



PSNZ Help Sheet No 22

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**Landscape – Advanced**  
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It has been said that the key to successful landscape photography is emotion. Powerful landscape images evoke an emotional response - even if the response is only, "Wow!"

Powerful landscapes go beyond mere mapping exercises where the photographer says to the viewer, "I was here and this is what I saw." Powerful landscapes capture the *feeling* of the place. They convey to the viewer what it was really like to be there.

This does not mean that photographers simply need to lose themselves in their emotions to make successful landscape images. Quite the contrary, in fact, in photographing the landscape, as in photographing everything else, some disciplines are indispensable.

There's a useful way to remember some of the elements which contribute to successful landscape photography, built on the word LANDSCAPES. Each letter stands for one of the elements the photographer should consider. The list is not all-inclusive; nor is it a formula. But many have found it helpful.

- L** stands for **Light**
- A** stands for **Angle of View**
- N** stands for **Near-ground**
- D** stands for **Distance**
- S** stands for **Sky**
- C** stands for **Composition**
- A** stands for **Aperture**
- P** stands for **Pattern**
- E** stands for **Exposure**
- S** stands for **Simplicity**

**L: Light**

Light is unquestionably the single most important element in landscape photography. Except for aerial photography, the best times to capture the landscape are at the very beginning of the day and at the very end of the day. This is when the sun is low and casts long shadows across the land. This is when the light is warm and soft. This is when the landscape has most *feeling*.

Serious landscape photographers talk about "the magic minutes" -- as dawn breaks... then again at the end of the day as the sun sets. Aim to make landscape pictures during the first or last hour of daylight.

Indeed, the light often has wonderful qualities just *before* the sun rises and just *after* it sets. Many good photographs are missed by packing up too soon at the end of the day. Wait and watch for some time after the sun goes down.

The direction of the light is also important. Successful landscapes are commonly made with cross-lighting -- shooting at around 90° to the sun. Low cross-lighting gives the land texture. Shooting *towards* the sun can add even more drama. By contrast, having the sun behind you, shining directly on the subject matter, makes everything look flat.

### **A: Angle of View**

Powerful landscapes are often achieved by adopting an unusual viewpoint, or Angle of View. One example is a high viewpoint, looking down on the land forms below. Vistas from hilltops, when captured in low light, can be very appealing.

In some cases, even a modest amount of extra height will enhance a view. Several famous landscape photographers have strengthened the roofs of their cars to be able to stand on them!

Equally valid is the low viewpoint, taking a worm's eye view of the landscape. This can be used to dramatise the height of simple features like bushes and plants. A low viewpoint is particularly helpful if you need something to fill a bland and empty sky. Material as mundane as gorse bushes, thistles and spaniards can sometimes be used for this purpose when shooting from a very low angle of view.

It's a general truth that photographs are made more interesting by adopting a viewpoint which is out-of-the-ordinary, and not the way we commonly see the world.

### **N: Near-ground**

Successful landscapes invariably feature interesting material in the foreground, the near-ground. The viewer's eye is helped by having a focal point to lead it into the picture. Classical landscape painters often included figures, animals, streams and similar subjects in the foreground to anchor the picture and invite the viewer in.

It's been said that New Zealand's spectacular natural landscape is really a "backdrop." Mountains and valleys, of themselves, are seldom totally satisfying in the two-dimensional format of a painting or photograph. Having a point of interest in the foreground adds the third dimension. It gives the viewer an entry point, and a sense of scale.

When searching for landscape photographs, it's therefore important to look for a foreground -- a point of interest in the near-ground. The background will often almost take care of itself once you've found an appropriate and well lit near-ground.

Consider using a wide-angle lens to increase the significance of an interesting feature in the foreground.

### **D: Distance**

Most starting photographers tend to equate landscape photography with distant land forms. For these, the telephoto zoom lens is a great asset. Interesting features can be selected and arranged by zooming in.

An important point to consider in photographing a distant landscape is the picture's *sharpness*. In the low lighting conditions most suited to landscape photography, there is seldom sufficient light to hand-hold a long lens. A useful rule of thumb for hand-held exposures is that the shutter speed must at least equal the reciprocal of the focal length. In other words, when using a 200mm lens, the shutter speed needs to be at least one 200th of a second. Hand-holding a 200mm lens at any speed

slower than a 200th is likely to result in an unsharp image. So to photograph a distant landscape with a long lens, you will nearly always need to use a tripod.

Keep an eye out for possible relationships between material in the foreground (near-ground) and background (distance). Many successful landscapes have been created by identifying shapes and textures in the foreground which are repeated in the distance.

### **S: Sky**

It's well-known that a brilliant sky can make a landscape photograph. Some successful images in fact contain almost nothing *except* a dramatic sky. Always therefore keep an eye out for spectacular cloud formations.

Avoid cutting a landscape equally in half, with 50 per cent of the picture-space going to the sky and 50 per cent to the land. Decide which should dominate and allocate the picture-space accordingly.

To optimise the impact of a dramatic sky when photographing in colour, use a polarising filter. It will enrich the blue of the sky and make cloud formations stand out more dramatically. In general, you will *not* improve your photography simply by buying more equipment. But a polarising filter is an exception. It's a 'must' for successful landscape photography.

