

PHOTO BASICS BY JIM CREW

This tutorial introduces new photographers to the basic photographic concepts that everyone needs to understand.

SEEING PHOTOS

Photographers eternally look for good subjects. The simple truth is that all objects are good subjects if they are photographed with skill and imagination. There is no magic formula.

The factors that make a good photograph are an interesting subject, composition and lighting. A fact of a photographer's life is that there are no new subjects – we have to find new ways of photographing old subjects.

The art of seeing a photograph is all about knowing *how* to photograph, not *what* to photograph. Consider the following concepts.

1. Use an abnormal format to add some vibrancy and interest. Take vertical landscapes and horizontal portraits instead of always being traditional.
2. By moving the viewpoint around and looking up or down you can make the image more dynamic and stronger.
3. Turn your snapshots into photographs by using light effectively. As a general rule avoid the middle part of the day.
4. Use the camera as an extension of your artistic sense.
5. Seeing a photograph is seeing how the subject will look when it is removed from its surroundings and presented on a small flat piece of paper.

The simple fact is it is not what you photograph but how you photograph.

COMPOSITION

The objective of photographic composition is to attract the viewer and focus and hold their attention to allow your message to be conveyed clearly.

Your picture cannot communicate if you can't get people to look at it.

Good composition is the key to this challenge.

The elements of composition that create the most effect are as follows.

Selection

That is what to include and what to leave out. Include only just what is necessary for your message and omit all else.

Completeness

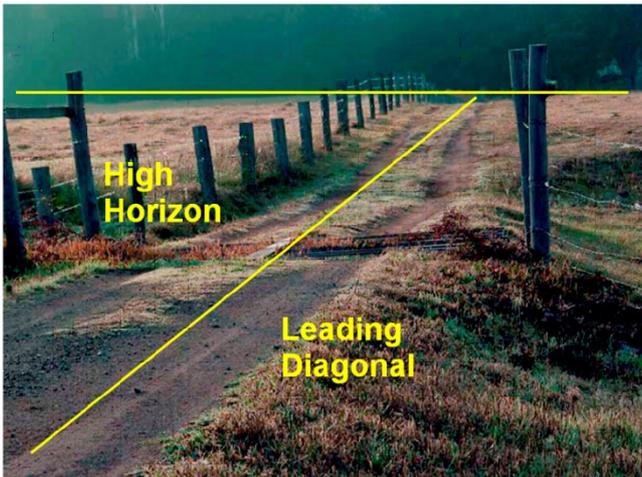
A photograph that does not present the complete message is like a book with the last chapter missing. The story cannot be effectively told.

Viewpoint

As we go about our daily lives we view the world from standing eye level. It is hard to present a subject in a novel way if we make all of our photographs while standing with the camera at eye level. A very simple method for creating interest in any subject is to select a high or low viewpoint.

The viewpoint also determines what the direction of light will be. By moving around the subject the best lighting result may be obtained.

Composition Lines



Techniques that can be used to create a pleasing composition include the use of lines.

The most popular line is the rising diagonal but a diagonal in any direction will help with the result. Lines that form triangles or circles can also be effective.

Space

The effective use of space within the frame is important to good composition. The subject should fit within the space but it is not necessary to always fill the space.

Selective Focus



Selective focus is a good tool for improving composition as it can be used to separate and isolate a subject from its background or to give prominence to one of a group of objects.

Tone

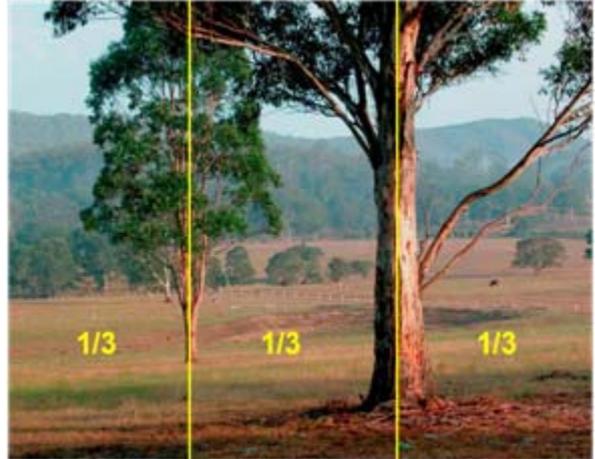
The viewer will be drawn to the lighter parts of the image and the use of tone is therefore an effective composition tool. Keep the darker tones around the edges of the frame and the lighter tones in the middle to create a spotlight effect on the subject to draw the viewer's attention.

Rules

There are many established rules of composition. Some of the more familiar are as follows.

1. **Golden mean** – the Greeks determined that paintings that had sides in the ratio of 5:4 were pleasing to the eye and this was said to be the golden mean.

