# Unit 3: Visual Composition

## Overview

We will now make our theory more practical. So far, we have focused on project excellence and the three phases of filmmaking we will use to create it. In this unit we will concentrate on the basics – the single image and how to craft it well.

This unit will also give you a chance to apply what you are learning in a creative way. Don’t worry if you think you are not creative or an artist. We will focus on simple elements and reveal how they can help you see the world and capture it in exciting ways. We will do so by focusing on composition—the way in which the elements in a picture or image are arranged.

Visual composition will play an important role in this course, so taking the time to learn it is well worth the investment.

## Topics

This unit is divided into the following topics:

1. Elements of Composition
2. Principles of Composition
3. Photographic Themes

## Learning Outcomes

When you have completed this unit, you should be able to:

* Describe the elements used in visual compositions
* Define composition principles
* Apply composition elements and principles to photographs
* Create photographs that reveal your understanding of the chapter’s content

## Activity Checklist

Here is a checklist of learning activities you will benefit from in completing this unit. You may find it useful for planning your work.

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| 🗹 | **Activities** |
|  | Activity 3.1: Read Chapter 3 - Elements of Composition and [11 Thoughts: An Introduction to Photographic Composition](https://www.bhphotovideo.com/explora/photography/tips-and-solutions/11-thoughts-introduction-photographic-composition), by Todd Vorenkamp. |
|  | Activity 3.2: Study resources on techniques and principles of design. Read the next section of Chapter Three, Principles of Composition. |
|  | Activity 3.3: Explore images online. Read the next section of Chapter 3 in the course text - Photographic Themes. |
|  | **Assignment 1: Unit 3 Film Journal** |
|  | **Assignment 2: Composition Exercise** |

## Resources

Here are the resources you will need to complete this unit.

* Chapter Three of course text: *Digital Filmmaking: A Beginner’s Guide to Mastering the Craft*, by Ned Vankevich (e-text)
* [The Visual Elements: The Building Blocks of Composition in Art](http://www.artyfactory.com/art_appreciation/visual-elements/visual-elements.html)
* [20 Composition Techniques That Will Improve Your Photos](https://petapixel.com/2016/09/14/20-composition-techniques-will-improve-photos/)
* [Taking Constructive Criticism Like a Champ](https://www.themuse.com/advice/taking-constructive-criticism-like-a-champ)
* [How Criticism triggers Growth…](https://artplusmarketing.com/how-criticism-triggers-growth-52d775e97557)
* [Principles of Design](https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/principles_design.pdf)
* Guidelines for Visual Composition Assignment
* Other resources will be provided in the unit.

## Topic 1: Elements of Composition

At heart, visual composition means the intentional arrangement or conscious activity of constructing the “ingredients” of an image. As we grow in our filmmaking craft, we must continually be aware of what takes place within the frame (the border of a picture or a film shot).

**Important Tip**: Before continuing below, study this overview of the building blocks of composition in art: [The Visual Elements: The Building Blocks of Composition in Art](http://www.artyfactory.com/art_appreciation/visual-elements/visual-elements.html).

The following are the formal elements that make up the design and structure of an image. However, it is important to remember that subject matter and composition are linked and a type of line can evoke something different from the general sensibilities listed below.

* **Line**
* **Shape (geometric, organic, natural)**
* **Colour (hues, intensities, symbolism)**
* **Texture (tactile feel)**
* **Value (shadows and shading)**
* **Form (3-D, 2-D)**
* **Space (positive/objects); (negative/space between objects)**
* **Depth (foreground/mid-ground/background)**

### Learning Activities

#### Activity 3.1: Viewing and Studying Elements of Visual Composition

Read Chapter 3 - Elements of Composition. Be sure to study each of the images provided in this section for these elements to increase your understanding of how they function in visual compositions.

Before exploring the rest of this chapter, study this essay to help guide you during the process see: [11 Thoughts: An Introduction to Photographic Composition](https://www.bhphotovideo.com/explora/photography/tips-and-solutions/11-thoughts-introduction-photographic-composition), by Todd Vorenkamp.

