

Photography Composition



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To: *North Haven Camera Club*

May 12, 2026

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Slides at: CCullens.com/Composition-2026

Photography can be a lifelong passion!

I got my first camera
59 years ago!

Composition tip:
Don't let your subject's
dress blend in with the
background wallpaper!



Photography Composition - What is it?

The arrangement of visual elements within a frame to create an impactful photo.

It helps tell a story and guide the viewer's eye to the subject.



Photography Composition - Why is it important?

Brings all visual elements together to express the purpose of the photo!

- **Captivates the Viewer** – Holds the viewer in the photo and prompts them to **look** where the most important element is placed.
- **Creates a Sense of Harmony** – Focuses on how items are **arranged** and what to include or exclude.
- **Express Individuality** – There are many composition “rules”, however, you can also **break** those “rules” to help express your vision for the image.



Composition's Role in Impactful Photos

The “4 Legs” of a Highly Impactful Photo Usually Include:

- Storytelling
- Creativity
- **Composition** (*Brings those visual elements together!*)
- Technical Excellence

From: Creating Photos with Impact by Chane Cullens
Download: ccullens.com/impact



Photography Composition

“Composition Rules” are “Guidelines”!

Use them as a starting point then see which work for the scene and the story you want your photo to tell!



Composition Topics



Getting to the Subject:

- Center of Interest or Subject
- Compose to Tell a Story

Composition “Rules”:

- Leading Lines & S-Curves
- Rule of Thirds vs. Centering
- Rule of Odds
- Fill the Frame vs. Breathing Room & Negative Space
- Golden Ratio

Positioning:

- Direction & Perspective
- Reflections & Symmetry
- Framing

Setting the Scene:

- Colors, Contrast & Light
- Foreground, Middle Ground & Backgrounds
- Camera Depth of Field

Things to watch for:

- Mergers, Corners, Horizons, Ankles & other joints
- Simplify

Finishing Touches & Tips:

- Cropping & Vignettes
- Try Something Different!
- Have Fun with Post-Processing
- Words & Still Life Tips

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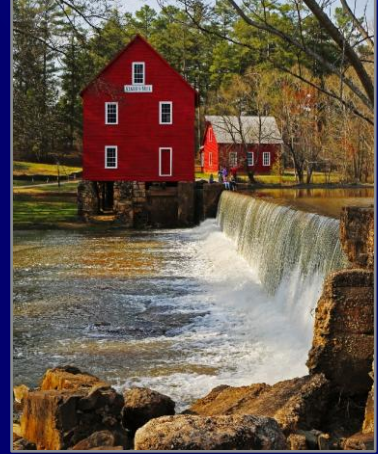
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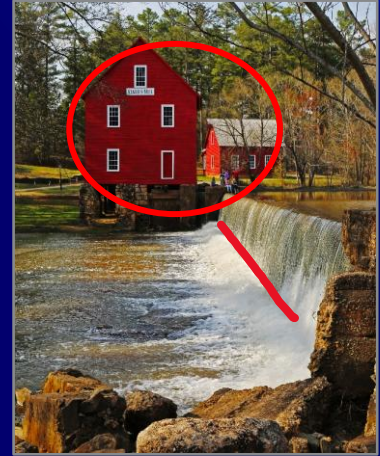
Center of Interest or Subject – What caught your eye?

It is a place for the viewer's eye to land. Composition helps us get there.



