



Composition Basics

Art Elements & Principles of Art and Design in Photography

“There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographs.”

— Ansel Adams

The art elements are the building blocks that artists use to create their compositions.

The elements are:

1. line
2. shape
3. form
4. color
5. value
6. texture
7. space

From

<http://www.wildlifeart.org/Rungius/intro1.html>

Artists create compositions by arranging these basic elements. By following the principle of art & design an artist can influence the viewer’s experience.

The principles of art & design are guidelines for planning and composing a visual image. Artists use the principles for many purposes. The principles govern the way the art elements are arranged to guide the eye, evoke a mood, tell a story or achieve other goals.

The principles of art/design are:

1. balance
2. contrast
3. emphasis
4. movement
5. pattern/repetition
6. rhythm
7. proportion
8. unity / harmony
9. variety

From

<http://www.wildlifeart.org/Rungius/intro1.html>

Different sources will use different terms when describing composition. You will notice some terms have similar meaning while others add their own terms and descriptors.

In photography consider:

Shape	Every element in the scene has a distinct shape, which can be simple or irregular. Unusual shapes have a way of attracting attention away from simpler ones. This needs to be taken into account depending on which objects you want the viewer to be drawn to. Some shapes complement each other, while some are a distraction.
Size	An element’s size will determine its prominence in the frame. Depending on whether you wish the viewer to pay more or less attention to the object, you may want to select your lens and point of view to enhance or mitigate the effect of an element’s size in relation to others.
Texture	A texture can be interesting to the eye or make it difficult to notice other elements. Different textures may blend into each other or enhance each other.
Curvature	Unlike the shape, which is unique to one element, curvature may be a result of the arrangement of several objects, or part of a background. Curvature can lead the viewer’s eye towards or away from an element.
Pattern	A pattern is a recurring element within a scene. It can be a recurring shape or texture that is replicated in multiple elements.
Color	Some colors work better with others, vivid colors attract attention away from lighter ones. Again - depending on what you want the viewer to be drawn to, you must take these effects into account.
Tone	In color photography, pay attention to different shades of the same colors. In black-and-white photography, different colors may be rendered in a similar way depending on their tone. Tone is also a product of how an element is lit and its reflective qualities.

Photo Compositional Rules

The Rule of Thirds

Take the picture area and divide it into 'thirds' horizontally and vertically, where the lines cross in the picture area is the best spot in which to place your main subject or object of interest as it is the focal point of your picture.

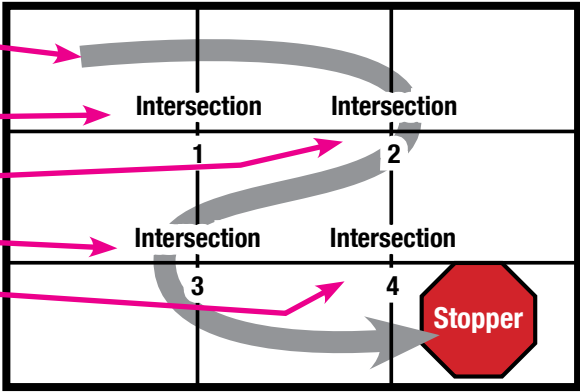
There are four spots where these lines cross. Note all these spots are away from the center bull's eye position in the picture frame. The two best spots are the upper left and the lower right because the eye enters the picture frame at the upper left hand corner of the picture frame, travels to the right hand position where it stops to look at the **center of interest**.

Reverse S
Shows how eye travels through image (gray line)

Intersections

1. Upper left
2. Upper right
3. Lower left
4. Lower right

Stopper
Acts to stop eye from exiting the image and should redirect eye to Intersection 1.



This is a psychological fact which has been proven over the years.

Look at how many art gallery or art museum two-dimensional art pieces have a subject at one of these positions.

Placing two items at opposite sides of the frame can cause problems with eye movement through the photo. The viewer will become confused as eyes move from one side to the other resulting in a lost of interest.

Create a line so the eye naturally flows from intersection one through to intersection four. A reverse "S" line is shows the natural eye movement.

Use a **stopper** to keep the eye from leaving the photo by placing an object in the lower right corner (intersection four).

Many digital camera have an option showing a Rule of Thirds grid. Use it and your photographs' composition will improve.

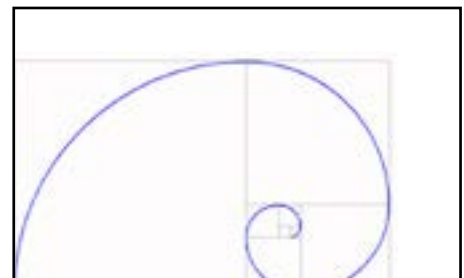
Golden Mean — Using Fibonacci number: 1.618 (the number)

It consists of a series of numbers in which each number (Fibonacci number) is the sum of the two preceding numbers. The simplest is the series 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, etc. Other terms used for this include Golden Ratio and Golden Rectangle.

