

## FOCAL POINT ISSUES

### **Part 1: Hierarchy of Focal Points**

Your image may have issues if the main focal point does not stand out as the most attractive area of the image, or if there are other areas of the image that are equally attractive creating a competition for attention. While the terms 'focal point' and 'center of interest' are used interchangeably, they are not exactly the same. The 'focal point' refers to small areas of light or intense color that stand out or 'pop' more than anything else in the composition, while the 'area of interest' is larger and includes not only the focal point, but the area around the focal point that provides the contrast. **You can have more than one focal point and center of interest in each image, but you should have only one main focal point and center of interest, with all other attractive areas being subordinate or less attractive by degrees.** In other words, like everything else in your image, there should be a hierarchy of dominance.

**The three most powerful eye magnets in photography are 1) sharpest focus 2) value contrast, and 3) intensity contrast. We can use these tools to strengthen or subdue a focal point as needed.** You may need none of them or all three of them to strengthen or subdue a focal point.

The *focal point* begins with the *focus point* that you place your *focus square* on just before you press the shutter release button. The *focus point* becomes the *focal point* of your image when you sit down to edit the image in post processing. The camera gives the *focus point* more **sharpness** than the rest of the image, but you can add further **sharpening** through a variety of post processing tools. We won't discuss sharp focus further in this lesson, because there are so many decisions to make regarding metering, Depth of Field, and enhancing focus in post processing. **Just remember it is a lot easier to blur sharp focus in post processing than it is to try to sharpen what is blurred.**

**Value contrast** and **Intensity contrast** are the most often used eye magnets in image editing because they nearly always trump all other contrasts. In fact, **value contrast** is your ace of spades, without which it would be impossible to create powerful black and white images, since all other color contrasts are eliminated.

Here is a quick review of the **value scale**, ...

<https://photographycourse.net/black-and-white-photography/>

...and the value scale combined with hue.

<https://lifeofadailypainter.com/2013/02/23/tips-for-better-paintings-value-scales/>

If you are not sure you understand color **intensity**, <https://forum.freecodecamp.org/t/the-basic-principles-of-web-design-the-colour-theory/324464> think of the CMYK 12-step color wheel. These are the purest, most intense colors you will ever see. When you start mixing a pure intense spectral color with another color, you start to de-intensify or dull the intense spectral color.

<https://scottnaismith.com/productcategory/resources/colour-wheel-for-artists/>

The more colors you mix into an intense color and the greater the quantity of those mixing colors, the less intense, duller, and grayer your original intense spectral color becomes, until it eventually loses its color identity and becomes a shade of gray somewhere close to neutral gray.

Watch the following Youtube: [Preview Mastering Composition with Ian Roberts](#). These demonstrations are oil paintings rather than photos, but the principle is the same. If you put **intensity contrast** and **value contrast** in areas other than in your focal point areas, you are going to drag the eye away from the focal

point. The viewer may never even see the focal point. If you would like to see more examples, refer to the DVD in the front cover of Ian Robert's book, Mastering Composition. (available in MCML library)

It is easy to prioritize areas of interest in an image. All you have to do is use your saturation slider locally to alter intensity and your exposure slider locally to alter value. Decide which focal point will be your main focal point, hopefully the one you focused on when you took the shot. A second area of interest should have less value and intensity contrast than the main focal point, and if you have a third focal point it should have subtlety less intensity and value contrast than the second, etc.

## **Part 2: Sky Holes**

One of the problems that sometimes distracts from the focal point in landscape photography is **sky holes**. Sooner or later both artists and photographers are confounded by a strong value contrast created by small areas of sky shining like spotlights through breaks in dark tree foliage creating competition with your focal point. These situations often occur in silhouette photography.

When the sun is overhead at high noon the zenith, which is the center of the dome of the sky directly overhead, is light because it is near the sun. The sky dome gradually darkens as it approaches the horizon line. It is just the opposite in early morning and late afternoon, which is the time when photographers are out shooting. The zenith is dark, and the sky gradually lightens the closer it gets to the horizon line. The sky can even appear white and luminous the closer you are to shooting into the sun. Whatever part of the land that extends above the horizon line, like trees, mountains, buildings, etc, will appear very dark, because they are turned away from the sun and in deep end-of-the-day shadow.

Sky holes are not always a problem. They can be if they are competing with your focal point, but they can also be used as the focal point, and they can be used effectively to create interest and to control eye movement. However, if you already have a different focal point in mind, then the sky holes need to be reduced in rank and prioritized. Some may need to be eliminated. In this lesson we will only discuss Lightroom editing, but Photoshop Adjustment Layer Masks or Range Masking may do a better job. Try all of them to see which one works best for you.

The acronym for the formula for reducing the strength of sky holes is **DDC**, which stands for **darker, duller, and cooler**. You may not need all three adjustments. With B&W photography you will only need to darken the value.

The logic behind DDC is based on two scientific principles.

The first is atmospheric perspective.

Light values appear to advance while dark values appear to recede.

Intense colors appear to advance while de-intensified colors appear to recede.

Warm colors appear to advance while cool colors appear to recede.

