

COMPOSITION...

The most important factor to consider when making an image is overall compositional arrangement. Don't be content with standing in front of a gorgeous landscape or colorful eye-catching subject, triggering the shutter button and assuming that's enough, it usually isn't. You will be in a rut making common snapshots and nothing more. Devoting significant thought to basic tools of composition will make the image have an artistic touch and keep the viewer's interest.

Owning the best camera and lenses money can buy without being able to make a proper composition, renders the expense nearly useless. Don't worry though, proficiency can be learned. For those lucky enough to have an inbred natural ability to capture content artistically, the sky is the limit. Remember, everyone interprets visuals differently, but as a photographer you must be able to see things in unique ways and project the subject matter so it intrigues. This is the entire purpose of learning composition.

There are various rules to utilize or break since some contradict one another! Here they will be referred to as guidelines rather than rules. Meant as "helpers", not steadfast concrete musts.

No matter what is being attempted to photograph, the first thing to consider is the direction and value of light, whether there are shadows, hot spots or reflections. After luminance evaluation, the subject and environment needs to be intently studied. Here is where things start to bloom. A successful composition can be achieved by deliberately arranging the visual design elements. First, envision what you want to convey in the image before you shoot, make a preconceived picture in your mind. See the contents flat rather than three dimensional. A quick overview of simple compositional guidelines will help decide such things as where to stand, how high or low to physically position the camera, where in the frame to place the subject, what objects can be added or subtracted to ensure stability. From this point, other guidelines shown below should be applied as aids to make the image more aesthetically appealing. Implement them wisely; singly or in combination.

***** Please note: Viewers should initially be attracted by something dominating in the image, then their eyes should follow through from the front, midpoint to the back. Keeping in mind the guidelines while photographing, will definitely lend to an improvement in refining the final outcome, however, one must not dwell so heavily on them so as to inhibit creativity.

Many of these techniques are shared with artists of many disciplines.

Here are the guidelines I implement:

THIRDS

Most often discussed in art and photography, but also most often intentionally ignored! It relates to where the focal point is placed in a grid of lines or thirds that create intersection points. The focal point may be best when not centered but placed where the lines intersect or along the lines. Centrally placed subjects can cause static, however, they can be enticing depending on the subject matter. In landscape photography it can be good judgement to place the horizon line along one of the lower lines of thirds rather than the center line.

In my opinion thirds doesn't necessarily have to be an indispensable guideline, but is always discussed when first learning photography and determining composition. When used properly, it can make more powerful images.

Some cameras display a thirds grid in the live view. Mirrorless cameras have this feature as well. If yours doesn't, try to visualize the grid lines in your mind in a flat dimension upon the subject you are making.

GOLDEN SPIRAL / FIBONACCI SEQUENCE

An abundance of subjects in nature follow a spiral pattern that is mathematically backed up. The concept was established by Leonardo

Fibonacci. The spiral can be helpful as far as subject placement since it draws into the subject matter and follows through the image.

This feature can be accessed in the Develop Module of Lightroom.
Develop Module/ Crop.

When in Crop make sure the tool overlay is on (bottom left). Then cycle through to get the spiral crop by pressing the letter O on the keyboard. The orientation of the spiral can be rotated 90 degrees by pressing shift O.

USING LENSES

Normal Lens: 50mm- sees like the human eye.

Wide Angle: exaggerates distance but makes objects small and more distant. Ex. Moon in the sky

Telephoto: makes things far apart in the distance more flattened perspective and closer than they really are.

DEPTH OF FIELD

Creating things in the image to become dominant or submissive. This is a very important concept for a photographer to master, it truly can make or break a successful image. Once this concept is applied by usage of aperture, the photographer now becomes armed with one of the most influential and valuable camera settings in their control. To get the most of this concept, consider using the camera in the manual mode.

USING COLORS/COLOR PSYCHOLOGY

How the photograph displays color is very powerful.

The effectiveness can be as a result of the colors themselves or lack of, the limitation of the number of colors and the combinations used. There is strong color psychology, thus hues in a photograph, painting or design can cause the brain to react emotionally and set a mood.

Strong reds, yellows and oranges are considered warm and dominant; purple, green and blue are cooler calming hues. Black elicits mystery.

Opposites on the color wheel are very striking and alluring to the brain. When placed together these complimentary colors can take on a vibrance or appear brighter. I find this very potent when photographing macro images. Ex. purple /green, blue /orange
Be aware: colors mean a variety of things in various cultures.

