

Composition Practice Pack

Step-by-Step Exercises

A printable set of guided drills you can use in the studio, out on location, or in a sketchbook.

Each exercise includes a clear aim, quick setup, step-by-steps, and reflection prompts.

Pick one per session or string a few together for a deeper workout.

How to Use This Pack

- **Timebox it.** Most drills are designed for 10–20 minutes. Set a timer.
- **Work small.** A5–A4 paper or a sketchbook keeps decisions fast.
- **Stay in values first.** If in doubt, work in black/white or two markers.
- **Repeat.** Aim for *quantity over polish*. Five roughs beat one precious drawing.
- **Reflect briefly.** Use the prompts to sharpen what you notice next time.

Suggested weekly loop:

- **Day 1:** Thumbnails + Values (Exercises 1–2)
- **Day 2:** Placement & Focus (Exercises 3–5)
- **Day 3:** Space & Balance (Exercises 6–8)
- **Day 4:** Structures & Paths (Exercises 9–12)
- **Day 5:** Edit & Break Rules (Exercises 13–15)

Minimal materials:

- HB pencil, black fine liner, brush pen or marker (light + dark), kneaded eraser
- Viewfinder (cut a rectangle in card) or two L-shaped corners
- Ruler/tape (optional), tracing paper (optional), phone camera



Exercise 1 — 5×5 Thumbnail Warm-Up

Aim: Generate options quickly and train your eye for balance.

Setup: Draw a 5×5 grid of tiny rectangles (about 3–4 cm wide) on a page.

Steps:

1. Choose a simple subject (mug, plant, street corner) or abstract shapes.
2. In each box, sketch a different placement of the main shapes in **20–40 seconds**.
3. Vary horizon height, crop, orientation, and size of the focal element.
4. Mark your top **three** with a dot. Ask why they work.

Reflect: Where did your eye land first? Which layouts felt static or lively—and why?



Exercise 2 — Notan Value Blocks (2–3 Values)

Aim: Build clear, readable compositions using light/dark design.

Setup: On A4, draw 6 rectangles. Pick a reference (photo or life).

Steps:

1. Reduce the scene to **two values**: dark and light (use marker/brush pen).
2. Fill one rectangle with a 70/30 dark-to-light split; next with 30/70; then 50/50.
3. Add a **third value** (mid-tone) in the last three rectangles. Keep shapes bold.

Reflect: Which value split reads best from arm's length? Where's the strongest focal pull?



Exercise 3 — Rule of Thirds Placement Sprint

Aim: Avoid centre-heavy layouts and practice off-centre emphasis.

Setup: Lightly grid a rectangle into 3×3 thirds.

Steps:

1. Place your subject on **each** of the four intersections (four thumbnails).
2. Try one version where the subject crosses a grid line without touching an intersection.
3. Compare emotional feel: stable, dynamic, spacious, intimate.

Reflect: Which placement suits your subject's mood? What did the centre do by comparison?



Exercise 4 — Focal Point by Contrast (Three Routes)

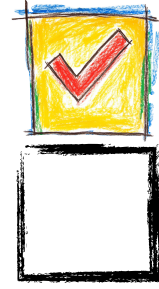
Aim: Create focus without arrows or text.

Setup: 3 thumbnails.

Steps:

1. **Value contrast:** Make the focal shape the highest contrast edge in the frame.
2. **Edge contrast:** Keep most edges soft; make focal edges crisp.
3. **Detail contrast:** Keep most areas simplified; concentrate detail only at the focus.

Reflect: Which contrast was most effective? Did you overuse more than one at once?



Exercise 5 — Leading Lines Scavenger

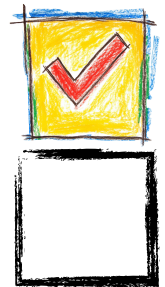
Aim: Guide the viewer's eye with lines and implied paths.

Setup: Go for a 10-minute walk with sketchbook/phone.

Steps:

1. Collect 6–8 scenes with strong lines (roads, fences, shadows, rivers).
2. Back at the desk, make **six** 60-second thumbnails exaggerating those paths.
3. In two of them, bend or curve the line to test a smoother eye-path.

Reflect: Where does the line *enter* and *exit* the frame? Does it trap or escape?



Exercise 6 — Negative Space Flip

Aim: See the spaces *between* things as compositional actors.

Setup: Pick a subject with gaps (chair, bicycle, tree branches).

Steps:

1. Paint/ink only the negative shapes (the holes and sky shapes) as flat tones.
2. Keep the subject itself white/blank.
3. Adjust gaps until the white subject reads clearly without outlines.

Reflect: Which negative shape is most beautiful or awkward? What happens if you enlarge it?



Exercise 7 — Three-Shape Asymmetrical Balance

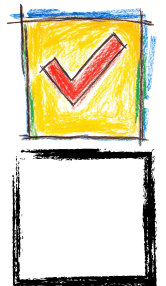
Aim: Balance unequal elements so they *feel* equal.

Setup: Cut three paper shapes (large, medium, small). Any silhouettes.

Steps:

1. Arrange them on a blank page until the grouping feels balanced but not symmetrical.
2. Trace and fix the arrangement; add a ground/horizon.
3. Shift one shape slightly and notice how the balance changes.

Reflect: Which shape carries the most *visual weight*? Why (size, value, complexity, position)?



