

Academic Innovation and Distance Education

Basic Techniques in Photography

Adapted from: http://photoinf.com/General/NAVY/Photographic_composition_Balance.htm

Unlike some art forms that take years of training to produce an acceptable product, most anyone can quickly learn how to take a decent picture. These basic photographic techniques are essential in producing good photographs. You can apply each of these fundamentals each time you take a picture.

PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION

Photographic **composition** is the pleasing arrangement of subject matter elements within the picture area. Creative photography depends foremost on the photographer's ability to see as the camera sees because a photograph does not reproduce a scene quite the way we see it. The camera sees and records only a small isolated part of the larger scene, reduces it to only two dimensions, frames it, and freezes it. When we look at a scene we selectively see only the important elements and more or less ignore the rest. A camera, on the other hand, sees all the details within the field of view. This is the reason some of our pictures are often disappointing. Backgrounds may be cluttered with objects we do not remember, our subjects are smaller in the frame or less striking than we recall, or the entire scene may lack significance and life.

Good pictures are seldom created by chance. To make the most of any subject, you must understand the basic principles of composition. The way you arrange the elements of a scene within a picture, catch the viewer's attention, or make a clear statement are all qualities of good composition. By developing photographic composition skills, you can produce photographs that suggest movement, life, depth, shape, and form, recreating the impact of the original scene.

How are photographic composition skills developed? You look, you study, you practice. Every time you take a picture, look all around within the viewfinder. Consider the way each element will be recorded and how it relates to the overall composition. Experiment with the camera and look at the results carefully to see if they meet your expectations. With experience, you begin to *think through your camera* and begin to concentrate on composition.

Start to look at various media: movies, TV, magazines, books and newspapers, and evaluate what you see. What is good about this picture or that TV image? What is bad about it? What principles of good composition could you apply in a different way to make the picture better.

There are no hard-and-fast rules to follow that ensure good composition in every photograph. There are only the principles and elements that provide a means of achieving good composition when applied properly. Some of these principles and elements are as follows.

As you study these principles of composition, you should soon come to a realization that some are

very similar and overlap one another. Because all or most of these principles must be considered and applied each time you take a picture, it may all seem quite confusing at first. With experience you can develop a sense of composition, and your consideration and application of the principles will become almost second nature.

CENTER OF INTEREST

Each picture should have a principal idea, subject, or **center of interest** to which the viewer's eyes are attracted. Secondary elements within the picture must support and focus attention on the center of interest.

A picture without a dominant center of interest or one with more than one dominant center of interest is confusing to a viewer. When the picture has only one, dominant point of interest, the viewer quickly understands the picture.

The specific topic, idea, or object to be portrayed must be set in your mind as you prepare to take a picture. When there is nothing in the picture to attract attention to a particular area or object, the eyes wander throughout the scene. The center of interest may be a single object or numerous ones arranged so attention is directed to one definite area.

A photographer usually has at his or her disposal many factors or elements that can be used and arranged within the picture area to draw or direct attention to the primary idea of the picture. Some of these elements are lines, shapes, human figures, tone, and texture.

Human figures attract attention more strongly than almost any other subject matter. Unless they are the main subject of the photograph, they should probably be kept out of the picture. When a person or people are not the intended point of interest, we miss the statement and purpose of the picture. When people are subordinate elements within the picture and they are looking in a direction other than at the camera, the viewer's attention is directed from the people to what they are looking at, which should be the center of interest; for example, when people are grouped around a piece of machinery that is the center of interest of the picture, have them look at the machine, rather than the camera.

SHAPES AND LINES

Shapes and lines are important elements in photographic composition. As a photographer, you usually have control over the way shapes and lines are used in your pictures.

Shape

Shape is a two-dimensional element basic to picture composition and is usually the first means by which a viewer identifies an object within the picture. Even though shape is only two-dimensional, with the proper application of lighting and tonal range, you can bring out form and give your subjects a three-dimensional quality.

Shapes can be made more dominant by placing them against plain contrasting backgrounds;

for example, consider again the white sail against the dark water background. The greatest emphasis of shape is achieved when the shape is silhouetted, thus eliminating other qualities of the shape, such as texture and roundness, or the illusion of the third dimension.