Although super saturated colors are more enticing and very dominant in images published in contemporary magazines, books, and Instagrams. I find it be very unacceptable for any image to be super saturated in post production well beyond what the cones of the human eye can interpret naturally. More photo competitions are agreeing with me (finally), and obvious over saturation will eliminate the entry.

DEPTH THROUGH USE OF COLOR

Renaissance painters used colors to give a three dimensional effect, lighter hues of colors in the background created a sense of distance. Certain colors were symbolic and had meaning. Study these techniques and apply them to photography.

REDUCE CLUTTER

Minimize the content from chaos to simplicity by keeping only primary elements that add to the scene not complicate it. A common mistake by a novice photographer is not being able to sort out what belongs in the composition. Also, by using a large aperture (small f/stop), the background will fade into soft detail and highlight the main elements.

If an element doesn't add anything, don't include it, be very selective. Filling the frame can be potentially a good technique if the composition is not cluttered. Yet leaving negative space in relationship to the positive space can be very effective. Leaving parts of the main subject can work ex. adding only part of the flower. Good decisions will be made as the photographer becomes more experienced.

VISUAL ODDS

Include an odd number of subjects in the image. This causes a natural phenomenon where the brain is forced to pair things up. Eyes keep moving throughout the image and various points. Fibonacci's theory is supported here, many things in nature exist in odd numbers.

REFLECTIONS

Cause cognitive dissonance and make the image more interesting. Don't use a 50/50 split of subject matter, but try to make the reflection more asymmetrical. Here is case where the rule can be broken as far as subject placement, centering the subject can make the reflection pop.

SHADOWS&CHIAROSCURO

Very powerful entities, when used properly they can create a huge dynamic in an image. Shadows have the ability to alter mood. When used with geometrics, they heighten the effect. Very potent in abstract or architectural subjects. One must learn to look for shadows and know how to integrate them into an image. Chiaroscuro is a technique in painting but can be applied to photography as a play with light and shadows.

VISUAL WEIGHT

This will be the dominating subject matter compositionally. Where to place the commanding factor in the frame is an important decision for the photographer.

Things that can be used for visual weight:

Eyes or faces in portraiture

Centered objects

Large objects

Multiple repeating patterns

Areas of high contrast

Unusual textures

Color dominance

*VISUAL ANCHOR ****

Using this element will greatly change the way you photograph. It causes initial interest and adds a definite wow factor. For landscapes, a strong accentuated foreground element photographed from a low angle utilizing an ultra wide angle lens is extremely effective and eye catching in my opinion. Place the lens close to the visual anchor to exaggerate the size. I am immediately forced to look at and study these photos. Pick up any photography magazine, these type of images will most always be in a copy. Surely, a wide angle perspective with beautiful colors draws the eye, but add a dominant foreground element and now your rendering can move up from a novice level to a more advanced standing. The visual anchor can lead the eye into important elements in an image. The key points are the low angle with a focal lens of 14mm or a bit wider. The foreground hooks the viewer and draws them from the foreground, to middle ground, all the way through to the background.

I have a tendency to place the anchor near the front far left or far right, but there are no set rules. The anchor may be placed within an area of negative space. Use your judgement, however, moving your camera in order to change the position of the visual anchor can make a huge difference. It is recommended to make several attempts, look at them in post processing, and poll others to determine which is the most pleasing.

If there is no visual anchor, consider looking for S or C curves that might take the viewers' eyes throughout the composition instead.

DIMINISHING PERSPECTIVE

A technique used by artists and recognized from the Renaissance painters. The theory: the further away a subject is, visual perception makes the subject seem smaller. When photographing landscapes, using a smaller f/stop number (f/ 2.8, 4. ...)(larger apertures), will create a blurred

background and render the distant background smaller, thus giving more depth into the overall image. This technique creates a natural pathway into the composition.

When photographing portraiture with wide angle lenses, there is an intimacy, since you immerse the portrait subject into the environment. But keep in mind: there can be a more rounded effect rendered by lenses on the edges so position the person towards the middle but not necessarily centered. Keep extremities near their bodies, since things closer to camera will look bigger and be distorted. Maintain the camera level. Using a cell phone too close to the subject can distort facial features.

INTENTIONAL DISSONANCE

Using contrasting designs and/or various lines and shapes. The dissonance doesn't distract but entices the brain.

DESIGN ELEMENTS

Types of symmetry: symmetrical, asymmetrical, radial:

Symmetrical Concept:

When there is a mirror image that balances both sides of the image. This tends to inflict a calming effect, however, the image lacks movement.

