

## COMPOSITION

**Definition:** the arrangement of the visual elements seen through the viewfinder, ideally resulting in a cohesive and communicative photograph.

**Controls:** by altering either the position of the subject(s) or that of the camera (you, the photographer), the placement of or the relationship between the elements in the viewfinder is changed, thus affecting the composition.

There are no rules governing composition, as it is viewed as a subjective choice that varies from photographer to photographer, HOWEVER, there are numerous visual design tools that can be used to effectively compose your photographs. A good start is to avoid placing your subject directly in the center of your frame, which can sometimes work, though more often results in a photograph that lacks dynamic. Instead, place the subject to one side, or toward the top or bottom of your frame.

Here's a photograph taken by someone who has no compositional sense.....



.....and one shot by a good photographer:



**Visual Elements** are composition components that can be used to form the basis of a photograph and make it visually appealing to the viewer. Every scene, or subject, features all, or most of these four elements, though you may choose to emphasize only one of them, in order to communicate your visual response to the subject. They are **shape, form, texture and colour**.

**1. Shape** is the two-dimensional outline of the subject (e.g. round, oblong, square, triangular), which can be used to effectively command the viewers attention, through either the repetition of this shape (for example, a row of shiny new Volkswagen Beetles on a car lot), or the use of a **single** strong shape (a construction crane set against the sky, for instance). Shape can be portrayed effectively by a silhouette, as well as a more three-dimensional rendering, though to be effective, a silhouette is best if it's simple and graphically recognizable. Think of Alfred Hitchcock's profile, which became his television show's trademark, and you'll know what is meant by recognizable.



shape through silhouette



repeated shape

In the two photographs above, shape is used in distinctly different ways, yet both accomplish the same thing; make the viewer look at the photograph for longer than a second!

The photograph on the left offers only a two-dimensional outline of the subject, yet from that outline comes much information about the subject.....

- a) it's a man
- b) he is bald
- c) he wears glasses
- d) he is elderly and can't walk very well (cane)
- e) he is quite heavy
- f) he is calm and poised, as suggested by his body position

All that from a silhouette; the simplest form of **SHAPE**!

The photograph on the right uses shape in a repeated fashion to draw the viewer through the photograph. The fact that all the nurses are wearing the same style of head scarf makes one's eye jump from nurse to nurse, all the way to the rear and back again.

**2. Form** is the description of how an object occupies space, which suggests the third dimension in a two-dimensional photograph. It can be effectively illustrated by aspects such as shadows, and the overlapping of far objects by near ones. The use of form in a photograph tends to give it much more depth.



**3. Texture** is the surface quality of a subject, which can be emphasized by lighting, especially from the side. Texture can be used to further describe the subject, or be used as the primary visual element in a photograph.



4. **Colour** is used to complete the description of a subject, or simply to enhance the mood of a photograph. For example, contrasty colours such as red and yellow add intensity to a photograph, whereas harmonious colours, such as pale greens and blues offer a much more subdued mood to the image. Think of a softly-lit morning in the countryside.....

Many photographers choose to eliminate colour from their photographs by capturing the image in black-and-white; as appealing as colour can be, it can sometimes prove distracting, or ineffective in communicating the desired mood of the photograph.

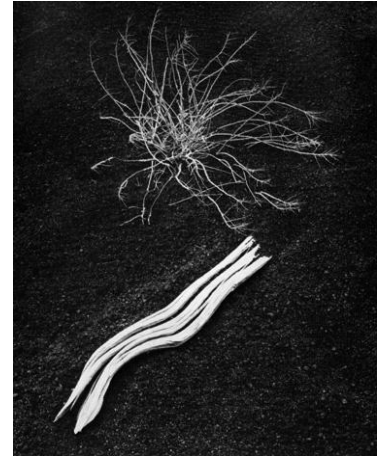


In this photograph, colour makes the house look warm and inviting; quite the opposite in the black-and-white version, which renders the scene somewhat foreboding.



**Compositional Design Elements** are structural aspects of a photograph which are aimed at directing the viewer's eye in such a manner that they are compelled to explore the entire image, rather than just glancing at it. Naturally, you, as the photographer, want to hold the viewer's interest, and that can be accomplished by the use of thoughtful composition. The following elements of design are not exclusive to photography, and are used in any practice in which design is an important factor, such as architecture, sculpture, and interior design.

1. **Line** is used to direct the viewer's eye through the photograph. The line may be a straight line, curved, diagonal, or even quite vague, though ultimately it will lead the viewer to a point of interest, or simply 'force' them to explore the image.



2. **Rhythm** (or **Pattern**) employs similar shapes throughout an image to make the viewer's eye "jump" from one shape to another and, in doing so, explore the entire photograph. In the photo on the left, the light has 'created' a shape with the buildings, which is repeated several times throughout the image. This repetition makes the viewer explore the entire photograph....as in the photo of the staircase, where the viewer's eye can go nowhere but up the stairs to the very top.



