Principles of Interior Design

A practical six-page companion for observing a room, comparing relationships, and testing one useful change. These are design questions, not compulsory decorating rules.

BALANCE

Where does visual weight concentrate? Compare size, tone, height, density, and surrounding space.

SCALE

How does an object relate to the room and its users? Check actual size as well as visual presence.

PROPORTION

How do parts relate to each other? Compare artwork to furniture, or a lampshade to its base.

EMPHASIS

What deserves attention from the main viewpoints? Give supporting elements a quieter role.

RHYTHM + REPETITION

Which recurring color, shape, line, or material connects separate elements? Allow variation.

CONTRAST

Which useful differences clarify the composition? Avoid making every element compete.

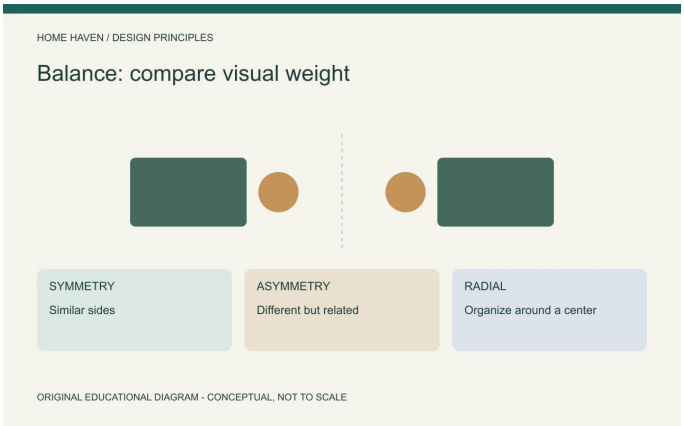
UNITY

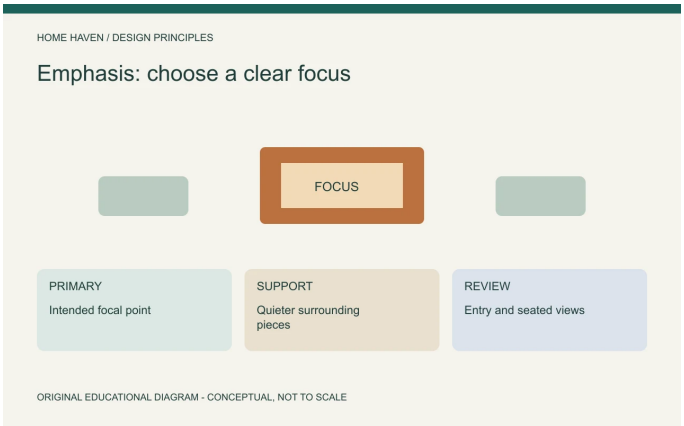
Do the parts support a recognizable whole while leaving room for variety and personal use?

Start here: Choose one room and one specific problem. Keep useful furniture and real household needs in view. Go to page 5 for the room audit, then use page 6 to plan a reversible trial.

Balance and emphasis

Observe the room from the doorway and the main seating position. A clear composition should still support everyday activities.





Balance exercise
Identify the visually heaviest area. Try simplifying that area before adding objects elsewhere. Matching pairs are one possible strategy, not the only solution.

Emphasis exercise
Name the feature you want to notice first. Reduce one competing detail and review the result. A room can have different priorities from different views.

