

Composition

Photographs relate information about the subject. They tell a story or elicit an emotion. They command some reaction from the viewer.

If a photograph interprets the subject effectively and conveys the message that is intended, it has good composition. If portions of the image detract from the subject or send unintended mixed signals about the subject, then the composition is wrong. We get a sense of what the photographer intends from

- his body of work
- other photos of the same subject by the same photographer
- signals placed in the photo
- the title of the photograph
- our own life experience

The photographer knows the story behind the events leading up to the making of the picture, but the viewer won't be emotionally informed of the image's backstory. The photo has to provide enough details to tell the intended story. You must decide what needs to be in the frame to tell the story. But don't include so much detail that the subject gets lost and the message obscured.

The photographer has control of the subject framing. We can use compositional principles as a guide for the viewer. Compositional choices should enhance the idea the photographer is trying to express and should not detract from the intended message.

The principles of good composition give us options. They are not inviolable, but can be useful. Some people instinctively see good composition, but most of us must detach from real life and learn to see subjects as a collection of lines, shapes, forms, and colors.

Some basic guides to good composition include:

- Match the frame to the subject to avoid wasted space and to fill the frame.
Orient the camera vertically when the subject is taller than it is wide.
- Avoid the "autofocus syndrome" of leaving half the frame empty above your subject.
Learn to use focus lock and re-compose.
- Choose the point of view and arrange the elements within the frame to make a subject more interesting. The "Rule of Thirds" helps us find a strong place within the frame that gives a subject emphasis. Divide the frame with lines drawn $1/3^{\text{rd}}$ into the frame and parallel from each side and place the subject at one of the intersections.
- Use leading lines for interest and eye flow. The "S" curve is popular in landscapes.
- Vertical lines establish stability and balance but can also be static
- or restful.
- Diagonal lines bring action and tension and can depict falling.
- Repetition of line or shape contributes eye flow and emphasis. You can exaggerate emphasis by interrupting repetitive flow with a contrasting subject.
- Selective focus (using a large f -stop to emphasize your subject by rendering the rest of the picture a blur) can be a compositional tool because it forces the viewer's eye to the sharp area of the image.
- Clutter can be controlled by using a wide aperture to throw the background out of focus, or by changing your point of view to place a cleaner background behind the subject. Shooting from a low angle and using a plain sky for background accomplishes this.