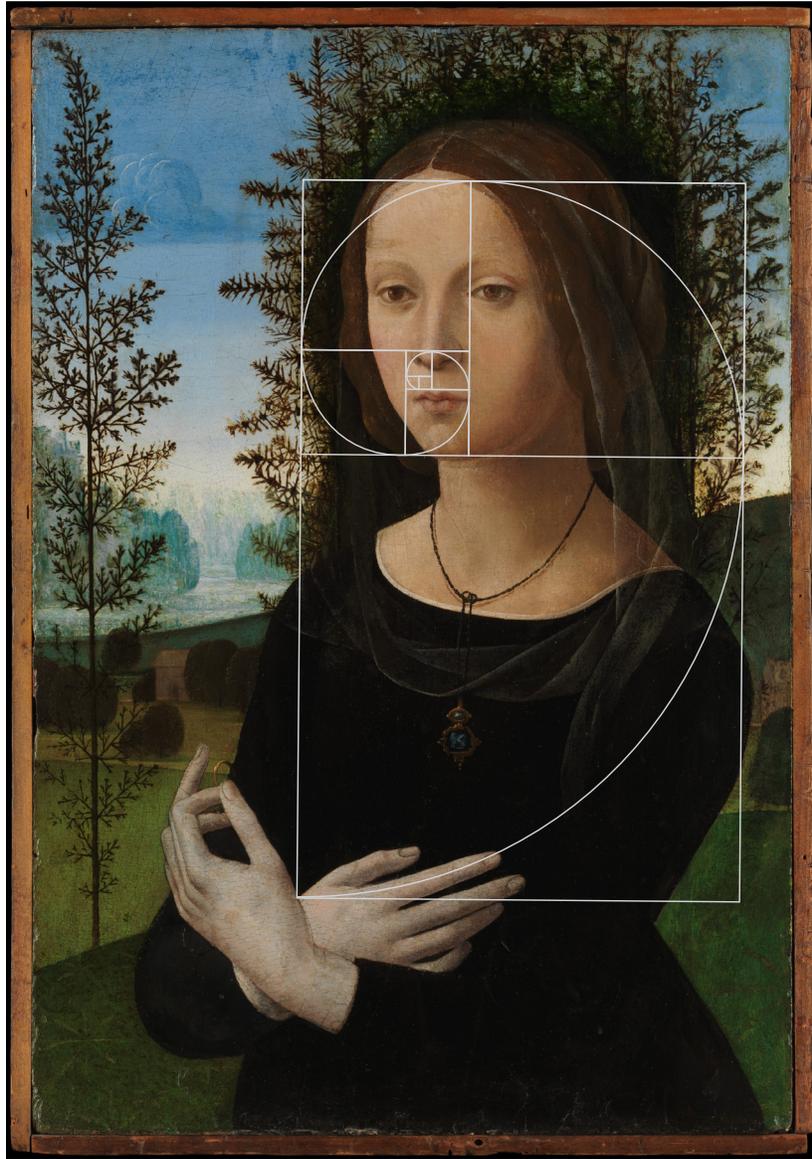

Composing Art with Confidence E-Book



Don't let the mathematical aspects of good composition discourage you.

*Becoming familiar with the tools inside this short e-book
will soon have you composing art with confidence.*

This down-to-earth guide will walk you through examples of key compositional tools and how they have been used by artists over the years. Download these tools here and add them to your sketchbook . With a little practice you will quickly become comfortable creating timeless art with the ability to draw the viewer in and hold them captivated.

The PDFs in this e-book will help you confidently compose your sketches, drawings, and paintings from a design perspective.

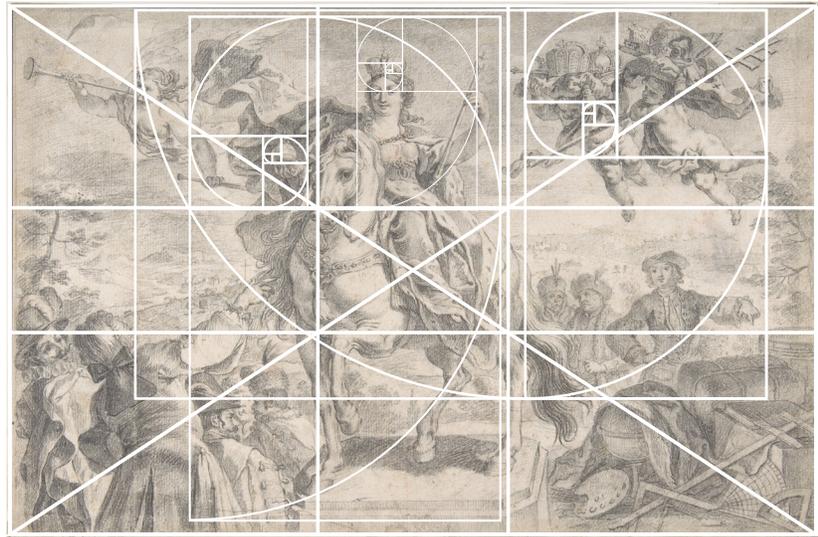
The download will provide you with an example of each of the compositional rules discussed. I hope you'll check out the examples and familiarize yourself with the different approaches to using these tools.

There are also other factors to consider in addition to these tools when composing your work, such as balance, leading objects, lines, visual weight, dynamic tension, perspective, leading lines, framing, and rhythm (through pattern and repetition). You will find additional notes on these design elements with each example that follows as well.

BEFORE YOU BURN THIS

The purpose of these downloads is to **build your confidence** through becoming familiar with various compositional tools. These frameworks are not requirements for every work of art, and not every artwork will fit into one of these frameworks. I hope that by becoming familiar with them and learning to recognize them in the artwork of others through the ages, you will gain confidence when composing your own drawings and paintings. This will enable you to approach the first stage of your work with intention and awareness of what makes great composition.

STEP 1 Take a look at the examples of compositional rules in the pages that follow and familiarize yourself with how they can be used.



STEP 2 Try looking at images of paintings and drawings online to see if you can identify any of these rules in use. It can truly be a fun game, especially when touring galleries and museums

STEP 3 Print out some of the grayscale armatures starting on page 10 at whichever sizes work for you—there are multiple versions of each tool in various sizes to fit standard sketchbooks, up to letter size. Try doing some drawings right on top of these frameworks, using the gray lines as a guide for placement of elements.

If you have a digital program like Adobe InDesign, Photoshop, or Illustrator, or even Power Point or Keynote, the PDFs in this file can be electronically placed over art images to identify which tools the artist may have used, *or placed over photos of your own sketches* to identify tools *you* might use to strengthen your own work.

If you want to do a larger than letter size sketch using one of these tools, you can email the PDF to a quick

SHOWN ABOVE: *Europe*, Gottfried Bernhard Goetz, German, Etching, 1728-1774

You can see numerous compositional rules at work in this etching, including the Fibonacci (or Golden) Spiral, the Rule of Thirds, and strong diagonal lines in both directions. You can find a detailed review of the compositional rules of this etching on page 7.

print and have them output them at the size you need. Then you can do your composition on a large sheet of tracing paper laid over the printout. Keep in mind the PDF file will have to be adjusted for sizes larger than letter size for the Golden Triangle, Rule of Thirds, or Golden Ratio to maintain proportions from edge to edge.

Page 9 of this e-book will provide a list of links for further reading on the rules of composition. This e-book is a sneak peak at my upcoming portrait course. The subject will be covered more in-depth in the course. In the meantime, I'll see you on the Podcast at passionatepainterpodcast.com.

About The Tools Included in This Download

THE RULE OF THIRDS GRID

Sizes provided:

4" x 6"

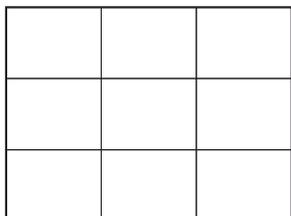
5" x 7"

7" x 10"

8" x 10"

9" x 12"

11" x 14"



Keep in mind you can also rotate this for use in vertical formats.

THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

Sizes provided:

4" x 6"

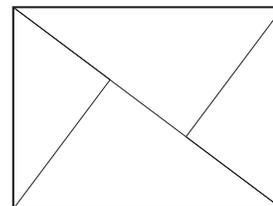
5" x 7"

7" x 10"

8" x 10"

9" x 12"

11" x 14"



Note: Second set provided flipped for opposite diagonal slant. Keep in mind you can also rotate this for use in vertical formats.

All four "Golden" templates in the section below are variations on the same ratio of 1.618 : 1 (explained in the pages that follow). You don't have to learn complex math to make use of them. Just check out how they relate to the placement of objects within the artwork that follows to see how you can make use of them, too.

You can rotate the Golden Ratio grid for use in vertical formats. The Golden Spiral and the Golden Ratio detail without the spiral can be used rotated at various angles within a composition to help you with relationships of elements to each other (such as placement of hands relative to a figure's face).

The Double Golden Spiral is really the same thing as the Golden Spiral, with

an additional spiral set into a smaller quadrant. This is here just to show you how you can get as much detail as you would like in using the tool. Think of how it can be useful to plan the focal points in works on a large scale, such as large canvases and murals. Every segment of the spiral can contain another spiral, but don't worry about getting too fancy, just familiarize yourself with how this tool can be helpful to you.

THE GOLDEN RATIO GRID

Sizes provided:

4" x 6"

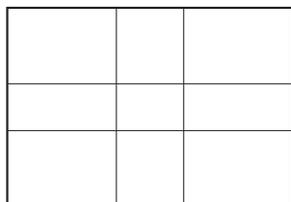
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7" x 10"

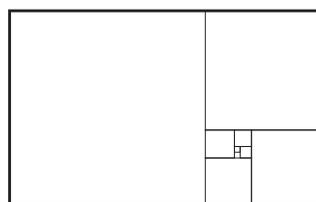
8" x 10"

9" x 12"

11" x 14"



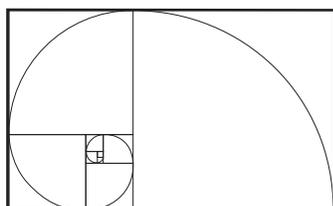
THE GOLDEN RATIO DETAIL



Note: Spiral left out for simplicity. Second version also provided flipped for opposite direction

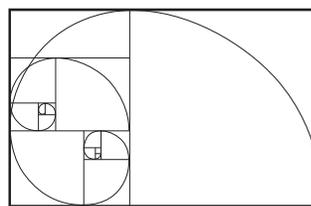
GOLDEN SPIRAL

Note: Second set provided flipped for opposite diagonal slant



DOUBLE GOLDEN SPIRAL

Showing second spiral within first. Note: Second set provided flipped for opposite diagonal slant



How the Golden Triangle Can Help Your Compositions

The **GOLDEN TRIANGLE** is a compositional tool you won't see as often as the Rule of Thirds or the Golden Mean. It is created when a diagonal line is drawn from opposite corners of the canvas, and right triangles are placed with their base sitting along opposite sides of this line, while the two non-right angles of the triangle meet opposite corners (see diagram). The result is a composition with dynamic force.

This etching is an excellent example of the Golden Triangle composition. Because the two lines at right angles to the diagonal line provide tension and movement, it is important that other elements in the composition assist in keeping the eye from zipping through the piece too quickly and right out again along the diagonals. This etching has some interesting things going for it that achieve the desired outcome of keeping the eye moving within the composition.

OTHER COMPOSITIONAL ELEMENTS IN THIS PIECE

LEADING LINES The most obvious feature is the staircase, which forms an angular "S" curve drawing you up the stairs after entering by the aunt's feet at the bottom of the stairs. The faces of the two figures at the top of the stairs work with the repetition of the globe caps on the newel posts of the banister to keep our eyes within the frame. The eye moves from the lower left corner



A Maiden Aunt Smelling Fire
Thomas Rowlandson, British,
Etching, [May 1, 1806], reissued
May 1

At any size, the Golden Triangle works off of diagonals from the corners of the canvas. Therefore, in using it as a compositional guide it must not be stretched or skewed.

the strong figure of the aunt. The cat at the base of the stairs helps to anchor her by widening the base of her figure, almost as an extension of her feet as the cat implies her next move up the stairs.

SUMMARY While there will be numerous examples of compositional rules in paintings within the Portrait Code course, it was fascinating to find so many examples in 19th century etchings as I created this e-book. I suspect that the strong emphasis on the development of academic drawing skills during this period was a driving factor in finding so many examples of strong composition. It is very helpful for painters to study drawings and etchings in addition to the paintings of our predecessors, because good painting will never make up for poor drawing, nor lack of compositional awareness. Studying drawings and etchings also develops better value scale sensitivity. When it comes to realism, even if you struggle with your colors in a painting, if your values are correct, you're moving in the right direction.

It is helpful to take photos of your work as you paint and convert them to grayscale to do a values check without color. Many phones have filters that allow you to do this.

up the aunt's body to her face, then up the left banister to the waving woman at the top left. Now across to the figure at top right, and down the right banister via the repeating globe-shaped newel caps to the cat, and finally back to the starting point.

REPETITION The vertical newel posts and banister spindles create repetition and pattern, resulting in **RHYTHM**.

