

10 Rules for Successful Composition



(plus some handy hints and tips)

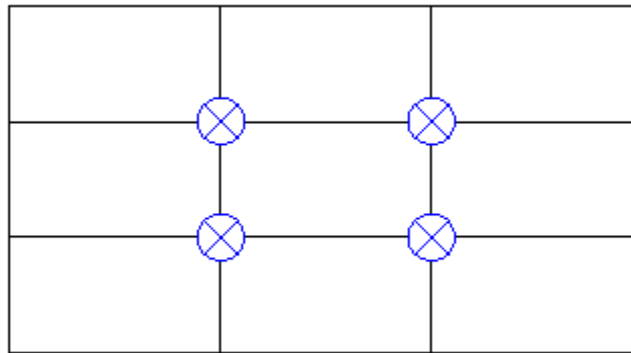
Successful composition in photography is, of course, a very subjective subject. When we ask ourselves why we like a particular image – particularly if we prefer one image over another similar one, the reasons why we feel a preference are often very personal.

There are, however, a number of accepted approaches we can adopt that may help to ensure that the composition of an image is successful. Successful composition does not necessarily mean a successful image, but it is certain that if we pay no regard to composing our pictures then we are likely to be disappointed with our results.

I have attempted here (with examples) to describe 10 tools that you may find useful when making decisions about what to include in the frame. Technique number 10 is placed last for a reason, although there is an argument that it might be the most important of all.....

1. The Rule of Thirds.

If you imagine splitting your composition into 9 equal sections as shown here.....



The focal point or point of interest should be placed at one of the 4 positions marked with a :



2. Leading lines.

Lines that lead the viewer into the picture help to give a sense of depth. Here the lines in the foreground rocks help to direct the eye towards the end of the valley.



3. Open and closed compositions.

In the UK we are used to reading words from left to right. For this reason we tend to see pictures where the point of interest or “weight” is on the left, as being “Open” and on the right as “Closed”. Some people find “Open” more appealing although I have yet to discuss this with someone from a country who reads from right to left! Any set of images – for example a panel of images for a qualification should be organised with Open images on the left and Closed images on the right in order to hold the viewer’s attention within the panel.



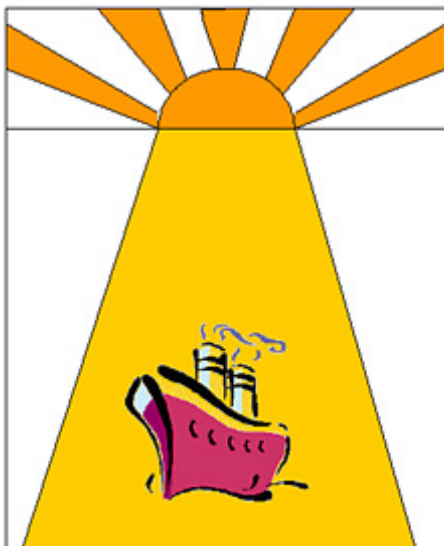
This is the image as I actually framed it. This is an example of an “Open” composition.



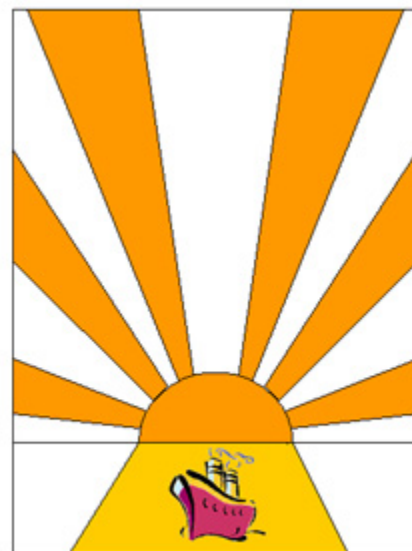
By flipping the image in Photoshop it is possible to see how it would look as a “Closed” composition.

