

# The Elements of Good Composition

By Robert Lay

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## What Is and What is Not Part of Composition

Composition does *not* include issues of tonality, range of tones, issues of color vs. monochrome, issues relating to "interest", etc.

Each of those issues are considered as separate topics at the same hierarchical level when it comes to judging an image.

Composition *does* include the issues of Landscape vs Portrait orientation, points or areas of tension, issues of softness vs hardness or harshness, issues of random clutter vs. monotony, placement of objects in the frame, placement of objects with respect to one another, etc.

## Placement of Objects in the Regions of the Frame

### ***Rules Relating to Placements Around the Horizontal Axis.***

Pictures that have an identifiable horizon should avoid having the picture divided into equal halves by the horizon. The more appealing ratio between upper region and the overall height of the frame is generally accepted to be the Golden Ratio (0.636).

### ***Rules Relating to Placements Around the Vertical Axis.***

Pictures having a single object of interest should avoid having that subject in the center of the horizontal dimension. It is generally accepted that the preferred location of a single object of interest is approximately at one of the four intersection points of the lines dividing the frame into thirds. Equally valid are locations that place a single object of interest such that the Golden Ratio is implemented. For example, along the horizontal, the distance from the center of the object to the furthest side divided by the frame width would be in the ratio  $2/\pi$ . A similar preference would also apply in the vertical direction.

In the Landscape orientation, for example, the positioning along the vertical dimension is not as important as the positioning along the horizontal dimension. Therefore, in general, give precedence to off-setting the primary subject in the longer dimension of the image!

Remember, these "rules" are to be treated as rough guidelines for use in simple situations, and are usually applied in the interest of avoiding a static appearance or an obvious imbalance between the primary object of interest and the secondary areas of interest.

## **Relationship Between Major Lines and Frame Orientation (Landscape vs. Portrait).**

When there are strong vertical or horizontal lines in a picture (tall masts, isolated tall trees, distinct horizon line, a line of waves, a horizontal roadway or track, etc.), the dominant lines should be complemented by choosing a consistent orientation. I.e., choose a vertical (Portrait) orientation when the dominant lines are vertical, or near vertical, and vice versa.

## **Direction of Motion and the Concept of Extended Space**

Objects (especially the primary object of interest) that are showing the attribute of being in motion should have Extended Space available in the image into which they can project. In other words, avoid having something in motion that is heading more "out of" the frame than "into" the frame.

This concept is important for objects in motion, but it also applies in portraits to the subject's eyes. In other words, the portrait subject should be looking into a space that is contained within the frame. Avoid having the subject looking in a direction which heads more "out of" the frame than "into" the frame.

## **"Framing" in General**

Since our images all have finite dimensions, they all have a frame - even if that frame is only "implicit". In most situations there will be some aspect of the scene that lends itself to use as a "frame". The photographer should always be on the lookout for those elements of the scene, itself, that can be employed to frame the image. The reason that this is a better approach than relying on an implicit frame or the physical frame of wood and glass that might be employed is that a natural frame is usually more appealing. In other words, you have to look for natural vegetation, such as an overhanging branch or trees at the side or sides, etc., when composing the picture.

For architectural work or portraits, the rectilinear surroundings will often present a natural boundary between the area of interest and the objects that are being excluded. If such situations do not occur in your favor, so be it. However, it behooves the photographer to be thinking about the opportunities of natural framing circumstances that could be taken advantage of.

This is especially important with portraits, because there is usually a great deal of freedom in choice of location for portraiture - both indoors and out-of-doors. Absolutely

blank, surroundings may be what you want, and a lot of random clutter in a portrait is always to be avoided. However, there are also many opportunities available to use the architectural surroundings or natural vegetation play an important role in providing a frame for the subject. Don't overlook them!

## **Objects that Kiss (Just touch or almost touch) the Frame.**

Quite often an object comes uncomfortably close to the frame and does not extend "behind" the frame. Such a situation usually causes un-wanted tension. Examples are a pointed object whose point comes directly up to the frame, just as if the frame were a physical stop for the object. Another example is a circular or elliptical object that seems to rest exactly up against the frame. As a general rule, these "kissing" situations are to be avoided in favor of either maintaining a respectable distance from the edge or allowing the object to clearly go cleanly through the frame, as if it were not there (Think of the frame as your way of depicting a scene as viewed through a window). Avoiding any impression that the frame is a real physical boundary helps the viewer imagine the scene as being in the "window of his eye".

## **Issues Involving Tonal Merger**

Objects that have nothing to do with each other may overlap one another in a scene causing an unfortunate tonal merger. This may cause confusion for the viewer in recognizing the objects for what they are. Such tonal mergers are to be avoided – especially if they actually confuse the viewer.

## **Issues Involving Foundations for Primary Objects**

Many objects require a foundation, or base, upon which to stand. Examples include people and animals, most man-made structures, ships and terrestrial vehicles, etc. Exceptions might include flowers and small vegetation, flying objects, etc.

