

GOING BEYOND THE RULE OF THIRDS

TAKE YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY COMPOSITION OUT OF FIRST GEAR

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FOREWORD

Every photographer invariably runs into the omnipresent *rule of thirds* at some point early in their learning. And while it has its place as a kind of compositional catch-all, it's easy to get caught in its spell to the detriment of your creativity and learning.

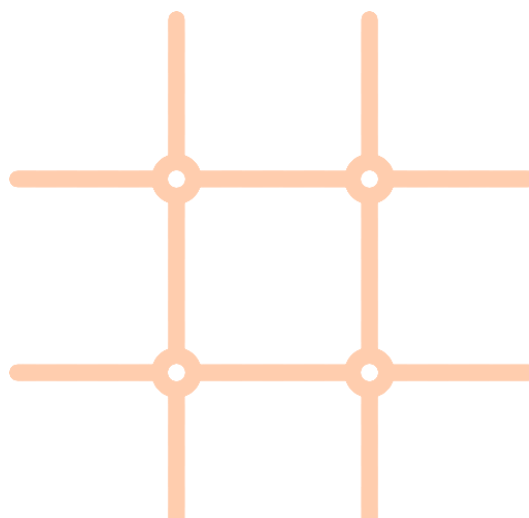
But for many of us, it's difficult to go beyond such strong guidelines... go where?

What we have tried to do with this guide is to give you a brief and useful set of compositional tactics to take you beyond the rule of thirds. This isn't meant to be a comprehensive treatise on photographic composition, but it is meant to help give you a roadmap for the next steps. To hopefully help spark your own creativity.



With that in mind, guides like this are best used in conjunction with practice. So take the examples offered and head out with a camera to make your own.

And, as with any hobby, enjoy yourself!



Rob Wood

Editor

Light Stalking

THE FIRST RULE OF PHOTOGRAPHY - WHAT EXACTLY IS THE RULE OF THIRDS?

When it comes to learning photography, there are some rudimentary rules and skills that everyone needs to understand quickly if they are going to start producing great images.

The Rule of Thirds can get you started very quickly in the realm of good composition, even if it's something you should try not to always be bound by.

In the world of art and photography composition, no rule is more fundamental than the Rule of Thirds.

It is no joke, the first of photography that you should learn is the rule of thirds. It is the very first thing that you need to know, even before the exposure triangle, and I'll tell you why.



Photo by Kevin Noble

My first encounter with the rule of thirds wasn't exactly delivered to me by a photographer, but my mother; and I wasn't exactly told in a nice way. I think I was like 14 years old when this happened...

We were at a family dinner, and the “family picture” moment arrived. I jumped up and went to take a photograph with my dad's digital camera, but my mom told me to leave the camera alone and to give it to my cousin – because he works as a photographer and he knows about composition.

Later that night I asked her about this “composition” thing, and she told me “yes, because most

people shoot things centred and they don't look good, he takes better photos so must know more about composition than you”.

At that time neither my mom nor I knew that she was talking about the first rule of photography...the rule of thirds.

After that moment, I always tried to be creative with any camera whenever I got the chance. Six years after that, when I began studying photography, I learned about the famous Rule of Thirds, and all made sense to me.

Eventually, anyone learns to expose by correctly mixing aperture, shutter speed and ISO, but few learn to see creatively, that's why I believe you should start with composition.

An Example Of The First Rule Of Photography

It is very likely that you have already heard about this “rule”. It is even possible that, as a new photographer, you've been encouraged to break this rule. However, I still consider the rule of thirds to be the most elegant rule there is in composition.

Let's look at the image below for example:



Photo by Mercedes Mehling

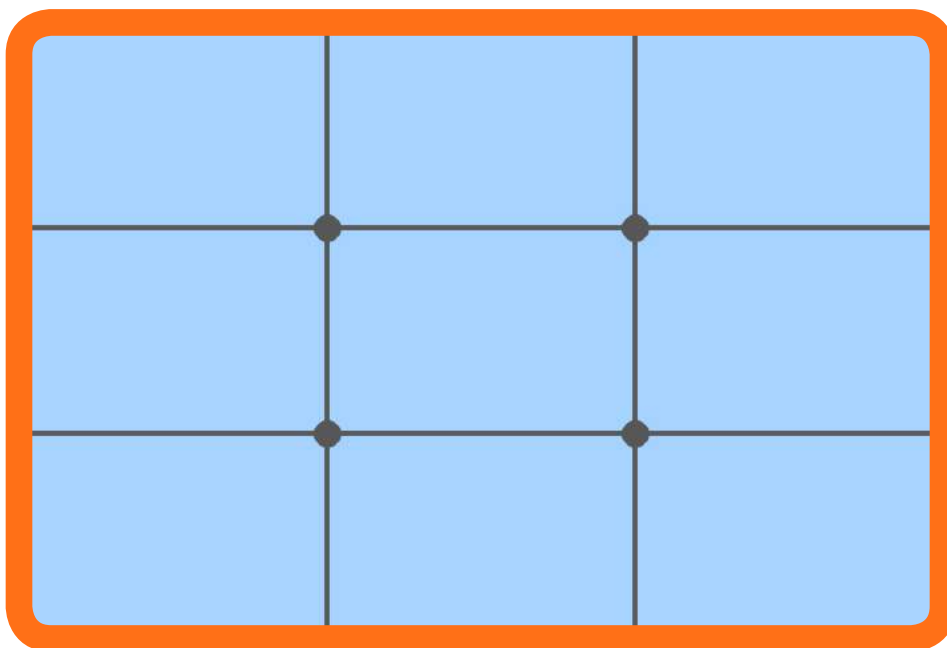
The photographer has shot the image with the Rule of Thirds in mind. The lighthouse and the tiny boats are all placed along or near the thirds grid. If the photographer had shot this image with the horizon and the lighthouse right in the middle of the frame, the image would have lost its impact.

No matter how good a photograph is, if it does not have a good composition, then the photograph fails and ends up with no meaning at all. In the photograph above the strength lies in the rule of thirds.

The Rule of Thirds is a basic yet useful technique for achieving balance in your photographs.

This is achieved simply by subdividing your frame into thirds with two vertical and two horizontal imaginary lines (pretty much like a tic-tac-toe board).

Some cameras have an incorporated grid that helps people figure them out. Even Adobe's Lightroom has a thirds grid when cropping images.



Where the horizontal and vertical lines meet is your focal point.

Illustration created for Light Stalking

The four sections where the lines cross are interest points, and if you want to enhance a subject's presence and interest in a photograph, you should place it at any or several of them (not randomly of course, with aesthetical purpose).

You'll rarely use all four points of interest at once, so don't worry about that.

Some people on the internet encourage young photographers to break this first rule of photography. And I do agree that the rule needs to be broken in order to achieve interesting results, but before breaking a rule, it should be mastered with practice. This rule is simple to learn, and it can take a number of years to master. And as pretty much everything that relates to composition, understanding it requires both theoretical knowledge, and tons of practice hours.

Of course, once you master the rule of thirds, it is at that point that you can start experimenting

with your photography composition.

MOVING BEYOND COMPOSING WITH THE RULE OF THIRDS

While the rule of thirds alone holds merit, it is not the only component one should reach for when composing a photograph. When used in conjunction with other important elements of composition, the rule of thirds can give you an image that really pops.

Next time you're lining up your viewfinder, take some of the following tips into consideration and see how they can all work together to have a positive effect on your photography.

Harmonize Negative and Positive Space

◀ In a nutshell, the positive space in a photograph is any space filled by your subject. Conversely, the negative space is any space that does not contain your subject. Negative space is commonly used in photography as a way to single out the subject such as in high key lighting, product photography, or when the sky is being used as a background to a bird flying through the air. The negative space, or background in such instances, is usually ignored altogether, while the eye focuses solely on the subject. Generally speaking, these are all effective uses of negative space, but it is not the only way to use it.

When taking a photograph, look to see if you can compose it so the negative and positive space provides definition and compliment each other. In the image below we see a great use of negative space by using the blue sky and the corner of the building that serves as the positive space.

Photo by

Max Rentmeester



Use Multiple Layers of Interest

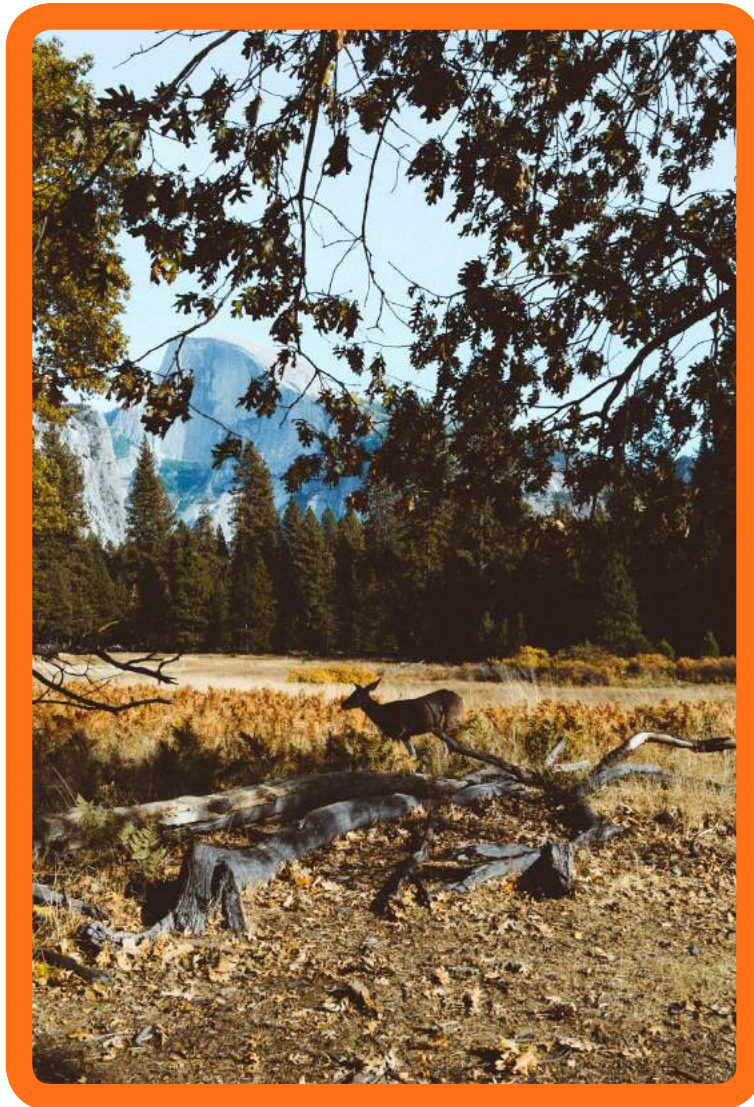


Photo by Michael Heuser

It's our duty as photographers to pay attention to the background and middle-ground of an image. In fact, it's almost second nature to make sure that the two compliment each other.