On a side note, B and H Photo is a great resource for buying and learning about photographic and film and video gear.

Based on your study of this section of Chapter 3, and the elements presented, what are some observations you can share in your journal and with you facilitator and classmates?

## Topic 2: Principles of Composition

In addition to elements of design, there are also principles or rules that give structure to visual compositions and which can also lend meaning or a theme to an image. Elements are specific things whereas principles are more general. Here are four that the course text focuses on:

1. **Balance**
2. **Rule of Thirds**
3. **Repetition and Patterns**
4. **Combinations**

There are many other principles such as the use of triangles and frame with a frame in compositions.

### Learning Activities

#### Activity 3.2: Readings on Techniques and Principles of Composition

Study these helpful resources: [20 Composition Techniques That Will Improve Your Photos](https://petapixel.com/2016/09/14/20-composition-techniques-will-improve-photos/), and “[Principles of Design](https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/principles_design.pdf).”

Read the next section of Chapter Three, Principles of Composition, and see if you have a richer understanding of composition. Log your observations in your journal.

Find an example of the use of frame within a frame and triangular commotions and share them with your facilitator and classmates.

## Topic 3: Photographic Themes

The subjects of a visual image are the objects, people, or items in the frame. E.g., mountainous landscape, a portrait of twins, etc.

A more advanced approach to composition involves the use of creating a theme or deeper meaning to a composition, or where you take a topic such as clothes on clotheslines and film a series of images that reveal them.

As you grow in your composition skills you will discover how to add more depth and interest to your photographs and images.

### Learning Activities

***Activity 3.3: Read and Explore***

You do not have to create a theme for your photographs in this unit. However, studying websites like the following can help enrich your understanding and find images that stand out in intriguing, startling, fascinating, and emotionally moving ways.

* “[34 Powerful Photos That Tell a Story](https://www.jotform.com/blog/35-powerful-photos-that-each-tells-a-story/),”
* The [Lee Gallery Walker Evans exhibit](https://www.leegallery.com/walker-evans/photography/),
* The outstanding the Depression Era works of Dorothea Lange are also rich with theme. See “[The History Place Dorothea Lange](http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/lange/).

Read the next section of Chapter 3 in the course text - Photographic Themes.

Log in your journal and share with a peer in your lab what you learned about photographic themes.

## Unit 3 Summary

In this unit, you learned about the elements and principles of visual composition and design.

Composition and subject matter are different but intimately related. We can have a simple subject with little composition. A white ball on a black table. Or we can have a complex composition with little subject matter. The bokeh (blurred or out of focus) of rain splashes on a glass window.

We have emphasized composition here because well composed shots are a foundational building block of a good film. As you will learn, if the head space of your shots is too much or too little, or there is a lack balance of how people are arranged, or of you do not give enough leading entry space in a jogging shot, it will detract from the effect of your film. (There are exceptions to these rules which will be addressed later.) Too many flaws will mark you as an untrained or sloppy filmmaker.

## Assessment

## Assignment 2: Composition Exercise

Congratulations! You have earned the right to shoot your first assignment for the course.

After you have done some composition research (exploring Pintrest, etc.), review Chapter 3 and go out and find and create five outstanding visual compositions with your camera (cell phone, DSLR, etc.). Share these with your family, friends, and peers and get their feedback about what worked and did not work.

Remember, the name of the game is to learn not to be perfect.

Refer to the specific guidelines in the assessment section. Be sure to study them carefully.

#### Grading Criteria:

See the Assessments section for more details on your composition, as well as the grading criteria.

### Assignment 1: Film Journal

After completing this unit, including the learning activities, you are asked to make sure you are doing journal entries and when appropriate to share your responses with your facilitator and classmates when you meet.

#### Grading Criteria:

See the Assessments section for more details on submitting your journal, as well as the grading criteria.

## Checking your Learning

Before you move on to the next unit, you may want to check to make sure that you are able to:

* Describe the elements used in visual compositions
* Define composition principles
* Apply composition elements and principles to photographs
* Create photographs that reveal your understanding of the chapter’s content