Exercise 8 — Symmetry & Near-Symmetry Study

Aim: Use symmetry intentionally instead of by accident.

Setup: Split a page into three rectangles.

Steps:

1. **Perfect symmetry:** Mirror left/right forms.
2. **Near symmetry:** Keep overall mirroring but break it with one strong asymmetrical element.
3. **Broken symmetry:** Start symmetrical, then shift masses to one side for tension.

Reflect: Which version feels ceremonial, which feels alive? Where would each be appropriate?



Exercise 9 — Triangle & Pyramid Composition

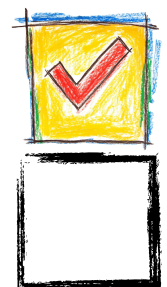
Aim: Create stability and hierarchy using triangular groupings.

Setup: 4 thumbnails.

Steps:

1. Build a **broad base** triangle (classical stability).
2. Try a **tall narrow** triangle (elegant, precarious).
3. Use **implied** triangle tips (heads/peaks/lamps) without drawing the edges.
4. In one, **invert** the triangle for deliberate unease.

Reflect: Which triangle height felt most dignified? Which felt dynamic or anxious?



Exercise 10 — S-Curves and L-Compositions

Aim: Test common visual paths for flow and anchoring.

Setup: Two larger thumbnails.

Steps:

1. **S-curve:** Design a meandering path from foreground to background.
2. **L-shape:** Create a strong vertical + horizontal that frames the scene.

Reflect: Where does the eye pause? Are corners too heavy or empty?



Exercise 11 — Golden Ratio / Spiral Overlay (Optional)

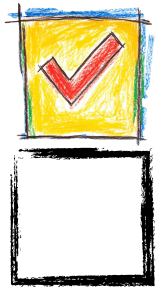
Aim: Explore classical proportion as a *guide*, not a cage.

Setup: Lightly sketch a golden spiral (or print one on tracing paper).

Steps:

1. Arrange major masses to echo the spiral's sweep.
2. Place the focal accent near—but not exactly at—the coil's tightest turn.
3. Try a second version that *ignores* the spiral and compare.

Reflect: Did the spiral improve flow, or did it force awkward gaps?



Exercise 12 — Framing with Edges & Windows

Aim: Use foreground elements to direct attention and add depth.

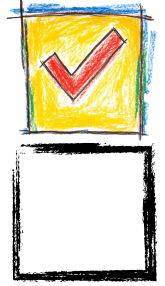
Setup: 3 thumbnails.

Steps:

1. Frame your subject with a doorway, arch, foliage, or shadow.
2. Let the frame **crop** the subject boldly (don't be timid with overlaps).
3. Test one open frame vs. one tight frame.

Reflect: Does the frame feel like a *peek* or a *prison*? Adjust thickness and placement.

Exercise 13 — Cropping Clinic (Edit Like a Photographer)



Aim: Strengthen a weak composition by subtraction.

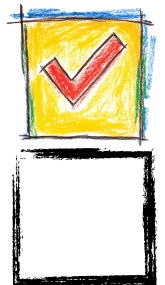
Setup: Photograph your artwork or scene; print small or use phone edits.

Steps:

1. Make **five** different crops (rotate if needed): tighter, wider, square, panoramic, vertical.
2. For each, note what story becomes clearer and what gets lost.
3. Redraw the best crop as a clean thumbnail.

Reflect: What did you remove that improved clarity most?

Exercise 14 — Figure-Ground Clarity (Silhouette Test)



Aim: Ensure subject reads instantly at a glance.

Setup: Choose a subject; switch to pure silhouette.

Steps:

1. Fill the subject as a single dark shape; keep the background light.
2. Nudge pose/angle until the silhouette is unmistakable (no tangents, no mergers).
3. Reverse values (light subject on dark ground) and compare.

Reflect: Are any edges kissing/tangent with the background? Pull them apart.



Exercise 15 — Deliberate Rule-Break

Aim: Learn *when* to bend conventions.

Setup: Pick any earlier exercise.

Steps:

1. Identify the rule in play (e.g., thirds, leading lines, negative space).
2. Break it boldly (centre the subject, cut off heads, overload a corner, flatten values).
3. Add one design choice that *rescues* the piece (strong value grouping, clear silhouette, rhythm).

Reflect: What did breaking the rule *give* you that following it didn't?

One-Minute Checks (Pin This!)

Use this micro-checklist whenever a piece feels off:

- **Readability at 2 metres:** Can you still tell what it is?
- **Value map:** Is there a clear light family and dark family?
- **Entry/exit:** Where does the eye enter the frame? Where does it leave?
- **Weight:** Is one corner heavier than the rest? Is that intentional?
- **Tangent hunt:** Any accidental kisses of edges/contours? Separate them.
- **Focal restraint:** Did you concentrate contrast/detail *only* where it matters?

Useful Printable Templates (DIY)

- **Thumbnail grid:** Rule up boxes 3–4 cm wide; leave margins for notes.
- **3×3 thirds grid:** Light guidelines only; erase in finals.
- **Notan panels:** Six empty rectangles labelled 70/30, 30/70, 50/50, then three 3-value.
- **Silhouette card:** A5 sheet painted solid black; use white gel pen for background tests.

Closing Note

Composition is the choreography of attention. Train it little and often; your eye will start composing *before* your pencil touches the page.