However, too often the foreground is paid little attention when it is not the primary focus of the image. Take note of the scene you are shooting and look for interesting elements that can provide an additional layer of interest.

For example, look at the photograph below. Notice how the fallen tree and rocky path in the foreground lead the eye to the middle of the image, where the deer has been captured in silhouette. Now look at the background of the image, the mountains in the distance add the third stratum to the image.

Start Using Your Feet

Don't forget that you and your tripod are mobile. Avoid falling into the habit of setting yourself up in one spot and staying put. If the situation allows for it, move around and explore the scene. Take photographs from many different angles and perspectives. Yes, you'll probably end up trashing a majority of the shots, but you'll be surprised at how often your initial vision of a photograph can be improved by a simple change of location. That is the beauty of shooting digital, it gives you the freedom to experiment without putting a huge dent into your pocketbook.

Of course, there are many other elements to composition that can improve a photograph. So let's look at some more rules of composition that will really take your photography to the next level.

LEADING LINES

Perhaps, one of the easiest but often overlooked compositional tool is that of leading lines, or in other words using a part of the image to move your eye towards the final subject.

Arguably, it is leading lines that, after the rule of thirds, should be the next rule that you look to master. Indeed, leading lines will improve your compositional technique.



Leading lines, a powerful compositional tool

Photo by Florian Schneider

So What Are Leading Lines?

As we mentioned before, they can be any element within the image frame that draws your eye further into the image and onto the main subject or focal point. Most commonly leading lines are used in landscape photography to draw to viewer into the scene, but they can be used in more or less any form of photography, from portraiture to macro.

Leading lines can be found virtually anywhere, from the shoreline of a river to the stone walls of a castle. The secret is to position yourself to maximize their impact. Rather than try and describe ways of using leading lines, the best way to understand the concept is from looking at images, so coming up below are a number of images and beneath each section is a brief description on how the leading lines are working.

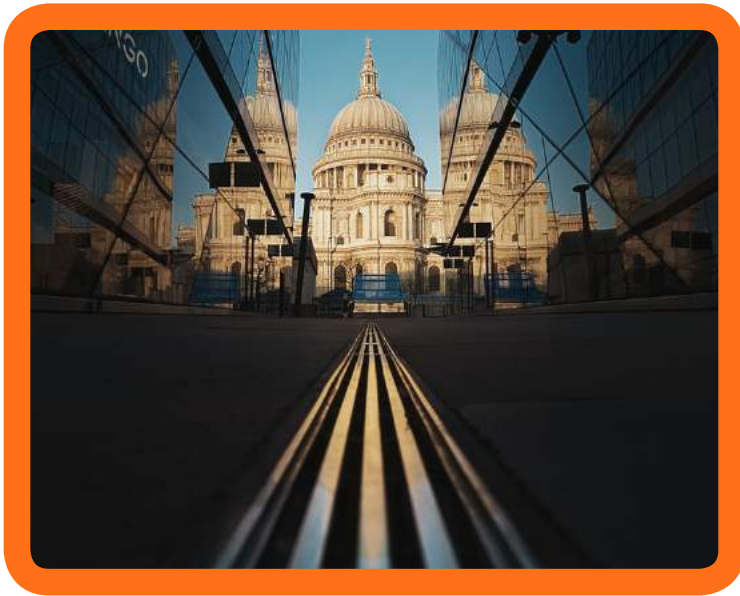


Photo by Roman Fox



Photo by Stefan Grage

These first two examples demonstrate the use of leading lines in architecture. The top image uses the straight lines in the pavement and in the reflective walls on both sides to draw the eye into the building in the frame. The second image uses the pier with illuminated lights ending up at



Photo by Jose Alba



Photo by Free-Photo



Photo by Luke Stackpoole



Photo by KS Kyung

In the samples above, we demonstrate leading lines bringing our eye to the subject and then continuing into the background. The rule of thirds is also in use with the subjects on the bottom



Photo by Gert Boers



Photo by Aaron Burden

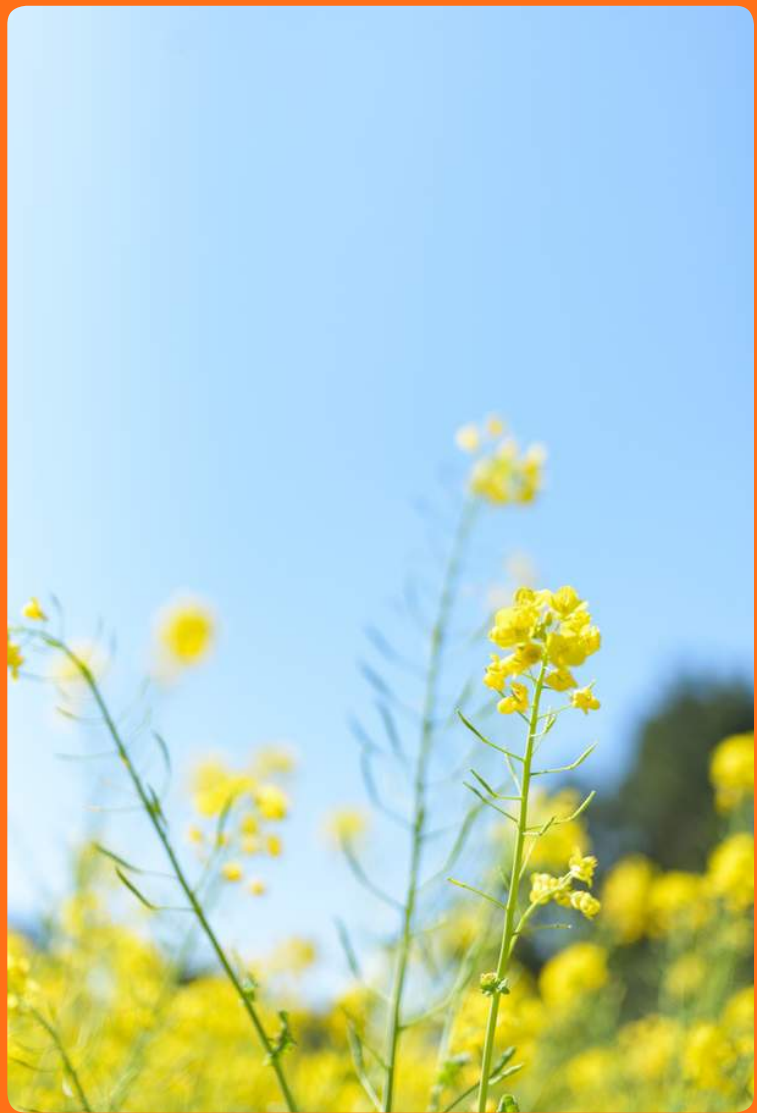


Photo by Masaaki Komori

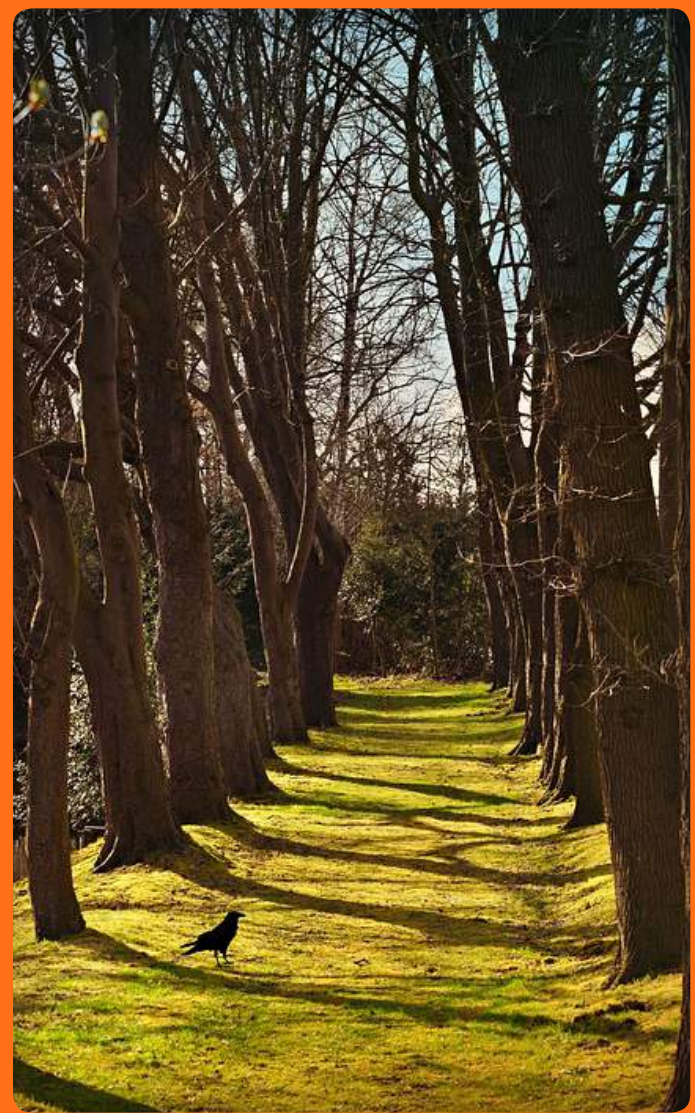


Photo by Mabel Amber

In these examples, we see two elements at play. First that the lines do not have to be strictly

defined and secondly that by controlling our depth of field we can enhance the effect of our lines.



