

VSST 108: Design Terminology

Note that many of these terms have meanings in contexts other than the visual (e.g. a musical composition, an engineering design solution). In this list, only the meaning within the visual context is considered.

Part 1

Design: The intentional creation, manipulation and arrangement of visual elements. The term composition is often used synonymously, but design encompasses all visual aspects of a work, not just composition.

Composition: The arrangement of elements in a two-dimensional art/design work.

A composition with a representational nature in which spatial relationships are implied may be further specified as a *scene*.

Frame: The boundaries of a two-dimensional art/design work. Most often, the frame is rectilinear.

Open/Closed Composition: A *closed composition* is one that feels complete, often static, and does not have significant elements near - or cropped by - the frame. An *open composition* moves elements near the frame, or even has elements that are apparently cropped by the frame. This tends to pull both the eyes- and the imagination - outward from the center and beyond the frame.

Analytical/Synthetic Processes: A *synthetic* process is one that begins with a blank composition and adds elements until the work is complete. An *analytical* process looks at a pre-existing composition or representation, or at reality, and selects a portion.

Generally, artists who paint or draw work using a synthetic, or additive, process while photographers work using an analytical, or subtractive, process.

Picture Plane: The implied plane at the *foreground* of a composition; it generally aligns with, but is not identical to, the physical surface on which the composition is created.

Foreground/Background: If there is implied depth in a composition, the *foreground* is that portion of the composition that appears closest to the viewer; it may be coextensive with the *picture plane*. Similarly, the part of the composition apparently farthest from the viewer is the *background*.

If there is the suggestion of intermediate space, it may be called the *mid ground* or *middle ground*.

Besides being the implied farthest space, *background* also connotes the portion of a composition which lies “behind” the other elements and may be less important.

Figure/Ground: A *figure* is an element of a composition (usually a shape or form) that appears to represent a distinct object with a perceivable position in the implied spatial structure. A ground is that part of the composition that seems to be behind one or more figures. (A background could be termed a master ground.) Often, in art/design, two elements will have a *figure-ground relationship*, meaning that one seems to be an object in front of an element or set of elements that seem to lie behind it. In another set of terms, the figure has a *positive* spatial relationship within the composition and the ground has a *negative* spatial relationship (see below). There can be many different figure/ground relationships within one composition.

Positive/Negative Space: An element of a composition (often a shape or form) is said to be an area of *positive space* if it seems to move forward - towards the foreground and the viewer. If the element seems to move towards deeper space, or to represent deeper space, it is said to be an area of *negative space*.

In yet one more variation, positive space is said to *pull* (i.e. towards the viewer) and negative space is said to *push* (i.e. away from the viewer).

Perspective: A system for the representation of spatial and scale relationships in a two-dimensional art/design work.

The most common form of *perspective* is *linear perspective*, meaning that the spatial illusion is created by using a set of lines originating in one or more *vanishing points*. Another form of perspective is *atmospheric* (or *aerial*) perspective, which uses relatively lighter values to suggest relatively more distant spaces.

In *linear perspective*, one, two, or more *vanishing points* are situated on a *horizon line* (which may be visible or just implied). The horizon line of a scene is a line, usually horizontal and parallel to the bottom edge of the frame, that represents the intersection of the planes of the ground and the sky. All lines drawn originating in the same vanishing point are perceived to be parallel to each other, at right angles to the picture plane.

Scale: Relative size relationships within a composition.

Scale may also refer to the absolute size relationship between two things - such as between the representation of an object in a drawing and its actual size in the world.

Proportion: Relative relationships within a composition - of size but also of quantity or degree of emphasis.

Proportion may specifically refer to the apparent size relationship of objects or parts of objects within a representational composition, often in connection with the effects of perspective such as *foreshortening* (the apparent compression of objects that are at, or near, a right angle to the picture plane).

Symmetry: A mirrored arrangement of elements in relationship to an axis (a dividing line) either vertical or horizontal.

Symmetry around both a vertical and horizontal axis is called quadrilateral symmetry.

Balance: As a basic principle of art (specifically of design), balance refers to the ways in which the elements (lines, shapes, colors, textures, etc.) of a piece are arranged and is related to *harmony*.

Balance can be *symmetrical*. It can also be *asymmetrical*, with elements placed unevenly, but with various factors (scale, distance from axis, other weighting factors) used to create the perception of balance or harmony.

Achromatic: Without color. Using only neutral, gray values.

Monochromatic: Using only one color (hue). Monochrome gray is the same as achromatic.

Point: An element in space having a definite position and technically no dimension.

In art and design, a point is on a surface (a physical two-dimensional plane) and must have some size; it may be very small and geometrically perfect, or it may be elaborated as a dot, dab or blob.

Line: The path a point makes as it moves across a surface.

In mathematics, a line joins two or more points. It has length and direction, but no width. A true line extends to infinity; our lines are technically *line segments*.

In art and design, a lines must have width. It may be straight, curved, geometric, organic. It may be of constant width or varying width; varying-width lines may be referred to as *weighted lines*.

A line may close on itself, becoming an *outline* and forming a *shape* (see below).

An *implied line* may be interrupted or may even just be suggested by the alignment of various elements; human perception joins the pieces or connects the dots.

A *contour line* may a perceived line - rather than an actual line - at the boundaries of a form or at a consistent change of value (such as in a photograph). It may also be drawn as an actual line.

Shape: An enclosed area identifiably distinct from its background and other shapes.

A shape, in general usage, can be bounded by an actual outline or by a difference in texture, color, or value surrounding a visually perceived edge. *In this course, however, we will only use shape in the sense of bounded by a line or lines and not filled with tone or texture.*

Shapes can be geometric (definable by mathematical formulas), rectilinear (a subset of geometric, meaning bounded only by straight lines usually parallel to the vertical or horizontal boundaries of the picture plane), curvilinear or biomorphic.

Although the space inside a shape is identical to the space outside it (the same untextured and ungradated surface - such as blank paper) three-dimensional illusion may still be created. Shapes may seem to be on different planes than the *picture plane*. Shapes may be interpreted as solid objects (e.g. as a sphere rather than just a circle).

Form: For this course, a shape that contains value (which may be continuous or made up of a pattern, texture, gradient, etc.) A form may have a distinct edge or boundary, or may be *amorphous*, such as a cloud.

Note that *form* is also often used, confusingly, in a more generic sense to mean any visual element, even an entire design. "Formal" analysis may refer to a consideration of all visual elements. "Formalist" is sometimes used to mean an artist/designer who is more interested in the visual elements of an artwork (its "forms") than in its "meaning."