



## Mastering Composition

### What is Composition - Definition

The selection, arrangement and treatment of subject matter within the picture area.

Good composition normally aims for a satisfying arrangement that best expresses the purpose of the image. Often this is also the most pleasing arrangement but this may not be the case depending on the purpose of the image. If the image is intended to instruct, entertain, amuse, shock, or even annoy then a pleasing arrangement might not be appropriate. Mostly however we aim to please the viewer (or judge!).

The subject matter on its own will usually only partially meet these criteria. The rest lies in the way the subject is presented by the artist.

Sometimes a good composition 'just happens' or is seized upon by the aware photographer. Cartier Bresson was known for his ability to see and record the crucial moment in a fluid scene. Mostly a good composition is created by the photographer in either (or both) pre or post production phases of picture creation.

The elements of good composition have been known for a long time and have been implemented by artists including painters, sculptors, architects and builders through the ages.

### Emphasis

Firstly, decide on your subject. In a picture of figures in a landscape are you interested in the figures or the landscape. Are the figures there to add scale or perhaps to give a focal point, or are they of interest in their own right and the landscape is almost superfluous? A random collection of unconnected elements will evoke little interest in the viewer. Uncluttered designs free from distractions and with a unity of purpose are usually the most successful. Complexity can work but is more difficult to present in a pleasing manner.

Traditionally painters have been thought to have an advantage over photographers as they can easily leave out items which do not contribute to the composition and insert items that do. With digital techniques the

painter's ability to modify the picture can be duplicated to a significant extent by the photographer – distractions can be cloned out and items of interest can be pasted in. Some pursue this with enthusiasm, others believe the scene should be essentially as first recorded.

*Note 1: I tend to believe the final image is the important thing pretty well regardless of how it is produced, but not all would agree. There is room for both views – and scope for much debate!!*

*Note 2: Natural History images usually take a much stricter line and the rule is that the image must not have received any post manipulation which would destroy the integrity of the original scene. However I have noticed that this is being stretched to some extent with distracting background elements being removed and even foliage obscuring an animal's face being taken out!*

Keep it simple. Less is more. The fewer elements there are in a picture the easier it is for the viewer to concentrate on the main item. In particular, avoid distractions at the edge of the picture, especially if they are bright highlights. Darken them down or clone them out.

The main subject can be emphasised in several ways:

**Tone:** If the main subject is lighter or darker than the background and/or other objects it will stand out. In many pictures it is an improvement to lighten the centre of the image (or darken the edges). In the darkroom this was commonly done by dodging and burning; in Photoshop it is easily done using a feathered selection plus curves or levels. Alternatively some 'plug-ins' have a built in filter for this (e.g. Nik Colour Efex).

It is usually good practice to ensure a full range of tones with details in both highlights and shadows (in Photoshop by adjusting levels or curves, using RAW files, and in extreme cases, by use of HDR methods).

The tone of the main subject can of course be suitably changed. Common techniques are:

Select the subject and use curves or levels  
Use a levels or curves adjustment layer, fill the layer mask (which is automatically produced) with black, and paint on the mask with white to reveal the effect in the desired areas.  
Use the dodge and burn tools (at low opacity settings).

**Tip;** a good way to dodge and burn in Photoshop is to create a new layer and fill with 50% grey. Change the blend mode to 'Overlay'. With the foreground colour set to black, paint on the layer with a soft brush at low opacity. This will have the effect of

*darkening (burning in). Painting with white will lighten the subject. The process is totally reversible and non-destructive.*

**Sharpness:** use of a large aperture will result in a small depth of field. Focus on the subject and let the background and near foreground go out of focus and hence be less conspicuous.

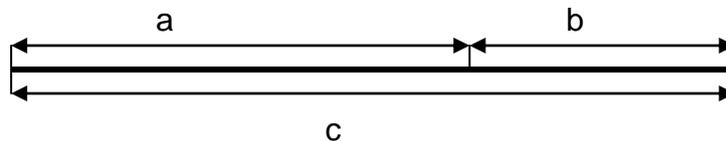
**Scale:** larger objects are more dominant. The size of the subject in the picture space can be changed by distance from the subject and by use of wide-angle or telephoto lenses.

**Colour:** see colour notes. Essentially, use of contrasting (or complementary) colours will aid the separation of subject from background, especially if the subject is a warm/aggressive colour such as red against cool recessive colours such as pale blues and greys.