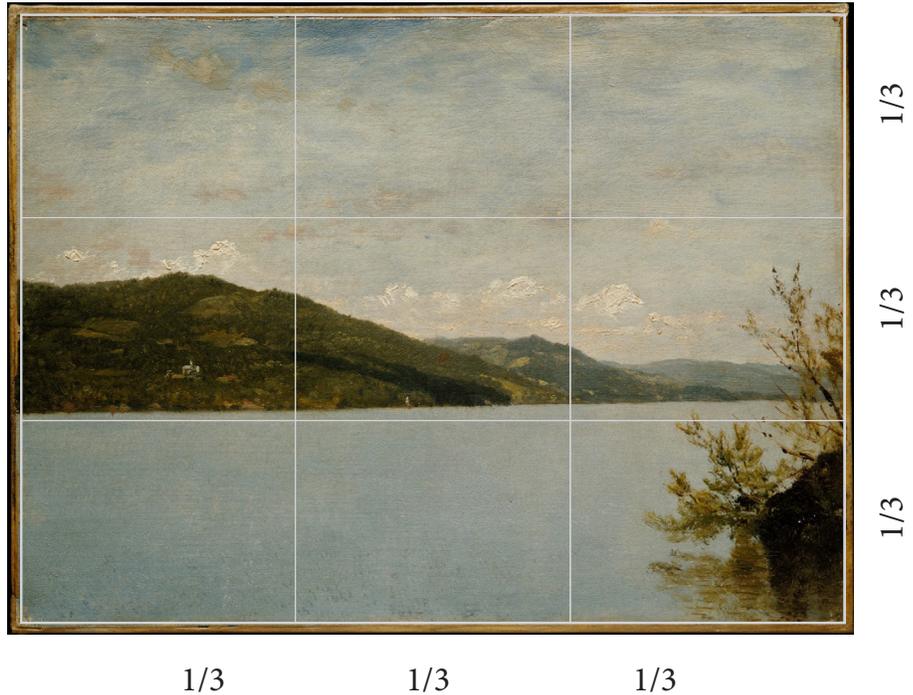
BALANCE The dominant light value of the aunt/stairway combination is balanced by the dark areas in shadow to either side, with a strong value **CONTRAST** along the right side where the room falls into shadow along the sharp zig zag of the banister. The contrast is further enhanced by the cross hatched **TEXTURE** in the shadows compared to the stark linear depiction of the light areas.

The detailed stained glass window on the right serves to further **BALANCE**

How the Rule of Thirds Can Help Your Compositions

The **RULE OF THIRDS** is a grid of even columns, each $\frac{1}{3}$ of the width, and even rows, each $\frac{1}{3}$ of the height. This proportion is always maintained. The ratio creates a pleasing feeling in design and a strong composition when the key focal areas are placed at intersections of the grid. You can also use it to strengthen your composition by distributing your elements within this grid, as you see here.

Lake George, 1872 1872 John Frederick Kensett, American, Painting, 1872



In this example, the horizon line is at the lower third mark. Having your horizon on either the lower or the higher third line is preferable to splitting your canvas in half. Likewise, breaking up your vertical elements along the vertical lines of this grid is preferable to cutting your painting in two by dividing items on either side of the center, or centering one item down the center line.

In this example, the largest dark land mass takes up $\frac{2}{3}$ of the space across. This $\frac{2}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ relationship is one of the hallmarks of a strong composition.

While it may appear at first that this composition is broken into 3 even rows horizontally, it follows a $\frac{2}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ composition: The sky and mountains take up $\frac{2}{3}$ of the top of the painting, with the horizon strongly along the bottom $\frac{1}{3}$ line. The $\frac{1}{3}$ strip of water with the dark spot of land on the right

is a perfect balance to the large land mass and sky. Dividing it further, the dark land mass is balanced by the large expanse of sky. The small dark area on the right serves as an anchor in the design, preventing the larger land mass from "floating away," lost between the water and the sky.

OTHER COMPOSITIONAL ELEMENTS IN THIS PIECE

COLOR TEMPERATURE: The large land mass and the smaller one on the right are both darker and warmer than the rest of the image. This creates both value contrast and atmospheric perspective, as warm colors appear closer than cooler ones. The deep green foliage in the land on the right helps it appear closest, as does its being placed lowest on the canvas. In the large land mass, the left side is darkest and warmest, causing the cooler hills to the right

along the horizon line to appear to be overlapping as they roll away into the distance.

REPETITION AND RHYTHM

The two smaller, grayer hills on the right are of similar shape to the larger dark hill, creating rhythm as they echo into the distance.

LEADING LINES There is diagonal movement in this painting from the top of the large hill down along the middle hill and over to the dark patch on the right. From there, the eye finds interest in the foliage and reflections in the water, and can pick up the diagonal branches pointing back again to the slant of the dark hill.

SUMMARY This painting may not have a lot of action in it, but the compositional elements work together successfully to move the eye and create an overall feeling of tranquility.



How the Golden Ratio Can Help Your Compositions

The Golden Ratio grid is a mathematical ratio defined as 1.618:1. It means that the width and the height are each divided into three segments, the two outer ones being a ratio of 1 to the center's ratio of 0.618. This proportion is always maintained, while the grid is stretched to fit whatever dimension the artwork is in width and height. It is more specific than the rule of thirds, with the middle section being of smaller dimension. The ratio creates a pleasing feeling in design and strong compositions when the key focal areas are placed at intersections of the grid.

Saint Zenobius Resuscitating a Dead Child, Benozzo di Lese di Sandro, Italian, Painting, ca 1460



1 0.618 1

At first glance, this painting appears to follow the rule of thirds both vertically and horizontally. At closer inspection, it more closely follows the Golden Ratio grid. Read on to see how it strengthens this composition.

The viewer's eye is drawn in at the open ground in the middle bottom and the children's figures in clothing that is in stark contrast to the ground. The eyes are then led around in a circle through the four "points" of the grid intersections, hitting upon the faces closest to those points as they are drawn back to the children.

Notice the faces are almost all aligned near the horizontal line that separates the top row from the middle row. The placement of nearly all of the people in the lower 2/3 of the grid creates order despite the large crowd. With most of their faces at the top of this 2/3 section, a feeling of airiness is created in the center where the central focus is. You know whose faces to look at first.

OTHER COMPOSITIONAL ELEMENTS IN THIS PIECE

COLOR: You can see repetition in the green, blue, and red in of the figures' robes in the foreground throughout the crowd, encouraging the viewer to move around "within" the painting.

REPETITION The figure standing in the dark robe in the center rectangle creates repetition of the standing child in his hair, dark cloak, and the angle of his body (though in the opposite direction). This reinforces the movement of the eye as it goes from dark small foreground child to dark edge of the priest's cloak to the dark figure in the center quadrant and returns via the face of the kneeling figure in blue.

PERSPECTIVE The perspective of the buildings at the top creates **LEADING LINES** to the arch and doorway of the center building, where there is a figure in a dark cloak whose proximity and extended arm brings

your eye back again to the figure in the central quadrant.

MORE LEADING LINES There are diagonals created from the priest up to the arched doorway in the top center, and from that doorway back down to the kneeling figure across from the priest on the right to the same doorway. These implied leading lines draw the eyes into the background as they travel through the faces on the left diagonal, coming back down through the right diagonal through the faces on that side.

RHYTHM The upheld hands of the crowds people creates a rhythm throughout the piece.

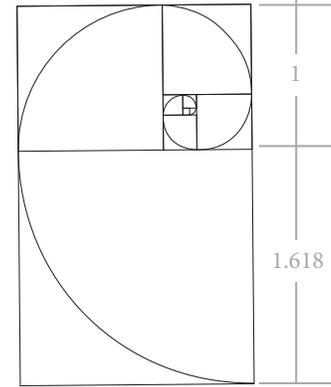
SUMMARY You don't have to have more than one compositional rule per piece—and in fact *not every artwork has even one*. You can see that in this painting, however, the artist achieves a strong composition through several techniques.



How the Golden Spiral Can Help Your Compositions

The **GOLDEN SPIRAL**, also known as the Fibonacci Spiral, is another way of displaying the golden ratio. See how the same ratio of 1.618 : 1 is present in the breakdown of the spiral shown on this page.

Rounded to the third decimal, each segment is 1.618 times larger than the preceding section as the spiral grows outward from its origin. The sequence the ratio follows was discovered by Italian mathematician Leonardo Bonacci, often referred to as "Fibonacci." I will use the terms "Golden Spiral" and "Fibonacci Spiral" interchangeably in this e-book.



Portrait of a Young Woman, Lorenzo di Credi (Lorenzo d'Andrea d'Oderigo) Italian, Painting, ca. 1490-1500

At any size, the Fibonacci Spiral adheres to the ratio of 1.618 : 1. Therefore, in using the spiral as a compositional guide, it must not be stretched or skewed.

You can see how the sections can each be further broken into smaller versions of this ratio. When you draw a curve from one square through the opposite corner of each segment as the segments get smaller and smaller, a spiral is formed. This ratio is found in nature and registers as visually pleasing to the eye.

I have included a version of this ratio without the spiral in the downloads as well, should you want to focus on how the space may be broken up without the extra detail of the curve. The spacial ratios will still remain. Factoring either version of the Golden Ratio will strengthen your composition.

Keep in mind this spiral, as in nature, can be flipped around and rotated. It can be used within the larger piece between elements, and also with regard to how every element is placed relative to the entire canvas (both methods are utilized here). It can be seen small as in a tiny nautilus shell, huge, as in the ever-expanding arms of the

Milky Way galaxy, or anything in between. Its value is the proportional relationships it adheres to.

In this example, the eye sweeps between the crossed hands, arcing along the arm, over the head dress, and into the face. You will see the same underlying structure in Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa.

Interestingly, if you lay another spiral on the entirety of the background you will find that the actual placement of the figure relative to the edges of the frame is also set with a larger spiral, as is the placement of the horizon and the trees.

OTHER COMPOSITIONAL ELEMENTS IN THIS PIECE

CONTRAST The figure's face and hands have been made into focal points through the contrast of their light value against the dark dress and head dress.

FRAMING The dark tree behind the figure is another dark mass further anchoring the figure and highlighting

the face through value contrast.

BALANCE The lighter "spriggy" tree on the left may seem optional or arbitrary, but it provides balance to the larger dark mass of trees and the figure on the right. The contrast between the crisp blue sky and this tree causes it to further stand out and emphasize its role as an anchor.

LEADING LINES The tree on the left also serves as a path for the eye to travel on from the eyes back to the hands. If the viewer is starting their visual journey on the woman's left hand and sweeping up in the direction it is pointing, that lone tree serves as a guiding boundary as the eye travels back to the face, keeping the viewer within the frame.

SUMMARY Not all works of art utilize this rule, nor do you have to. It is a wonderful framework to keep in mind when setting up a portrait, however, as you can see from the example on this page.

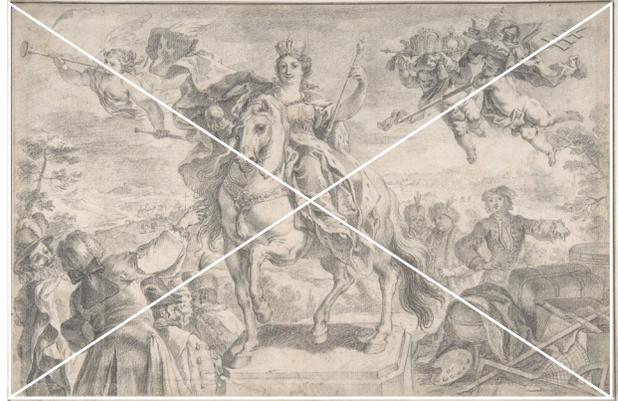
How the Golden Spiral Can Help Your Compositions

DIAGONALS, SPIRALS, AND RATIOS—OH MY!

A.



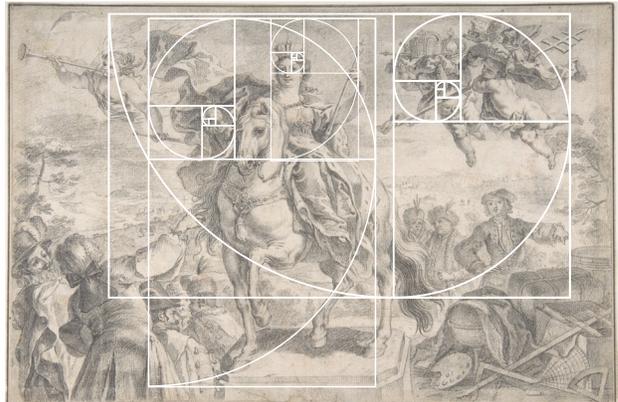
B.



C.



D.



Since I opened with this headache-inducing example of the use of compositional tools, I want to break it down here to show you how it all works together. This design makes use of strong diagonals, the Golden Ratio, and multiple Fibonacci (Golden) Spirals. While you don't have to use even one of these rules, you can see how each has a part to play in the placement of elements to give even this full composition a sense of harmony.

A. This beautiful etching provides a lot to look at, while succeeding in moving your eye around and exuding a feeling triumphant grandeur.

B. Starting with the most basic division of space, check out how the artist has

aligned elements along both diagonals to provide dynamic movement. See how the angle of the lines and their intersection point lead you to general the focal point, the woman on the horse.

C. Getting into more detail, the Golden Ratio grid is at play, each quadrant containing specific information contributing to the whole: heralding angels, a hand pointing to the central figure, faces looking toward her, the dark sweep of the horse's tail that follows the diagonal.

D. Those Spirals! See how at least 3 Golden Spirals are at work here (you can probably break it down further, but I personally would need an Advil). Note that you can rotate a golden spiral

within a composition, because as long as the ratios are maintained, the spiral can guide you to strong relationships between elements within a composition, in addition to the composition as a whole as it relates to the edges of the canvas.

Exercise: Print one golden spiral from the various gray line examples in this e-book, paste it into your sketchbook, and see if you can compose a simple drawing using the spiral as a guide.

I'm serious. For example, try drawing one figure, such as a portrait, and place the hands and face in relation to the Golden Spiral.



Links for Further Reading on Compositional Tools

THUMBNAILS A helpful way to tell if your painting will work compositionally is by making thumbnails and Notan sketches. The purpose of these small drawings is to force you to distill the elements down to the most important lines and elements.