Photo by João Marcelo Martins



Photo by Logga Wiggler



Photo by Fancy Crave

All these images above demonstrate complex leading lines along with following the rule of thirds. The top image uses the multiple lines on the road going around the lady on the road to draw your eye to the subject, while the second image uses the stone walls as leading lines to draw the viewer's attention towards the mountainous landscape and beyond. In the third image, the



Photo by StockSnap

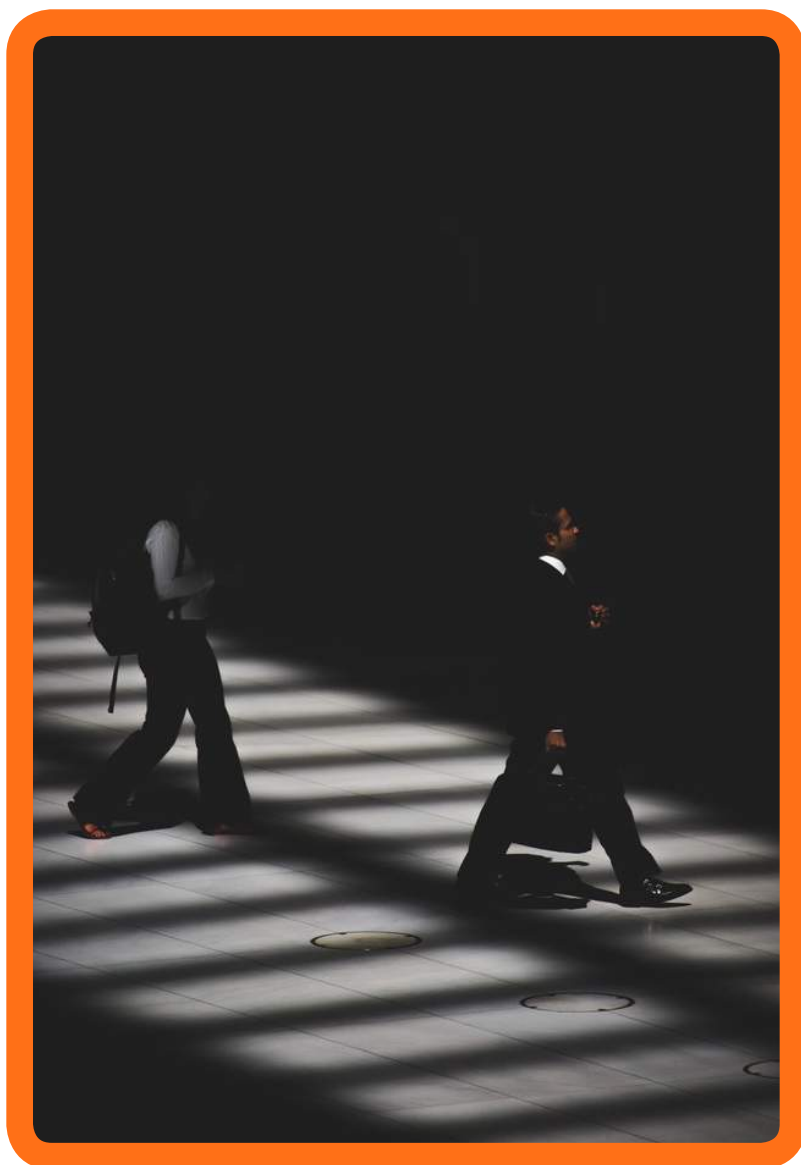


Photo by Jack Finnigan

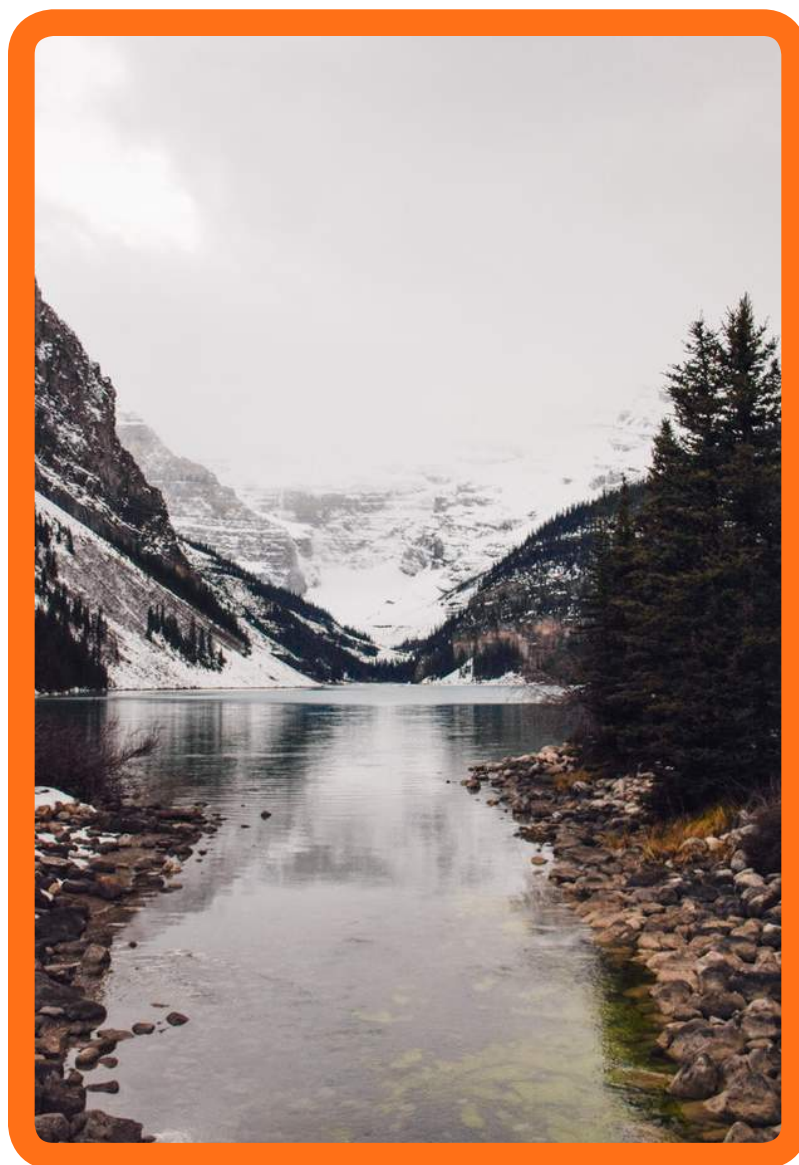


Photo by Ian Keefe

The first two images above use shadows as leading lines and the last image uses reflection to demonstrate that leading lines do not have to be physical things. In these images, the lines are defined by light and shade and naturally lead the eye to the subject. In the last image, the leading lines are defined by the light and shade of water and naturally leads the eye to the boat crossing the lake.

Leading lines appear virtually everywhere in life. They are a powerful compositional tool in the photographers' armoury that, when used well, can elevate an image from the mundane to the spectacular.

MORE ON USING LINES IN YOUR COMPOSITIONS

So the basics of leading lines in outlined above, but let's look at lines as a more advanced compositional element. Our world is a 3-dimensional space, yet every photograph we take is a 2-dimensional representation of it.

Therefore, it makes sense that lines play such an important role in composition.

In composition, lines play various roles, from giving the image a structure to even guiding the viewer in and out the image's own space. Lines are the most basic element of visual composition, and yet, they can be challenging to many photographers no matter their level of expertise.

The great thing about lines is that you can start looking for them pretty much right now, and you'll start to grow as a photographer in no time.

There are *5 types of lines* that you can find around you and I'm going to group them into *3 categories* – easy to find, hard to capture and extremely difficult to master.

1. Easy To Find Lines To Use In Your Compositions -



Photo by Kevin Mak

Easy to find lines are the simple ones:

- **VERTICALS,**
- **HORIZONTALS**

You can find vertical and horizontal lines using roads, trees, buildings, fences etc just to

name a few.

A note on vertical and horizontal lines – verticals can give a feeling of movement and direction and, of course, height. this compares with horizontal lines, which while still a strong



Photo by Behzad Ghaffarian

In the harder to capture field, are those that are more fluid in nature:

- **DIAGONALS**
- **ORGANIC LINES**

Diagonal lines are still obvious to the naked eye, but they have a twist thanks to their dynamic position in the frame. You need to be careful, as you can “cut” your frame in half or remove the focus from subject easily.

