

Composition & Framing: Quick Summary

Key takeaways for Week 6, drawn from Framed Ink, Directing the Story, and Film Directing: Shot by Shot

The big idea: a frame is a set of choices about where the audience looks and what they feel. Every tool below does the same job: guide the eye and support the story.

1. Rule of thirds and off-center placement

- Perfectly centered, symmetrical frames work for epic or special moments, but feel self-conscious when used constantly.
- Placing subjects along thirds lines or at their intersections feels natural and keeps them from crowding the edge.
- Compositions are judged in sequence, not alone. Alternating off-center shots create a pleasing left-right rhythm for the eye.
- Where the eye lands at the end of one shot should match where it needs to land at the start of the next, so viewers never have to hunt.
- Placement also tells story: a character who is bigger, higher in frame, or chasing across the screen reads as more in control.

2. Leading lines

- Lines can be real (roads, fences, shadows, rooflines) or implied (a row of heads, a character's gaze).
- Perspective lines pull the eye toward the vanishing point, so put your focal point there.
- Curves feel calm and gentle, diagonals feel dynamic or tense, straight lines feel firm and assertive.
- Movement is the strongest line of all. A new character entering the frame will steal attention from everything else.
- Avoid accidental tangents and coincidences that draw the eye to something that does not matter.

3. Shape language and silhouette

- Plan a frame in simple, clear shapes first, then add detail inside them.

- Round shapes feel soft and friendly, squares feel solid and dependable, sharp triangles feel dangerous or edgy.
- A strong silhouette should read instantly, even as a tiny thumbnail.
- Pose changes the silhouette: expansive action uses diagonals, a sad or insecure character folds inward, a relaxed one reads horizontal.
- If a character changes outfits, keep at least one distinctive shape (hair, hat, accessory) so they stay recognizable.

4. Balance, symmetry, and negative space

- Symmetry feels formal and epic, and can feel eerie when it is too tidy.
- Asymmetry stays balanced by trading a big mass against smaller ones. Mixing large, medium, and small shapes adds depth and energy.
- Negative space is not wasted space. It can frame a subject, isolate a character, or add tension.
- Empty space around a lone character can say "alone" better than a crowded frame ever will.
- Clear space between two characters suggests open communication. A heavy object between them suggests a break.
- Tight, closed compositions feel staged and balanced. Cropped, cluttered ones feel more documentary and immediate.

5. Value grouping (light and dark)

- Plan the frame as two or three large value shapes before drawing details.
- The eye goes first to the area of greatest contrast.
- A pool of light inside a dark mass isolates the subject and creates mood.
- Light also carries meaning: a lit character feels open or trustworthy, one in shadow feels uncertain.
- Quick test: squint or shrink the thumbnail. If the focal point still reads, the values are working.

Putting it together

1. Decide what the shot is about and who or what the eye should find first.

2. Block in big shapes and values, not details.
3. Place the focal point off-center, on a thirds point.
4. Aim lines, gazes, and lighting toward it.
5. Use empty space and contrast on purpose, and check that the silhouette still reads.

Sources

- Mateu-Mestre, Marcos. *Framed Ink: Drawing and Composition for Visual Storytellers*.
- Glebas, Francis. *Directing the Story: Professional Storytelling and Storyboarding Techniques for Live Action and Animation*.
- Katz, Steven D. *Film Directing: Shot by Shot: Visualizing from Concept to Screen*.