

Just so we can say we've talked about composition, let's have a go at it.

Which of these pictures, in your opinion, would you like to brag, "I took that!"

A picture of your mother with what looks like a telephone pole growing out of her head?

A shot of your best friends, sitting across the dinner table from you, with an overexposed floral arrangement partially covering one of their faces?

A photo of the statue of liberty, listing at about a 30° angle?

A snapshot of the family's newborn, from head to waist, with crumpled bed sheets on both sides?

They all sound great, don't they? We've all taken them, or ones just like them. But we don't **have to**, do we? Of course not. We can learn from our mistakes, and do better next time. Let's think about how.

When taking a picture, the most obvious consideration should be, "What is this a picture of?" If you can't answer that question, why take the picture at all? If a photo has no subject or center of interest, you'll later wonder why you shot it in the first place. Avoid that: don't fire the shutter.

The most common problem most amateur photographers face is where to put the subject. Many people choose to put the subject dead center. An aptly named location, because it is the most static place to put your subject. Nothing happens there. Aesthetic composition (in western culture) follows what is called the rule of thirds. Think of your pictures size and shape and measure off dividing your dimensions by three. As an example, let's work with a 3" square print.  $3/3=1$ , so measuring off horizontal and vertical lines one inch from each corner gives us what appears to be a tic tac toe board. Each intersection is one-third into the picture. Placing your subject at one of those intersections follows the rule of thirds. Put your subject there, and not in the center. You'll immediately notice more interesting pictures.

Next, don't have your subject looking "out" of the picture. If your subject is facing in a direction other than at the viewer, have it face the farthest border. If it faces the nearer border, the viewers' eyes will follow the subject's line of sight right out of the photo.

I mentioned a cultural concern. As westerners, we read across from top left to top right, and so on down the page. When we look at pictures, we subconsciously "read" them the same way. We scan left to right. If we place a subject on the left side, looking right, our eye travels in the same direction – often right out of the picture. If the subject allows, place it on one of the right side

intersections, facing left. This acts as a brake for your eye, keeping the viewer looking back “into” the photo. Your photos will automatically become more active and less static.

When thinking about your subject, does it go side to side (horizontal) or up and down (vertical)? Position the camera to match the position of the subject. For example, if you are taking a picture of the Empire State building, compose a vertical shot. (If, however, the building just fell down, a horizontally composed shot would be in order.) If you are taking a group photo of your family in your back yard, horizontal composition would probably be best. If it was raining, and you arranged the same family members on a staircase, compose vertically. No one travels laterally on a flight of steps; they go up and down. Make your picture go up and down.

Another thing about positioning your subject is image size. Pretend we are photographing a person standing up, and make a 4x6 print. If we fill the frame horizontally, the image can be as tall as 4”. If we turn the camera, the subject can now be as tall as 6”. That’s a 50% increase in size, detail, etc. Which picture do you think you’d like to look at?

Today’s automatic cameras, transmissions, washing machines, etc. succeed at one thing: they save us from thinking. In the camera term “Point and Shoot”, the word “think” does not appear. So, most people point and shoot, but do not otherwise think about their pictures. This begets the lamp pole mama mentioned above. So many of our pictures can be greatly improved if we spend just 1-2 seconds thinking about the shot. Look around in your viewfinder. What do you see that really isn’t pertinent to the scene? Where is the light source? What items clutter the foreground and or background? Believe it or not, either bending, leaning, or taking one step in any direction can overcome most of these faults. Look, and think. Think and do.

Using the Statue of Liberty motif, don’t put the horizon dead center. Put it 1/3 of the way into your picture, probably up from the bottom. Then, make sure that the camera is level. Don’t have your horizon line run up or downhill. Ever! If you’re on a swaying boat, don’t squeeze the shutter release until the horizon is level.

The baby photo is the most complicated. What, exactly, about the baby is the subject? The face, the size, the expression, the location or something about the environment the baby is in when the camera is fired? “Compose the picture” does ***NOT*** mean get as close as possible, then shoot. Make the picture interesting. Remember the rule of thirds. Have your picture say something about the baby rather than “here is a picture of a baby”.

When was the last time you saw a professionally shot picture of a baby? It was not a picture of a face, was it? Of course not. It was a picture of a whole baby, possibly later cropped to accentuate the expression in response to some stimuli.

It expressed something about the baby, lent character, and told a story. It was more than a close up of a young face.

While on this subject, let me mention one of my personal pet peeves, people firing their camera's flash into a baby's eyes from point blank range. As an adult, would you like someone to do that to you? Not too keen on the concept, are you? Do people really think anything about the infant when they take these shots? Obviously not. Having spoken to ophthalmologists for decades now, many feel that permanent eye damage may well be caused by these flash pictures before the child's rods and cones are completely formed, which I am told is a few months after birth. Other eye doctors have told me this is rubbish. I don't know the real answer, but without eyesight, I'm out of business. Eyesight is something we take for granted, even when we start to lose it. Let's not risk taking someone else's by selfishly firing the flash at point blank range. (Thank you for letting me get this off my chest.)

Another compositional tool worth considering is framing. Using framing techniques in every picture gets boring, but it can turn an acceptable picture into a very good one. Let's say the subject matter is a seascape, with all the subject matter and action going from left to right. Using an element to frame (or border) the right edge of the picture bounces the viewer's eye back into the shot. A tree, or a cliff, or boathouse, or almost anything large enough to command attention at the right edge will serve this purpose. Another example could be a sunset, with an overpowering empty sky and a low horizon. Framing the top edge works great. Use something like a tree branch or an awning, which would appear silhouetted against the colorful sky.

These have been easy ways to improve every picture you take. Like anything else, they require practice. Seeing the picture before you take it is a discipline. You have to work at it before it becomes second nature. You're sure to find it worthwhile.

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It's been several months since I mentioned a website I frequent, so let me plug it again, [www.takegreatpictures.com](http://www.takegreatpictures.com). This non-commercial site gives lots of information and excellent ideas about picture taking, and displays lots of great images, as well as images from notable personalities. I hope you enjoy it.

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In our industry, our photo industry association holds an annual trade show and convention in February. Lynne, Rob and Rob (our store managers) and I will be going. In our absence, we will be somewhat understaffed for 3 days while we learn more about modern imaging innovations. Expect to hear more about that in next month's newsletter.

I've been toying with an idea, and I invite your feedback. Is there any interest in a very informal question and answer session about digital photography? I'm envisioning this as maybe an hour in length, with no specific products mentioned, nothing for sale, and free. This would be a fact-finding session, where we can mutually learn from each other. This would NOT be "How do I use my digital camera?". This is more geared towards customers who do not own a digital camera, and are wondering what this "digital revolution" is all about. What do you think?

We appreciate the kind words several of you have mentioned about these newsletters. Your thoughtfulness makes it very rewarding, and worth the effort of creating them.

Jerry & Lynne.