

One Week to Better Photography

Lesson 2 – Photo Composition

The objects of this lesson are:

1. Students will be able to recognize the principles of photographic composition.
2. Students will be able to use the principles of effective composition in their yearbook photo assignments.

This lesson has three handouts, one related reading and two exercises.

Related Readings

Six Rules of Thumb for Good Photo Cropping

<http://www.walsworthyearbooks.com/idea-file/26840/six-rules-of-thumb-for-good-photo-cropping/>

Photo Composition Handout – Elements of composition

Taking a photo that has strong visual impact depends on just the right placement of the main subject and the other elements in the image. That arrangement of elements is called photographic composition.

Effective photographic composition is the result of careful thought and planning by the photographer. Keep these ideas in mind when you are on assignment, and move around to look for the best image.

1. **Move in close.** Think about where the camera should be in relation to the subject. Move in close to the subject and fill the viewfinder frame with only the essential storytelling elements of the scene. Question the importance of everything that appears in the viewfinder and adjust the camera position to eliminate everything that does not contribute to the story.



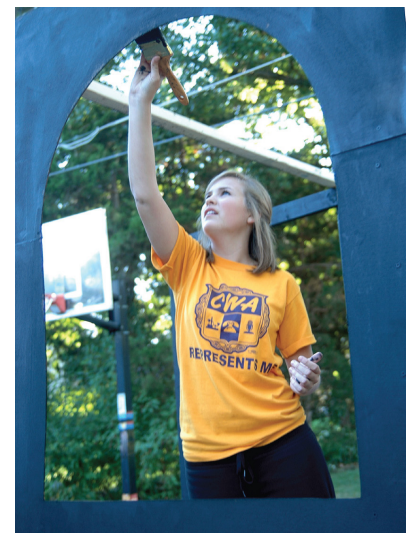
2. **Vary the distance** to subjects and the angle of view to avoid a visually boring set of photos that were all taken at eye-level and from the same distance.
3. A good photograph should have a **center of visual interest** (CVI) that tells the visual story. Subjects that are closer to the camera, for example, will dominate other subjects and objects in the photo. Placing the center of interest farther away from the camera can allow it to share importance with other subjects and objects in the scene.
4. When shooting **moving subjects**, you need to capture the subject and some distance to the frame edge to allow them to complete their “movement.” Otherwise, a runner or cyclist may look like they are falling off the page.

Effective photographic composition makes the photographer think about how to organize the many elements seen in the camera viewfinder into one compelling storytelling image. The elements of composition will guide you in making quick and effective decisions about arranging elements in the viewfinder.

- **Rule of thirds** – Placing the main subject of a photo right in the center makes the image uninteresting. By composing the photo with the center of visual interest slightly above, below or to the side of center, the image is more dynamic. To help with this concept, imagine a tic tac toe drawing over your viewfinder, and place the subject in one of the four places where the lines cross, which are just off center.



- **Subject-background contrast** – You can give your subject or other elements emphasis by placing them in front of a background with a contrasting tone. Subject-background contrast can often be achieved either by you moving to put the camera at a different angle, or waiting for the subject to move in front of a different background. This can also be achieved by using a wide-open aperture, creating shallow depth of field, which gives the photo a feeling of selective focus.
- **Framing** – You can draw attention to the subject of the image by using objects or people in the foreground as a frame. This framing is most effective when the foreground is slightly out of focus and contrasts in tone with the main subject. The most effective frames are those that appear naturally in the scene. But make sure your frame does not become an unwanted center of attention.



- **Filled Frame** – Getting in close to a subject, or using the zoom lens, and filling the viewfinder with the subject makes for a better image. If you think you are in close enough, take another step forward and check the viewfinder again. You might just have an even better image.

- **Leading lines** – A pointing arm or a stair railing can emphasize the subject if they lead the eye directly to the main subject. Leading lines are especially effective when they lead the readers to a center of interest in the photo's background. As with frames, leading lines should provide eye direction rather than distraction. Leading looks, when several people in a photo are looking at the same thing, have the same effect.



- **Curves** – Like leading lines, curves can add interest to a photo and help place emphasis on the main subject. Automobile advertising images, for example, often show a car on a winding road, drawing attention to the product and adding movement.
- **Repetition of pattern** – A repeating pattern, created by people or objects, is visually interesting. When one element is slightly different than the others, the visual impact is increased and an effective center of visual interest is created. A photo of five people watching a basketball game, for example, creates a repeating pattern of faces, which becomes more interesting if one of them has an unusual expression.



