

# Photojournalism

## WEEK FOUR: Arranging the image to communicate

### Learning Outcomes



At the end of this week, you should be able to:

1. Explain photo composition
2. Explore the Rules of composition
3. Apply photo composition correctly

### Introduction

This lecture introduces you to composition that is how the elements of a photo are arranged. A composition can be made up of many different elements, or only a few. It is how the artist puts those things within a frame that help a photograph become more or less interesting to the viewer.

### The basics of photography composition

Photo composition refers to the arrangement and placement of elements within a photograph to create a visually pleasing and effective image. It is the art of organizing various elements in a scene to convey a specific message or evoke certain emotions in the viewer. Composition is an essential aspect of photography, as it can greatly impact how the audience perceives and interprets a photograph (Didyk, 2023).

### **The Importance of Composition for Photographers**

According to Didyk (2023), the arrangement of elements in a work of art plays a crucial role in shaping the viewer's experience. So let's look at a few basic points that will help you understand the importance of building an interesting composition:

1. Effective composition can make an image visually appealing, engaging, and memorable.
2. It helps draw the viewer's attention to the central object or focal point, creating a strong visual impression.
3. It is a powerful tool for storytelling in photography, allowing the photographer to convey a narrative or evoke specific emotions in the viewer.

4. A well-balanced composition creates a sense of order and cohesiveness that enhances the overall impact of the image.
5. Through composition, photographers can emphasize the main subject or point of interest in the image.
6. It allows photographers to add their personal style and interpretation to photos, making them more distinctive and appealing.

### The Rules of composition

The elements of photo composition are the fundamental building blocks that photographers use to create visually appealing and effective images. These elements work together to form a cohesive and engaging photograph. Elements of composition are: patterns, texture, symmetry, asymmetry, depth of field, lines, curves, frames, contrast, color, viewpoint, depth, negative space, filled space, foreground, background, visual tension, shapes (Vorenkamp, 2016). Here are some of the key elements of photo composition proposed by various authorities:

1. **Subject:** The subject is the main focal point of the photograph, the primary element that draws the viewer's attention. It's what the photo is primarily about (Maentz, 2022).
2. **Foreground:** The foreground is the part of the image that appears closest to the viewer, often located at the bottom of the frame. It can be used to provide context, depth, and a sense of scale to the photograph the foreground is the part of the image that is closest to the camera. The background is the part of the image that is further away from the camera. So by default, the middle ground is that what is in the middle of the foreground and the background. (Gupta, 2023).
3. **Background:** The background is the area behind the main subject. A well-chosen background can complement the subject, create contrast, or add to the overall story of the photo. According to Britannica Dictionary (2023), it is the part of a scene or picture that is farthest from the viewer: the part of a scene that is behind a main figure or object in a painting, photograph, etc.
  - Objects in the foreground are drawn larger than those in the *background*.
  - a photograph of a house with mountains in the *background*

- The mountains provided a perfect *background* [=backdrop] for the wedding photos.
4. **Lines:** Lines within a photograph can be actual (like roads or fences) or implied (like the gaze of a person or a row of trees). Lines can be used to guide the viewer's eye, create a sense of movement, or lead to the main subject. According Schneider (2003-2023), leading lines are, in essence, visual paths drawn in an image that lead the viewer's eye towards a particular point, often to the main subject of the photograph. They serve to guide the viewer's attention, create depth, and add a dynamic element to a composition. Leading lines are everywhere, from the natural lines created by rivers or coastlines, to architectural lines in cityscapes, to implied lines in portraits.
  5. **Shapes:** Shapes are created by the arrangement of objects within the frame. Recognizable shapes, such as circles, triangles, and rectangles, can add structure and visual interest to a photograph. According to Vorenkamp (2021), There are two basic types of shapes: geometric (or regular) and organic. We all know geometric shapes—circle, square, triangle, dodecahedron, and so on. We are also familiar with organic shapes—the outline of a bird, elephant, flower, tree, etc. Fluids can create organic shapes that cannot be permanently defined—the shape of a cloud or a rain puddle, for instance.
  6. **Color:** Color plays a crucial role in photography. It can convey mood, emotion, and contrast. Photographers often consider color harmony and contrast when composing their shots. According to Vorenkamp (2021), Color has three properties: hue, value, and saturation. **Hue** is simply the description of the color (e.g., blue, red, yellow, etc.). **Value** is the relative brightness or darkness of a color. **Saturation** is the intensity or purity of a color. The purest color is a hue with no white, black, or gray added to it. There are different types of colour and when you separate the different colors of the rainbow and we can see these varied colors elicit different emotional responses—some based on genetic response, others based on cultural programming. Red can mean danger, blue symbolizes calm, yellow is happy, black is mournful, white is innocent, and purple can symbolize wealth.