The concept of the Notan sketch comes from Japan. It is the simplification of a drawing or painting down to two or three values. To make it quick and easy to do Notan studies for your paintings, I recommend a gray marker (or two, max) and a black marker. The goal is to have either a two-color Notan (Black and White) or a three-color, with black, a mid-tone gray, and white. The white of your paper will serve as the light value. You can use two different grays for a four-color Notan, but anything above four values really just becomes a straight-up value study. While helpful, more detailed value studies miss the point of the Notan, which is to distill the work down to its basics so you can plan your composition.

I have included links to sets of gray sketching markers in the column on the right. I am not endorsing one brand over another and am not an affiliate of any brand, I'm just giving you somewhere to start.

I looked for gray marker sets with a lower price point that included some light-to-middle tones. You could try using the gray marker that comes in a set of kids' Crayola®-type markers, but I have found that marker to be about an 80% black on the value scale, which is really too dark for a three-color notan. You should be able to distinguish between the values in these small drawings at a glance.

Here's a quick example (and these studies are meant to be quick and simple) of a thumbnail and a Notan study for a painting. I used cross-hatching on the gray in the Notan because the marker was too dark and this sketchbook won't take kindly to watercolor. You don't have to have a specific set of markers or paints to create Notan sketches. You could also use pencils of varying hardness, for example, a 4H and a 6B for your notan, so long as you don't forget to keep it simple. It's all about seeing the values.



Thumbnail



Notan

When you do your *thumbnail* sketches, you are looking to see if the composition is strong when distilled down to its most basic elements.

When you do your *Notan*, you are going a step further, looking to see if the basic *values* (distribution of lights and darks) work. Is there an order to it, or is it scattered and unfocused? Pay attention to if/how it moves your eye around.

CONCLUSION Remember, this e-book is not meant to put you off the topic of composition. My goal is to build your confidence through becoming familiar with various compositional tools. Not every artwork will fit into one of these frameworks. I hope that by becoming familiar with them and learning to recognize them in the art of others through the ages, you will gain

confidence when composing your own drawings and paintings. This will enable you to approach the first stage of your work with intention and awareness of what makes great composition.

The printable sketchbook armatures start on the next page. [Send me an email](#) and let me know how this e-book worked for you (or didn't). I'm always listening, and happy to hear from you.

Caroline

Until next time, go make something.

ADDITIONAL READING

[Essays on Art](#)

[Further details on the Golden Ratio](#)

[The Painter's Sacred Geometry](#)

[PetaPixel Website](#)

Remember the value of studying composition in fields such as photography and digital design. The rules still apply, and you'll find many more examples by widening the scope of work you look at.

[Creative Blog: Art and Design](#)

[Inspiration Website](#)

Again with the cross-training. This site is geared toward digital designers and game designers.

[Art Apprentice Blog](#)

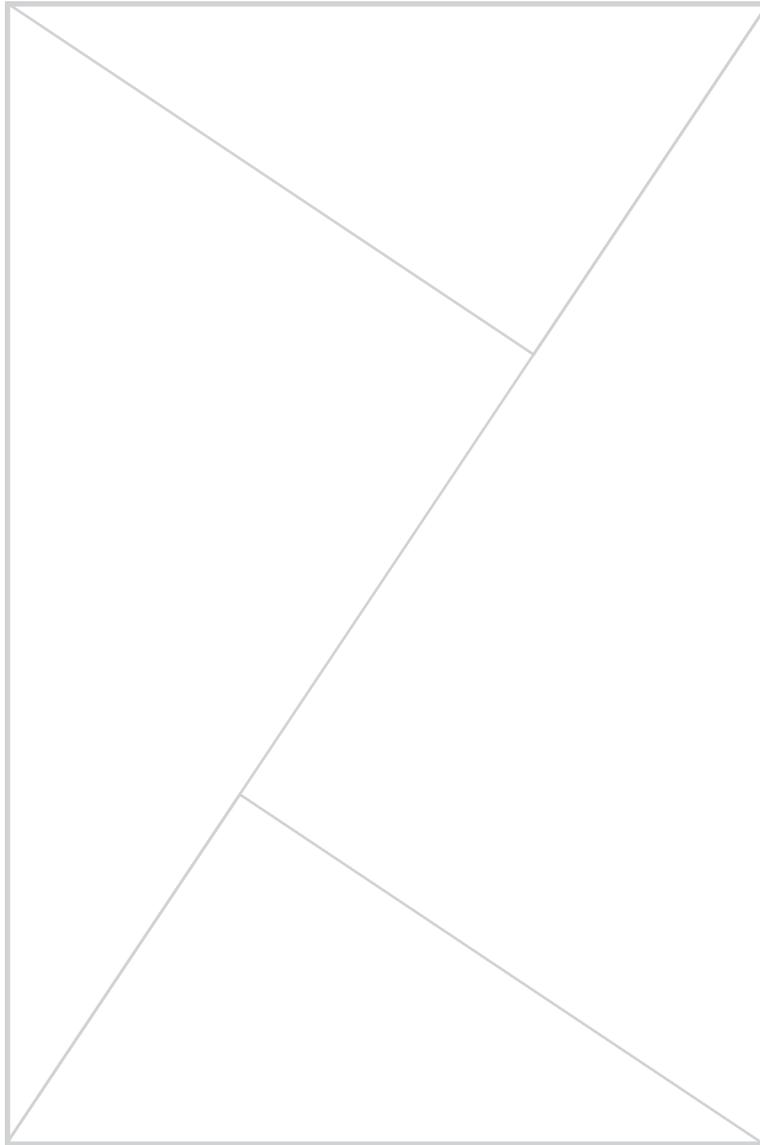
[A Guide to Notan](#)

GRAY SKETCH MARKER SETS

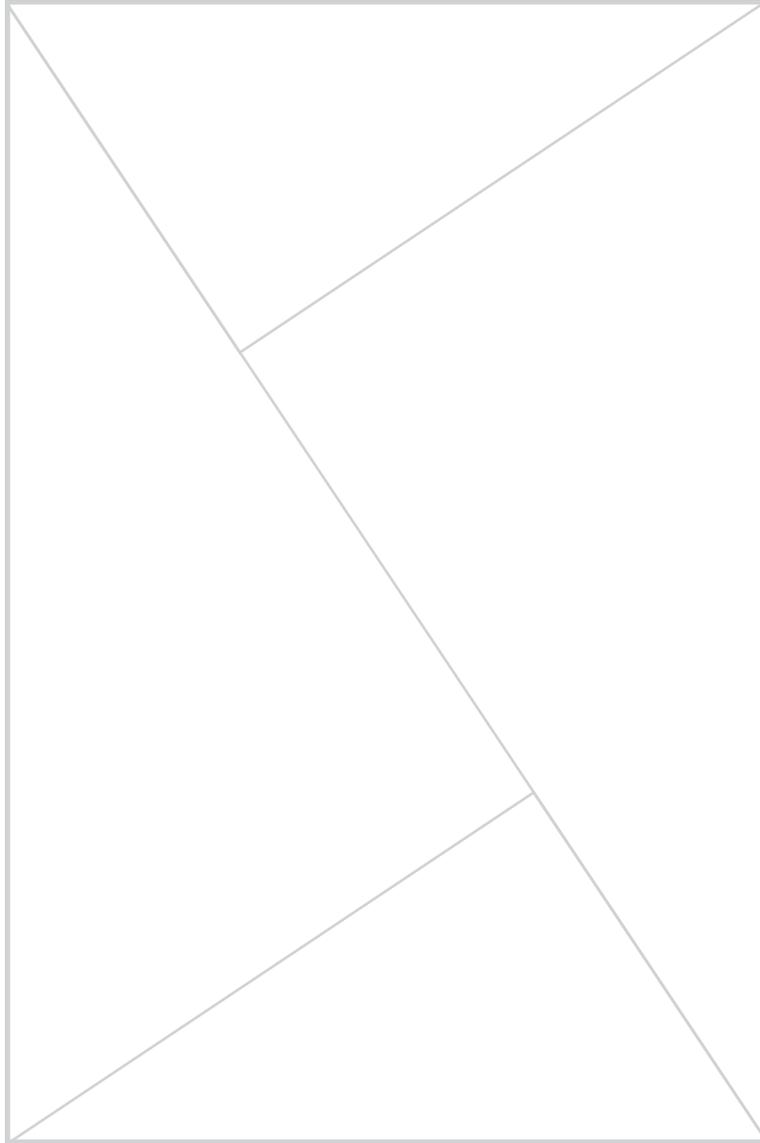
[Jet Pens Website](#)

[Dick Blick Website](#)

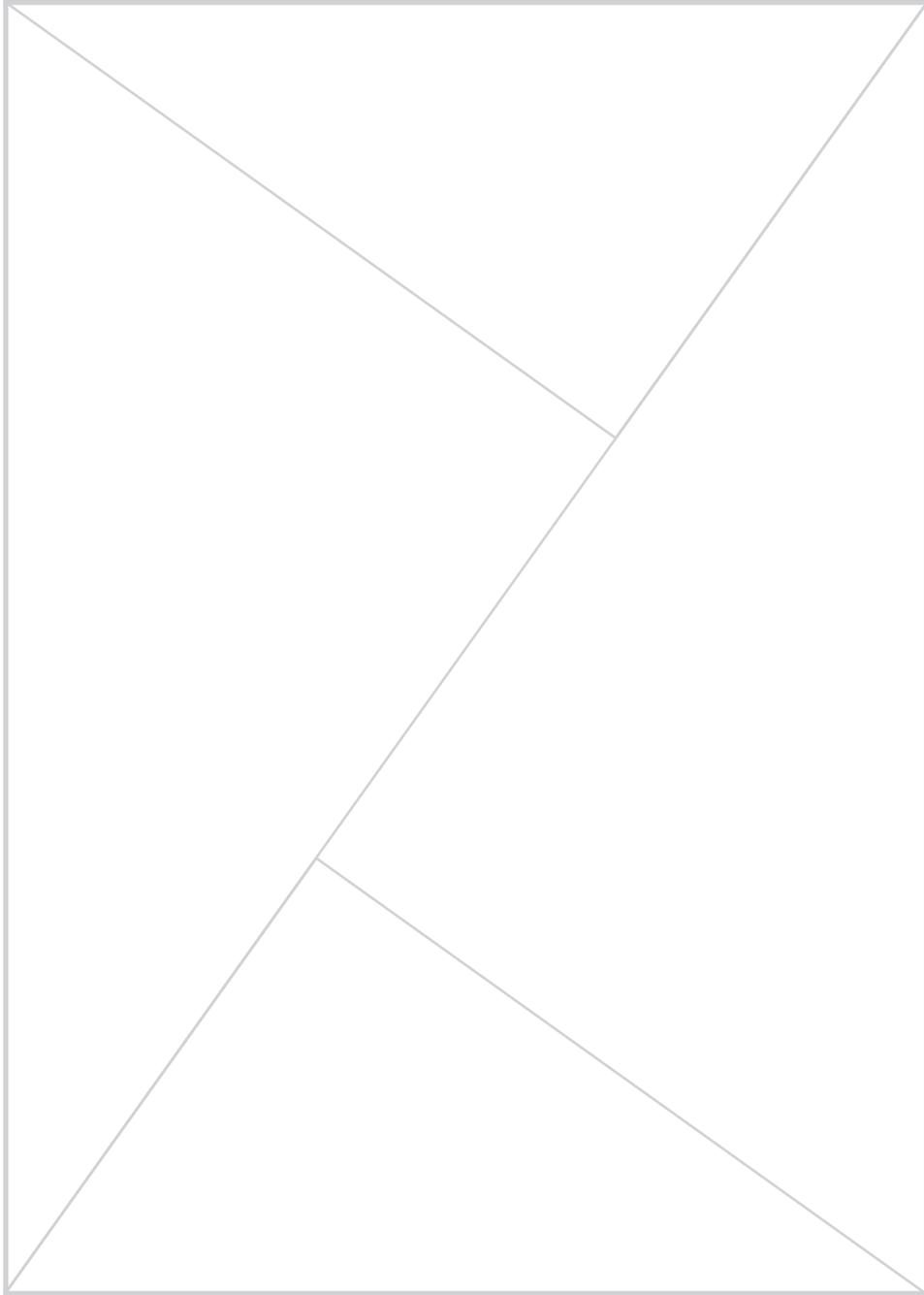
[Rex Art Website](#)