4. The “80/20” Rule.

On acceptable way to break the “Rule of Thirds” is to use what I call the “80/20” rule by placing the horizon either 20% or 80%, vertically within the frame :



Horizon at 80% emphasises the foreground



Horizon at 20% emphasises the sky

5. Using Colour for Impact..

The colour **RED** is very important in colour pictures as it always draws the eye to it. Even a very small bit of red, placed using the rule of thirds, can have a huge impact.

Another way to use colour is to limit the number of colours in your composition – perhaps even to just one – monochrome – or two. If you have only two colours these have more impact if they are complementary colours – especially **BLUE** and **YELLOW**. Limit your picture to just blue and yellow for real impact (perhaps a yellow beach hut against a pure blue sky). Other complimentary colours are **GREEN** and **MAGENTA** OR **RED** and **CYAN**.



Single colour images can be very effective. In this case the pale blue has a calm, relaxing feel to it.



Although not strictly “yellow” the colour of these chimneys is complimented by the deep blue sky.

6. Choose the moment!

Take that little bit of extra time and press the shutter button when the moment is “right”. Just as the wave breaks, when the shadow of the cloud is in just the right place, when there is a lull in the breeze etc.

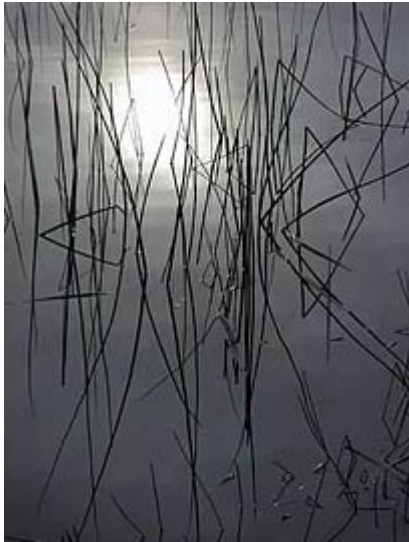
This image of the Stars and Stripes was taken on a very windy day. I wanted to see the majority of the flag, but didn’t want it to seem as stiff as a board. For this reason it was important to choose the moment very carefully.



7. Using Contrast for Impact.

The eye is always drawn to the brightest part of your image. This is one reason to avoid a thin sliver of sky across the top of your composition i.e. less than 20%! Try and place your highlight in accordance with the rule of thirds for maximum impact.

If you have areas of light and shade in your picture, always try and start at the bottom of the image with the shadow to give a strong “Base” to the composition.



In this shot of reeds on Watendlath Tarn it was important to place the reflection of the sun in accordance with the rule of thirds.



The dark shadows beneath the Olympic Symbol in Barcelona give a strong base to this composition.

8. Use the corners.

Lines that run right into the corners of the frame often work well.

In this shot (taken in the Capitolio building in Havana) I have tried to get lines to run into each of the four corners which gives a great sense of depth to the composition. As you can see, I didn't quite get it right in the bottom right corner. My excuse is that I had to work quickly because a few seconds later we were thrown out by security guards for not having the proper paperwork.



9. David Ward's "KISS" Principle.

Keep it simple – stupid! – There should be nothing in your picture that doesn't add to the composition. Always check the edges and never cut anything in half. Pictures with only 2 or 3 elements often have more impact.

This image of wet pebbles on a beach in South Wales is an attempt at "keeping it simple" The 7 main stones are all whole within the frame, there is space around them (albeit very small). The second layer of stones don't really matter as they are merely background to the main subject.



10. Ignore all the above.

All the above rules are made to be broken – but if you are going to break them it should be a conscious decision to do so. Try and be aware that you are breaking a rule and make sure you have a good reason for doing so and you may come up with some of the most exciting compositions of all!!!!

Handy Hints and Tips to help improve your photography

Advance Planning

- Planning plays an important part in photography. Time of day, angle of sun, length of shadows, seasonal and tidal variations will all influence when we press the shutter. An hour either side of both dawn and dusk is often the most productive time. It is not usually a good time to photograph when the sun is overhead. It often pays to use this time to scout for possibilities to return to later in the day.
- Look at the published work of other photographers (e.g. books, calendars, exhibitions, brochures and magazines), not to copy, but to gather ideas on the use of light, composition and subject matter. Strive to improve upon what has already been produced.
- Postcards are a very useful source of information. There are good and bad varieties, but each has something from which we can learn.

