
Introduction to Design Techniques

DESIGN TECHNIQUES

Now that you have a good understanding of the elements and principles of design, the next step is to learn the techniques of floral design. When professional floral designers use the term *design techniques*, they're referring to the methods used to assemble or construct an arrangement's individual parts. As in any craft, there are methods of construction in floral design that make your ideas come to life. There are many techniques to learn. Some are very general, and others fit best into certain styles of design.

Styles will be covered in this unit also, and you'll soon come to know how all of these things work together. Principles, elements, techniques, and styles are really players on the same team; attention needs to be paid to all four for successful results. Style requires technique that requires principles that govern the elements of design. Just as we've examined the principles and elements one by one, here we'll discuss techniques one at a time. Once we get into styles, you'll see that the building blocks to successful designing are good knowledge of principles, elements, and techniques. It's something like putting a puzzle together. The more familiar you are with all of the parts, the better you'll be able to use them to solve a wide range of designing challenges.

This section will cover the following design techniques:

- Basing—layering or stacking, terracing, pavé, clustering, and pillowing
- Focal area

- Grouping
- Banding
- Binding
- Shadowing
- Sequencing
- Framing
- Zoning
- Parallelism
- Skeletonizing

Let's examine each of these design techniques in detail.

Basing

The act of covering the area at the base of a floral arrangement is generally known as *basing*. An arrangement's base is the horizontal ground surface found at the container's top. This ground surface usually consists of the exposed surface of the floral foam block into which the floral elements are inserted.



FIGURE 1—Basing establishes focal emphasis at the lower portion of the arrangement.

(Design by Michael O'Neill)

Basing creates focal emphasis at the base of an arrangement (Figure 1). Basing adds texture, color, shape, dimension, and visual balance to an arrangement. Don't underestimate the importance of visual balance! For example, very tall arrangements may look as if they're going to topple over if additional floral weight isn't added to the base.

Basing a design can activate the surface with texture. Texture is the main element involved in basing, but color plays an important part here too. Contemporary design styles can use basing techniques very effectively. Formal linear and parallel arrangements need open space for all of the

upright placements to be clearly visible. This leaves the surface of the foam exposed, since there won't be any bulky foliage to cover the foam in a general way. By using the basing techniques that we're about to discuss, that surface area can be another opportunity to add interest and carry out the design idea. The color theme can be developed further here. Texture can be added; familiar materials can be seen in a new light. Let's spend some time on basing techniques, but keep your mind open and you may even find some basing ideas of your own.

Basing covers the mechanics of the completed arrangement. The term *mechanics* refers to the way the arrangement's individual pieces are put together and physically held in place. For example, the foam brick and the tape or glue used to hold the arrangement in place are part of its mechanics. Wood picks, steel picks, and floral tape are also part of an arrangement's mechanics. All of these items must be hidden in the finished arrangement, or the design will look sloppy or careless. Basing the horizontal surface of the arrangement hides the mechanics in a creative way.

One of the simplest ways to base an arrangement is to cover the foam brick's surface with greenery, such as moss, fern, or pittosporum. Greenery is secured to the foam with *greening pins*, which are horseshoe-shaped pieces of wire (Figure 2).



FIGURE 2—Greening pins are often used to hold basing materials in place. (jillfrancinemiller.blogspot.com/2008/10/dried-rose-topiary.html)

Other types of greenery, such as foliage, are inserted directly into the foam. Many different materials can be used for basing; the only real limit is your imagination! Some of the more common materials used by floral designers include moss, fern, statice, gerbera daisy centers, boxwood, and chrysanthemums, and flower buds, seeds, and pods, to name a few.

Layering

Layering, sometimes called *stacking*, is a basing technique in which leaves or other thin, flat materials are placed one on top of the other for visual effect (Figure 3). The edges of the leaves get the most attention in this technique. They can be secured together in stacks of three or more with a small, wired wooden pick and placed into the foam horizontally. The leaves can be of graduated sizes with the largest on the bottom. Or they can also be reversed to reveal the different color on the back. The designer may also place the layered stack of foliage so that it extends over the edge of the container, in that way breaking the line created by the container's edge.

