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ESP FOR ART STUDENTS: TESTING VISUAL AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

Abstract: This study investigates the comprehension and use of the elements and principles of design by art students during the 2022–2023 and 2024–2025 spring midterm tests. Using The ABCs of Art: The Elements and Principles of Design booklet by M. C. Gillis as a core teaching tool, the research analyzes common errors in vocabulary, spelling, and conceptual understanding across four specializations. Particular attention is given to difficulties with artistic terminology, visual representation in drawing tasks, and oral exams where students interpret works by renowned painters. In the 2022–2023 academic year, the booklet was used in eight classes, and the average score (out of a maximum of 20 points) on the second midterm test for 38 students was 16.44; no student achieved the maximum score. In the 2024–2025 academic year, the average score was 13.68 for 29 students, but the number of students who achieved the maximum score increased to five. Recurring issues included misunderstandings of distorted proportions, spatial relationships, and the meaning of quantifiers such as a couple of. The findings highlight the booklet's effectiveness within an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context, supporting faster learning and the development of both linguistic and artistic skills. To conclude, we believe this study will contribute to improving pedagogical approaches in art education.

Keywords: elements of art, principles of design, art education, vocabulary acquisition, student errors, ESP, visual literacy.

1. Introduction

This paper explores how art students understood and applied the elements and principles of design during their spring midterm test for the 2022–2023 and

2024–2025 academic years. The study is based on *The ABCs of Art: The Elements and Principles of Design*, a booklet by M. C. Gillis developed to introduce essential artistic vocabulary and foundational concepts necessary for visual literacy and creative expression. The booklet covers key elements such as line, shape, form, color, texture, space, and value, as well as core principles including balance, rhythm, unity, variety, and proportion. Together, these components form the fundamental language of art.

Art students pursuing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) face distinct challenges that extend beyond learning specialized terminology. Mao and Zhou (2024) highlight that these learners struggle not only with mastering discipline-specific vocabulary, but also with applying language skills in authentic artistic contexts. This finding underscores the importance of ESP courses that integrate both language and subject-matter instruction. Similarly, Sánchez Milara and Cortés Orduña (2024) argue for ESP approaches tailored specifically to art students, noting that specialized language instruction enhances both linguistic proficiency and conceptual understanding. This dual focus effectively bridges the gap between language acquisition and creative practice.

In addition, visual culture education challenges traditional models of art instruction by shifting the emphasis from technique and aesthetics to the broader social and cultural contexts of images. As Freedman (2003:p.15) asserts, this expanded perspective requires not only artistic skills, but also the language competencies necessary for students to critically interpret and communicate about art within wider societal frameworks.

As mentioned earlier, throughout the course we used a booklet titled *The ABCs of Art: The Elements and Principles of Design*. By providing focused, discipline-specific language adapted to the needs of art students, the booklet facilitates accelerated learning and supports a more efficient use of instructional resources. This study therefore contributes to the development of effective teaching strategies that foster both language proficiency and artistic competence, ultimately enriching art education.

1.2. Description of the Booklet

The following section presents an overview of the vocabulary introduced in the booklet. The author begins with the elements of art—line, shape and form, color, texture, space, and value—and provides definitions, examples, and illustrations. Words associated with line include *long, short, broken, thick, thin, horizontal, ver-*

tical, wavy/curly, dotted, perpendicular, zigzag, jagged, straight, diagonal, varied, tapered, spiral, and contour (outline). Additional descriptors include *lazy, bold, light, flexible, energetic, shy, dark, continuous, and rigid.*

For shape and form, the vocabulary includes geometric terms such as *sphere, pyramid, cube, circle, triangle, square, rectangle, oval, cylinder, trapezoid, diamond, star, pentagon, heart, semicircle, hexagon, octagon, and moon*, as well as terms describing organic, natural, or free-form shapes.

Color-related vocabulary encompasses various color schemes, including *primary, secondary, warm, cool, complementary, analogous, rainbow, neutral, and intermediate.*

In discussing texture, students are introduced to terms such as *smooth, rough, hard, soft, woven, bumpy, lumpy, jagged, irregular, and ridged.* These descriptors enable them to articulate surface qualities in both physical and visual terms.