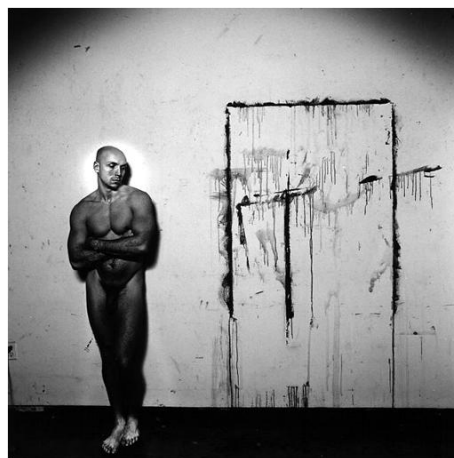
3. **Proportion** uses the ration between the primary subjects to create dominance of, yet balance with another. For example, in a photograph of a landscape, the natural tendency is to place the horizon line in the centre of the frame, creating equal spaces top and bottom. This composition, however, often results in a static image, and placing the horizon line toward the top or bottom of the frame will often create a more effective sense of proportion. In the portrait of jockey Willie Shoemaker and basketball player Wilt Chamberlain, both subjects command equal attention because of the proportion, despite the fact that Chamberlain occupies much more of the frame. In the photo of the windmill, the small strip of land, coupled with the relative size of the windmill adds scale to the image, suggesting the enormity of the sky, here in “big sky country”. Finally, in the photo of the father and child, the water pipe has ‘eliminated’ the distance between the two subjects, thus making the child look tiny in comparison to her dad. There, the proportion has been somewhat skewed by the optical illusion of the girl being much closer to her dad....



4. **Balance** can be either **symmetrical**, whereby two halves of an image are similarly occupied, or **asymmetrical**, as the subject is placed toward one side of the frame and, perhaps, balanced against a much larger subject. The results can be dramatically different, yet both may be considered “balanced”.



symmetry

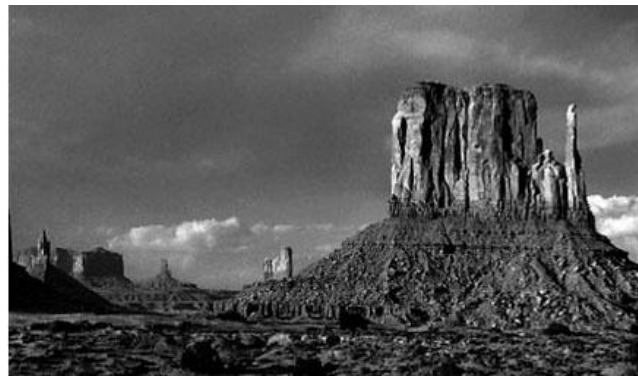
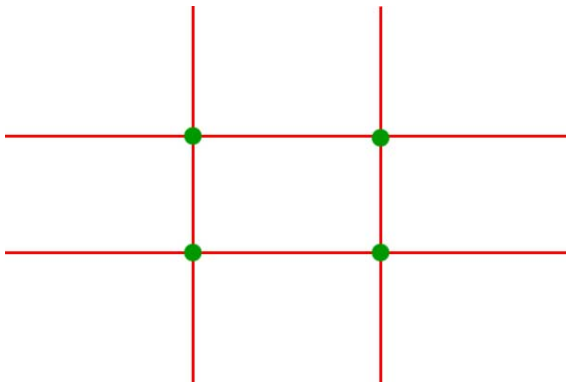


asymmetry

5. **Perspective** can be used to suggest depth in a two-dimensional photograph. For example, railway tracks, roads, fences and tall buildings (photographed from ground level), all feature converging lines, which suggest distance, and, subsequently, a sense of depth.



6. The **Rule of Thirds** is an extremely useful approach to composing photographs. To employ this rule, the camera's viewfinder is "dissected" into nine equal sections, by drawing two imaginary lines horizontally, and two vertically, creating **four intersecting points**. The rule of thirds suggests that if the subject or subjects are placed on one or more of the intersecting points, then balanced composition will result.



Here, the foreground butte is situated on the upper right intersecting point, and the background buttes placed on the lower left point.

7. **Framing** is a compositional technique that uses a foreground subject, sometimes out-of-focus, to "lead" the viewer into the background. The foreground doesn't necessarily have to be recognizable, though the background subject should be **sharp**.





Woman framed by iron gate



Building framed by trees



Butte framed by tree

Many of your photographs will be **multi-element designs**, which use several of the above compositional principles in a single photograph.



line, texture, perspective



proportion, balance, shape



rule of thirds, framing, proportion