

Definition of *composition*

Composition *noun* com·po·si·tion \,kām-pə-'zi-shən\ : the way in which something is put together or arranged : the combination of parts or elements that make up something

Welcome to the wonderful world of photographic composition! In its most general terms, photographic composition is the art of composing an image through framing. And there lies the problem. How is it that the one thing that almost everyone agrees is critical to the success of a photograph is completely subjective? Composition is an art unto itself and is created by rules that should and can be broken regularly, often with great success.

Keep it Simple!

Shooting a well composed photo shouldn't be so complicated as to confuse things. There are all sorts of theories about the Golden Ratio or more simply "The Rule of Thirds", for example. But if you pay too much attention to strict formulas, your photos may lose any kind of spontaneity. In the real world, you'll be working with a wide range of subjects and scenes, and this requires a more open-minded approach. What works for one photo won't necessarily work for another.

Technical know-how is very important in photography, of course. But a good understanding of the rules that govern the composition of your photo will affect the way a shot looks and how people perceive your photos. The way you frame a shot, choose a point of view or position a person can make all the difference.

Rule 1. Simplify the scene

When looking at a scene with your eye, you focus on the subject or subjects of interest. But the camera can't discriminate - it captures everything in front of it, which can lead to a cluttered, messy picture with no clear focal point. As a general rule, simple images tend to be more appealing than complicated ones. As a general rule, simple images tend to be more appealing than complicated ones. This idea is similar to "filling the frame" in that it demands that you get rid of distracting elements in your photo. To use this compositional rule, simply ask yourself this question: does that element add to my composition? If it doesn't, get rid of it. You can do this by recomposing so that the element is no longer in the frame, zooming in on your subject to fill the frame, using a wider [aperture](#) for a shallow [depth of field](#), or simply cropping the image later in post processing.

What you need to do is choose your subject, then select a focal length or camera viewpoint that makes it the center of attention in the frame. You can't always keep other objects out of the picture, so try to keep them in the background or make them part of the story.

Fill the Frame

When you're shooting a large-scale scene it can be hard to know how big your subject should be in the frame, and how much you should zoom in by. In fact, leaving too much empty space in a scene is the most widespread compositional mistake. It makes your subject smaller than it needs to be and can also leave viewers confused about what they're supposed to be looking at.

To avoid these problems you should zoom in to fill the frame, or get closer to the subject in question. The first approach flattens the perspective of the shot and makes it easier to control or exclude what's shown in the background, but physically moving closer can give you a more interesting take on things.

Backgrounds

Don't just concentrate on your subject - look at what's happening in the background, too. This ties in with simplifying the scene and filling the frame. You can't usually exclude the background completely, of course, but you can control it.

You'll often find that changing your position is enough to replace a cluttered background with one that complements your subject nicely. Or you can use a wide lens aperture and a longer focal length to throw the background out of focus.

It all depends on whether the background is part of the story you're trying to tell with the photo. In the shot above, the background is something that needs to be suppressed.

Rule 2. The Rule of Thirds

One of the most widely known compositional rule! Any photographer who does more than just take snapshots knows something about the [rule of thirds](#). The basic theory goes like this: the human eye tends to be more interested in images that are divided into thirds, with the subject falling at or along one of those divisions. Many DSLRs will actually give you a visual grid in your viewfinder that you can use to practice this rule. If yours doesn't, just use your eye to roughly divide your image with four [lines](#) into nine equal-sized parts, then place your subject at the intersection of those lines. For example, when photographing a person it is generally better to position him or her at the right or left third of the frame rather than directly in the middle.