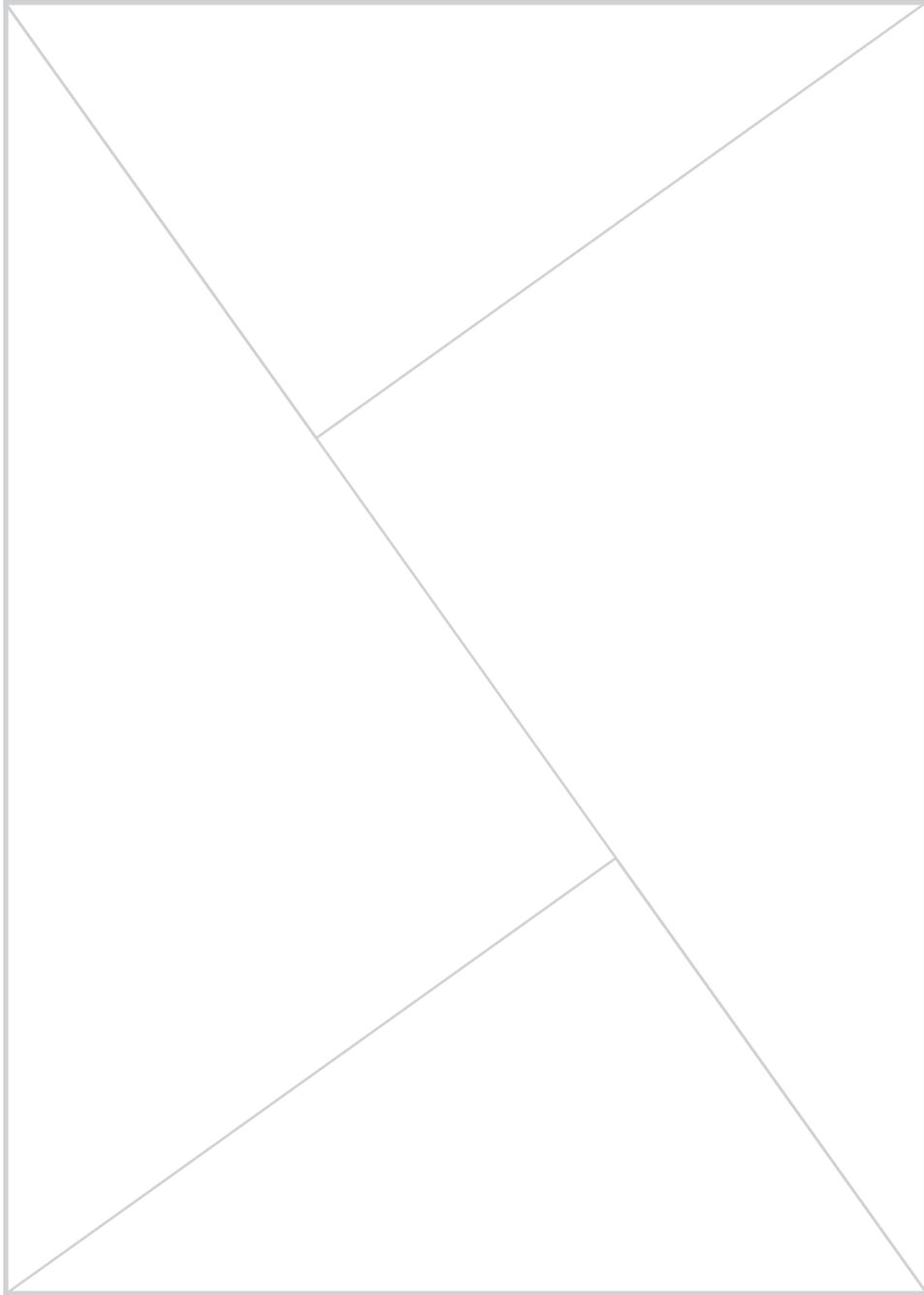
Golden Triangle 4" x 6"



Golden Triangle 4" x 6" - reverse slant



Golden Triangle 5" x 7"



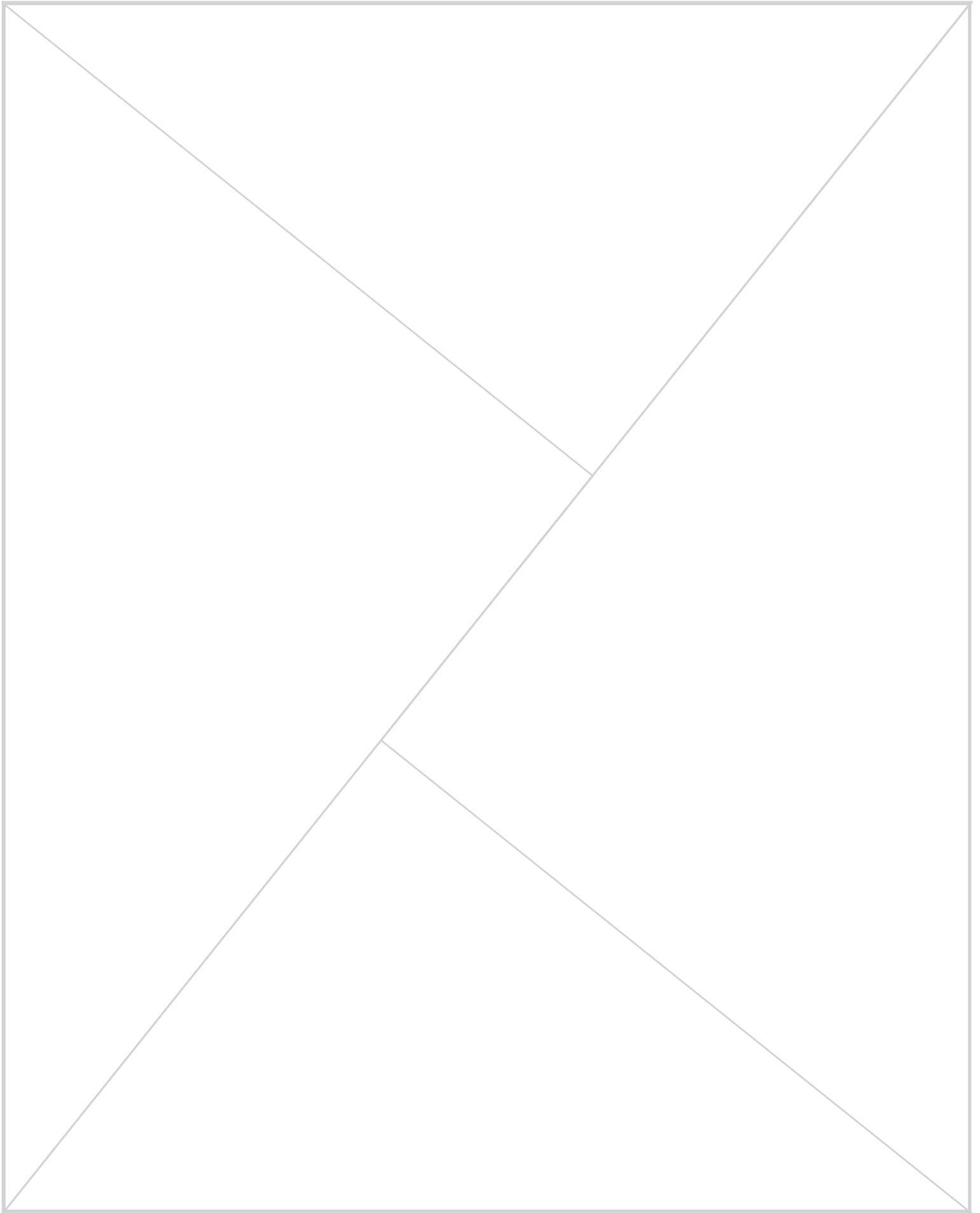
Golden Triangle 5" x 7" - Reverse slant



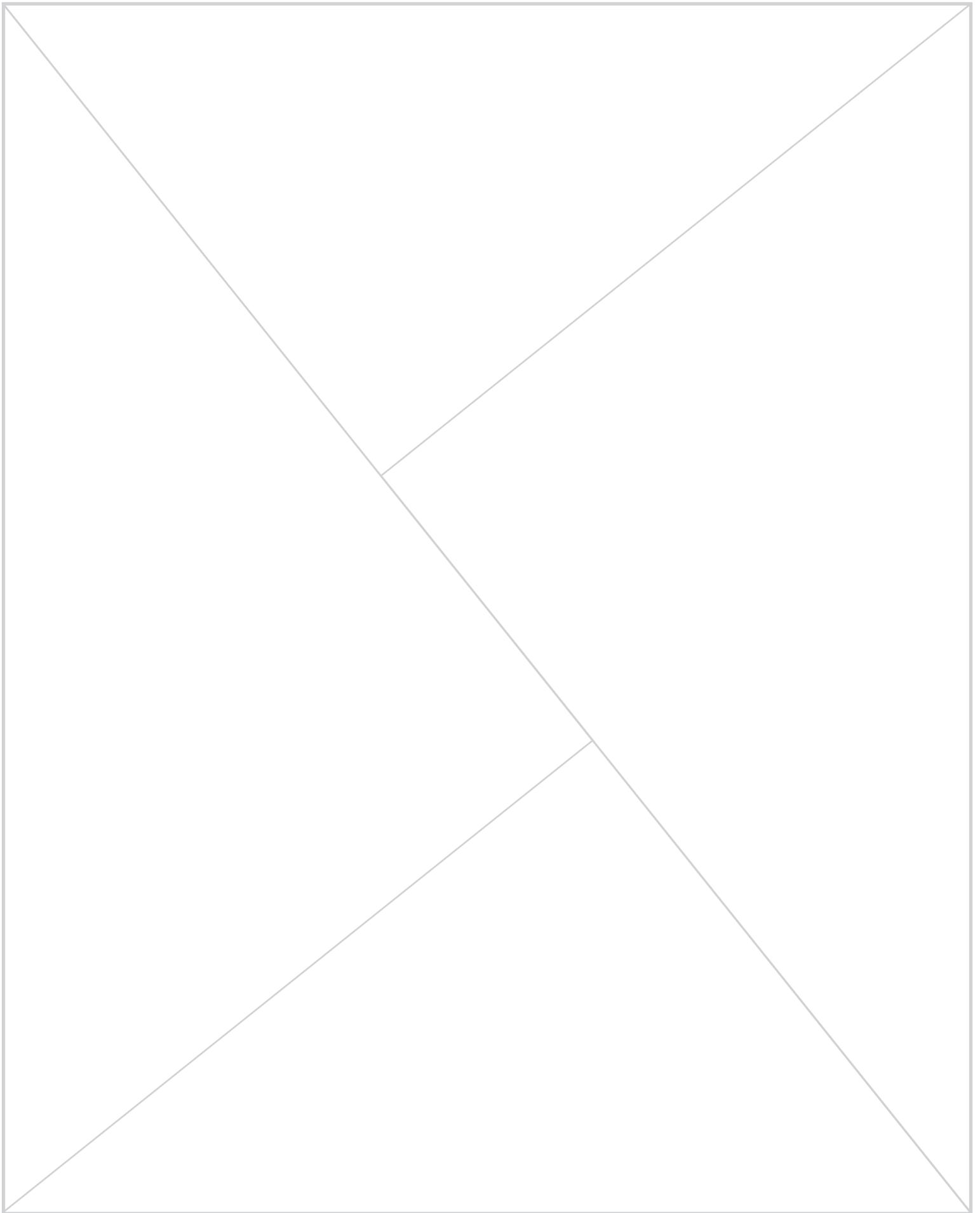
Golden Triangle 7" x 10"



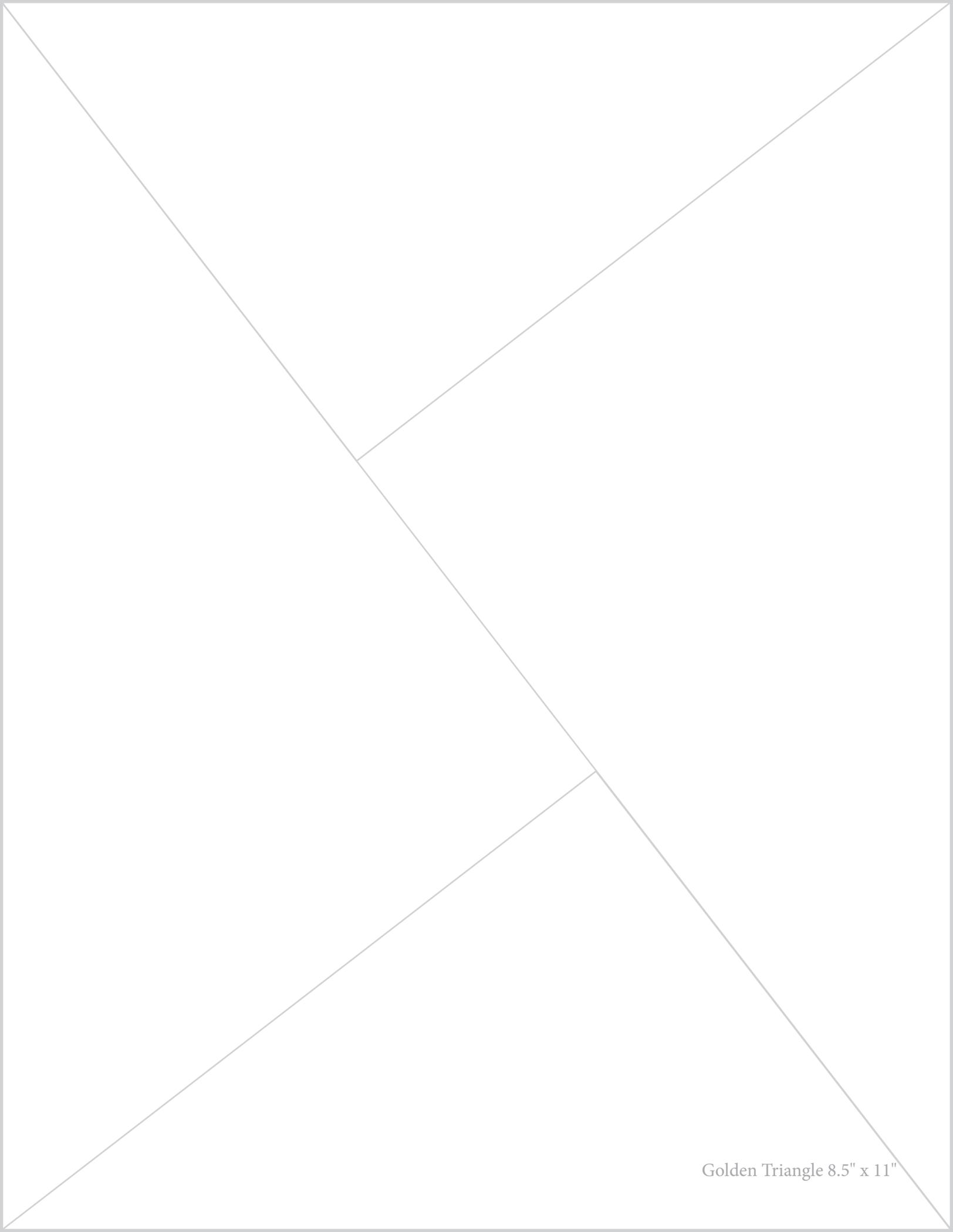
Golden Triangle 7" x 10" - reverse slant



