



TWOPEASINABUCKET.COM PHOTOGRAPHY COURSE: 12 WEEKS TO BETTER PHOTOS

By Mark & Joanna Bolick

LESSON FIVE: Composition

Whew! We've been working hard these past four weeks, haven't we? We thought we'd take a break from the technical jargon and manual operation of our cameras this week to concentrate on composition.

Lanna asked: I've got the lighting (usually) and the other technical stuff, but when it comes to framing, yeah, not so hot. If you aren't born with an innate sense of framing/composing, how can you learn it? I'd love five fail-proof tips ... or six or seven...

According to the online *Oxford American Dictionary*, composition can be defined as "the artistic arrangement of the parts of the picture." Simply put, it's the way you compose your photos. Composition, like creativity, is in the eye of the beholder, and there can be great differences of opinion in what one considers to be "good" composition. Our goal in providing the following tips, therefore, is to give you a starting point for composing your photos. (This is by no means an exhaustive list, but is intended to be a spring board for your learning.)

Tip#1 -- Keep it Simple.

Eliminate the distractions in your photos.

It's important to train your eye to be aware of what is going on in the background behind your subject (not to mention the foreground if it's visible.) You can remove distracting elements from your photos by physically moving them out of the scene, repositioning your subjects in a better location, taking a few steps forward for a close-up shot, or decreasing your depth of field.

Case in point: In the example on the right you just *might* notice the black lamp sticking out of the back of Mark's head, not to mention dozens of people behind him. While we couldn't eliminate the people (tourists) I did ask him to take a few steps to the right and then recomposed my photo.



Tip#2 -- Apply the Rule of Thirds

The rule of thirds capitalizes on the fact that our eyes are naturally drawn to a point about two-thirds of the way up (or over) on a photo. Mentally divide your scene into 3rds as you're looking through your viewfinder or at the LCD screen. To follow the rule you'll want to compose your photo so that your subject(s) or action is located at one of the intersecting points rather than in the middle, or dead center, of the image.



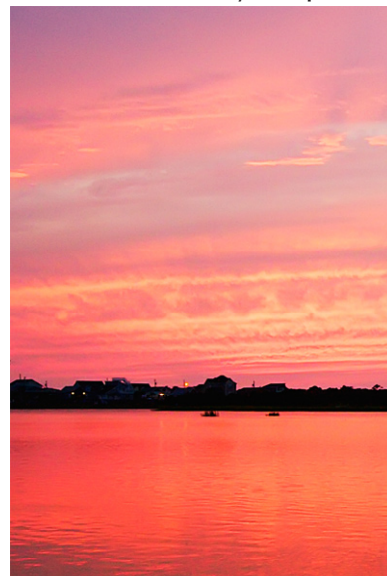
Tip#3 -- Keep an Eye on the Horizon

You can also apply the rule of thirds to the placement of the horizon in your photos.

Place the horizon about 2/3 of the way up on the photo to keep the focus on what is below it (such as land or water)

OR

Position the horizon about 1/3 of the way up on the photo if you want the focus to be on what is above it (the sky.)



*** Keep in mind that the rule of thirds isn't an actual "rule" but a guideline. For example, if you want to command someone's attention you can break the rule by placing your subject directly in the center of your photo, like we did in the first photo below.*

Tip#4 -- Frame your subject

Use elements in the foreground of your photo to frame the center of interest. Architectural elements (such as arches or fences) as well as those found in nature work well for this.



Tip#5 -- Fill the Frame

In addition to eliminating distracting backgrounds (tip #1) it's also important to eliminate wasted space in your photos. Allow your subject to dominate the photo (fill the frame) to give it more prominence. Keep in mind that cropping your photos in an editing program is a simple fix. It's also important to distinguish that empty space in a photo is not necessarily considered wasted space when used effectively.



1. too many distractions



2. good, but could be closer



3. a simple crop in Photoshop

Tip#6 -- Try a New Perspective

Make sure to examine your subject from different angles - a new view can change the perspective of the whole photo.

For example, take a horizontal and a vertical shot of the same subject.



Step back and look for lines (in this case, footprints) or patterns that will lead the viewer's eye across the photo.



Hit the ground - if you're taking photos of a child or pet, get down on the ground and see the world at their level.



Tell the story by taking photos from different perspectives.

WEEKLY CHALLENGE: Creative Composition



This week: Take on this week's tips for composition!

The good news: It doesn't matter what kind of camera you have for this challenge!

Consider one or more of the following tips as you compose your photo:

1. Keep it simple - eliminate distractions
2. Apply the rule of thirds
3. Keep an eye on the horizon
4. Frame your subject
5. Fill the frame
6. Try a new perspective

Then post your favorite photos from the week in the photo gallery, but be sure to share how you applied the tips (or effectively broke them) to compose your photos.

*****Bonus points: Share YOUR favorite tips for composition with us! *****



What tips from the checklist did we use in this photo? week five 5

Q & A: Composition

Q: heather*t asked: A beginner question would be, What are the rules for good photographic composition...and what rules can be broken effectively? Also, what can you do compositionally to spice up posed family pictures?

A: Rules are meant to be broken, right? Just because this week's tips might work in many situations doesn't mean that they'll work in ALL situations. So the important thing is to remember not to take the tips as RULES, but as GUIDELINES. If they work for you, use them. But if they don't work, don't worry about staying within the guidelines. Don't let these tips hinder your creativity.

A: As far as group portraits, here are a few suggestions we've found to be effective:

After taking a tradition, full-length photo, take a few steps closer for a close-up of your subjects. Also note that the pose directly below is relaxed and comfortable. Encourage your group to have some fun (such as the jumping groomsmen pictured below) to avoid stiff, posed photos. A little fun can also go a long way to relaxing your subjects, and you can follow the fun with a formal pose as well.



For full-length poses, stagger your subjects, or try arranging groupings within your portrait - for example, have mom and dad stand together, then daughter and son together but a little in front of mom & dad.

Finally, try a different perspective. The group photo on the left was shot from the top of the stairs while the family stood at the landing halfway down the stairs.

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