

# Compositional Styles - Descriptions

**There are no unbreakable rules when it comes to how you should compose your photographs.**

We have gone over 20 Compositional Styles that you should become familiar with. Below are their written description to help you better recognize them. First of all we have to define what is meant by 'composition'.

**Composition refers to the way the various elements in a scene are arranged within the picture plane.**

As I've already mentioned, these are not hard and fast rules but guidelines. That said, many of them have been used in art for thousands of years and they really do help achieve more attractive compositions. I find that I usually have one or more of these guidelines in the back of my mind as I'm setting up a shot.

## **#1. Rule of Thirds**

So I've just told you that there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to composition and then the first thing I write about is the 'rule' of thirds. In my defence, I didn't come up with the name. The rule of thirds is very simple. You divide the frame into 9 equal rectangles, 3 across and 3 down. Many camera manufacturers have actually included the capability to display this grid in live view mode. Check your camera's manual to see how to turn on this feature.

The idea is to place the important element(s) of the scene along one or more of the lines or where the lines intersect. We have a natural tendency to want to place the main subject in the middle. Placing it off centre using the rule of thirds will more often than not lead to a more attractive composition.

## **#2. Centred Composition and Symmetry**

Now that I've told you not to place the main subject in the centre of the frame, I'm going to tell you to do the exact opposite! There are times when placing a subject in the centre of the frame works really well. Symmetrical scenes are perfect for a centred composition. They look really well in square frames too. Architecture and roads often make great subjects for a centred compositions. Scenes containing reflections are also a great opportunity to use symmetry in your composition.

**You can often combine several composition guidelines in a single photograph.**

## **#3. Foreground Interest and Depth**

Including some foreground interest in a scene is a great way of adding a sense of depth to the scene. Photographs are 2D by nature. Including foreground interest in the frame is one of a number of techniques to give the scene a more 3D feel. Adding foreground interest works particularly well with wide-angle lenses.

## **#4. Frame Within the Frame**

Framing a Scene, Including a 'frame within the Picture Plane' is another effective way of portraying depth in a scene. Look for elements such as windows, arches or overhanging branches to frame the

scene with. The 'frame' does not necessarily have to surround the entire scene to be effective. The use of scenery viewed through arches was a common feature of Renaissance painting as way of portraying depth. Using a 'frame within a frame' presents a great opportunity to use your surroundings to be creative in your compositions.

## **#5. Leading Lines**

Leading lines help lead the viewer through the image and focus attention on important elements. Anything from paths, walls or patterns can be used as leading lines. Leading lines do not necessarily have to be straight, In fact curved lines can be very attractive compositional features.

## **#6. Diagonals and Triangles**

It is often said that triangles and diagonals add 'dynamic tension' to a photo. My mother in law also does an excellent job of adding tension to any scene. What do we mean by 'dynamic tension' though? This can be a tricky one to explain and can seem a bit pretentious. **Dynamic tension is a way of using the energy and movement available in various features of the frame to draw the eye out of the picture, in contrasting directions.** Look at it this way, horizontal lines and vertical lines suggest stability. If you see a person standing on a level horizontal surface, he will appear to be pretty stable unless he's stumbling out of a pub at 2am. Put this man on a sloping surface and he'll seem less stable. This creates a certain level of visual tension. Or more simply put We are not so used to diagonals in our every day life. They subconsciously suggest instability. Incorporating triangles and diagonals into our photos can help create this sense of 'dynamic tension'. Incorporating triangles into a scene is a particularly good effective way of introducing dynamic tension. Triangles can be actual triangle-shaped objects or implied triangles. Having diagonals going off in different direction adds a lot of 'dynamic tension' to the scene. This is what creates the visual tension.

## **#7. Patterns and Textures**

Human beings are naturally attracted to patterns. They are visually attractive and suggest harmony. Patterns can be man made like a series of arches or natural like the petals on a flower. Incorporating patterns into your photographs is always a good way to create a pleasing composition. Less regular textures can also be very pleasing on the eye.

## **#8. Rule of Odds**

In the world of photography, there are certainly plenty of 'odds' but the 'rule of odds' is something different entirely. The rule suggests that an image is more visually appealing if there are an odd number of subjects. The theory proposes that an even number of elements in a scene is distracting as the viewer is not sure which one to focus his or her attention on. An odd number of elements is seen as more natural and easier on the eye. To be honest, I think there are plenty of cases where this is not the case but it is certainly applicable in certain situations. What if you have four children? How do you decide which one to leave out of the shot? Personally, I'd go by future earning potential.

## **#9. Fill the Frame**

Filling the frame with your subject, leaving little or no space around it can be very effective in certain

situations. It helps focus the viewer completely on the main subject without any distractions. It also allows the viewer to explore the detail of the subject that wouldn't be possible if photographed from further away. Filling the frame often involves getting in so close that you may actually crop out elements of your subject. In many cases, this can lead to a very original and interesting composition.