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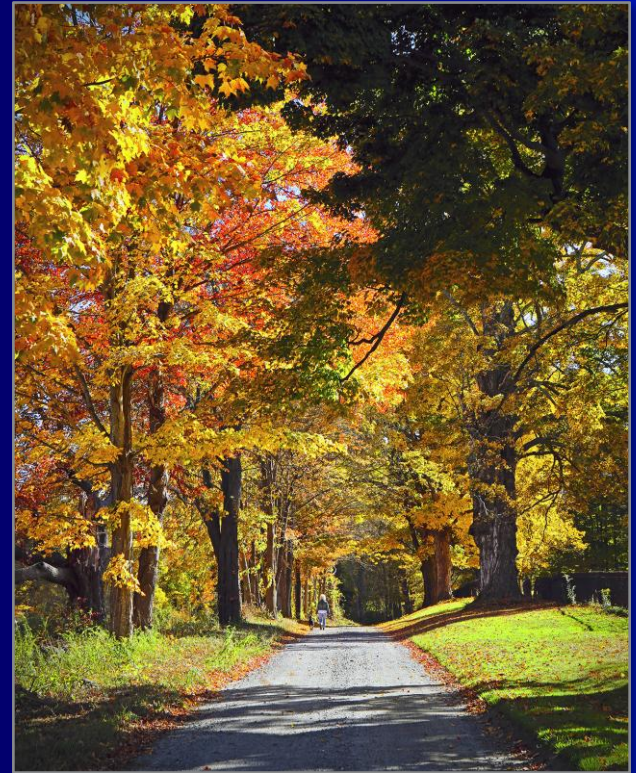


Sometimes the “Subject” Includes Surroundings

Composition helps us take it all in before resting in one spot.



A Summer Day



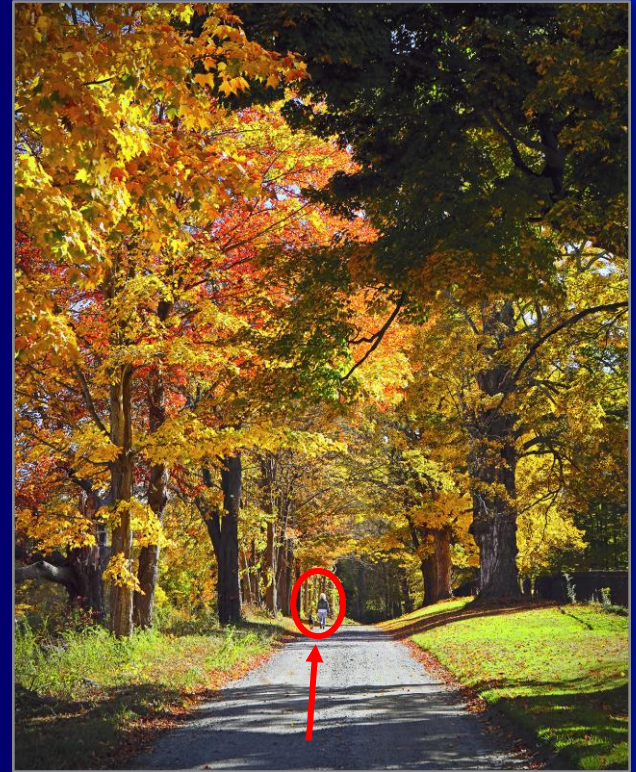
A Fall Walk

Sometimes the “Subject” Includes Surroundings

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A Summer Day



A Fall Walk

Compose to Tell a Story When Possible

Think of a caption for the scene you see. Does your photo convey that story?



Longing for Freedom



I'm still in charge!



Don't forget to wash behind the ears!

What “story” are people telling? Consider capturing people in action



Tip: Do all of the elements in the frame contribute to the story? If not, can anything be cropped out?

Does the story have emotional impact?

Look for subjects and settings that evoke an emotional reaction



Is there a story showing an emotional connection?

Look for and capture those moments



What stories do you see?

Capture what catches your eye!



Sometimes an animal next to the road catches your eye.

Warning: You may catch their eye too!



Taking a Snapshot vs. Composing a Photograph

Good composition transforms a simple snapshot into an impactful photograph by organizing the scene to make it visually engaging and clear.

It is arguably the most critical aspect that makes a photo succeed, directing the narrative experience for the viewer.



