A TEACHING METHODOLOGY FOR DEVELOPING STUDENTS' COMPOSITIONAL THINKING IN PENCIL DRAWING CLASSES

Mahmudov Behzod Tilabovich
Docent, National institute of painting and design named after Komolidin Behzod
Tashkent, Uzbekistan
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Abstract. This article proposes a step-by-step teaching approach to developing students' compositional thinking in pencil drawing classes. Compositional thinking is understood as the ability to arrange visual elements purposefully on the page, judge their relative proportions, and establish a focal point. The approach involves observing a still life from different viewpoints, producing several thumbnail sketches, comparing alternative arrangements, and developing the selected composition into a finished pencil drawing. The sketches are evaluated according to how well the arrangement fits the page format, how effectively it balances objects and negative space, how clearly it establishes a focal point, and how it distributes light and dark values. By explaining their choices and revising their sketches after discussion, students practice making independent compositional decisions.

Keywords. Pencil drawing, compositional thinking, visual arts education, still life, thumbnail sketches, focal point, visual balance, assessment criteria.

Introduction

A still-life drawing requires students to make decisions about the whole image while observing individual objects. They must determine how much of the setup to include, how large to draw the objects, where to place the group on the page, and which part of the drawing should receive the strongest emphasis. These decisions influence how the viewer moves through the image. A bottle, a bowl, and a folded cloth may each be drawn accurately, yet the composition can appear fragmented if the objects are treated as separate studies or if the spaces between them have received little attention. Learning to draw a still life therefore involves recognizing relationships among forms, tonal areas, and the surrounding space.

In this article, *compositional thinking* refers to the ability to anticipate the visual effect of an arrangement, explore alternative solutions, and evaluate them in relation to an intention. A student may wish to emphasize the height of a bottle, the interaction between two overlapping objects, or the contrast between a dark bowl and a light cloth. Each intention calls for a different combination of viewpoint, scale, placement, and tonal emphasis. Compositional thinking becomes visible when the student can explain these choices, identify their effects in the drawing, and revise the arrangement when the intended emphasis is unclear.

Still-life drawing provides a practical setting for teaching these decisions because the same objects can be studied under several compositional conditions. A change in viewpoint can alter the overlap between forms. A change in format can affect the amount and distribution of empty space. A change in tonal contrast can shift the focal point even when the placement of the objects remains the same. Comparing such variations allows students to connect individual decisions with recognizable effects on the whole image.

The aim of this article is to propose a staged teaching methodology for developing compositional thinking in pencil drawing classes. The methodology takes students from observation and thumbnail sketching to the comparison of alternatives, the development of a full-size drawing, and reflection on the completed work. Assessment encompasses both the visual organization of the final drawing and the reasoning documented in the preliminary studies.

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Main part

The first stage asks students to examine the still life as a group before drawing its component objects. A basic setup may consist of a tall bottle, a low bowl, and a folded piece of cloth. From the front, the bottle may dominate through its height and upright silhouette. From an oblique viewpoint, the bowl may partly overlap the bottle, creating a stronger connection between the two forms and indicating their relative depth. From a lower viewpoint, the cloth in the foreground may occupy more of the visible area and draw greater attention. The teacher can ask students what changes when they move and which view best suits the part of the arrangement they want to emphasize.

Students then examine the overall silhouette of the group and the negative spaces between and around the objects. The gap between the bottle and the bowl, for instance, can help distinguish the two silhouettes. If their contours appear to touch at a single point from a particular viewpoint, their spatial relationship may become ambiguous. A small shift in viewpoint can create a visible gap or a clearer overlap. Discussing these alternatives directs attention to the relationship between the objects and the shapes of the spaces around them.

This stage can end with a short statement of intention. A student might decide to emphasize the tall silhouette of the bottle or to direct attention toward the point where the bowl overlaps the cloth. That intention gives the student a basis for judging the sketches produced in the next stage.

In the second stage, students produce three or four thumbnail sketches of the same setup. They use simple shapes and broad tonal areas to record compositional differences. Surface texture and small details can be introduced after the main arrangement has been selected. The immediate purpose of each sketch is to test a decision about the whole page.

In one exercise, students keep the viewpoint fixed and explore the effect of format. A vertical study may emphasize the height of the bottle and tighten the grouping around it. A horizontal study may give more room to the bowl and cloth, increasing the visual importance of the foreground. Students can then keep the format fixed and vary the scale or placement of the group. A small grouping surrounded by open space may suggest distance, while a larger grouping may direct attention toward the relationships among the objects themselves. Placing the group slightly off centre can also be effective if the surrounding space and tonal areas balance its visual weight.

