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Composition: Part I

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There are three important guidelines to keep in mind when composing a photograph. **Theme, Emphasis, Simplicity.** All three things help to focus the attention on the subject. The subject is what the photographer intended to take a picture of, right? So now that the photographer knows what his subject is, how does he go about expressing his vision of the subject? The photographer accomplishes this by determining the theme, placing emphasis on the subject, and simplifying the background.

Theme: What is the universal message of this photograph? What does it imply? What does it say? What kind of statement is the photographer making? Is it about love, or childhood, or parents, or growing old? Is it about the beauty in nature, or the ugliness of poverty? Is about the tremendous power of the weather or the gentleness of a lamb? What makes this photo worth taking? Why do you want to take this image? We covered theme in a previous article but it is important to mention it again. Theme is what makes a photograph different from a snapshot. Theme is what makes a timeless image. It is what moves and inspires the viewer to look at the photograph again and again. Theme is what makes a person want to hang a photograph on the wall, not bury it in a shoe-box.

Emphasis: What is the subject? Where is the subject? Where should the viewer look? What is important? There are many techniques used to show emphasis. The photographer can show emphasis through framing choice, whether he uses a vertical or horizontal format. Or he might show emphasis by the placement of the subject, governed by the rule of thirds. Or he might use selective focus to simplify the background. Or by drawing the viewers attention to a certain spot within the frame using perspective.

Simplify: The photographer works to simplify the composition by assuring that nothing in the viewfinder competes or distracts from the subject. He looks to see that nothing in the photograph weakens the theme. Everything visible in the photograph helps to support the theme and the background does not distract from the subject but adds to the composition. He simplifies the composition.

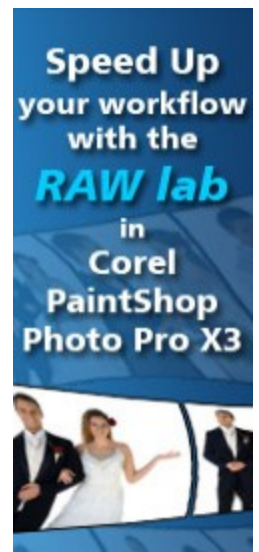
The use of selective focus and depth of field are two great ways of simplifying the image. If the background is not important, using a large aperture will render it out of focus. This technique is great for getting rid of busy or cluttered backgrounds. How much out of focus? That depends on the theme and what the background does to support it. If the background is totally irrelevant, then it should be out of focus as much as possible. If the background helps to reinforce the theme, then it should be out of focus to a degree that it does not distract from the subject but adds to the scene.

For example, in a landscape of the Grand Canyon, nothing should be out of focus. The subject is the landscape and the theme is the grandeur. However, if the subject is three friends on a trip to the Grand Canyon, then the landscape is the background and the subject is the three friends. The background should add to, but not compete with, the subject. Here the background should be just out of focus enough to diminish it slightly, but it should still be recognizable as the Grand Canyon. The message or theme is look at my three friends on their vacation to the Grand Canyon, not look at the three tourists blocking my view of the Grand Canyon. Two very different photos, two very different themes.

World through the viewfinder

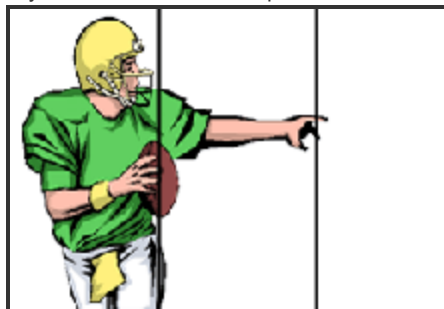
Rule of Thirds: Think of the viewfinder as being divided into three equal parts, either horizontally or

