

## CHAPTER

# 6

## Composing Pictures Like a Pro



Want to quickly improve your digital pictures? Improving composition is a quick way to get better pictures. This chapter explores some simple techniques used by professional photographers that will immediately improve the photos that you take. You also learn ways to add interest to all your photos using a variety of composition techniques.

## Visualize Composition

The best pictures not only catch your attention, but they also hold your attention. To get these kinds of pictures, compose images carefully and tell a story in each picture. Begin by borrowing established design principles and composition techniques that artists and photographers have been using since the camera was invented. As you progress, add in your own personal style to create signature pictures that viewers remember.



### Stand Back and Evaluate

You interpret each scene for your viewers. It is your job to combine your emotional perceptions with the objective viewpoint of the camera. Begin by evaluating all the elements in the scene. Gradually narrow your view to identify individual vignettes. Then look for defining elements, colors, patterns, and textures that can help organize the visual information in the picture.

### Consider Audience and Occasion

The most important questions to ask during this stage are, "Why am I taking this picture?" and "What do I want to tell the viewer?" Answering these questions helps you focus on the important elements in the scene. From there, you can choose to include or exclude visual elements that add to or detract from the message you want to communicate to viewers.



**Use Light and Exposure Controls Creatively**

When you know the message you want to convey, you can use or modify the light, and choose exposure settings that create the mood, concentrate attention, and provide the perspective of the scene. In this picture, having the young woman stand in the shade gives her image a hint of mystery. To learn more about light, see Chapter 3. To learn more about exposure, see Chapter 4.

**Keep It Simple**

Just as with writing or painting, messages are most effectively delivered and retained when they are simple. Strive for a clean shot — an uncluttered visual scene that conveys a single story, or conveys a clear graphic shape, as shown here. To get a clean shot, you can clear away clutter, change your shooting position, or zoom in on the subject.

**Evaluate the Result**

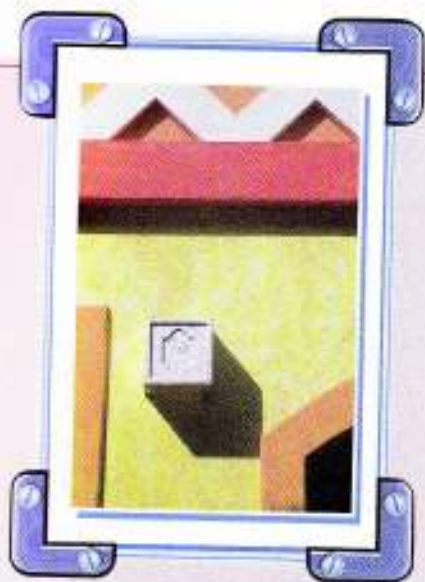
With a digital camera, you can immediately evaluate the success or failure of your images on the LCD. Take advantage of the opportunity to make adjustments, and immediately reshoot the picture. The more pictures that you take, review, and reshoot, the better you become at recognizing composition problems by looking at pictures on the LCD.



## Consider Design Principles

Many principles of photographic composition are derived from the traditional design disciplines of art and graphic design, some

of which date back to the Renaissance. Here are a few of the most widely used principles.



### How the Shapes of Objects Affect Photos

The number and kind of shapes in a photo determine where viewers focus their attention. The human shape or form always draws attention in a picture. A single, small shape attracts attention either as the subject or as a secondary element that helps define the subject. Groupings of similar objects invite the viewer to compare size, shape, and spacing between the objects.

### Create a Sense of Balance

Balance is a sense of "rightness" in a photo. A balanced photo does not appear to be too heavy at any point, or too off-center. When composing your pictures, consider the following: the visual weight of colors and tones – dark is heavier than light; objects – large objects appear heavier than light objects; and placement – objects placed toward an edge appear heavier than objects placed at the center of the frame.



**Visual Line Convey**

Visual lines have symbolic significance that you can use to direct the focus and organize the elements in your picture. Horizontal lines convey stability and peacefulness.

Diagonal lines imply strength, as shown in the picture, and dynamic tension. Vertical lines convey motion, while curved lines resemble grace, and zigzag lines imply

**Is Symmetry Good or Bad?**

Perfectly symmetrical compositions, images that are the same from side to side or from top to bottom, create balance and stability, but they also are viewed as boring compositions. Symmetrical designs, as shown here, often offer less visual impact than photos with some asymmetry and tension.

**Placement of a Subject within a Picture**

Just as symmetry is visually uninteresting, placing a subject or the line of the horizon in the center of the frame is usually equally boring. Subject placement depends on the scene, but placement should identify the subject and create a natural visual path through the photo. Also, motion and implied action should come into the frame rather than travel out of it.



## Discover Rules of Composition

There are many established rules and guidelines that you can use to improve your photos. Most of them are simple and easy to remember. There are no binding rules of composition. Some of the greatest artists today broke the rules of composition and technique of their time. The techniques in this section provide a good starting point for designing images. Be sure to experiment and let the subject help define your composition.