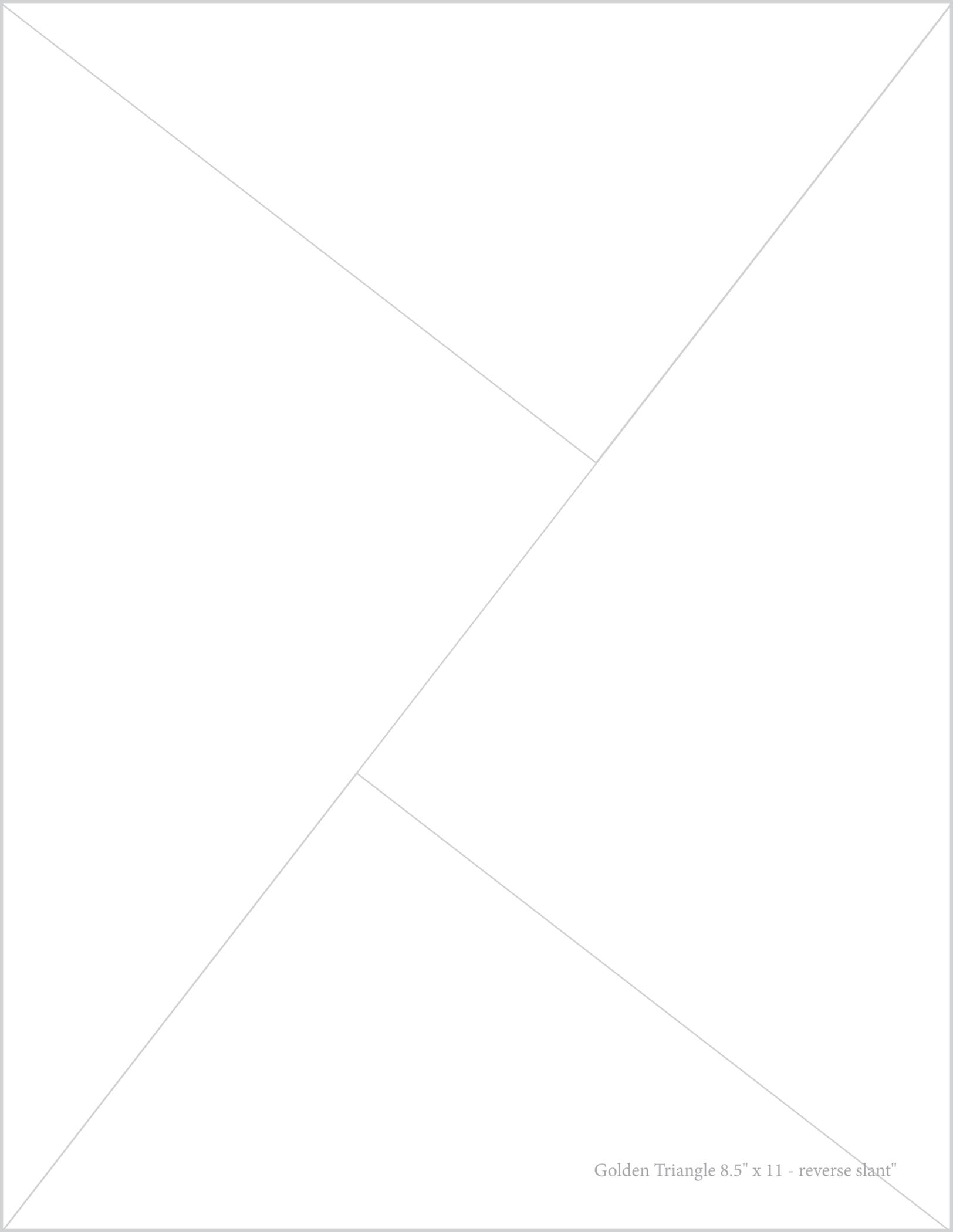
Golden Triangle 8" x 10"



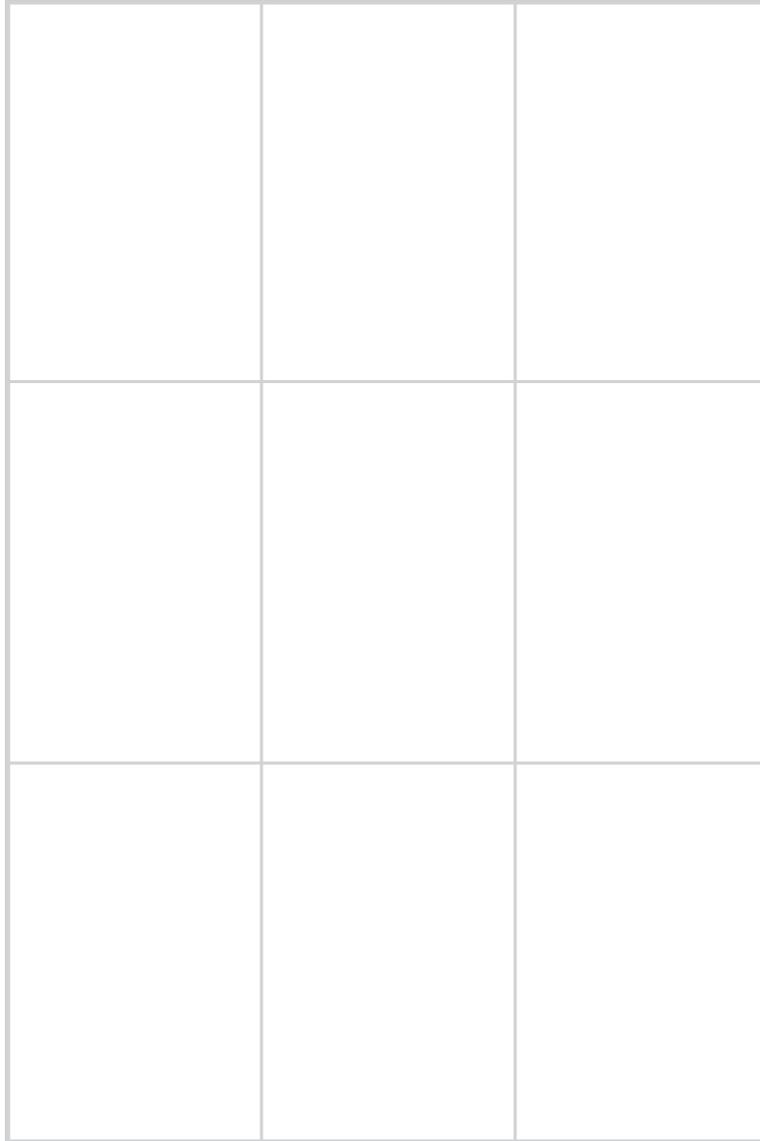
Golden Triangle 8" x 10" - reverse slant



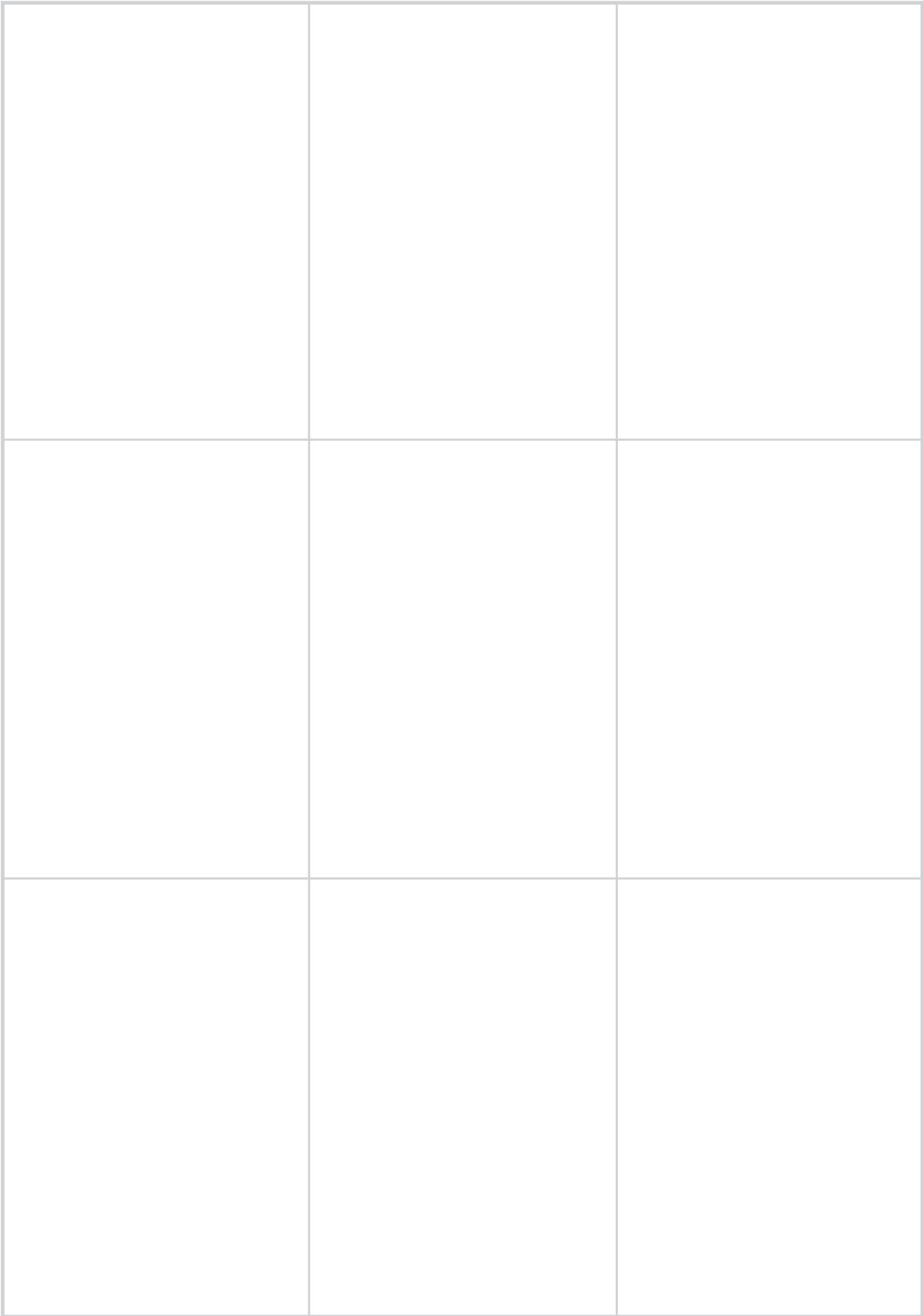
Golden Triangle 8.5" x 11"

