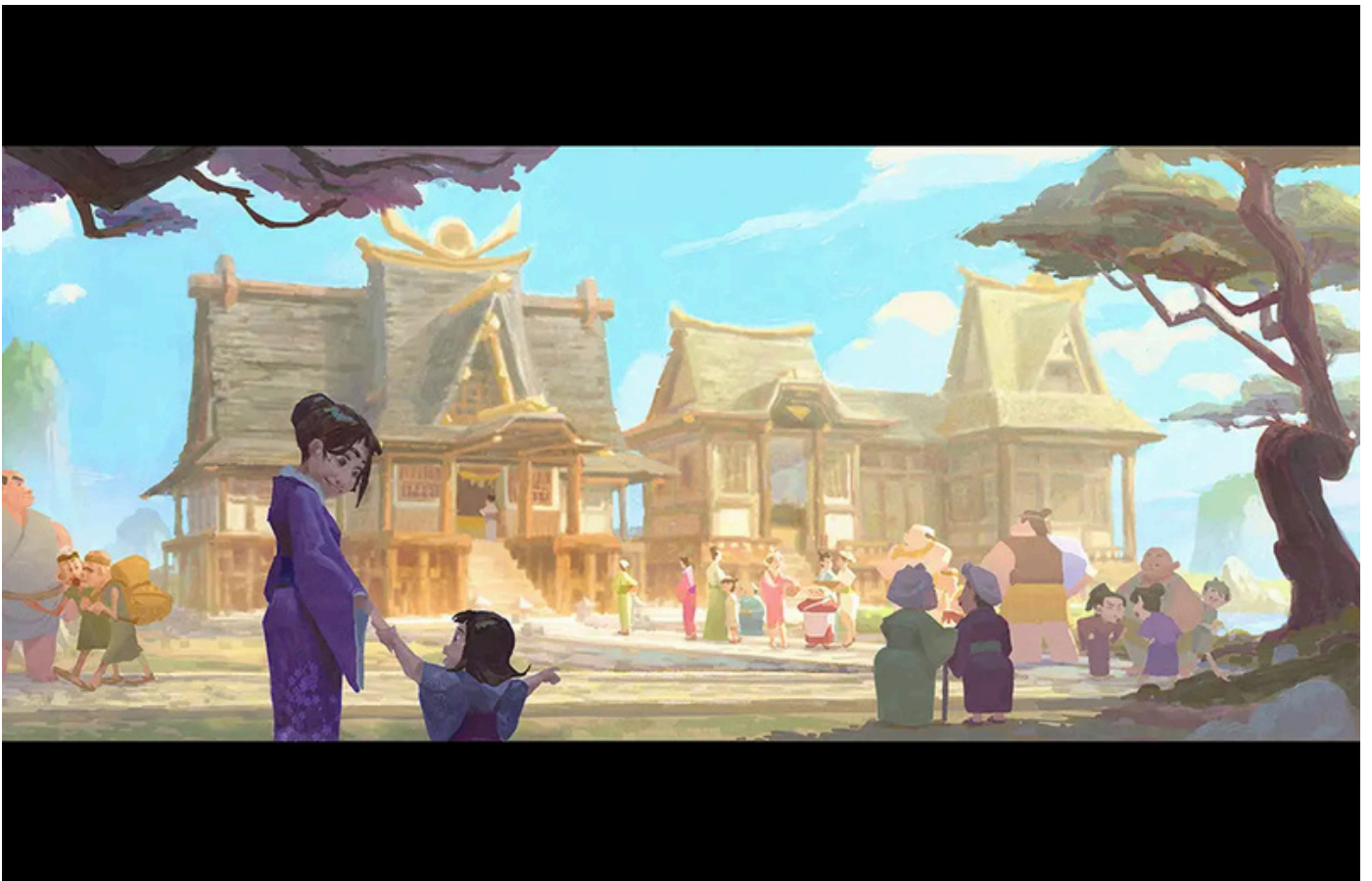
The 8 Elements of Composition in Arts

Student Challenges

Rule of Thirds Story

- Create a composition where your subject is off-center.
- Use background and negative space to reinforce meaning.

Reflection: How did this placement change the story?



Personal work based on "Urashima Taro" by Iwaya Sazanami

Student Challenges

Leading Line Experiment

- Use natural or invented lines to guide the eye.
- Try both realistic (roads, rivers) and abstract (brushstrokes, geometry).

