Capture Your Audience:
Tips for Effective Composition

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These notes are intended to help you to become more deliberate about your photographic composition, so that you can rely more on your skills, and less on luck, to capture great images.

Okay, let's "begin at the beginning," as Lewis Carroll wrote. For me, the beginning of any good image lies in determining what has attracted me to my chosen subject matter. *Why* have I chosen it? When we are doing our creative photography, we are usually drawn to our subject by some kind of emotional pull. Most often, this is instinctive, and the reason for the draw may never reach our conscious minds. I'd like to encourage you to change that. Before shooting a subject, I'd like you to try to analyze why you are drawn to it. I believe this analysis is the first step in improving your images.

Once you understand what has attracted you to a particular scene or subject, you can employ all the tools at your disposal to more effectively convey that message to the viewer. Photography is a medium for communication, after all. The more coherent your story, the easier the communication.

Companions in the mist
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

In this image, the horses are my subject, and yet they are very small within the picture frame. I wanted to give a sense of the peacefulness of the morning mist, so I included a large area of the environment, since it was empty and uncluttered.

In my opinion, if there had been only one horse in the picture, the story would have been very different. In that case, with so much empty space around, the story would have been one of isolation or loneliness. Here, with three horses, the mood is more uplifting, and the story is one of companionship.

In spite of being small, the horses still stand out because they are very dark in contrast to the background.

As an aside, if your subject can move, then leave some extra space in front of it so that it has somewhere to go in the picture space; the viewer will imagine this movement, and it will let them keep looking at the image longer.

Now that you understand what you want to say, let's look at some of the compositional tools that can help you get your message across.

Composition

Composition is one of the most important aspects of a great photograph. What you include in the image (and what you don't), and how you arrange the elements within the frame, contribute significantly to the overall success of the image. Will it have impact? Will it convey your message? There's no right or wrong, but the elements included, and the perspective taken, should serve to strengthen the story being told -- *your* story.

Here are a few tips to help you choose a composition that reinforces what you're trying to say.

Color and Tone:

When we refer to "color" we are usually referring to the hue – red, or green, or brown, for example. "Tone" refers to the degree of brightness.

Color and tone can express emotion. As you might expect, light tones tend to lift the spirits, while dark tones are perceived as "moody." Red is a color of passion. Blue - well, we've all heard the expression about "feeling blue." Use color and tone to reflect the mood you are trying to create in your image.
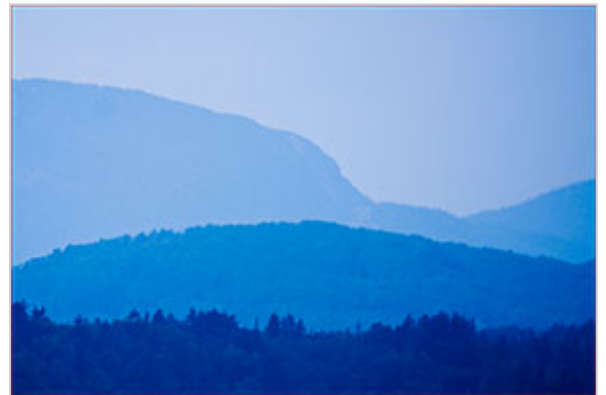
In my horse image above, the tone is very light and uplifting, and the yellow-green color says "fresh" and "Spring."

Compare the feeling you get from the following two images. The one on the left has a warm hue; the one on the right has a cool hue.

Sentinels in the mist
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

Charlevoix hills
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

Lines:

A line in an image may be an actual object, like a road or the stem of a plant, or even the human form. It may also be the boundary between two different colors or tones in the image. Like color and tone, lines also express emotion.

Vertical lines are uplifting, strong, and powerful.

This flower is standing tall and proud.
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

Diagonal lines imply motion, action or change. They are dynamic.

The diagonal line of the boy on the bike emphasizes his motion.
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

Curved lines are slow and meandering. They say "take your time, and don't rush." They can appear melancholy or hopeful, depending on the direction of the curve. They can also be sensual.

