



Composition Basics

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Introduction

Learning the basics of composition will improve your photography faster than any other skill you can learn. A pleasing photo will always have a purposeful and well-thought-out composition. Good composition takes planning and being aware of compositional elements as presented here. These elements are not to be considered rules, only as guides. A photo may have a combination of several elements or just one. In all cases, good composition is paired with appropriate focus and attention to lighting (proper exposure) which are not covered in this guide, but are covered in other materials offered on our website.

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Photography Composition Basics

Composition is essentially an art form. It is the way you frame or arrange an image and it is critical to the outcome – whether that image is just good or great! A set of rules for good composition exists, yet it is still at best subjective, and great photographic images break these rules all the time. The best advice is to know the rules, so then you are aware when you are breaking a rule and can decide if that will, in fact, make your image better. Aside from the “rules” there are a couple of general photography guidelines that will also help you.



Photography Composition Basics

Let's start with those...

First, know how to properly hold your camera by using the grip with one hand and support under the camera with the other hand. You can have perfect composition and still have blur if you don't hold your camera correctly. Even better, use a tripod. Many people believe that using a tripod will "mess up" their freedom and limit their creativity. I find the opposite to be true. Using a tripod forces you to slow down and think about positioning (which is critical to several of the composition rules). Where should the tripod go? Closer? Should I lower the height? Should I raise it? Should I rotate the entire setup to shoot from a different side? Should I rotate the camera from landscape to portrait? The worst thing you can do is always shoot in the same mode from the same distance using the same orientation! If your camera has a zoom lens or interchangeable lens system then slowing down also forces you to think about those options. In my experience, I am more apt to play with camera settings when I am on a tripod as well.

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“A good photograph is knowing where to stand.” -- Ansel Adams

Second, learn to see what the camera actually sees. Look through the viewfinder (preferable to an LCD screen in my opinion). Don't just look for the subject. Look at everything else. Look for distractions you don't want to see in the photo like wires, cars, poles, or really bright light sources that could create flares or exposure issues.

Good composition emphasizes the subject. If other aspects of the photo compete for attention, then that is not good.

Also, remember, that when you look out at the world, your eyes are much more powerful and capable of more impressive color ranges and light ranges than even the most expensive camera sensors. You will not always be able to capture what you see in your camera – and that is okay! Know when to capture the memory instead.



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Third, understand the basics of lighting and your camera modes (including the “exposure triangle”). Automatic shooting modes will have a difficult time capturing your “vision” so you will need to know how to use Manual mode or other modes based on shutter speed and aperture. Read a few articles or tutorials about the best times of day for lighting your specific subject and try to practice during those times (for example, many portrait photographers use the hours just before sunset, known as the golden hour). As a general rule, avoid harsh sunlight which can create large shadows and washed-out colors.

Okay, so with those three basics plus your passion for photography, you are ready to learn composition. The elements of composition will not all be present at all times in every shooting scenario, even in controlled studio environments. Use what you have available for each image.

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Pay Attention to Form, Patterns, and Textures

What you are photographing has 3 dimensions, yet we are putting it into a 2-dimensional product. Move around your subject so that the form shows clearly. Side light (early morning or later afternoon and evening) provides shadows that help show form. Look for patterns – the row of slats in a picket fence for example. Then look for breaks in the pattern. Patterns appear in many man-made objects and places, but they exist in nature as well. Examine the textures of what you are photographing. The material that something is made of will have a texture, whether that be rough or smooth. Nature has textures too, like the bark of a tree. Using forms, patterns, and textures will give your images depth, which is a good thing!

