

"The best photographs move you—emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. There's almost a visceral reaction to a really striking photograph that communicates on all those levels."

*Joe McNally- photographer
Life, Time, National Geographic*

Composition Tips

Most people aren't thinking about composition when they look at photos, but they do know when a photo is pleasing to look at even if they don't know why.

The Rule of Thirds

One of the first questions to ask yourself when composing your picture is: "What is my subject?" Of all the things you see in front of you, which one is the reason for taking the photo? Once you've answered that question you can begin to work on how best to show that subject. The rule of thirds is a guide to help you do just that.

When you look through your viewfinder or at the LCD screen, imagine a tic-tac-toe grid over the scene. Now, notice where the lines intersect. The rule of thirds suggests that these points are the best places to position your subject. Doing so will generally result in a pleasant and balanced composition.

Try moving your camera so your subject appears where two of the lines meet. The subject doesn't have to be directly on the intersection, but somewhere close. Try a couple of different compositions to find your favorite.

Into the Frame

When photographing people and animals, it's best to have them looking into the frame. If there's action in your picture, leave more space on the side of the frame where the action is headed. It looks more natural that way and gives the viewer a feel for where the subject is going.

The Closer the Better

An important element in composition is distance. As Robert Capa suggested, "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough." Getting closer often assures more intimacy with your subject as well as a tighter, more refined composition. Beginners frequently stand back because they are perhaps unsure of their cameras or are unwilling to call attention to themselves. Advanced shooters know that there is no hiding behind cameras; they step forward.

Watch Your Head

How many times have you seen this happen? You compose your portrait and click the shutter. Then you look at the image on your LCD screen and, oh no, there's a tree growing out of her head. Always consider the background when composing your image. Look for any distracting elements that might spoil an otherwise nice photo. If there's something behind your subject that you don't want in the final photo, you have a few options. First, and often most effective, you can change your physical position, or, that of your subject. If that's not possible, try changing the focal length of your lens. Zoom the lens on your camera to avoid the unwanted object in your photo.

Turn it over

One of the simplest ways to add interest to your compositions is to turn the camera. A lot of shooters fall into the habit of shooting all horizontals. Consider a vertical image when your subject suggests it.

A Better Portrait

First, put some thought into the background. It shouldn't distract from the subject. A plain wall, dark green foliage—anything that's simple (without strong lines or patterns) works well. Make sure the background is not brighter than the subject. The human eye is drawn to the brightest parts of an image and a bright background can cause an exposure problem, too.

If you photograph someone against a bright background, you may well end up with a silhouette. That's because the brightness can cause the camera to underexpose the subject, making them look dark. You could pop up your flash to add light to your subject's face, but you'd still have that bright background.

Keep in mind that the picture is about your subject. Don't shoot the whole area around the person. Get closer by physically moving in or by using a zoom lens. Isolate your subject against that simple background you found. People are vertical, so shoot them that way. Horizontal portraits can look uncomfortable.

Next, consider how the subject is dressed. Solid colors and black tend to work well in portraits, mainly because they're not distracting (remember that bit from backgrounds, right?). Bright patterns scream out, "Look at me, don't look at the subject!"

Finally, unless you shoot mug shots for the local police department, don't photograph your subject head-on. Have them turn their body a little, maybe 45 degrees away from you, and then rotate her head back to face you. It's a nicer, more flattering pose and helps slim people down.

Look Carefully

To improve your composition skills spend some time looking at the photos taken by people whose work you admire. Pay attention to how they've positioned their subjects within the frame, what their backgrounds look like, what was included in the image, and what might have been left out. Now, review some of your own photos and ask yourself how you could have made the picture better by changing the composition.

Finally

Although we may call these ideas rules, they're best used as starting points. As Edward Weston said, "Consulting the rules of composition before taking a photograph is like consulting the laws of gravity before going for a walk." Perhaps the best thing about putting the rules of composition into practice is that the better you know them, the better the results when you intentionally break them.