The road and the river together form an S-curve that leads our eye slowly through the image.
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

Horizontal lines are steady and calm. They imply tranquility or stability.

The serenity of the morning is echoed in the horizontal line of pond plants.
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

Whatever the statement you want to make with your image, consider positioning the main line of your subject to reinforce the appropriate feeling. You may even find that you are subconsciously drawn to subject matter whose lines "align" with your mood!

Some Rules of Composition:

How you assemble your picture elements together determines whether the final image "works" or not. In fact, the rules of composition are not hard and fast *rules*; rather, they are *guidelines* that you can use to combine your picture elements so that you tell your story most effectively. Here are a few rules for you:

Simplify

You've probably heard of the KISS principle. "**K**eep **I**t **S**imple, **S**tupid!" It teaches us to strive for design simplicity, and avoid unnecessary complexity. In photography, that means that we don't want to include any elements in our picture space that detract from our main message.

It can be tempting, when we come upon a great scene, to try to include *everything* in the picture. That is a mistake. The picture ends up being a jumble of elements that produce "information overload" for the viewer. It's up to you to figure out what attracted you to the scene in the first place, and simplify the image to emphasize that factor.

You must evaluate each element in the frame, and make sure it contributes to your story. If it doesn't, you need to eliminate it. This can be done in a few different ways:

- -recompose the image by changing your position, or just moving the camera a little.
- -zoom in closer to fill the frame with only part of the scene.
- -use shallow depth of field to eliminate background clutter, and draw attention to the in-focus elements.

Eliminate distractions

Scan the edges of your frame to look for "intrusions." These are objects that poke into the frame, but that don't belong in the story – like an odd tree branch, or a person's elbow! Taking the time to do this check can significantly improve your images.

Watch out for "hot spots" (very bright areas) or what I like to call "black holes" (very dark areas); both will draw your eye away from your main subject.

Try to avoid "mergers." Mergers are when two significant objects overlap one another. If the overlap is slight, it can actually be distracting. Try to adjust your camera angle to separate all the objects in the frame, or (if they move) wait for them to move into a better position.


A rather unfortunate merger
results in an eight-legged beast!
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

Mergers can also happen with the edge of the picture frame. If just a little bit of your subject is cut off at the edge of the frame, we call that a merger too. It is distracting because we immediately want to see the missing bit. The positioning looks (and usually is!) accidental. If you want to cut part of your subject out of the frame, make it look deliberate, and cut a lot out.

The Classic Rule of Thirds

The rule of thirds is probably the most often referenced rule of composition. It is all about subject placement within the frame. First of all, imagine that your picture space is divided into thirds both horizontally and vertically, like a tic tac toe grid.
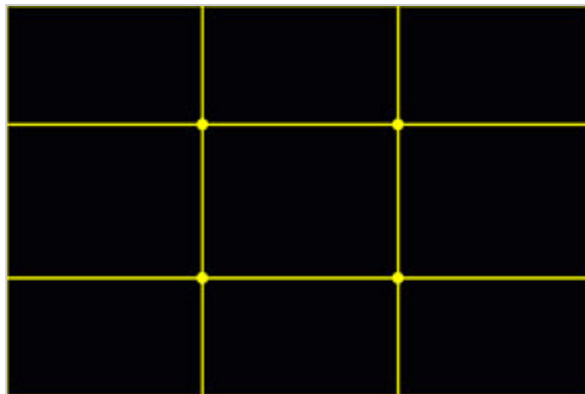
Rule of Thirds grid
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

The rule of thirds tells us to align our subject with one of the points where those lines cross. That means our subject is one third of the way "into" the picture space – from either the top or bottom, and from either the left or right. And *that* means it's not in the middle. Too often, novice photographers instinctively place their subject in the dead center of the image (there's a reason it's called the "dead" center! -- it's dull and uninteresting!).

I love to stretch the rule of thirds and place my subject even further off-center.

