



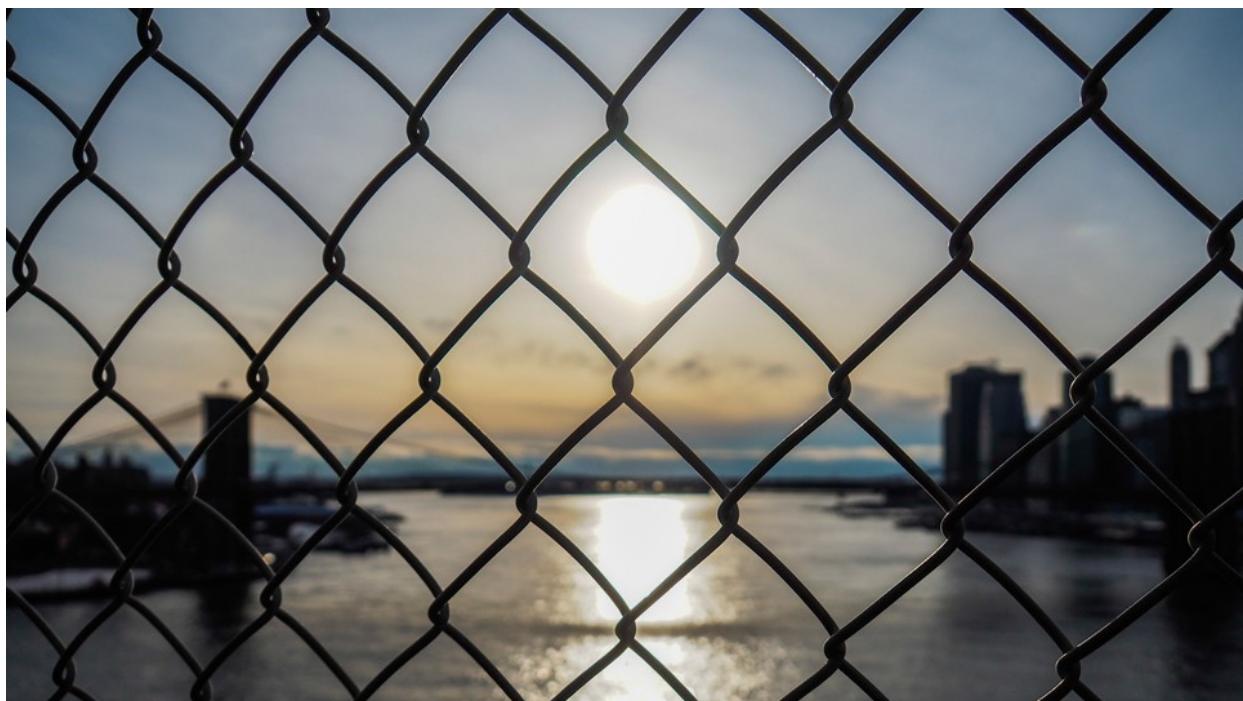
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Viewpoint and Perspective in Photographic Composition

By Todd Vorenkamp | 3 years ago

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Today's cameras can do almost everything automatically. The one thing they cannot do is tell you where to stand and where to point the lens and when to take the photograph. These are the sole responsibilities of the photographer, and it is the photographer who determines the viewpoint and perspective of the image he or she chooses to create.

Photographs © Todd Vorenkamp

Viewpoint

viewpoint 1 a way of looking at or thinking about something (Definition from Merriam-Webster)

All photographs contain one or more subjects. (With an abstract photograph, the abstraction may be the subject.) As a photographer, when you see a subject or scene that you wish to photograph, you point the camera in that general direction, compose, and release the shutter. A great many of us are standing when we do this, and we raise the camera to our eye and take the photograph.

Not all photographs need to be taken from our eye level (or from the top of a fully-extended tripod)—nor should they. Changing your viewpoint is not only a great way to enhance a composition; it might make your photograph stand out from all of the other eye-level views made of a similar subject.

What happens when you change your viewpoint? The background and foreground change with it.

