

The Art of Seeing & Composing Photographs

by Eric Sines

Compositional Design Elements:

- Simplicity** – Find one point of interest. Eliminate unnecessary elements. Watch the background. The simpler the better.
- Viewpoint** – Walk around. Bend with the knees & mind. Bird's eye, worm's eye. Get closer. Crop out conflicting elements.
- Format** – Landscape (stable, natural, multiple subjects) verse Portrait (dominant, height, single subject)
- Rule of Thirds** – Divide the Frame. Shoot off center. Place the subject(s) on a line or intersection of the grid. Use all sides of frame.
- Framing the Subject** - Use branches/arches/windows/etc to frame the subject
- Balance** – Distribution of elements: shape, color, line, tone, textures, form, pattern... Keep main subject large.
- Structural Shapes** – Triangle relationship, Vertical lines, Horizontal lines, Diagonal lines, Leading Lines, S-curves, L-shape, Zig-Zag line, Geometric shapes (round, oval, semi-circle, spiral...), Repeating shapes, In-Camera Dynamic Angles
- Illusion of Depth** – Creating distance & image depth through scale changes, foreshortening, converging lines, color, contrast, shifts of tone. Linear perspective (convergence of lines). Atmospheric perspective (tones progressively lighten with distance).
- Lens Choice** – Wide (sense of depth), Normal (like the human eye sees), Telephoto (narrow, shallow, flattened perspective)
- 2 vs 3 Dimensions** – We live in 3-D world, but photos are 2-D. Try closing one eye to more easily see in 2-dimensions.

Lighting:

Character and Intensity of Light –

Hard lighting (harsh point source, bare bulb, direct sunlight, direct flash) produces strong feelings (intense, dramatic)

Soft lighting (flat, indirect, diffused, overcast, bounced flash) produces muted feelings (moody, harmonious, pastel colors)

Direction of Light – front lighting, top or side lighting, back lighting

Intensity of Color – Ranges from subtle monochromatic (“consisting of one color or hue”) to intensely saturated “Disney”

Color of Light – Warm (yellow to red in color - early or late in day) to Cool (blueish – shadows, mid-day & after sunset)

Silhouettes – Reduces the subject to graphic simplicity through the use of high contrast tones

Timing and Movement:

Peak of Action – The decisive or critical moment. The most telling instant. Anticipate the action!

Framing Action – Place more room in front of subject's facial direction than behind, so they don't look like they're leaving.

Sequences – Story telling or creating a theme with a beginning, middle and end (ie: seasons, construction project, births). Use traditional movie techniques (establishing shot, long shot, medium shot and close-up). Also assembled panoramics.

Backgrounds:

Most neglected aspect of composition and largest contributor to poor images. Clutter (telephone lines, power poles, cars, signs, junk...) looks even worse when it overlaps the subject in a false attachment between the two (like a stop sign that seems to be growing out of a person's head). To avoid this problem, always check what may be happening behind the subject. Fixes: change position, use telephoto to throw background out of focus, backlight the subject.

Hints:

Landscapes - Slow down and think. Choose one dominant subject (ie: tree, river, rocks, leaf, spider web, flower, dew covered grasses).

Compose with foreground, midrange, background and horizon. Avoid mid-day sun. Seek unusual weather, light and cloud formations. Crop out dull or blank skies. Types of landscapes: natural, human, animal and close-up.

People – Most interesting when doing what interests them. Capture in context of their lives (environmental). Tell a story in one image.

When photographing 2 + people, have them interacting in a natural or fun way, ie: hugging, dancing, playing.

Flash Photos – Flash usually produces an unnatural look. Best used where it doesn't act as the main light, but instead just “fills” the darkest shadows in a naturally lit scene. In full sunlight your camera may already do this automatically, but as it gets darker the auto-flash often over-powers the existing light, giving that ugly washed-out look. In these conditions look for a special balanced-flash-and-existing-light mode, sometimes called “slow-speed sync” or “fill flash” or “night balanced flash”. A non-flash option is to set the camera to “no flash” and then use a high ISO setting, allowing images to be taken in available low light. This method often produces grainy (aka: “noisy”) images that still look great. Try all methods.

Break the rules – While helpful, these suggestions are just a beginning. Sometimes doing the opposite is even better.

Summary – You won't be able to incorporate all of these techniques right away, but if you pick a couple to work on each time you go shooting, you'll see some amazing results. Most of all: practice, practice, practice. And always remember what photojournalist Robert Capa said: *“If your photographs aren't good enough, you're not close enough!”* Happy shooting.