



PSNZ Help Sheet No 28

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## Composition – The Thinking Person's Guide

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### What is composition?

Composition could be described as the arrangement of the elements within an image to give a balanced and interesting picture.

### How is good composition achieved?

- By having a good “photographic eye”.
- By applying the basic photographic principles learned.
- By control of lighting, exposure and by good camera technique.

### What are the basic tenants of composition?

1. Balance.
2. Creation of a centre of interest.
3. The use of shape and form.
4. The use of perspective.
5. Simplicity.

#### 1. Balance

Above all else the image must be ‘balanced’ - it must look right. It must ‘read’ correctly with a lead in taking the eye from the edge of the frame into the ‘centre of interest’ where the mind can dwell and evaluate and appreciate the image. It should not be unbalanced to the point that the eye roams around the image seeking a point upon which to alight, or be over burdened with too much information such that the eye cannot comfortably alight on the heart of the composition. It must fit the frame and be correctly positioned within it. It should fill the frame - not be but a part of it with useless, peripheral information surrounding the essential image. Balance does not mean symmetrical balance - i.e., everything dead centre or all elements of equal size and shape or equidistant from each other, as this is generally uninteresting. It is better to opt for ‘dynamic imbalance’ where the elements are of unequal size or of varying distance from each other. Think of a fulcrum - a heavy weight at one end, close to the centre of balance counterbalanced by a lighter weight at the other end, further away from the centre point. The two are uneven yet are in balance - so it is with composition.

#### a) Principle of thirds

If the 35mm frame is mentally divided into 1/3's, both vertically and horizontally, experience has shown, that any subject lined up along these lines, or any intersections thereof, will often result in a harmonious balance among the various elements. It is not a rigid rule but rather a guide that will usually give a pleasing balance and harmonious composition.

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### **a) Diagonals**

Diagonal lines in an image can be used to lead the eye through to a centre of interest or can be used to give a more dynamic balance to the image. They can be straight lines, curved lines, parallel lines or converging lines. Their application should strengthen the composition and add interest to the basic image. Diagonal lines are stronger than horizontal or vertical lines and when used as lead in lines can give a strong, balanced composition.

### **c) Horizons**

Avoid placing the horizon through the centre of the image. Raise or lower it away from the centre to strengthen the image and give a better balance. Learn to make a feature of either the landscape or the sky - not both at one time. Its called making decisions, which is what good composition is all about. Get to the heart of the image and remove the dross - a bit of each of two separate elements in one image rarely works. Better to isolate one element and build a composition around it rather than introduce too many elements into it (KISS principle). If you must have a horizon in the image make sure it is straight and level!

### **d) Backgrounds**

I consider the selection of the background to an image to be of equal, or even more importance than the subject itself. It must not compete with, or overrule the subject - for good balance it should be subsidiary to, yet complement the main subject matter. Choose your backgrounds with equal care to that of your subject, as the background is the base on which your composition sits. It should complement and enhance your subject - not overwhelm it. This can be achieved by lighting ratios, points of view, selective focus, colour and lighting contrasts, etc.

## **2. Centres of Interest**

Most images need a centre of interest or a point that is the heart of the composition - the logical point to which the eye is lead. It is usually best placed on the strong portion of the image - for example on the thirds line, and is often counterbalanced by one or more subsidiary elements in the composition, in 'dynamic imbalance', as explained above. The centre of interest should be the strongest element in the image around which all else revolves.

It can be achieved by making it the largest apparent element in the frame, or by highlighting it with stronger lighting, or by using strong lead in lines to bring the eye logically to that point. Alternatively, you can use a muted background to project your subject matter as the strongest element in the composition, or you can use a combination of all these artifices.

As a photographer you need to cultivate an ability to correctly select the centre of interest in your image and build an interesting composition around it by using all the artifices of your craft. You need to be selective, you need to have a thorough knowledge of exposure and lighting and your camera's capabilities and above all, you need to indulge in a little creative and lateral thinking to achieve your ends. You need to create the image in the mind first then set about translating it into practice through the application of sound photographic practices.

## **3. Shape and Form:**

Shape infers the organisation of lines into cohesive, two dimensional outlines, whilst form implies that in addition to the subject outline its three dimensional volume is apparent, also. Because photography is inherently two dimensional, shape and form are essentially graphic characteristics of the medium. They suggest the real world but belong to the graphic world.

Shape and form can be enhanced by light and shade, by camera angle or by colour contrast. The extent to which shape and form should be emphasised in the image should result from conscious decisions on the part of the photographer. By a change of camera position, or a lighting alteration, or a change of lens or perspective, a photographer may alter the shape and form of any given subject. He must be ever conscious of the image's frame and how it relates to the objects within it.

The emphasis may lean towards the graphic world, or, alternatively, towards the real world, but, whichever way the pendulum swings, the emphasis should result from choice - not chance.

#### **4. Perspective**

The perspective of an image will vary depending on the distance from which an object is viewed and, also, by the angle of view. Thus an object when viewed from close up with a wide angle lens may appear unusually large and distorted. The same object when viewed from a middle distance may appear totally normal yet when viewed from a distance with a telephoto lens it may appear compressed. The presence of both very near and very distant objects in the same image may give the impression of expansiveness whilst, conversely, the shallow field of view of a telephoto lens causes distant objects to seem unusually close together. Pointing a wide angle lens upwards may cause distortion and converging lines. All these characteristics can and should be used to good compositional and creative effect. The inspired use of perspective and camera angle are two of the most effective compositional tools available to the creative photographer.

#### **5. Simplicity**

KISS - keep it simple! As with most things in life simplicity in composition is the most effective. Most photographers try to put too much information into their images. Try to ruthlessly eliminate all extraneous information from the composition and endeavour to concentrate on the heart of the issue - the essential elements only. Spend time looking through the viewfinder and visualising the final image. Try to find an angle that allows the subject to be displayed in isolation from any extraneous and peripheral information. Use all the artifices of your craft - careful lens selection, precise point of view, selective focus, balanced lighting ratios, selective exposure or whatever other artifice you can conjure up to keep the composition concise and strong. Within reason, the simpler the composition the more effective it will be.

As a photographer you must learn to use all these principles to create an interesting and vibrant image. You should cultivate your eyes to see the subject matter and your mind to create the final image. The best images are seen with the eyes but are created in the mind. It matters not that the final image may be somewhat divorced from reality - in fact this may be an advantage. It is more important that it be compositionally and creatively effective - this is the photographer's licence.

Of all the aspects of photography, the art of composition is an exercise of the creative mind. It involves much creative input, a fine measure of lateral thinking and an ability to apply creatively, some basic principles of the art. Do not be afraid to experiment, or to break the so called rules, but always, endeavour to be creative and allow the mind full reign.

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