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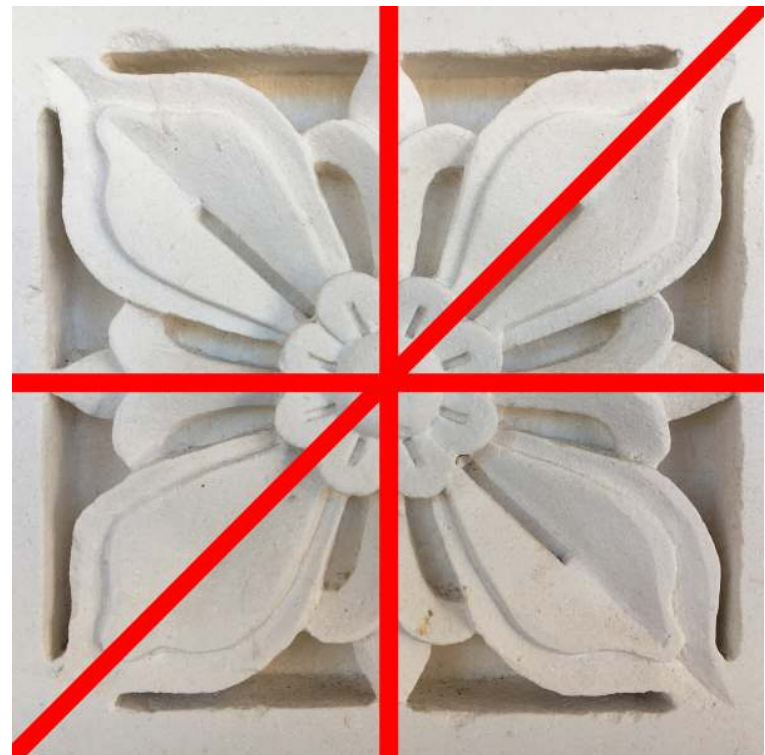


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Look for Balance (Symmetry vs. Asymmetry)

A good photographic composition has balance. The image does not feel “weighted” to one side. Portrait photographers balance their photos when they arrange groups of people. Symmetry creates balance because the photograph will have basically the same or very similar scenes on both halves of the image. Lines of symmetry can be horizontal, vertical, or even diagonal (see diagram below).

Asymmetric photos will still have a balance, but the scenes will be of different subjects. The balance is created by the size of objects, their distance, and their color. Darker objects in the front of an image are “heavier” than lighter-colored objects in the background. Examine your image, before you snap it, through the viewfinder and check for good balance.



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Visually Check for Lines, Curves, and Frames

This is where the most famous photography rule comes into play – The Rule of Thirds. The rule of thirds means to imagine lines dividing the image into thirds, both horizontally and vertically. Then place important aspects of your subject on those lines and their intersections. However, the Rule of Thirds lines are not the only lines to think about. In landscape photography, the horizon is also an important line! Lines are not always straight. Sometimes they are curved.

Think about those beautiful scenic photos with the curving roads through the mountains. The most famous curved line that occurs in nature is the Fibonacci sequence. Some post-production editing programs offer overlays of different types of lines and patterns so you can find one that works for your images.



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Lines of any type, whether straight or curved lead our eyes. These types of lines are also known as “leading lines.” They force our eyes to move around the image. The curved (or straight) path through the forest leads our eyes through the forest.

When lines converge or surround a subject, they create what are known as frames.



Frames can be man-made, like windows or doorways, or natural like a stone arch or tree trunks. Use the lines and curves in your image to emphasize the subject. If the lines and curves are all over the place, try a different position. Make sure tree trunks are not “growing” out of people’s heads!

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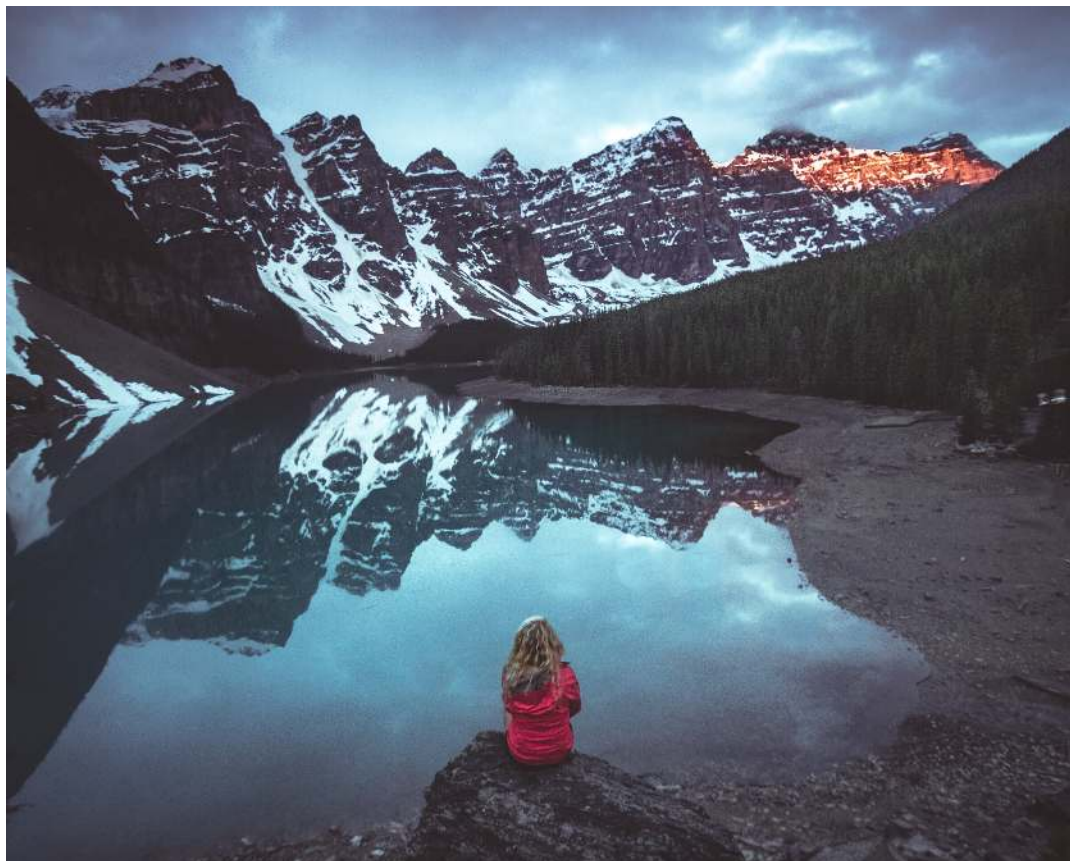
Find Opportunities to Use Contrast, Color, and Shapes

