

18 Composition Rules

<http://www.digital-photo-secrets.com/tip/3372/18-composition-rules-for-photos-that-shine/>

Filed in [Tips](#) by [David Peterson](#)

Rules. When you were a kid, you hated them. You probably still hate at least some of them. For all the good that rules do in our world, they have the ugly side-effect of stifling freedom and individual creativity. And what is photography but a way to express creativity and artistic freedom? There shouldn't be any "rules"!

Actually, photography rules are kind of like pirate code. More what you'd call 'guidelines' than actual rules. They are there to provide guidance, but if you need to break them you should do so without regret. Let's take a look at 18 of the more common composition rules (okay, guidelines) to improve your photography.

Compositional Rules

You hear photographers talk about composition all the time, but what exactly is composition and how is it different from subject? Simply put, composition is the way that elements are arranged in an image. Composition includes all the elements in a photo, not just the primary subject.

The human eye tends to prefer images that have a certain sense of order, while it tends to reject images that are chaotic. That's the basic difference between good composition and poor composition, though it's obviously a lot more complicated than that when you move past the basics.

In order to develop a good understanding of what works and what doesn't work in photographic composition, it helps to learn the "rules" and practice following them. And there are a lot of rules. You've probably heard of at least some of them, but they are worth repeating. Remembering, of course, that these are really more guidelines than actual rules.



[Portland Maine Ocean Lighthouse](#) by Flickr user Captain Kimo

The rule of thirds

The king of compositional rules! Any photographer who does more than just take snapshots knows something about the rule of thirds. The basic theory goes like this: the human eye tends to be more interested in images that are divided into thirds, with the subject falling at or along one of those divisions. Many DSLRs will actually give you a visual grid in your viewfinder that you can use to practice this rule. If yours doesn't, just use your eye to roughly divide your image with four lines into nine equal-sized parts, then place your subject at the intersection of those lines. For example, when photographing a person it is generally better to position him or her at the right or left third of the frame rather than directly in the middle.

The Golden Ratio

And now to confuse you even more, enter “the golden ratio.” While the rule of thirds divides your scene into equal thirds, the golden ratio divides your scene a little bit differently, into sections that are roughly 1:1.618. Unless you are a mathematical genius or at least a whiz, you’ll probably need to see this visually:

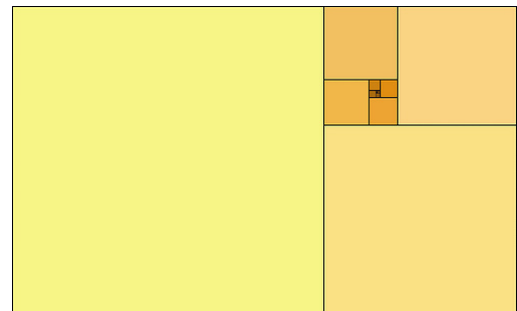


[Into the wood](#) by Flickr user Manu gomi

As you can see, instead of being evenly spaced as they are in the rule of thirds, golden ratio lines are concentrated in the center of the frame, with roughly 3/8ths of the frame in the above part, 2/8ths in the middle and 3/8ths at the bottom. This idea has been around for centuries – millennium, really, and can be found in many of the great classic works of art. Of course I have given you a very oversimplified version of this idea. There is also a golden section rectangle, which looks like this and is based on a very complex mathematical formula:

[Golden section](#) by Flickr user Absolute Chaos

With the idea being that a perfectly composed image should follow the lines in this rectangle.



Golden triangles and spirals

But wait, there's more. So far we've just talked about the perfect rectangle, which at 5:8 roughly corresponds to the size of a 35mm image. But if your image has diagonals, try composing it using "golden triangles." To do this, divide your image diagonally from corner to corner, then draw a line from one of the other corners until it meets the first line at a 90 degree angle. Now place your photograph's elements so that they fall within the resulting triangles.



[szent anna tó II](#) by Flickr user 'Ajnagraphy'

The golden spiral, as you might guess, is a compositional tool for use with objects that have curving lines rather than straight ones. This spiral is drawn based on that complicated series of rectangles we saw above, but you can actually visualize this based on nature's nautilus shell, which matches the golden spiral shape almost exactly. If that seems a little too convoluted to you, just look for compositions where there is a spiral that leads the eye to a particular point in the image.



