

A Little more on Composition

It's easy to forget that what you see in your viewfinder is what you're going to capture, so it's worth scanning the scene thoroughly first. When you're composing your shots, don't fret about getting everything in. Instead, focus on capturing the essence of the scene by following these tips, and try putting contrasting elements together to create a striking shot.

1. Think before you shoot

It's easy to forget that what you see through the viewfinder is what you'll capture when you press the shutter, so it's essential to scan the frame with your eye before you take the picture, moving carefully around the edges of the viewfinder and into the scene.

Look at the elements in your photo and ask yourself whether they're working in harmony with one another. Where is your eye being led? Are the colours and tones balanced? And what's happening with the lines, shapes and textures - are there any visual distractions? Is there any dead space that detracts from the image as a whole?

Take a walk around (when possible) to look for different viewpoints - you may be able to find an angle that allows you to cut out something that would detract from the composition or something to include that improves it.

Most D-SLRs don't show the whole scene: you'll only see about 95% of what will be recorded. 5% might not seem like much, but it's enough to change your composition.

2. Capture the essence

You don't always need to shoot the whole scene to capture its essence. In fact, it's often impossible to fit the entire scene into a single shot. A good example is when you're trying to photograph an entire bed of flowers in a garden. Landscape photography, for example, doesn't always need a wide view... you can find isolated views which can still sum up a whole mountain range.

Rather than fretting about trying to squeeze everything in and cursing your lens, compose your shots to fit in the most essential parts of the scene. Use the Av mode on your camera and set your lens for a wide aperture, such as f/2.8, to focus on the foreground but blur the background.

3. Abstracts

Stunning abstract shots can often be found in the most mundane locations, but you need to look for them. If you're used to taking sweeping views of landscapes and cityscapes, try adopting a different attitude when you're looking at a scene - look for shapes, colours and textures that will make abstract patterns. Get in really close if it needs it - and get rid of unnecessary elements. It's not easy... but one trick is to think of pictures that you could use in a "What's This?" photo competition. Concentrate on only the composition and you'll take the picture to a new level.

4. Contrasts

To help you to think differently about your compositions, try bringing contrasting elements together.

Capture the atmosphere of a city, for example, by focusing on the top of an old building, while keeping contrasting modern towers in 'balancing' positions in your composition. Or vice-versa. Not only colours work with each other, or provide contrast - it can be achieved with perhaps two styles of the same basic object - an office block and an old church, or a "Poker Run" boat with a sailing ship. A young fashionable student with a very 'proper' senior citizen.

5. Odds and evens

Photographers (probably based on the works of other artistic styles) have worked out that it's easier to make a pleasing composition with an odd number of objects or elements. Naturally, when you're out and about you won't always be able to move objects around, but you can move yourself and your camera. This concept can be applied to portraits, too. Try to shoot groups of threes at a wedding, for example. Three or five trees really do work better than four or six.

6. Leading lines

An effective way to draw people's attention into - not out of - your images is to use leading lines. Look out for them when composing your shots. Lead lines can be anything from a fence to a river or a shadow line, and can be used to improve composition and draw attention to your subject.

7. Eyes have it

Portrait photography doesn't always have to be about traditional head-and-shoulders shots. Don't be afraid to compose your shots by zooming in to make more of your subject's face. Positioning people's eyes in a top corner can make for a more striking composition, too. If you include eyes, they really must be sharply in focus.

8. Frame within a frame

Look for features that can work as a frame in your composition. The branch of a tree, the arch of a door or a window frame are all effective devices.

9. Don't fixate on eye contact

You could get creative and try some portraits without any direct eye contact. Try getting your subject to sit on a chair, looking out of a window. This makes for a nice composition, plus you'll get better light falling on their face. Get them to rest their chin on their fist to bring another interesting element to your composition.

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