Asymmetrical Concept:

Composition has objects that aren't mirror images of one another, the movement is not static.

Radial Concept: Spacing the elements equidistant from a center point, like spokes on a bike tire.

Flowing Rhythm:

When repeating lines show variants in shape, or curves to draw attention.

LINES

Draw the viewer deep into the image and help let them see a flow or depth.

Types of Lines: Leading, S curve, C curve

Diagonals: can suggest motion or direction. They are the most powerful of all lines.

Vertical: suggest power.

Zigzag: efficiently add drama and cause the eye to follow.

TEXTURE

The image can be of one or a mixture of diverse competing textures. Good use of texture lets the brain subconsciously imply what the subject matter feels like in the photo. Smooth as well as nubby textures in macro composition are useful. In portraiture, use light to create highlights or shadows upon the subject to add dimension.

PATTERNS

Eyes are naturally drawn by repeating patterns and shapes. Discover patterns, they exist everywhere. Train your eyes to start noticing them in the world around you. Especially be aware of patterns in architecture. Filling the entire frame with a repeating shape can be very effective.

WEATHER & ATMOSPHERIC CONDITIONS

Cloudy days are the best. Fog is your photographic friend! It creates an ethereal mood and removes distractions. Kiawah fog landscapes are my favorite.

Unusual clouds add a special touch to landscapes and can make or break them. Wet objects from rain or dew possess greater color saturation.

JUXTAPOSITION & COUNTERPOINT

Putting together dissonant or opposite things together to cause elemental contrast. The placement and juxtaposition should be considered.

Keep elements opposing but complimentary in special ways:

Examples: dark vs. light, squares vs. circles, large objects vs. small, old people vs. young

ABSTRACT

Let your imagination run wild. Mix colors, reflections, textural dissonances. Experiment with double exposures, image overlays and long exposures. Use your camera to paint.

CROP OR NOT TO CROP

Cropping is not always the best technique for improving. Imagine the final image before making the composition, rather than subtracting or cropping out what shouldn't be there later. If the resolution is good, a RAW file, and the image is tack sharp in focus, it may be successful. Using the thirds grid in post production can help determine where to crop.

NEW PLACES / NEW PERSPECTIVES

Before traveling do your research. Look for hotel rooms that might give new perspectives or maybe a higher view. Also, determine when festivals and special events are occurring before you schedule the travel dates. Think up new ways of photographing the iconic postcard scenes.

ADD DRAMA

Take your images to a new level by waiting for the right moment. Look for shadows and more contrasting light. Wait until the person or persons are positioned against the background properly. For this you must visualize the image flat. Wildlife shouldn't be stagnant, capture it engaging in an activity that helps tell a story.

TRAIN THE BRAIN TECHNIQUE

*****VERY IMPORTANT ...

Start making a habit of configuring compositions in your mind even when you aren't photographing.

Force yourself to stop seeing in 3 dimension, imagine what the final outcome looks like flat when all parts of the composition will be compressed upon one another.

**** AS ALWAYS,,, I encourage SIPS... My acronym meaning:

SELF IMPOSED PROJECTS

These are so very helpful as exercises for composition. For this exercise to be most useful, find a main subject of interest. Adjust your aperture, change your perspective visual anchor or visual weight, alter angle or level of the camera. Change how far or close you are to the subject. Take many images making them as different as possible. Upon downloading, study the files to see which you are drawn to, which have a dramatic appeal. Poll others for their opinion. Don't delete the bad ones. Study what could have been done for improvement. Be mindful of the metadata, which can offer insight into why the image wasn't a success.

Intentionally, set up a shoot at locations that aren't beautiful or contain subject matter that isn't the most appealing. Ugly, is not out of the question. It is important to shoot alone without outside distractions such as cell phones or carrying on conversations with others. Challenge your brain to come up with something different keeping in mind placement and compositional techniques. Try it, you'll be hooked. One of my favorite spots is nothing more than an old fishing dock full of nautical ropes, rusty laden junk strewn about.

This exercise will prove to be a valuable lesson, trust me, it works. Be diligent, you should see an improvement in composition if SIPS are employed and practiced often.

**** Your images can possess one or a combination of the compositional elements, if implemented, you will see a refinement which will take your files from common "tourist snapshots", to interesting artistic captures.

**** Over time, your images will reflect not only what you like to photograph, but ones that move you in terms of color, textures, and inner emotions. If all this can be translated and appreciated by others ... then CONGRATULATIONS you understand the components of composition.

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