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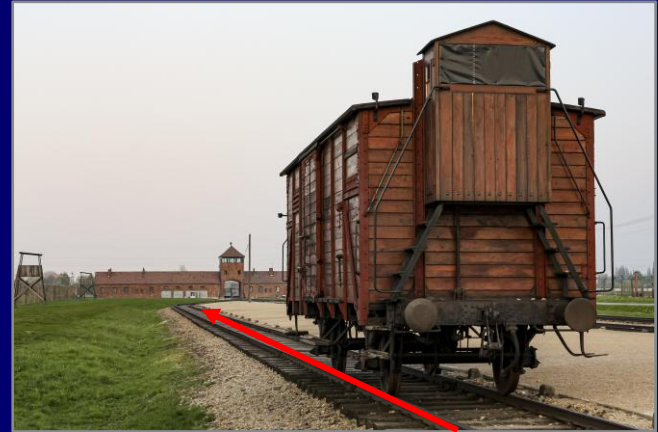
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Leading Lines – Draws the Viewer's Eye Into the Photo



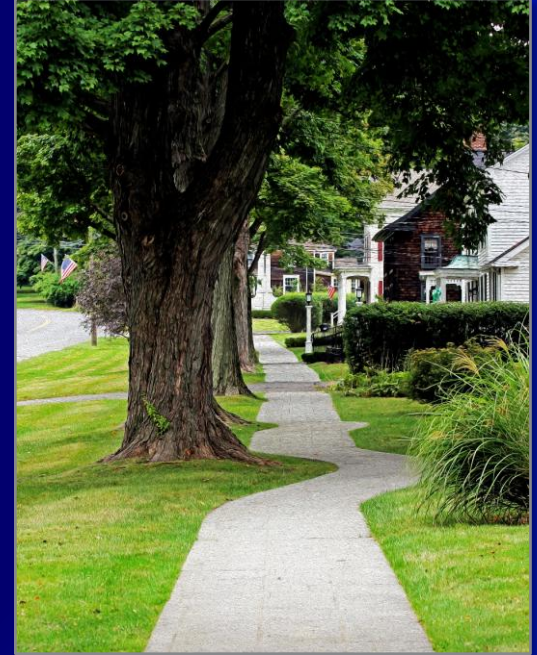
Look for Directional Elements

Leading Lines – Draws the Viewer's Eye Into the Photo



Look for Directional Elements

Leading Lines – Natural or Man-made



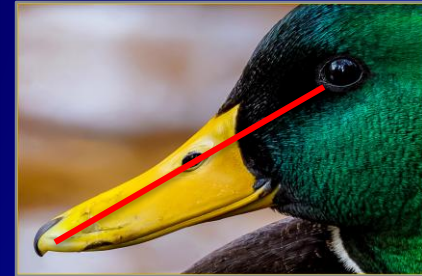
Straight Leading Lines



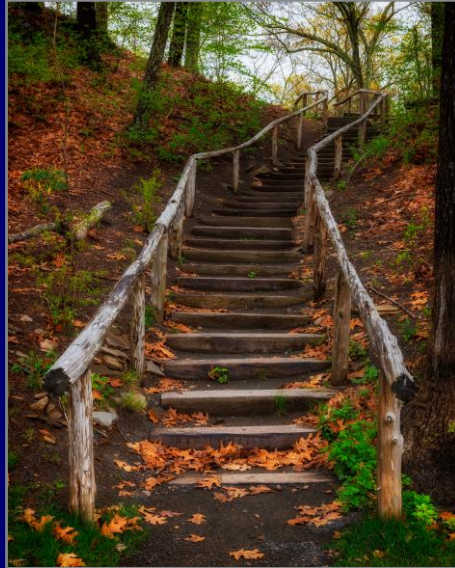
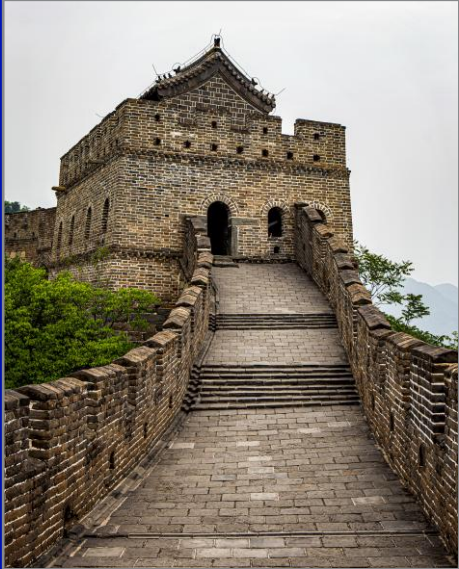
Diagonal Leading Lines