Uxbridge silo
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

A natural extension to the photography rule of thirds is to place your horizon line along the one-third or two-third line of the tic tac toe grid, rather than in the middle. Once again, fight your natural tendency, and don't place your horizon in the middle. Whether you place the horizon closer to the top or closer to the bottom of the picture space depends on which you want to emphasize more: the land or the sky. If you have a dramatic sky, by all means, give it two thirds (or more!) of the picture space!

Shefford sky
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

Note: All rules are meant to be broken. The lessons here are meant to make you think about *why* you are placing the subject where you are, and not just to blindly follow the rules. Central placement of objects and horizons is considered "dull" because it's very static. There's no tension if an object is in the "middle" -- it's not being pulled more to one side than the other. But if your *message* is about stability, constancy, and equilibrium, then central placement might be exactly the right thing to do. Use your judgment, and learn when to override the rules!

Horizontal or Vertical Framing?

Most novice photographers tend to always shoot with their camera held horizontally, producing pictures in *landscape* format. Sometimes it's better to hold the camera vertically, and shoot in *portrait* format. How do you when to use which format? The bottom line is that the frame should compliment the form. In other words, when positioning your camera, match the orientation of the frame to the orientation of the subject.

Break through creative barriers

Creativity. It's that elusive "something extra" that takes a photograph from "okay" to "wow!" You can master the technical aspects of photography, but without a creative spark, your images won't get a second look. Creativity can't be explicitly taught, but it can be encouraged and stimulated.

My Own Experience with Creativity

Many years ago, I was photographing a canola field with my friend. We were out there for a few hours. When I finally came up for air, I felt like I had taken every conceivable photograph of that canola field!

A rather conventional image of a canola field
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

I looked around. My friend was still "in the zone," and I didn't want to disturb him. What to do? I really felt like I had exhausted all my photographic opportunities. "What the heck," I thought to myself, "I'll just mess around and have some fun for a while..." Bing! (That's the sound of a light bulb going off, as my attitude suddenly shifted from "work mode" to "play mode.") I took my camera **off** the tripod (can you hear another Bing!?) and started to wander around.

The next thing I knew, I had walked into the field a few rows, and was lying on my back shooting up into the sky, with some bits of canola so close to the lens, they weren't in focus. Which photos do you think were my favorites of the day?

That day, I learned that, at least for me, I often have to shoot my way through all the "expected" and conventional photographs first. When I've exhausted those, the trick is to push myself and **keep shooting**. After all, what's left after you've taken "every" shot? That's right! You *have* to get creative at that point to make any more images.

If you keep shooting after you believe you've exhausted all the possibilities, then you have to be shooting something that's new - at least to you!

The Lewis Carroll quote I opened with ends like this: "Begin at the beginning ... and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

My advice to you? Don't stop at the end! When you think you've finished shooting, you've only just begun. Keep going! You might just surprise yourself with the results.

"Creative" canola
© Julie Waterhouse Photography

When You're Shooting...

- **1. Before you click…** Consciously ask yourself what it is that has attracted you to the scene you want to shoot. Is it a color? A texture? A particular element of the scene, like a barn? If it's the barn, what is it about the barn? Is it the fact that it's the only structure for miles around (so it tells a story of isolation)? Is it that it is old and run down, but still standing (so it tells a story of survival)? Is it reminiscent of days gone by, and nostalgic? You get the idea. Practice analyzing your motivation for taking a picture. Once you know why you want to shoot something, you can make a better image of it by using techniques that enhance your story.

- **2. Simplify!** Work hard with each image to eliminate elements that don't contribute to your story. Also, clean up any distractions by scanning the entire picture space looking for "hot spots," "black holes," mergers and intrusions.

- **3. Pay attention to lines and subject placement.** Use them to reinforce your story, and make a balanced image.

- **4. Work it!** Don't just take one or two images of a subject. Push yourself to take many. Try different perspectives. Shoot from up high! Shoot from down low! Walk around to the other side. And when you think you've made all possible images, do yourself a favor, and make a few more. They may just be your favorites of the day.

- **5.** Enjoy yourself and **have fun!**

  Happy shooting!