FIGURE 3—Layering is a basing technique in which leaves are stacked for visual effect. (Design by Michael O'Neill)



Terracing

Terracing is similar to layering except the materials used are thicker and more three-dimensional. More depth can be achieved with terracing. Just like a terraced rice field, a stair-step placement creates the depth. Certain materials are natural for this technique: lotus pods (Figure 4) and sponge mushroom are two dried materials that bring texture and contrast to a fresh design. Because they have a relatively flat top surface, terracing done with lotus pods or sponge mushroom is easy to execute and understand. Other materials that work well for terracing are discs of wood, stones, and fruit slices. This stairstep idea can also give movement to static areas at the bottom of a design (Figure 5). Try this at angles or from front to back.



FIGURE 4—Different-Sized Pods Used in Terracing



FIGURE 5—Terracing involves stair-stepping identical materials. Note how the spruce bark (lower right-hand corner) is placed to resemble stairs.
(Design by Michael O'Neill)



FIGURE 6—Pavé basing creates a cobblestone texture by placement of identical small flowers or pods very close together but not overlapping, so that each retains its identity. (Design by Michael O'Neill)



FIGURE 7—The basing method used in this arrangement is clustering: the statice are placed so closely together that they lose their individual identity. (Design by Michael O'Neill)

Pavé

Pavé is a word borrowed from the craft of jewelerymaking. Pavé is a basing technique in which practically identical small flowers or pods are placed close to each other and close to the floral foam (Figure 6). If you think of this as a cobblestone effect, you can understand how each part still has its own identity while working to create an overall texture. That each placement retains its own identity is important because it makes this technique different from other basing techniques. The cobblestone texture of pavé basing can be used in small areas, or you can use it to make a path from the front to the back of a design.

Clustering

Clustering is another basing method in which like materials are placed so closely together that they lose their individual identity. With this method, the quantity and shape of each individual flower is obscured to the point that the cluster acts as one unit. In other words, one flower in the group doesn't stand out from the others and call attention to itself. For example, clustered liatris would be seen as one mass of purple flowers. Certain flowers work better than others for this method; for instance, carnations are an excellent choice for clustering because all of the petals are almost the same. When they're placed close together, they all blend into one another and in the process lose their individual identity (Figure 7).

Pillowing

Pillowing is a basing method that's a variation on clustering. As the name implies, rounded shapes are the object of this technique. Think of rolling hills, clouds, or pillows: the contour is rounded, and harsh angles are absent. Pillowing involves the use of a mounded mass of floral materials at the design's surface level (Figure 8).

Pillowing can be used at the edge of a container where a rounded shape would make a good transition from the container to the design. This kind of a soft shape can be used as a contrast to harsh lines elsewhere in a design. It can also be used to repeat a curved line to help develop a theme with rounded shapes.

In your design work, these basing techniques will help you add interest to your design and provide a more sophisticated alternative to just covering foam with moss. Experiment with these techniques and use each material to its best advantage.



FIGURE 8—*Pillowing is a basing technique in which rounded materials are massed to create the effect of soft pillows, billowing clouds, or rolling hills.* (Design by Michael O'Neill)

Focal Area

An arrangement's *focal area* (also called *focal emphasis*) is the point or region to which the viewer's eye is automatically drawn first. In almost any arrangement, the individual parts become secondary to the focal area. When properly executed, the arrangement's exact focal area is easy to identify. For example, in an arrangement where floral elements radiate from a single area, the focal area is the place where the stems meet or cross (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9—The Focal Area in a Fan-Shaped Arrangement



There are a variety of materials available to floral designers for establishing focal area. (Keep in mind that the design style itself greatly influences the placement of the focal area.) Some of the more common materials used include larger flowers, ribbon, pine cones, lotus pods, and various kinds of statues. The key to establishing focal area is this: the material chosen to do so must command the most attention in the finished arrangement. All other supporting elements, such as line and secondary flowers, must lead the viewer's eye back to the focal area. In other words, focal area is the point in the arrangement where the viewer's eye comes to rest.