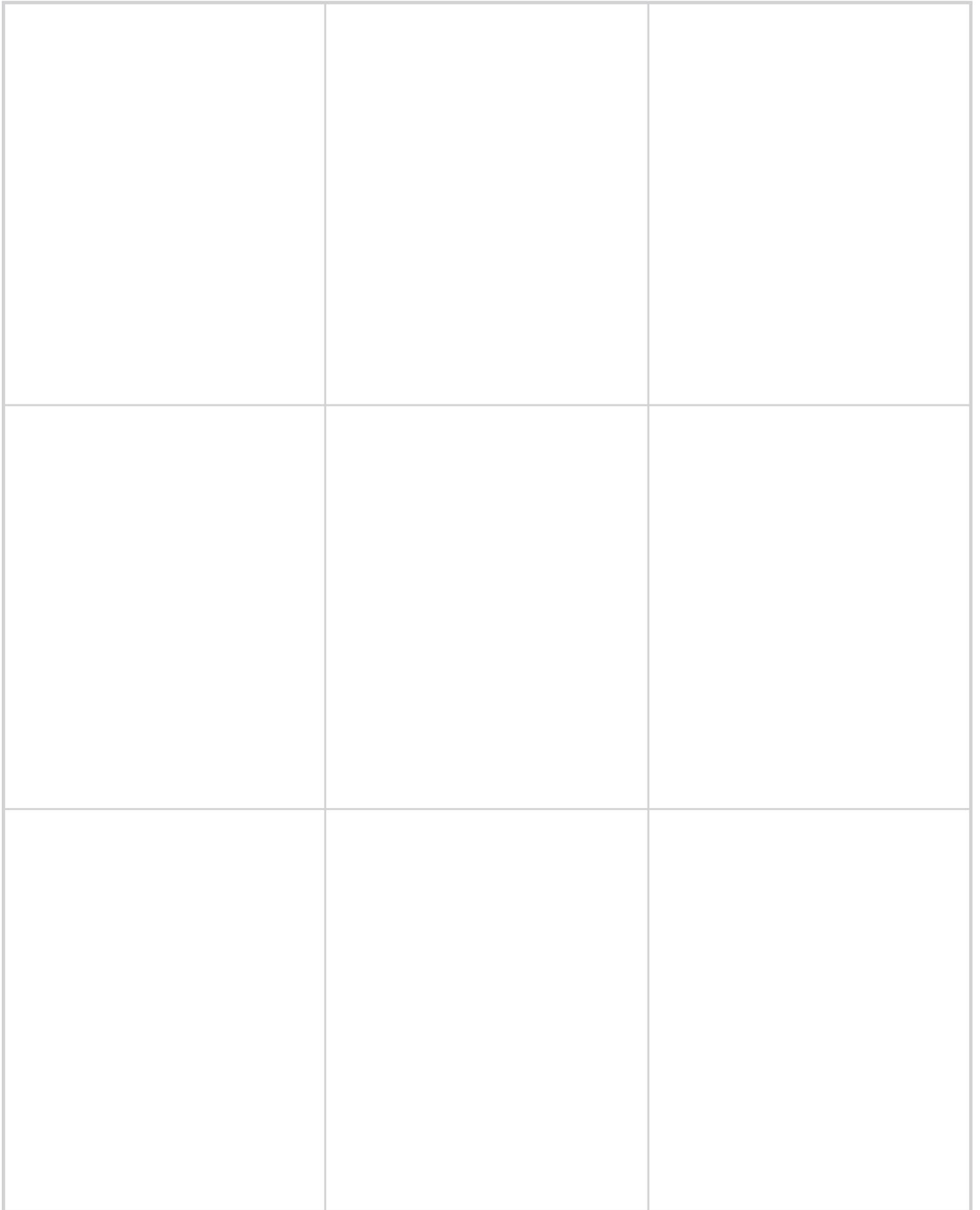


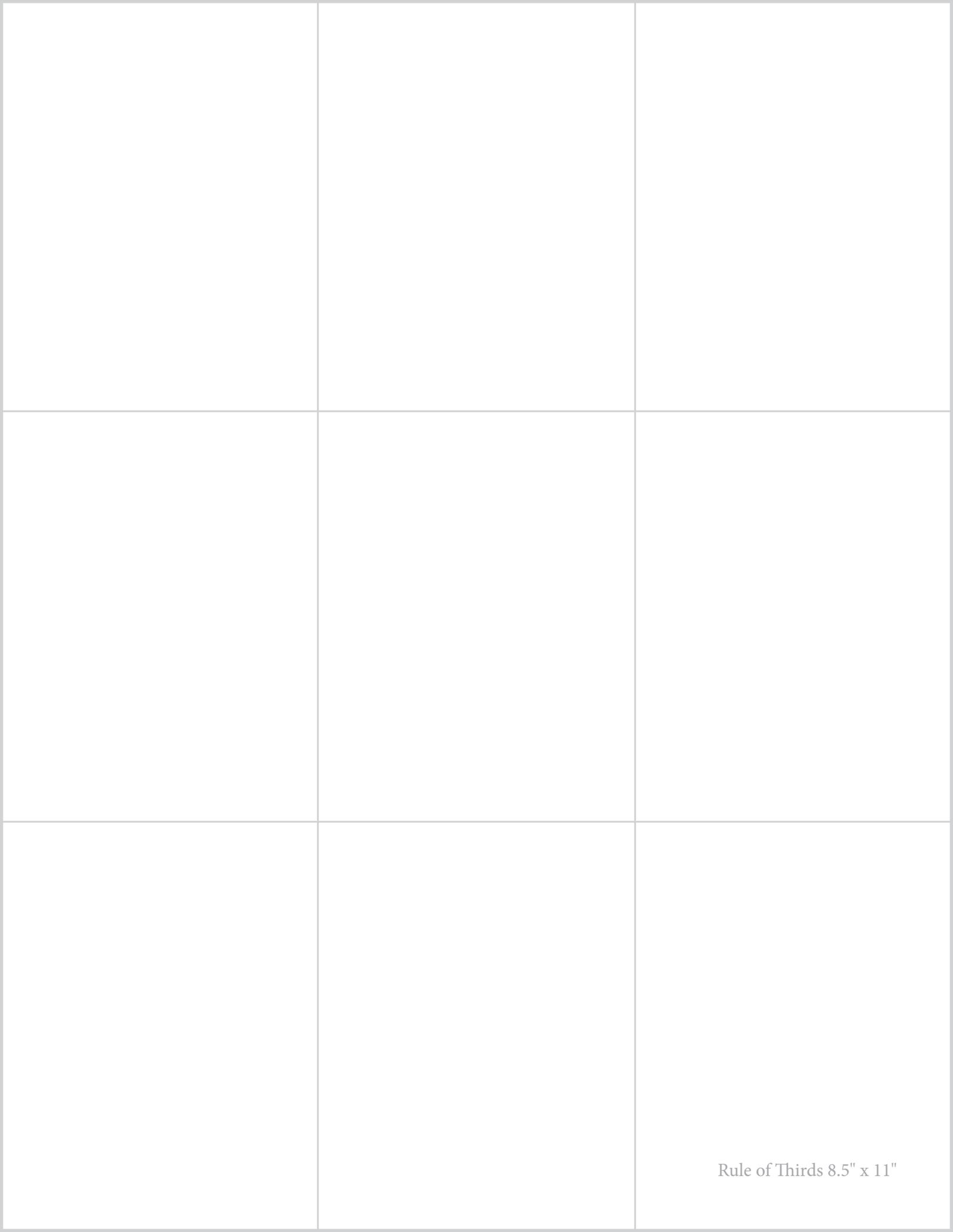
Golden Triangle 8.5" x 11 - reverse slant"

