

Composition

Everyone takes photos these days – some 1.2 trillion (yes trillion) of them in 2018 alone.

But not all snaps are photographs. Images hastily taken on phones may tell you what a place looks like, but a photographer's mission is to capture how it feels.

Proper photographs tell stories, or suggest stories.

To record the subject, to do it justice, calls for no small amount of skill, not least, mastering a camera's technical abilities, post processing and not least – COMPOSITION.

So – where to start?

Some thoughts -

Photo composition is a visual language. Use it to record a scene/event, tell a story, and maybe ask 'What happens next?' or 'Where does this lead?'

Poor composition can make a fantastic subject dull, but a well-set scene can create a wonderful image from the most ordinary of situations.

Photo composition doesn't have to be complicated. There are all sorts of theories about the various 'rules' but if you pay too much attention to strict formulae, your photos may lose the spontaneity that can make them unique.

In the real world, you'll probably be working with a wide range of subjects and scenes, and this requires a more open-minded approach. What works for one photo won't necessarily work for another.

The key thing is to understand how all the decisions you make about composition can affect the way a shot looks and how people perceive your photos.

Technical know-how is very important in photography, of course, but to create great shots you need visual knowledge too. So here are 10 key things to look out for...

1. Keep it simple - fill the frame . . . or not?



When you look at a scene, your brain quickly picks out subjects of interest. But the camera captures everything in front of it, which can lead to a messy, cluttered picture.

Choose your main subject carefully, - then decide how big it should be in the frame. Leaving too much empty space can make your subject too small and can leave viewers confused about what they're supposed to be looking at.

To avoid this, zoom in to fill the frame, or get closer to the subject. This can give you a more interesting take on things. But on the other hand, leaving space around an isolated subject can give the scene a sense of scale and depth that may be lost by zooming in too close.

You must choose, depending on how you want to interpret or portray the scene before you.

Keep it simple for maximum impact.



2. Consider alternative view-points?



Selecting the most suitable camera viewpoint may seem obvious. But look around you - a better view-point, or even an alternative subject, maybe discovered by simply turning around, or walking a few yards!



And don't forget low down view-points for even more impact – a lot of modern cameras now have screens that swivel, so near-ground views are easier to achieve than ever.

3. Horizontal or Vertical?

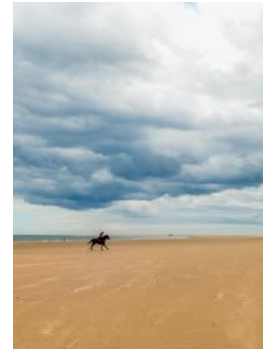
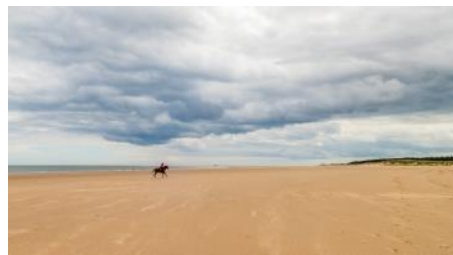


It's easy to get stuck in a rut and take every picture with the camera held horizontally. Try turning it to get a vertical shot instead, adjusting your position or the zoom setting as you experiment with the new style. You can usually improve on both horizontal and vertical shots by cropping or adjusting the photo later.



4. Avoid the middle? – Rule of Thirds

It's tempting to put your subject in the centre of the frame. However, this produces rather static, boring pictures – but not always! One of the ways to counteract this is to use the 'Rule of Thirds',



split the image into thirds, horizontally and vertically, and try to place your subject on one of these imaginary lines or intersections. Whilst 'safe', this can be an overrated approach, though.



Try moving your subject away from the centre and get a feel for how it can be balanced with everything else in the scene, including any areas of contrasting colour or light. There are no hard and fast rules about achieving this kind of visual balance, but you'll quickly learn to rely on your instincts - trust that you'll know when something just looks right.