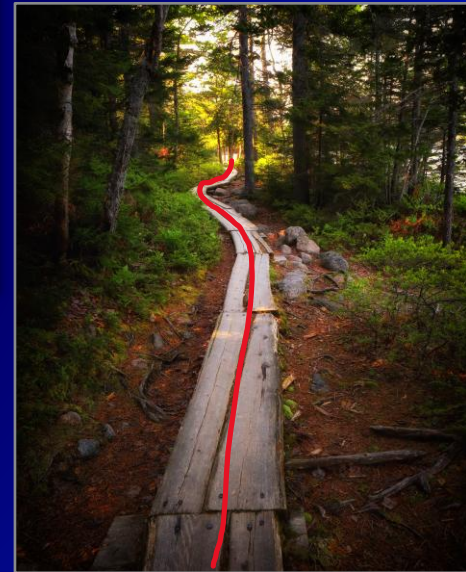
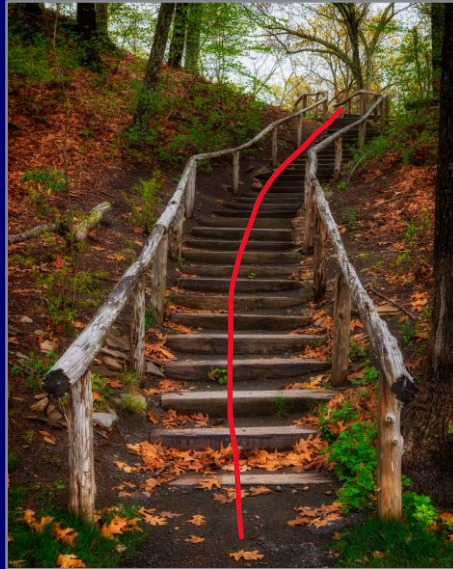
Diagonal Leading Lines



Curved Lines



Curved Lines



S-Curves Can Lead Into the Photo Too!



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S-Curves Can Also Lead to the Subject!

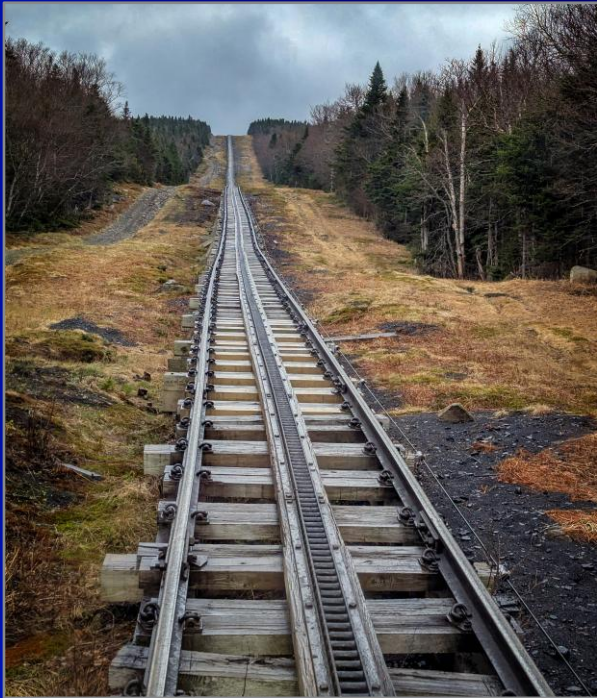


S-Curves Can Also Lead to the Subject!



