

COMPOSITION

The most important thing you can do to take good photos is to learn how to use your camera properly to produce sharp properly exposed pictures. The second most important thing may be composition.

The word “composition” as it applies to photography is defined as “the organization or grouping of the different parts of a work of art so as to achieve a unified whole.” The composition rules for painting and photography are identical. So, our goal is to learn how to place the objects in a photograph so that the result is a better picture. It should be noted that the “rules” of composition are made to be broken, and there are many times when a straight-on photo with no composition tricks is the best approach. Note that you can’t use all of these rules in a single photograph, but should use them in different situations.

RULE OF THIRDS - Visualize two vertical and two horizontal lines equally spaced within your frame. This divides your picture into thirds. The places where the lines intersect are called power points and are the preferable spots for the subject to be placed. In this example the center of interest is in the upper right power point.



VERTICAL FORMAT – Your camera has a horizontal format, but it often helps to turn the camera on end to take a vertical picture. People, trees, and other tall objects are best as vertical subjects.

FOREGROUND, MIDDLE GROUND, BACKGROUND – Landscapes are especially effective when they have strong elements close to the camera, in the middle distance, and in the far distance.

CENTER OF INTEREST – Try not to clutter your photos. A single center of interest is better than competing centers of interest. Oddly enough, three strong elements in a photo are usually better than two.

DEPTH OF FIELD – the amount of your photo that is in focus from front to back is the depth of field. Shallow depth of field means only a small part of the photo is in focus, and it is accomplished by using a small *f* stop, such as *f* 2.8 (large lens opening). This can be a creative composition technique to blur distracting elements in the photo. On the other hand, a large depth of field means most of the photo is in focus, and it is accomplished by using a large *f* stop, such as *f* 22 (small lens opening).

BACKGROUNDS – Your center of interest can be hard to see if it competes with a cluttered background. Simple backgrounds are usually better, and can sometimes be controlled by reducing depth of field or by changing your position. You can also zoom in to fill the frame with your subject and reduce the amount of background.

USE OF LIGHT AND SHADOW – An object in bright sunlight really stands out when placed in front of a shadowed background. Conversely, an object in shadow stands out against a light background.

MERGERS – We have all seen photos of people posing in their living room with antlers growing out of their head. Mergers also include photos where the main subject blends with the background too much. Always be aware of the surroundings and position yourself or your subject to avoid mergers.

LEADING LINES – A photograph with a strong center of interest becomes even stronger when there is a line leading (such as a fence, creek, road, or curve) from the photographer to the main subject.



S-CURVE – A curve shaped like an S is always a strong element in a photo. It may be used as a leading line or may be the main subject.

DIAGONALS – The eye is drawn to diagonal lines in an image. They can give a feeling of motion even in an inanimate object.

LEFT TO RIGHT – We read from left to right so we have a tendency to “read” a photo from left to right. A photo with multiple objects will have more impact if the minor objects are on the left and the major objects on the right because your eye tends to enter the frame from the left and follow the minor objects to the main center of interest. Mobile objects such as a car or walking horse will be more effective if they are facing to the right.

ROOM TO MOVE – Certain subjects look better if they have room to move. That is, leave some empty space in front of them. For example, a portrait with a person looking to the side may be more effective if they have some space to look into, and a photo of a train looks better if there is a little room in front of the engine.



MOVE IN CLOSE / FILL THE FRAME – A picture will have more impact if distracting elements are eliminated by filling the frame with the subject.

SCALE – Sometimes it is difficult to tell how big an object is. A person added to the photo as a reference provides information to give the object scale.

FRAMING – Depth can be added to a photo if you are looking through an opening which is placed on the edge of the picture toward the center of interest. Example: Branches framing the main subject.

LAYERS – Depth can also be added if the photo consists of several layers. For example, several ridges in the foreground form layers to emphasize a sunset in the background.

LOW ANGLE – A lower angle places emphasis on foreground objects, adds depth to the photo, and may help include a foreground, middle ground, and background.

HIGH ANGLE – Looking down on your subject allows you to cut out background distractions and add drama to your photos.

WIDE ANGLE – Wide angle lenses, especially in combination with a low angle position, can have several effects. Parallel lines become slanted, depth of field increases, distortion may increase, and more can be included in the foreground.

SIDE LIGHTING – Light from one side creates shadows on the opposite side. This can increase drama in a photo and emphasize curves.



HIGHLIGHTS – The eye is drawn to bright spots in photos.

THE USE OF COLOR – The eye is also drawn to bright colors, such as red or yellow. Using a single dominant color has a lot of impact. Mood can be affected by the use of hot (red, orange, yellow) colors and cold (blue, green) color.

TELEPHOTO COMPRESSION – Telephoto lenses create a phenomenon called compression, where distant objects appear to be stacked close together.

PEOPLE – When photographing someone full length, the composition looks less static if each hand and each foot is at a slightly different level. Portraits of a single face look better if slightly tilted.

HORIZONS – Try to be sure your horizons are level. It is especially bad if it looks like water is running “downhill.”

CLEANUP – There is nothing worse than taking that once in a lifetime trip to Tibet and finding that all your photographs of the forbidden monastery have a beer can in the foreground. Look at the entire image in your viewfinder and remove objects that don't belong there.

CROPPING – Your viewfinder does not exactly match what you will see in your final print or slide, so don't be afraid to crop out unwanted elements by cutting the print or using special slide mounts.