Organic lines are those created by nature, which are obviously not perfect but can give an extremely uplifting notch to your photographs. Diagonal and organic lines can be found in the shape of a path, a river, or even the fall of natural light on a scene.

PRO TIP: Blending together easy to find lines with diagonal lines will help you create a nice composition filled with power and dynamics.



Photo by Lance Asper

Last but not least, we have those lines that are super difficult to master:

- **IMPLIED LINES**

Implied lines are those lines that are not really present but can be felt. The best example is when a photograph depicts two people looking at each other. The sense of tension between them creates an implied line that is not really there but can be felt.

THE S-CURVE

In a similar vein to leading lines, is the S-Curve. While the rule of thirds is among the most common building block in composition, the S-curve is definitely one to be on the lookout for.

The S-curve can lead into or out of a scene, start at the bottom or side, but fundamentally it will roughly shape the letter S and either define the photograph or split the composition into two sections.



Photo by Ethan Dow



S-curves also don't need to be used as separators or dividers, they can also be utilized as the focal point of the photo.



Photo by Marc Zimmer

While these three examples show mostly landscapes, S-curves are visible in almost all types of photography, including shooting people and groups. The key is to look for and exploit the opportunities you have to utilize these soft, flowing lines to either help create compositional separation in the frame or utilize the curve itself as the focal point and featured portion of the image.

Now that you've mastered the rule of thirds and leading lines, it is worth your time understanding a simple but effective rule in the rule of odds.

THE RULE OF ODDS

The rule of odds is a fascinating compositional rule which is all about creating visual pleasure. We get joy from our subjects being framed – ie 2 elements on either side of the subject making for 3 in our rule of odds. The human brain is hardwired for arranging things into symmetrical compositions – it is just aesthetically pleasing.

◀ The rule of odds is all about using that psychological condition of the human brain in order to make some really interesting and pleasant compositions in photography. Unlike the rule of thirds, this “rule” isn't about where you place your subject in the frame of your photo but with arranging elements into very functional and good-looking quantities.

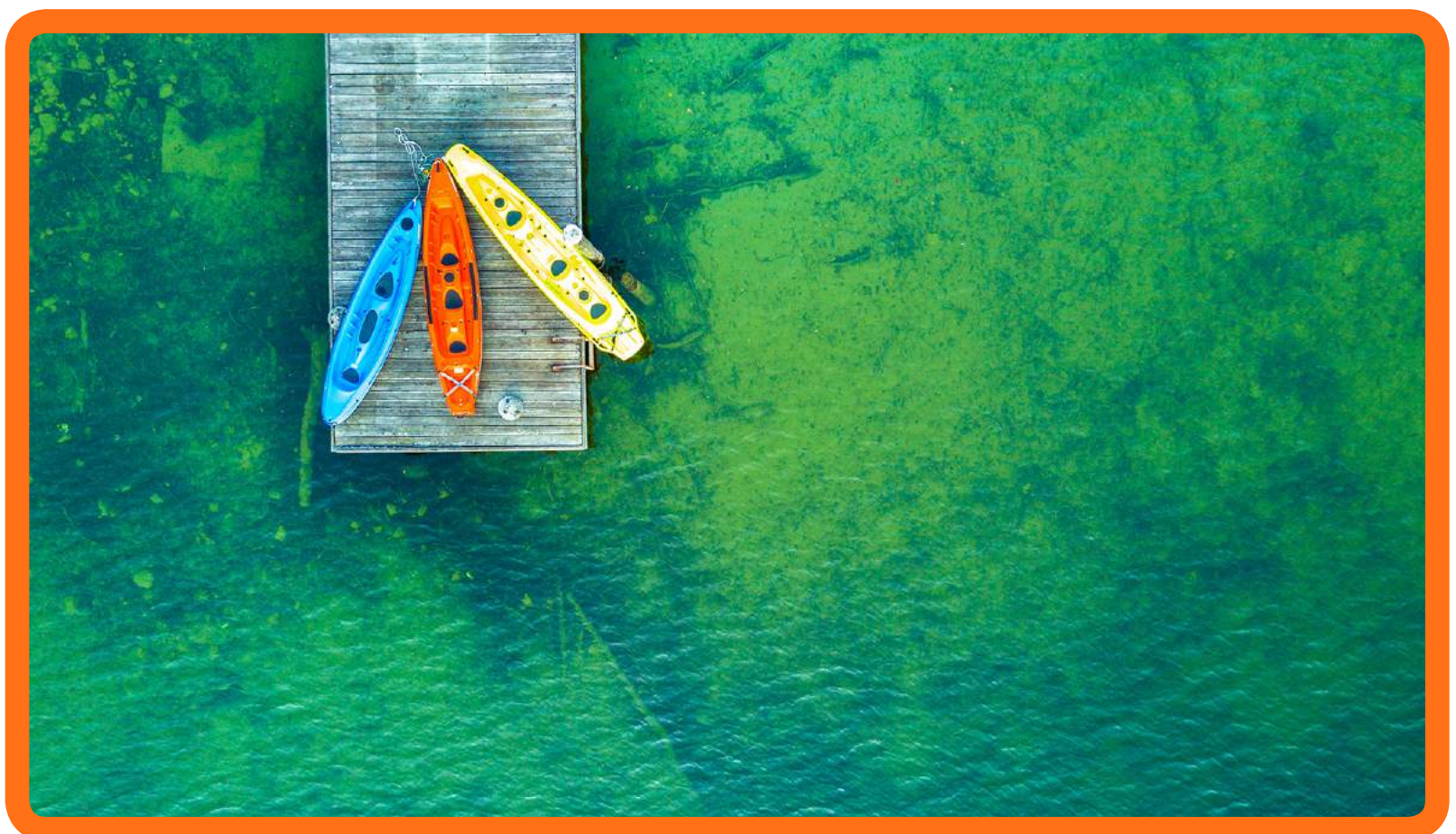


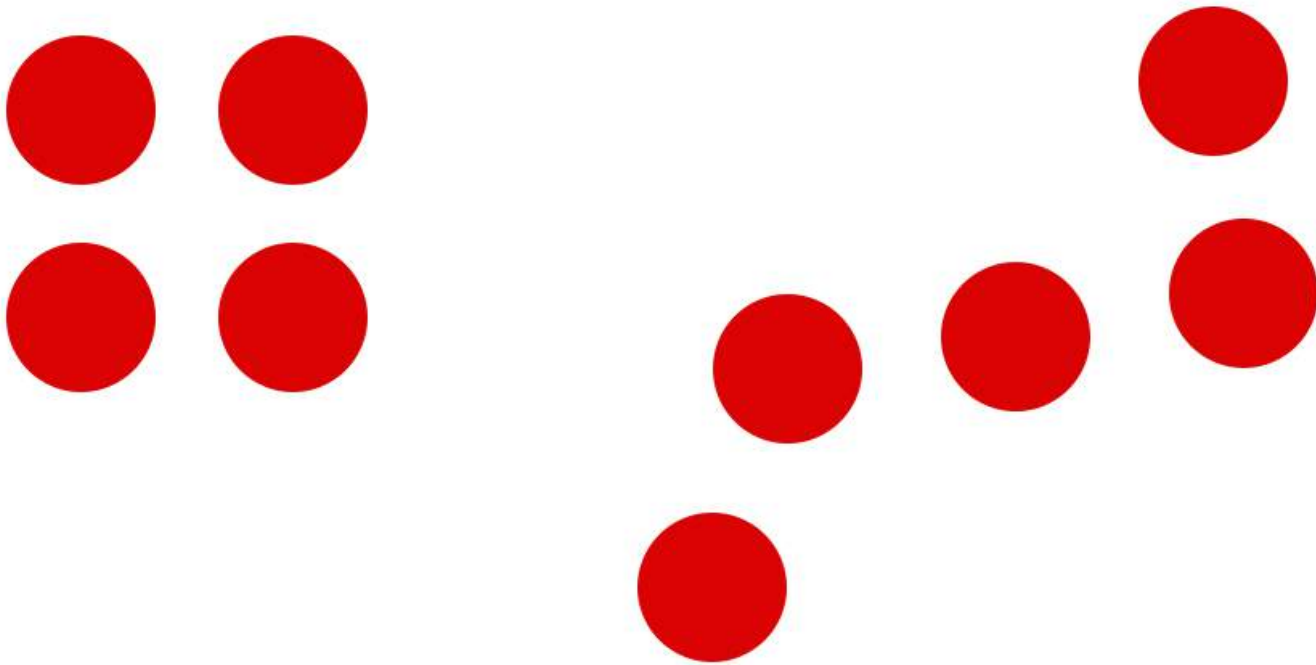
Photo by Willian Justen de Vasconcellos

Why Is It Rule Of Odds And Not Rule Of Evens?

Elements arranged into even numbers suffer from our own human urge to group things out. If a group is composed of 2 or 4 elements, our brain will immediately try to split them out into two groups. Even numbers also create some sort of competition between the elements constructing the group. There is competition with the eye wandering between the evenly matched grouping, trying to figure out which is the element that we should focus on. Even numbers create symmetry that is in fact unnaturally static.



You can see the difference two and three elements create (*illustration created for Light Stalking*).



Here again, you can see that the one with 4 elements is highly static forming a perfect symmetry or geometry whereas the one with five elements creates a dynamic feeling (*illustration created for Light Stalking*).

How Should You Compose Your Elements

You can give a subject a high level of protagonism simply by surrounding it with other subjects, as long as you keep things in odd numbers.

