

NEGATIVE SPACE — ONE-PAGE ARTIST CHEAT SHEET

What Is Negative Space?

Negative space is the **area around, between, and surrounding** the main subjects of an artwork. It's not "empty" — it's an active part of the composition that shapes how the viewer reads the image.

Why It Matters

Negative space can:

- Create **balance**
- Strengthen **composition**
- Clarify the **subject**
- Guide the **eye**
- Add **calm, tension, or drama**
- Make the silhouette **readable** from a distance

Often, the negative space reveals more about the composition than the subject itself.

Two Types of Negative Space

Passive Negative Space

Calm, open, restful areas. Used in: portraits, still life, minimalist work, Japanese sumi-e.

Active Negative Space

Bold, shaped gaps that become part of the design. Used in: graphic design, posters, silhouettes, logo-style art.

How to See Negative Space

- **Squint** to simplify shapes
- **Flip the artwork upside down**
- **Check the silhouette**
- **Cover the subject** and study the gaps
- **Trace the empty shapes** — are they interesting?

If the negative space feels awkward, the composition usually is too.

What Good Negative Space Looks Like

- Clear and intentional
- Varied in size
- Balanced
- Helps the eye move
- Supports the subject rather than competing with it

Common Mistakes

- Filling every corner with detail
- Tangents (edges touching awkwardly)
- Crowding the subject
- Backgrounds that fight for attention
- Uneven spacing that feels accidental
- Silhouettes that don't read clearly

Quick Fixes Using Negative Space

- Move the subject slightly off-centre
- Increase breathing room
- Remove one unnecessary detail
- Simplify the background
- Strengthen the silhouette
- Let one area stay quiet so another can shine

Useful Crit Questions

- "What shape does the *space* make?"
- "Does the silhouette read clearly?"
- "Is this gap intentional or accidental?"
- "What happens if you give this area more room?"
- "Is the background supporting or competing?"

Famous Examples

- **Matisse cut-outs** — pure positive/negative interplay
- **Japanese sumi-e** — mastery of empty space
- **Georgia O'Keeffe** — huge breathing room
- **Saul Bass posters** — active negative space
- **Rodin sculptures** — tension in the gaps

A Simple Phrase to Remember

"The space around the subject is part of the subject."