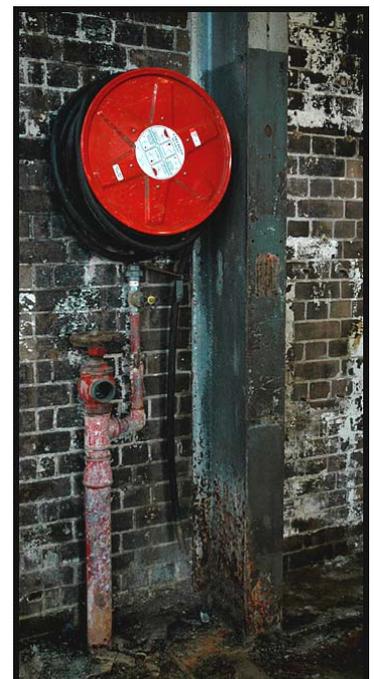
2. **Thirds** – by dividing the picture area into three equal slices in both the horizontal and vertical gives two lines in each direction to place the subject and four intersections to place the focal point. This is the rule of thirds and it will more often than not produce a pleasing photograph.



3. **Balance** – balancing the elements in the frame will provide a picture that is more easy to look at. Place large objects towards, but not in, the centre and balance them with smaller objects nearer the edges.



4. **Picture/subject shape** – in spite of the golden mean, consider making the shape of the frame suit the shape of the subject. If you have a tall thin subject use a tall thin frame. If you have a wide panoramic landscape use a picture shape that is also wide.



TECHNIQUES

Photographing Landscapes

The important aspects of landscape photography are capturing the grandeur of the scene and creating visual depth and a feeling of presence. Lighting is also most important.

Include an object in the foreground to which the viewer can relate to with regard to size to give dimension to your landscape and help depict scale and capture grandeur.

Use shorter focal length lenses to create a feeling of presence and to obtain a deep depth of field.

Photographing Buildings

The challenge of photographing buildings generally relates to their size. This causes converging verticals and sometimes loss of detail because you have to move away to fit the building in.

To overcome the converging verticals you have several options.

1. Deliberately accentuate them to emphasise the height of the building.
2. Find an elevated location from which to photograph, the building across the road for example.
3. Use a wide angle lens that includes a lot of foreground that can be cropped off later.
4. Use a long lens and move well away from the building.

To overcome the size of a building, consider concentrating on some of its architectural detail instead of the whole.

As with all photography light is most important when photographing buildings. With good light direction the detail will be lost and the building will look flat and dimensionless.

Photographing People

The contemporary style of photographing people generally requires an approach that gives a natural look. This will often mean the use of available light and casual poses.

The following points may help you obtain more interesting portraits. The list is not exhaustive but will give some suggestions to help you produce better pictures of people.

1. When posing a group of people try to obtain a natural arrangement rather than having the subjects in line.
2. When taking a head and shoulders portrait place the subject's eyes on the top third of the frame.
3. To obtain a different result, occasionally use a horizontal format.
4. Don't photograph in harsh sunlight – this can make the subject squint.
5. Don't have you subject force a smile, this will always look unnatural.

6. Use a reflector or second light source to balance the lighting and reduce harsh shadows.
7. Avoid direct flash.
8. Use a medium length lens to give a good perspective and selective focus to control depth of field.
9. Focus on the eyes.
10. Choose a compatible background.

10 Top Tricks

Observe the following 10 Top Tricks to improving your photos:

1 – Get Close



Whether you are photographing a large subject like the Sydney Opera House or a small insect, get close enough to fill the frame with the important subject elements.

Failure to observe this simple guideline accounts for more unsuccessful pictures than any other photo mistake.

If your pictures are not communicating it is most probable that you are not close enough.

2 – Simplicity

Look for simple single theme subjects and then cull out all unwanted detail.

Do not divide the viewer's interest by having more than one story line.

Choose a viewpoint that minimises the effect of background material. Getting close also helps to simplify your composition.



3 – Hold Camera Steady

Unless you deliberately want blur to create an effect, make sure you hold the camera steady and use the fastest practical shutter speed.

Unwanted camera movement will destroy details and make it difficult for your picture to communicate its message.



4 – Set Subject Off-centre

Most subjects benefit from being placed off centre. This generally gives the composition better balance and less rigidity.

However, a central placement used well can make a striking image.



5 – Watch the Horizon

It seems too obvious to warrant mention but many photographs suffer from not having the horizon horizontal.



A horizon that is not straight will invariably distract your viewer's attention and prevent your message from getting through.

6 – Light Direction

Add sparkle and impact to your pictures by carefully choosing the light direction. Side lighting will give better modelling and dimension to your subject and back lighting will add impact.

Strong backlighting will most probably require some fill light if silhouettes are to be avoided.

Strong cross lighting in a landscape will enhance the appearance of sharpness.



7 – Keep People Busy



When photographing people do it while they are occupied in an activity in which they have an interest.

This will give the photograph a natural and relaxed look.

8 – Consider Whole Picture

Before pressing the shutter have a look around the full area of the viewfinder to make sure that there are no distracting details.

Items such as rubbish in the foreground, a bright highlight or as is the case in this picture, writing that can detract from your main theme.



9 – Familiar with Equipment



Be thoroughly familiar with your equipment. Read the manuals carefully so that you understand all of the functions and controls.

Nothing stifles creativity more than stumbling with the hardware.

10 – Take Plenty of Photos

The more photos you take the more proficient you will become.

Be imaginative and experiment. This will broaden your knowledge and skill and allow you to get better results.

However, still plan and consider each shot – have you chosen the best viewpoint, lighting and composition?