

Rules of Composition

A photographic print is comparable to a painter's drawing of a scene or portrait - it contains similar elements of composition such as color, line, shape, tone, texture and volume. Unlike a painter, we can not add, modify or eliminate these elements at will; but must compose the final image in the viewfinder (we may, of course, alter that image later). As a visual language, photography has developed a body of acceptable practices including rules of composition for handling the above elements. This article sets forth some of those rules which hopefully lead to better visual communication.

A Disclaimer

If you religiously follow the rules contained in this article (and elsewhere) you will create a body of work that is stilted, unimaginative and boring. Many of the photographs of the master photographers of the 20th Century break one or more of the accepted rules. Does that mean they learned the rules, then purposely set out to break them? For the most part, no. They intuitively chose the viewpoint and other photographic controls based on the subject matter and what they were trying to convey.

So, why learn rules? Whether novice or experienced, understanding the rules (instead of just following them) can suggest different ways of seeing a subject that may make for a stronger image. For example, if most of your landscape shots have the horizon line in the center, this realization can cause you to wonder what if you shifted the viewpoint to show more or less of the sky. Is the sky or the foreground the dominant feature? If the sky is boring (e.g., no clouds) shift the horizon line up to the point where it merely suggests context. If the clouds are the real subject (as is frequently the case in Florida), move the horizon line down.

Learn to explore the potentials of your favored subject matter. Use the rules of composition as merely a guide that suggest other possibilities. Don't use them as a straightjacket stifling creativity.

Rule of Thirds

This is actually an oversimplification of what the Greeks called the Golden Section or Golden Ratio. In its simplified form, an image is divided vertically and horizontally into 9 equal sections. The 4 points that result from the crossing lines are considered the ideal locations for subject matter. According to this rule, the subject should be located at one of those points.

A major premise of the rule of thirds or Golden Section is that the subject of the image should not be in the center. There are several caveats to this premise: portraits, size of print, background if any, and how does the subject relate to the frame. Many famous portrait photographers, for example, place the subject squarely in the center for some of

their best work (e.g., Richard Avedon). So, be hesitant to automatically place your subject off-center.

As said earlier, the rule of thirds is an oversimplification of the Golden Section. The Greeks recognized that, in architecture, buildings that had a certain proportion were more pleasing to the eye than others. The mathematics for this observation is that a line divided up so that the ratio of the longer section to the whole is the same ratio as the shorter section is to the longer section.

As with architecture, the other arts including photography have been found to benefit from the Golden Section. Move your subject within the picture frame along the horizontal line and see at what point it appears most pleasing. It is very likely to be at the Golden Section. Try the same vertically. One caveat, it really depends on what format you are using. A square format camera such as a Hasselblad may not benefit from this treatment while a wider format, especially panoramas, will have a stronger, more balanced image.

Horizon Line

The horizon line gives a landscape image a sense of context. Without it, the viewer has to use some other visual clue in order to be oriented. One often hears the adage that the horizon line should not be in the center (often muttered by camera club trained judges). But actually, it depends. Quoting from John & David Collett's book, *B&W Landscape Photography*: "When the horizon cuts directly through the center of your landscape, your scene splits into two equal halves. Sometimes, this equal division can lead to a boring, overly static composition. In some cases, however, a centered horizon can emphasize a landscape's stillness, peacefulness, quietude, and symmetry." A lower or higher horizon line can make for a more dynamic image. Ask yourself what elements in the scene you wish to give more emphasis. If the elements are split evenly between upper and lower, then a centered horizon line can be effective.

Whether high or low, make sure your horizon line is level; otherwise you'll have to crop the image thereby potentially losing important detail.

Diagonal Lines

Diagonal lines suggest movement and tension. Crossing diagonal lines lead the eye like a focal point. This can be good or bad depending on the real subject of the image. Do the lines distract from the subject or do they lead you to the subject?

Curved Lines

Can be of two types: tight or erratic curves which suggest dynamic feeling while smooth, long curves are relaxing or even sensuous.

Shapes & Patterns

When a human looks at an image he tries to discern patterns even in chaotic scenes. Three stones whether spaced evenly or unevenly will be seen as a triangle, for example. Look for patterns in your field of vision, and hone in on them. Visual shapes, whether real or perceived, draw the viewer's eye. Each shape (circle, square, rectangle, triangle, or irregular) will have different aesthetic perceptions. The square and circle, for example, give a static feeling whereas the others are more dynamic.

Multiple shapes in a scene can be distracting, but they also can be repeating elements (a good thing if not overdone) such as a foreground rock with a background mountain. If repeating elements, look for odd number combinations (3, 5, 7 etc.).

Weight & Balance

A scene will have elements of weight and overall balance. A balanced image can be achieved symmetrically or asymmetrically. Every object in a scene has visual weight with larger and/or darker objects having more weight. That weight can be taken into consideration when trying to achieve a balanced scene. Consider your image like a see-saw with a varying fulcrum point. As a viewer, we subconsciously presume the fulcrum point to be the center of the print. If the two sides of the see-saw are equal, it is balanced thru symmetry or equal weights. If the fulcrum point is off to one side, the weight of one object is being counterbalanced by the lesser weights of several objects on the other. If there is no fulcrum point, then the image is unbalanced. This may be more dynamic but less satisfying for the viewer.

Viewpoint & Perspective

We are usually trying to make a 3 dimensional scene appear real on a 2 dimensional print. Visual clues/tricks used by other media such as painting can be used to create perspective. The inclusion of foreground to background lines such as a road. Or two or more people at varying distances. Or a familiar foreground object such as a tree branch. One of the problems is that the eye/mind expect the foreground object(s) to be in focus as well as the more distant subject of the image. Painters can do this easily but photographers have to grapple with such controls as depth of field. A wide-angle lens can help, or a lens that can tilt such as the Lensbabies, or a view camera.

For viewpoint, our choices are usually vertical or horizontal. You may think that for tall subjects you have to switch to vertical; but the mind has a tendency to complete an object when it goes beyond the frame. This suggests that you don't have to include the entire subject in the frame - move in closer and let the viewer mentally complete the image. This can add a dynamic aspect to your image.

Also an image that is not perfectly vertical or horizontal can be effective suggesting something taken in haste as in photojournalistic. But it can also look amateurish as in a snapshot, so use the technique with caution.

Background

Too often, we'll take a shot of a subject without thinking about the background. Our eyes have a narrow focal view so that only the subject of our interest is in focus; but the camera lens can have a far greater focus both in depth of field as well as side to side. This can be of benefit or a distraction. If you have a busy background that may distract from the subject, blur it through lower f/stop or find a simpler viewpoint.

When blurring a background, you also need to consider the type of blurring effect or Bokeh, which is defined in Wikipedia as "the appearance of out-of-focus areas in an image produced by a camera lens using a shallow depth of field. Different lens bokeh produces different aesthetic qualities in out-of-focus backgrounds, which are often used to reduce distractions and emphasize the primary subject." Some older lenses are prized for their Bokeh, e.g., swirling bokeh; but they can also be distracting like the doughnut shape of points of light in a mirror lens.

Reference

For more information on Composition, visit <http://photoinf.com/>