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COMPOSITION

What Do We Mean By Composition?

Simply put, it is the arrangement of the elements of a photograph. Composition is part of a trio that work together to make a good image. These being Light, Gesture and Composition. None of these exist in isolation, only in the context of each other.

It is important to realise at this point that there is *no one perfect way to take a photograph*. There are also no laws of composition. However, we do have basic rules and techniques to guide us. Three photographers shooting the same scene can all create appealing photographs with completely different composition. What to show, what to hide, what to emphasise and what to play down is our job as the creator or recorder of the image. It is up to us to decide where to put the elements of our image.

Light

The first partner to composition is the choice of light to illuminate our subject. This can either be artificial or available light, or a combination of the two, usually dictated by our subject or location. When shooting landscapes, the quality and colour of light is influenced by weather conditions and time of day.

The Golden Hour is the period just after sunrise and before sunset, where the light is warmer and softer.



The Blue Hour is the period just before sunrise and after sunset, the light takes on a bluish tint and is soft and diffused.

The intense light on a cloudless day creates strong shadows and high contrasts and can be very challenging to work with.

Water vapor in the air creates more feel of depth in landscape photography and may improve perspective by softening the distant parts of an image.

Cloudy or overcast days offer diffuse light and are preferable for portraits and close up photos. The time of day can be used to your advantage by using shadows to create texture and interest in your image, as the sun gets lower in the sky shadows and dark shapes change rapidly. Fog, mist, and rain soften the light as well as helping to hide distant objects, this can be used to concentrate the viewers' attention on the chosen subject.

Inclement weather can be an opportunity to catch the sunlight that peeks through the clouds and can create clear light that contrasts from the surrounding stormy light.

Indoors using the available lighting, you may have no control over you need to be aware of the direction and form of the light as well as any colour cast that may be present.

In a studio you have complete control over all aspects of light and lighting.



Gesture

The next partner to composition is capturing meaning and expression to create a response in the viewer. This can be gesture or emotion expressed by a person.



It can also be the emotional response that a non-human subject or scene can evoke in the viewer.

Gesture in photography is more than just the look on a face or the movement or stance of a person or animal. It can be the shape of a tree or a cloud, or texture of rock or the way grass bends in the breeze.

Think about how you can create an image to tell the viewer a story.



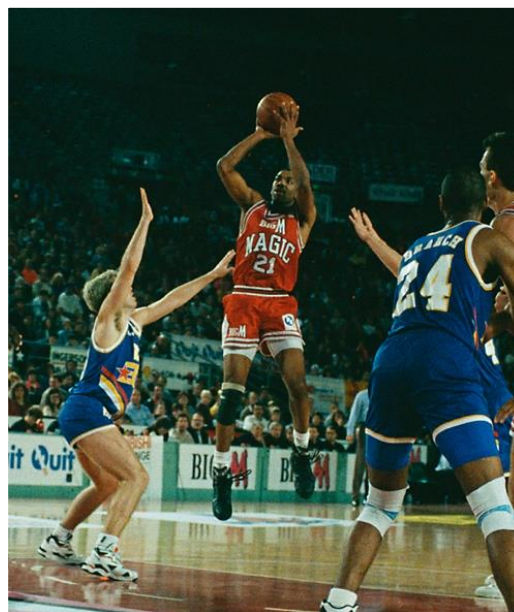
Composition

The third part of the trio is composition, arranging the elements of the image.

The idea with composition is to keep it simple. Good composition is about eliminating what isn't needed. If something in the image isn't helping to tell the story, if possible, don't include it.

Create a single subject or theme

The first idea that can help us decide where to put the elements of the image is to create a single subject or theme within your image. For impact, use the KISS principle (Keep It Simple Simon). If the picture contains two or more subjects, they need to contain a strong link; otherwise, the viewers' attention is divided. Avoid having disconnected elements in an image. Secondary subjects or points of interest should relate to the main subject, always spend some time looking around your viewfinder to find out what you can eliminate.



USE THE THIRDS

The rule of thirds is a guide to determine where to place the elements of the image. Mentally divide the image area into thirds, both horizontally and vertically, the areas at the intersection of the thirds are the 'strongest' points of the image. Moreover, to give it strength, the main element, or point of interest should be at one of these points. In contrast to the strength of these points is the centre of the image, which is the weakest area in compositional terms.



Note: the rule of thirds is a simplification of a much older idea used in art for many centuries, called the Golden Ratio. Do some research on the Golden Ratio and how it relates to photography as it will generally lead you down a path of stronger composition.

DON'T SPLIT PICTURES

It is inadvisable to divide any picture equally into two parts, either horizontally or vertically. As an example, something like a tree, power pole or tower centrally reaching from bottom of the image to the top creates two separate areas and the viewers' attention is divided. Similarly, the horizon line does not sit well across the exact centre of the image. If possible, put it at one of the thirds, or if you can leave it out altogether it creates what is called a closed landscape.

