

How to get the composition of a photograph perfect



MASTERCLASS
DAVID WARD
Composition

YOU'VE BEEN FRAMED

THERE ARE NO RULES FOR GOOD PHOTOGRAPHS, THERE ARE ONLY GOOD PHOTOGRAPHERS.
ANSEL ADAMS

THE GREAT AMERICAN LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHER ANSEL ADAMS wrote: "There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographers."

Composition is a huge subject both in terms of the range of visual arrangements that we find acceptable and also in terms of the complexity of solving the four-dimensional puzzle necessary to make a pleasing image. This is far too much to cover in a single article, nevertheless I've attempted to show the worth of Ansel's advice and hopefully shed a few truths about composition.

Hardly modern, Ansel never looked up to a master's eye or would have been keen to learn through our photographs. Instead he had the most important book for any photographer: his own image. In an absolute of excellence, the photographer made his viewpoint the world as he saw it, clearly visible in all his findings for their subject. Good composition is the art of achieving such clarity – that's more than just a question of aesthetics.

Composition in other disciplines ranges from a gift of mechanical rules leading to unpleasing results, through to being composed about one finding their work the elements, include (a) to have the main subject on the right, (b) to use the rule of thirds, and so on. Offering these rules is akin to using mathematics as a crutch like they did one day, of achieving one goal, but they also didn't lose sight of it. It's to make their images, one needs to think the elements away.

DAVID WARD
David Ward is one of Britain's most accomplished large-format photographers, as well as a published writer and successful course workshop leader for Light & Land. He is also well known for his knowledge and humorous, accessible manner.

PURITY FIRES
Composition isn't just about form, it's also about colour, especially colour contrast – the image above displays blue and yellow. A monochrome version of this image would be much less powerful. This image also uses the blue negative space in the centre of the knot as a key part of the composition. Negative space is normally defined as the space around and supporting the subject. Here the blue, out-of-focus strip is as important as the finely defined surface of the wood, providing a counterbalance in both colour and level of detail.

WWW.PHOTOGRAPHYMAGAZINE.COM

David Ward is one of Britain's most accomplished large-format photographers, as well as a published writer and successful course workshop leader for Light & Land. He is also well known for his knowledge and humorous, accessible manner.

Composition isn't just about form; it's also about colour, especially colour contrast — the image above displays blue and yellow. A monochrome version of this image would be much less powerful. This image also uses the blue negative space in the centre of the knot as a key part of the composition. Negative space is normally defined as the space around and supporting the subject. Here the blue, out-of-focus strip is as important as the finely defined surface of the wood, providing a counterbalance in both colour and level of detail.

The great American landscape photographer Ansel Adams wrote: "There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographers."

Composition is a huge subject both in terms of the range of visual arrangements that we find acceptable and also in terms of the complexity of solving the four-dimensional puzzle necessary to make a pleasing image. This is far too much to cover in a single article,

nevertheless I will attempt to show the worth of Adams' advice and hopefully dispel a few myths about composition. Perfect rendering alone never raised a smile on a viewer's face or moved them to tears. Concentrating on conveying our passion through our photographs should be the most important task for any photographer. For an image to be emotive or evocative, the photographer needs to represent the world in a way that clearly conveys his or her feelings for their subject. 'Good composition' is the art of achieving such clarity — but it's more than just a question of aesthetics.

Composition is often explained simply as a set of mechanistic rules leading to guaranteed success: include a large foreground object; use leading lines; work the diagonals; include Zs or Ss; have the main subject on the right/left; employ the rule of thirds and so on. Utilising these rules is akin to using stabilisers on a child's bike: they stop you falling off and hurting your pride, but they also inhibit free movement. In order to really make progress, one needs to throw the stabilisers away. Sticking to 'the rules' can inhibit creativity, yet I have often seen images unfairly criticised for breaking them. The *rule of thirds* has almost become the Holy Grail of composition. In some circles, breaking this rule is tantamount to sacrilege. *RoT* isn't even an original idea; it's a bastardised version of the 'Golden Section', a mathematical definition of proportion that has achieved almost mythical significance in the arts. The rule states that an image should be imagined as divided into nine equal parts by two equally spaced horizontal lines and two equally spaced vertical lines. Important compositional elements should be placed along these lines (eg the horizon) or their intersections (eg a lone tree). Proponents of the technique claim, with little evidence, that aligning a subject with these points creates more tension, energy and interest in the composition than simply centring the subject would.

Yet even a cursory study of art from other cultures and periods will expose plenty of alternative approaches that are equally as powerful. Good composition, like all things relating to art, is relative, not absolute. Some compositions seem more powerful than others, but there's no definitive approach, no true right or wrong. Not only does the notion of composition vary across time and cultures, it also varies from individual to individual. But surely there must be something intrinsically worthwhile about 'the rules', or their use wouldn't be so widespread?

I think there are two main reasons for their popularity. Firstly, many people feel uncomfortable with the notion that there isn't a 'right way' to do something and applying them seems to take some of the uncertainty out of choosing one's framing and viewpoint. Secondly, the rules draw some of their power from the fact that they are a shorthand expression for how we understand reality. While some are culturally specific — eg Westerners read an image from left to right — the majority relate to approaches for

expressing three dimensions in two and specifically for depicting scale. Humans understand depth in any scene because we know that objects appear smaller the further away they are, we call this perspective, and one of the best-known examples is a drawing of a tiled floor. Using leading lines, including a large foreground object etc are simply ways to emphasise perspective. A diagonal line lends depth because it corresponds to the vertical edges of the tiles in the drawing I mentioned above (the same principle applies to a zig-zag line). It is obviously often desirable to create the illusion of depth in a two-dimensional image.

The clear danger when using any formula for composition is that images can become formulaic. The very best images almost always break the rules; proof if proof were needed that what matters most is not a blind adherence to an aesthetic norm, but a willingness to experiment. Edward Weston mused that, if one is solely motivated by the desire to depict one's subject in the most appropriate way "…so-called 'composition' becomes a personal thing, to be developed along with technique, as a personal way of seeing" .