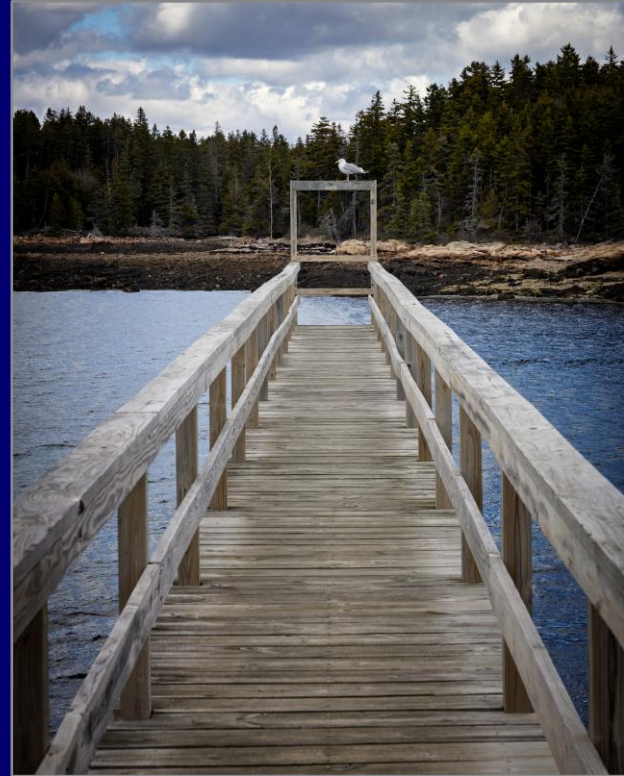
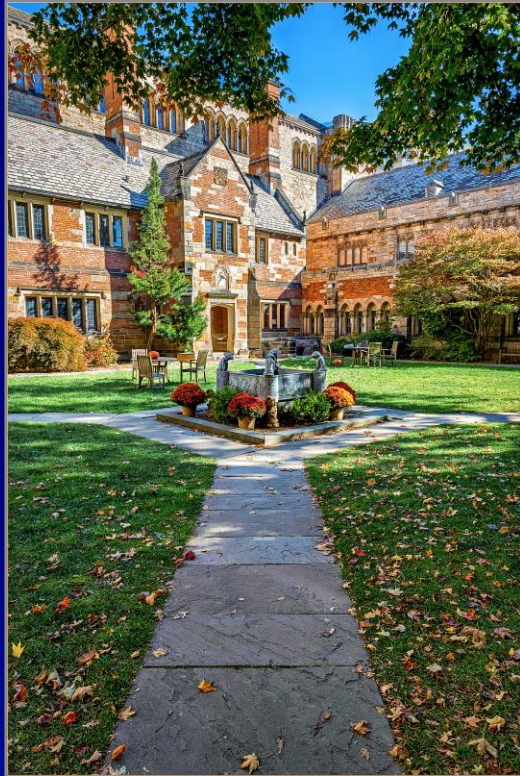
Leading Lines Work Best When They Lead To Something

Is there a subject the viewer's eye can "land" on?



Leading Lines Work Best When They Lead To Something

Stronger compositions include a place for the eye to land.



Leading Lines Work Best When They Lead To Something

Stronger compositions include a place for the eye to land.

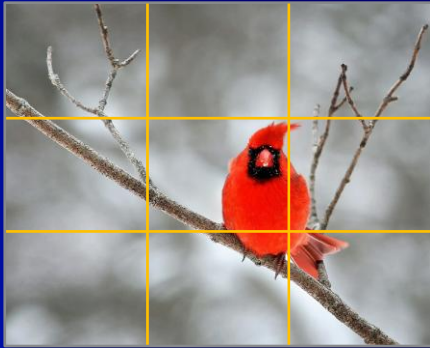


Rule of Thirds

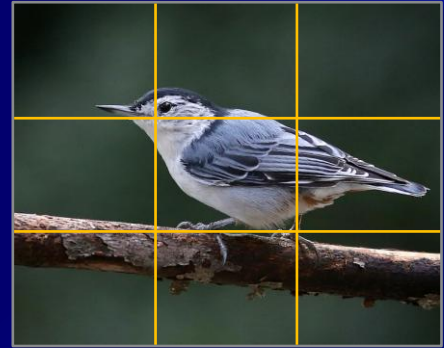
Divide the photo into 9 parts with an imaginary tic tac toe grid



Put points of interest on lines or intersections.



The eye is a point of interest.