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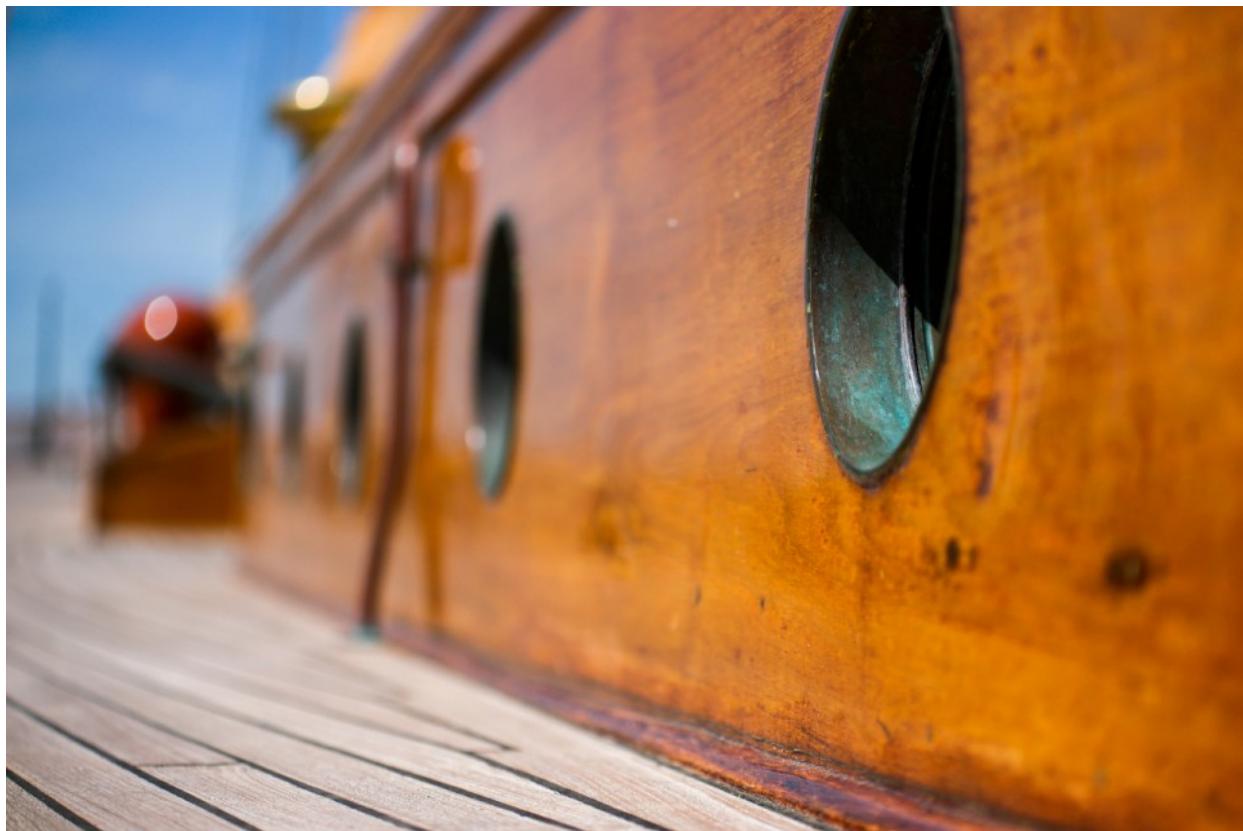