### **#10. Leave Negative Space**

Once again, I am going to completely contradict myself! In the last guideline, I told you that filling the frame works well as a compositional tool. Now I'm going to tell you that doing the exact opposite works well too. Leaving a lot of empty or 'negative' space around your subject can be very attractive. It creates a sense of simplicity and minimalism. Like filling the frame, it helps the viewer focus on the main subject without distractions.

### **#11. Simplicity and Minimalism**

In the last guideline, we saw how leaving negative space around the main subject can create a sense of simplicity and minimalism. Simplicity itself can be a powerful compositional tool. It is often said that 'less is more'. Simplicity often means taking photos with uncomplicated backgrounds that don't distract from the main subject. You can also create a simple composition by zooming in on part of your subject and focusing on a particular detail.

### **#12. Isolate the Subject**

Using a shallow depth of field to isolate your subject is a very effective way of simplifying your composition. By using a wide aperture, you can blur the background that might otherwise distract from your main subject. This is a particularly useful technique for shooting portraits.

### **#13. Change your Point of View**

Most photos are taken from eye level. In my case, that's barely 5 feet! Getting high up or low down can be a way of creating a more interesting and original composition of a familiar subject. I've often seen wildlife photographers in particular lying in the mud on their bellies to get the perfect shot.

### **#14. Look for Particular Color Combinations**

The use of color itself is an often overlooked compositional tool. Color theory is something that graphic designers, fashion designers and interior designers are all very familiar with. Certain color combinations compliment each other well and can be visually very striking. Take a look at the color wheel above. You can see that the colors are arranged logically in the segments of a circle. Colors that are opposite each other on the color wheel are said to be 'complimentary colors'. As photographers, we can look for scenes that incorporate complimentary colors as a way of creating attractive and striking compositions. Have you ever noticed how many movie posters have blue and yellow/orange color schemes? This is done quite deliberately to create eye catching adverts.

### **#15. Rule of Space**

The rule of space relates to the direction the subject(s) in your photo are facing or moving towards. If

you are taking a photo of a moving car for example, there should be more space left in the frame in front of the car than behind it. This implies that there is space in the frame for the car to move into.

#### **#16. Left to Right Rule**

There is theory that says we 'read' an image from left to right in the same way we would read text. For this reason, it is suggested that any motion portrayed in a photograph should flow from left to right. This is all very well but it assumes the viewer is from a country where text is read from left to right. Many languages are read from right to left such as Arabic for example. To be honest, I've seen plenty of fantastic photographs that 'flow' from right to left. I was once criticised by a judge for the fact that a woman in a photo I took was walking from right to left. He told me it didn't follow the 'left to right' rule. I reminded the judge that the photo was taken in Tunisia where people read from right to left. I didn't win.

#### **#17. Balance Elements in the Scene**

The first compositional guideline we looked at in this tutorial was the 'rule of thirds'. This of course means that we often place the main subject of the photo to the side of the frame along one of the vertical grid lines. Sometimes this can lead to a lack of balance in the scene. It can leave a sort of 'void' in the rest of the frame. To overcome this, you can compose your shot to include a secondary subject of lesser importance or size on the other side of the frame. This balances out the composition without taking too much focus off the main subject of the photograph.

#### **#18. Juxtaposition**

Juxtaposition is very powerful compositional tool in photography. Juxtaposition refers to the inclusion of two or more elements in a scene that can either contrast with each other or compliment each other. Both approaches can work very well and play an important part in enabling the photo to tell a story.

#### **#19. Golden Triangles**

Are you still with me? We're almost there.... I promise. The golden triangles composition works in a very similar way to the rule of thirds. Instead of a grid of rectangles however, we divide the frame with a diagonal line going from one corner to another. We then add two more lines from the other corners to the diagonal line. The two smaller lines meet the big line at a right angle. This divides the frame into a series of triangles. As you can see, this way of composing helps us introduce an element of the 'dynamic tension' we learned about in guideline number 6. As with the rule of thirds, we use the lines (of the triangles in this case) to help us position the various elements in the scene. The rule of triangles can seem like a complex way of arranging a photo but it can result in some really striking compositions.

#### **#20. Golden Ratio**

It's true that the golden ratio method of composing a photograph can seem very complex at first. In reality it's quite simple. It's like a slightly more complex version of the rule of thirds. Instead of a regular grid, the frame is divided into a series of squares. This is known as a 'Phi Grid'. You can then use the squares to draw a spiral that looks like a snail's shell. This is called a 'Fibonacci Spiral'. The squares help to position elements in the scene and the spiral gives us an idea of how the scene should flow. It's a little

like an invisible leading line. It is believed that the golden spiral method of composition has been in existence for over 2,400 years having been devised in Ancient Greece. It is widely used in many types of art as well as architecture as a way of creating aesthetically pleasing compositions. It was particularly well employed in Renaissance art. The golden ratio can be set up in different directions.

Obviously, it would be impossible to have all of these compositional guidelines in your mind as you are out shooting. Your brain would melt! However, a good exercise is to make an effort to use one or two of them each time you go out. You could do a photo session where you look for situations to use a 'frame within a frame' for example. After a while, you'll find that a lot of these guidelines become ingrained. You will begin to use them naturally without having to think about them.