

Photography from the Inside Out

Part One - Setting the Stage

by Jim Merrithew with Susan Mackie

“Don’t be repressed in your work - dare to experiment - consider any urge - if in a new direction, all the better...Let the eyes work from inside out - do not imitate “photographic painting” in a desire to be photographic!”

- Edward Weston (photographer)

These words come from a letter written by photographer Edward Weston in 1932. They were sent as inspiration to his friend Ansel Adams, who, as is widely known, would come to be one of the world’s most famous photographers. Adams frequently sought advice from his many friends and colleagues, and devoted his life to the study of light and shadow, timing, and the technique that would become his trademark.

Great photography can be a mystery, even for someone like Ansel Adams. With all of the advanced cameras and other equipment available in today’s market, and at any good camera store, almost anyone can become technically proficient. But what magic

occurs at that point between technical competence and a truly excellent photograph? What is it that makes a picture great?

This article (Part One) will focus on the planning of a really good photograph - on the aspects of composition that make a picture great. Part Two will discuss the technicalities - how to use your camera and its settings to their best advantage and yours.

Let’s look at the elements you need for a really great picture!

- Composition
- Lighting
- Contrast
- Expression
- Subject Matter
- Action/Timing

Composition (perspective and depth)

Photographs can often be improved and made more interesting by taking the time to compose the subject. Many people tend to place the subject dead centre in the picture; resulting in a picture that includes so much space around the subject and so many other items in the photo that the main subject gets lost.

Composition is the placement of the subject in the photo to make it the focus of the viewer’s attention. Composition is also the utilization of other elements to draw or lead the viewer’s eye to the subject.

In traditional composition, the frame of the picture is split into thirds, both horizontally and vertically. The subject of the photo is placed at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal lines. If the subject of the photo is a person, have them on the left facing into the space to the right, or on the right, looking to the left.

Rule of Thirds

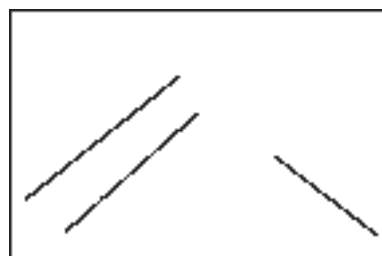
Another use of composition is the use of diagonal lines to lead the eye to or from the subject. Parallel lines, such as the edges of roads or railway tracks converge as their distance from the camera increases. These converging lines lead the eye, giving depth to the picture. “S” curves lead the eye into, out of, or through the photo.

Scenic photos can be improved this way. In any scenic photo, an object in the foreground, close to the camera, will be larger than the same object at a distance. The diminishing

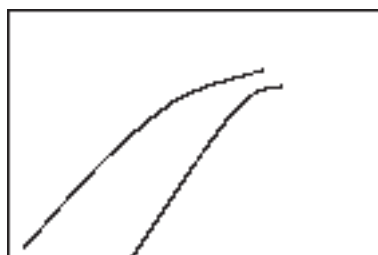
Elements of Composition



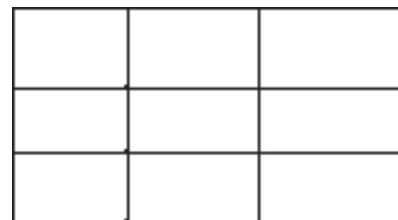
▲ **“S” Curves**



◀ **Diagonal Lines**



▶ **Converging Diagonal Lines**



▲ **Rule of Thirds**

in size of the objects farther from the camera, gives a sense of scale, of distance and depth to the photo. Photos with a foreground, a middle ground and a background will have more depth and be more interesting.

The vantage point, or from which the picture is taken makes a big difference in a photograph. Most people take their pictures from eye level, while standing. Before taking the picture, think about whether it would look better if you took the photo from a lower angle, from your knees, or if you were higher, up a short step-ladder. Would the picture be improved if you moved right, left, ahead or back? Take a few seconds to experiment, to imagine, and to study the subject.

When composing the picture in the camera, aim it slightly left, right, up, down to move the subject to different locations (positions) in the frame. Does this make the image any better?

Many nice pictures are ruined by distracting elements (i.e. hydro poles and wires). Can you avoid or eliminate these by moving slightly? Keep in mind that busy or distracting backgrounds can also divert attention from the subject.

Don't forget: some pictures are nicer as verticals than horizontals. Try turning your camera!

Lighting

Most people take pictures with the light coming over their shoulder (from behind the camera). Did you know that lighting which comes from the side will emphasize textures and the shape of the subject? In some cases, if the light comes from an angle behind, it may make the picture appear more dreamlike and moody. However, in hard sunlight, during midday, this may result in either underexposure of the subject, or overexposure of the background which is in full sunlight.