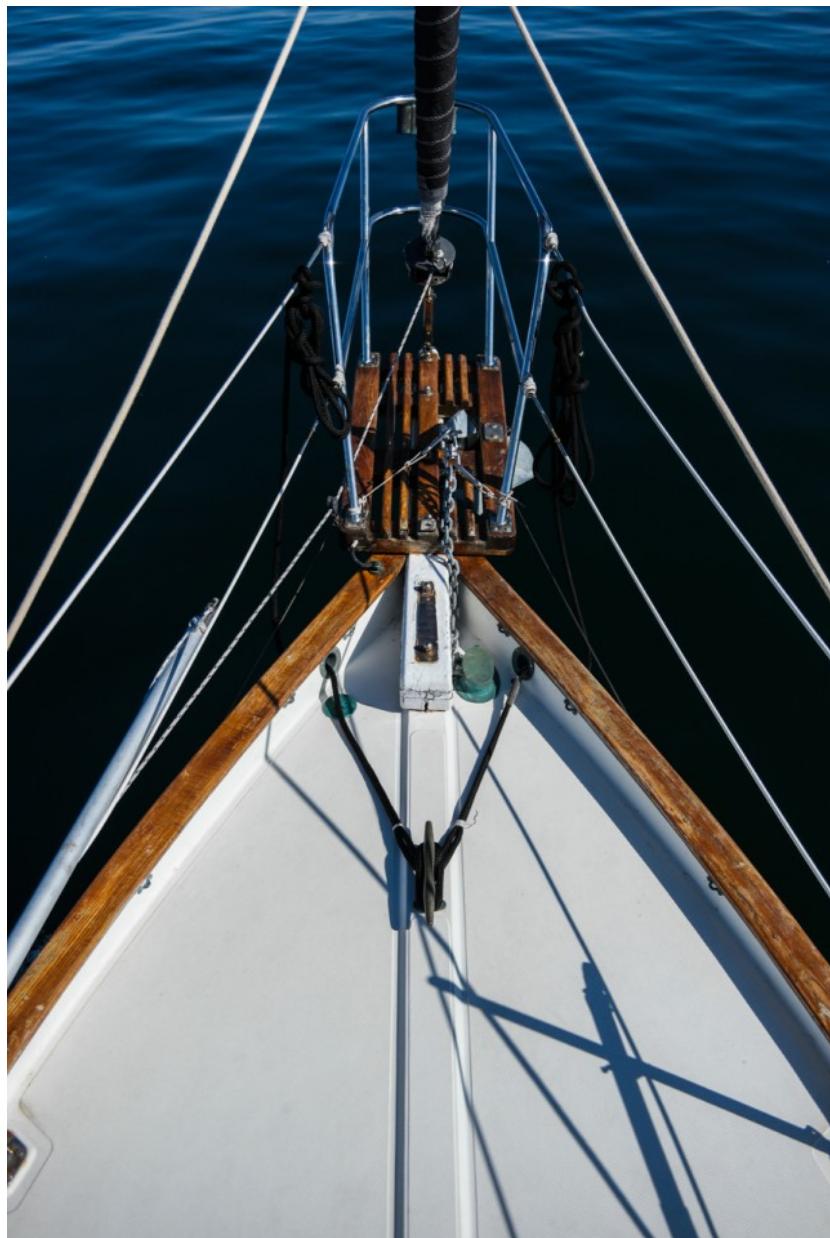
Photo of a sailboat, taken from the eye level of a creature shorter than I.

Picture a simple scene with a person standing before a landscape. If you photograph them from your eye level, the photograph looks exactly like what a passerby would see with their own eyes as they walk past you, the photographer, capturing an image of your friend. Now, this photograph can be fine—depending on the execution—but think about how you can change the composition by altering your viewpoint.

You can change your elevation. Kneel down and take a photo. Or, hold the camera above your head and shoot down on your subject. Move right. Move left. Go aside your subject or behind them. Get closer. Get further away. Roll diagonally right or left. Notice how the background shifts. Notice how things are added to or eliminated from the foreground. Most importantly, notice how the photograph you capture is no longer something that a casual passerby would see.

Subtle changes in viewpoint can add a deeper meaning or feeling to an image. When is the last time you saw a photograph of the President of the United States seated behind the Resolute desk in the Oval Office, taken from above his or her head? By shooting lower, the photographer emphasizes an iconic vantage point, signifying the power of the office. You will be hard pressed to find a photograph of the Oval Office where the camera is positioned higher than the President. On the contrary, if you were to photograph a young student being scolded at his desk, you would likely shoot the image from a higher viewpoint—from the vantage point of the dean or principal about to assign punishment—or you would chose the lower perspective from the student's point of view with the towering power figure looming overhead.