7. **Texture:** Texture refers to the surface quality of objects within the frame. Highlighting textures, whether they are smooth, rough, soft, or gritty, can add depth and tactile appeal to a photo. According to Vorenkamp (2021), texture in “real life” can be, basically, smooth or rough. We can use other descriptors as well: slimy, wet, hard, soft, bumpy, shiny, etc. The physical print has its own texture—glossy versus matte, or even canvas-textured printing papers, for example—which may or may not be aligned with the texture of the objects in the photograph. Texture can be elusive in a photograph, depending on the subject, the lighting, and the forms in the image. Texture in the photograph is similar to form in that it is revealed by variations in tonality and presented in two dimensions.
8. **Contrast:** Contrast refers to the difference in brightness and color between elements in a photograph. It can be used to draw attention to the subject and create visual interest.
9. **Pattern and Repetition:** Patterns and repetitive elements in a photo can create rhythm and harmony. Photographers often use patterns to add visual interest and structure to their compositions. According to Sandra (2016), there is a reason why we love patterns – they are aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Another aspect to explore: include something in your photograph that interrupts a pattern, adding an element of surprise. In our case, a man-made pattern provides an attractive composition. However, you can look for repetitions and patterns created by nature, such as an alley of trees, dunes, or waves.

Take Note



Useful hint. Try to break the pattern. The imperfection will add interest to the image and draw the viewer’s attention.

10. **Symmetry and Balance:** Symmetry involves creating a sense of equilibrium by arranging elements in a photograph to be mirror images of each other. Balance refers to distributing visual weight evenly within the frame to achieve stability or tension, depending on the desired effect. According to Sandra (2016), there is beauty, simplicity

and a certain type of elegance in a photograph that is perfectly symmetrical. It's pleasing to the eye and a sure way to catch the attention of many. The same goes for a slight variation of the style; asymmetrical shots that include empty space for visual interest (use the first photo composition rule in this list to find out where to place your subject). Symmetrical compositions involve creating balance by placing similar or identical elements on both sides of the frame. Asymmetrical compositions, on the other hand, use different elements with varying visual weight to create balance (Sandra, 2016).

11. **Depth:** Creating a sense of depth in a photograph can be achieved by including elements in the foreground, middle ground, and background. This helps convey a three-dimensional feeling in a two-dimensional medium. According to Vorenkamp (2021), how well the **depth** is rendered is dependent on the objects in the frame, your choice of composition, and your perspective in relation to the objects in the frame. Most images have a foreground, middle ground, and background. The stronger the delineation between those successive “grounds,” the stronger the sense of depth in your image. According to Sandra (2016), **form** is created when the shape becomes three dimensional. This can be done by adding depth to a photo through lighting and perspective. Thus, when the shape and shadows collide, we see touchable contours brought out by the tonal range.

12. **Point of View (POV):** The angle and perspective from which the photo is taken can drastically affect the composition. Different points of view can convey different emotions and messages. According to Vorenkamp (2021), all photographs contain one or more subjects. (With an abstract photograph, the abstraction may be the subject.) As a photographer, when you see a subject or scene that you wish to photograph, you point the camera in that general direction, compose, and release the shutter. A great many of us are standing when we do this, and we raise the camera to our eye and take the photograph.

Not all photographs need to be taken from our eye level (or from the top of a fully-extended tripod)—nor should they. Changing your viewpoint is not only a great way to enhance a composition; it might make your photograph stand out from all of the other eye-level views made of a similar subject.

13. **Negative Space:** Negative space is the empty or unoccupied areas in a photograph. It can be used to highlight the subject, create a sense of isolation, or add simplicity to the

composition. According Innovature BPO (2023), in photography, negative space refers to the empty space around the main subject. Simply put, the area surrounding the object itself contributes to the definition of the positive space (or main focus). Negative and positive space can help viewers understand how your image is put together when used creatively together.

Negative space in Photography is a simple technique for producing stunning, minimalist images with strong dramatic impact. Large stretches of empty space can truly attract the eye toward the focal point of your image while maintaining a powerful emotional charge.