[Day 23/365 : Three silly drops](#) by Flickr user ~jjohn~

Rule of Odds

Moving on to some simpler ideas, the rule of odds is somewhat related to the rule of thirds. The eye tends to be more comfortable with images that contain an odd number of elements rather than an even number. A photograph of three birds on a wire, for example, is probably going to be more appealing than an image shot after that third bird flies away. The reason for this is that the human eye will naturally wander towards the center of a group. If there's empty space there, then that's where the eye will fall. As a photographer, you want your viewer to look at a subject, not at an empty space.



[jump!](#) by Flickr user cpboingo

Leaving Space

This rule incorporates two very similar ideas: breathing room and implied movement. The leaving space rule probably comes naturally to you, but if you need a way to visualize it think of your frame as a box and your subject as something you're going to be putting inside of a box. To make your subject comfortable, you need to give him a bigger box that allows him some visual freedom and/or freedom of movement. If your subject is looking at something (even something off-camera), make sure there is some "white space" for him to look into. (White space, of course, is not a literal term but a term used to describe the space that surrounds your subject, usually that part of the frame where there isn't anything happening.) Likewise, "implied motion" means that if your subject is in motion you need to give her some space that she can move into.



[2009 Richmond Jingle Bell Run/Walk](#) by Flickr user rogercarr

Fill the Frame

The rule of space may seem to contradict this next rule, which is the idea that you should fill the frame with your subject. Filling the frame, of course, is different than crowding the frame. Crowding the frame means that you're breaking that rule of space and putting your subject in a constricting box. The "fill the frame" rule, on the other hand, simply means that you're looking for distracting background elements and cropping them out whenever you can. Or put another way, decide how important your subject is and then give him/her a ratio of the frame that is directly related to his/her importance.

For example, an image of an old woman with interesting facial lines and features who is standing on a busy street corner will probably warrant filling the frame. But if you want to capture context – say that old woman is standing in the quirky second-hand shop she's owned for 50 years – you may not want to use that "fill the frame" rule, because you'll want to capture her with her environment instead.



[Portrait of a flower. \(Explored\)](#) by Flickr user Linh H. Nguyen

Simplification

As a general rule, simple images tend to be more appealing than complicated ones. This idea is similar to the previous “fill the frame rule,” in that it demands that you get rid of distracting elements in your photo (see how all these rules are related)? To use this compositional rule, simply ask yourself this question: does that element add to my composition? If it doesn't, get rid of it. You can do this by recomposing so that the element is no longer in the frame, zooming in on your subject, using a wider aperture for a shallow depth of field, or simply cropping the image later in post processing.



[Ashbridges Bay Skate Park](#) by Flickr user [thelearningcurvedotca](#)

Balance

Especially when you are using the rule of thirds or the golden ratio, sometimes an image needs balance. A photo with a large subject positioned in the foreground at one of those sweet spots may end up creating an image that looks tilted, or too heavy on one side. You can create some balance by including a less important, smaller-appearing element in the background.



[The leading bridge](#) by Flickr user Miroslav Petrasko (blog.hdrshooter.net)

Lines

If you've read my series on the [six classic elements of visual design](#), these next rules will be familiar. The first one is the rule of leading lines, which says that the human eye is drawn into a photo along lines—whether they are curved, straight, diagonal or otherwise. A line – whether geometric or implied – can bring your viewer's eye into an image and take it wherever you want it to go. If your image doesn't have clear lines you will need something else to let the viewer know where to look, otherwise her eye might just drift around the image without ever landing on any one spot.

Diagonal lines in particular can be useful in creating drama in your image. They can also add a sense of depth, or a feeling of infinity.



[aloe](#) by Flickr user Genista

Patterns

Patterns appear everywhere, in both man-made settings and in natural ones. If you don't notice patterns all around you, then you're not looking hard enough. Pattern can be very visually compelling because it suggests harmony and rhythm, and things that are harmonious and rhythmic make us feel a sense of order or peace. Pattern can become even more compelling when you break the rhythm – then the eye has a specific focal point to fall upon, followed by a return to that harmonic rhythm.



[Upside down !!](#) by Flickr user Nina Matthews Photography

Color

Perhaps nothing can compete with color as a tool for creating mood in a photograph. Cool colors (blues and greens) can make your viewer feel calm, tranquil or at peace. Reds and yellows can invoke feelings of happiness, excitement and optimism. A sudden spot of bright color on an otherwise monochromatic background can provide a strong focal point. How you use color can dramatically change a viewer's perception of an image. Pay attention to the colors in everyday scenes and use them according to what you want your viewer to feel when looking at your image.



