Creating Abstract Art with Geometric Shapes

Abstract art uses shapes, colors, lines, and even ideas to create artworks. Abstract art usually does not depict humans, animals, cars, or other basic items we see in our real visual world.

The following exercise will introduce vocabulary and some examples of abstract art. After being introduced to abstract art, a simple art project using nothing but paper cut-outs will let you create your own original abstract works of art.
Vocabulary

• Geometric: Characterized by regular lines and shapes. Think of straight lines, circles, rectangles, triangles, and squares.

• Composition: The final arrangement or placement of the visual elements in an artwork. In this exercise, it is the final placement of the geometric shapes on the background.

• Complementary Color: On the color wheel, the two colors directly across from each other are complementary. For example, green and red are complementary colors.

• Analogous Colors: On the color wheel, the colors that are immediately next to a color on each side are analogous colors. For example, green’s analogous colors would be blue and yellow.

• Neutral Colors: Colors that usually don’t show up on a basic color wheel. Think of black, grey, white, and sometimes brown.
Leon Polk Smith

*Center Columns, Blue Red*

1946

Oil on panel

73 x 50 x 2 ¼ in. (185.42 x 127 x 5.72 cm)

Purchased with assistance from the Phillip D. Adler Fund, the Friends of the University of Iowa Museum of Art, and the Judith Rothschild Foundation

2001.26
Josef Albers

*Formulation: Articulation*

1972

Silkscreen on stiff wove paper

12 x 20 in. (30.48 x 50.8cm)

The Nancy and Frank A. Seiberling Jr. Family Collection

1991.251
Step 1. Cut out a bunch of solid color geometric shapes. You can use construction paper, old paper, or even items ready to go to the recycling center.
Step 2. Find a solid color background. Construction paper works best, but you can use the back of an old t-shirt, a folder, just about anything with a solid color.

I’m using the same red background color that Josef Albers used for *Formulation: Articulation*. Albers used three colors for his painting: red, black, and white. I’m going use two colors: the red background and white shapes.
Step 3. Start placing your shapes on the background. I chose a white circle to contrast against the red.

You can make a circle by grabbing a drinking glass, a can of food, or anything with a round bottom and running a pencil around the bottom while it is on top of the piece of paper. Then follow the line with the scissors to cut out the circle.
Step 4. Start adding different shapes. Feel free to arrange them until you like how they look. You can glue the shapes to the background sheet once you have a composition you like, or you can leave them free to create new artworks.
Here is what I ended up with. If you look at the center triangle, you can see I placed different colored shapes on top of one another to get that effect. Let’s do another with a different colored background.
Here is my pile of shapes, this time with a green background.
Now I’ve started to add my shapes. The white circle and red circle have different shapes and colors placed over them.

Now you try: place your shapes in any way you would like to place them. Red and green are complementary colors on the color wheel and often draw the eye toward them in works of art.
Yellow and green are known as analogous colors. This means they are right next to each other on the color wheel.

Analogous colors are often used to make soothing compositions. By placing some yellow on the left side of the page, you can balance out the harsh red and green complementary colors on the right side of the artwork.

This is my final composition on the green background. I’m going to show you one more example using a white background, like Leon Polk Smith used for *Center Columns, Blue Red.*
Leon Polk Smith used a white background with basic geometric shapes to create *Center Columns, Blue Red*. I went a different route and used many more colors and a bunch of different geometric shapes.

Have fun—try different shapes, colors, and backgrounds. Don’t be afraid to stack different shapes and colors on top of one another. The neutral colors of white, black, and grey can help balance a composition, or make it harsher depending on how it is placed.

Try a composition using nothing but complementary colors. Try another with only analogous colors and see how the different compositions look to you.