## Arrangement

**Central:** rather static. May be OK for where the aim is to portray something as solid and formal but does tend to be dull and not very exciting.

**Off Centre – Rule of Thirds:** this is usually a more dynamic and pleasing arrangement and is a close approximation to what in classical art and architecture was referred to as the ‘golden mean’ defined as below:-



$$b/a = a/c$$

That is, the line is divided so that the ratio of b to a is the same as that of a to c

In a picture the most pleasing position for a subject will be on 'the thirds'.

	X	X
	X	X

This 'rule' applies equally to any horizontals and verticals in the picture. For instance, it is usually best to place the horizon on the upper or lower third depending on whether the sky or landscape is regarded as the most important. Central horizons generally leave the viewer in doubt as to whether the sky or the land is the most important part of the image. Always correct sloping horizons, especially if they are water/sky. If you have a tree or a post which is a major part of the picture, place it on a third.

**Balance:** it is often beneficial if the main subject is 'balanced' by a smaller item, perhaps on a diagonal third. Symmetrical subjects, although they might be said to be precisely balanced, generally need a degree of asymmetry to be more pleasing – hence a large object of light tone might be balanced by a smaller object of darker tone.

Three objects are often better than two.

Landscapes can be difficult and work best if dark masses balance on opposite sides of the picture. Dark hills on one side and light sea on the other leads the eye out of the picture.

Moving subjects need space to move into.

**Lines:** use lines to take the eye into, through and around the picture. Diagonal lines are dynamic and can draw the eye to a main subject. An 'S' curve is often used to lead the eye into and around a picture.

## Placing the Subject

**At the taking stage:** Focus, hold focus and recompose. Use single focus point on your camera or at least watch out for where the focal point is placed by the auto system. Use a suitable background.

**By cropping and/or trimming:** better to crop the image in the manipulative stage than to trim a print.

**Montage:** subjects can be added or moved by selecting, copying and pasting. It is important to get the scale right, the lighting right, and insert shadows where appropriate.

## Conveying Movement

**Panning** – blur the background leaving the subject sharp.

**Blur** the subject.

*(Don't forget to leave some space for the subject to move into)*

Both can be done in Photoshop by selection>blur>motion blur. The latter has also been used to enhance the verticality of subjects like trees.

*(Note - the old way was to use an anamorphic (cylindrical) filter or sometimes to smear a filter with Vaseline.)*

## Classic Arrangements

On the thirds

Stable triangle

Unstable triangle - unsettling

L shape

Diagonal lines

Recurring colours and/or shapes

Frame the subject

'Anchoring' by placing an object in one or other of the lower corners

Perfect symmetry with one asymmetric object.

*Tip 1 ; make a selection in Photoshop, copy>paste>flip horizontal (or possibly vertical). Expand the canvas and reposition. Deal with any problem at the join. Then paste in another object to provide an asymmetrical element.*

*Tip 2: even greater symmetries can be produced from quarter sections duplicated, flipped and joined to make kaleidoscopic forms. Overlapping can give interesting images (experiment with blend modes). If you have an urge to produce kaleidoscopic images try a free download which will produce an infinite variety much faster than doing them manually. Go to [www.mehdiplugins.com](http://www.mehdiplugins.com) and look for kaleidoscope. When loaded the mehdi plug in appears in the filter menu of Photoshop.*

## Things to Avoid

**A blank sky.** Selectively darken it to bring out any clouds, or replace it with a more interesting sky (make a collection of skies to use when necessary). *Tip; taking in RAW file format will allow much greater scope to recover highlights in the sky areas.* At the taking stage use a graduated ND filter or, if the subject has such a wide spread of tones that even an ND filter will not deal with it, take several pictures at different exposures to ensure all detail is captured. These may be combined manually or, more easily, using HDR software. You can find this in the more recent editions of Photoshop or can use other proprietary software such as Photomatix pro. Ideally the shots should be taken using a tripod but hand held can work (use the alignment facility in the software).

**Chopped off Bits at the Edges;** check at the taking stage or, if unavoidable, clone out before making the final picture. However, it may be desirable to leave a tree (for instance) cut off at the sides of the image as this could allow the viewer to extend his/her conception of the image outside the frame. This is sometimes referred to as an 'open' image as opposed to a 'closed image where all the components are well contained within the frame.

**Nasty Juxtapositions;** poles growing out of heads, adjacent colours in subject and background