

Composition Techniques

Genevieve Moyer, 3/02

1. Rule of thirds

Place your subject in one of the viewfinder's "intersection of thirds." That's where the eye naturally goes when you're looking into a frame. Large subjects can be placed in the upper or lower third of the frame or in the left/right third. Remember to keep subjects with eyes looking into the frame. Avoid the center of the frame, except for exactly symmetrical compositions.

2. Framing

Try to put a frame around your subject. An arch in a building, the curve of a palm frond, the window in a sail, the frame of a window – the frame should relate to what is being framed in location subject, history, or color.

3. Leading lines

Watch for any opportunity to use a leading line (S-shaped roads or fences are ideal) that draws the viewer's eye into the picture toward your subject. Your subject may be placed anywhere along the leading line, the start of the line often being the most effective.

4. Foreground V shape

An unusual application of the leading line technique is the use of a strong "v-shape" in the foreground, particularly when you're using a wide-angle lens to photograph scenics. A fence is the most common tool, but the corner of a table or anything else that's square or rectangular may work. Use the "v" as a frame for your subject.

5. Break the horizon

Straight lines that parallel your frame should be avoided. If you photograph people, church steeples, flagpoles, or boat masts so that they "break the horizon," your photographs will be more dynamic. Remember that the horizon might be the crest of a hill, the roof line of a building, or some other straight or long horizontal line in your composition. If you can't avoid them, use them to your advantage. Since you must place yourself down lower to situate subjects against the horizon, this technique is often combined with that of the "worm's eye view."