5. Lead-in lines



A poorly composed photograph will leave your viewers unsure about where to look, and their attention might drift aimlessly around the scene without finding a clear focal point. However, you can use lines to control the way people's eyes move around the picture.

Converging lines give a strong sense of perspective and three-dimensional depth, drawing you into an image. Curved lines can lead you on a journey around the frame, leading you towards the main subject.



6. Use diagonals



Horizontal lines lend a static, calm feel to a picture, while vertical ones often suggest permanence and stability. To introduce a feeling of drama, movement or uncertainty, look for diagonal lines instead.

You can need nothing more than a shift in position or focal length to get them - wider

angles of view tend to introduce diagonal lines because of the increased perspective.

7. Space to move into

Photographs can convey a strong sense of movement. When we look at pictures, we see what's happening and tend to look ahead - this creates a feeling of imbalance or unease if your subject has nowhere to move except out of the frame.



You don't just get this effect with moving subjects, either. For example, when you look at a portrait you tend

to follow someone's gaze, and they need an area to look into. For both types of shot, there should always be a little more space ahead of the subject than behind it.



8. Backgrounds



Don't just concentrate on your subject - look at what's happening in the background, too. This ties in with 'simplifying the scene' and 'filling the frame'. You can't usually exclude the background completely, of course, but you can control it.

You'll often find that changing your position is enough to replace a cluttered background with one that complements your subject nicely. Or you can use a wide lens aperture and a longer focal length to throw the background out of focus.

It all depends on whether the background is part of the story you're trying to tell with the photo.

9. Creative with colours



Bright primary colours really attract the eye, especially when they're contrasted with a complementary hue. But there are other ways of creating colour contrasts - by including a bright splash of colour against a monochromatic background, for example. You don't need strong colour contrasts to create striking pictures, though.

Scenes consisting almost entirely of a single hue can be very effective. And those with a limited palette of harmonious shades, such as softly lit landscapes, often make great pictures.

The key is to be really selective about how you isolate and frame your subjects to exclude unwanted colours.



10. Break the rules!



Photo composition is a visual language - you can use it to make your pictures pass on a specific message. However, just as we sometimes use the written word to create a deliberate impact or effect, we can do the same with photos by breaking with standard composition conventions.

Doing it by accident doesn't count! It's when you understand the rules of composition and then break them on purpose that things start to get interesting. It's often best to break one rule at a time!

For every rule suggested, somewhere out there is a great picture that proves you can disregard it and still produce a fantastic image!

Remember – if you like your pic, that's great. If others like it too – that's a REAL bonus!

QUESTIONS?

Do horizons need straightening?
Do the diagonals work?
Does it need rotating to create better angles?
Does it have impact?
Is it balanced?
Do you like it?
Are you proud of it?

Composition – IN camera or OFF camera?

This very much depends on your individual preference and the subject you want to shoot. Composition is about how the structure of the various elements of the picture goes together and how their final positioning will convey the message or story you want to project.

For example when shooting still life or macro using a tripod, most of the composition will probably be done IN camera and its set up will reflect this - depth of field controlled by aperture, precise focusing points, low ISO ratings etc.

On the other hand if you're shooting moving subjects like street photography or a sports event, then you need to capture situations that can't be repeated. So higher shutter speeds and perhaps smaller apertures will be the order of the day.

Or maybe you're at a location and don't have the time to make considered decisions on the exact composition at the time. In that case it is vital to be aware of the main components that will make up the final picture and to ensure they are included. More exacting composition can then take place later, OFF camera.

Here probably are the two most important but simple tips for any OFF camera composition that can dramatically affect the outcome of your efforts:

1. STRAIGHTEN the picture – horizontally and/or vertically.

This may just be a simple case of straightening the horizon, a simple enough task with most editing software. A crooked horizon is a definite 'no no'! But it may involve more advanced procedures to correct misalignment of verticals, also possible with some software packages.

2. CROP the picture to achieve your objective.

This can turn a relatively ordinary picture to one with much more impact.

But don't forget – ALL 'rules' are made to be broken!