

PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION

Today's cameras are very automated but won't compose the picture for you. A great camera won't magically make you a great photographer although that notion helps Nikon and Canon sell lots of cameras. The camera is simply the tool that captures the image and light you've composed.

You don't just take great pictures – you have to make them. One of the main reasons why some pictures are more outstanding than others is because of their strong composition.

A picture is a playground for your eyes to wander and investigate plus space for them to rest and relax. Our eyes instinctively find light, bright areas, lines, patterns and look for people, particularly their eyes and mouth.

Some snapshots may turn out to have good composition, but most good pictures are created. How do you create a picture? Simply taking the time to think about good composition will result in higher quality pictures. Concentrate on creating a few good images vice a bunch of mediocre ones.

Follow the rules till you know to break them.

Visualize

Effective composition starts with visualizing what you want the picture to look like. If you pick a subject and point-n-shoot you'll typically end up with a mediocre image.

Start with identifying the subject and study it's environment to choose a viewpoint. Your subject is often what initially caught your attention but be open to selecting other subjects. Then visualize the elements that you want in the image then work to achieve that visualization.

As you visualize it's helpful to anticipate what might happen in a scene and wait for elements to fall into place. When you visualize think about how you would give the viewer a sense of being there.

You should learn to keep both eyes open when shooting vice closing one eye while looking through the viewfinder. This will help you be conscious of the surroundings so you can shoot when the time is right. This will eliminate shooting a picture just as someone enters a scene. The contrary is also helpful if you want to include a particular person, birds, the sun, traffic, clouds or any other object that is moving into your composition.

Once you shoot your image explore further to find another viewpoint that would show the subject in a different light or from a different perspective.

Composition is like assembling a puzzle. There are multiple ways to do it. The guidelines below will help with assembling your composition. Eventually you'll do this automatically. It comes with practice.

Simplicity

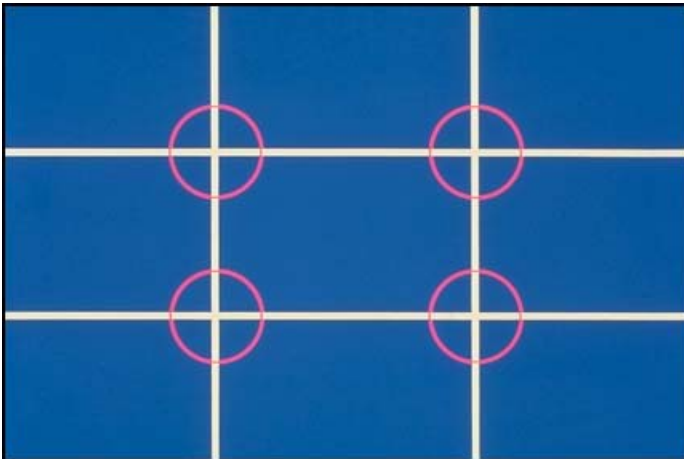
The first and perhaps the most important guideline is simplicity. Look for ways to give the center of interest in your pictures the most visual attention. One way is to select uncomplicated backgrounds that will not steal attention from your subjects. Avoid unrelated subjects or move in close to isolate the subject.

Compose your photograph so that your reason for taking the picture is clearly seen. Arrange other parts of the picture area in such a way as to complement what you choose to be the center of interest.

Pay attention to detail in the frame for distracting elements particularly at the edges. You can recompose to remove the distracting element or hide it behind another object. If the distracting element is trash you could perform community service by picking it up thus removing it from your composition!

Rule of Thirds

The rule of thirds is a guide for positioning the subject of interest in a picture. According to this rule, there are four preferred points to place the center of interest. The four points are shown below by dividing the frame into thirds horizontally and vertically. The intersection points are areas of strength within the frame.



Positioning a subject one third into frame can make for strong composition as long as there is balance throughout the rest of the picture.

If a subject depends on symmetry for effect then central position in the frame is best.

Generally, pictures with subjects directly in the center tend to be more static and less interesting than pictures with off-center subject placement. At least you should shoot off center. The exception to this is if the subject depends on symmetry then the central position in the frame is best.

It's usually best to place horizons off center, it's also best to place verticals off center.

Remember to keep your subject of interest in focus. This could require you to center the subject to lock focus then recompose for the desired composition.

Lines

You can use natural lines to provide a viewing path through the picture. It's a simple and easy path for the eye to follow to the main subject.

Lines will lead the viewer through the image – imagine yourself walking in through scene.

The composition can also draw the eye immediately to center of interest. The eye would then follow lines to explore rest of image.

Lines are everywhere such as fences, roads, trees, walkways, railroad tracks, etc.

Balance

Good balance is simply the arrangement of shapes, colors, or areas of light and dark that complement one another so that the photograph looks well-balanced.

Negative space (area with few details) helps the viewer absorb the rest of the image by allowing the eye to rest. Too much detail will confuse the viewer.

Natural Frames

Natural frames are created by surrounding the center of interest with objects in the foreground. This can give a picture the feeling of depth it needs to make it more than just another snapshot. You give a sense of being there. Some examples of natural frames are doorways, windows, trees or any other shape you can shoot through. The frame can be in or out of focus.

Avoid Mergers and Amputations

Mergers and amputations will draw attention away from your main subject. The human eye tends to notice these right away because they are unnatural.

The most common merger that you'll be familiar with is the object that can be growing out of someone's head if you're not careful with composition. Your eye can distinguish the depth of having the object in the distance but the picture you're taking is in two dimensions.

Amputations occur when a person is at the edge of a frame. The amputation can be at the feet, arms, or even the head. Beware of this and try to avoid it. The most common amputation is the feet when taking pictures of people. Either recompose to include the entire body or zoom in to make it a shot from the waist up.

Moving Subjects

You should always consider the path of moving subjects and, generally, leave space in front of them into which they can move. If they are moving out of frame the viewer will be left with wondering where it's going... what's beyond the edge of the picture.

Patterns

Repeating patterns can often give more impact to an image. A reflected image of your subject is one type of repetition. Look for patterns of shape, form, line and color.

People in the scene

People or other objects of known size add scale to the scene.

People literally add life to a scene.

I try to have only locals in the image if possible. I sometimes have to wait for the 'ugly' tourists who are detracting from the scene to move out of the frame.

Other Points

Remember that your camera can be turned vertically!

Taboos to Avoid

Don't put your horizon in the middle of the image unless there is a mirror reflection or other symmetry you're trying to maintain.

Don't put your subject in the center of the image unless it's a portrait. Always shoot with the subject off-center if possible.

Keep your horizon level! There's no better way to ruin a seascape than to have the water at the horizon sloped to one side or the other.

By Doug Mann

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