The concept of space is explored through techniques that create depth and dimensionality. Spatial relationships can be conveyed through tonal variation—for instance, using darker values in the foreground (near space) and lighter ones in the background (far space)—as well as through the overlapping of forms. Further emphasis is placed on the use of both positive and negative space to enhance the perception of depth. Strategies for creating the illusion of space include drawing at a large scale (*draw big*), filling the entire page (*fill the whole paper*), extending lines beyond the edges of the composition (*extend lines off paper*), considering placement in relation to the horizon, and varying size, tone, and overlap (*smaller in the distance, larger and darker closer up, lighter farther away, overlapping*).

Value, defined as the range from light to dark within an artwork, is essential for expressing depth, form, and contrast. Students learn to represent value using line-based techniques such as *hatching, cross-hatching, and stippling*, as well as through blending methods involving *tinting* (lightening with color) and *shading* (darkening with color).

Several types of contrast are introduced and illustrated in the booklet:

- light against dark (black and white),
- light against dark (color),
- pattern against no pattern (black and white),
- pattern against no pattern (color), and
- detailed versus undetailed space.

These principles are also connected to contrasts observed in natural and man-made environments.

After addressing the elements of art, the booklet presents the principles of design, including *pattern, emphasis, variety, unity, balance, rhythm and movement*, and

proportion, each accompanied by definitions, examples, and illustrations. *Pattern* is categorized into three types: patterns of lines, shapes, and colors. Similarly, *variety* is classified into varieties of lines, shapes, and colors.

The concept of unity is explored through several examples. Elements such as *tints* (colors mixed with white), *analogous colors* (adjacent on the color wheel), *consistent shapes*, and *both black and white lines* can create visual harmony. Balance is explained through three main types: *symmetrical*, *asymmetrical*, and *radial*. Proportion is discussed in terms of size relationships, including *scale*, *monumental*, *miniature*, and *exaggerated proportions*, as well as distinctions between *accurate* and *distorted proportion*.

The teaching material from the booklet was used in the form of preparatory tests. For these classes, students brought colored pencils, as the format of the preparatory test mirrored that of the midterm test, helping them gain a clear visual understanding of what the exam would look like. An example of a preparatory test is provided later in the paper.

2. Methods

This paper focuses on error analysis, while the instructional methods used in student preparation included analytical discussions of works by renowned painters and draftsmen. These sessions incorporated both dialogic techniques and dictation exercises to reinforce the importance of precise spelling and accurate use of terminology.

Because the dialogic method was implemented, the questions were structured to reflect those later used in the oral examination. The midterm assessment was designed as a written test, whereas the oral examination served to verify and consolidate the knowledge acquired during midterm preparation. The oral component deepened student engagement by requiring them to analyze works by prominent painters and apply the vocabulary and principles learned throughout the course. This activity further strengthened the integration of language learning and visual analysis.

Students were also provided with a preparatory written test that shared the same form and structure as the midterm test. In the first part of this test, students were expected to identify elements or principles of art, translate specific Serbian art terms into English, and answer vocabulary-related questions. The second part consisted of a drawing task that required students to create a composition combining a variety of elements and principles of design (Appendix 1).

It is important to emphasize that, during our preparation for the midterm test, we also consulted literature in Serbian, which provided additional clarification of the following terms: form (natural and artistic forms), space, repetition, form perception, contour, and composition along with its elements (line, direction, shape, texture, value, and color), based on *Forma i oblikovanje* by Milun Mitrović.

For topics related to color, its classification, and contrast, we referred to *Metode slikanja i materijali* by Metka Krajger Hozo. To understand the principles of visual unity, symmetry, asymmetry, and radiation, we used *Izbor tekstova za izučavanje predmeta teorije i forme* by Radenko Mišević.

3. Results

Below, we present images of well-executed midterm tests in which most tasks were completed correctly. These examples demonstrate knowledge of the content, accurate spelling, and creativity.