Later in this study unit, you'll be given an overview of the major design styles in use today. One of these styles is called the *western line style*; its focal area is established by placing the largest flower in the design at the container's lip. The size of the other flowers is gradually decreased, while the distance separating the flowers is increased. In other words, the flower closest to the largest flower can be very close—almost touching it. As flowers are placed farther away from the focal flower, their size decreases and the space between the flowers increases. The idea is to draw the viewer's eye into the primary focal area.

In other design styles, the focal area is established in the arrangement by a technique known as *framing*. Designers use this technique to place various elements, such as branches or flowers, on the outer edge of the arrangement. Doing so encloses the area and forms a frame around the design. Framing will be discussed in more detail later in this unit.

In all cases, creating a focal area *showcases* (points out the importance of) a particular design element. Focal area is the floral designer's way of calling attention to the element in the arrangement with the greatest artistic value and visual impact.

When choosing floral materials to establish focal area, designers must think in terms of form flowers. Form flowers with distinctive shapes and colors work best. Irises, roses, and lilies all serve well as focal point flowers. It isn't necessary that the individual flowers be massive; smaller flowers can be grouped together to form a mass. Two other design techniques, clustering and grouping, establish focal emphasis with a mass of smaller flowers. We've already discussed clustering as a basing technique. We're about to go on to grouping now.

As a floral designer, be aware that you don't always need to position the focal area at the very center of the design. An arrangement with an unexpected, off-center focal area can generate much more creative excitement.

Grouping

Grouping refers to placing collections of identical floral materials in an arrangement, and separating the collections from each other with clearly defined negative space. *There must be space between individual groups of elements.*

Negative space makes each group distinct. Negative space is open space deliberately included in an arrangement. It's "negative" because it separates the individual elements. In a grouped arrangement, the flowers in a particular group must all be the same. The individual flowers within each group generally retain their individual identity and can be of different heights (Figure 10). Grouping is often used in vegetative, landscape, parallel, and new convention arrangements.



FIGURE 10—Grouping lets flowers in a group stand out as individual elements. (Design by Michael O’Neill)

Banding is a decorative technique only; it serves no functional purpose. In other words, the twine, ribbon, or tape is only ornamental—it’s not used to hold the floral elements in place.

FIGURE 11—In a banded arrangement like this, the decorative bands aren’t holding the floral materials in place. (Design by Michael O’Neill)

Grouping, then, joins identical flowers into individual groups and draws attention to each group of material. Grouping gives the colors and shapes additional strength while adding visual emphasis and impact to each area in the arrangement. Grouping arranges and classifies similar elements to emphasize form and/or color. However, the elements aren’t massed; each group makes a statement as a separate entity.

Banding

Banding is mainly used as a decorative addition to an arrangement. In banding, some type of material, such as metallic wire or ribbon, is wrapped around one or several stems (Figure 11). A banded bouquet creates a strong visual statement.



As early as the sixth century, the Japanese used banding in *Rikka* arrangements for the temple. *Rikka* is an Oriental Ikebana floral design style that features the use of tall plant materials. In Europe, banding was first mentioned in connection with flower arranging in the fourteenth century, during the Italian Renaissance.

Binding

Binding involves tying a group of many stems into one mass. Materials like sheaves of wheat, straw, or corn are bundled together for use in floral arrangements. In other words, relatively large quantities of material are bound together with string, twine, or *raffia* (not with floral tape) and worked into an arrangement. Raffia is a natural material obtained from palm trees which is often used to make mats, hats, and baskets.

