

12 Elements of Composition

1) Rule of Thirds

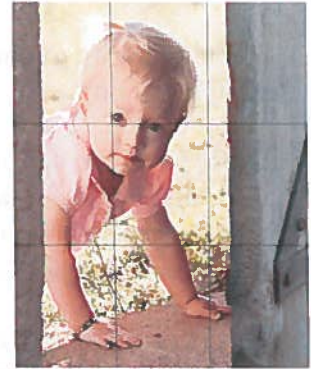
Just put your subject in the middle of the viewfinder and click – right? Wrong.

For a more professional and balanced image, imagine dividing the scene into thirds both horizontally and vertically.

[Photo Credit: Rachael Olson]

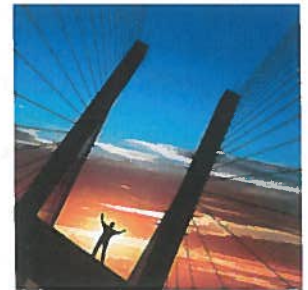
Make the focal point of your photograph land near one of the intersections. This will be more visually pleasing than centering your subject.

Here it is simply put: just move the frame so the subject is slightly off-center. Voila! An instantly more appealing picture.



2) Leading Lines

Lines in a photograph can lead the eye to the focal point. Slightly tilting the angle of the camera can make the lines more effective. (Note: one of my pet peeves is when someone just tilts the camera with no rhyme or reason to be “artistic”. Make sure the choice to tilt the camera fits with the lines of the scene).



3) Shapes

Photo Credit: Rachael Olson]

Most every picture has one or more shapes in it. (Think Sesame Street where they look for shapes everywhere). To make a photograph more interesting, you can change the composition to highlight the shape differently, like moving it to the side rather than centering it. You can also look for repeating shapes in a scene as an indicator that it might make an interesting image.



4) Repetition

[Photo Credit: Alisha Shaw]

Repeating shapes or patterns adds a little flavor to your pictures. Feel like that would make your picture too busy? Well, it's actually easier to focus on what is simple, so a repeating pattern may lead a person to your simple subject.



5) Contrast

By being aware of contrasting tones in an image you can make it more intriguing.

The best way to see the effect of contrast is by examining a black and white photo. In fact, black and white images are pretty blah without a good amount of contrast (think of it as the widest variety of discernible shades of gray – ranging from black to white).



It's the contrast between the subject and the background that makes the subject stand out. The eye is naturally drawn to light. If the lightest part of the scene is not where you want the viewer's eye drawn, then recompose or find a way to light your subject.

The mood of the photograph is affected by the intensity or subtlety of contrast. High Key photographs only have light tones (white to light gray) and feel bright and clean. Low Key images are more dramatic.

To understand another element of the importance of contrast, think how a landscape is more appealing when the sun is low compared to the appeal of the landscape at noon. There is more contrast between highlights and shadows with a low sun.

Look for contrast when composing your photographs, but also, you can increase it in a photo editing program.

6) Space

[Photo Credit: Rachael Olson]

This is really just something you need to **think** about – there really aren't *rules* involved here. Keep in mind what you want the focus to be. Will the background, foreground, or anything in between detract from your subject? Oftentimes simpler is better. Negative space (the space around the subject) can help balance the picture or it can be distracting, drawing the eye away from the subject. (See post on



Part 1: In summary:

Remember that *rules are made to be broken*. I admit to breaking the rule of thirds often. But there's a difference between not following the rules because you don't know them and CHOOSING to not follow them because *you* have a better idea.

7) Color

I was reading about King Henry VIII the other day. Apparently he and Anne Boleyn wore yellow after the death of his first wife, Katherine of Aragon – the queen beloved by the people. When you read that, how do feel they were reacting to her death? My first thought is they were jerks to wear such a joyful color (they claim they wore yellow because that represents mourning in Spain, where Katherine was from).



The point is, color can represent and even trigger emotions and moods. It's hard to imagine a picture of someone wearing yellow as depressing.

Consider the [mood](#) of the story you're telling with your picture. What colors will evoke the feelings you want from your viewer? Choose carefully what colors you include in the picture.

Colors like gray or blue can show sadness or depression (King Henry should have chose one of these). Or blue can be a peaceful, calming, color that people trust. Red and yellow make people hungry – think McDonald's.

8) Framing

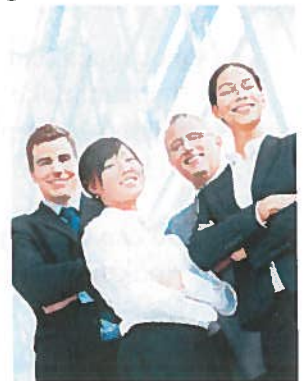
You can bring attention to your subject by placing a frame around it. And I'm not talking about framing a picture to hang it on the wall. Use elements within the picture itself such as windows, door frames, branches, etc. This would be a fun assignment to give yourself: look for elements around you that would make a good frame.



9) Perspective

The angle that you shoot from can significantly affect the drama of a photograph. Rather than just shooting straight on, try moving around your subject and shooting from different angles. Also, experiment with shooting from above and shooting upwards. Shooting down can make your subject seem more submissive to the viewer, while shooting up makes the subject seem dominant.

A change in perspective can also be [more flattering](#) to your subject. Rather than shooting down on a child, try crouching down to his level. Shooting up at a person who is weight-challenged will make him look even larger. So if your point is to make someone look dominant, but not fat, try going to the side of the person rather than shooting from directly in front of him. Shooting down may slim a person, but do you want them to look submissive?



Be careful that the camera to subject to background angle doesn't make it look like something in the background (like a pole or a tree) is growing out of the subject's head. Just a little change in your perspective can fix that.

Work to find a perspective that makes your picture stand out and conveys an appropriate message about your subject.

10) Horizon Lines

This goes along with perspective... changing the perspective can move where the horizon line falls in your picture. You don't want it going through someone's head. The horizon line is a leading line [see [Photography Composition Part 1](#)] and will lead eyes off the page. The subject of the image should be above or below the horizon line.



11) Cropping

This really goes along with all the other elements of composition we've discussed. Summed up, what do you want to include in the picture? Do you want to focus on details? Or are you trying to shoot a whole scene to [tell a story](#)?

I usually try different crops on the same subject and scene. I'll take some that include more of the scene and others that crop tightly on the subject with little negative space [see [Photography Composition Part 1](#)].

Cropping tightly when one would normally "point-and-shoot" a whole scene can make for a more interesting or dramatic photograph.

A note of caution: when photographing people, never crop at a joint like an elbow or knee. It naturally makes the viewer feel like something is missing. Choose somewhere in between like biceps or calves.



12) Juxtaposition

Once again, consider the [story you're telling with photography](#). Using opposites alongside each other can make your photograph more interesting. Examples are wrinkly skin next to baby skin (like this example of a grandma with her newborn granddaughter), salt and pepper, tennis shoes and heels, dogs and cats, etc.

You can create juxtaposition in a picture, but it's even more fun to look for it from a photojournalist perspective.



Final thoughts on composition

To move beyond being a point-and-shoot photographer, “open your brain” as a friend of mine says. Do the components of the picture tell the story you want? Are you capturing the important parts? Will it elicit the appropriate emotion? Is it interesting? Basically, will anyone’s eyes want stop to look at it?

Consider everything in the scene – will it add or detract from the photograph? Open your brain and make your pictures eye-catching!