THE FIRST MID-TERM EXAM

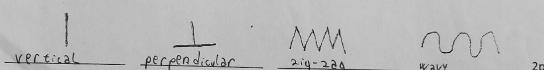
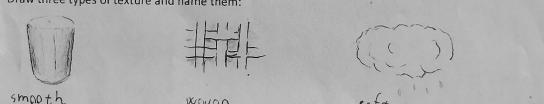
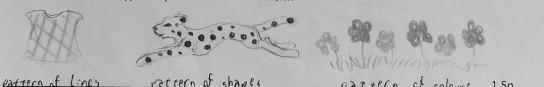
1. Write down the elements of art:
line, shape and form, space, colour, texture, value 3,5p
2. Name these types of lines:

vertical perpendicular zig-zag wavy 2p
3. The outer edge of an image, object or a shape is named contour or contour line. 1,5p
4. Draw three types of texture and name them:

smooth woven soft 1,5p
5. Name the secondary colors and color the squares with them: orange, green, purple. 1,5p
6. Draw three various types of pattern and name them:

pattern of lines pattern of shapes pattern of colours 1,5p
6. Are these statements true or false:
a) Focus or main idea is also called emphasize. Yes / No
b) Purple and all the colors with blue and green are cool color. Yes / No
c) Positive space is the „empty“ space around the subject or object. Yes / No 1,5p



Figure 2: Example of a well-executed midterm test.

To evaluate students' understanding of the elements and principles of design, the midterm assessment combined theoretical vocabulary tests with practical drawing assignments tailored to different specializations within the Academy of Arts. This dual-format approach allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of students' language use alongside their ability to visually express core artistic concepts. Common issues observed during the assessment included spelling mistakes, misuse of terminology, and conceptual misunderstandings—for example, confusing cubes with squares, using the phrase “distorted proportion” incorrectly, and misinterpreting expressions such as “a couple of” in instructional contexts.

3.1 The Most Common Mistakes Made by Students in the 2022–2023 Spring Midterm Test

Considering that the total number of art students was 38, they were organized into two groups: Group A and Group B. Each midterm test consisted of two

parts. The first part focused on vocabulary, spelling, and theoretical knowledge, while the second part involved a drawing task requiring students to apply various elements and principles of art. The instructions on the midterm test were given using imperatives such as *write down*, *draw*, and *name*, which are used to inflect the verb when making requests (Novaković & Tomić, 2017:p.59), guiding students to perform specific tasks.

To systematize student results, the following abbreviations were used:

- CS – Correct Spelling: number of students who spelled the word correctly
- WS – Wrong Spelling: students recognized the word but misspelled it
- ES – Empty Space: students left the answer blank, possibly out of uncertainty
- WW – Wrong Word: students used an unrelated or incorrect word

3.1.1 Results: Group A (17 students)

Table 1 presents how students recorded the terms based on their visual representations. Here, we selected the two most difficult words for correct spelling. Under the heading “Term”, the correct spelling is provided. Under the heading “Definition”, the definition of the term is included, sourced either from the booklet or the Cambridge Online Dictionary. Under the headings CS, WS, WW, and ES, the table shows what the students wrote or did not write.

Table 1: Vocabulary Test Results

Term	Definition / Notes	CS	WS	WW	ES
Contour	The outer edge / line of an image, object or a shape	4	2 (<i>contur line, contore line</i>)	4 (<i>edge, frame x2, positive space x2</i>)	7
Perpendicular	Line at a right angle to another	3	11 (<i>perperclivia, perpendicular, perperdinclual, perperticual, perpedicual, perpedional, perpendicular x2, parpendicular</i>)	0	3

Apart from the spelling and vocabulary test, we also examined students' ability to apply vocabulary appropriately within the given context.

3.1.2 Application of Vocabulary in Drawings

The second part of the exam required students to interpret and visually represent an assignment that integrated key elements and principles of art.

Table 2: Student Achievement Across All Tasks

Drawing Component	Observation	Correct / Clear	Incorrect / Issue	Comments
Four rectangles	Number of students who drew 4 rectangles correctly	11	6	2 drew triangles; 4 drew cubes instead
"A couple of accessories"	Students asked to draw 2 accessories	-	17	Avg. = 3.29 accessories; range from 0 to 10
Understanding of bumpy/lumpy	Interpretation of texture terms	12	5	5 did not correctly apply or visualize these terms
Distorted proportion	Conceptual application	10	7	7 did not incorporate or misunderstood the concept
Understanding of free form space	Examples given in the booklet	Few	Majority	Not clearly understood
Lines off the paper	Interpretation of movement	12		5 took it literally and extended lines unnecessarily
Invented terminology	Incorrect phrase "pattern of contrast" used	-	1	Meant to say "pattern of colors"
Negative space statement marked false	True statement misunderstood, negative space is the empty space around the subject/object	11	6	6 students marked it incorrectly
Confusion: elements vs. principles of art		15	2	Mixed up fundamental categories

3.1.3 Results: Group B (21 students)

The following is an analysis of common spelling and conceptual errors observed among Group B students during the spring midterm test. This group consisted of 21 students, and the focus remains on both vocabulary use and the application of artistic concepts through drawing. Additionally, the table includes definitions of the terms, sourced from the booklet.

