

Composition*

Rules of Composition

- * Rule of Thirds
- * Balance
- * Line
- * Geometric Form
- * Dominance

Have you ever looked at a photograph and stopped to take it all in? Such pictures could not just happen. The photographer was aware of rules and techniques that go into making that picture unique and pleasing. As well, if you've seen a photograph that leaves you cold or wondering why it was made, then applying these rules could help improve the image.

The work of a photographer can be compared to that of a traditional artist. In each case, both are trying to produce a picture, and likewise in both case, each is concerned with producing a picture that is interesting and pleasing to the person looking at it. These artists follow similar rules in making a picture; however the traditional artist can alter their work in the middle of their project or art piece, whereas the photographer has to learn to see his picture beforehand. If the photographer desires to omit or correct any parts of his subject, he/she must change their viewpoint to exclude or include them. It is not difficult to create a picture that is interesting and pleasing to look at. All that is required is to learn a few rules that will make an interesting photograph and to learn the points that you must avoid in order to avoid making a bland photograph. These rules and principles that embody the 'make-up' of a photograph are referred to as composition. **Many of these points of good and bad composition are things that you are already aware of as a result of your lifetime experiences of seeing things about you!**

In the following material, some of these more important rules are briefly discussed. The most important thing to remember is that all of the rules are only general and none are absolutely foolproof. There are instances where they can be altered, combined or violated and a unique and intriguing image can still exist.

Finally, remember that knowing and understanding photographic composition is a technique that requires practice, experience and thought. In the same manner that one must develop an 'ear' for music, the photographer must develop an 'eye' for pictures.

1) Rule of Thirds: (division of space)

Most pictures have a main point of interest or subject matter that should be placed in such a manner as to attract attention and still be pleasing. In order to accomplish this, the subject should be placed at certain natural points which may be located by the rule of thirds.

- The subject of the picture should be placed at the natural points of interest indicated by the line intersections. If there is more than one important subject, then it should be placed on one of these points. If there is more than one important subject, then place the others at the other natural points of interest.
- In landscape scenes, if the foreground is the most important element of the image, the line between the horizon and sky should be 2/3rds of the distance from the bottom of the image. If the sky is the most important element of the image, then it should occupy 2/3rds of the picture.
- Use variations in spacing.
- Do not divide the bottom half and top half into equal parts. Do not divide a picture into halves and quarters.

Draw an example



2) Balance:

A picture usually conveys a feeling of weight somewhere within itself and because of this; it should be distributed throughout the image. Such things as size, tone and position all serve as elements of weight.

- Two objects of equal size may be balanced by placing them equal distance from the center.
- Several small objects can balance one big object
- A heavy object near the center of a picture may be balanced by a smaller object at a greater distance from the center.
- Objects in the background may balance objects in the foreground.
- Don't place a heavy object alone on one side of the picture.
- Don't balance background with unrelated objects.

Draw an example



3) Line:

Most pictures convey a feeling of mood that emphasizes the subject matter. This can be done by the use of various types of lines which suggest certain moods.

- Use vertical lines to suggest height, strength or power. Think about the use of lines in intense scenes in movies.
- Slanting lines create a feeling of motion, force or action. They tend to attract the eye.
- A curved line suggests grace and charm. Think about an 'S' shaped curve in a river or seashore. The curve may leave the picture and re-enter at another point.
- Horizontal lines suggest peacefulness and quietness.

Draw an example



4) Geometric form: (repeating patterns)

Geometric forms also suggest mood in a picture. These forms are made of masses, lines or objects within the picture and are composed of several fundamental shapes.

- Pyramid or triangular shapes suggest symmetry*, solidarity and dignity.
- Circles are found in many landscapes and are a calming figure.
- The 'L' composition, which ties vertical and horizontal lines, can be used when photographing a sitting person.
- Radial lines tend to focus the attention on a central point of interest as the spokes of a wheel lead to the hub.
- The 'S' curve is often associated with peace, grace and charm. This is the most popular form used.

Draw an example



Definition of 'symmetry': 1) Beauty as a result of balance or harmonious arrangement. 2) Exact correspondence of form and constituent configuration on opposite sides of a dividing line or plane or about a center or an axis.

5) Dominance:

The word 'dominance' means to *stand out in strong form* or to *attract attention*. Pictures too usually have some form that will attract the eye above the other elements in the picture. The dominant points can be useful in holding attention to the main point of interest and, if incorrectly used, dominant elements may distract your attention from the main part of the picture.

- Be aware of dominance by size- large objects are usually the first thing to be noticed in an image.
- As well, objects that are close to the center of the picture will often be noticed immediately.
- Avoid lines that enter from corners. This divides the picture into separate parts.
- Contrary to common practice, only architectural subjects, statues and portraits should be placed in the center of a picture. All other subject matter should be placed at the natural points of interest.
- Points of entry that lead the eye to the subject are very useful in directing the viewer's attention towards your subject. These may be open gates, road, curbs or pathways.
- Natural frames, such as trees, archways etc. make for good composition.
- Diagonal or curved lines are typically more pleasing to the eye than straight lines.
- Oftentimes simpler backgrounds are more effective.
- Try to get a picture that tells a story.

Draw an example

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Definition of 'dominant': 1) The condition or fact of being dominant. 2) Exercising the most influence or control. 3) Most prominent, as in position; ascendant.