[2006-08-16 Train cemetery detail](#) by Flickr user [henning]

Texture

Texture is another way of creating dimension in a photograph. By zooming in on a textured surface – even a flat one – you can make it seem as if your photograph lives in three dimensions. Even a long shot of an object can benefit from texture – what’s more visually interesting, a shot of a brand new boat sitting at a squeaky-clean doc, or a shot of an old fishing boat with peeling paint sitting in the port of a century-old fishing village?



[Hypersymmetry](#) by Flickr user psychogeographer

Symmetry

A symmetrical image is one that looks the same on one side as it does on the other. Symmetrical designs are an excellent excuse for you to break the rule of thirds. There are a couple of ways you can take advantage of symmetry, which can be found in nature as well as in man-made elements. First, look for symmetrical patterns that are in unexpected places. For example, you probably won't expect to find symmetry in a mountain range. If you do, it's worth capturing with your camera. Second, look for symmetrical patterns with strong lines, curves and patterns. The more visually beautiful your subject is the more appealing it will be as a symmetrical image.



[Autumn leaves](#) by Flickr user Roy Cheung Photography

Viewpoint

Viewpoint can dramatically change the mood of a photograph. Let's take an image of a child as an example. Shot from above, a photograph of a child makes her appear diminutive, or less than equal to the viewer. Shot from her level, the viewer is more easily able to see things from her point of view. In this case the viewer becomes her equal rather than her superior. But shoot that same child from below and suddenly there's a sense of dominance about the child. Think of those woeful parents who can't keep their rowdy child from picking the neighbor's award-winning roses.

Perspective can also change the viewer's perception of an object's size. To emphasize the height of a tree, for example, shoot it from below, looking up. To make something seem smaller, shoot it from above, looking down. Viewpoint isn't just limited to high, low and eye-level of course – you can also radically change the perception of an object by shooting it from a distance or from close up.



[Enjoying the sun's warmth.](#) by Flickr user kaybee07

Background

This is one of those rules that almost all beginning photographers break. Sometimes we get so wrapped up in our subject that we don't pay any attention to what's going on behind them. If the background is busy and doesn't add anything to your composition, try using a wider aperture so those distracting elements will become a non-descript blur. Or you can just try changing your angle. Instead of shooting the subject with all those beach-goers right behind her, angle her so that she's in front of the water instead.

Not all backgrounds need to be excluded, of course. Just make sure you pay attention to them and ask yourself whether they will contribute to or detract from your final image. Your answer will let you know whether you should get rid of them or include them.



[dikey boyut / vertical dimension](#) by Flickr user m e l a n

Depth

Depth is closely related to background, and is also dependent on the type of image you're trying to capture. In a landscape, for example, you typically want everything to remain in focus. In a portrait, you may want that background to be out of focus. To isolate your subject from his or her background, use a wide aperture. To include the background, use a smaller one.

Depth can also be shown through other means. Including something in the foreground, for example, can add dimension to an otherwise two-dimensional appearing image. You can also overlap certain elements – since the human eye is used to seeing closer objects appear to overlap objects that are at a distance, your viewer will automatically interpret this information as depth.



[Onyar river in Girona \(in a natural frame\)](#) by Flickr user bernat...

Framing

In photography, the term “natural frame” doesn’t necessarily mean a natural object. A natural frame can be a doorway, an archway – or the branches of a tree or the mouth of a cave. Simply put, a natural frame is anything you can use en lieu of one of those expensive wood frames. Using natural frames is a trick that will isolate your subject from the rest of the image, leading the viewer’s eyes straight to the place you want it to go.



[The Beth Chatto Gardens - Instant Releaf!](#) by Flickr user antonychammond

Orientation

Many beginning photographers make the mistake of shooting everything with horizontal orientation. This is short sighted and easy to correct by following this simple rule: when an image contains a lot of horizontal lines, use a horizontal orientation. When it contains strong vertical lines, use a vertical orientation. This of course is another one of those “guideline” rules (as they all are, really), because you can take excellent shots of vertical lines in a horizontal frame, and vice-versa. But the choice is, as always, going to depend on what you want that final image to say.