Changing your viewpoint is a photographer's great advantage. We see the world from eye level—be it walking around the city, driving down a country road while seated in a car, or bicycling through a village—and that level is relatively the same for all adults. The photographer, however, can give us a child's eye view of a scene, a bird's eye view, or even a viewpoint that is literally unique to the camera, as the human eye cannot physically reach the position. Use this freedom to your aesthetic advantage and make images from creative viewpoints.



Looking down

Perspective

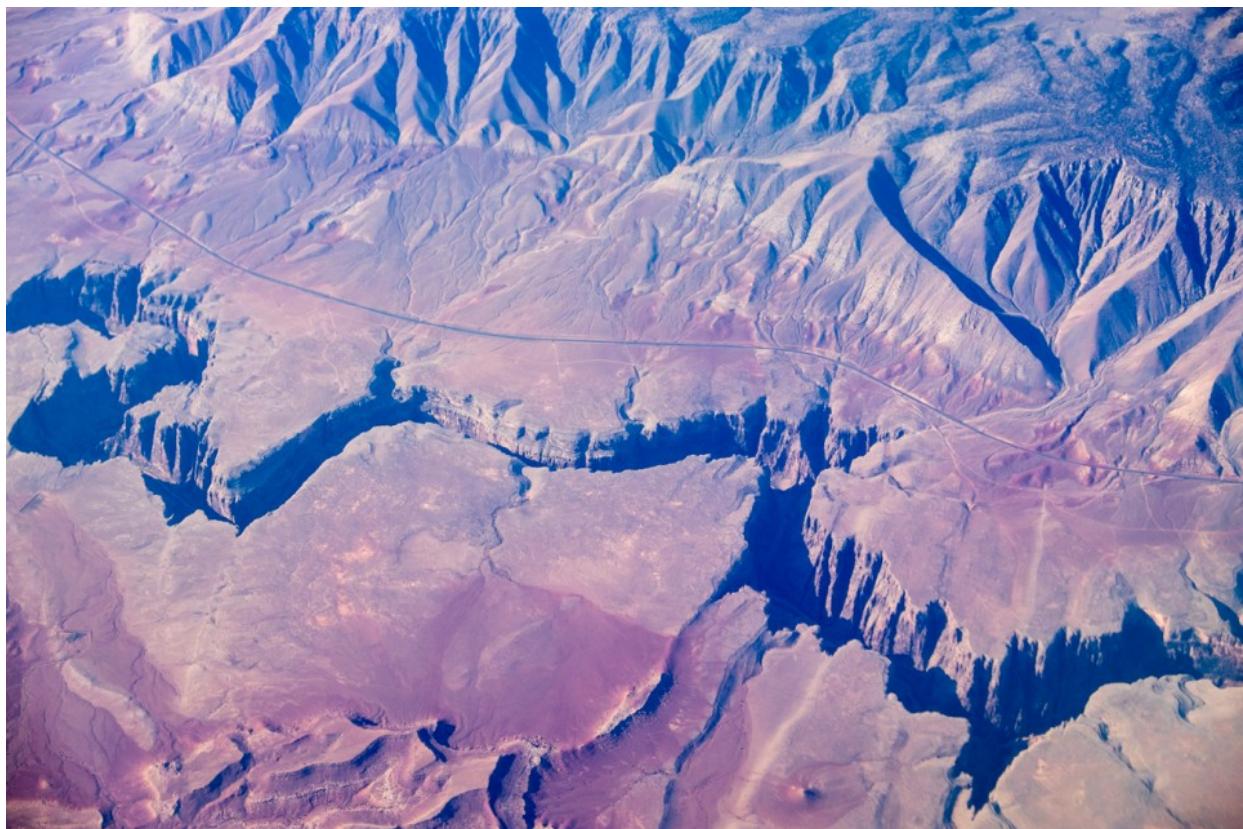
perspective 1 a: the technique or process of representing on a plane or curved surface the spatial relation of objects as they might appear to the eye; specifically: representation in a drawing or painting of parallel lines as converging in order to give the illusion of depth and distance; b: a picture in perspective; 2 a: the interrelation in which a subject or its parts are mentally viewed places the issues in proper perspective; also: point of view; b: the capacity to view things in their true relations or relative importance trying to maintain my perspective; 3 a: a visible scene; especially: one giving a distinctive impression of distance: vista; b: a mental view or prospect to gain a broader perspective on the international scene — Current Biography; 4: the appearance to the eye of objects in respect to their relative distance and positions (Definition from Merriam-Webster)

Perspective has several different meanings—several applicable in some way to photography. For the photographer, perspective is a summation of the relationship between objects in a photograph.