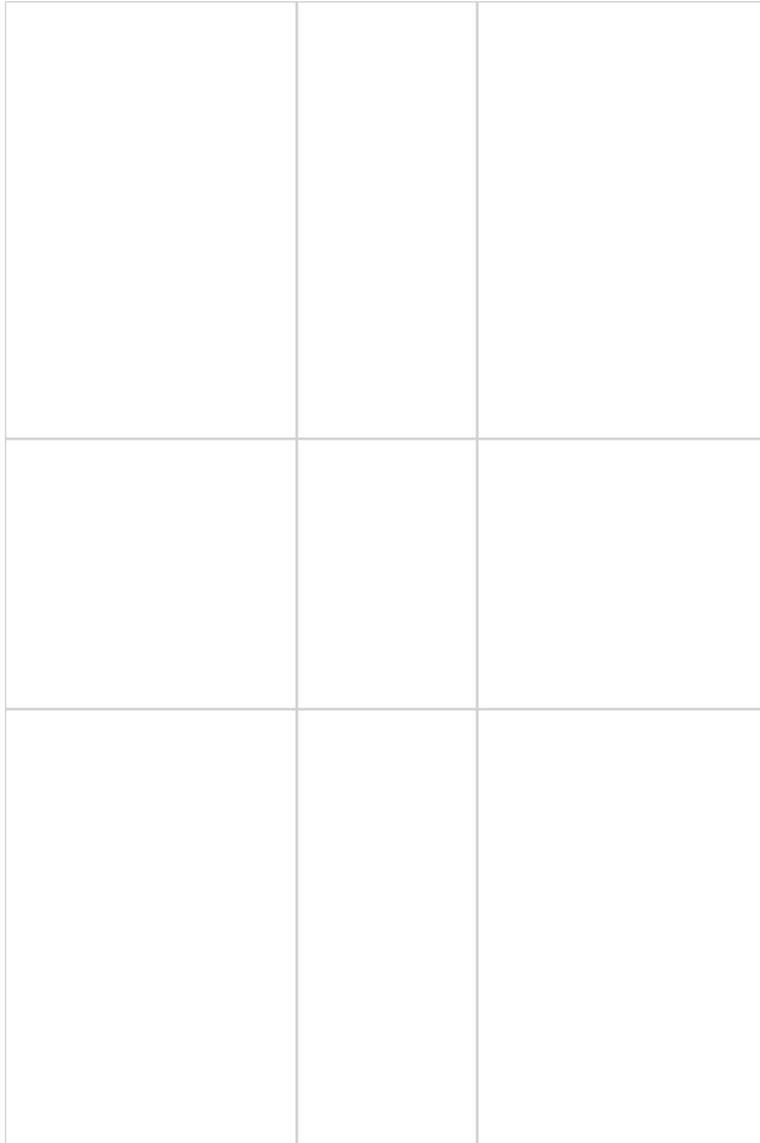


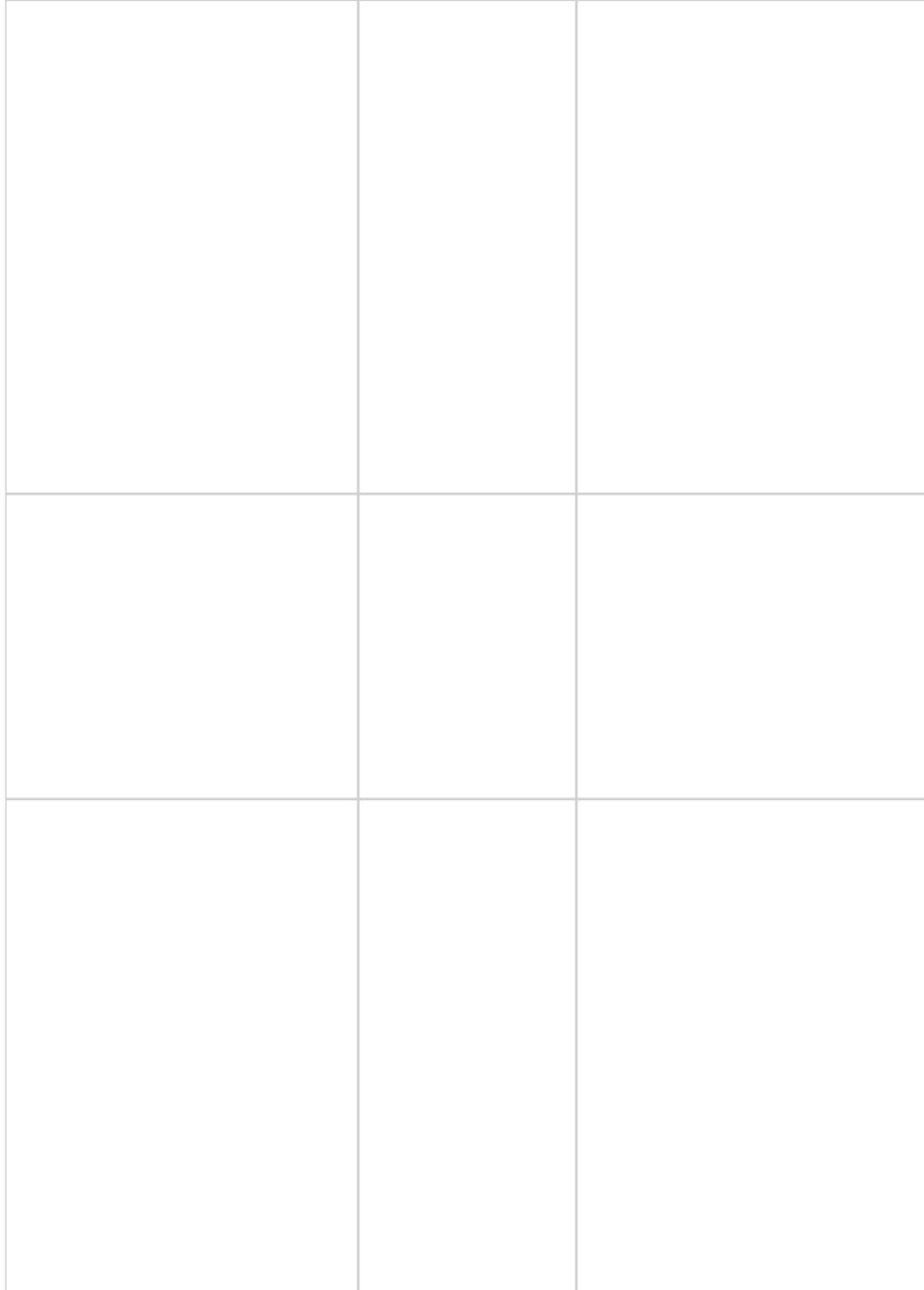


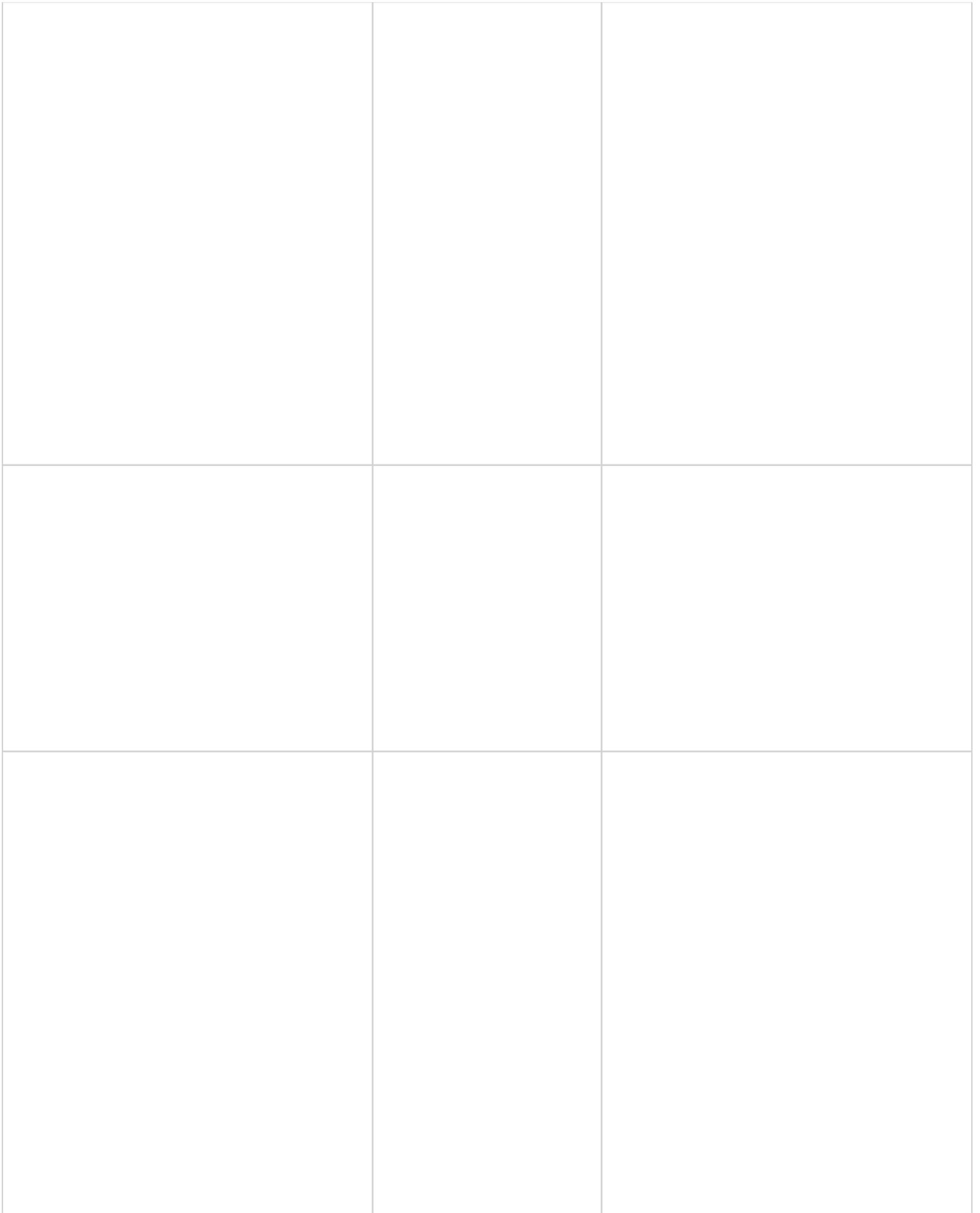


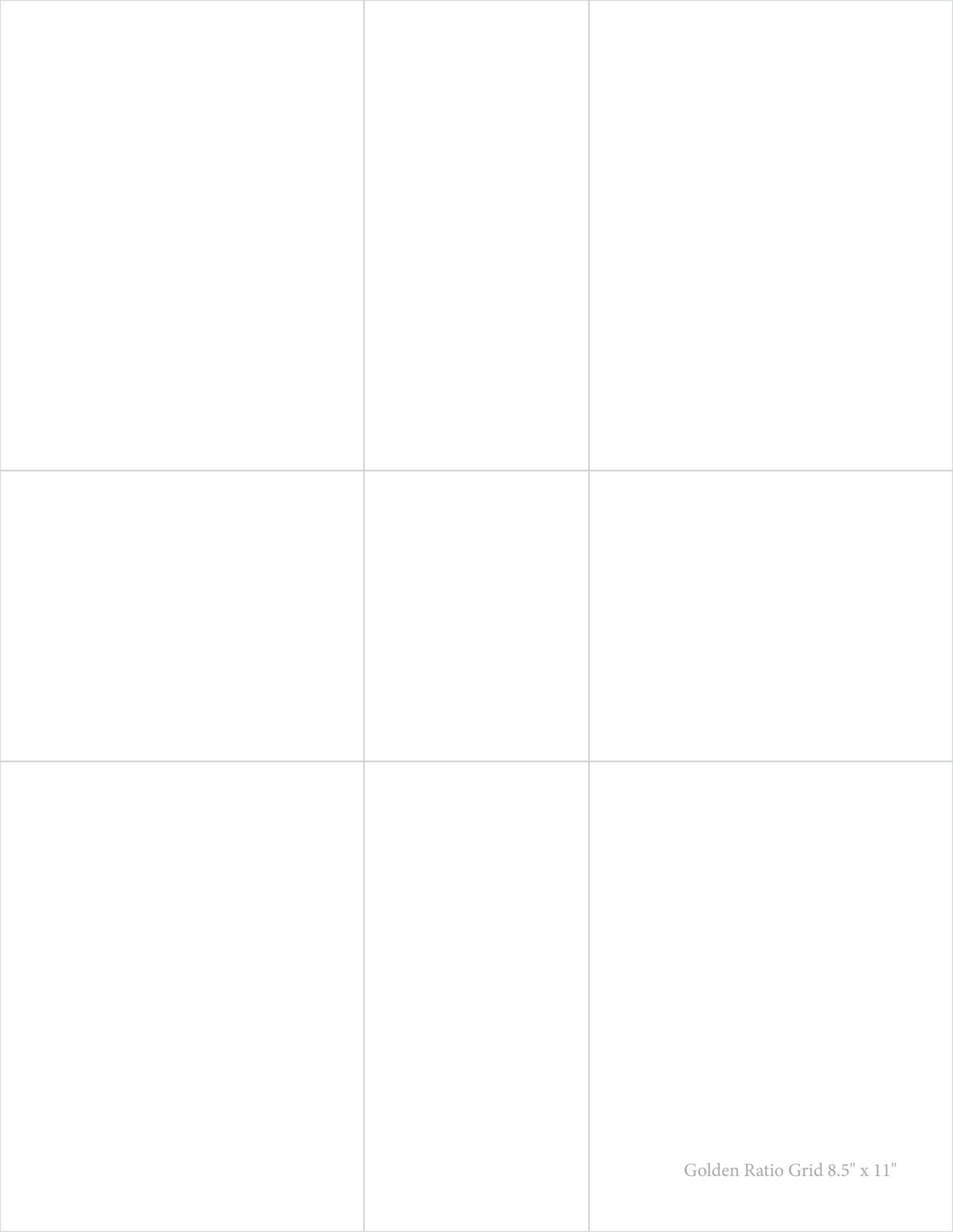


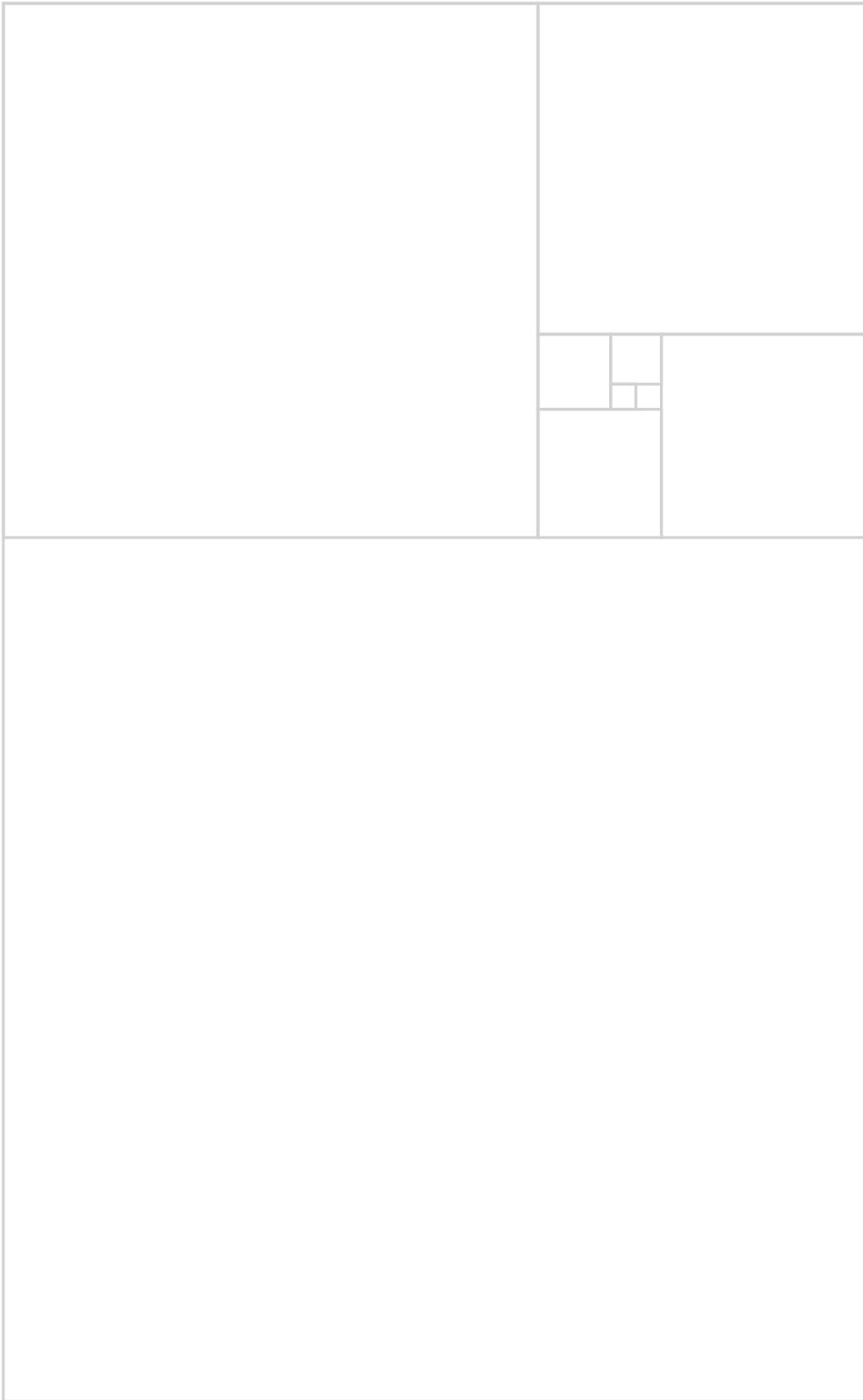


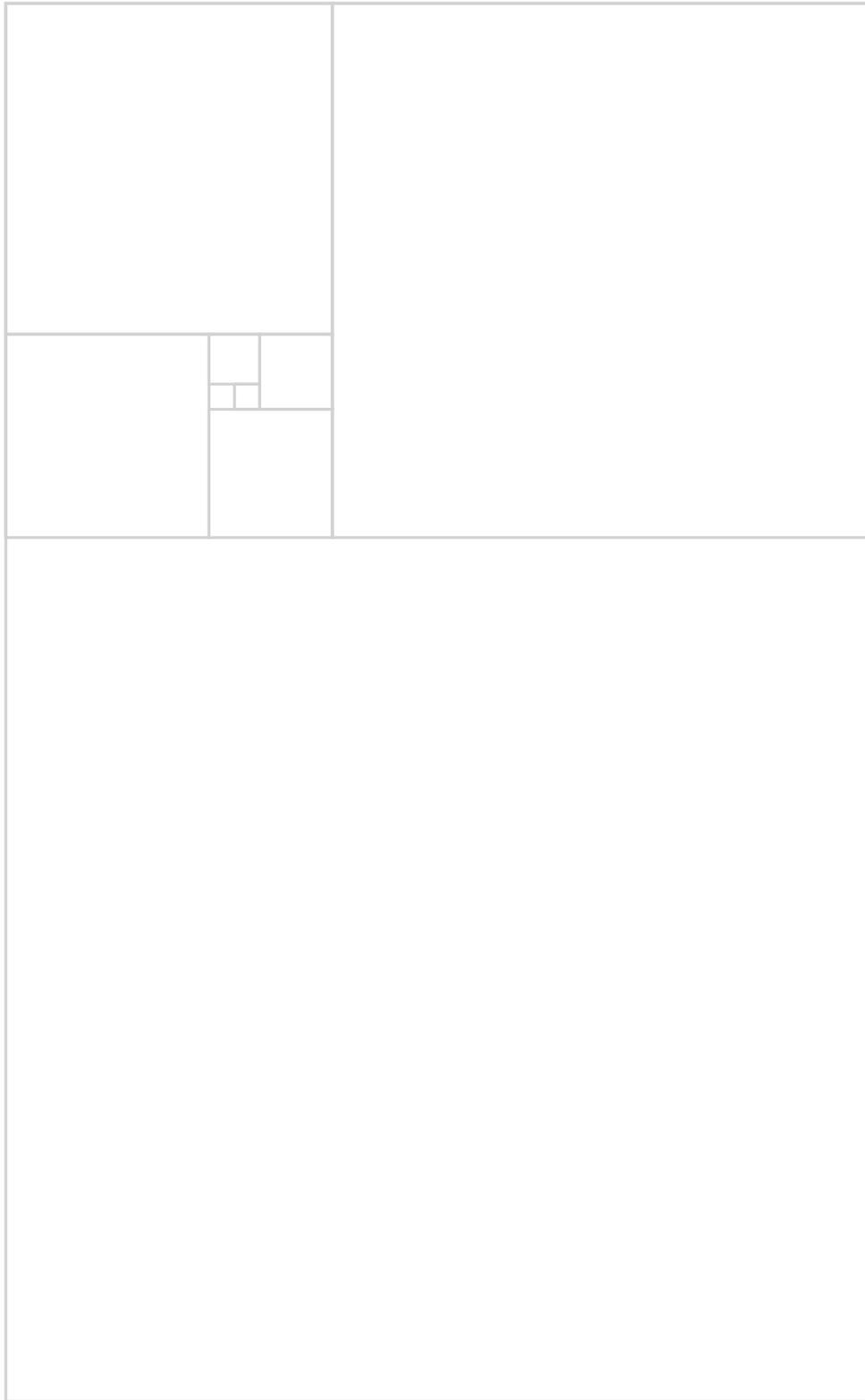


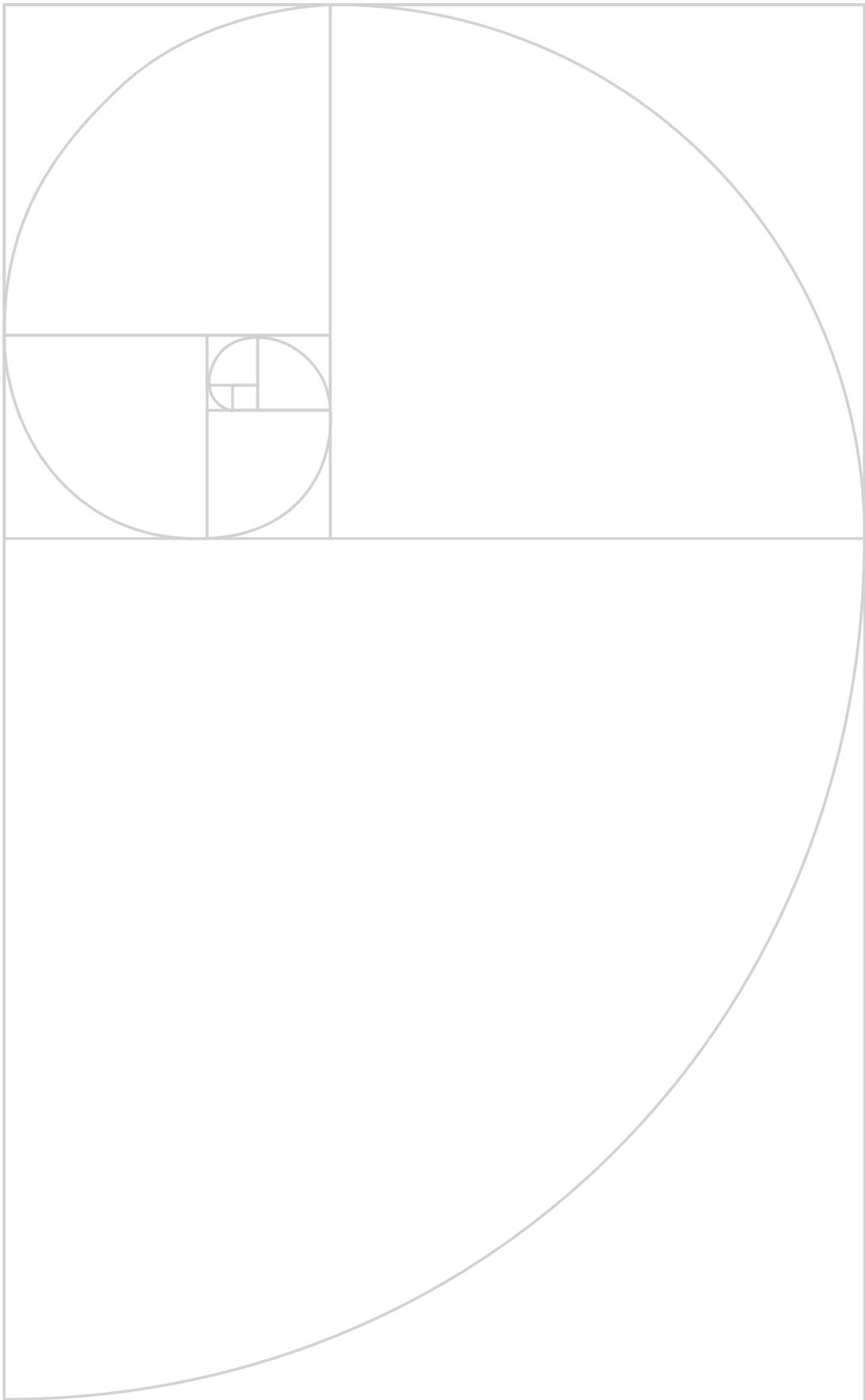