Leonardo Fibonacci around 1200 A.D. realized there was an absolute ratio prevalent in nature. A design which universal in living things and pleasing to the human eye. Hence, the "divine proportion" nickname.

When diagrammed the numbers form a spiral, which is found throughout nature. It is considered to be one of the most pleasant shapes probably because this ratio is

found repeated through out the human form. Top models have this ratio appearing in their facial and body features.



The idea is to show the relationship of items compositionally with this pattern of 1.618 repeating, as in the diagram. **The diagram can be flipped or turned, the ratios stay the same.**

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Implied Lines Hold the Picture Together

Implied lines are not actual lines that you can see in the picture area, they are 'implied' and are made up by the way objects are placed in the picture area. Sometimes actual items or objects do make lines

The Leading Line

The line that leads your eye in to the picture area easily like a road or fence, a shoreline or river, a row of trees or a pathway. A successful **leading line** will lead your eye in to the picture and take it right to the main subject or center of interest

An unsuccessful leading line will take the eye in to the picture but will **zoom** the eye right **out** of the picture if there is no **stopper** to hold the eye in the picture frame; such as a tree, house or other large object on the right hand side of the picture frame which will **stop** the eye from going out of the picture. The Center of Interest or Main Subject will act as a Stopper and hold the eye in the picture frame.

The best leading lines will start at the lower left area of the picture frame but not in the exact corner. Again, the

The Vertical Line

It denotes dignity, height, strength, and grandeur. We find vertical lines in trees, tall buildings, fences, people standing up, mountains, etc. A

The Horizontal Line

Denotes repose, calm, tranquility and peacefulness, such as a person lying in the grass sleeping, flowers in a field, the flatness of a desert scene or lake. You can make your

The Diagonal Line

This line gives the sensation of force, energy and motion as seen in trees bent by the wind, a runner at the starting line or the slope of a mountain as it climbs into the sky. By knowing this you can create force, energy and motion

The Curve

Here is a line of great beauty and charm and nothing gives a better example than a beautiful female form with all its

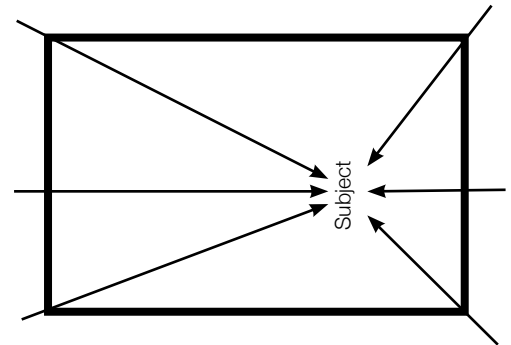
The S-Curve (Reverse S-Curve)

This line goes further than just a plain 'curved line. It is called the 'Line Of Beauty'. It is Elastic, Variable and combines Charm and Strength. It has Perfect Grace and Perfect Balance. You have seen this 'S' Curve hundreds of times in drawings and paintings and other works of art.

such as, railroad tracks, telephone wires, etc.

These 'implied lines' can actually create a response in various ways:

eye likes to enter a picture frame at this point and the leading line will help it get in to the picture easily and swiftly.



Implied forms also hold a picture Together.

Implied forms are a combination of **implied lines** and they help to hold a picture together. The eye enjoys these interesting forms and will stay in the picture area to examine each one of them, if they are present.

tall building shows height, strength, dignity and grandeur. Trees show height and strength.

photograph illicit these feelings if you look for them in the picture area and use them in your photographs.

with your camera easily by tilting the camera to make objects appear to be in a diagonal line. A dignified church steeple when photographed at a slant will change to a forceful arrow pointing towards the sky and show motion.

lines and curves. Of course there are other examples: The curve in a river or a pathway through a flower garden.

Examples: the double curve of a river makes an 'S' curve. A path, row of trees or bushes that curve one way and then the other way create the 'S' curve. Look for this type of design and use it in your photos to add interest and beauty.

Shapes

The Circle

It is made up of a continuous 'Curve' and it's circular movement keeps the eye in the picture frame. There are many circles in nature and man made objects and if you find them in an image before you, be sure

to make good use of them in your photograph.

Circles can be made up of children playing 'ring around the roses' or a small pond or lake is usually in the form of a circle and of course many race tracks are a form of circle.