This is a very difficult rule to apply in many instances, because there are perfectly valid reasons for cutting the ground out from under many objects. However, there are equally compelling reasons for not doing so. A great deal of judgment and common sense must be applied. My rule is simple - if I have a valid reason for cutting away the foundation upon which an object is normally considered to be dependent, then it's OK. What is not OK is to do it for no good reason, and to do it in a way that makes the scene less interesting or less appealing. An example is a flag pole. It is not nearly as essential that a flag pole be shown as stuck in the ground as it is that a house be shown standing on earth or a boat be shown sitting in water. The image of a sitting person whose complete torso is shown should include whatever he is sitting upon, although it is not necessary to show whether his feet are on the floor or not.

## **Desirable Tensions**

There are many aspects of "tension". An example would be in the case where there are significant objects in the image - one being red, the other being green. This will cause a tension between the two objects because those two colors have the greatest color contrast between them.

Any object in the scene that comes up to an image border and just "kisses" it, is a point of tension.

Tension can be thought of as different manifestations of "contrast".

Generally speaking, tension attracts the eye. Obviously, if you attract the eye to an area of no interest, that's bad. Conversely, you can add tension in an image specifically to draw the eye to that area.

In every image there are reasons for incorporating tensions. Usually, the basis for incorporating or emphasizing a tension is in the interest of acquiring the attention of the viewer or controlling his eye movement. There are certain situations that create tension and the photographer must be aware of them in order to utilize them to his advantage. The most common form of tension is the one caused by a high local contrast (i.e., an object that is deep black in close proximity to an object that is bright white.) A similar tension can be produced by objects in close proximity that have similar levels of luminance but exhibit an extreme of color contrast. The best example of this is the use of red with green. Humans seem to associate a great deal of tension with such conjunctions.

Therefore, even though it is seldom possible to artificially create such points or areas of tension wherever you feel like, it is certainly feasible to take advantage of them when you can – especially if it is a simple matter of re-arranging things slightly in the scene in order to get the effect that you want. In general, what you want is for your primary subject of interest to be the first thing that the eye goes to. Anything that you can do to enhance that will improve the appeal of your picture.

Note that every human has a built-in point of high local contrast that should be known by the photographer. Think about what that might be and how you might utilize it.

## **Bad or Unresolved Tension**

In some cases, tension can be a problem. This occurs when there are two primary subjects, and there is nothing to resolve which one is the dominant one.

The only rules that I can offer are as follows:

When there are two primary areas or objects of interest, try to give one of them something to make it dominant. That could be a brighter coloring, a larger relative size, or some important lines that draw the eye unambiguously to that one, or a background that tends to absorb the less dominant one. In other words, one of the two must recede and one of the two must become prominent.

## Lines – Imaginary and Otherwise

The famous “S” curve appears so often in landscapes that it has become a cliché. The “S” curve may even appear as an imaginary line connecting discrete objects into an “S” shaped path. Usually, it appears as a winding road or stream. The important thing about the “S” curve is that it takes the eye to a distant point – whether intentional or not. When the artist can take advantage of this, it is usually very effective.

## Backgrounds

Most images can be divided in the vertical direction into 3 major areas – the foreground, the middle ground and the background. Some images will defy that and appear to have no middle ground, only a foreground and background. A good example of such an image is the close-up or macro photograph. Another is the portrait. In general, portraits have a subject that occupies the middle ground and/or the foreground – it’s very difficult to divide the area from the camera to the background into two regions. Landscapes invariably have all three regions.

Backgrounds that consist of sky with or without distant mountain ranges are seldom a problem. However, backgrounds for macro photography and background for portraiture are often problems – either due to color or tonal value considerations or due to texture or focus considerations.

The rule that I like to follow for backgrounds in macro photography and portrait photography is very simple and flexible -

***“The background should not take away from the subject”***

One implication of that rule is that the background should not be brighter than the subject unless a separation of values to avoid tonal merger cannot be obtained otherwise.

Example:

The subject has very dark hair, and a dark background would probably not be dark enough to avoid tonal merger. Therefore, use a lighter background than the hair (and possibly a different color, as well) in order to isolate the subject from the background.

In general, a background that is darker in value or more somber in color will cause the background to recede and the foreground subject to come forward. Obviously, nothing

really moves, but the eye perceives a greater distance between the two when the background is darker and vice versa.

## Glossary

**Object** - Any part of an image that is treated separately or recognized individually. Could be an area delineated tone or color or by texture or shape.

**Regions and Locations in the frame** - The image can be divided into 9 equal sized rectangles by 4 perpendicular lines. These nine regions could be identified as Upper-left, Upper-center, Center, etc. They are usually used as the basis for the "Rule of Thirds". Additional locators in the frame include the intersections of the 4 perpendiculars that divide the frame into thirds. These four intersections could be referred to as Upper-left intersection, Lower-right intersection, etc.

**Tension** - Tension is the tendency to pull the eye to a point or region - typically, as the result of great contrast in tone or color contrast (such as between red and green).

**Extended Space** - The space into which a moving object is traveling. This would apply to objects that seem to be moving as indicated by directional smear or blurring and would also apply to objects whose motion is only implied, such as a person who is frozen in time but is obviously walking or running. This would not apply to a background that has directional smear or blurring as a result of panning.

**Tonal Merger** - The problem that arises when two separate objects have overlap and the luminance or color of each object is such that the eye has difficulty in distinguishing where one object ends and the other object begins.

**Golden Ratio** -  $2/\pi$ , or approximately 0.636. This value was recognized by the ancients and appears in many architectures dating back thousands of years.