COMPOSITION

18 professional techniques to improve your photos instantly
1. The rule of thirds

Perhaps the best known of all photographic composition practices is the rule of thirds, sometimes referred to (incorrectly) as the golden mean, the golden ratio or the divine ratio. The title itself is misleading in that the word “rule” is not a rule as in a law but a line, as in a ruler. A less ambiguous title would be line of thirds. Even so, it has become a compositional cliché, primarily due to the fact that, like most clichés, it has considerable merit.

The rule of thirds derives from the golden mean, which, in turn, is believed to come from ancient Greek and Egyptian times and was used by architects of the era to decide on the best positioning of windows and doors. It is a mathematical formula, which I won’t bore you with here but you can find on Wikipedia, if it’s of interest. The rule of thirds is loosely based on this formula and has grown in popularity because of its ease of application.

The reason the rule of thirds has become a compositional cliché is simply that it works. That’s to say, it works if its effect is what you intend and is correctly balanced with other equally important design considerations within the frame.

From the point of interest, the eye moves into the larger area of space radiating from the polar point - referred to as the area of interest. Essentially, whatever is in the area of interest gains emphasis over visual elements outside this area.

Of course, this presupposes the presence of visual substance in the space formed by the area of interest. If there is nothing present of any relevance, the rule of thirds simply draws attention to empty space. The technique is widely used in landscape photography because it brings visual elements beyond the principal subject into prominent view, taking the viewer, in a one dimensional way, on a visual journey from point A (the subject of interest) to point B (the area of interest), which, superficially, is the aim of a landscape photograph.

In some ways, the simplicity of this compositional tool is what makes it so effective - the viewer doesn’t have to work too hard to read the visual story. At the same time, its one-dimensional nature is its downside. Used in isolation it creates a relatively static composition - you start at one point and go to another - and the visual story is more a children’s storybook than a Shakespeare play. If you’re a novice, is it a good place to start?
Well, applying the rule of thirds will turn an image that could have worked but didn’t into an image that’s okay. However, at best, the rule of thirds is an overly simplified form of a more complex set of design principles known as Dynamic symmetry (see Page XX) and, by itself, won’t take your photography too far beyond ordinary. That said, it provides a sound base from which to start before moving forward.

Now, I stated earlier, “... it works if its effect is what you intend ...” What did I mean by this statement? As I explained above, from the point of interest the eye is drawn into the larger area of space radiating from the intersection. In other words, the eye is drawn away from the principal subject. But what if you don’t want the viewer’s attention to leave the subject in this way? What if you want the viewer’s attention to remain fixed on the point of interest? In this case, the rule of thirds is working against you.

Positioning the point of interest (the intersection of the railings and the base of the tower) on the bottom right polar point, leads your eye into the area of dramatic sky in the upper left of frame, as shown in the smaller image (right).
2. Positioning the subject in the centre of the frame

Imagine holding a traffic cone to your eye, large aperture towards you, and looking down it. Whatever you point the cone at, your gaze is directed and held there. Exactly the same thing happens, compositionally, when you place the subject in the centre of the frame. Centre positioning holds the viewers gaze and stops them exploring the space around the subject. It is a tool for isolating the subject from its surroundings.

Centre positioning creates stasis and there's nothing wrong with that. For example, it is widely used in portrait photography because it focusses attention on the subject's facial features, in particular the eyes. In wildlife photography, I use it when photographing portraits of animals for the same reason and because it isolates my subjects. When I want to include the environment as part of my story, I avoid central positioning. Positioning the subject in the centre of the frame is also a way of creating simple symmetry. A balanced photograph is aesthetically pleasing. If the subject is positioned off-centre, the visual weight of the photograph follows, much like a set of scales, which leads to imbalance.