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We live in a three-dimensional world and we are designed to have stereoscopic (or 3D) vision, with which we can determine the relative distance of the various objects in our view. The photograph is a two-dimensional representation of that three-

dimensional world and, therefore, our stereovision does not see the photograph in the same way we see what is before us. When we look at a photograph, we determine spatial relationships by analyzing the objects in the frame.



Road and canyon

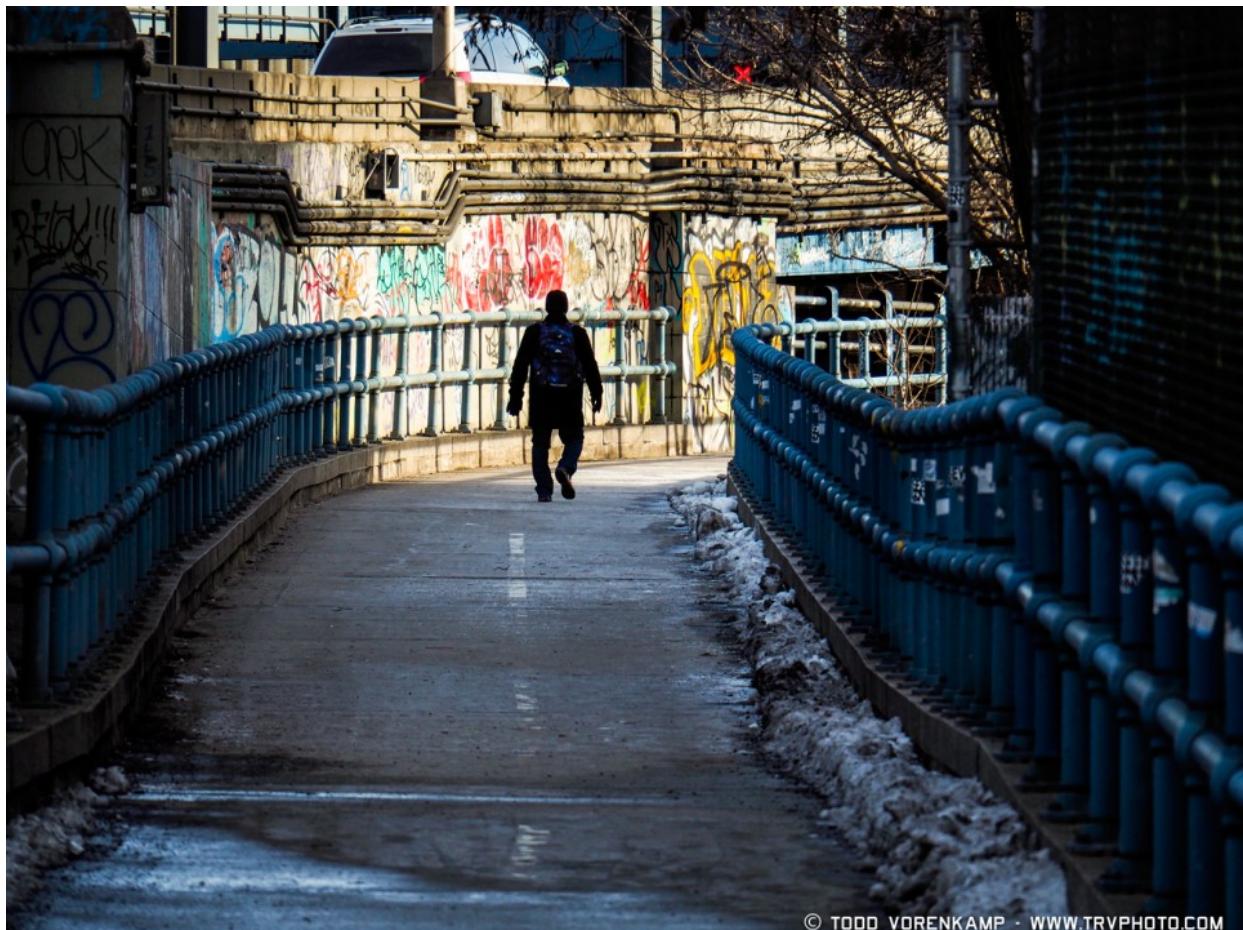
The camera, by means of its magical transition of a three-dimensional scene into a two-dimensional one, creates perspective. This is an automatic function of the camera—built in at no extra cost.

