

Composition Guidelines

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Why are some photographs strong? Why do some photographs hang in a gallery or win a contest or competition? Why do some photographs hold your interest a long time? Chances are it is because those photographs have strong or pleasing composition.

What is composition? The dictionary might say, "The act of combining parts or elements to form a whole." In the words of Edward Weston, "Composition is the strongest way of seeing." Steve Traudt says, "Composition is the only thing which makes your photograph look different than mine." In this article we consider six guidelines for stronger composition. Please note the use of word guideline; these are not rules.

1. **Simplicity** - First, you must identify what your subject is. Then look for ways to give your subject the most visual attention. Watch the background; a busy background competes with your subject. How much or how little of your subject should you include? Should the arrangement be horizontal or vertical? Often, moving in closer can strengthen your story. Be careful though. Simplifying your photograph does not mean letting it become static or dull.
2. **Principle of Thirds** - Generally, photos with the subject directly in the center are more static and less interesting. You can use the principle of thirds to guide you in off-center placement. Imagine the picture area divided into thirds, both horizontally and vertically. The intersect points suggest four options for placing your center of interest. Use this principal to allow room for the subject to move, allow framing or enable the use of leading lines. You can use thirds to compose your horizon too. Unfortunately, auto-focus cameras invite you to center everything by the very nature of the mechanism.
3. **Lines** - Lines add tremendous visual interest. A diagonal line is probably the most dynamic. Diagonals suggest motion and movement. They increase tension because they are not "stable." A diagonal is often used to lead the eyes toward your subject. Another effective line is the "S" curve, which is graceful and pleasing. A "C" curve works in much the same manner. Using geometric shapes can help hold your composition together. A triangle is great for visual unity; it is made from three diagonals and is generally considered to be a strong shape.
4. **Balance** - Balance is simply the arrangement of shapes, colors, or areas of light and dark that complements one another. Such a photograph looks or feels well balanced. Symmetrical balance means the subjects balance very evenly. Symmetrical balance may be more visually interesting. Also, it can be static or boring, so use symmetry with discretion.
5. **Framing** - The use of foreground or background objects to frame the subject gives the photo a feeling of depth. A frame can be a tree part of a building or even a person. Frames add scale to the photo, help concentrate the eyes of the viewer and generally increase impact. A frame can help explain the subject better by providing context.
6. **Mergers** - Avoid them! The typical merger is a tree or telephone pole growing out of the subject's head. A border merger cuts off heads or feet at the edge of the photograph. A tone merger occurs if the subject blends in too much with other tones in the photograph. As we compose a photograph, we tend to focus our eyes on the subject, without seeing the rest of the frame. Therefore, train your eyes to scan the entire viewfinder. My particular practice is to move my eye around the perimeter of the frame. A tripod allows you to do this much easier.

Summary - The intelligent use of these guidelines will help your photographs become stronger and more visually interesting. Here are some other thoughts:

- a) The eyes go toward the brightest point first.
- b) They also migrate to the sharpest area or object.
- c) The eyes tend to enter the photograph from the left side.
- d) A strong color, such as red, will pull the eye strongly toward it and make the object protrude.
- e) Darker colors tend to make an object seem to recede.

Finally, the most dramatic composition might not follow any of these guidelines, so use your own intuition. The bottom line is to understand what drew you to the particular subject, that is, what interested you. Then your task is to try to make others see it as you did and present it in an interesting or exciting manner.