

Rudy Umans Imaging

Improve your pictures instantly, the easy way

Many of us take pictures regardless of our level of interest in pictures, our skill level, or complexity of our equipment. In this write-up I would like to point out a few easy to follow tips and tricks to improve your pictures without the need for fancy equipment. The simple tips and tricks we discuss here can improve any picture regardless of the equipment. To put it formally, how to create a photograph as opposed to "taking a snapshot". What do I mean by that? Taking a snapshot is more or less that you point your camera at something and you push the shutter button with little or no thought. In the case of you amputating somebody's feet or part of the head, oh well, you just took a snapshot. Although there is nothing wrong with snapshots, it is for another workshop and not this one. Creating a photograph is a little bit more complex. Not much more, but just enough to help you enjoy your pictures a little longer when you and others look at them.

There are several "building blocks" that are utilized in photography to create a more pleasing picture. These building blocks are Composition, Focus, Color (or grey scales), shapes, and Light. Although, there is an overlap in the utilization of these building blocks in the creative process of creating a photograph, in this exercise we will discuss composition. The reason why we emphasize composition first is because it is something that does not require fancy, expensive equipment, a 4 year degree, any special skills, and it has instant gratification. Technically, Focus, Color, Shapes, and Light can be all part of the composition as well, but we save those for a more advanced class.

What is it and why is it important? You might not realize it, but we find composition everywhere. It is like wallpaper, everybody knows it is there, but nobody notices it until it is no longer there or poorly executed. A good composition will make you feel at peace, comfortable and worry free. It makes you feel at home, so to speak. A bad composition might make you feel the opposite. It gives you that uneasy feeling of knowing something is wrong, but you can't really figure out what it is. If composition is everywhere and has such an impact on our well being, what is it?

Simply put, composition is the arrangement of the available elements. Elements are objects and objects can be anything really. This could be the notes and chords in music, furniture in your home, office, or your favorite restaurant, art such as photographs, paintings, flower arrangements, etc. you name it. Arranging or composing these elements has the purpose of creating a certain balance in the finished work that is easy and pleasing to the senses, to draw the attention to one of the elements, or both.

Now we got this far, how can we achieve a well balanced picture? How can we go from “Oh that’s nice” to “Wow”? How can we go from a “Snapshot” to a “Photograph”? Fortunately you do not have to reinvent the wheel. Although nobody knows exactly how long it took, over time a few simple rules were developed to help you with achieving the “Wow” factor. The Following are some of them. They are not in any specific order but they are all important. Sometimes we can achieve only one of them and sometimes we can achieve all of them in one picture. In other words, there is no need to use all of these rules in one photograph, but try to apply at least one of them when you take your next picture. Excuse me, photograph!

1. Focal point



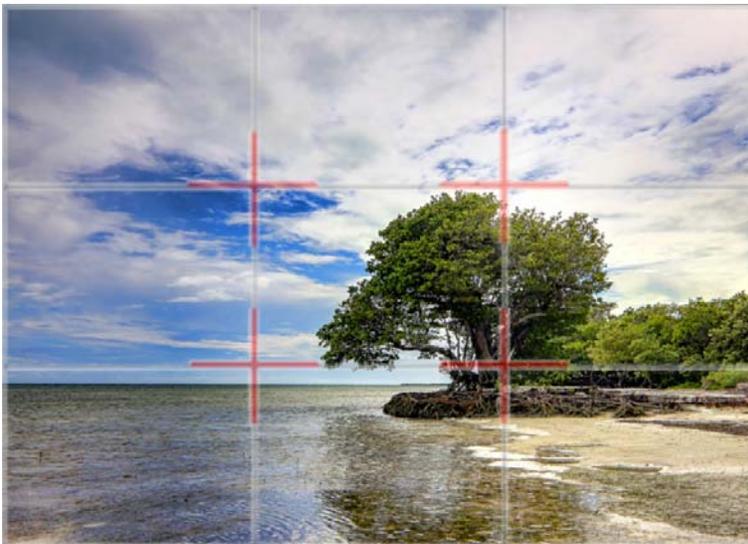
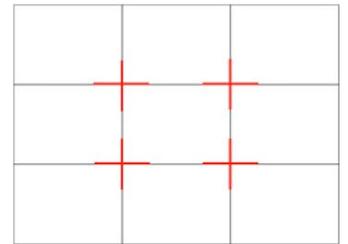
Very often we see something in the field that we really like. Let’s say a group of terns you stumble upon on the beach as in the pictures below and to the left. We snap a picture and when we come home and look at it, all we see is a big blob of tiny birds. It is like a big confusing jigsaw puzzle. To make the picture more interesting, there needs to be one bird that stands out from the rest. If we promote one bird as the main bird we would have something to focus on instead of looking at a pile of something that reminds us of those “Find Waldo” books.