For the photographer, awareness of perspective can be a beneficial tool when searching for an engaging composition; so let's look at different aspects of perspective.

[This topic overlaps with the subject of lens perspective distortion. For more reading, please see my article, [Perspective Distortion in Photographic Composition](#).]

Linear Perspective

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The path narrows and turns.

The easiest way to illustrate linear perspective is to imagine a photograph taken on a road that vanishes into the distant horizon or a photograph taken down a set of train tracks. Even though the sides of the road, or the train tracks, are parallel, as they move farther from the eye, they seem to converge. Both the eye and the camera register this. This is sometimes called *vanishing point perspective*.

With linear perspective, both the subject-to-lens distance and the lens's focal length influence how the linear perspective is made apparent in an image. You may have heard how telephoto lenses "compress" a scene. This is linear perspective. Place yourself back on the road, vanishing into the horizon. If you photograph the image with a telephoto lens, you will see a relatively shorter section of road tapering off to a point on the horizon. If you create a photograph from the same position using a wide-angle lens, the image will provide the scene with a different sense of depth and scale.

Rectilinear Perspective

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Straight lines (mostly)

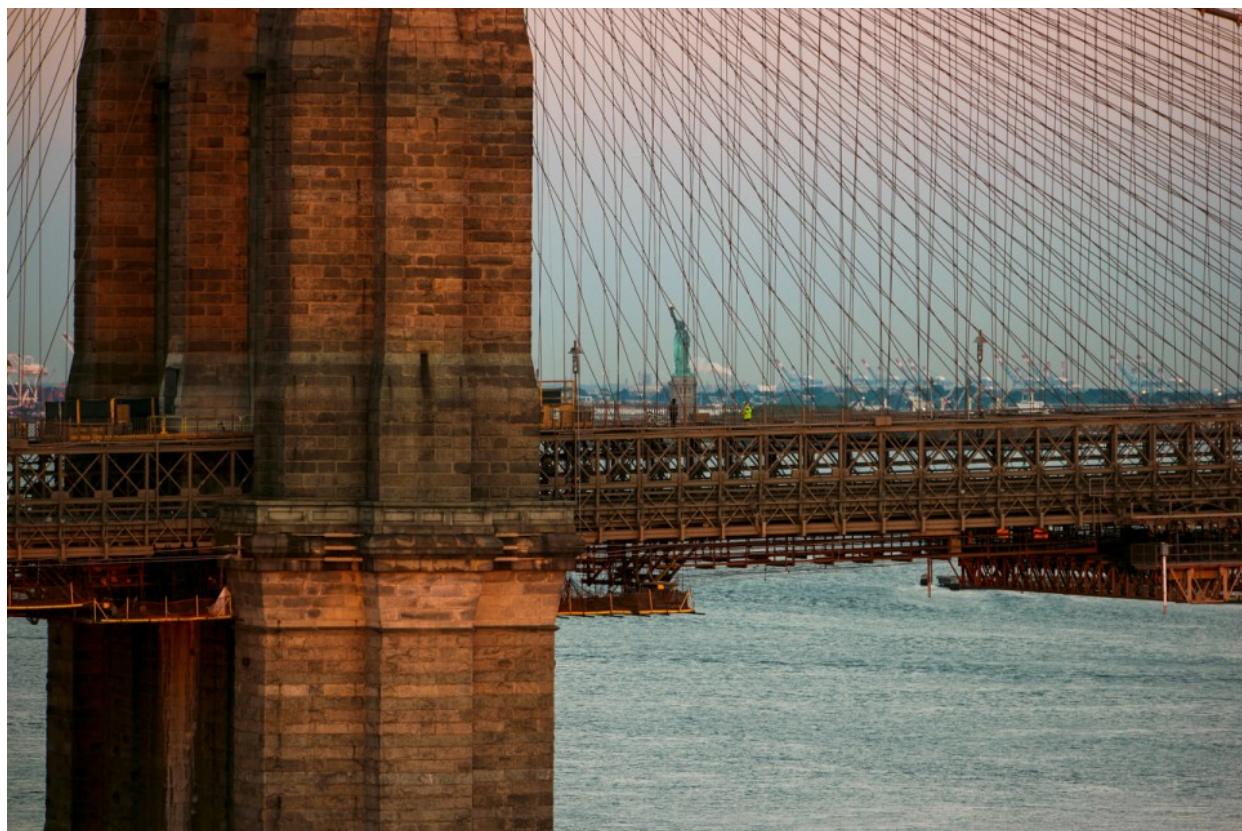
Most camera lenses produce a rectilinear perspective. Our eyes do the same. Straight lines appear as straight lines to our eyes and in the photograph. The exception is curvilinear lenses—a fisheye lens. With the fisheye lens, straight lines will intentionally curve in the image. Dedicated panoramic lenses can produce a *cylindrical perspective* in which the horizon line remains straight, but horizontal lines above and below the horizon become distorted.

