



Basic Image Elements

Composition is the key to a good photograph. A well-composed photograph will direct and lead the eye through the image, whereas a poorly composed shot will result in a difficult to 'read' image. All images can be broken down into individual elements, and it is the considered use of these elements that defines a good photograph.

THE RULE OF THIRDS

One of the most important 'rules' in photography is the Rule Of Thirds. Imaginary lines are drawn dividing the image into thirds both horizontally and vertically. You should place important elements of your composition along these lines and where these lines intersect (sometimes known as 'zing points'). You can also arrange areas into bands occupying a third or two thirds of your photograph.

As you will see it is fairly simple to implement. For instance, the positioning of the horizon in a landscape works better if it is placed on a lower or higher third, rather than in the middle of the picture. Strong elements within the landscape, such as rocks and trees also look good when placed on a third. Elements that are placed in the middle of the image are usually seen as static. However, you can successfully get away with this if you are showing symmetry or reflection in your photograph.

Using the Rule of Thirds helps produce nicely balanced, visually pleasing images.

LINE

Lines are perhaps the most common element. When used effectively, they lead us into and through the scene, moving us along a visual path. Three types of lines exist - horizontal, vertical, and diagonal - and all of them create a different amount of movement or energy in a photograph and therefore a different effect.

Horizontal lines produce a stationary, pastoral feeling. Fields, gentle rolling hills, lakes, rivers and ocean scenes are just a few subjects that often exhibit strong horizontal lines. The most common occurrence is the horizon itself, and if unbroken, it creates a rather static composition. Incorporate objects (mountains, rocks, trees) that break up the line and add visual interest, and place your horizon off-centre for more impact, unless you are aiming for absolute symmetry.

Watch for those subtle, implied horizontal lines, such as pastures and gently rolling fields.

Vertical lines add movement and energy to an image. They often have an implied direction. They help to make an image expressive and often more powerful. The trunks of trees, grass blades, flower stalks represent just a few vertical lines in nature. When working in macro mode, vertical lines can become visually overpowering, because you are working with so few elements to start. Choose your compositions carefully when using vertical lines, and be sure that they don't lead you away from the main focal point of the image.

Diagonal lines produce the most energy or movement of any type of line. Like vertical lines, they pull us in and direct us through a scene, yet they do so more aggressively, creating visual tension as a result. Diagonal lines are found in the same subject matter as vertical lines. You can also find diagonal lines in the form and shape of mountains, hillside meadows, in sunbeams and shafts of light in a forest. Don't forget that a vertical line can be *made* diagonal by angling the camera. This is a great technique in macro photography, when the stalk of a flower or branch of a tree produces a strong line.

FORM

Form is the three-dimensional quality of an object, and is photographically defined by light, even though it is translated onto two dimensional paper or a monitor. The quality of lighting is therefore vital to delineate form. Edges should usually be clearly defined as these surround the form and separate it from its background.

SPACE

A print is a two dimensional representation of a three dimensional plane. Too much space between objects will loosen the composition, while too little space will produce a disbelief in the viewer. Look for, and control the relative values of positive and negative space - the area around an object is negative space, while the area within is the positive space.

SHAPE

Shape is the two-dimensional definition of an object (height and width). Lacking any definition or shading that would give objects form, the geometrical shapes of objects can create graphic, dramatic results if used effectively. Remember that the shape of negative space can be compositionally important as that of positive space in a photograph.

TEXTURE

We can translate a tactile effect onto a two-dimensional computer monitor or paper by creating *implied* texture. Texture is most commonly brought

out with an oblique angle of light (sidelight) which, in skimming the surface of the object, records the pockets of contrast, and picks up any imperfections, cracks, and ridges to create the textured effect. In some instances soft, diffuse light can work well, if there is enough contrast to define the texture.

PATTERN

When colours, shapes or lines repeat themselves, a strong pattern can emerge. Fallen leaves, branches on trees, and flowers in a meadow all create visual pattern. You can create stunning photographs by incorporating pattern. To be understood, however, you must include enough repetition to establish a pattern. In most cases, pattern only begins to emerge when there are at least three similar elements in the frame, and becomes much stronger with five or more.

PERSPECTIVE

Perspective is the representation of depth in photography. Depending upon how you arrange the design elements (lines, shapes and textures) within your frame, you can increase or decrease perspective. Wide-angle lenses increase perspective while telephoto lenses decrease it. If you intend to exaggerate distance in a scene three techniques can be used: choose a short focal length lens, move in closely on some foreground object in your scene, and lower your camera or tilt it downward. Each of these can increase the perception of depth or distance in your photograph.

PROPORTION

Proportions of objects within the frame to one another can be controlled by lenses and the space between the elements of the image. Wide-angle lenses can be used to create an imbalance between near and far objects by exaggerating size and space. Telephoto lenses, on the other hand, compress the separation of near and far objects.

BALANCE

Pictorial balance holds diverse parts of the image together and produces harmony. Weighty areas of dark tone should be counter-balanced by other visually strong elements.

FORMAT

Strong and unified image structure can only be achieved by decisive judgement about the final format of your image (whether portrait or landscape format) and the proportions of the frame. The **image** should define the final print format, not your paper proportions! In other words, if the image works best cropped into a 'letterbox' format, print it that way and then trim the paper down.

COLOUR

When shooting in colour consider how this effects your mood and reactions. Cold colours recede, while hot colours stand out.

Atmospheric or aerial recession softens and mutes colour as distance increases. Colours become bluer and cooler as you are looking through more and more of the Earth's atmosphere.

If complementary colours are placed adjacent to each other they will intensify each other. This is a psychological effect, and is why yellow oilseed rape fields always look good against a deep blue sky.

These elements are the building blocks, the raw material, of designing and composing a photograph. Learn to incorporate these elements into your photography, and you'll soon be making more visually pleasing images.