Reflection: Where did the viewer's eye travel first?



The Polar Sea, Caspar David Friedrich, 1824, oil on canvas, DEA Picture Library

Leda, Juan Gris, date unknown, gouache, pen and ink, Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images



Student Challenges

Contrast Focus

- Choose a subject and make it the brightest, darkest, or most colorful element.
- Surround it with subdued tones to heighten impact.

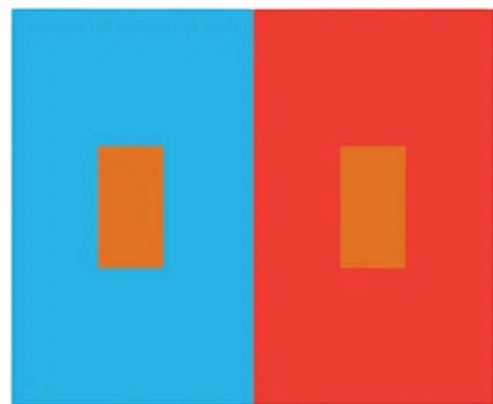
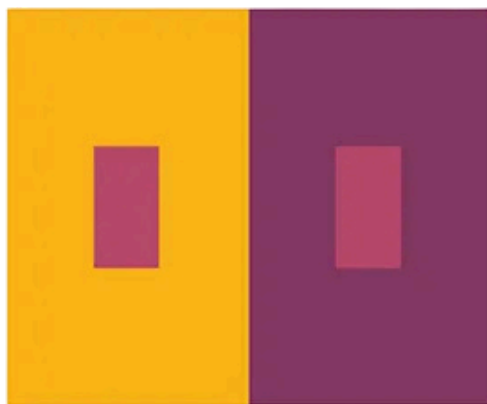
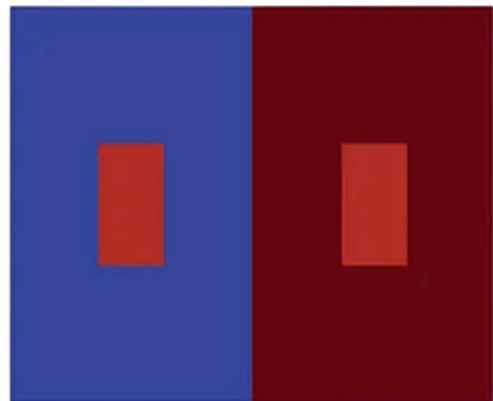
Reflection: How does contrast control emotion?



*The Matchmaker, Gerard van Honthorst, 1625, Oil on wood,
71 cm × 104 cm (28 in × 41 in), Centraal Museum, Utrecht*

IB Reflection Prompts

- Which compositional choices did I make intentionally?
- How do these choices affect the mood and meaning of my piece?
- Does my composition encourage harmony, tension, or movement? Why?
- How can I compare my approach to an artist who uses similar compositional strategies?



*Color Contrast in Art. Image via
painting.about.com*

Student Worksheet

Name: _____

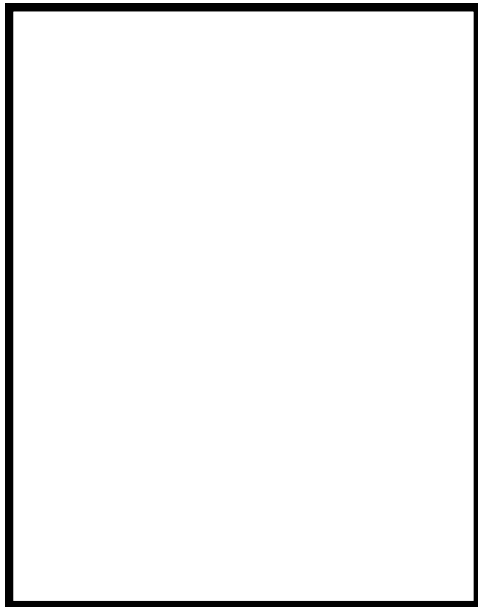
Date: __/__/____

Project Planning

- Main Subject: _____
- Chosen Composition Technique: _____
- Story/Message: _____

Sketch & Notes

(Thumbnail boxes for composition sketches)



Reflection

1. What do you want the viewer to notice first?

2. How does your composition help guide the eye?

3. What changes improved your visual impact the most?
