

Focal Points & Eye Flow

Every composition needs a clear hierarchy — one primary focal point the eye lands on first, supported by secondary points that keep the viewer engaged.

BEGINNER

A focal point is the place in your drawing where the viewer's eye goes first. Without one, the eye wanders with no place to land and the drawing feels chaotic or boring. You create a focal point through contrast — the lightest area surrounded by dark, the most detailed area surrounded by simplicity, the warmest color in a field of neutrals. Everything else in the drawing should be subordinate to the focal point: less detail, less contrast, quieter. Think of your composition as a stage: one actor under the spotlight, everyone else in lower light. You are the director of where the viewer looks.

HOBBYIST

Eye flow is the journey the viewer takes through your image after they land at the focal point. A skilled composition creates a deliberate path: the eye enters, moves to the primary focus, travels to secondary points of interest, and loops back. You construct this path using leading lines (roads, arms, architectural elements pointing toward the subject), value paths (sequences of light or dark leading the eye), and repetition of shapes or colors that the eye follows like stepping stones. The worst compositions are those where the eye has nowhere to go after the focal point — it hits the subject and then bounces off the edge of the frame. Keep the viewer in the image by creating a circuit.

PROFESSIONAL

Professional illustrators and concept artists think about focal points at the thumbnail stage, before any detail is committed. The distribution of values in a thumbnail is essentially a map of focal hierarchy: the highest contrast defines the primary focal point, medium contrast defines secondary points, and low contrast defines the rest. In sequential art and storyboarding, eye flow is managed across panels — the exit of one panel's eye flow should enter the next panel naturally, creating seamless visual reading. In editorial illustration, the focal point must typically coincide with the editorial message: the most important idea gets the compositional emphasis, and everything else defers to it.