



Isolation

When the colour of the subject is too close to a similar colour in the background, the subject will lose its potency. Try to ensure the colour that is dominant is exactly that. The left hand image of the Rainbow Lorikeet shows the foliage merging with the bird's plumage, whereas on the right there is a clear distinction between the subject and the background; they are isolated from one another. Communication in a picture can also be distorted by merges between individual subjects or subjects and borders.



Lines

Lines will lead the eye just as train tracks vanishing into the distance do. Ask yourself when you are composing your picture where you wish to lead the viewer – away into the distance, up into the sky – and use the natural lines of buildings or trees, rivers or pathways to take the viewer on a journey into your picture. The major beach and wave-break lines in the above picture lead the eye and the mind on a long wandering walk by the sea.

Picture composition – an introduction

My artist friends describe me as an “intuitive” photographer relying on instinct in designing a picture rather than on traditional formulas. Many people don't need rules: their results have a natural balance and order. I endorse the philosophy of Peter Emerson, the 19th century photographer who was the first to promote photography as an art in its own right. He advocated that each photograph requires its own composition free from the restrictions of formulas.

However, I have indicated some approaches that may be helpful in designing pictures. These are guidelines only, to be broken, added to, played with and adapted. Some of the commonest pitfalls in composition are: (a) centring the main subject, where it is most visually boring; (b) leading the eye out of the photograph; (c) failing to adequately isolate the main subject. But even these “faults” can be used to telling effect. Remember that strict adherence to the compositional rules may ultimately stifle creativity. The aim is always to take photos that look good.



Rule of thirds

A rectangle is divided into thirds horizontally and vertically, and the elements of the picture – focus points, horizons, subjects – are arranged along the lines and intersections of the grid. The picture bottom left shows the grid, and the one bottom right shows a different composition. Is one composition better than the others?



Balance

Balance in a picture is connected to aesthetic appeal but there is a mathematical relationship to design which works around the Greek Golden Mean in western culture. Most people can intuitively see the appeal of a well-balanced picture without going into the detail. It is interesting, though, to understand and then push yourself to photograph in a different way. The picture at top is composed with a central horizon and the vanishing point (the cliff and headland) being out of the picture's centre of interest. The bottom picture is composed to the 'rule of thirds'.



Simplicity

An image that is overcluttered with distracting information will confuse the viewer. A simple image can convey a strong, clear message.



Space

An image composed to include the surrounds may give meaningful detail to make the picture more interesting but sometimes, too much space can lead to the subject being swamped and a closer perspective would be better.



Framing

A frame will give a sense of scale and limit to a picture. It can accentuate the feeling the viewer has as an observer.