

Photo Composition Notes

Definition of 'good composition': "Good composition is all about 'arranging' the elements in the viewfinder or on the LCD screen so that their shape, form, colour and tone interact with one another in a way that looks visually appealing."

Three key areas to be considered in composition:

1. The center of interest—"Having decided what the central subject of the photograph is to be, ascertain where the photograph is to be shot from to achieve the most effective background."
2. Possible distractions or intrusions—"examine the subject, background and foreground very carefully to ensure that the picture will not be spoiled by an unwanted element."
3. Enhancing the foreground—"it is important to decide if there is anything that might add to the foreground without detracting from or obscuring the center of interest."

General Guidelines for Good Composition

1. **Fill the Frame.** "If your photos aren't good enough, you're not close enough." "There are two ways of filling the frame for maximum impact and eradicating unwanted backgrounds: 1) Move closer to the subject. 2) Zoom in or use a longer focal length lens."
2. **Keep it Simple.** "One way of keeping your images simple is to pick a specific subject from the scene you're photographing . . . the less visually cluttered an image, the more powerful it becomes."
3. **Rule of Thirds.** Imagine a tic-tac-toe grid placed over your image or photograph. If you have any major horizontal lines or elements in the image, place them on or near the horizontal lines of the grid; likewise for vertical lines or elements. Place key 'points of interest' on one or more of the four intersection points of the grid.
4. **Frame Within a Frame.**
 - a. **Landscape:** In landscape photography trees or other foreground subjects are used to frame a distant view. This usually adds depth to the composition.
 - b. **Portrait:** In portrait photography because the subject and frame are on the same plane, you don't get the perception of depth, but the frame does act like a border which visually contains the subject and enhances its significance.
 - c. **Focus:** "To create the perception of depth, this technique usually works best if both the foreground 'border' and subject are in sharp focus." This isn't a hard and fast rule, so experiment for best effect.

5. **Choosing a Viewpoint.** "The photographer takes into account the background and foreground, and any interesting angles that will lead the eye naturally toward the emphasis of the image. By using different viewpoints the photographer can dramatically alter the impact of a picture." "...all that it takes to achieve a better view is a little thought of where one should stand and how the foreground can be utilized to the greatest effect."

6. **Using Backgrounds.** Key points about backgrounds:

a. "Backgrounds should not dominate the photograph, and obscure the main subject."

b. "Are the background colours harmonious or unusual in some way? A telephoto lens can push the background out of focus, throwing up some interesting shapes and muted colours."

c. "Does the sky appear in the background? If there are any clouds, try to retain their clarity and detail, perhaps by using a graduated neutral density filter or polarizing filter..."

7. **Shapes and forms.** Shapes (2 dimensional) and forms (3 dimensional) make up many of the key elements in a photograph. In order to best convey a 3 dimensional form in a 2 dimensional medium such as a photograph, one must carefully use light and shadow. "The relationship between the light and dark areas provides us with the visual information we need to recognize the object's form." "Contrast plays a key part in describing form in a subject."

8. **Pattern and Texture.** "As a photographer, your aim should be to provide a view of the world that others have not considered before. Spotting patterns in everyday objects and scenes will provide a fresh and new perspective on the world."

9. **Composing with Horizontal and Vertical lines.** If there is a significant horizontal element in the composition, be sure it is straight. Use the Rule of Thirds for key horizontal or vertical elements in the image.

10. **Composing with Diagonal Lines.** "If you want to add a sense of movement to an image, look for strong diagonal lines instead. These tend to produce the most dynamic results and lead the viewer's eye through an image, especially when they lead to the subject of the photograph." Watch out for clashing diagonals because they can add tension to an image and create a sense of chaos, which may be good or bad.

11. **Composing with Curves.** "Curves, like diagonals, tend to add dynamism and movement to an image and help to lead the viewer's eye through the picture. The most powerful compositional curve is the S-shaped curve." In addition to motion an S-curve can add balance and grace." Leading lines lead the viewer into the image, and optimally to the subject of the image. If possible, avoid having that leading line go from one edge of the image to the other edge, which would draw the viewer's eye out of the image.

12. **Compositional Balance.** "Balance in composition is mostly determined by how well the primary elements of the image are divided by the vertical axis that runs . . . down the center of the image." There is such a thing as symmetrical balance and asymmetrical balance. Symmetrical balance is what it sounds like—equally weighted objects or elements are positioned on opposite sides of the vertical axis (and in some cases, the horizontal axis). Asymmetrical balance is more interesting and dynamic. "Asymmetrical balance works on the basis that objects in an image each have their own visual 'mass'—whether it's their physical size, how colourful they are, how bright they are, whether or not the object is in focus and so on. A well balanced image will have the various components arranged in such a way that their various 'weights' are balanced."

Guidelines on Relative Weights for asymmetrical Balance:

1. Greater contrast elements have more weight than low contrast elements.
2. An object at the edge of the frame has more weight than a centered one.
3. Irregular shapes have more weight than regular ones.
4. Isolated objects carry more weight than those surrounded by other objects.
5. Objects in focus take precedence over out-of-focus objects.
6. Colorful elements carry more weight than less colorful ones.
7. More interesting objects attract greater attention than less interesting ones and therefore have more weight.