Sometimes it is better to take a shot of just one bird by itself, or a few, instead of a bunch. We also have to make sure that the subject or object we focus on is not too small in the frame or it is doing something that the others are not doing. It has to stand out. Otherwise it kind of defeats the purpose of a focal point.



2. Rule of Thirds

Now we have this focal point, what do we do with it? Many times we just leave it smack in the center of the picture, which is fine for close-up portraits for example, but most of the time it is not very inviting and just plain boring. That is where the second building block comes in. This one is called: the "Rule of Thirds". It means that the photograph or what you see in your camera is divided into nine equal squares.



This rule is very old, but in more recent years, it was developed for commercial purposes by Japanese marketing experts. They found out that the eye is drawn to objects/subjects placed on any of the intersections first. If you look at ads in magazines etc. you will see that most of the time the most important part of the ad, such as the product, logo, or name, is strategically

placed on one of those intersections. Photography adopted this rule real quick, and today it is probably one of the most effective ways to instantly improve your pictures. Over the years, some varieties on this rule were developed, but we don't bother with those. We like to keep it simple.

3. Foreground



Obviously what we see in real life is three dimensional. Pictures on the other hand are flat and therefore two dimensional. In order to “translate” the three dimensions into two dimensions we need to give the picture a sense of depth. There are several ways to do this such as “leading lines” which we will discuss next. Another way of giving the image a sense of depth is having foreground

interest. It also gives the image a sense of scale or dimensions and distance.

There are situations where there is no real foreground, nor a real focal point. In those situations, we need to find a way to combine the two as in the example here. As a foreground, many things will do such as a tree, a rock, or a puddle. Anything that could give some dimension to an image could be used.



4. Leading lines



What the heck are leading lines you ask? Well those are naturally occurring features in a picture or a scene that function as lines or look like lines. Power lines for instance, but also a road, a path, a waterway of some sort, a row of trees or plants, or anything else that resembles a “line”. The line doesn’t have to be a continuous one, it could be a row of puddles,

nor does it have to be really obvious, such as a valley seen from above between two hills, a gorge, a streak of sunlight, or even a shadow.



As the name implies, these lines lead. They lead the eye of the viewer deeper into the picture, so to speak, as opposed to leading them outside the picture. By doing so they engage the viewer with what is going on in the image. They ensure that you keep your interest in the image just a little bit longer. Very often, you will find the Rule of Thirds,

Focal Points, and Leading Lines combined in an image. They are in harmony as in the Tree on the beach sample picture in the “rule of thirds” section illustrates. In addition, they also provide the three dimensional feel we need. The key with these leading lines is that we have to make sure that they lead towards something in the picture. A curved road for instance has to curve inward. It cannot curve outward and face the edge of the picture, which would defeat the purpose. We call that looking inward vs. looking outward.

5. Subject Placement



A less desirable way is to place a subject is a subject that faces to the right and is placed on the right half of the frame, looks outward towards the edge of the picture. It would be like it is looking at a wall from a close distance. Not very pleasing, unless you shoot a prisoner and you want to show that this prisoner is imprisoned and cannot go anywhere. A better way is to position a subject that faces to the right on the left half of the frame. The purpose is that this subject looks inward. This is particularly important with anything that has eyes. It is also important with objects that could point to several directions, like a flag waving in the wind for instance.