Remember that the eye is drawn to the lightest area in the picture-space. On bald, grey days it is therefore often wise not to include any sky at all. While a dramatic sky can enhance a picture, a dull sky can ruin it. Where the sky doesn't add to the picture, don't hesitate to eliminate it.

### **C: Composition**

Landscape photographs need to be well composed. Good composition is a matter of flow and balance. It is commonly held that the viewer's eye enters the picture on the left and seeks to flow through the picture-space from the foreground to the background. A road, a fence line, or a stream running diagonally through the picture can therefore be a strong compositional element.

In general, avoid horizontal lines cutting across the picture in a manner which acts as a visual barrier. A solid line of trees or a fence, for example, may stop the natural flow of the eye through the picture. If there's a gate in the fence line, the eye will travel more easily through the picture if the gate is open. The addition of a vertical element, such as a tall tree, also helps the eye to cross horizontal lines which would otherwise be barriers.

In determining where to position a vertical element, an open gate, or any other visual feature you wish to highlight, it's useful to observe the so-called rule of thirds. The rule of thirds states that items of significance should be placed one-third of the way into the picture from either side of the frame, or one-third of the way in from the top or the bottom.

Visualise the frame with two vertical lines - one a third of the way in from the right edge and the other a third of the way in from the left edge - plus two horizontal lines - one being a third of the way down from the top of the frame and the other being a third of the way up from the bottom. The four points where these four lines cross are known as the "intersections of the thirds." These points are the strongest positions in the frame. Powerful compositions frequently place a particular point of interest - such as a building, a tractor or an interesting tree or rock feature - on the "intersection of the thirds."

Even more important than observing the rule of thirds, however, is avoiding photographic "distractions." One of the main potential distractions in a landscape is a light area on the edge of the frame. Because the eye is drawn to light areas, it will tend to run out of the picture if it finds a light area on the edge of the frame. The composition will then lose balance.

A landscape image with good balance will retain the eye within the picture-space by including darker material around the edges, and by distributing visual weight relatively evenly between the two sides of the image.

### **A: Aperture**

An understanding of aperture settings is important to enable you to determine where the photograph will be sharp. Technically, an image is pinpoint sharp only at the plane of focus. But use of a small aperture extends the area of apparent sharpness. This is known as increasing the “depth of field.”

The smallest aperture settings are those with the highest number. As the number rises -- from f5.6 through f8 to f11 and f16 and so on -- the physical size of the aperture *reduces*, and the depth of field *increases*. For landscape pictures to appear sharp from the near foreground to the far distance, use the smallest possible aperture, i.e. the highest possible aperture number (e.g. f22, f32).

This is not to say that every landscape needs to be sharp throughout the frame. Mood can be created by deliberately allowing parts of the image to be soft. It is important, however, that the image’s sharpness or otherwise arises from a deliberate decision, not by accident. Depth of field is determined by aperture selection.

When small apertures are used to maximise depth of field, a slower shutter speed will be needed to expose the film correctly. Unless a wide-angle lens is used, the camera will almost always need to be on a tripod when a small aperture is selected to create a landscape which appears sharp from the near-ground to the distant background.

### **P: Pattern**

One of the most satisfying visual elements in a landscape is pattern. Cultivated land often has a distinct pattern which is pleasing to the eye. Cloud formations can also exhibit wonderful patterns.

A particular style of pattern to look out for is repetition. A simple example would be the repeated lines of a ploughed paddock or freshly cut grass. Crops, fence lines and tree plantings are often repetitive elements which can introduce pattern and design.

A high viewpoint is best for revealing the patterns in a landscape. Aerial photography can capture wonderful patterns which are not readily observed from ground level. A hot air balloon flight is a wonderful gift for a landscape photographer!

An interesting way to impose pattern on a landscape is to photograph a vista *through* something -- for example, a window frame, a broken wall, or an archway. This will usually be more successful if the ‘frame’ is dark and as sharp as the landscape beyond. The best way to achieve this is with a wide-angle lens and a very high aperture number.

### **E: Exposure**

In photographing the landscape on slide film, the results are frequently enhanced by a slight degree of under-exposure. This will saturate the colour and make early morning or evening light more dramatic.

Remember that cameras with built-in light meters try to ‘average out’ light and dark areas in selecting the exposure. If there are dark shadows or dark boulders, for example, in a relatively large area of the frame, the camera will try to lighten them. The result may be burnt out highlights in other parts of the frame. A degree of under-exposure will prevent this.

If your camera has spot-metering capability, use this to ensure that any highlights in the landscape are correctly exposed, and allow other areas to go darker if necessary.

When having colour negative film printed commercially, it is not difficult for the printer to increase the impact of your landscape photographs. Ask the printer to give the image more “guts” -- more saturation, more punch.

### **S: Simplicity**

With landscapes, as with most photographs, less is often more. Landscapes don't have to be grand vistas. Satisfying landscape images can be constructed from simple elements, selected and arranged with care and feeling.

A single tree from a low angle-of-view, positioned on the intersection of the thirds and photographed in end-of-the-day light, for example, could be the basis for a successful, simple landscape. Look for simple elements which have immediate visual impact. Many landscapes are spoiled by being too cluttered and too complex.

Almost more than any other kinds of photographs, landscapes are made to hang on a wall. They will be pleasing if they are inherently simple.

This paper is illustrated in 'Creating Landscapes': PSNZ Recorded Lecture

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