Table 3: Vocabulary Test Results – First Part of the Midterm Test

Term	definition	CS	WS	WW (Wrong Word)	ES
Rhythm	A regular repetition of the elements of art to create a sense of movement	8	13 (<i>rhytm, rytzm, rhytem, rhytim, rhtm, ritam, rhythmic, rythtam</i>)	–	0
Parallel	Two or more lines that are <i>parallel</i> to each other are the same distance apart at every point	8	6 (<i>parallel, paralleles, paralel, parrellel</i>)	7 (<i>horizontal ×4, straight, vertical ×3</i>)	0
Variety	An assortment of lines, shapes, colors and other elements of art in the art work	16	5 (<i>variety, varietly, varieti, variaty2x</i>)	–	0
Symmetrical	The same design on both sides of a mid-line	20	1 (<i>simetrical</i>)	–	0
Asymmetrical	A Balance made by size and weight and a variety of images but not evenly from the mid-line.	19	2 (<i>asimetrical, asymetrical</i>)	–	0
Balance	Equal amounts	20	1 (<i>balans</i>)	–	0
Proportion	The size relationship between two or more objects	20	1 (<i>propartion</i>)	–	0

Perpendicular	A line that intersects another line at a right angle.	18	3 (<i>perpendicular, perpendicular, perperdicular</i>)	–	0
Unity	How the elements work together, fit together, so that the artwork looks complete.	20	1 (<i>uniti</i>)	–	0

3.1.4 Errors in Application: Drawing Task (Part 2 of the Exam)

In addition to the primarily spelling-related mistakes observed in the first part of the test, the second part, which involved drawing, revealed more substantial errors, as illustrated in the table below.

Table 4: Errors in interpreting drawing instructions

Drawing Component	Observation	Correct / Clear	Incorrect / Issue	Notes
Circle vs. Sphere	Confusion between 2D and 3D form	20	1	Circle misinterpreted as sphere
Rectangle vs. Triangle	Misidentified shapes	19	2	Rectangle misinterpreted as triangle
Pyramid vs. Rectangle	Misinterpreted 3D form	16	5	
Cube vs. Square	3D vs. 2D confusion	–	Several	Not precisely quantified
Drew cubes instead of rectangles (counted)	3D vs 2D confusion	20	1	4 cubic forms drawn instead of 4 rectangles
“A couple of accessories” interpretation	Free-form shapes	3	18	One student drew 10 accessories
Symmetrical balance	Drawing balance	16	5	2 partial symmetry; 3 asymmetrical drawings
Smooth-textured pyramid (midground)	Shape and texture misunderstanding	20	1	Drew triangle instead

Drawing Component	Observation	Correct / Clear	Incorrect / Issue	Notes
Distorted proportion	Conceptual application	2	Majority	Not clearly shown in most drawings

3.2 The Most Common Mistakes Made by Students in the 2024–2025 Spring Midterm Test

This section presents the combined results of four groups (A, B, C, and D), comprising a total of 32 art students. Rather than analyzing each group individually, the data are evaluated collectively, with a focus on spelling accuracy, conceptual understanding, and the application of artistic terminology in both written and practical (drawing) tasks. Definitions are not included in this table, as the majority are already provided in the table above.

Table 5: Spelling and Vocabulary Errors (Written Section)

Term	Correct (CS/CW)	Wrong Spelling (WS)	Wrong Word (WW)	Empty Space (ES)	Notes
Rhythm	—	<i>rhythm</i> (2), <i>rhytem</i> , <i>rhytim</i> , <i>rhtm</i> , <i>ritam</i> , <i>rytzm</i> , <i>rythm</i> , <i>rythmic</i> , <i>rhytam</i>	—	—	Most commonly misspelled term
Vertical	CW	—	—	—	One student wrote “straight” (accepted in context)
Parallel	2	<i>paralel</i> (2), <i>parellet</i> (2), <i>parallele</i> , <i>parallelle</i>	—	1	Frequent spelling confusion
Perpendicular	1	<i>perperndiculi</i> , <i>perperndi</i> , <i>perpeticular</i> , <i>perpeticual</i> , <i>perperdicular</i>	—	4	One of the most problematic terms

