

Beginners' Guide to

digital photography



Part 4: Composition

The Rule of Thirds

A cornerstone of successful photography

Symmetrical and
Asymmetrical Balance

Achieving visual harmony

part four



Part 4: Composition

Composition and Design

Composition is the selection of elements to include and exclude from the image and the decision of how to arrange them. These decisions are made in order to create an image that is interesting and pleasing to the eye. Good composition is a key element in creating compelling photographs.

There are a few options to consider when framing your image in order to improve composition. The first consideration is whether you should use a vertical or horizontal format. Turn your camera both ways to decide which format produces the best results. Decide what the main point of interest is in your scene. Photographs must have a 'main' subject – an item that your eye is drawn to – in order to maximise impact. It doesn't necessarily have to be an object: it could be a shape, a texture or a line.

Too many subjects in a scene can become confusing and distracting to the eye. When considering which elements to include, look at which elements are important and serve to enhance your main subject. Which elements give a sense of place or time to the photograph, or suggest a mood or convey depth? Anything that does not improve your scene should be cropped out or removed

if possible. The eye is naturally drawn towards light tones in an image so unless the object is your main subject you are generally best advised to remove it or risk unwanted distraction. The rule is to keep your image as simple as possible so there is less chance of elements competing for the viewer's attention.

Now that you've selected the elements, you need to decide how best to arrange them. There are a few elements to composition that can be helpful to understand.

Rule of Thirds

One of the most recognised elements is what is known as the rule of thirds. Imagine your scene is divided into a grid consisting of two vertical lines and two horizontal lines.

Some cameras offer this grid as a viewing feature, which can be very handy to use until identifying this grid becomes second nature. The rule of thirds suggests that, rather than positioning your main subject in the centre of the image, which can often lead to static, boring photographs, position it somewhere along the grid lines, or at a point where the lines intersect. By doing so, it will add balance and interest to your image.

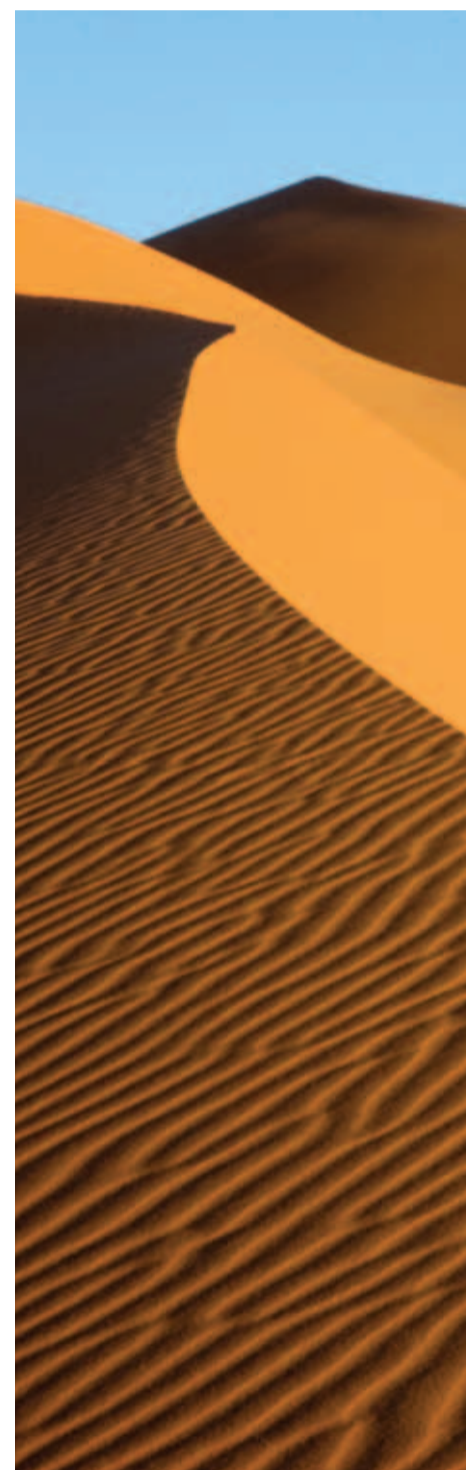


Line

Another element that can be used to improve composition is line. Lines can be a very powerful element in an image. They are extremely useful in leading the eye to the main point of interest, but they can also serve to separate, unify, indicate direction and create mood. They also have the power to evoke emotional reactions. Vertical lines portray a sense of stability and strength, whereas horizontal lines are tranquil and restive. Diagonal lines give a sense of movement or action, and a curved line is graceful and rhythmic.

