

Background

Despite this rule's critical importance, it can be the one you're most likely to end up forgetting. It can be so easy to get lost in the subject during the shooting, only to realize later on that the background completely ruined the images. You might find that a busy background took the spotlight, or maybe the lenses you used flattened and blended the different layers. To avoid this issue, put your main subject in front of a plain background or use large apertures that give a narrow depth of field.

Natural framing

Using elements in the image to frame the main subject will help you draw the viewer's attention straight to it. They can also be used to hide unwanted objects within the shot or create some context around the subject. Don't let the name fool you - you can also use artificial or human elements as frames.

Viewpoint

The position from where you capture a subject directly impacts the message that the image conveys. Because we're so used to seeing the world from a specific point of view (that is, our height), changing it completely alters the way we perceive things. For example, lowering down to an animal's eye level when capturing pet photography will make the viewer see them as equals and create a deeper connection. You can also use it to exaggerate or minimize the size of elements, by shooting from a much lower or higher viewpoint respectively.

Center

Placing your subject in the middle of the shot is either hit or miss. Complementing it with the right elements can turn a seemingly boring composition into a stunning shot. Essentially, you'll need to find a way to direct the viewer's attention to the middle of the image. Symmetries, leading lines, natural framing, negative space, and minimalism are great methods to do so. On close-up portraits, such as in corporate photography, placing the subject's dominant eye in the center of the composition gives the impression that they're following you with their eyes.

Symmetry

This kind of composition is the best possible excuse to break most of the rules in this list. Who doesn't love a perfectly symmetric image? Whether it's a natural subject, human-made, or a reflection, the result will be remarkably appealing for viewers. Try to find symmetrical patterns in unexpected places to combine their inherent beauty with an element of surprise. You can take this rule one step further by using elements that are not equal but rather really similar to each other in terms of color, shape, or texture.

Rule of thirds

Based on the idea that the human eye is more attracted on images divided into thirds, this is probably the most well-known photography composition rule. Imagine that your shot is divided into nine equal sections, just like a tic-tac-toe board. Once you've done so, simply place the main elements on your composition on the lines that divide these sections or, better yet, on the points where these lines meet.

When following this rule, some compositions may feel unbalanced as the main subject puts more of the visual weight on a specific side. To avoid this, you should include a second element of lesser importance to fill the empty space.

Golden ratio

You can think of it as a math-based version of the rule of thirds. The golden ratio also divides the image in nine sections, creating lines for you to place your main elements on. However, these sections are not equal in size, as the middle triangles are slightly smaller than the rest. This rule can be developed into golden spiral and golden triangles to add more complexity to the composition.

Rule of odds

This one is based on the (proven) theory that odd numbers are more visually appealing than their even counterparts. It is especially relevant when talking about a small number of objects in a specific composition. When presented with an even number of elements, the human eye tends to gravitate towards the empty space between them. On the other hand, odd groups are perceived as patterns rather than an incomplete sets.

Minimalism

Generally, simple images are more visually appealing than complex ones. The main reason behind this is that our brain struggles to find a point of focus on compositions where there are a lot of elements, and ends up getting bored of trying. Something like spending an hour browsing Netflix and ending up going for a walk because nothing seems interesting enough. To make sure this doesn't happen with your photos, leave any non-indispensable elements out of the composition.

Negative space

Negative space is simply the name given to the area that surrounds the main subject in a composition. Occupying most of your composition with this negative space will result in dramatic compositions that rapidly catch people's attention. On the downside, our preconceptions on how scenes should be seen can result in images that are not as good as we expected. To avoid this, pay attention to how well the negative and positive spaces work together.

Filling the frame

Occupying the whole composition with your main subject will give you more personal and impacting images. Don't worry, this doesn't mean you should refrain from shooting anything but extreme close-ups from now on. Simply make sure to keep any distracting elements out of your frame to keep the spotlight on your subject. In order to take great pictures, make sure to get closer rather than using your lenses' zoom in order to fill the frame.

Compositional Rules for Outstanding Shots

Patterns

Repetition is an amazing tool to create harmonic and dynamic compositions that transmit harmony in peace. Filling the frame with a pattern gives the impression that the number of elements is much larger. This results in a capture with a large impact. Repetitive objects also function as leading lines that direct the viewer's attention towards a main subject that breaks the pattern. Including a point of focus that is somewhat similar to the pattern, yet clearly different, can significantly increase the visual interest a photo transmits.

Implied Motion

This photography composition rule is where space and direction meet. Whenever your subject is performing an action, you should give them enough room to breathe. Imagine that the framing of your shot is a box, and make sure no one is about to crash into one of the walls. If the subject is still, but looking somewhere off-camera, leave some space within the image for them to look into.

Depth

Capturing a three-dimensional scene within a bi-dimensional format can be quite challenging. One of the best ways to overcome this obstacle is creating different layers within the shot. Placing elements on the foreground, middle ground, and background will add a sense of depth in your composition. When using this technique you'll need to make sure additional objects don't take the attention away from the main subject.

Leading lines

When looking at an image, our sight unconsciously follows the lines within it. Paying attention to these leading lines and how you place them in your composition will allow you to guide the viewer's eyes from and to wherever you want. You can either place diverse subjects around these lines or use a main subject at the end. These compositional technique is primarily used to capture beautiful landscape photos, as roads, rivers, paths, and clouds make for amazing leading lines.