Lines

Lines can be effective elements of composition, because they give structure to your photographs. Lines can unify composition by directing the viewer's eyes and attention to the main point of the picture or lead the eyes from one part of the picture to another. They can lead the eyes to infinity, divide the picture, and create patterns. Through linear perspective, lines can lend a sense of depth to a photograph. (Linear perspective causes receding parallel lines to appear to converge in the picture. This allows you to create an illusion of depth in your pictures.) The viewer's eyes tend to follow lines into the picture (or out of the picture) regardless of whether they are simple linear elements such as fences, roads, and a row of phone poles, or more complex line elements, such as curves, shapes, tones, and colors.

Vertical, diagonal, horizontal, and curved lines create different moods. Vertical lines communicate a sense of strength, rigidity, power, and solidarity to the viewer. On the other hand, horizontal lines represent peace, tranquillity, and quietness. A generally accepted practice is to use a vertical format for pictures having predominantly vertical lines and horizontal format for pictures having predominantly horizontal lines. Again, this is a generally accepted practice, NOT a rule.

PATTERN

Creating your pictures around repeating elements or patterns provides unity and structure. When lines, shapes, and colors within a picture occur in an orderly way, they create patterns that often enhance the way a photograph looks. Pattern, like texture, is found almost everywhere. Patterns should be used to strengthen and add interest to your subject.

Shape is the most common and powerful pattern element. Repeated lines, tone, and color can also provide unity to your composition and combinations of these create interesting pictures. Triangles, squares, and circles are the basic shapes to look for in a pattern. Triangles and squares are usually static but can be placed to create a tension-filled, dynamic effect. Circles and curves are pleasing pattern shapes.

LIGHTING

Lighting is also an important creative element of composition. By controlling the light and directing it where you want it, you can subdue objects or distracting elements in the scene to give more emphasis to the main point of interest.

For good picture composition, you must develop an awareness of how changes in lighting can affect the appearance of things around you. Light and shadows can be used in composition to create mood, to draw attention to an area, to modify or distort shape, or to bring out form and texture in the subject.

Shadows are an important way to create form in photographs. Without shadows, the subject looks flat and lifeless. Generally, harsh, black shadows are undesirable in a photograph. This is because you lose detail in them. Try to stay away from big areas of black, harsh shadows in your photographs. When the lighting is harsh, such as on a clear, sunny day, shadows have sharply defined edges and are probably very dark, sometimes to the point that they appear stronger than the primary subject and attract attention to themselves. Gentle, soft shadows are the best shadows.

TEXTURE

Texture helps to emphasize the features and details in a photograph. By capturing texture of objects being photographed, you can create form.

When people observe a soft, furry object or a smooth, shining surface, they have a strong urge to touch it. You can provide much of the pleasure people get from the feel of touching such objects by creating texture in your pictures. Texture can be used to give realism and character to a picture and may in itself be the subject of a photograph.

FRAMING

Framing is another technique photographers use to direct the viewer's attention to the primary subject of a picture. Positioned around the subject, a tree, an archway, or even people, for example, can create a frame within the picture area. Subjects enclosed by a frame become separated from the rest of the picture and are emphasized. Looking across a broad expanse of land or water at some object can make a rather dull uninteresting view. Moving back a few feet and framing the object between trees improves the composition.

FOREGROUND

A large percentage of otherwise good pictures is ruined, because they include unnecessary or distracting foreground. This common fault can result from the photographer standing too far away from their subject when they take a picture, or the fact that normal focal length or standard lenses cover a relatively wide angle of view.

Undesirable foreground can be eliminated by moving in closer to the subject or by changing viewpoint or camera angle. In most cases, the foreground should be in focus. You should clear the foreground of items that have no connection with the picture.

BACKGROUND

The background is almost as important an element in good composition as the camera angle. Too often it is overlooked when composing a scene since the photographer normally gives so much at-

tention to the subject. Be particularly observant of the background to see that it contains nothing distracting. A tree or pole that was unnoticed in the distance behind a person when composing the scene may appear in the photograph to be growing out of his or her collar or supporting his or her head.