Visual contrast can really increase the excitement in your images. Visual contrast can be based on light versus dark (using color or black and white). Look for areas in the image that are light versus those areas that are in shadow. Try experimenting with silhouettes, or a portrait of a person standing at a window. Consider the same for color, or tonal contrast. Are there areas of light color that are in contrast with areas of darker colors?



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Contrast can also be used with shapes. Clouds, the sun, and the moon are often photographed as shapes in contrast to their surroundings. Rock formations are also popular shapes that contrast with their surroundings. Size can also provide visual contrast in an image. Small objects next to larger objects really show scale and can inspire awe!



Check Your Viewpoint

One of the most overlooked ways to improve composition is to simply change your viewpoint. Get down lower! Go up higher! Rotate around for a different angle! Actually getting down on the ground to shoot a small subject or to shoot up at larger objects can provide fascinating new perspectives.



This is sometimes called “worm’s eye view.” For the photo shown here, I was literally on my belly in the mud to get this shot.

Getting above and shooting down can do the same! So go higher. This is sometimes called “bird’s eye view.” Drone photography is a very popular new form of changing your viewpoint; however, consider ways to get to higher ground without a drone.

Consider the Space (Negative vs. Filled and Foreground vs. Background)

Look through that viewfinder again. Locate your main subject and then check the background. What is behind it? Is it distracting? Are there telephone wires? Bright colors that compete for attention? Then do the same for the foreground. What is immediately in front of your subject? Does it attract our eyes away from the subject? Think of the background, foreground, and your subject (mid-ground) in a way similar to the rule of thirds. Only this time instead of using the concept as lines for focusing attention, think of the areas as the three-dimensional spaces that they are.

The foreground is the distance from the camera to the subject and the background is the distance from the subject to the vanishing point or horizon. These are not necessarily equal thirds. We want to use these spaces to show the viewer the dimensionality of our image.

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Photographic prints basically compress the image into 2D so we need our subject to appear 3D. Therefore, the foreground and background should not be completely empty. Something needs to be there, even if the background is indistinguishable because it is blurred out with shallow depth of field (discussed in the next section). Whatever we use in the background and foreground should not be distracting, as already discussed above.

Decide which part of your image is the main focal point. An image should have only one main focal point or "hero." Everything else in the photo should be there to support the "hero" and make that focal point stand out.



If aspects of the image detract from the "hero" then do something to modify the composition (you move, move the subject, or remove the distraction). Manipulating the depth of field is one way we can remove distractions from the foreground and background (see Depth of Field in the next section).