If the subject is backlit (i.e. the lighting source is coming into the camera from behind the subject), you should move in for a tighter picture to reduce the amount of background. Photographs taken of people outside in full sunlight at midday (between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m.) will often feature dark shadows in the eyes, and the nose shadow will come down onto the mouth - not the most flattering lighting! If the picture is taken at dawn or

dusk, when the colour of the light is either reddish or yellowish, the sun is at a much lower angle. This angle and the colour of the light will often make for very beautiful photographs.

Hard/contrast lighting gives subjects hard, sharp edges. It defines their shapes. In some cases, if the contrast between the highlight and the shadows is too extreme, the film will not record the complete range of detail. In most cases, film is limited to a three-stop range, and the photographic exposure is based on the highlights. If the highlights are properly exposed and the shadows are too dark, this is more acceptable than if the highlights are overexposed and "washed out".

Overcast, low contrast/soft lighting usually gives the picture more depth. The transition from light to dark and between colours is softer, more subtle, more gradual.

Contrast (in black and white photos: contrast and tonality, in colour photos: the colours, the colour contrast or complementary colours)

Light contrast is the ratio of light in bright areas to light in dark areas.



◀ **Use your imagination when composing your shots.**

Photo: Dennis Power



▲ **Contrasting colours give life to a picture.**

Photo: Len Wagg

▶ **Overcast lighting makes for a moodier image.**

Photo: Rick Bramm



All films are limited as to the contrast levels they can handle. Some films can handle higher contrast lighting and will reduce contrast. Other films will increase the contrast of a subject. If the contrast range is too great, set your exposure so the highlights are not overexposed.

Colour contrast refers to the differences between colours. Light colours contrast with dark ones and dark colours contrast with light ones. Dark tones do not stand out from dark colours. Black will stand out from yellow, and vice versa. Black may not stand out from navy blue, especially if there is little light on the blue. A yellow or pink flower will stand out from its green foliage.

Most people, when viewing a painting or picture, will focus their attention on the brightest, lightest or more colourful parts of the photo or artwork.

Some films are more sensitive to some colours than other colours. Most films are designed to render skin tones well; however, there are many different skin tones - pale, tanned, ruddy or honey-toned. People of oriental descent are slightly yellow in complexion. People of African heritage may have skin tones ranging from light brown to dark chocolate to black with bluish highlights.

Subjects with a hard, shiny surface will appear to be brighter, more contrasted than an item with a soft, dull finish. Wet subjects, and scenes after a rainfall, will seem to have deeper, more intense colours.

Expression

The facial expression contributes to the emotion of the photograph. Often, candid photographs are more interesting than shots of posed individuals lined up or “mugging” for the camera. A photograph which captures a facial expression projecting the emotion of the activity makes the photograph more exciting. For example, a runner crossing the finish line and winning the race may erupt in a spontaneous expression of victory and joy. At the end of a long climb, on a hot, humid day, the look of exhaustion and the sweat on a hiker’s face may tell more about the challenge of the climb than any words could.

Subject matter

Landscapes, wildlife, friends, family, sunsets – these are all fascinating subjects that could be explored with a camera. There are as many different subjects possible for a photograph as there are ideas. The outdoor adventures at the heart of Scouting provide a wide range of possibilities for photographers – whether they are trying to produce a piece of photographic art, or hoping to capture the essence of the activity. The backdrops for many Scouting events are as spectacular as Nature provides – sunsets, lakes, trees, and the amazing beauty of the outdoors.

Action/timing

Scouting programs are chock-full of opportunities for spontaneous, dramatic photographs of outdoor activities and sports, especially if you

manage to capture the action at the peak of its intensity. For instance, a kayaker splashing through the waves in a series of rapids will usually have more impact than someone paddling across a calm lake. A picture of someone struggling while paddling a canoe is a lot more interesting than someone posed and sitting. Sometimes the anticipation of the action is what makes a picture breathless.

An excellent example of “peak action photography” and anticipation is Gerry Prince’s photograph that appeared on the cover of the June/July 2002 issue of *Leader Magazine*. Gerry captured the youth at the exact moment he was about to enter the water, making it appear that the boy is doing a cartwheel on the surface. The mirror image in the water adds to the interest. This incredible, high-speed shot won the hearts of the judges and first place in *Leader Magazine*’s 2002 Photo Contest.

Next month, we look at the technical aspects of photography – how to use your camera, its settings and film to its best advantage – and yours.

(Look for Photography from the Inside Out – Part Two: The Technicalities in next month’s issue of *Leader Magazine*.) X

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