

How to Compose a Photograph: Rules to Follow

Are you disappointed by the photos you take? You aren't alone. The truth is that stunning photography is harder than people think, mainly because photography is more about *how* you shoot rather than *what* you shoot.

Even the most beautiful scenes and subjects can turn out awful if the one behind the camera doesn't have a solid sense of how to take a shot the way they want it to turn out. This entire process of "taking a shot" is called composition, and if you want to get good at it, there are some rules you should consider.

Note: Even though we call them "rules", they aren't set in stone — nor should you adhere to all of them in every shot you take. Learn why these rules exist, then apply them as necessary for each photo you take in the future.



The Rule of Thirds

For a lot of photographers, the Rule of Thirds is the first piece of photography theory that they learn. This is the most valuable rule you'll learn.

The first time you picked up a camera, you probably felt compelled to center the subject. After all, attention should be on the subject, and attention is most drawn in the center, right? It works sometimes, but often this results in a photo that feels off somehow.

A perfectly centered image, in most cases, loses its sense of balance. It sounds contradictory, but it's true.

If a person's head is smack in the center, then their

body is below and empty air is above... and that's unbalanced. The Rule of Thirds is one way to resolve this.

Imagine splitting a photo into a 3×3 grid and looking at the four corners of the center section. These are the intersection points of the "thirds" — a third from the top, a third from the bottom, from the left, and from the right. When shooting, place the subject in one of these four spots.

Stock photography experts do this a lot because it's an easy way to make photos more compelling. Remember that the Rule of Thirds isn't enough to produce spectacular photos — but it's definitely an important ingredient.



Leading Lines

One of the most important concepts in photography is that you want the photo to "draw" the viewer's eyes somewhere. Most people start at the top left and move to the center, but this isn't always the case.



The easiest way to pull the viewer's eyes through a photo is to provide them with a direct route. Roads, fences, tree branches, walls, natural contours, or even silhouettes can be used as leading lines. The shape, direction, and depth of lines can create a sense of motion and make your photos feel alive.

So the next time you position yourself and hold the camera to your eye, make sure you look for all the potential lines in the scenes. Don't be afraid to stop and relocate if it means you can take better advantage of the lines around you.

Foreground & Background



For some, the greatest difficulty of photography is capturing the beauty and essence of a three-dimensional scene in a two-dimensional photo. Often, the result is a flat, static image that has none of the life that made the scene so awesome in the first place.

While there are many ways to trick the brain into thinking a two-dimensional image is three-dimensional, one of the easiest methods is to make sure that the photo has a foreground and a background.

In the above photo, notice how the tree (which is close to the camera) and the mountains (which are far from the camera) work together to create a sense of relative 3D space, and you can tell the mountains are big. Without the tree, you wouldn't know how big those mountains are. In case you missed it before, I'll repeat it here: you do not have to use ALL of these Rules in every single photo you take. In fact, you could potentially take an awesome photo that doesn't involve ANY of the aforementioned rules.



As a general rule of thumb, if you have a photo that doesn't look good, applying one or more of the rules in this article will probably improve it.

This handout was adapted from an article by Joel Lee, January 18, 2016
(<http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/compose-photograph-rules/>)

