

# Thumbnail Planning

*Small, rough sketches used to explore multiple compositional options before committing. The fastest way to find the strongest arrangement.*

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## BEGINNER

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A thumbnail is a tiny rough sketch — rarely larger than a playing card — used to quickly explore compositional options. Instead of starting a drawing full-size and realizing halfway through that the composition is weak, you do ten thumbnails in the time it would take to start one finished piece. Most of them will be bad. That is fine — the goal is to find one or two strong ones. The small size forces you to think in big shapes and values rather than details. If a composition does not work as a small rough, it will not work larger. Keep thumbnails loose: blobs and lines, no detail, just the arrangement of dark and light masses.

## HOBBYIST

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Good thumbnail practice follows a process: do a first pass of several ideas without editing yourself, then evaluate and eliminate the weakest, then push the strongest two or three further. Value thumbnailing — filling masses with a marker or thick pencil to indicate dark, mid, and light areas — is the most useful form. You are designing light and dark patterns, not drawing objects. The best thumbnails have simple, readable silhouette patterns that make sense even without any line information. Study the thumbnails of illustrators like Norman Rockwell or N.C. Wyeth — their compositional planning was extensive and the final paintings carry that planning as invisible structure.

## PROFESSIONAL

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Professional illustrators and concept artists never skip thumbnailing. Even experienced practitioners with strong compositional intuition do thumbnails because the process surfaces options the mind would not generate directly. Production concept art pipelines require thumbnail approval from art directors before any detailed work begins, precisely because reversing compositional decisions at a rendered stage is enormously wasteful. At a high level, thumbnail sessions become almost shorthand — quick gesture-like marks that represent lighting scenarios, camera angles, and character arrangements simultaneously. Reading your own thumbnails well is a skill unto itself: the ability to look at a rough blob of value and understand what a finished composition would look like from it takes practice but is essential to trusting the process.