14. **Frame within a Frame:** This technique involves using elements within the scene, such as arches, windows, or natural frames, to enclose or highlight the subject. A frame within a frame is the use of visual elements in a scene to border a subject, further drawing the focus to them. The first frame is the literal shape and border of the entire image. The second frame is then created within the image, hence the term. To create this additional frame, photographers and cinematographers often use windows, doors, or other foreground elements. Subjects can also be framed with background elements that create the shape around the subject. It does not always have to be rectangular or square, just a shape that borders a subject (Deguzman, 2022).

15. **Light and Shadow:** Lighting is a critical element in photography. The way light falls on the subject and creates shadows can dramatically affect the composition, mood, and storytelling in a photograph. According to Adobe (2023), the contrast of light and shadow is important for the proper balance of images. Light makes an image seem brighter while shadow can draw drama to a certain part of an image's composition. For great photos, a careful balance is needed. The right balance of light and shadow can help your image by:

- Providing dimension
- Pulling focus
- Strengthening contrast

That's not all — light and shadow play a key role in adding crucial elements to your images, often acting as the fine line between a good photo and a stunning image.

## Application of photocomposition Techniques

Remember that these elements are not isolated from each other but interact in complex ways to create a compelling composition. Skilled photographers consider these elements and how they work together when framing and capturing their shots. Additionally, creativity and personal style play a significant role in how these elements are used to create unique and impactful photographs.

Some key principles of photo composition include:

1. **Rule of Thirds:** One of the most well-known and widely used composition techniques. The image is divided into nine equal parts by two equally spaced horizontal and two equally spaced vertical lines. Important elements of the photo are then placed along these lines or at their intersections. The rule of thirds is a composition technique. It divides the frame into a grid with two equally spaced horizontal lines and two equally-spaced vertical lines. The method is to align the subject or main elements of your image on the 4 intersecting points, or along the vertical or horizontal lines (Landwer-Johan, 2022).
2. **Balance:** Achieving visual balance in a photograph involves distributing visual weight evenly across the frame. This can be done through the strategic placement of objects and subjects to prevent the image from feeling lopsided or weighted to one side. According Ainsley (2023), photography balance is when the elements of your photo are organized properly, and the image feels whole or complete. *Symmetrical* balance is a type of formal balance where two sides of the image appear the same. One side may mirror the other forming symmetry. *Radial* balance uses evenly spread orientated lines, shapes, forms, colours, or patterns surrounding the center. *Asymmetrical* balance is when one side of the frame holds the main subject, and the other side of the image is balanced out by smaller subjects or negative space.
3. **Leading Lines:** Utilizing lines within the photograph to guide the viewer's eyes towards the main subject or points of interest in the image. Leading lines are lines that appear in a photograph that have been framed and positioned by the photographer to draw the viewer's eye towards a specific point of interest. These lines often draw the viewer's eye

in a specific direction or towards a designated portion of the photograph (MasterClass, 2021).

4. **Foreground, Middle ground, and Background:** Creating depth and dimension by incorporating elements in the foreground, middle ground, and background of the photograph. The basic elements of composition, foreground, middle ground, and background may not be as intuitively easy to understand as you might expect them to be. This belies their usefulness greatly! From using distinct layers as framing elements to simply innovating on them to add depth to an image, foreground, middle ground, and background are really versatile (Jacoby, 2023).
5. **Framing:** Using natural or man-made elements in the scene to frame the main subject and draw attention to it. Framing in photography is the use of elements in a photoshoot within a scene to create a frame around the subject. We can achieve it by using natural objects such as trees, windows, and doorways, or by artificially manipulating the environment. It's possible through the use of props or other means to create a frame. The intent of framing is to draw attention to the subject, add depth and dimension, and improve the composition of the photograph. Photographers can produce visually appealing images that tell a story and stir up emotions in the viewer (Color Experts International, 2023).
6. **Repetition:** Incorporating patterns or repetitive elements in the photo can add visual interest and create a sense of unity. Repetition in photography refers to the technique of integrating recurring elements, patterns, or themes in a composition to produce a sense of rhythm and balance in an image. This can involve the repeated use of lines, shapes, colors, textures, or other visual elements that create a sense of consistency and uniformity. The repetition photography examples could be anything—a row of trees, a series of arches, a field of sunflowers, or even a group of people dressed similarly. By echoing these elements throughout the image, the photographer guides the viewer's eye across the photograph, establishing a visual rhythm (Skylum, 2023).
7. **Pattern:** Pattern involves the repetition of shapes, lines, or motifs within a photograph. Patterns can occur naturally or be deliberately created. They can add visual interest, rhythm, and a sense of order to an image. Capturing patterns in everyday scenes or using

them as the main subject can result in visually captivating and intriguing photographs. *Rhythm* refers to the visual flow and repetition of elements within a photograph. It creates a sense of movement, harmony, and continuity. Rhythm can be achieved through patterns, leading lines, or repeated shapes. By incorporating rhythm into your compositions, you can guide the viewer's eye through the image and create a sense of visual engagement (Nielsen, 2023).