Quality of Light

- Remember, the quality of LIGHT is the most important element of what we are all trying to achieve. We photograph light falling onto and reflecting off a subject. Without it we would struggle to say the least.
- If the light is poor or doesn't add to the scene, it may still be advantageous to make a photograph. This will remind you to return at a later stage when conditions are more suitable. You may then be able to use both sets of compositions to make lighting comparisons.
- Photographing with the sun in front of you may help to produce exciting images, but do take care not to have sunlight falling directly on to the lens, causing flare. Shield the lens with a piece of card or a hand. A lens hood may not be sufficient.

At your chosen location

- Before pressing the shutter, cast your eye around the viewfinder. Do this twice and think to yourself "Is this really what I want to photograph?"
- Look at the scene from different angles. The "obvious" picture may not necessarily be the best one.
- Look at both landscape and portrait alternatives for the photograph.
- Try to pre-visualise what your final image will look like. Then work out how you are going to achieve it.
- Think about having only part of the scene in focus. Out of focus foreground & background objects may be influential in your decision making.
- Look out for patterns, shapes, abstracts, oddities, relationships between various elements of a scene.
- A single tree, building or person standing in the landscape often provides a strong focal point for the photograph.
- Foreground interest may often be used to lead the eye into the scene. Take care to use elements which are complimentary and don't detract from the scene as a whole.
- Try to avoid over-complicating a picture. It is better to keep it simple and avoid clutter.
- Photographing a small part of a scene may be better than the whole – it leaves more to the imagination.
- Shadow areas themselves may be an important part of a photograph. Equally, they may be overpowering and spoil the scene.
- Remember that others may be photographing in the same area. It is easy to forget that we may be visible through someone else's viewfinder.

- Be wary of leaving footprints on the ground where either you or others are about to photograph e.g. wet grass, sand, snow.
- Look out for anything which may not be initially obvious, such as plane trails, electricity pylons, telegraph poles, people in red clothing, cigarette ends or litter.
- Make notes. It will be helpful to both yourself and others providing important information. It's important to caption accurately too.

Technical Detail and Equipment

- Be aware that some camera viewfinders show only 97% of what will be captured on film. Take care with perimeters of important subjects you wish to exclude.
- Use a tripod and remote shutter release wherever possible. It's important to minimize camera shake. This enables long shutter speeds and minor adjustments to the composition to be made.
- To test the brightness range, squinting is useful. The highlights and shadow areas may be too great for transparency film. Various neutral density filters would be a useful addition to the camera bag.
- If you are using transparency film and an SLR (single lens reflex) camera, it is a good idea to "bracket" exposures. Make exposures either side of the one the camera's meter suggests
- Predominantly bright or dark scenes can be confusing to the camera's metering system. Over or under-expose accordingly.

Skies and seasons

- Try photographing these; sequences of light falling on the subject; the same scene in each of the four seasons.
- If the sky doesn't add anything to the picture, consider excluding it from your photograph. Alternatively, some skies are so interesting they deserve to be the major part of the photograph.
- Consider using clouds creatively. Shadows may be used to hide blots on the landscape, mirror elements in the landscape, and help to provide interesting reflections in water or glass.

After the shoot

- Use a red marker pen to number your film canisters. Ask the processing lab to reference the processed films with the same numbers. It may save you considerable time when sorting through your results.
- Be selective where you have your films processed and printed. Your photographs are precious and potentially valuable.

Important to remember

- Always carry more film and spare batteries than you think you'll need. There's nothing worse than being caught short so to speak!
- Take care of your camera gear, particularly in towns and cities. Not everyone is as honest as you are.
- Be creative, daring, break the rule of thirds, think of alternatives. Be different and generate your own style.