The Triangle or Pyramid

This has a 'solid base' and will show Stability. It also has Height and Strength. The Pyramids of Egypt have survived for thousands of years while other types of solid buildings have crumbled in to dust in less time.

three points in the scene, such as two trees on the grounds pointing to a cloud in the sky. Sometimes a fence in combination with a stream and a farm house can form the Triangle Composition.

A Triangle can show up in your viewfinder as

The Radian

is a connection of 'Lines' meeting in the Center and it is also an expansion of 'Lines' leaving the Center. The Radian is usually found in Nature Subjects. The best example of the man made Radian is the spokes of a wheel.

The eye has two ways to go when it comes upon the Radian. It can either be drawn in to the picture area or it can be led out of the picture area. You must be careful how you used the Radian and try to have the eye led into the picture.

The Cross

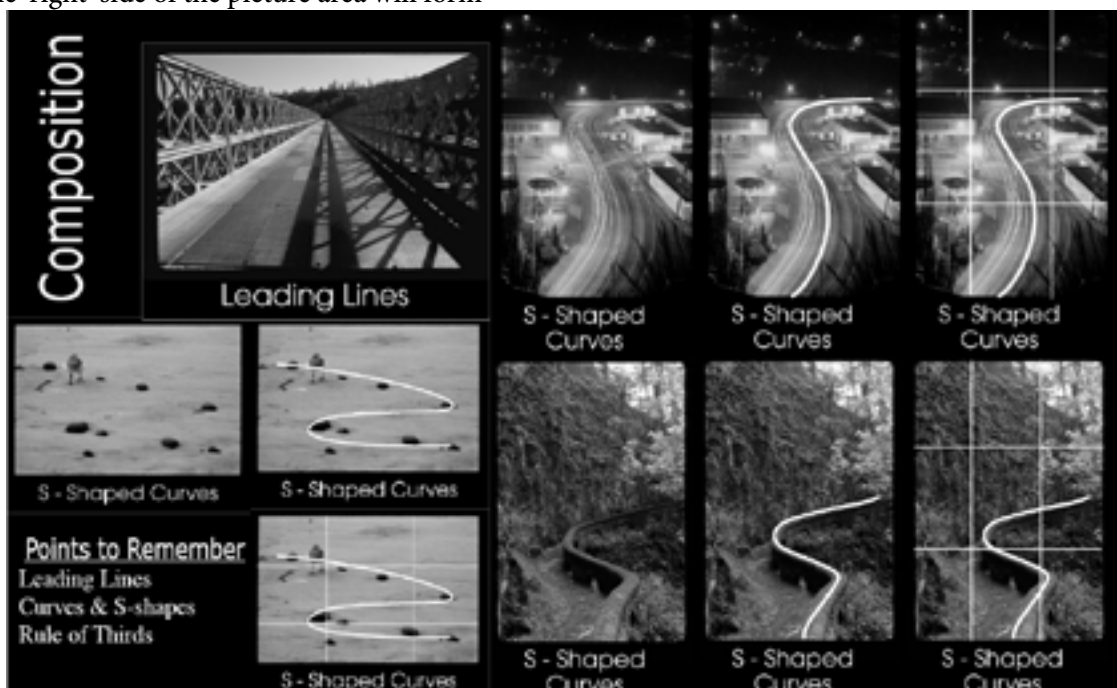
A showing of 'Opposing Force' that will give the picture a feeling of Cohesion and Relationship. The horizontal bar of the Cross will act as a "stopper" while the vertical pole can act as a leading line. The

windows in a large skyscraper will form crosses and will keep your interest in the building. The Cross also has religious meaning and the subtle use of the Cross can give hidden meaning to a photograph.

The "L" or Rectangle

This makes an attractive 'frame'. It can be used to accentuate important subjects. Many times it is a 'frame' within a 'frame'. A tree with an overhanging branch at the 'right' side of the picture area will form

a 'Rectangle' and help frame the Main Subject in the picture. By doing this you will make the Center of Interest stand out and be noticed clearly.



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Value of Colors (Not a rule, methods to used to apply rules)

Color can also help in Photo-Composition by drawing attention to the subjects and objects. The eye will **always** go to the highlights or the 'brightest

and lightest' color is in a photograph. You must watch the play of colors at all times and make sure they are doing what you desire in your image.

Value

The value of colors are intensity, brightness and luminance factor. Thus colors are said to have strong or weak values. They can be warm or cold, advancing or receding. The 'longer wavelengths' from red to yellow are usually described as strong, warm, advancing colors while the 'shorter wavelengths', the greens and blues

may be described as weak, cold and receding colors.

Pastel colors are quiet and moody while bright colors are strong and active. However, certain colors 'react' very strongly with each other to give "strong contrasts" and to many people these will become 'discords' rather than 'harmonies'.