- **Angle/point of view** – The direction from which you are viewing an image puts the subject in a different perspective. For example, think about the difference in images from a football game from above or a bird's eye view, the ground or a worm's eye view, or the 50-yard line versus the end zone.



- **Depth of field** – This is the distance between the nearest and farthest objects appearing in sharp focus. Larger apertures allow more light into the camera and produce shallow depth of field, enabling the photographer to blur the foreground and background to sharply define the center of visual interest. Depth of field increases with smaller apertures.
- **Selective focus** – You can create visual emphasis by using depth of field to make the background or foreground sharper or more in focus.
- **Contrast** – The degree of black and white, light and dark, and color tones in an image. The difference in the amount of light or the colors in the image can be used to draw attention to the main subject.

Photo Composition Handout – Images with impact

It takes more than accurate focus and exposure to get images with impact. Follow these five steps to effective photo composition.

1. See the storytelling photo possibility.
2. Move to eliminate everything from the viewfinder that does not contribute to the story.
3. Work to achieve effective composition appropriate to the content using the elements of composition.
 - a. Select a vertical or horizontal format
 - b. Use the rule of thirds to appropriately place the subject
 - c. Move in to use the viewfinder to crop the scene for visual impact
 - d. Allow visual space in the viewfinder for moving subjects
 - e. Use depth of field to highlight different aspects of the story
 - f. Find emotion in the story to capture
 - g. Find scenes using these elements to highlight the subject
 - i. Framing
 - ii. Leading lines
 - iii. Repetition
 - iv. Angles for interest
 - v. Curves and triangles
4. Wait for an interesting moment to take the photo. Great photo potential at a dull moment does not make a great photo.
5. Take the photo.

So, remember this mantra when preparing to take a picture:

See it—Move to it—Wait for it—Take it

Photo Composition Handout – Cropping for effectiveness

Effective cropping begins with the viewfinder. Scan the edges of the viewfinder to see what is in the frame before pressing the shutter. Amputated body parts and missing storytelling elements cannot be reattached or added later. The trick is to get all the important elements in the image. You can apply effective cropping in the editing process to improve the image for publication.

When cropping, use this information to get the most out of your photos.

1. **Crop for emphasis** – Determine the center of interest in the photo and then crop to enhance the focus on that element.
2. **See the story** – See the visual story and then crop out any elements that do not contribute to the story.
3. **Take a little off the top** – When images are quickly composed in the viewfinder, there is a natural tendency to include too much space above the center of interest. See it and crop it.



4. **Crop for impact** – Crop tight on sports photos to enhance the intensity. Tight cropping of other subjects can create interesting visual tension.
5. **Crop like you mean it** – Cropping that looks like an accident is not effective. If body parts have to go, make it a complete cut.



Photo Composition Exercise – Composition quest

Instructions

Find each of the following approaches to composition. Cut out photos from magazines, or look through sample yearbooks from other schools, but use Post-It® notes to tab pages and make a note about the photos selected.

- Rule of thirds
- Subject-background contrast
- Framing
- Leading lines
- Curves
- Repetition of pattern
- Worm's eye view
- Bird's eye view
- Depth of field
- Selective focus
- Contrast

Label each of the image examples with a brief description of the approach to composition used.

Photo Composition Exercise – Framing the world around you

Two of the most important composition decisions a photographer makes relate to camera format and distance to the subject. Practice using the viewfinder without worrying about the technical aspects of image capture.

As you do these steps, make notes about your observations, and reflect on how this exercise will help you improve your photo composition when you are shooting yearbook photo assignments.

Take a piece of cardboard and cut a 1 x ½ inch rectangle in the center to represent a camera viewfinder. Use the simulated camera viewfinder to examine a variety of subjects:

- View a subject in vertical and horizontal formats and note the composition differences.
- Adjust your distance to the subject and work to fill the frame with the center of interest.
- Adjust the distance to the subject to include both the center of interest and key storytelling elements in the background.
- Adjust your angle to the subject by getting up high and down low. Note the changes in composition from the changes in perspective.
- Move around your subject. Note the change in the background and changes in the subject-background contrast.
- Locate a subject that can benefit from leading lines composition. Adjust your format, position and angle to take the best advantage of the line leading to the center of interest.