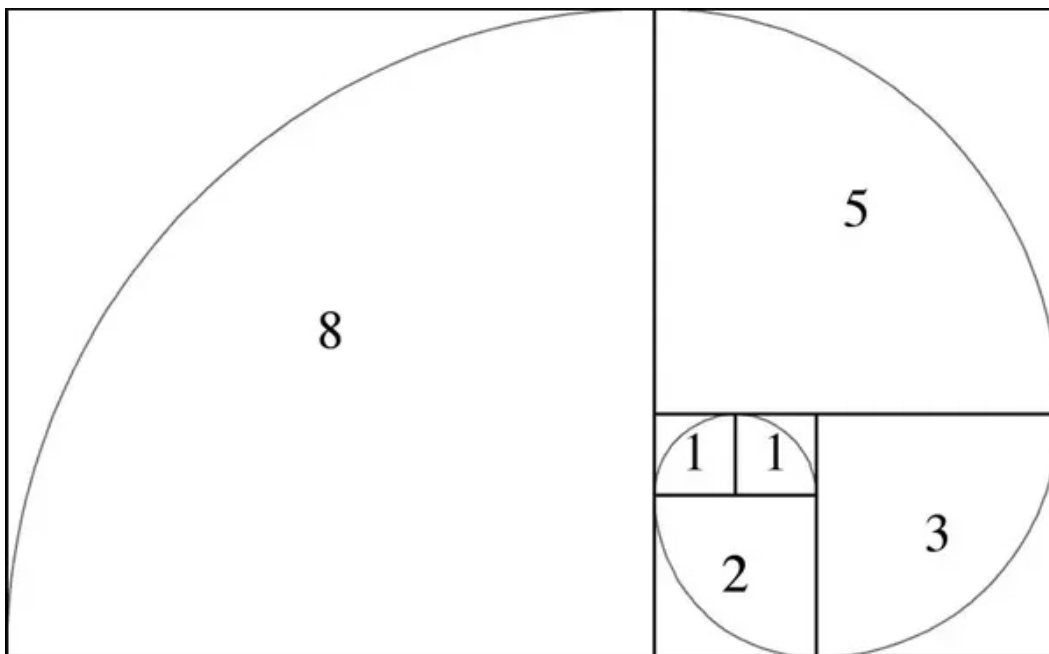
The Golden Ratio

And now to confuse you even more, enter "the golden ratio." While the rule of thirds divides your scene into equal thirds, the golden ratio divides your scene a little bit differently, into sections that are roughly 1:1.618. Unless you are a mathematical genius or at least a whiz, you'll probably need to see a visually. As you can see, instead of being evenly spaced as they are in the rule of thirds, golden ratio lines are concentrated in the center of the frame, with roughly 5/8ths of the frame in the above part, 2/8ths in the middle and 3/8ths at the bottom. This idea has been around for centuries - millennium, really, and can be found in many of the great classic works of art. With the idea being that a perfectly composed image should follow the lines in this rectangle.

Golden triangles and spirals

But wait, there's more. So far we've just talked about the perfect rectangle, which at 5:8 roughly corresponds to the size of a [35mm](#) image. But if your image has diagonals, try composing it using "golden triangles." To do this, divide your image diagonally from corner to corner, then draw a line from one of the other corners until it meets the first line at a 90 degree angle. Now place your photograph's elements so that they fall within the resulting triangles.

The golden spiral, as you might guess, is a compositional tool for use with objects that have curving lines rather than straight ones. This spiral is drawn based on that complicated series of rectangles we saw above, but you can actually visualize this based on nature's nautilus shell, which matches the golden spiral [shape](#) almost exactly. If that seems a little too convoluted to you, just look for compositions where there is a spiral that leads the eye to a particular point in the image.



Rule 3. Aspect ratio

It's easy to get stuck in a rut and take every picture with the camera held horizontally. Try turning it to get a vertical shot instead, adjusting your position or the zoom setting as you experiment with the new style. Try cropping to a 16:9 ratio for a widescreen effect, or to the square shape used by medium-format cameras.

Rule 4. Leading lines

A poorly composed photograph will leave your viewers unsure about where to look, and their attention might drift aimlessly around the scene without finding a clear focal point. However, you can use lines to control the way people's eyes move around the picture.

Converging lines give a strong sense of perspective and three-dimensional depth, drawing you into an image. Curved lines can lead you on a journey around the frame, leading you towards the main subject.

Lines exist everywhere, in the form of walls, fences, roads, buildings and telephone wires. They can also be implied, perhaps by the direction in which an off-center subject is looking.

Rule 5. Use diagonals

Horizontal lines lend a static, calm feel to a picture, while vertical ones often suggest permanence and stability. To introduce a feeling of drama, movement or uncertainty, look for diagonal lines instead.

You can need nothing more than a shift in position or focal length to get them - wider angles of view tend to introduce diagonal lines because of the increased perspective; with wide-angle lenses you're more likely to tilt the camera up or down to get more of a scene in.

Rule 6. Space to move

Even though photographs themselves are static, they can still convey a strong sense of movement. When we look at pictures, we see what's happening and tend to look ahead - this creates a feeling of imbalance or unease if your subject has nowhere to move except out of the frame.

You don't just get this effect with moving subjects, either. For example, when you look at a portrait you tend to follow someone's gaze, and they need an area to look into. For both types of shots there should always be a little more space ahead of the subject than behind it. Allow your subject visual freedom or freedom of movement.

Rule 7. Symmetry

A symmetrical image is one that looks the same on one side as it does on the other. Symmetrical designs are an excellent excuse for you to break the rule of thirds. There are a couple of ways you can take advantage of symmetry, which can be found in nature as well as in man-made elements. First, look for symmetrical patterns that are in unexpected places. For example, you probably won't expect to find symmetry in a mountain range. If you do, it's worth capturing with your camera. Second, look for symmetrical patterns with strong lines, curves and patterns. The more visually beautiful your subject is the more appealing it will be as a symmetrical image.

Rule 8. Creative with colors

Bright primary colors really attract the eye, especially when they're contrasted with a complementary hue. But there are other ways of creating color contrasts - by including a bright splash of color against a monochromatic background, for example. You don't need strong color contrasts to create striking pictures, though.

Scenes consisting almost entirely of a single hue can be very effective. And those with a limited palette of harmonious shades, such as softly lit landscapes, often make great pictures.

Rule 9. Frame

In photography, the term "natural frame" doesn't necessarily mean a natural object. A natural frame can be a doorway, an archway - or the branches of a tree or the mouth of a cave. Simply put, a natural frame is anything you can use in lieu of one of those expensive wood frames. Using natural frames is a trick that will isolate your subject from the rest of the image, leading the viewer's eyes straight to the place you want it to go.

Rule 10. Avoid the middle

When you're just starting out, it's tempting to put whatever you're shooting right in the center of the frame. However, this produces rather static, boring pictures. One of the ways to counteract this is to use the Rule of Thirds, where you split the image up into thirds, both horizontally and vertically, and try to place your subject on one of these imaginary lines or intersections.

Instead, move your subject away from the center and get a feel for how it can be balanced with everything else in the scene, including any areas of contrasting color or light. There are no hard and fast rules about achieving this kind of visual balance, but you'll quickly learn to rely on your instincts - trust that you'll know when something just looks right.

Breaking the rules

The rules of composition are like a blue print that you can use it to make your pictures convey a specific message. However, just as we sometimes use words to create a deliberately jarring effect, we can do the same with photos by breaking with standard composition conventions.

Just remember: for every rule suggested, somewhere out there is a great picture that proves you can disregard it and still produce a beautiful photos!