

B B C BITESIZE

With a human figure we compare the size of features and parts of the body to judge how well they reflect a realistic person.

Rodin's 'The Thinker' looks like a real person with realistic, if idealised, proportions.

Alberto Giacometti's sculptures are recognisable as human but they are stretched out of proportion into elongated slender figures. To many people, the strange proportions give Giacometti's sculpture a sense of isolation and loneliness.

While proportion refers to parts of an object, scale refers to the size of an object compared to another. We tend to compare the scale of an object to our own bodies and our own experience. So this pair of binoculars seems about the right size. But scale them up and the stranger they seem...

These giant binoculars are the facade of a building in Los Angeles. They're in proportion - they're exactly as we'd expect but they've been scaled-up until they dominate the street. So a tool we use to magnify has, itself, been magnified on an epic scale!

Proportion and scale aren't just related to the human form. The Rule of Thirds is a set of proportions that can help a composition appear visually interesting, energetic or just 'right'.

It occurs when an artwork is divided into thirds, horizontally and vertically, creating nine equal parts. The idea is that important compositional elements should be positioned near the intersections.

We can see it applied to Edward Hopper's painting 'Nighthawks'. Our eyes are drawn to the couple positioned near one of these intersections. Their section of the painting can be divided again and we can see how the rule works on a smaller scale.

The Rule of Thirds gives this painting structure and the relationship between the elements creates a sense of space and isolation.

Artists can use proportion to create a sense of harmony and make something look real or right. And when pieces are out of proportion and scale, the more surprising, unsettling or even bizarre the results can be.