You can give a subject a high level of protagonism simply by surrounding it with other subjects, as long as you keep things in odd numbers.

The best way of using the rule of odds is to adjust your composition so that your subject remains the focus of your image – perhaps you can use smaller objects in the frame, or think about using distance – ie putting your elements on another plane, or perhaps having some of your composition out of focus as well.

You are looking to frame your subject, so you could try some of the following compositional choices:

- 1. You can put your subjects in a line – side by side or perhaps vertically**
- 2. Or try a triangle formation**
- 3. When there are more than 3 elements, move them around to create a pleasing composition in the frame**



Photo by Aaron Burden

Yes, Overcrowding Your Image Is Possible!

Remember with the rule of odds that we are really talking about limiting your compositional

elements to 3 or possibly 5. You can still have odds with 5 or 7 objects, but you should stay with small populated groups, otherwise, you'll start falling more into the trap of repetition, patterns or rhythm instead of simple odds. And then we are back to your brain trying to group them and wandering around trying to find the focus. Also, the human brain has a better chance of feeling attracted to arrangements of 3 to 5 elements tops.



Photo by Simon Matzinger

Make Sure You Create A Subject With The Group

Sometimes, when using the rule of odds, the grouping can become the whole image, by that I mean that you've diluted the impact of your actual subject. So make sure that you have the focus of your image in mind when you are constructing your composition. You can have a group made with odd elements but perhaps remember to still lay them out with the rule of thirds in mind.

Now that you are building your repertoire, it is worth understanding more advanced composition techniques to really make your images pop.

MORE ADVANCED COMPOSITION TECHNIQUES

Photographic composition is a topic that usually begins with discussions about the rule of thirds and golden section and ends with people's eyes glazing over. But when you start digging deeper,

there are a lot of useful things to get to know that will help you get more powerful images.

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is basically when two things are next to each other and have a contrasting effect. That might be visual contrast or even topic contrast or emotional contrast.

In photography, good images that display strong juxtapositions are highly regarded. They require either a good eye for visual contrast or patience and luck spotting visual examples of for emotional contrast.

Juxtaposition in photography is a common and popular element of composition. What is important to understand is that juxtaposition is more an element or technique than a genre.

It can be extremely subtle, almost unnoticeable, or strikingly obvious. Here we will review how to use juxtaposition in photography and show you how it can be a tool you can use to overcome a creative block.

What Is Juxtaposition In Photography?



First things first: let's define this weird word, juxtaposition. In photography, it is the act of framing two different elements to relate them in some way. Juxtaposition can be used for anything from humor to complaint and is a powerful element that can make your images more striking.

Even though the word “juxtaposition” sounds a bit pretentious, it is an extremely important element in photography. By relating two dissonant elements, the act of telling a story becomes more efficient. After all, the great thing about meaningful photographs is that, by themselves, without additional explanation, they can tell a story. Juxtaposition in photography is often seen to be more powerful than any other visual format because it is

Photo by Toa Heftiba

capable of relating two essences, two realities.

The trick with juxtaposition is that you need to be able to capture with your camera the unseen relationship between the two elements. If it is a trivial thing, it might not create the impact you're looking for. We talk about only two elements because the resulting clash of an almost binary situation in the frame makes it so powerful.



Photo by Matthew T Rader

The great thing about juxtaposition in photography is that it can be very simple or extremely complex, even conceptual. The important thing is to get the viewers' attention so that they will eventually discover the messages in your image, thanks to the relationship between the opposing elements. Remember – one major goal when creating meaningful photographs is to make people stop and read it.

Why Does Juxtaposition Work So Well In Photography?

The answer is very simple: because capturing or creating a juxtaposed situation is hard. Good things always require effort. That's why juxtaposition is a useful way to surpass a creative block. The element of surprise is crucial to a good juxtaposition. Two unrelated elements coexisting in the same area of a frame in a totally unexpected way – that's the art of juxtaposition in photography. It is the quintessential evidence that a photographer was not only creative but extremely aware of what was going on. It is also proof that, as a photographer, they are alert enough to be open to the possibilities that arise.

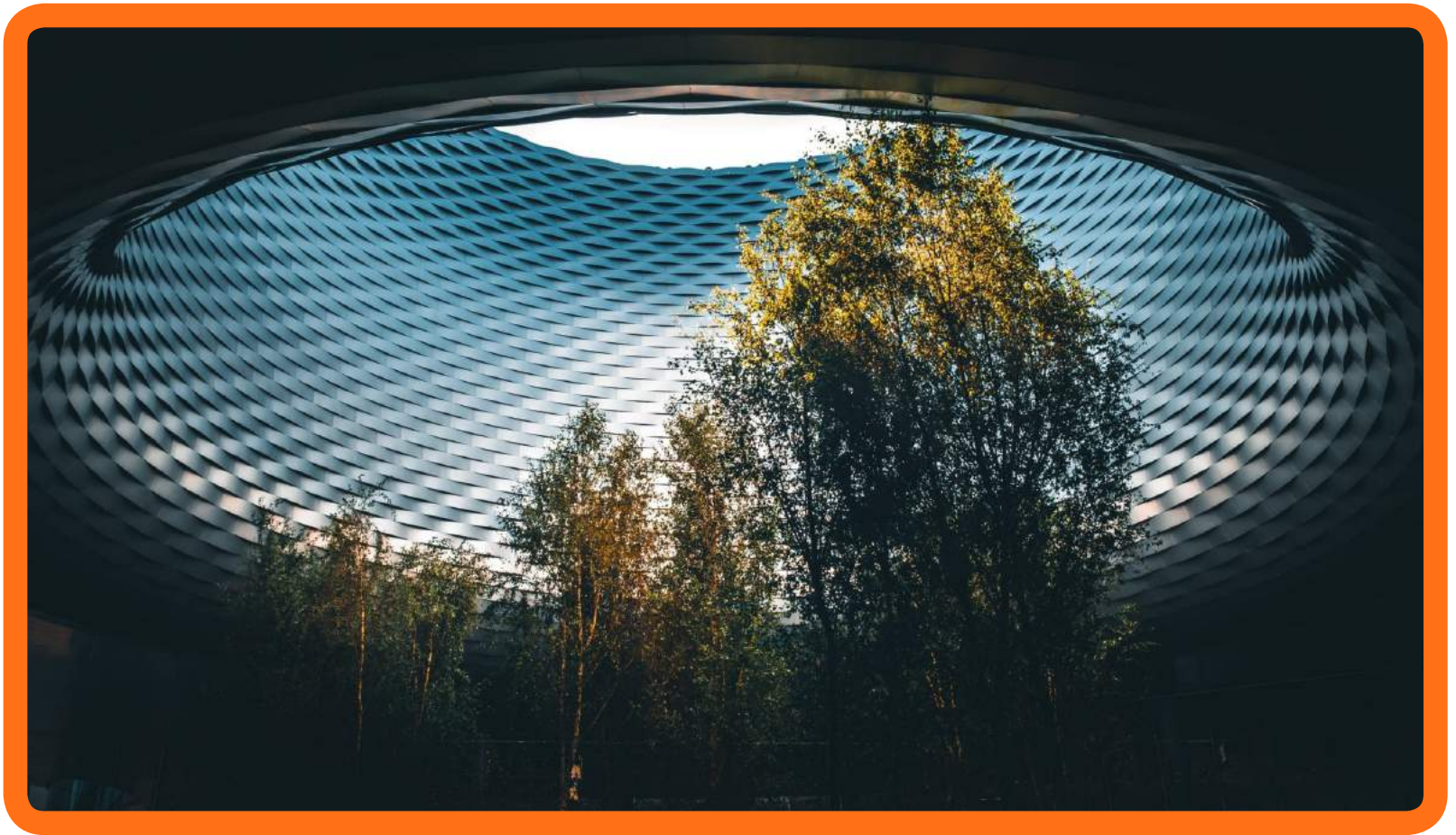


Photo by Serhat Beyazkaya

Many images that present juxtaposition show things like people holding up buildings or the sun, forexample. The challenge here is to look for new things that are engaging.



Photo by Jon Tyson

After all, the purpose of using this tool is to emerge from creative stagnation. But not all juxtapositions need people – and that’s the wonderful thing about this strategy: basically everything has the potential to be part of a relationship that is completely opposed to its own essence; as a result, it will give an image that surprises, and that is worth capturing.

Getting a juxtaposition to work can’t always be done at first since it is not easy. To suddenly find both an opposite relationship and an aesthetic blend between two elements that can activate a satisfactory reaction in the human mind is the result of huge effort, and even a bit of luck.

Techniques To Capturing Juxtaposition

Composition, depth of field and a wide-angle lens will make using juxtaposition in photography easier for you. It is important that all the elements in the image are easy to recognize since you are trying to present an odd relationship between the two elements.

It's highly likely that you can have such elements interacting in your frame, but not in the same space. Wide-angle lenses are extremely helpful for getting rich amounts of context, which will allow you to capture the story in your frame. If you are working on a concept-based photograph, the concept of your photo needs to be extremely carefully developed as well.

Selecting the right focal length will help you make the elements closest to the lens appear larger or smaller, depending on what effect you ultimately want. The important thing here is that the focal length will depend on the kind of juxtaposition you are trying to photograph.

When composing your shot, it is important to keep it simple and potentially restrict yourself to two elements in the frame. The important thing about the image will be the relationship between these elements; any other element will have the potential to inject unwanted chaos into the image, and that will reduce its impact.