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6. Go Down



One easy way to improve the composition and overall impact of your pictures is to go down on your knees, especially with children and pets. There is a saying among photographers that shooting down on people and pets is an instant snapshot. Why is this? Shooting down is almost like looking down on somebody. In a way it is almost condescending. It's like saying: "Look I am bigger than you". Being on eye level or even a little

bit below eye level empowers your subject. Your subjects look better and your pictures have more impact on the viewer. This little trick works especially well on subjects that are alive. With landscapes and buildings it could also work but it depends on how majestic the landscape or building is. Especially with buildings there is sometimes little choice unless you carry a 50 foot ladder. What you could do, if there is enough room, is to back up. Remember, the longer the distance from you to your subject, the lesser the angle from you in relation to your subject. For people and pets however, go down on your knees and impress your friends and loved ones!



7. Fill the frame



This tip has a similar effect as going down on your knees. Like taking pictures from a lower viewpoint, filling the frame has more to do with impact than with engagement. Many times the subjects are too small in the frame and therefore lose a lot of the impact one tries to achieve and the desired Results are just not there. Don't be afraid to

close in on your subject, but make sure that you are not too intrusive in a way that makes



your subject uncomfortable. Having your picture taken is for many people a very personal thing and getting too close may be a little bit too personal. This is where your zoom lens comes in. Just back up a little to give your subject a little bit more space and use a longer zoom setting, but not all the way to the longest setting, that might cause loss of image quality. Without getting too technical, longer zoom settings also make the background a little blurry and that is good for portraits and close-ups. Another problem with a subject that is too small in the frame is the background. There will be just too much of it and it might be a distraction from what you really wanted to show in your image. We talk about this more in the next section.

8. Background



The trick with backgrounds is to keep them simple. Less is more. There is probably nothing more distracting in an image than a cluttered background. In many cases, the background is almost as important as the subject itself because a background can either add visual impact to the main subject or take it away. Light blobs from a lamp, telephone poles or trees that are right behind the subject and are seemingly growing out of somebody's head, trash (!), and overall clutter will take away from the main subject. Simple backgrounds with no clutter, very bright spots, etc, will add visual impact to the subject. This tip is important and maybe even more important than any of the other tips discussed here. For example, look at the picture of the cat here. There is a fence, a bright road, a tree, and a pole of some sort. These are all distracting elements with the worst one probably being the bright grayish road. One thing to remember is that brightly colored or lit elements are usually more noticeable than dark ones. As in this picture, the first thing you probably see is the gray blob in the background (Also

because it is close to one of the “rule of thirds” intersections). All these elements take away from the main subject, the cat. The example on the right is much better. There are not too many elements in the background, just the fence. There are no distracting elements and the color is even. The main subject can really come to glory and has a lot more visual impact than in the “bad” example



9. Horizon



We talked about leading lines and there is one other line that is not so much a leading line, but a line nevertheless. This line is the horizon. In general, the best position for the horizon is either 1/3 from the bottom or 1/3 from the top. Which one of these two options is better depends on the subject and the other elements in the scene. In the sunset picture the Sky is more important and is actually the main subject of the picture. Therefore, the horizon was placed lower in the picture. In the two chairs on the wooden pier, the foreground is obviously more important and therefore, the horizon was placed higher in the picture. From dealing with all the lines in a picture, this one might be the toughest. It is so easy to make the horizon crooked or to place it smack in the middle. I can ask you not to do this, but most likely you will on a regular basis. I guarantee you, even after all these years, I still do from time to time.



This is it for now as far as composition is concerned. We did not discuss every single detail, nor did we discuss many other rules that are floating around, such as the influence of color or shapes (Colors and shapes have a certain "weight" that can give a picture balance). I hope that what we have discussed so far will make an improvement to your photography if applied properly. It is not as complicated as it might seem.

That's all there is to it.

Have fun.

Rudy Umans

www.rudyumans.com

rudyumans@yahoo.com

561-762-2279

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