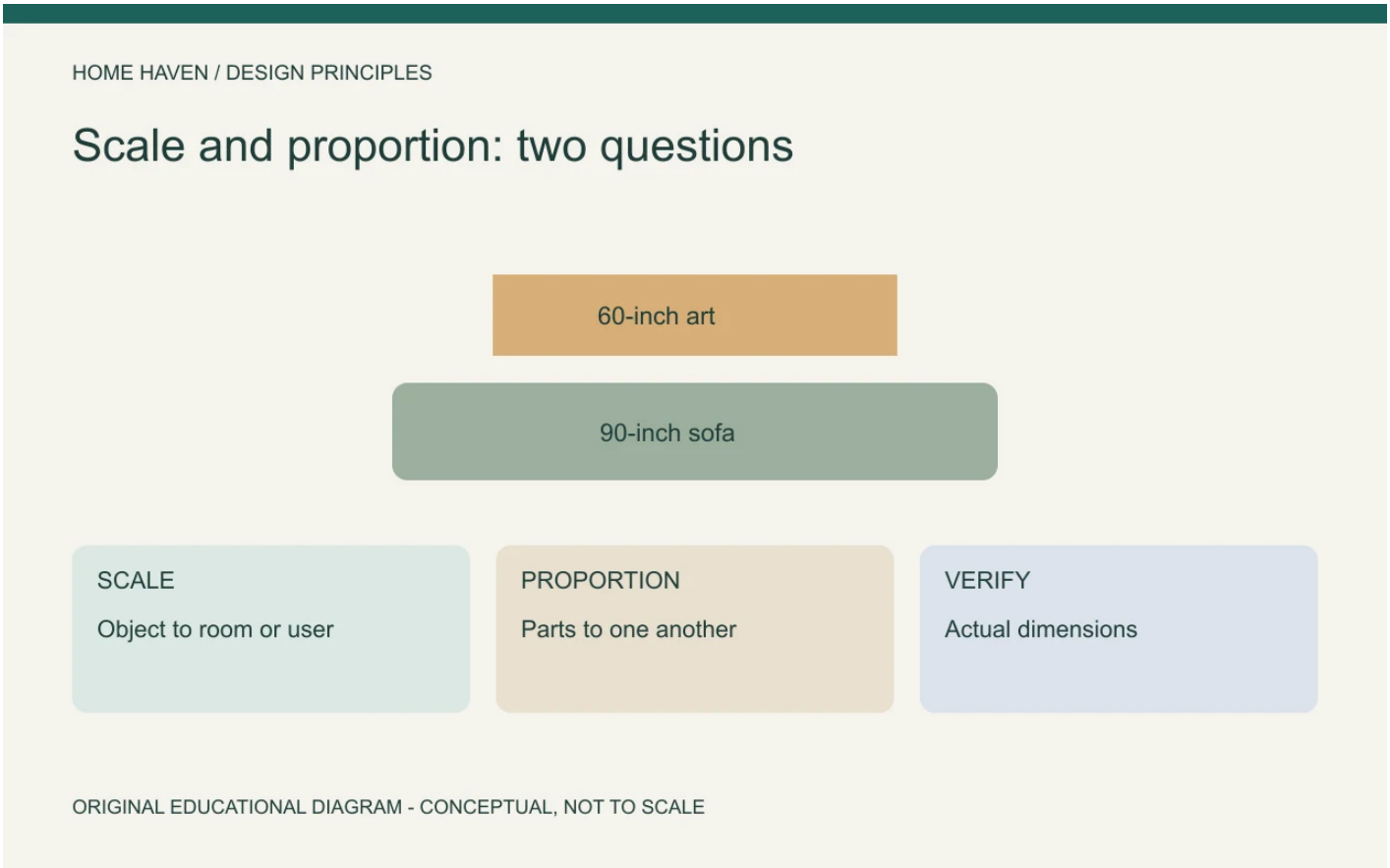
What attracts attention now? What should attract attention?

Which area feels visually heavy, and what contributes to it?

Practical check: Keep doors, drawers, furniture in use, and ordinary routes workable. A balanced photograph does not establish a suitable room layout. Diagrams above are illustrative, not measured plans.

Scale and proportion

Measure first, then compare the relationships. An object can fit physically while feeling visually dominant, or look convincing while being awkward to use.