Photo by Kevin Jarrett

Use juxtaposition in photography wisely, and I guarantee you that you'll achieve extremely powerful images. Before getting out there, try to think about what elements might offer great juxtapositions in your current surroundings.

Some brainstorming material to get you started might be old and new, black and white, war and peace, traditional and modern, natural and artificial. The key here is to jolt the viewer with the stark difference between two things.

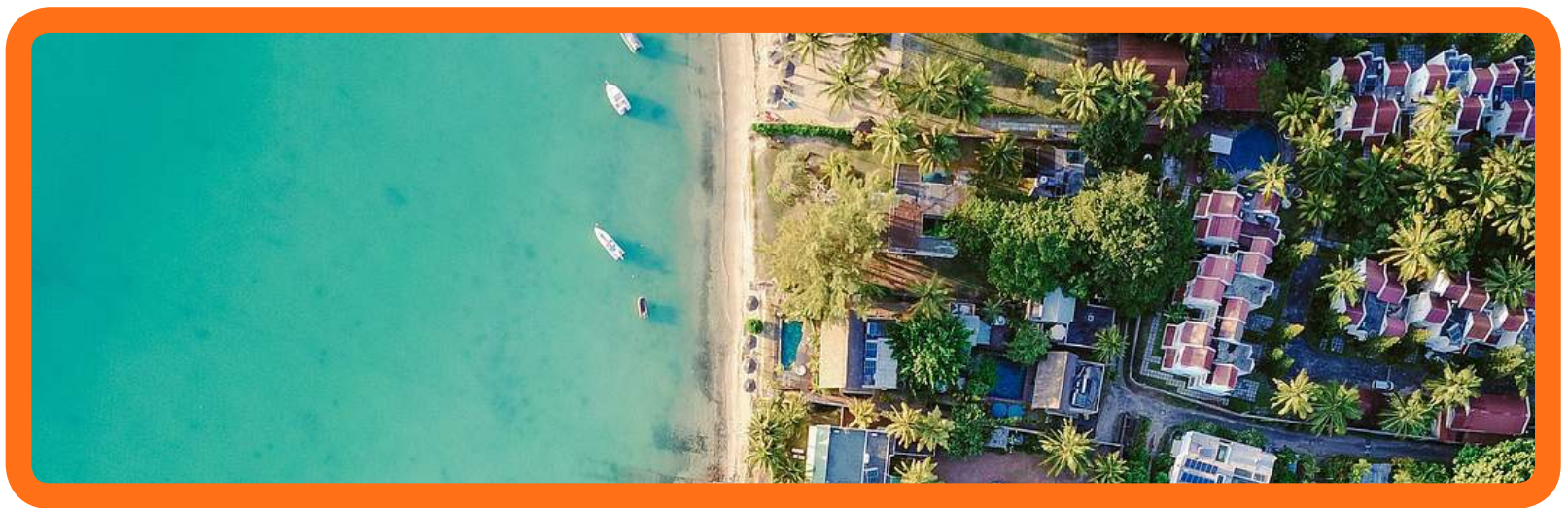


Photo by Pexels

This aerial drone photo from pexels is a great demonstration of a juxtaposed scene – in this case, the busy land against the smooth sea.



Photo by Rawpixel

Another example of juxtaposition as a compositional element of a photograph. This image is a great example of the pink lemon juxtaposed against the yellow lemons.

FRAMING AND LAYERING

First up, layering a technique favoured by photographers to show visual depth in an image. At its simpler end, it simply creates a visual difference between “layers” of a scene (foreground, mid-ground, and background for example).

NOTE: The longer the focal length of your lens, the “tighter” the layers of an image will appear stacked.

Here are some examples of scenes composed with layering in mind:



Photo by Nuno Lopes

This photo by Nuno Lopes is a classic example of how landscape photographers often use layering in mountains. The haze also helps with this effect.



Photo by Jeswin Thomas

Another successful example of layering the foreground, midground and background by Jeswin Thomas. In the same vein as layering, we have the compositional element of framing. Every photograph has a frame. By its very nature, the top, bottom, and sides of a photo be it digital or printed are the boundaries of our composition.

However, composition does not have to stop at the physical or digital edges of our images. Very often we add an extra frame to the outside of our images. This could be a photo frame for a print or a black border for a digital image. Both will change the composition of the image.

There is, of course, another type of frame that we can use in photography, one that changes the feel of a composition significantly more than an external frame. We are talking about frames within our images and today we are going to take a look at it.



Photo by Cosmic Timetraveler

Frames are a way of isolating our subject

What Are Frames?

A frame within an image is an element of the shot that blocks our eyes from wandering away from our chosen subject matter. This element can be physical such as a door or window frame or it could be something like a shadow or a line of low dark clouds. To make a good frame the elements that make it up have to have a strong geometrical presence in the image without moving visual weight away from the subject matter. One important thing to note is that frames within frames do not have to bound the entire image, they can be limited just two or three of the image's limits.

Why Use Frames?

So why would we use frames in our photographic compositions? There are multiple reasons, we might be trying to give our image a sense of depth, a three-dimensional feel. A frame will instantly tell the viewer that there are two very different areas to the image, a foreground, the frame and a background, the subject. A frame that has a deep width can further enhance that depth by creating leading lines in towards the subject. All of this changes the perception of a two-dimensional image into one with a three-dimensional feel.



Photo by Kristopher Robinson

Even a reflection in glass can be used as a frame

We may wish to lead our viewer's eye on a journey through the images and towards the subject.

A carefully composed frame can do this by preventing the eye from wandering to the image's edge and beyond. The strong graphic element of the frame acts as a boundary to the composition pushing our eyes back towards the main subject matter. Frames can add a sense of mystery to our images. Looking through a window our eye is focused on one subject but our mind might question what lies outside the boundaries. They can also add context as in the images below.



Photo by Skeeze



Photo by Kris Cros

Types Of Frames

A frame can completely surround the subject, such as a window or frame the subject in two or three directions. The frame can be a man-made object or a natural one. A completely closed frame works as a very strong device for leading the eye to the subject. The way the frame is lit will change the perception of that subject. For example, if we are shooting a yacht at sea through a window, if we expose the interior of that window to be very dark, we create a bold geometric shape that focuses our eye solely on the yacht. If however we also add light to the interior, the whole mood of the image changes. With the window frame lit we are in that room looking out at a yacht, the mere act of lighting the interior gives us a sense of mystery.



Photo by Tim Gouw

Couple framed between tree branches



Photo by Harli Marten

Subjects framed by the tree



Framing on two or three sides gives us a more fluid image, it allows our eye to wander yet return to the subject. This type of framing works well with natural frames such as trees, leaves and plants. Their softer edges allow the subject to breathe and give us more tranquil feel to the image.

Photo by Charles Postiaux

The trees frame the buildings on two sides

When using framing in your shots you will often have to work in other compositional techniques. For a strong bold image, you can use symmetry and a fully closed frame. The symmetry will come from the identical sides of that frame. As mentioned before, if our frame has a certain amount of depth, we can use that as a leading line. The join between the side and bottom of a castle's window, for example, can lead the eye out through that window. Thirds work well within framed images. Make sure to position your subject on a third within the frame and not within the whole image.



Photo by Hieu Vu Minh

Frames working with symmetry and leading lines

Frames are a powerful way to isolate an image and create a feel or mood. They are all around us, be it natural or man-made. Next time you are shooting take a look to see if you can incorporate a frame within your shot.

COMPOSING WITH COLOR

Colour is fundamental to composition in photography, and before anyone screams about black and white, it's actually fundamental to that too. Colour can contrast, complement and enhance our images depending on the way we use it. But how do we know which colours work together? Are there colour combinations we should avoid? Today we are going to break colour down into its constituent part, **primary, secondary and complimentary**.

The Primary Colours

◀ The primaries are the building blocks as far as photography is concerned. You will know them to be red, green and blue and combinations of these three will give us any other colour. They are also the basis for our camera's sensors. Any one pixel will either capture red, green or blue light. The amount of red, green and blue that these pixels capture and the fact that they are so tightly packed together is how our camera's render colour in a digital image.



Photo by Devin Edwards

Much of the way we work with colour in post-production is based around red green blue. Colour profiles for cameras, screens and printing work with red, green and blue. It's even one of the ways we can define an absolute colour, by using RGB values. These numbers will reproduce the same colour no matter what the software we are using.

The primaries alone can give us a very striking colour contrast in our images. However, when we mix in the secondaries, we get even more creative possibilities.



Photo by Mark Grandcourt



Photo by Mohammad Faruque

All three primaries in one shot make for a striking image

The Secondary Colors

The photographic secondaries can be seen as the polar opposites to the primary colours. The secondary to red is cyan, of green is magenta and of blue is yellow. In film photography and in digital post-production we can use the secondaries to remove a primary cast. For example, if we have an image that is looking way too blue, we add yellow to make it look more natural.

This is particularly useful when correcting particular tonal ranges in images. Shadows sometimes have the tendency to go a little blue. By adding yellow in the shadow tonal range we can counter that without compromising the entire image. A similar example might be if we have a sunset sky that looks way too red, we can add cyan in the highlight tonal range to counter it.

Interestingly, images that combine red with cyan or green with magenta can be very jarring and uncomfortable to the eye, yet blue and yellow often compliment each other well. Think of the number of sports teams that play in blue and yellow. That leads us nicely on to the complementary colours.