Height Perspective

This is a bit obvious, but I would be remiss not to mention it. In a two-dimensional image, the closer an object is to the horizon line, the farther away it is. Envision a simple landscape scene where we have a photograph of a field of grass extending to the horizon. Above, there are cumulous clouds. The grass in the foreground, farthest from the horizon, is closest to the photographer, just as the clouds near the top of the frame are closer to the photographer than those near the horizon. This is yet another form of perspective that conveys depth in a two-dimensional image.

Overlap Perspective

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Overlap

Overlap perspective is another of the more obvious types of perspective. When one object is closer than another object, it may overlap the more distant object in the frame. The obstructed object is farther away. Regardless of relative size, or position in the frame, overlap is one sure way to see that one object is closer to the lens than another.

Size Perspective

If objects of identical size are placed in a scene and they appear to be the same relative size in the photograph, the distance from those objects to the photographer is the same. Move one or more of those objects closer or farther from the camera and the objects' relative size will change in the image. Again, this is a visual clue to gauge depth in a photograph.

You might consider positioning similar objects of different sizes in an image as an exercise to confuse the viewer about the relative distances of these objects.

Volume Perspective

When an object casts a shadow, the size and shape of the shadow not only gives the photograph depth, the shadow can also emphasize the three-dimensional qualities of that object in the frame. The shadow gives the viewer information about the shape and size of any object in the image.

More evidence of depth in a photograph may occur when one part of an object is lit and the rest disappears into shadow. Everyday examples of this effect include the crescent moon with a faint penumbra or a portrait with side-lighting that highlights a small portion of the face.

Atmospheric Perspective

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Greater distance equals more air (and snow) through which light must travel.

Unless you are fortunate to be photographing in a vacuum or on an insanely clear day, the greater the distance from the camera to an object, the more air the light from that object must pass through to get to the lens. Therefore, distant objects may start to lack sharpness, contrast, color, and definition the farther they are from the camera. This is another clue to depth in the image.

Conclusion

So, now that you are giving some thought to perspective of varied types, you can consider ways in which to change your perspective, or preserve it. The simplest ways to alter perspective are to change to a different focal length lens (zoom in and out if you have a zoom lens), or change your viewpoint. If you feel there is a photograph to be had, but the scene is just not working for you, a simple change of viewpoint may be all that is required. Or, swap lenses and see what a new field of view, in the form of perspective, adds to or subtracts from the scene before you.

All this perspective and viewpoint stuff is fairly simple, right? In some cases, it is so obvious that we don't give it much thought. Thinking about the obvious and being conscious of the value perspective and viewpoint bring to the practice of image making can be very important to crafting a striking composition.

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