

## The Basic Rules of Good Composition

~ Compiled by Mary Doo ([mary@marydoophoto.com](mailto:mary@marydoophoto.com)) ~

The rules of composition are basic and general starting points for any visual art. These fundamental "pictorial" rules have been proven to work effectively through the centuries for great painters and photographers, and their presence is evident in many great artworks across cultural boundaries.

Some may argue that, in these contemporary times, adherence to a set of design rules may stifle creativity. Yes, although rules are meant to be broken given an appropriate situation, I believe one should not dismiss the value and creative potentials of these tried-and-tested compositional principles without first trying them out.

So, let's begin...

- **Rule Of Thirds** - Imagine a "tic-tac-toe" grid of lines superimposed on the image in your viewfinder: One-third from the top, one-third from the bottom, and one-third from both sides.
  1. Do not center your subject in your viewfinder. Add visual interest by arranging your composition in such a way that the most significant item of interest (e.g., a lighthouse, an animal, or a person...) is placed on the vicinity of one of the four areas where the vertical and horizontal lines intersect.
  2. Try to achieve a balanced composition. Your image should not be top, bottom, or side-heavy. For example, if you have a subject on the upper left intersection and a lot of space left over, placing something on the lower right intersection will provide a good visual balance. The balancing interest should be weaker than the main subject in terms of size, contrast, or color so as not to overshadow the main subject. It's even better if a weaker balance somehow leads the eye back to the main subject.
  3. If there is a division of the subject across the scene, such as a horizon, try not to divide the two parts equally. Instead, let the more important and interesting portion occupy a larger proportion of the frame.



*In this illustration (Portland Head Lighthouse, ME), the horizon is placed on the top third. Foreground interest is emphasized.*

*The main interest is placed on the top left intersection, the items on the rest of the frame provide a balance, with a line (a C-curve) leading to the main interest.*

***Tip:*** *Use a grid screen or bubble level to help ensure that the horizon is level. Nothing ruins a beautiful landscape more than a crooked horizon!*

- **The Diagonal** - Strong diagonal lines provide a sense of movement and speed, and add drama to a composition. A diagonal arrangement of the main subject appeals more to the eye than a perfectly horizontal or vertical placement. Our eyes naturally favor the non-traditional arrangement of lines.



*This fence at Chatham, Cape Cod, leads the viewer's eye from the foreground to the distant left and back again to the right.*

*Diagonal elements convey movement and motion.*

- **Leading lines, curves, and "S" Curves** - We see wonderful scenic images composed with leading lines and pleasing curves. The "S" is classical. In a scene it can be a winding stream, fence, path or road leading the eye to gently wander from the foreground to a distance. Its effect is somewhat similar to a diagonal line. However, the more graceful "S" curve draws the eye to the frame instantly.



*These curving, diagonally placed shadows and dune ripples of Death Valley present more visual excitement than flat and direct lines.*

- **The Triangle** - This technique is applied subtly to relate the main subject of interest to a secondary one. It directs the eye from one point to the next within the triangle of elements in the frame. Combine the triangle with diagonal lines and the image will never look dull.



*Each point of interest (the dome of the State House of Rhode Island and the two firework clusters) is in the vicinity of an imaginary triangle, leading the eyes from one point to the next.*

- **The Frame** - Frame a more distant subject of interest using nearby element(s) that are appealing such as a tree, an arch, a doorway, etc. Framing gives a sense of depth, scale, and distance.



*This yet-to-be-named stone arch of Alabama Hills nicely frames the Eastern Sierra Mountain Range from a distance.*

- When framing a subject, remember to check the depth-of-field, as you would normally want all the elements in your composition to be sharp from back to front. It is a good idea to use a hyperfocal table to find the optimum point of focus for maximum depth of field.

When a hyperfocal table is not available, I use a small aperture to approximate the hyperfocal distance to be about 1/3 into the composition. This method, low-tech as it may be, has worked well so far. (Please see the following example.)



*Depth-of-Field matters. The trunk of the tree is tack sharp, so are the background elements. I focused about one-third into the trunk with my Nikon 17-35mm wide angle zoom at f22. (Darwin Falls)*

- **Pattern and Abstracts** - Sometimes you may hear a judge say, "This is a beautiful picture, but it does not have a center of interest! Does a photograph have to have a center of interest? We find repetitive patterns in nature and all other things around us. Sometimes the center of interest is the pattern itself.
- **Abstracts** - We often hear that abstract subjects are not good bets for competition. However sometimes we see such irresistibly beautiful abstract subjects such as colorful boats reflected on water as wavy patterns, or abstract designs in sand dune ripples.