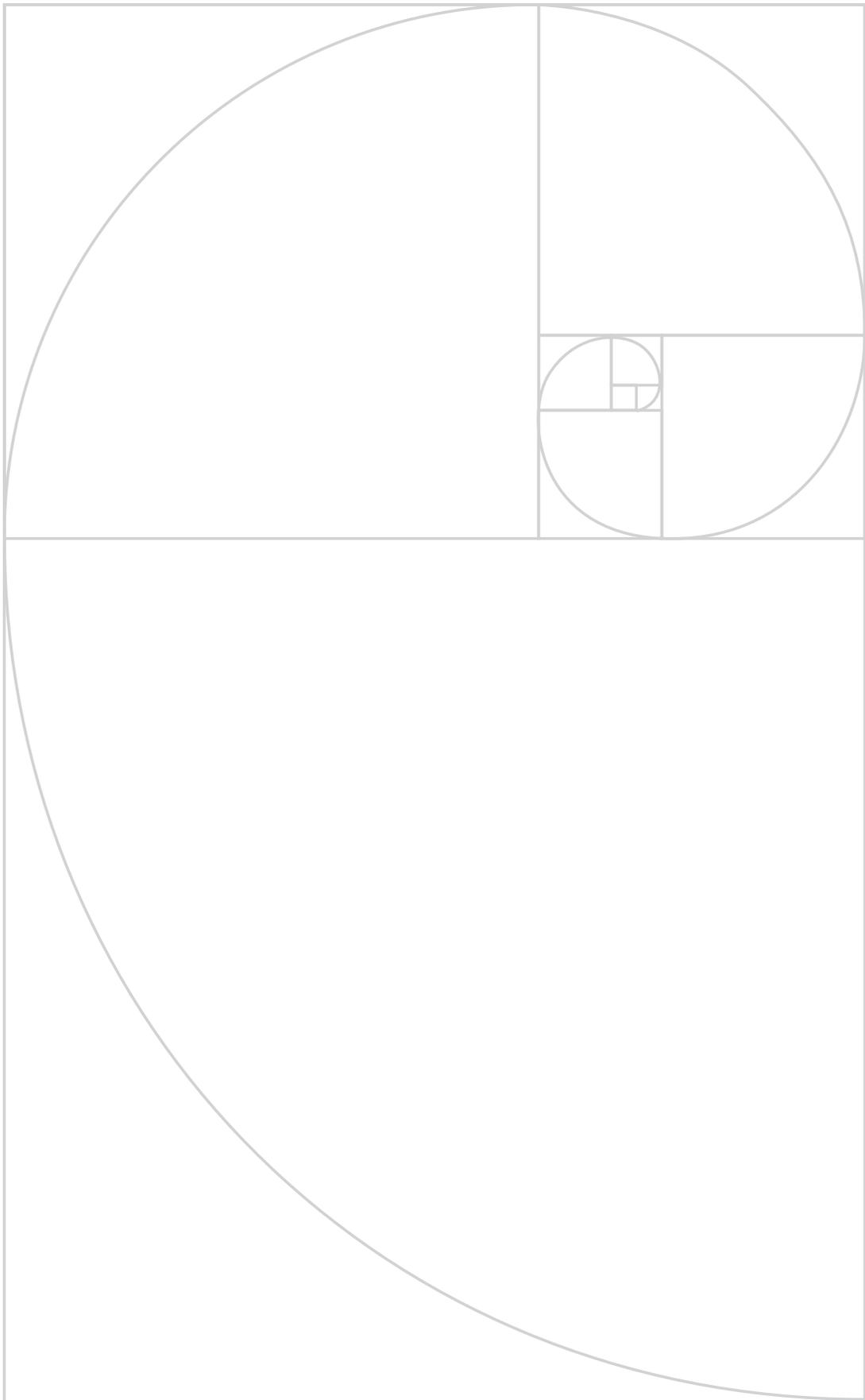




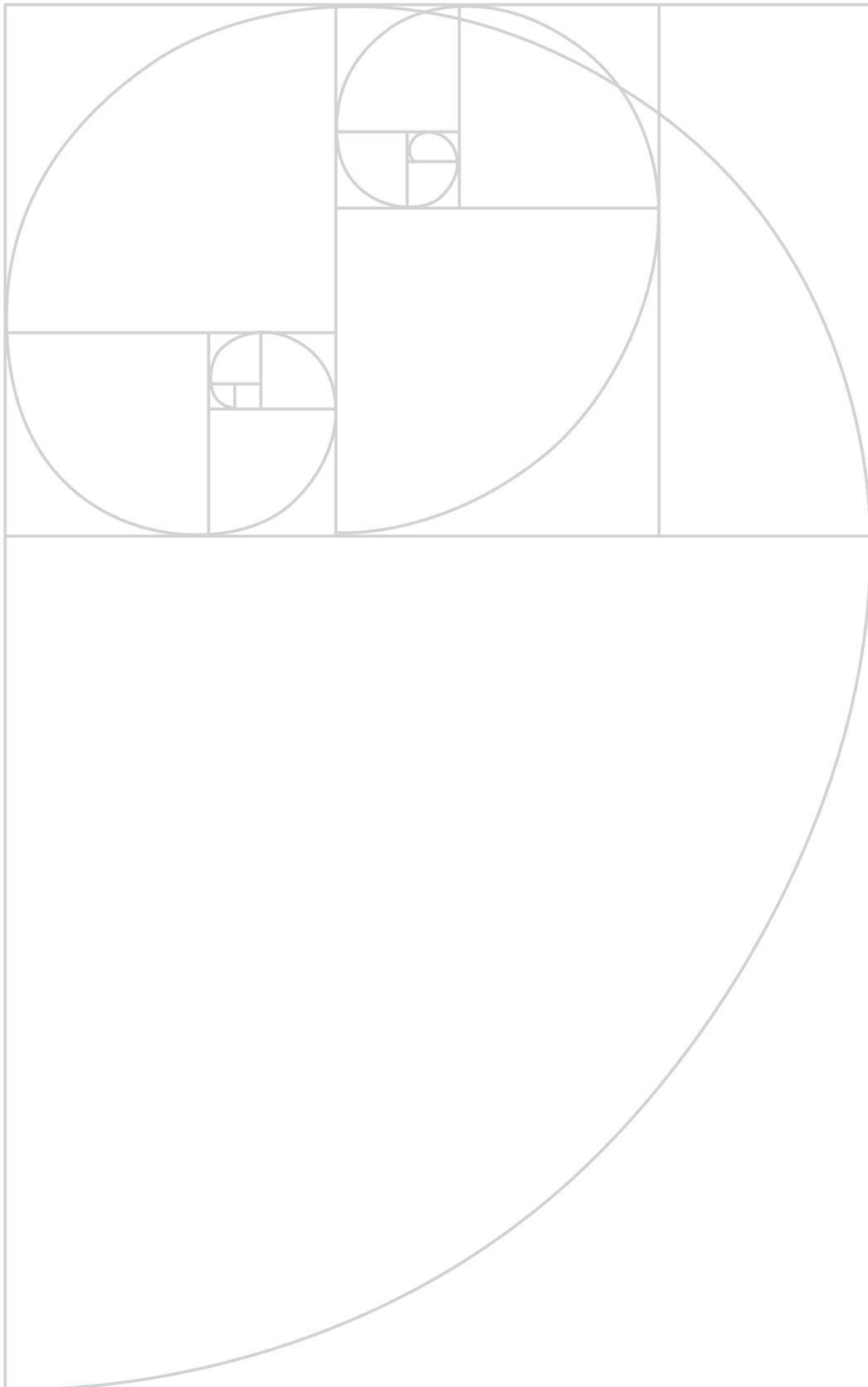




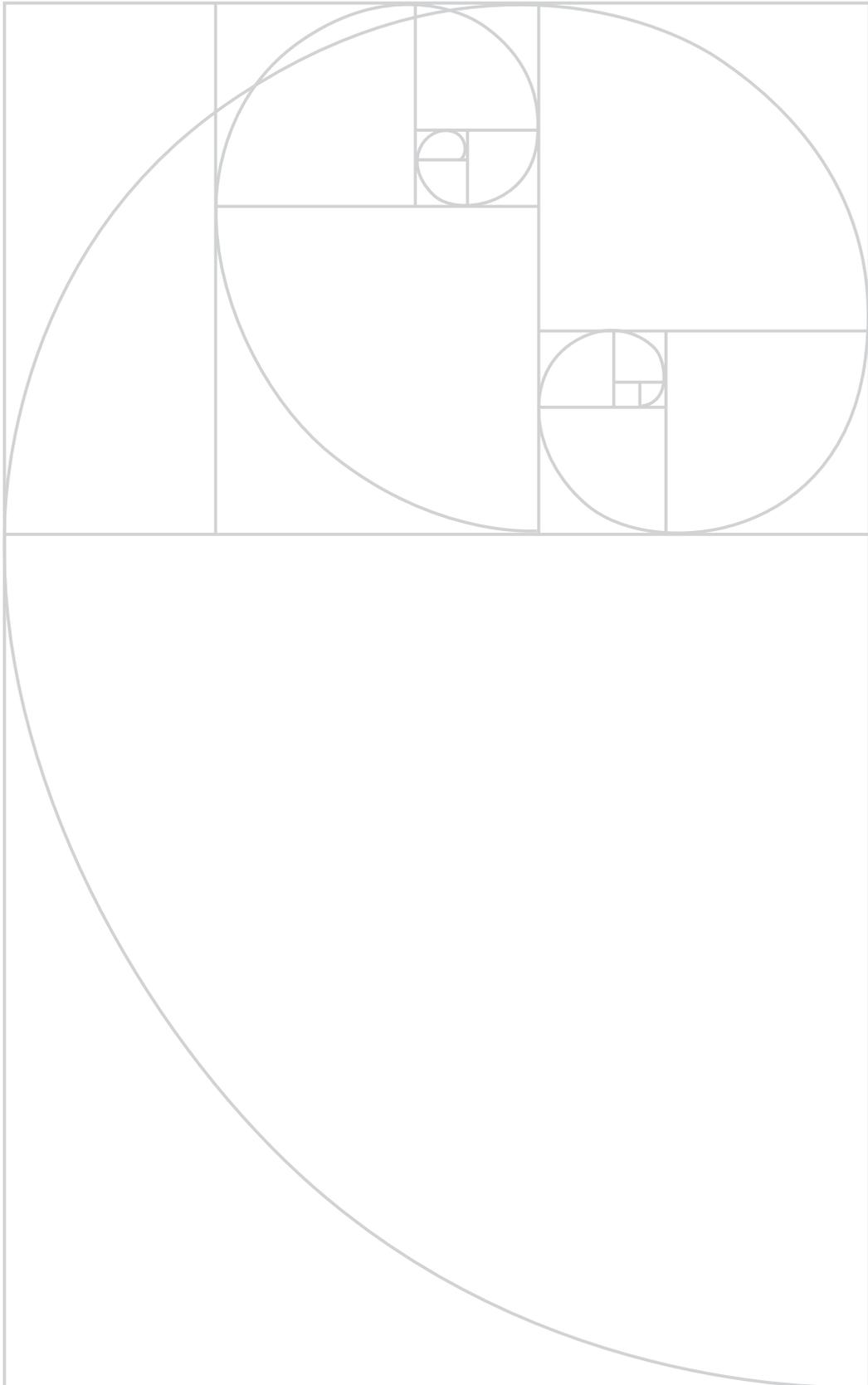
Golden Spiral - print at size needed



Golden Spiral - reversed - print at size needed



Double Golden Spiral - print at size needed



Double Golden Spiral - reversed - print at size needed