Although banding and binding sound alike, they're not. The purpose of banding materials together is a decorative one only. In binding, however, the purpose is to actually hold the floral elements in place. In other words, binding is a functional technique, while banding isn't. But note that, while binding actually does the physical task of holding a group of materials together, the binding material and method should have some decorative quality as well (Figure 12).

Shadowing

In the *shadowing* technique, floral designers place two pieces of identical material in an arrangement, one immediately behind the other. Shadowing is most effective in arrangements with only a few flowers and foliage elements. The result resembles a shadow (Figures 13A and 13B). As with a shadow, one element is larger than the other. Many times this is accomplished

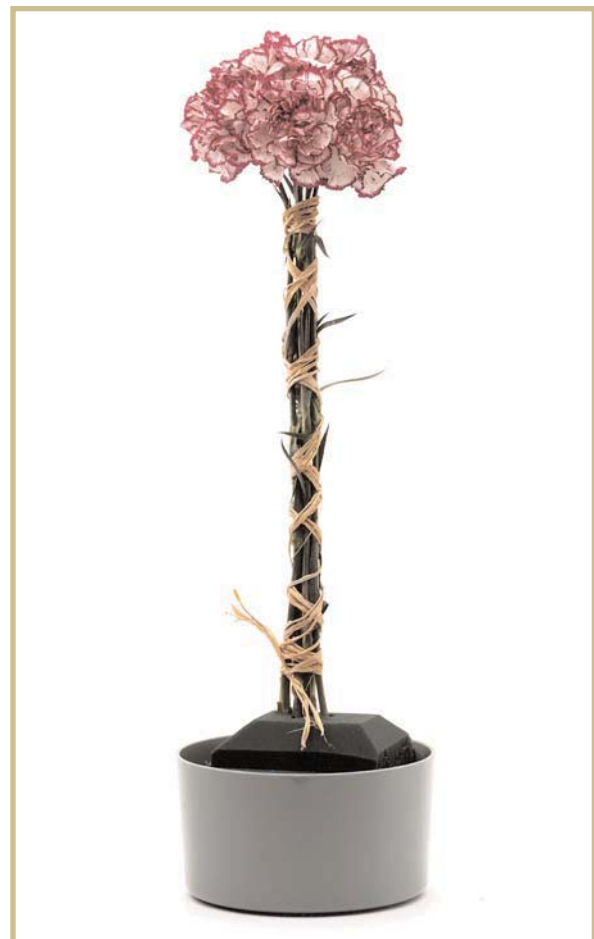


FIGURE 12—In this arrangement bound with raffia, the binding functions to hold groups of flower stems together, but it's also decorative. (Design by Michael O'Neill)



(A)



(B)

FIGURE 13—The Shadowing Technique. In A, note how the outer leaf on the right-hand side shadows the first leaf. (Design by Michael O'Neill)

with flowers, foliage, or fern fronds that protrude from a single point in the arrangement. When fronds are used, one frond is placed behind another (or behind a similar piece of foliage). Identical flowers, such as carnations, delphinium, or alstroemeria, to name just a few, can be used to shadow each other. Shadowing adds visual depth, or a third dimension, to the design.

Sequencing

In *sequencing*, floral materials are arranged in a pattern of progressive change. Sequencing is most powerful when the change in the pattern of color, size, or texture is gradual (Figure 14). The size can move from large to small or small to large. Color can change from dark to light or light to dark. And, texture can change from smooth to rough or from rough to smooth. Sequencing doesn't demand, however, that all three elements change in any one arrangement. It's only necessary for one element to display a gradual change. Sequencing is used to create distinctive, modern arrangements.

Sequencing is a gradual progression of color, size, or texture in the materials in the floral arrangement. Earlier, we discussed a western line arrangement where each successive flower was placed farther and farther away from the largest, focal flower. The size of the flowers decreased while the space between the flowers increased. The idea was to draw the viewer's eye to the focal area. As you can see, this type of progression is a form of sequencing.