Term	Correct (CS/CW)	Wrong Spelling (WS)	Wrong Word (WW)	Empty Space (ES)	Notes
Ridged	3	—	<i>rigid</i> (2), <i>jagged</i> (2), <i>rudged</i> , <i>woven</i> (2)	—	Confusion with similar texture words
Variety	Majority	<i>variety</i> , <i>varietyl</i> , <i>variety</i>	—	—	Majority spelled it correctly
Symmetrical	—	<i>Simetrical</i>	—	—	Minor error
Asymmetrical	—	<i>asimetrical</i> , <i>asymetrical</i>	—	—	Minor error
Balance	—	<i>Balans</i>	—	—	Minor error
Proportion	—	<i>Proportion</i>	—	—	Minor error
Symmetry	—	<i>Simetry</i>	—	—	Minor error
Unity	—	<i>Uniti</i>	—	—	Minor error
Contour/ Outline	Uncertain	—	Unclear usage noted	—	Multiple students unfamiliar with the term
Incorrect phrase	—	—	“ <i>pattern of contrast</i> ” instead of <i>pattern of colors</i>	—	Misuse of established terminology
True Statement	—	—	One marked “ <i>Negative space...</i> ” as false	—	Misconception of accurate definition

In the example drawing presented at the beginning of Section 3, a student personally explained the areas in her work where she applied distorted proportions, noting that this artistic technique may not be immediately apparent to the viewer. To clarify her intention, she supplemented her drawing with additional written information highlighting these distortions.

Despite the adaptations, several recurring errors were observed across all four departments during the midterm tests. These included consistent issues in vocabulary use and conceptual understanding. Such errors may be partly attributed to the metaphorical nature of the artistic lexicon. As Muhić (2023) argues, cognitive

processing in art is often shaped by layered metaphors that resist direct interpretation—for example, the tendency to blur the lines between dichotomies such as good and evil or simplicity and complexity. This metaphorical complexity may contribute to students' difficulties in translating theoretical language into visual form.

The advantage of this type of test lies in the fact that students show less resistance to it, as it encourages creativity and does not focus on English grammar. Although 30 minutes were initially allocated for this kind of exam, a preparatory test indicated that more time was needed—no less than 45 minutes—because students, even on tasks that did not explicitly require creativity, demonstrated it by decorating and coloring their answers. It is also worth noting that art students generally prefer tests in which grammar is not assessed. Moreover, exams designed in this way reveal that students make more mistakes on tasks requiring repetitive practice, such as spelling exercises.

In the spring semester of the 2022/2023 academic year, the oral exam required students to analyze their own artworks. Each student was asked to select one drawing and two colored works executed in media such as oil, watercolor, acrylic, or another painting technique. It is important to emphasize that students selected their pieces prior to the examination. This assessment method was perceived as less stressful compared to the format implemented in the 2024-2025 academic year. In the latter approach, students were provided with a selection of books on renowned painters and their most significant works at the time of the exam. Each student was then required to choose one artist and conduct a detailed analysis of two to three of their artworks, applying *The Elements and Principles of Art*. They were given approximately 10 minutes to prepare their answers. Students analyzed works by the following artists: Gustav Klimt, Ilya Repin, Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Andrei Rublev, Andy Warhol, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and others.

4. Conclusion

This study underscores the essential role of specialized language resources, such as *The ABCs of Art: The Elements and Principles of Design*, in facilitating art students' dual development of linguistic proficiency and artistic skills. Such resources are particularly beneficial in the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as they provide targeted language and concepts tailored to the academic and professional needs of art students. Incorporating this booklet into teaching practice accelerates learning through focused, relevant content and enables more efficient use of in-

instructional time by aligning language teaching directly with students' field-specific objectives. The analysis of midterm test outcomes across multiple student groups revealed persistent difficulties related to vocabulary accuracy, conceptual comprehension, and the practical application of design principles. Frequent spelling errors, misunderstandings of fundamental artistic terminology, and challenges in translating verbal instructions into visual representations highlight the need for more focused and integrative pedagogical approaches.