Hue

Is the scientific counterpart for the more popular word 'color'. Red, yellow, green and blue are the **primary hues**,

while orange, blue-green, and violet are secondary **hues**.

Complimentary Colors

Colors that go with each other will compliment each other and are desirable in any painting or photograph.

If you place the primary and secondary colors on a 'color wheel' you will find red will be opposite green; orange will be opposite blue and yellow will be opposite violet. These 'opposites are complimentary colors and can be used together to create the best color harmony.

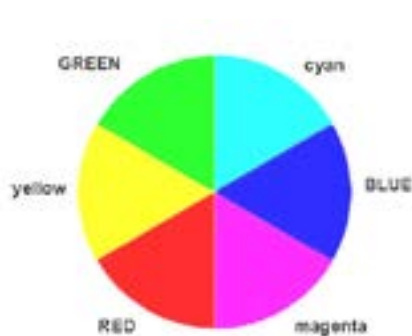
For example, a red barn in a green field of grass has harmony. The blue and orange sky of a sunset has color harmony. Always look for complimentary colors in the visual image you plan to photograph and use them to create better photographs.

Notice how green is opposite magenta, blue is opposite blue and red is opposite cyan.

Adapted From

http://www.photoinf.com/General/Arnold_Kaplan/The_Magic_Of_Selective_Vision_-_Photo_Composition.htm

Simple Color Wheel



Additive Primaries & Subtractive Color Results



Subtractive Primaries & the Additive Results



5 Basic Photo Guidelines from Kodak

1. Simplicity

Look for ways to give the center of interest in your pictures the most visual attention. One way is to select uncomplicated backgrounds that will not steal attention from your subjects.

2. The Rule of Thirds

You can use the rule of thirds as a guide in the off-center placement of your subjects. Here's how it works.

Grid

Before you snap the picture, imagine your picture area divided into thirds both horizontally and vertically. The intersections of these imaginary lines suggest four options for placing the center of interest for good composition. The option you select depends upon the subject and how you would like that subject to be presented.

2. Lines

Lines also play an important role in composition. A picture is much more dynamic because of the strong diagonal lines.

3. Balance

Achieving good balance is another one of our guidelines for better picture composition. The camera viewpoint and subject placement need to be carefully selected to create a well-balanced photograph. Good balance is simply the arrangement of shapes, colors, or areas of light and dark complementing one another so that the photograph looks well-balanced.

4. Framing

What we mean is to frame the center of interest with objects in the foreground. This can give a picture the feeling of depth it needs to make it more than just another snapshot. Whether or not you use a frame for a picture will depend on each new subject. What you choose as a frame for the scene will, of course, vary as well.

5. Avoiding Mergers

Avoiding mergers is our sixth guideline for better composition. Remember: we see things in three dimensions, so it's easier than you might guess to focus our eyes on the principal subject only and not see that background at all. The camera always sees mergers, so look for plain backgrounds before you pose your subject.

From: http://photoinf.com/General/KODAK/guidelines_for_better_photographic_composition.html

You should notice differences in terminologies used by the four different sources.

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Some Web Sources to Read:

These will help you answer the questions

http://www.photoinf.com/General/Johannes_Vloothuis/landscape_composition_rules.html

http://www.photoinf.com/General/Geoff_Lawrence/Composition.html

http://www.photoinf.com/General/Guy_Tal/Learning_to_PhotoGraph_the_Landscape_Part_I.html

http://www.photoinf.com/General/Guy_Tal/Learning_to_PhotoGraph_the_Landscape_Part_II.html

http://www.photoinf.com/General/Arnold_Kaplan/The_Magic_Of_Selective_Vision_-_Photo_Composition.htm

http://www.photoinf.com/General/Gary_Stanley/An_Eye_for_Composition.html

http://www.photoinf.com/General/Gao_Mu/Introduction_To_PhotoGraphy_Composition.htm

http://www.photoinf.com/General/Peter_Ensenberger/Improving_Your_PhotoGraphy_Lesson_Two_Composition.htm

http://www.photoinf.com/General/Gloria_Hopkins/Composition_Getting_Beyond_the_Snapshot.htm

http://www.photoinf.com/General/Gloria_Hopkins/Composition_in_Nature_PhotoGraphy_and_the_Elements_of_a_PhotoGraph.htm

http://www.photoinf.com/General/Theresa_Husarik/PhotoGraphy_Tips_-_Composition_Refreshes.htm

http://www.photoinf.com/Golden_Mean/Michael_Fodor/Photo_School_-_Composition_Basics.htm

http://www.photoinf.com/Golden_Mean/Stuart_Low/The_Golden_Mean.htm

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Notes