Use Appropriate Depth of Field

Depth of Field is a tricky concept because you will have to understand your lens focal lengths and aperture settings. You may need to do some additional reading on these concepts. We offer a guide to the basics of aperture, ISO, and shutter speed on our website. You will hear photographers talk about shallow or narrow depth of field and deep or greater depth of field. Depth of field is, in a nutshell, how much of your image is in focus. In a landscape scene, you would need everything, from front to back, all in focus. This means you want a deep or greater depth of field. You will need narrow (higher number) aperture settings to accomplish this. For a portrait, or picture of a single flower, you would want your subject in focus, but everything else to be blurred or softly focused which is a shallow depth of field. Wider (lower number) aperture settings are used to accomplish this.

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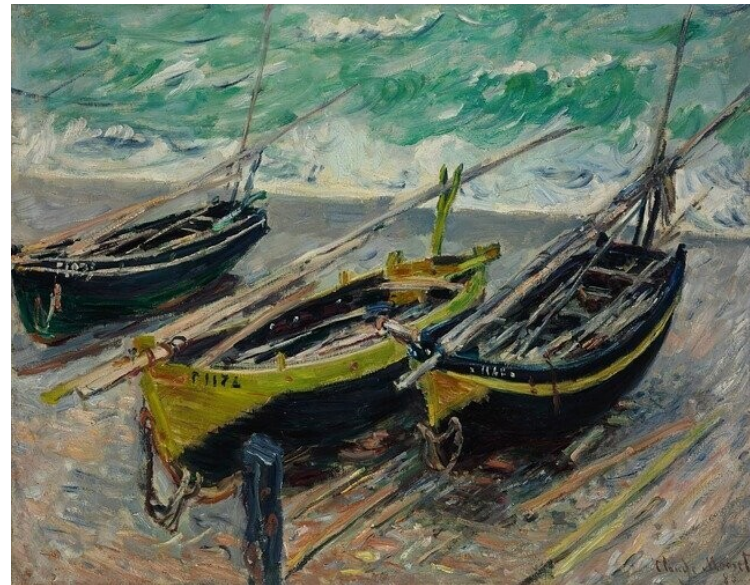


Depth of field is an important compositional tool because you determine what the viewer will look at by deciding what areas will be in focus. The brain naturally tends to ignore areas that are out of focus and instead attends to the areas that are in focus. Decide which level of depth you need before you shoot and then experiment with different aperture settings. Try using aperture priority mode on your camera and photograph the same person or subject at $f/5.6$ (or lower if your lens allows), $f/11$, and $f/22$ (or its highest setting) and see how the focus range changes.

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One final tip... Study the Masters

Most of the compositional elements in photography were developed in the art world of painters. These experts have given us hundreds of years of examples of compositional techniques that make people want to stare at paintings for hours and wait in long lines to see them. They use the same techniques of leading lines, repetition of patterns, symmetry and balance, curves, and contrasts to make their works feel three-dimensional and compelling.



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Fortunately, composition techniques can be learned! Great composition takes observation, patience, and practice, but most importantly, can be accomplished no matter what level of photographer you are or which equipment you use. That's the fantastic part of photography, anyone can get a prize-winning photo!

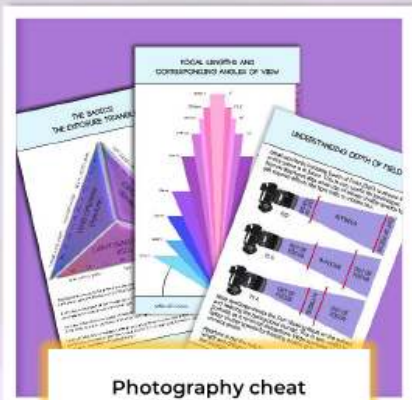




Mega Pixel our Superhero Mascot!

You finished this guide! You're awesome!

You know what else is awesome? These additional photography resources to help you along your photography journey!



Photography cheat sheets help you understand the basics



Guides and tutorials covering many popular photography topics



Photography courses and workshops for many genres and all skill levels



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About the Author

Cheryl Ritzel, founder of FocusEd Camera, is an esteemed instructional coach. Her exceptional talents have garnered recognition and accolades throughout her career. Cheryl's company and her remarkable work have been featured in prestigious publications such as ICM Magazine, Business Insider, Dogster, Spectrum News, and Yahoo News, and on the social media channels of Lensbaby, Canon, and Adaptalux.



Learning the Basics of Composition...

...will improve your photography faster and more easily than any other skill you can learn in photography. All good photos have three things in common:

1. Well thought out composition
2. Attention to light (exposure)
3. Appropriate focus

Using the tips in this guide and taking time to practice daily will improve your photos by leaps and bounds.