USE THE RIGHT FORMAT

The shape and arrangement of the picture elements should dictate the picture format, whether to use horizontal (landscape) orientation or vertical (portrait) orientation. Have a think about the image elements, what do they tell you; If it is not obvious try both formats.



Camera design encourages you to use it in the horizontal position, Make a habit of shoot in both landscape and portrait orientation. Pro-level cameras are set up to use easily in both modes and battery grips are available for most SLR's that give easy access to shutter button and control wheel in both modes. Any camera can be used easily in portrait mode.

CREATE BALANCE

A picture will be more pleasing if the masses within it are balanced. Do not have all the interest on one side, and the other empty without good reason. Try to balance the elements (for the purpose of composition we can think of objects, areas of light or shade and colours themselves as elements). A tilted horizon can also cause imbalance in an image.



USE LEADING LINES

Strong lines can help your image by literally



leading the viewer into and around a scene; they can be used to prevent distraction by minor elements. Leading lines can be used to create a sense of depth and perspective in an image by emphasizing distance and the relationship between the elements. Moving your viewpoint and recomposing can often help to create a more dynamic image that will guide the viewer by creating a journey for their attention. Diagonal lines are often more powerful than horizontal and vertical ones. Lead the viewer toward the

subjects and not out of the frame - be aware of where the lines are leading.

FOREGROUND INTEREST

A foreground element can ground or anchor your image. Typical examples can be a rocks, flora or even a base object that would potentially appear darker than the rest of your scene. It creates a

starting point for the viewer to move from. With landscape photography, finding your foreground element can be a good way to start to formulate your composition.

WATCH THE BACKGROUND

The background should support but never compete with the subject. It is very easy to concentrate on the main subject and miss the background. Look beyond your main subject to see what is in the frame that may distract the viewer. Shift your camera angle to eliminate clutter. Using a large lens aperture, e.g. f4, can create a shallow depth of field, blurring and removing detail from the background. Bright spots, even if blurred out, will distract from your subject. If there is a sign or an object with writing on it, this will grab the viewers' attention as they attempt to read it. Make a habit of taking a good look around the viewfinder, look beyond and around your main subject.

USE COLOUR AND CONTRAST

The viewers' attention immediately goes to bright or contrasting areas and colours; with some colours, like red for example, attracting the eye more than others do. This can be used to guide the viewer. Colours from the opposite side of the wheel are said to be complementary and offer contrast and boldness to the image. Using colours next to each other on the wheel are called analogous and are more harmonious, however be careful to add enough contrast to avoid the image becoming too bland



Be aware that unwanted colour and contrast can draw the viewer's attention away from the main subject.

COMPLEMENTARY COLOURS

Complementary Colours are colours that sit opposite to each other. The most common combinations are:

Red and Green

Blue and Orange

Yellow and Purple

Using opposites can be very effective and work together to enhance each other.



COMPLEMENTARY

ANALOGOUS COLOURS

Analogous Colours sit next to each other on the colour wheel and are used to create a mood or a feeling. Grouping warm colours can help create a warm feeling to an image while colder colours can achieve the opposite.



ANALOGOUS

ACTIVE SPACE/ NEGATIVE SPACE

This refers to allowing a subject somewhere to go within our image. This is usually done by allowing more space in front of the subject than behind,



giving the viewer a sense of where the subject is moving

or looking towards and can create a sense of anticipation. Dead space is the area behind the subject, and if this dominates, the viewer can be left with a sense of having missed the action. Portraiture can benefit from the use of active space. In the case of a profile, or three-quarter portrait, leaving more space in front of the sitter than behind gives the impression that the sitter is not looking straight out of the picture.

VIEWPOINT AND CAMERA ANGLE

A quick look through most everyday amateur photo albums will likely reveal that most photographs were made standing up with the camera at eye level. To help make your image stand out, create some impact and catch the viewers' attention, try a different perspective, stand on a ladder or lay



on the ground. When shooting children or small animals, it can help to get down and shoot at their level, this avoids the 'looking down at the top of them' effect. Try to get down even lower if you want to give an impression of dominance by the subject. Altering the position of the camera can change the relationship between foreground and background elements. Some scenes can be improved by adding an element that will give the viewer a sense of the scale of the image.

BREAK THE RULES

Do not become a slave to the 'rules' by blindly following them, they should not be thought of as constraints for your imagination. Think of them as tools you can use to enhance your creativity, not to stifle it. Whatever you do in your images, make sure you have a reason for doing it, and make it count.

OTHER POINTS

Do not forget the elements of an image can also be non-objects, time of day, angle, or quality of the light, length of exposure or depth of field.

Turning an image upside down to check the composition will trick the vision system into just looking at the relationship between shapes and colours. When this happens, you can look for balance, dead space, and leading lines. You can also immediately see which element of the image first attracts your eye.



Good photography is a result of both creativity and technique. Remember that composition is part of a trio that work together to make a good image: Light, Gesture and Composition.