A separate set of thumbnails can focus on tonal organization. Students reduce the still life to three broad values: light, middle, and dark. They identify where the strongest contrast falls and compare it with their intended focal point. If the most pronounced light–dark boundary appears in a secondary area, they can test how simplifying that area or reducing its contrast affects the composition. This exercise shows how tonal values contribute to the organization of the entire page as well as to the depiction of individual forms.

At the third stage, students place their thumbnails side by side and compare them using shared criteria. The teacher asks students to support each judgement with evidence from the sketches. For example, the statement that one version is better balanced becomes more informative when the student identifies how a compact dark area on one side relates to a larger, lighter area on the other.

Assessment criterion	Evidence in the sketch
Use of format	The scale and placement of the group suit the shape of the page and the intended emphasis.
Visual balance	Objects, tonal areas, and negative spaces distribute visual weight across the drawing.
Focal point	Placement, contrast, or the direction of surrounding forms draws attention to the intended area.
Spatial organization	Overlap and spacing make the relationships among objects clear.
Tonal organization	The main light, middle, and dark areas support the focal point and connect parts of the composition.

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A useful form of peer feedback is to ask classmates where they looked first and what drew their attention. If a student intends the bowl to be the focal point but several classmates first notice a dark fold in the cloth, the difference gives the student a specific problem to investigate. The student can soften the fold's edge, bring its darkest value closer to the surrounding tones, or adjust the position of the bowl in a new thumbnail. The revised version can then be compared with the original to see whether attention has shifted as intended.

The criteria allow for several defensible solutions to the same assignment. One student may emphasize the bottle through a vertical format and a strong contrast along its silhouette. Another may choose a horizontal format and use the folds of the cloth to lead the eye toward the bowl. The quality of each solution can be judged by how consistently its visual elements support the stated intention.

At the fourth stage, students transfer the selected composition to a larger sheet. They establish the outer limits of the group, mark the main proportions, and check the distances between objects and the page edges. They then block in the largest tonal areas. These steps allow students to verify that the main relationships identified in the thumbnail still work at a larger scale. If the enlarged bottle crowds the upper edge or the gap between two objects becomes too narrow, the student can adjust the arrangement while the drawing is still lightly blocked in.

During rendering, students consider how graphite techniques affect visual emphasis. Dense hatching and repeated layers can deepen a dark area and increase its visual weight. Sharper edges can make a boundary more prominent. Softer transitions can integrate subordinate forms with their surroundings. If a newly rendered texture or a dark cast shadow begins to attract more attention than the intended focal point, the student can review its value or edge definition in relation to the whole drawing.

The thumbnail serves as a reference throughout this stage. Students may discover that an overlap needs to be clarified or that a middle-value area needs to be expanded once the drawing is viewed at full size. Asking the student to explain such an adjustment reveals how observation and judgement continue to shape the composition after the initial plan has been selected.

The final stage brings the preliminary studies and the completed drawing together. Each student identifies the intended focal point, explains why the selected sketch was developed, and describes one revision that affected the composition. A student might explain that reducing the contrast in the rear portion of the cloth strengthened the emphasis on the bowl. Another might show how increasing the gap between two objects made their silhouettes clearer. The explanation should connect a specific change to a visible effect.

The teacher uses the thumbnails and the finished drawing to assess different aspects of the student's work. The thumbnails show the range of alternatives explored and how the student responded to feedback. The full-size drawing shows how effectively the selected arrangement was developed through proportion, tonal organization, and control of edges. Together, they give the teacher a basis for deciding whether the next exercise should focus on generating more varied compositions, strengthening tonal emphasis, or preserving the organization of the chosen sketch during rendering.

Conclusion

The proposed methodology develops compositional thinking through a sequence of observation, experimentation, comparison, and revision. By producing several thumbnail sketches of the same still life, students can examine how changes in viewpoint, format, scale, placement, and tonal contrast affect visual balance and emphasis. Developing one of these sketches into a full-size pencil drawing requires students to maintain the main relationships while responding to problems that become visible as the drawing progresses.

Assessment of both preliminary sketches and completed drawings makes compositional reasoning visible. A student demonstrates this ability by identifying an intended effect, explaining how particular visual choices support it, and making a revision whose effect can be seen in the work. The methodology is presented as an instructional proposal illustrated through still-life tasks. Its effectiveness can be examined in classroom research by comparing students' preliminary and final drawings across

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successive assignments and analyzing how their explanations of compositional choices develop over time.

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