Basics of composition

Visual texts are constructed using tools that have been around for centuries. These notes will introduce you to the elements of composition and how they are used to create meaning.

To supplement these notes, read in Understanding Comics Chapter 4: Time Frames and Chapter 5: Living in Line. These notes cover:

- Dots, lines and movement
- The axis
- Shapes and their meaning
- Proportion
- Spatiality
- Balance
THE DOT is a small, circular point in space. It is the most basic element of visual composition. We see it as a dot because of the Gestalt principles of smallness and surroundness.
TWO DOTS create competition for the eye. Two dots create movement. When we have two dots, we have the beginning of a composition. From a semiotic standpoint, we have created meaning.
An **AXIS** is a line between two points. **AXES** are an important visual element; we organize other elements around axes, and we use axes to divide space. An axis is **often implied** through arrangement of visual elements.
Evolution always compact.

They drive a smart and find out what it's able to do.

When we see more than two dots not in a straight line, we try to form a **SHAPE**, a process Gestalt theorists call closure. We also create movement from dot to dot, something designers exploit.
Renoir uses areas of red to create a **triangular composition**. Red attracts the eye, so softens the effect by spreading out red; look for the red roof and boat, and other red in the painting.
A **LINE** can be thought of as a series of dots, or as “a dot that went for a walk.” A line by its nature separates things on either side of it. Or it can connect two things at either end.
Lines, either stated or implied, are the key elements in the **DIVISION OF SPACE**. How we deploy lines and how we divide space are signs like any others; it means something.
A **VERTICAL LINE** has the characteristics of alertness, action. When we stand at attention, we stand straight up.
A **HORIZONTAL LINE** suggests repose, relaxation. When we sleep, we are in a horizontal position. The horizon also suggests stability, solid ground.
DIAGONAL LINES are dynamic. They suggest that something is about to happen.
Lines conveys meaning through weight, contour, angle, color and texture. Scott McCloud writes that “all lines carry with them an expressive potential.” Typographers carefully consider the thickness of letter strokes and the contrast between thick and thin. They express mood and style through a letter’s angles and the contours of serifs, bowls and counters.
The style of line becomes an identifying characteristic for the cartoonist, part of the his or her code. The lines of many cartoonists are instantly recognizable.
Citing Marcel Duchamp’s “systematic decomposition of moving images” within a single frame, Scott McCloud notes the importance of motion lines in comics, an attempt to show motion within a single frame by marking the path of a moving object. This idea of a line suggesting motion has a more natural origin that we might first think.
A meteor marks its path in the sky, something not so different from comic book motion lines. We see motion in lines every day when a jet leaves a contrail across the sky.
Photography has revealed lines of motion that were hidden to us before.
We seek out **SHAPES** when we see lines. In this diagram, most of us would see a triangle rather than three independent angles, according to the Gestalt principle of **GOOD CONTINUITY**.
Shapes have meaning

**THE SQUARE**
- Conservative
- Honest
- Straight

**THE TRIANGLE**
- Dynamic
- Risky
- Exciting

**THE CIRCLE**
- Endlessness
- Warmth
- Protection
The everlasting **CIRCLE** is a symbol common to many cultures, from Native Americans to the Chinese. The circle appears in everything from the sun and moon to the ripples from dropping a stone into water.
Triangular composition is commonly used in art and design. In the Western tradition, the **TRIANGLE** also symbolizes the sacred meaning of the trinity.
■ While the **SQUARE** is not the most desirable shape for a photo or a painting, the square is the basis for grids used in design.

■ Otl Aicher’s comprehensive work for the 1972 Munich Olympics is based on a square grid.

■ Aicher (1922–1991) was a man of order and planning.
**PROPORTION** is the relationship of width to height in any shape or composition.

Proportion usually is stated as a ratio, width:height. A square has the proportion of 1:1.

The square cannot be found in nature, but it can be derived from natural things, such as the circle.

Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man* (c. 1490). DaVinci uses the human body to derive the shapes of the circle and square.
A **DOUBLE SQUARE** would have the proportion of 1:2. A double square of 3 feet by 6 feet is the basis for Japanese Tatami mats. Some Japanese rooms are designed to accommodate mats of this size.

A room using Tatami mats as a floor.
Aspect ratio is a category of proportion dealing with images, especially movies and television. The aspect ratio greatly affects the look and feel of a film.
When wide-screen or ultra-wide-screen movies are adapted for television, the frame can be clipped through a process known as **pan and scan**. Movie directors prefer that the aspect ratio be maintained using the so-called **letterbox**.
The Golden Proportion

Mathematicians from Pythagoras and Euclid in ancient Greece through the Italian mathematician Leonardo of Pisa (Fibonacci) to Oxford physicist Roger Penrose have studied the Golden Proportion and its properties. It is manifested in art and architecture, ancient and modern. The ratio arises naturally from the pentagram.
The Golden Proportion, like pi, is an **IRRATIONAL NUMBER**; its decimal place can be carried out to infinity. To form an accurate Golden Rectangle, divide a square in half. Draw a diagonal across one half, then swing that line around to align with the top of the square. Now complete the rectangle.
If you add a square to the long side of a Golden Rectangle, you get another Golden Rectangle.

This is related to the **Fibonacci Series**, in which each number after the first two is the sum of the previous two: 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21 …

By adding an arc to each square, a characteristic spiral is formed.
The Golden Proportion has fascinated scientists and philosophers in part because it can be seen many places in nature, such as in the structure of the chambered nautilus.

The Swiss-French architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, known as Le Corbusier, plotted the human form using the Golden Proportion.
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Spatiality

- Space affects our actions and interactions. It is a powerful cultural signifier. People use proximity to show intimacy or emotional distance, or a person might face someone or turn away.

- Dennis Stock’s photo of James Dean in Times Square exploits distance perspectives and aerial perspective to isolate his subject and make a powerful statement about loneliness and the city.

Dennis Stock, *James Dean, Times Square* (1955)
Personal space and culture

Personal space is the area around you that you reserve for yourself and people you know well. In some cultures the American norm of wide personal space translates into aloofness and standoffish behavior.
Ceremonial space

- Institutions and governments use large architectural spaces to invoke awe.
- Physical spatiality is used to show social power, wealth and moral authority: altars and pulpits are higher than the seats of parishioners, and government buildings are built on a grand scale.

Rotunda, U.S. Capitol
Sacred space

Sacred spaces can be grand or intimate. Often church buildings are huge, making a person feel small. They use dramatic lighting through magnificent stained-glass windows, often telling a religious story.
Sacred space

- Great cathedrals demonstrate how visual phenomena can suggest the sacred, but the same feeling might be found in an old country church.

- Sacred spaces try to suggest the uniqueness of a religion.

Space and axes

- Compositions are built within a **FRAME**.
- The proportion of the frame is crucial to the character of a composition.
- The sides of the frame form the **X AXIS** (vertical) and **Y AXIS** (horizontal).
- Artists and photographers exploit the **Z AXIS** by using perspective to create the illusion of three dimensions. A gentle **S-CURVE** is a way to achieve this.
- Film makers exploit the z axis through perspective, but also by moving the camera to move into the frame.
Balance
Designers arrange visual elements around a **DESIGN AXIS** using the principles of balance, formal and informal. **BALANCE** is the sense that a composition hangs together well and is at rest with itself.

- Formal balance (top), also called symmetrical or axial balance, arranges equivalent shapes and forms on either side of a vertical design axis in the center of the composition. Each side is a mirror image of the other in shape and form.

- Informal balance moves the design axis off center and arranges visual elements in an asymmetrical design. The composition still feels balanced.
FORMAL BALANCE conveys a strong sense of unity and formality. It can seem conventional, but in the right hands, it can be exciting.
INFORMAL BALANCE adds a dynamic quality to a composition, but it can be elegant, too.