Highlights

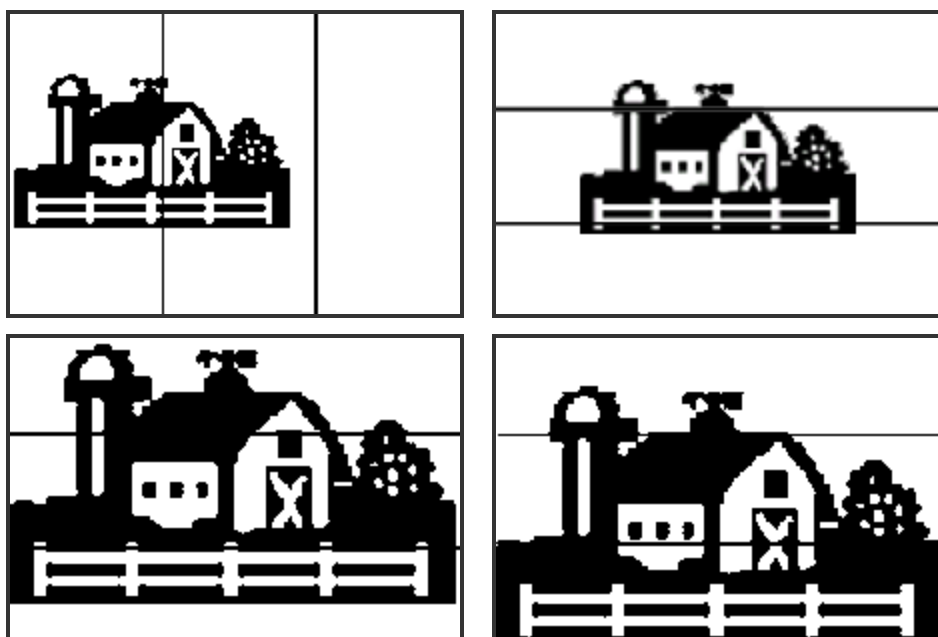


vertically depending on the composition. Each section of the photograph should contain some information relating to the theme or subject. Does this mean that the subject must be placed dead center? No. A subject can be placed in one-third and the other two-thirds used to balance the image. For example, if you were shooting a picture of an orchestra leader in action, the conductor could be placed in one third of the image with the other two-thirds left blank. The viewer would rightly assume the blank space was occupied by the orchestra even if they cannot be seen. The space then becomes just as important as the subject.

Where the photographer chooses to place the subject in the viewfinder depends on what the subject and theme of the photograph will be. What is the photographer placing emphasis on? Is it size? Is it detail? Is it beauty? Shape? Form? Action? Is the subject moving into or out of the frame? Is it motionless? All of these questions are answered for the viewer by where the photographer chose to place the subject. Look at the next series of images.



In the above images, how does placement affect the theme? The subject is the same, the background is the same. What does placement add to the theme? Which placement is correct? That depends on the theme and the message that the photographer is trying to convey. Which one portrays downward motion? Which skier looks like its caught in a mid-air jump? Which one best displays speed? Which one exhibits the hazards of skiing?



In this series of examples, what can be said about the placement of the subject? All four images are in a horizontal format. In the first image, the photographer considers the vertical division of the rule of



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thirds. In the three other images the placement is located along horizontal divisions. Which works better? That depends on the photographer's intended theme. Obviously, there seems to be no good reason for the composition in frame 2. Frame one might work if there are other strong elements in the landscape that occupy the other two-thirds of the frame.

Frames 3 and 4 draw direct attention to the barn as the subject, whereas frames 1 and 2 represent the landscape as the subject. In frames 3 and 4 the photographer has a choice of where to place the subject in relation to the horizon line. Which is the stronger composition? Frame three places the horizon line dead center of the frame. This could work except for one small detail, the fence. Is there a valid reason for the fence floating around in mid-air? If the foreground contained cows or horses, maybe so. Or if the barn sat on the top of a hill and the photographer wished to emphasize this fact, then this composition would also work. However, frame four clearly shows the stronger composition and the fence helps to frame the subject, the barn.

Look at frame 4 again. There is another point to consider in this composition that becomes important to well balanced compositions. Consider the placement of the sky. The sky occupies two-thirds of the frame. Now consider the barn. It also occupies two-thirds of the frame. This composition is said to be in perfect balance. Balance is an important element in composition. Both positive and negative spaces are said to have weight. When an image appears to be tipping over or falling out of the frame there is an unequal distribution of weight caused by a lack of balance in the composition. We will discuss more on balance in a future article devoted to just this concept.

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