The combined use of theoretical vocabulary assessments, practical drawing tasks, and oral artwork analyses provides a robust framework for evaluating students' understanding of the elements and principles of art. Moreover, the findings emphasize the critical importance of clarity in instructional language—particularly concerning quantifiers and specialized terms—to minimize misinterpretations and optimize learning outcomes.

By situating *The Elements and Principles of Art* booklet within the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context, this study demonstrates the resource's effectiveness in addressing the distinct linguistic needs of art students. The provision of targeted, context-specific content not only accelerates language acquisition but also promotes deeper engagement with artistic concepts, effectively bridging the gap between language and creative practice.

Future research in this field could focus on the long-term impact of such tailored instructional materials on students' academic progress and professional competence, as well as explore additional strategies for addressing common misconceptions. This study contributes to the advancement of art education by advocating for integrated, discipline-specific language instruction that empowers students to communicate and create with greater confidence and precision.

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ESP ZA STUDENTE LIKOVNE UMJETNOSTI: TESTIRANJE VIZUELNE I LINGVISTIČKE KOMPETENCIJE

Rezime

U ovom radu pokušali smo da pokažemo koliko je povratak osnovama u umjetnosti potreban da bi se razumelo umetničko delo, njegov jezik i struktura. Elementi i principi u umjetnosti, naše poznavanje tih elemenata, zaista pomažu da otkrivamo lepotu u sebi i oko sebe. Zato smo i uneli u naš predmet Engleski jezik 2 brošuru *Abeceda (osnove) umjetnosti: Elementi i principi dizajna* M. C. Gilis. Ova brošura predstavlja sadržaj drugog kolokvijuma u letnjim semestrima akademskih godina 2022–2023. i 2024–2025. kao i usmenog ispita. U radu smo bili fokusirani na uobičajene greške studenata u pogledu vokabulara i spelinga, te konceptualnog razumevanja na četiri umetnička smera Studijskog programa likovne umjetnosti, a to su slikarstvo, intermedija, grafika i grafički dizajn. Posebna pažnja usmerena je na teškoće u razumevanju umetničkih termina, vizuelnog predstavljanja u zadacima crtanja i na usmenim ispitima na kojima studenti tumače dela renomiranih slikara. Ponavljajući problemi obuhvataju nerazumevanje izmenjenih proporcija, prostornih odnosa i značenja kvantifikatora, poput izraza „a couple of“. Rezultati istraživanja nam ukazuju koliko je ova brošura delotvorna u okviru nastave engleskog jezika za posebne namene (ESP) jer podstiče

brzo učenje i razvoj kako jezika, tako i umetničkih veština. Verujemo da će ova studija doprineti unapređenju pedagoških pristupa u umetničkom obrazovanju jer je pokazala da povratak osnovama, odnosno jednostavnom vokabularskom kontekstu, nekomplikovanim rečima i izrazima, čak i definicijama može pomoći u prezentaciji i primeni složenijih umetničkih analiza koje nas, sa druge strane, ponovo vode umetničkim fundamentima.

► **Ključne reči:** Elementi dizajna, principi dizajna, likovno obrazovanje, usvajanje vokabulara, studentske greške, ESP, vizuelna pismenost.

APPENDIX 1: An example of a preparatory test

Preparatory test for the 2nd mid-term test (2nd semester)

What are the elements of art? _____

What type of lines do you know? _____

Translate into English:

Trapezoid –

Pravougaonik –

Heksagon –

Draw these items



ridged



bumpy/lumpy



jagged

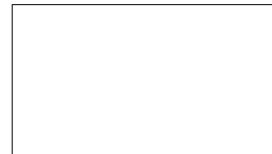
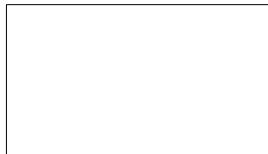
Answer these questions:

1. What is unity?

2. What can unify an image?

3. What are cool colors?

Draw 3 examples of patterns of lines and name them:



Let's draw the image described in this text!



There should be a large monkey in the foreground. Lines should indicate his angry mood. In the middle of the composition, there is a banana overlapping the monkey's head. The colors of the monkey and the banana should contrast in a way that emphasizes light against dark. A tree with dense branches should be in the background, and the branches should extend beyond the edges of the paper. The composition should be asymmetrically balanced. Additionally, there should be one moon-like form, one organic form, and as many natural forms as possible in the image. Finally, both rough and soft textures should be included.

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