Positioning the subject in the centre of the frame isolates it from the background and holds the viewers gaze on whatever is in the middle of the frame, in this case the eyes, which are the all important element in portraiture (shown right).
3. Dynamic symmetry

While the rule of thirds and central positioning are effective compositional tools, both are one-dimensional techniques that create relatively static images. Dynamic symmetry is a more powerful structure on which to hang the visual elements in the picture space. By elevating unity, balance and visual impact, in addition to simple line-of-sight, dynamic symmetry brings us closer to presenting our perspective in an authentic way and effectively representing the three-dimensional living world in a two-dimensional inanimate photograph.

Like the rule of thirds, dynamic symmetry is based on a grid system, called an armature. It’s the make up of the armature that’s different. The rule of thirds divides the rectangular image space created by the viewfinder using straight lines at one-third intervals. In dynamic symmetry, the space is divided first by diagonal lines. Two diagonals cut across from corner to corner. These are referred to as the Baroque diagonal (bottom left corner to top right) and the Sinister diagonal (bottom right corner to top left). Four reciprocal diagonals are then drawn, intersecting the primary diagonals at a 90-degree angle. Two vertical and two horizontal lines are then added to coincide with the intersections of the diagonals. These four straight (two horizontal, two vertical) lines are similar to those found in the rule of thirds but, importantly, create polar points at irregular intervals.

To apply dynamic symmetry, simply move around until you find a perspective where the position of the visual elements closely tie in with the armature.

4. Greatest area of contrast

In the tonal battle between light and dark, our eyes are naturally drawn towards the light. In the same way a polar point on a rule of thirds grid defines the point of interest, positioning your subject in or close to the greatest area of contrast (light tone against dark tone) will define the starting point of your visual story. Some exceptions to the greatest area of contrast rule are light points naturally understood and accepted in our minds, such as specular highlights reflecting off water or metal, sunlight through trees and artificial lights.
5. Eye level

Eye level is determined by the horizon line, whether actual or implied, and is one of the most important compositional elements in a photograph. A horizon line positioned low in the frame forces the viewer to look skyward - the eyes start from the bottom travel up.

A low horizon emphasises the space above it.

A high horizon emphasises the foreground.

Positioned high in the frame, the eyes start from the top and look down. Centrally positioned, the viewer looks straight ahead, into the image, which creates depth.

Controlling eye-level determines emphasis. A low horizon, where the eyes are forced to look upwards, accents the visual elements above the horizon line. This would be appropriate when photographing a landscape with a spectacular sky, for instance. When the horizon is placed in the upper area of the frame, objects below the horizon line gain prominence. This is a useful technique for scenes with a bland sky because it emphasises the foreground.

When the horizon line is placed midway, creating the sense the viewer is looking at the scene head on, both halves of the frame, above and below the horizon line are given equal weighting. Neither is emphasised above the other. This might be used in a photograph of reflections in water to accentuate the mirroring effect of the water's surface.

Eye level also affects humans psychologically due to a psychoanalytical theory known as the adult/child relationship. Adults look down at children and are the dominant force in the adult/child relationship, while children look up at adults making them the subservient participant. In an adult-to-adult or child-to-child relationship, where both parties are at eye-level, neither is dominant nor submissive - the relationship is one of equality.

A horizon placed in the middle of the frame creates equal weighting to whats above and below it.
This psychology spills over into the relationship formed between the viewer and the principal subject in a photograph. With a low eye-level, where the subject is looking down at the viewer, the subject is imbued with a sense of power, influence, authority or superiority. The opposite applies when eye-level switches from low to high. With this composition, it’s the viewer who takes on the dominant role and the subject becomes more passive and meek. Photographed head-on the relation between subject and viewer becomes equal, neither has power over the other and there is balance.

None of these impressions are wrong, or right. It depends entirely on your story. When photographing wildlife, I rarely photograph from a high position because this makes my animal subjects the weaker party, which is rarely the case between wildlife and humans. I prefer to photograph head on because this puts animal and human on an equal footing. It’s a more powerful composition that reflects the connection I make with the subject before I press the shutter. In other words, it more accurately portrays my story. Occasionally, if I want to generate tension between subject and viewer or emphasise the dominion of my subject, I shoot from a low eye-level.
6. Should the horizon line always be straight and level?

