

TECH TIPS

An intermittent column about things you can do to improve your photography.

Tom DeVange

This month's topic: Basic composition.

Don't be a 'bulls-eye' photographer. A bulls-eye photographer is one who puts the subject dead center in the frame. Unlike archery, you get no points for this in photography because it is almost always the best way to make a picture dull. How can you avoid dullness and invest your photographs with interest, excitement or dynamic tension? Follow this and nine other basic rules of composition.

Rule Two: Have a subject or focus of interest. (One could argue that this is really the first rule but I wanted to open with the bull's eye concept.) The subject can be obvious or subtle but the viewer needs to know what the photo is about. Let's say that you photograph a lake in the woods. Fine. But what is it about the lake that you want to communicate to the viewer? Ask yourself, "What attracted me to this? What about it makes me want to take the picture?" Try to give the answer by the way you compose the shot. Maybe it's that little island to one side or the flock of ducks floating on the surface. Maybe it's the last few wisps of fog on the water or the glitter of sunshine on the waves. Maybe it's the sense of peace or joy you felt. Identify it and look for a way to capture it.

An adjunct to this rule is to keep the photograph simple. Include that which is your subject and exclude all else. For example, a photograph of a soccer player need not include half of the field and the rest of the team. Watch the background too. Players on the sideline or the crowd in the bleachers can be distracting elements that make it hard to see the subject. You want the subject to stand out.

Rule Three: Follow the Rule of Thirds. Imagine that the area you see in the viewfinder is divided by two horizontal and two vertical lines. The horizontal lines are one-third of the way down from the top and one-third of the way up from the bottom, dividing the image into three equal bands. The vertical lines do the same thing from the right and left sides. The four corners where these lines cross are called 'power points.' The subject or focal point of the image should be at one of these power points or aligned along one of these four lines. It is usually best to avoid placing horizons or other natural 'cut' lines across the center of the image although this may be unavoidable with some reflection shots.

Rule Four: Be attuned to 'direction of movement.' For example, if your soccer player is running, place her so she appears to have traversed one-third of the image but still has the other two-thirds to go. In other words, give her some place to go in the frame. This sets up a sort of dynamic tension in that there is still something left to happen and keeps the viewer's eye from running right out of the frame with the player as it would if she were

about to exit. You don't want the viewer to feel that the photograph is saying, "Everything's over, nothing left to see here, move along."

Rule Five: Balance 'visual weight.' If you have an element on one side of the frame it is usually necessary to balance it with something else on the other side. Placement doesn't have to be perfectly symmetrical and the objects need not be the same size.

Rule Six: Use leading lines to direct the viewer's eye to your subject and keep it in the frame. Railroad tracks, roads, fences, shorelines and horizons are all examples of the types of lines you can use; so are the imaginary lines formed by the placement of objects in the frame. Lines don't have to be straight, either. Curves, especially S-shaped curves, are appealing and diagonal lines are more dynamic than horizontal or vertical ones. When your subject is linear or the subjects form a line (or a square, circle or triangle), play around with angles and perspective to find the most interesting view. Remember, the goal of using lines is to direct the viewer's eye to the subject so don't do the opposite and let a line guide the viewer's eye right out of the frame.

Rule Seven: Use depth to direct and control your viewer's eye. A sharply focused animal set against a forest that is soft-focused or blurred will seem to 'pop' from the background and draw the viewer's eye right to it. Framing your image with something like tree branches, the last few feet of a tunnel or a latticework arch can help add depth to the image and direct the viewer's eye into the picture to the subject. You've seen the classic example of this many times: palm fronds drooping into the frame from the top and side, an expanse of beach and a sailboat (the subject) out in the water. Another method is to place one or more people in the foreground to add scale when you have a large subject. All elements must be in focus for the framing and foreground elements techniques to work, however, so you'll need a small aperture for good depth of field.

Rule Eight: Use camera angle to add interest. Look around before you shoot. Don't think that you automatically walked or drove up to the best place to shoot that subject. Don't take every shot from your eye level and dead center on the subject. Vary the height above ground and right to left positions when developing a composition. Don't be afraid to get dirty or wet. The best composition might require you to lie on the ground or climb a tree. I once waded knee-deep into a pond to compose a reflection that was not visible from the shore. Shoot people and animals from *their* eye level. Always consider vertical format – it is underused.

Rule Nine: Pay attention to perspective. You can make the image of the subject the same size in the frame by shooting from up close with a shorter lens (e.g., 35-50mm) or from farther away with a long one (e.g., 85-135mm). The difference will be the field of view. There will be a wider field of view in the frame shoot with the shorter lens. Use this fact to make a composition decision.

Rule Ten: Scan for problems. After you've finalized the composition and exposure, run your eye around the perimeter of the frame. In most cases you want to be sure that no part of your subject is touching the edges. Make sure that no extraneous objects like tree

branches or flagpoles are poking into the picture. Then scan the whole frame looking for any distracting item. Is there a dead stick in that beautiful flowerbed or a signpost sticking out of your model's head? Do any of the elements of the picture overlap one another? If you don't do this scan, sooner or later, you'll be sorry. I skipped it once. I shot a huge, gnarled driftwood stump on the beach in long, evening light. I went away feeling that this was a killer shot. Once the slide was on the light table I found that it would have been, except for the chunk of Masonite someone had propped against the stump. The colors were close, the light was low and I had missed it in the viewfinder. I didn't want to drive 300 miles to repeat the shot.

Finally, learn the rules well enough so that you know when to break them. Sometimes, 'illegal' compositions work.

Happy shooting!

Abstract: This column explains ten ways to improve the composition of your photographs. These are: don't place the subject in the middle of the frame, have a subject or focus of interest, follow the rule of thirds, be attuned to direction of movement, balance visual weight, use leading lines, use depth, use camera angle, pay attention to perspective and scan for problems. Finally, know when to break the rules.