Framing

Framing is a design technique that involves enclosing specific floral materials within an area. The materials chosen for the frame must have some relevance to the materials used in the design and the design as a whole, or else the frame will look like an afterthought. Think of this technique in terms of placing a photograph in a picture frame. By putting a frame around a picture, you give the picture more emphasis. In the same way, framing a floral design puts special visual emphasis on the floral elements within the frame (Figure 15). Frames are most commonly made by placing straight or curved twigs at the right and left of the design. This creates a frame on the outer perimeters of the design. The focal area is located at some point within the frame. Flowers, branches, linear greens, or anything you can give a curve to are often used as framing materials.

Framing isolates the focal materials of a floral composition by demanding the viewer's attention. The frame might completely or only partially encompass the floral materials within the design. When a design is only partially framed, the eye completes the frame.



FIGURE 14—The key to sequencing is achieving a gradual change in the color, size, or texture of an arrangement. Note how the flowers are sequenced by size. (Design by Michael O'Neill)



FIGURE 15—Framing in a Floral Arrangement
(Design by Michael O'Neill)

Zoning

Zoning works in much the same way as grouping, but the space between the groups of floral materials is much more distinguishable. When zoning an arrangement, designers place a group of flowers into a zone; the zone is then given a prominent place within the design. Designers often zone arrangements that feature a group of expensive flowers, such as orchids or lilies. The flowers will be prominently displayed.

Another way to use zoning is to create a large-scale arrangement where the flowers are separated by *visual space* rather than actual empty space. In such an arrangement, the blooms in the mass can be very close to or can even touch each other. However, one zone of dominant flowers will be separated from another by subordinate flowers located between the two. For example, delphiniums can be positioned and clearly defined on one side of an arrangement, with liatris on the other side. An

area of contrasting blooms would be positioned between the two zones.

Parallelism

You'll learn in the next section that *parallelism* is one of the classical floral design styles. However, parallelism is also considered a generic design technique, an extension of zoning. As a technique, parallelism involves positioning like materials in separate vertical groupings. The result is similar to trees in a forest or to a row of telephone poles that are parallel to each other.

A designer might group gladiola, liatris, and iris within an arrangement. Each group is kept separate and distinct. Parallelism requires a distinct amount of negative space

between the groups. The container used with this technique is usually low—only a few inches high. The low container exposes the arrangement’s highly textured base. In parallel arrangements, there are never any diagonal (crossing) stems. Rather, all stems are vertical.

Skeletonizing

Skeletonizing is a way of trimming foliage to give added emphasis to the branch or stem. Using a sword fern as an example, hold the fern near the top with two fingers, and strip all of the leaves below where you’re holding it. This works well with eucalyptus—you create a material with a sleek line and an interesting tip. The skeletonizing idea comes from revealing the stem that’s obscured by the leaves on the stem (Figure 16).

In the next section, you’ll be introduced to each of the major floral design styles. You’ll learn about these styles in great depth in later study units. Before advancing to the next section, complete *Self-Check 1*.



FIGURE 16—Skeletonizing in a Floral Arrangement (Design by Michael O’Neill)



Self-Check 1

At the end of each section of *Introduction to Design Techniques*, you'll be asked to pause and check your understanding of what you've just read by completing a "Self-Check" exercise. Answering these questions will help you review what you've studied so far. Please complete *Self-Check 1* now.

1. Techniques are the methods that bring your design ideas to life. Are all techniques useful in executing all design styles?
 - a. No
 - b. Yes
 - c. Sometimes

2. Basing is a group of techniques. List the various basing techniques and review their differences.

3. *True or False?* Banding is only decorative, while binding is mechanical; binding actually holds things together.

4. Does basing provide color or texture or both?

5. Which technique encloses materials within an area?

6. In which technique are there never any crossing stems?

7. Progressive change is demonstrated by what technique?

8. When materials form a stairstep, a designer has used _____.

(Continued)