Lines can be found everywhere. Curving rivers, rows of trees, roads and bush tracks, shadows, fence lines, architecture and electricity wires can all be incorporated to great effect. You are only limited by your creativity.

However, some lines in composition should not be open to creativity. Horizons should always be straight. There is nothing more off-putting in an image than a sloping horizon. Another potential distraction is the unnatural 'converging' line; specifically, tall buildings that look as though they are leaning precariously. This occurs when you are photographing a tall object from a lower viewpoint. Converging lines in buildings are not a problem if you are photographing from a distance and shooting with the subject parallel to the camera's image plane. When shooting a tall building from a closer viewpoint, however, you need to tilt the camera in order to fit the object in the frame. This tilting action means that the subject and the image plane are no longer parallel, which results in an unnatural leaning. These lines can be corrected in Photoshop or by using a large format camera, but generally speaking it's easier to be aware of it and try a variety of angles and viewpoints to create a more pleasing image.





Beginners' Guide to digital photography

Balance

Balance in an image is important in order to achieve harmony. Harmony can be achieved by employing either symmetrical or asymmetrical balance within an image, often through the use of size or tone. By placing objects of less importance but of similar size into the scene on an opposite side of the axis, you are employing symmetrical balance. The same results can be achieved by using similar tonal 'weight'. It is important to note that black tones are heavier than white ones.

Asymmetrical balance, on the other hand, is accomplished by using unequal elements. The success of this depends on visual weight-size, tone, the relative position in the frame and the degree of interest in shape. Asymmetrical balance is less obvious than symmetrical, and is also less peaceful but often results in more interesting images.

Texture

Texture is another element that induces an emotional response, a sense of wanting to reach out and touch the image, or to run the hand over its surface. Texture is emphasised by the angle of light, which was discussed in part three of this course.



Pattern

Look for the presence of a pattern in your scene. Patterns are all around you, but you need to train yourself to really be aware of them.

Patterns are an orderly placement of recurring objects that can serve to make the image more interesting and worth studying. However, be careful not to make the pattern your main subject, as this can quickly become very boring. Instead, use them to enhance and define your main subject.





Part 4: Composition

Viewpoint

Before taking your photograph, consider your viewpoint. The position from which you choose to take your image has a massive impact on the composition of your photograph. Rather than just snapping from eye level, consider other positions available to you. By photographing from above, from down at ground level, from the side, from a distance or from up close, you can produce very different and striking results. Try also tilting your camera slightly so that the image is on a slant.

Depth

Because photography is a two-dimensional medium, we have to carefully contemplate composition in order to convey a sense of depth. Consciously including objects in each layer (the foreground, the middle ground and the background) of the image can help to make it appear three dimensional.

Depth can also be achieved through the use of scale. One way to do this is to place objects of a known size into your scene so the viewer can get a sense of the size of your subject.



Frame

In compositions where you are working with more complex subjects such as landscapes, you can use objects in the foreground to frame your subject. They can simplify a scene and keep attention drawn towards your main subject. A frame should complement the subject and tie in with the theme. Shapes such archways, overhanging branches and weathered windows can all make interesting frames, but be careful that your frame is not so engaging that it distracts the eye from the main subject. If this does indeed threaten to occur, try using the frame in silhouette by turning off the flash.

Framing can also be achieved through employing a shallow depth of field. By blurring objects in the foreground around your subject, you can also form a frame for your subject.

Put Your Best Image Forward

Email us an image you've taken (Approx 1MB) that incorporates one or more element of composition. Deadline for entries is 5pm Thursday. Email to photo@dailyexaminer.com.au. The best images will appear in the next installment of Beginners' Guide to Digital Photography, published on Monday 14th March.

Prize for the best image each week will be a 7" Digital Photo Frame. All photographs appearing in the paper will win the photographer 50 free 6x4 prints in store at Harvey Norman Grafton. At the end of the course, the best image will win the photographer a Panasonic Digital SLR twin lens camera Kit (DMC-G10KTWIN) VALUED AT \$900.00. **ALL PRIZES COURTESY OF HARVEY NORMAN.**



*Images for illustration purposes only

