

Rule of Thirds

A technique of composition in which a medium is divided into thirds, creating aesthetic positions for the primary elements of a design.¹

The rule of thirds is a technique derived from the use of early grid systems in composition. It is applied by dividing a medium into thirds both vertically and horizontally, creating an invisible grid of nine rectangles and four intersections. The primary element within a design is then positioned on an intersection of the grid. The asymmetry of the resulting composition is interesting to look at, and generally agreed to be aesthetic.

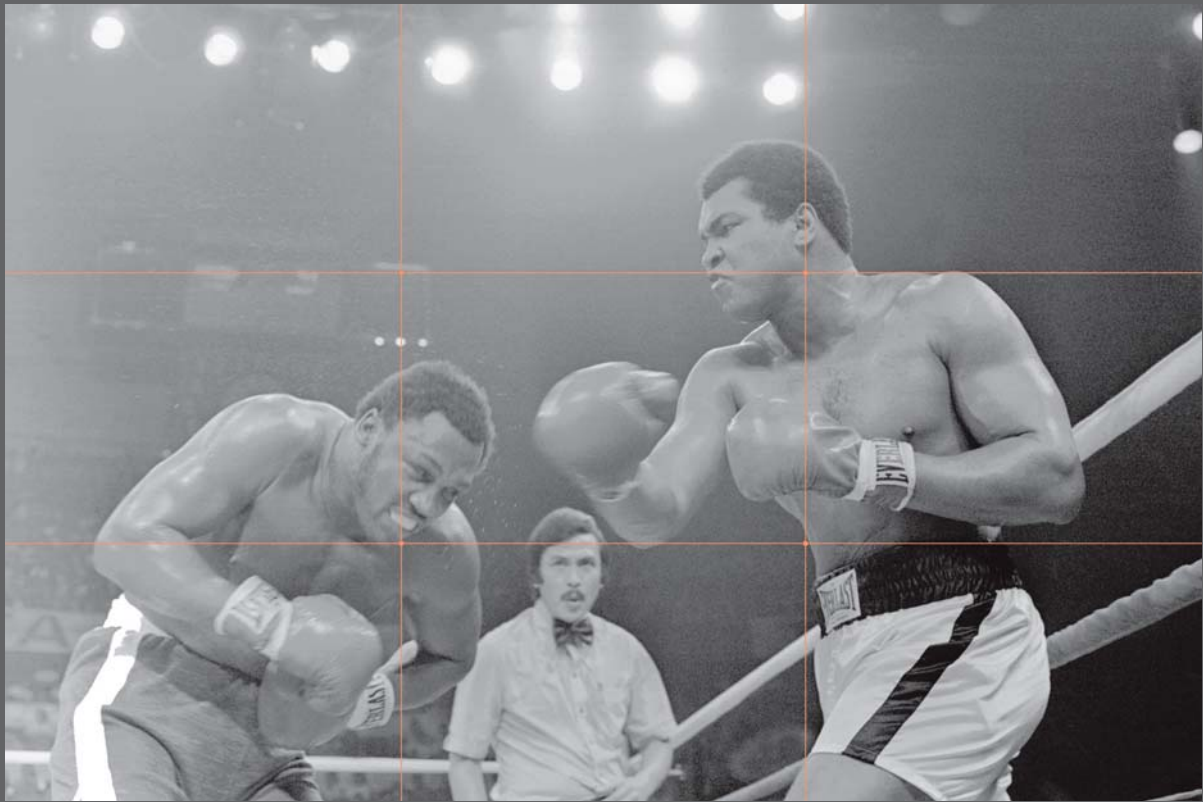
The technique has a loyal following in design circles due to its use by the Renaissance masters and its rough relationship to the golden ratio. Although dividing a design into thirds yields a ratio different from the golden ratio (i.e., the $\frac{2}{3}$ section = 0.666 versus golden ratio = 0.618), the users of the technique may have decided that the simplicity of its application compensated for its rough approximation.

The rule of thirds generally works well, is easy to apply, and should be considered when composing elements of a design. When the primary element is so strong as to imbalance the composition, consider centering the element rather than using the rule of thirds—especially when the strength of the primary element is reinforced by the surrounding elements or space. If the surrounding elements or space do not reinforce the primary element, use the rule of thirds and add a secondary element (known as a counterpoint) to the opposing intersection of the primary element to bring the composition to balance. In designs where there is a strong vertical or horizontal element, it is common practice to align the element along one of the grid lines of corresponding orientation.²

See also Alignment, Golden Ratio, and Symmetry.

¹ Also known as *golden grid rule*.

² A nice introduction to compositional concepts is *Design and Composition* by Nathan Goldstein, Prentice-Hall, 1997.



This photograph (above) from the Muhammad Ali–Joe Frazier fight in Manila, Philippines (1975) makes excellent use of the rule of thirds, placing the heads of both fighters at opposing intersections on the grid.

This photograph (right) from the Muhammad Ali–Sonny Liston fight in Lewiston, Maine (1965), by contrast, is an excellent example of when not to use the rule of thirds—strong primary element that is reinforced by the surrounding space.