This is a common question and the answer is, it depends. The horizon line is humans' natural form of orientation. Without it we lose perspective, which can lead to panic. Pilots and divers, for example, know well the perils of operating without a point of reference and the anxiety that often follows.

When we're lost, we seek the horizon. When we find it we sigh with relief. The horizon relaxes and grounds us. It calms us. And, because the horizon line is straight and level when we look at it, a straight and level horizon in a photograph creates these same emotions in the viewer. If that is your intent then, yes, the horizon should be straight and level. Think of a landscape photograph. Most of the time, landscape photographers set out to portray feelings of serenity and quietude. After all, one of the main reasons we venture into nature is to experience moments of peace. To generate these emotions, the horizon line is kept level.

But what happens if your intention isn’t to create calmness. What if you want your audience to feel disconcerted and ill at ease? In that instance, it's entirely appropriate to angle the horizon.

Study this image and pay attention to how it makes you feel. The level horizon creates a calmness that puts you at ease. Now compare it to the image on the next page.
7. Leading lines

Leading lines are a classic compositional tool. Lines that run parallel in real life will appear to converge in a photograph, leading the eye to the point of convergence. Classic subjects for leading lines are railway tracks, roads and pathways but they may be found in many environments, including rows of trees in a woodland or forest, glacial striations in bedrock, even shadows can form leading lines.

The important consideration is, the point of convergence must lead to the point of interest. A badly composed leading line will draw attention away from the point of interest and severely weaken your image.

In composition, leading lines are a classic tool used to draw the viewer into the photograph, which also adds depth.
8. Continuity lines

The human eye will always follow the path of least resistance. Using continuity lines in your compositions provides the viewer with a means of navigating the visual objects in your scene. Continuity lines can be explicit or implied. Explicit continuity lines may be obvious, such as a meandering river, or more subtle, for example in the branches of trees. Implied continuity lines are formed between separated objects that lead from one to another. They are a powerful tool for linking primary and secondary points of interest, leading the viewer along a prescribed visual pathway to reveal the plot of your photographic story.

9. Dominant diagonals

In this image, the dominant diagonal runs parallel to the Sinister diagonal, which adds pace to the energy of the flow.

Dominant diagonals are explicit or implied lines that run parallel to the Baroque or Sinister diagonals. A dominant diagonal paralleling the Baroque is generally considered easier on the eye, because it creates a left to right movement that matches the direction in which we read. Conversely, a dominant diagonal paralleling the Sinister is more aggressive because it runs against the natural flow of our vision. You could argue that both Baroque and Sinister diagonals can be read left to right or right to left, depending on whether you start at the top or bottom. In composition, however, the bottom of the image is considered the foreground and, therefore, the starting point of any visual journey.

10. Momentum and magnetic momentum

You can accentuate or diminish the power of diagonal lines depending on how you place the occurrence of any greater area of contrast. Taking the Baroque diagonal, placing the greater area of contrast in the bottom left of frame (below) will create an uphill movement. Once at the top of the diagonal, momentum draws the eye naturally left, back into the picture space.

Placing the greater area of contrast in the top right corner, however, creates a more static composition because it remains stuck in its position. Your eye will follow the diagonal, left to right, and then remain fixed on the greater area of contrast. Visual momentum is lost (overleaf).
A similar but opposite affect occurs with the Sinister diagonal. When the greater area of contrast is positioned in the top left corner (below) it creates a back-and-forth movement, the eye first following the line right to left, then returning whence it came as it figuratively rolls back down the diagonal. In composition, this is known as magnetic momentum.

11. Radiating lines

Radiating lines lead the eye out from a fixed point, or in towards a point of interest. Like most lines, they can be implicit, as found in the spokes of a wheel, or implied by positioning objects in such a way as to draw the viewers gaze towards the focal point (see image opposite).

Placing the greater area of contrast in the bottom right of frame (below) stops momentum, creating a more static image. In this instance, the eye is drawn in by the contrast and remains transfixed unless there is another powerful design feature within the composition that is able to assert enough force to pull the eye away again.