*Don't these dune ripples at Death Valley look a little like a pile of legs and arms?*

- **Avoid Distractions and Clutter** - Be aware of all the elements in your composition. Watch out for telephone poles, wires, and other elements that may distort the visual cohesiveness of the photograph. Nothing should distract the viewer from the elements of interest.

Distraction and clutter may appear in both the foreground and the background. Avoid unpleasant hot spots, light object against dark and vice versa, flares, or even distraction caused by excessive depth-of-field.

- **Avoid Undesirable Merger** - When two or more objects or tones are stacked together or appear to stack together, you have what is called a "merger".

Examples of undesirable mergers:

- The tree that "grows" out of one's head.
- Shadows on your subject, making it look like a blob with no detail.
- Two or more of your subjects appear to stack together - which would otherwise look good if separate and distinct

- **What's your theme?**

It is important to have a theme. Know what you want to say and locate those elements that help convey your message. Try to capture the essence of the scene. Train your eye to see expressive details that will contribute to your image. Exclude all that does not help you achieve your desired effect.

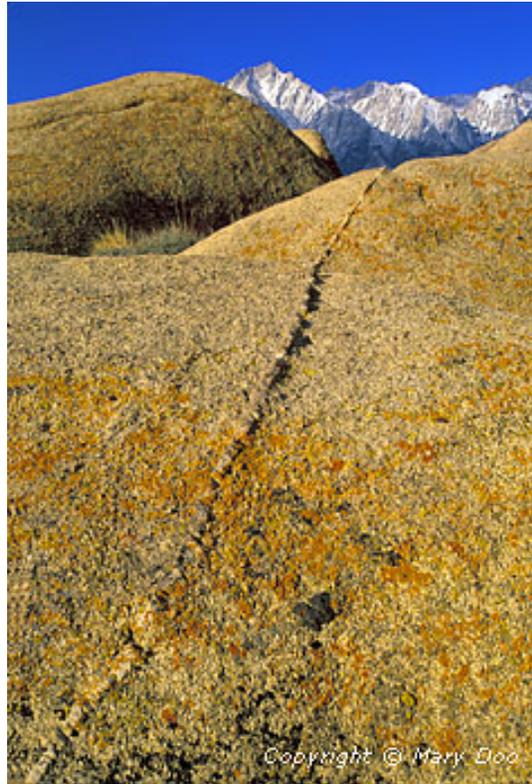
- **Avoid bad lighting condition and unflattering items**

Sometimes no amount of effort can make an image look appealing. This happens when the lighting condition is unsuitable for the result you wish to achieve (too bright, too dark, too harsh, too mild...).

This also happens when your subject is not appealing to begin with. For example, a flower that has a fatal flaw or a view that contains unappealing elements will not suddenly transform into a subject of exquisite beauty. Unless your goal is to bring these imperfections to your audience's attention, don't waste your time and film.

Then, again, perhaps you can compose and arrange these less-than-perfect elements into something that expresses character and emotion.

- **The Vertical Mystery** - Shoot vertical compositions as well as horizontal ones. The vertical frame has a natural dynamic tension and can add drama to a photograph.



*This image is framed by a vertical mass of lichen-covered rocks which happens to have a natural line leading to the middle peak of the snow-capped Mount Lone Pine at the distant background.*

- **Move in Close** - Move in close with a wide-angle lens to exaggerate flowing lines or to include more patterns. Move in close using a telephoto lens to close in on your subject of interest and to eliminate unneeded, distracting elements. Move in close by approaching your subject, zooming in, and shooting from different angles: top, side, below.
- **Work the scene** - Look at what you have selected as a subject matter and try different angles and lenses, view loosely, then tighten the composition. Hold your camera to find your shot, then mount it on a steady tripod as you decide how you will compose your photograph. Crop elements that will clutter your view/image.
- **The sky** - Unless it is picturesque and it has a definite place in your composition, do not include too much of it in your image. If the sky is overcast and totally uninteresting, I would exclude it all together, as it adds nothing but degrades the visual appeal of your image.

- **Give your subject space** - When your subject faces a certain direction (e.g., a running athlete, flying bird, or even a grazing cow), leave some space in front of it within the frame for it to "move" into.



*This picture would not look as visually balanced if the empty space on the right is truncated.*

- **Be aware of the light** - Compose your view to take advantage of the changing lighting condition.

Is the light direct, diffused, or reflected? Frontlit, backlit, or sidelit? How will this change the appearance of your subject as the light moves through the sky?

In most cases, shots taken at dawn or dusk, taking advantage of the soft magical sidelight diffused through the atmosphere, yield the most interesting shadows and results. The soft pastel light of dawn is ever so ethereal. Sometimes the colorful combination of light and clouds is dramatic and stunning.



**Mono Lane at Dawn**



**Mono Lake at Dusk  
(dramatic lenticular clouds)**