Photo by Vincent Giersch

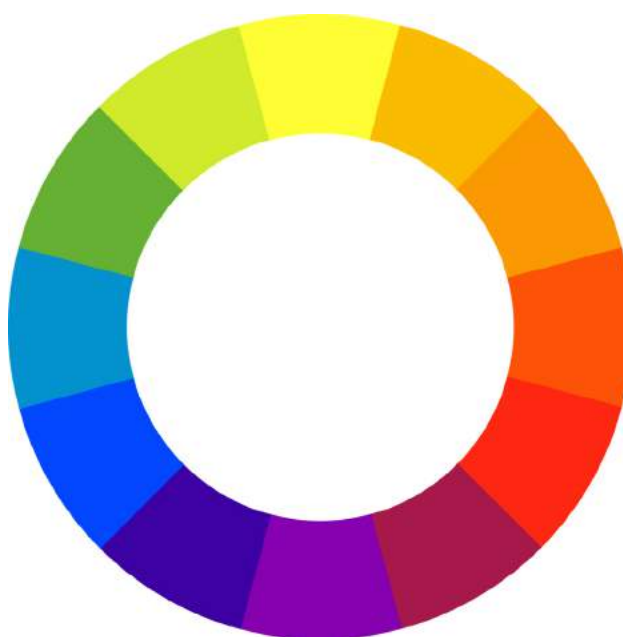


Photo by Andrew Pons

Orange/Yellow with blue combination works well in compositions.

The Complementary Colours

Artists have known for hundreds of years that certain colours work well together, complement each other. Fortunately, there is a very easy guide to help us in deciding which colours are complementary. It's called the colour wheel and most versions of it show 12 colours. These are the three primaries, three secondaries, and six other well-known colours.



The Color Wheel - Public Domain

In order to find the most complimentary colour, you look at the colours opposite on the colour wheel. For example, if you were shooting a subject that was predominantly red and you want to add in a striking contrast you would use green, the colour opposite in the wheel.



Photo by Anders Wetterstam

Red and green should never be seen? They can in photography.



Colour opposites often combine well

Image - Public Domain

◀ Complementary colors and pairs that provide a striking contrast in an image and yet are pleasing to the eye. We can use a combination of complementaries to draw attention to a subject or to provide a juxtaposition to it. However, there is a second benefit to the colour wheel in that many of the colours that lie next to each other, also complement each other. Rather than providing a striking contrast, they work to produce a subtle and delicate difference that is particularly suited to a low key muted style of photograph.

This is especially true on the right side of our colour wheel between the red and green. The colours here might be considered pastel shades, subtle but very effective in compositions.

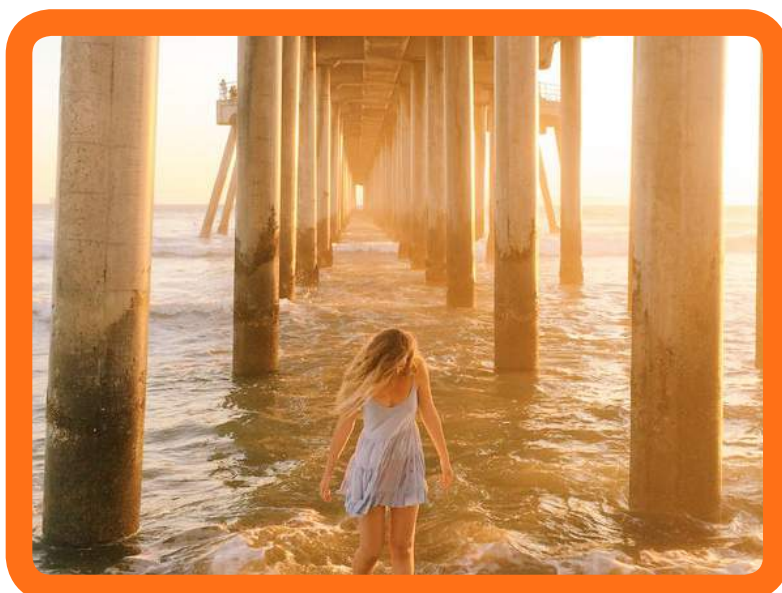


Photo by Greg Rakozzy



Photo by Marsel Mufaharov

These colours are grouped closely together on the colour wheel.



Close groups of colours on the wheel often create subtle images

Image - Public Domain



Photo by Robert Bye



Photo by Fereshteh Azadi

These images are predominately shades of blue.

Color science in photography is complicated. However, by understanding the basics of the primary, secondary and complementary colours we can greatly enhance the way we take photos. Understanding the way these colours relate to each other is an extremely useful thing to learn and to practice. Next time you are out with your camera, take some time to look for combinations of colours that work well together. Then when you get home, compare them to the colour wheel. There is a pretty good chance that the colours you picked are the ones represented on the wheel.

TRY SPOT COLOR COMPOSITION

Spot colour is characterized by placing an element of colour in a broader scene. Most typically, it is done with bright or contrasting colours to produce very strong images in which the viewer is compelled to look at that part of the photograph. Spot colour is perhaps one of the easier ways to get a powerful composition, but it can be difficult to find examples when you're out scouting for shots.

Using red as your spot colour is basically cheat mode. People go nuts for red. Believe it or not, the first attempts at colour photography date all the way back to the 1840's. Over the years, various inventors improved the colour photographic process by making it easier to produce, and by more stable under full spectrum lighting. It was in 1935 that colour photography became mainstream when Kodak introduced their legendary film, Kodachrome. The advent of colour photography opened up an entirely new world to photographers. It created a new element of composition that was previously unavailable.



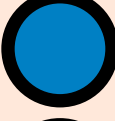
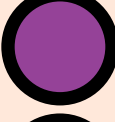
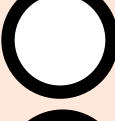
Colour as an Element of Composition

It has long been known that the various colours of the spectrum influence us psychologically. Businesses, both large and small, have long recognized the value of certain colours in obtaining a consumers attention. See the image below - yep instantly recognisable.



Photo by Thomas Charters

So, how does colour influence us subconsciously? Most colour theorists state the following:

-  **passion, desire, love, danger, determination, strength, power, energy**
-  **joy, happiness, intellect, growth**
-  **harmony, fertility, safety**
-  **trust, loyalty, wisdom, confidence, intelligence, faith, truth**
-  **wealth, wisdom, dignity, independence, creativity, mystery**
-  **innocence, purity, cleanliness**
-  **power, elegance, formality, mystery**

And there is a myriad of emotional context as it relates to the various shades, hues, and saturation of these colours. Most experts believe that this colour influence on our behavior dates back to prehistory where fire was red, the sun yellow, the ocean blue, and the harvest green.

Color theory is definitely a science in and of itself. Today, we are going to talk about one of our favourite tools of photographic composition – the colour red.



Photo by Shttefan

Why Incorporating Red Color Increases Impact in Your Images

1. Acts as an Invisible Leading Line



Photo by Rick Barrett

Since the colour red attracts the viewer's eyes, having multiple red objects can lead the viewer into the photograph. Remember the eye will go to the largest red object first.

2. Enhances Color Contrast



Photo by Johan Mouchet

When you place the colour red within a frame of contrasting colours the brain will always direct the eyes to the red object first. We've all been conditioned to do that. Think of yourself sitting in your car, staring out your windshield at a sea of stagnant traffic. Most likely there would be every colour of the rainbow all around you. But what does your brain focus on? Those flashing red lights in the distance. (The ones that tell you that you're going to be sitting there a while!) That's the power of RED! The photograph above contains some very dominate colours – particularly the colour blue. But the mind ignores them and immediately focuses on the man with the red hat. It's only after that part of the image has registered with the brain that it will then take in the rest of the image.

3. Creates a Focal Point (an anchor, something red, that isn't the subject, but supports it)



Photo by Vinicius Amano

In the above photograph, the red object isn't the subject. Its purpose in the photograph is to help anchor the viewers eyes near the subject. In this case, the boy and the cat. The photographer included just enough red to solidify that centre portion of the frame without overwhelming the boy (who is the subject). Imagine this photograph without the splashes of red. It would be much more difficult for a viewer to settle in on the boy's face as he is surrounded by shadows and shapes. Remember though, this is only one tool in your toolbox of special tricks. Keep your eyes open for opportunities and when they present themselves – Go Red!

Moving on from colour in composition, another interesting and difficult to master advanced composition technique is the golden ratio.

THE GOLDEN RATIO

The twelfth century was a golden age for photography. Let's step back from that statement a little because obviously, photography didn't exist way back then.

What did exist though was mathematics and in particular an Italian gentleman by the name of Leonardo Bonacci, also known as Fibonacci.

So what does this chap have to do with modern photography? Well, it's all about composition. Some of the fundamental rules of photographic composition come directly from Fibonacci's studies of mathematics. He discovered what is known as the Golden Ratio or Divine Proportion.

Oddly, the source of his discovery was the breeding habits of rabbits, but that is perhaps for another time. What he noticed overall is that the ratio he had discovered with the rabbits seemed to apply to many aspects in nature. That ratio is **1.61803 to 1**.



*Leonardo Bonacci (c. 1170 – c. 1250),
better known as Fibonacci*

Source - Public Domain

What Does the Golden Ratio Mean to Us Photographers?

Well, as we said above, the Golden Ratio is also known as the Divine Proportion. This is because it occurs virtually everywhere in nature. When we are shooting, our eyes are naturally accustomed to seeing this proportion wherever we look. If in our compositions we break this natural ratio, the image will look uncomfortable, jarring our eyes.

Although not strictly a Fibonacci rule, the rule of thirds is one of the most fundamental composition techniques in photography. It works because it is very close to the Divine Proportion and our eyes accept it as natural.