12. Gazing line

An implied line is created by the gaze of a person or animal in the photograph. The line extends from the eye in the direction of the gaze, taking the viewers eye with it. Generally, the gazing line should extend into space, and this becomes the area of interest, similar to the relationship between the point of interest and the area of interest described in the rule of thirds. The space behind the subject loses relevance, so careful positioning of the subject is important to avoid creating imbalance.
13. Rhythm, balance and visual weight

A photograph is visually balanced when all the elements and the positive and negative space are arranged in such a way that no one area of the composition overpowers another. Instead, while all the individual elements play their part, the sum of the whole is greater than its parts. The visual message is one of rhythm and harmony. When there is imbalance, the image conveys visual tension and disharmonious energy. Individual elements stand out, the whole becomes a backdrop to the dominant parts. Based on this observation, you might infer a balanced composition in all cases as the obvious path. Most of the time, it is. But let us remember, photography is storytelling and sometimes a quirky or tension-filled novel that takes you outside your comfort zone is preferable to a dull romance or your usual fare. The choice between balance and imbalance, as always, comes down to the story you want to tell.

Visual weight refers to the visual significance of a point of interest or area of interest. A balanced composition has visual weight throughout the frame. The balance of elements keeps the viewer engaged.
An unbalanced image has areas of disproportion. Some elements or zones stand out more than others and the less prominent elements are easily overlooked. As a tool for visually removing distracting information, an unbalanced composition may be effective. And, as a break from the norm or to make an image stand out, it is useful tool to have in your photographic armoury. However, in the majority of cases, a balanced composition makes for a more effective photograph.

14. Symmetrical balance

Symmetrical balance occurs when visual objects on one side of an axis near-perfectly reflect those on the opposite side. The visual weight is evenly distributed across both halves of the frame. Symmetry is commonly found in nature - a leaf, a butterfly, reflections in a perfectly-still pond, a zebra’s stripes and the human body are all good examples. In design, symmetry evokes a sense of formality and elegance. Imagine, for example, a classic wedding photograph with the bride and groom standing to attention, or the group shot of relatives neatly in line. In both these examples, you see the formality and balance of symmetry.
15. Asymmetrical balance

An image balanced asymmetrically will have elements of unequal weighting on either side of the axis. Balance is achieved by the sum of the parts - a weighty element on the right is balanced by two less weighty elements on the left side. When it is done well, the sum of unequal parts creates dynamism, vitality and visual energy, and is seen as a more modern approach to compositional balance.

16. Radial balance

When elements radiate from a fulcrum, radial balance is achieved. The focal point is always central and because everything radiates from that point, everything leads there, too. The visual elements are contained within the radius, which helps to hold the viewers gaze on the subject (much like central positioning of the subject). The ever increasing circles of ripples on a pond, a spoked wheel and a snowflake are all examples of radial balance.
17. Echoing

Echoing is a clever tool that’s especially useful in street photography and candid portraiture. It’s a technique Henri Cartier-Bresson used repeatedly. Echoing is achieved by matching the pose of the subject to an inanimate shape or object in the foreground or background.

I used echoing when candidly photographing this penguin. Notice how the pose of the penguin is echoed in the patches of rock on the cliff behind.

18. Negative space

Photographs generally contain both positive and negative space. Positive space refers to the subject while negative space is the area around the subject. Negative space helps to define your point of interest, as well as framing and emphasising areas of interest, and balancing the positive space to create a well-balanced composition.

Positioning your subject too close to the edge of frame, leaving only a slither of negative space will unbalance an image and leave no room for your subject to “breathe”. Conversely, too much negative space may be viewed as empty space, which is distracting. A large area of negative space offset in a rule of thirds composition, for example, could leave the viewer wandering aimlessly in the area of no interest until they give up and leave for good.

In this image there is a large area of negative space to the left of the bear, which forms the positive space. The negative space is well balanced, helping to define the subject.
Master the art of composition and visual storytelling in my comprehensive online workshop.

www.chrisweston.training