By 'advance' and 'recede' we are talking about three-dimensional depth. The length and width of an image are given to us, but the third dimension, that of depth, is an illusion we as photographers have to create and enhance on a flat screen or on a flat piece of printer paper. Brightly lit intense sky holes appear to advance ahead of the silhouette, but DDC editing forces sky holes to recede back to a plane behind the silhouette where they naturally belong

The second principle is based on the physics of light. Light photons enter from the back of the sky hole tunnel and make their way to the front of the tunnel to the viewer's eye. Along the way they bounce

back and forth off the sides of the tunnel where many of them are absorbed. Because less photons exit on the viewer's end of the tunnel, the hole in the tunnel appears to be darker than the bulk of the sky.

There is a third reason for darkening sky holes, although it is not considered scientific. There are tiny twigs and needles that don't show up in a photo and can't be seen by the human eye because of their size and distance, but which still block some of the light coming through the sky hole tunnel. They act as a screen or mesh over the sky hole filtering out some of the light. So, if you don't do anything else, at least darken your sky holes.

Sky holes will need to be darkened a bit in value using your Lightroom exposure slider on an adjustment brush. **If you need to both dull and cool, don't use saturation or vibrance for lowering the intensity. If you lower the saturation and vibrance sliders, you will cancel the effect of the temp slider, and you will never make your sky hole any bluer, no matter how hard you try.** Lower or gray the intensity by decreasing the shadows slider, and if necessary, the black slider. Make your changes subtle by lowering your sliders only a bit. The secret to properly edited sky holes is to make them so subtly different from the main bulk of the sky, you won't be able to tell any difference unless you are looking for it. You should not be able to tell the sky holes are DDC-er than the main bulk of the sky except by looking very closely and squinting.

Edges are important. Due to atmospheric perspective edges are hard with no feathering the closer they are to the viewer's eye. As they recede into the distance, they become softer and more feathered. Because most sky holes occur in the background, they *must* have soft, highly feathered edges. Otherwise they will advance ahead of the silhouette and look very unnatural - like bubblegum stuck to the computer screen. So, feather your adjustment brush until it looks natural.

Can sky holes appear in other than tree foliage? Absolutely, they can. Anything above the horizon line that can be silhouetted against low sunlight like **old dilapidated buildings, vintage cars, farm equipment, rocky cliffs, or ships at sea** can have sky holes if there are cracks or holes in the silhouette.

You can also punch in some sky holes if there aren't any, or if you think there aren't enough. Use the Lightroom cloning tool to sample some small sky hole shapes into your tree foliage. Then darken, dull, and subdue them. The old saying about dense tree foliage is 'Create enough space for the birds to fly through'. Dense tree foliage with no breaks feels confined and claustrophobic as opposed to opening up some tree holes to engage the viewer's imagination about what lies beyond the trees. If you do create new sky holes, don't place them over tree trunks or major tree limbs, since that would look very unnatural.

Paying attention to the number, size, shape, and position of sky holes can make your edit look professional. **Wait to apply DDC until after you have first eliminated, created, pruned, and adjusted the size, shape, and intervals between sky holes. DDC should be your last step.** The farther the sky hole is from the main sky, the more DDC you can get away with without it being noticeable.

To eliminate unwanted sky holes in Lightroom, you can sample and clone in neighboring tree foliage with a soft feathered edge, but nothing works better than Photoshop's Spot Healing Brush Tool. If you don't completely cover it with the first swipe, just go over it again.

If you have bushy, brushy twigs over the sky, like **deciduous trees in winter**, those don't qualify as sky holes. We prefer to define sky holes as rare breaks in otherwise solid dense dark, silhouetted elements.

You won't have as much trouble with **autumn leaves** or **light green summer foliage**. While they may be dramatically different from the sky in hue, they are equal in intensity and nearly the same value as the sky, so there is little or no dramatic contrast to draw the eye.

Sky holes can serve many purposes in composition:

- 1) They can invite the viewer farther back into the 3D depth of the image.
- 2) They can be used to help tell the story.
- 3) They can be opened up to draw the eye to an interesting part of the composition that might otherwise go unnoticed.
- 4) A light sprinkle of tiny sky holes, like salt, can add 'spice' to your image.
- 5) One or a small group can be the main focal point
- 6) They can be used as a pivoting point or change of direction for eye movement.
- 7) They can be used to create mood. For example, when pairs of bright sky holes are used in a twilight photo, they read as 'eyes' in the silhouette creating an exciting, spooky atmosphere.
- 8) Unusual silhouetted shapes with occasional sky hole 'eyes' can create interest, and will keep the viewer looking and discussing what they see with other viewers for a long time, like seeing sheep in clouds. (Anthropomorphism).

Watching for sky holes in computer screen savers and other well edited images can give you even more creative ideas for the use of sky holes. Discriminate use and placement of sky holes can add the finishing touch to your landscape image.

Internet Resources for further study of focal points:

<https://fixthephoto.com/focal-point-in-photography.html>

<https://skylum.com/blog/focal-point-in-photography-composition>

<https://www.picturecorrect.com/tips/focal-point-in-photo-compositions/>

Bhphotovideo.com - The Importance of Focal Points in Photographic Composition

Internet Resources for further study of sky holes:

<https://stapletonkearns.blogspot.com/2010/01/sky-holes-2.html>

<https://feltmagnet.com/painting/Painting-Sky-Holes-in-Trees>

<https://www.artistsnetwork.com/art-mediums/pastel/painting-sky-holes>

<https://gurneyjourney.blogspot.com/2008/03/skyholes.html>