**"Society honors its live conformists and its dead nonconformists." – Mark Twain**



### Practice the Rule of Thirds

A popular photography compositional technique draws an imaginary grid over the viewfinder. With the scene divided into thirds, the photographer places the subject on one of the points of intersection or along one of the lines on the grid. In a portrait, you can place the eyes of the subject at the upper-left intersection point, which is considered to be the strongest position.



### Frame the Subject

Photographers often borrow a technique from painters, putting the subject within a naturally occurring frame, such as a tree framed by a barn door, or a distant building framed by an archway in the foreground, as shown. The frame may or may not be in focus, but for it to be most effective, it should add context to the subject.



**Fill the Frame**

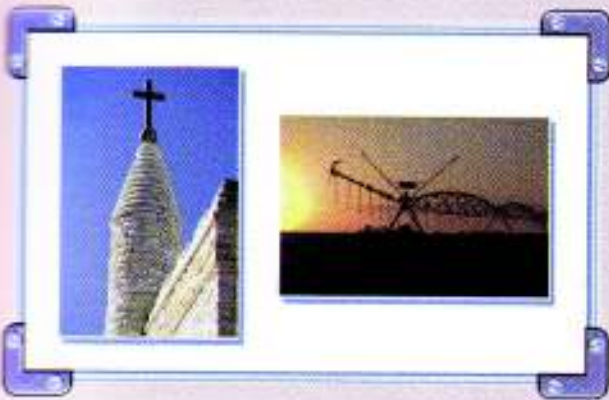
Professional artists fill an entire canvas with a scene, and photographers strive to fill the image frame with elements that support the message. Decide exactly what you want in the picture, and then fill the frame with what you envision for the picture. For variation, you can come in very close to the subject to show only part of the subject.

**Use Other Composition Aids**

Other composition techniques include using strong textures, repeating patterns and geometric shapes, and color repetition or contrasts to compose images. These elements can create a picture on their own, or you can use them to create visual motion that directs the eye or supports the subject.

**Choose the Orientation**

The most basic composition begins by choosing either a horizontal or a vertical orientation. Some subjects dictate the most appropriate orientation. For example, you can use a horizontal orientation for a sweeping landscape, and a vertical orientation for a portrait, as shown in this picture. Otherwise, choose the orientation that supports the composition you envision and avoids useless, empty space.

**Check the Background and Surroundings**

In a picture, the elements behind and around the subject become as much a part of the photograph as the subject, as shown in the photo of the young lady from Texas. As you compose the picture, check everything in the viewfinder or LCD for objects that compete with or distract from the subject. Then see if you can move the objects, the subject, or change your position to eliminate distractions.



## Learn to Control Composition

In a perfect world, you could control all the elements within a photograph. In a studio, everything is controlled by the photographer. In the outside world, you must work with existing conditions, backgrounds, and foregrounds. Here are some ways to get the best composition when you cannot control all the elements in the scene.

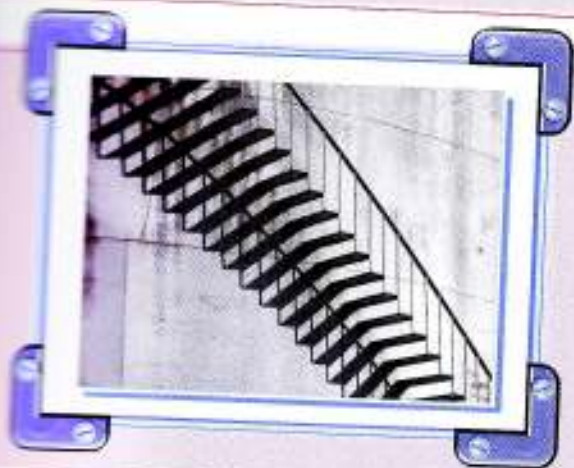


### Select Focus and Control Depth of Field

Because the eye is drawn to the sharpest part of the photo, you can use focus to emphasize the relative importance of elements in the picture. Or combine selective focus and depth of field to emphasize or subdue elements within the picture. Here, a shallow depth of field blurs a distracting background. For more information on depth of field, see Chapter 4.

**Change the Point of View**

Instead of photographing at eye level, try changing your viewpoint. For instance, if you photograph a subject from a lower-than-eye-level position, then the subject seems powerful, while a higher-than-eye-level position creates the opposite effect.

**Use Tone and Contrast**

You can use *contrast*, or the difference between light and dark tones, to emphasize your subject. Experiment by modifying the amount and angle of light to create more or less contrast, such as waiting for the sun to be in a position to produce long shadows, as shown. Or you can change position so the subject is backlit to add dramatic contrast.

**Define Space and Perspective**

Some techniques to control the perception of space in pictures include changing the distance from the camera to the subject, selecting a telephoto or wide-angle lens or zoom setting, changing the position of the light, and changing the point of view. In this example, a telephoto lens compresses the dry grasses blowing in the wind.