However, if you want to take your compositions to the next level you can apply Mr Fibonacci's rules to two more advanced techniques, the Golden Rectangle and the Golden Spiral.



Photo by Arif Wahid

The Golden Rectangle

Think of this as almost a centre-weighted rule of thirds. Whereas in the rule of thirds, each third is equidistant from the other, in the Golden Rectangle we use the Fibonacci Ratio to determine the distance between them. To explain a bit better if we split our image into three vertical lines, the distance of the first line from the left compared to the second line will be at a ratio of 1.618 to 1.

In other words, as you can see in the example, the outer boxes of the thirds are larger than the inner boxes. When we compose our shots, by placing our subject matter on the lines of these thirds we are using the Golden Rectangle. An even better composition would be to use the intersection of the thirds and moving beyond that you can use a counterpoint composition where you position subjects on diametrically opposite thirds. Although this might sound a little complicated, next time you are out shooting, visualize the image on the regular thirds, then just move those thirds a little more to the centre of the image.



An image cropped to the Golden Rectangle by Johannes Plenio

The Golden Spiral

◀ This is a little more complicated compositional rule but an extremely powerful one. It uses a series of boxes increasing in size by the Golden Ratio. The centre-point of the composition starts on the corner of the smallest rectangle. Then a spiral is imagined, moving out from the smallest box and intersecting through each of the larger boxes until it finishes on the corner of the largest box. This image demonstrates the route of the spiral.

Golden Mean



The Golden Spiral in Action. Photo by Josch13

By placing subjects along the route of the spiral and where the spiral intersects one of the Golden Rectangles we can create a visually pleasing image that allows our eye to follow a natural route through the image. This is quite tricky to visualise through the viewfinder but if you try to find a primary subject, then imaging a spiral emanating from it. By placing compositional elements on that imaginary spiral, you will start to understand the power of the Golden Spiral.

It might seem odd at first that a twelfth-century mathematician should be so important to photographic composition, but remember, most photographic composition has been around for centuries, practised by artists long before the discovery of silver halide. We have just adapted their techniques to a more contemporary medium.

So the next time you are visualising a great shot in front of you, take your mind back 800 or so years and remember, Fibonacci Rules, OK?

NEXT STEPS - BREAKING THE RULES OF COMPOSITION

So now that you've understood and mastered these rules of composition, it is worth understanding some tips and tricks about breaking them!

In photography, just like in real life, there are times when it makes sense to break the rules. No matter how great your photography is, if you always stick to the rules of composition, chances are your photos tend to look too perfect and hence a little bit boring.

In order to get out of a rut and do something more innovative when it comes to your photography, you can think about breaking some rules that we photographers usually stick to.

Break The Rule Of Thirds

You will achieve a great image by putting your subject or focus of your image on any of the “sweet spots” on the grid in the rule of thirds. However, you don't need to stick to this rule religiously.

Powerful images can also be created by placing your subject in the very centre, especially when there is symmetry or if you want to emphasize in a dramatic way the importance of your subject. Breaking the rule of thirds can work in any genre – they are many breathtaking portraits and landscape with centred composition.



Photo by Tim Foster

Tilt Your Camera

◀ In landscape and architectural photography (and sometimes in portraiture as well), keeping the horizon line straight is a very important rule of composition. However, breaking this crucial rule can result in extremely unusual and dynamic images, with a strong sense of movement. Tilting also adds a vibe of excitement to a composition and it works well when there is a strong horizontal element that can stabilize the composition. It's good to keep in mind that tilting, no matter how fun it is, shouldn't be overdone. It makes sense to use it only if it improves the composition.



Photo by Daniel Delle Donne

Embrace The Negative Space

Photographers are often trying to fill their frames and get close to their subjects as much as possible to avoid showing any background element that doesn't belong to their idea. However, leaving a lot of negative space around the subject can sometimes have the opposite effect.

Negative space allows the subject to "breathe" and it is also directing the viewer's eye towards the central part of the photograph. At the same time, making your subject "small" can sometimes have the purpose of storytelling, especially if you're trying to depict the sense of scale.



Photo by Joanna Kosinska

Consider Low Contrast

We tend to avoid using a low contrast between a subject and its background because we're afraid that our subject might "get lost". But there's nothing wrong with getting lost; if a subject looks like as if it's about to disappear, this can create a surreal, dreamlike atmosphere. This kind of technique can look marvellous in portraits if you want to show the fragile side of your model.

It can be also used in high-end product photography (especially when it comes to cosmetics and perfumery) because low contrast enhances the sense of subtlety and elegance.

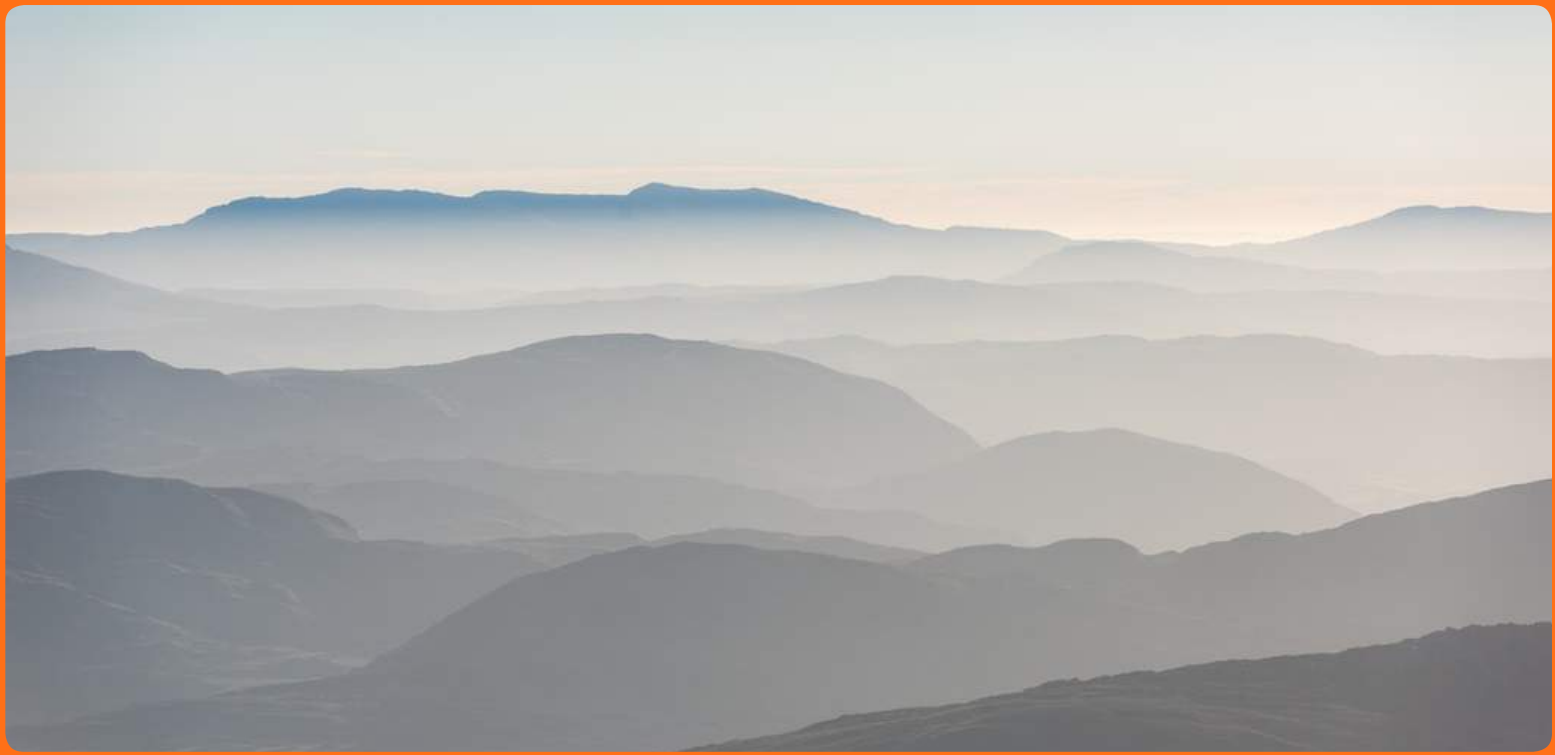


Photo by Paul Earle

Use Busy Backgrounds

Having a clean background looks like a perfect condition for any kind of portraits, but it is always like that? Even though a simple and clean background minimizes our chances for making mistakes in portraiture, it's not always a good choice. For instance, if we're shooting environmental portraits, it makes sense to show as much background as possible, because the background, in this case, has an important role in storytelling. Using a busy background can also introduce a sense of movement and chaos, which is also important in photojournalism and other candid genres.



Photo by Matthew Nolan

If you're looking to break the rules of composition in your photography, the first thing you should have in your mind is that your aim is to improve your shots. Before you grab the camera and start shooting, take some time to think and plan your photographs and then decide what's your goal, what are you looking to achieve.

In the majority of cases, breaking the rules works great only if you know why you decided to break them.

WHAT NEXT?

This guide, as you have probably gathered, really only starts to dip its toes in the very deep recesses of composition. Your job is to get out and to put it into practice. Now you have the tools.

Of course, if you want to take your composition skills into the realm of advanced, you can do no better than [Kent DuFault's Advanced Composition Guide](#) which really dives deep.

FIND US ONLINE

◀ We love sharing photos and would love to see yours! Please come and join us in the [Light Stalking forums](#).

It's a great place for friendly feedback and making friends with the same wonderful hobby.

You can also find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Pinterest](#)!