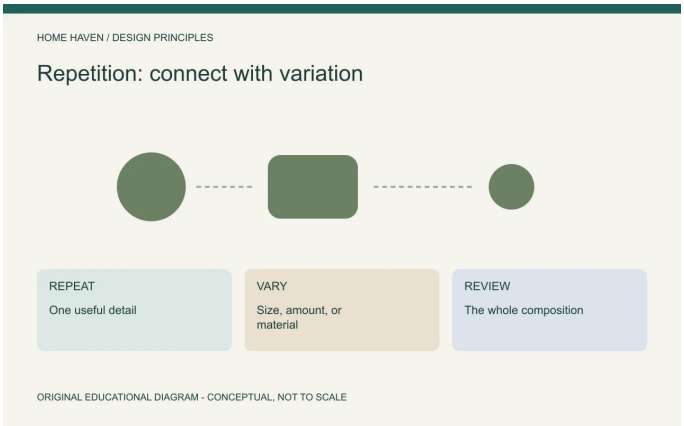
Hypothetical example: A 60-inch artwork above a 90-inch sofa has a width relationship of two-thirds. This describes an example, not a universal decorating requirement. Frame, shape, grouping, room, and viewpoint can change the result.

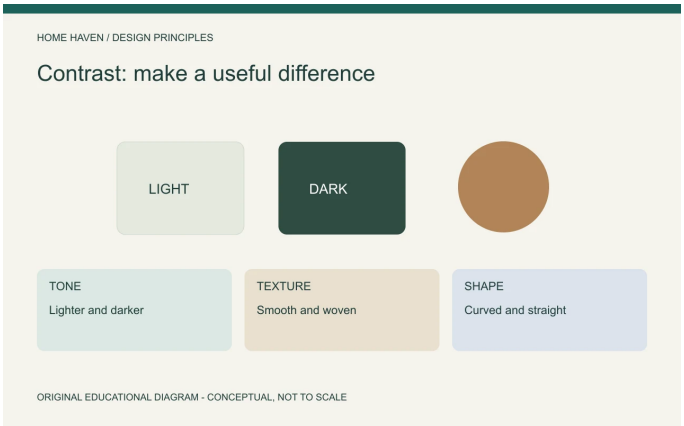
Reference piece and verified dimensions (include units):

Proposed relationship to test; practical use or reach to check:

Repetition and contrast

Choose one detail worth repeating and one relationship that needs definition. Stronger contrast everywhere can weaken the intended focus.





Connect
Repeat a color, shape, material, or line in selected places. Vary amount or size so the connection does not become mechanical.

Differentiate
Compare tone, texture, shape, scale, or finish. Keep the strongest difference connected to a purpose, such as defining an artwork.

Detail to repeat, existing locations, and useful variation:

Relationship needing contrast, sample to test, and lighting:

Review: Compare real materials under similar conditions. Consider care, durability, and everyday use separately from visual appearance. An attractive sample arrangement is not a complete specification.

One-room audit

Complete the fields you need. Use feet, inches, and square feet where appropriate, and label assumptions clearly.

Room, date, users, and primary activities:

Existing furniture or features to keep; verified measurements:

Specific problem seen from the entry and main seating position:

Principle that may help; reason for choosing it:

Light, plants, storage, movement, or maintenance to consider:

Open questions, information needed, and who will check it:

This is a printable worksheet, not an interactive form or technical assessment.

Plan one useful change

Choose a modest trial before a purchase. Record observations rather than assigning the room a perfect design score.

Proposed change and the specific relationship it should improve:

Trial method: rearrange, simplify, sample, or mock up:

Review result: what improved, what did not, and what remains uncertain?

Next action, responsible person, and information needed before purchase:

Before committing

Check actual product dimensions, room use, material samples, and current information. Construction, structural work, permanent electrical changes, and applicable accessibility requirements need appropriate project-specific professional assessment.

Further learning and sources

Full Home Haven principles guide
https://mydailyhomehaven.com/principles-of-interior-design/

Getty - Principles of Design
https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/formal_analysis2.html

Purdue University Libraries - Design Basics
https://guides.lib.purdue.edu/c.php?g=1421831&p=10541794

Room exercises and diagrams are original illustrative applications. Different educators may group the principles differently. Sources checked October 29, 2026.