8. **Color and Contrast:** Utilizing color and contrast to draw attention to the main subject or to create a specific mood or atmosphere.
9. **Point of View:** The angle from which the photograph is taken can significantly influence the composition and the story it conveys.
10. **Simplicity:** Striving for simplicity in the composition can often lead to more powerful and impactful images.
11. **The Golden Ratio:** The Golden Ratio differentiates from the rule of thirds by the balance of the photograph. Here, the focus of the photograph is more towards the center (with more details). The roots of this rule go back centuries and can be found in notable works of art. In essence, it is the perfect balance with a ratio of 1 to 1.618, and you can search for this to understand the proportions in photography, architecture, and art.

Instead of nine equal rectangles, the frame is divided into a sequence of squares that form a Golden Spiral, also known as the Fibonacci Spiral, which resembles a shell. The spiral guides the viewer's eye around the frame and shows how the scene should develop.

(Sandra, 2016).

12. **Diagonals:** One thing about diagonal lines that differentiates it from other composition techniques is that the lines help create movement in the photograph, even when your subjects are still. This is a great tip for photographers that want to step outside of perfect compositions, yet still create appealing photography compositions with the help of diagonal lines composition in photography is simply the arrangement of visual elements within a frame. (Sandra, 2016).

### 13. Figure to ground

According to (Sandra, 2016), try to focus on your subjects and make them stand out by narrowing in on the contrast between the subject and the background. The more contrast, the more dramatic your shots, and the more prominent your subject. A winning photo composition is one in which your main subject is isolated due to the contrast solution.

Our picture is a perfect example of the figure to ground photographic composition. The main subject contrasts with the background, making the model stand out. This effect can also be achieved with a contrast light difference, where more light falls on the subject than on the backdrop. Alternatively, you can find a subject that is lighter than your background and place it in the same light.



Source: Sandra (2016) *Back to Basics: 10 Composition Rules in Photography*  
<https://blog.depositphotos.com/back-to-basics-10-composition-rules-in-photography.html> Wednesday, 07 December 2016 8:40 Posted by Sandra. Retrieved on 20th September 2023.

**Hint for photography composition with two subjects in the photo.** Use the Golden Ratio rule or the rule of thirds to balance your image (Sandra, 2016).

### 14. Center dominant eye

When photographing people, place their dominant eye in the center of the photograph, this makes the picture more luring as it appears that the subject's eyes are following the viewer. It is a compositional technique where the main subject or point of interest in an image is placed near the

center of the frame but slightly shifted toward the dominant eye of the subject or viewer. This technique is used to create a stronger connection between the subject and the viewer, making the composition more engaging and visually appealing. You'll notice that the subject's eyes are always following your movement (Sandra, 2016).

15. **Fill the frame:** According to (Sandra, 2016), to fill the frame, your subject should occupy a significant portion of your image, leaving no or little space around it. This way, the photographer removes all distractions, allowing the viewer to focus on the main subject and explore every detail. Get up close and personal with your subjects. Have them fill in the frame so that they are the focus and the dominant feature of the photograph.

Remember that these principles are not strict rules but rather guidelines to help photographers create more compelling and engaging images. The best compositions often result from a blend of creativity, intuition, and a good understanding of these principles. As with any form of art, experimentation and personal style can also play a significant role in photo composition (Sandra, 2016).

#### Summary



Composition in photography is simply the arrangement of visual elements within a frame. When you look at other photos, try to find these elements and principles of composition within them. See how other photographers utilize them. Successful compositions often contain many of the strategies listed above, used in a harmonious and aesthetically pleasing way. Photography is all about creativity, inspiration, and sharing your unique artistic vision. Photography composition rules should always be kept in mind because they are fundamental in excelling as a photographer. Your basic knowledge of photography composition rules will give you the tools to experiment as you work on improving and establishing your style. Remember, while these guidelines can be incredibly helpful, they're not hard and fast rules. Experiment, be creative, and don't be afraid to break the rules once you've learned them. After all, photography is an art form, and you are the artist. Harness the power of principles and elements of photocomposition and let your unique vision shine through your work.

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