Rule of Thirds – Helps the Subject Stand Out



Rule of Thirds – Makes Photos More Dynamic & Balanced

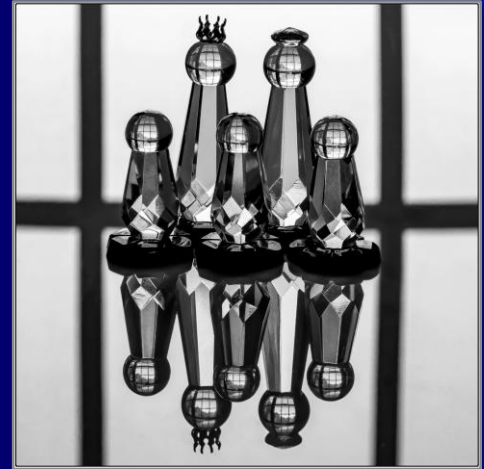


Centering Subjects Can Work Too!



Rule of Odds – 1, 3, or 5 Items/Subjects

An odd number can be perceived as more appealing and balanced



*Over 5 items usually
don't get counted!*

Rule of Odds



1 Mom + 3 Babies



1 Butterfly + 3 Flowers

Even numbers of subjects can work if interacting and close together



**If spaced too far apart or not interacting,
1 subject might be better than 2.**



**When too far apart,
crop one out!**

When Less is More



What is “too far” apart?



Is closer better?

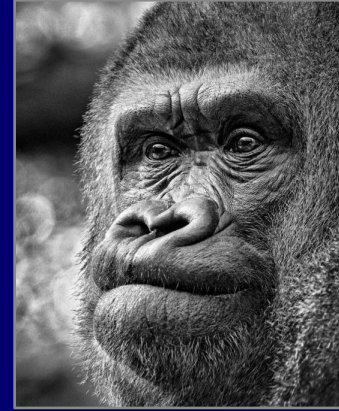


Just one
might be
best yet!



Fill the Frame

Subject occupies a large portion of the frame eliminating distracting backgrounds.



Breathing Room in Direction Subject's Heading

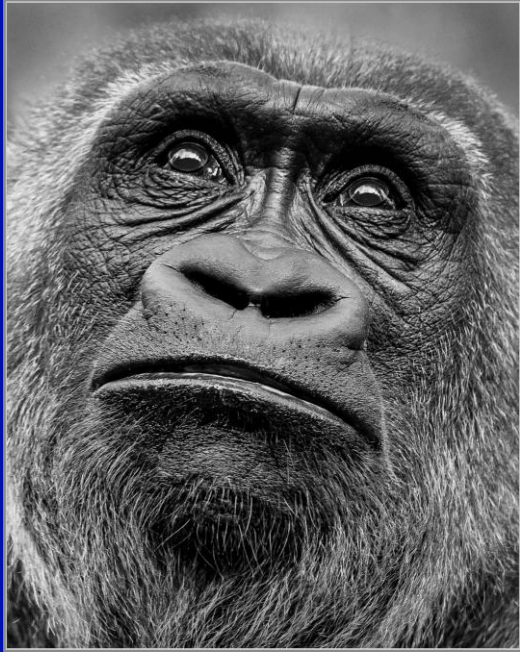


(Or equal space if
looking straight ahead.)

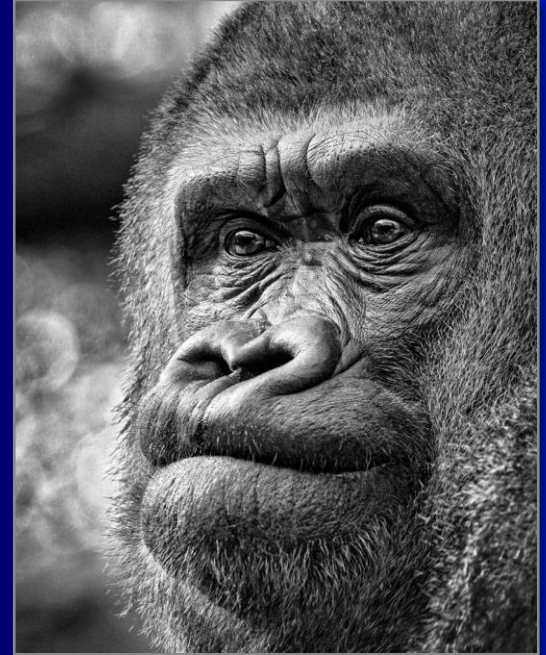
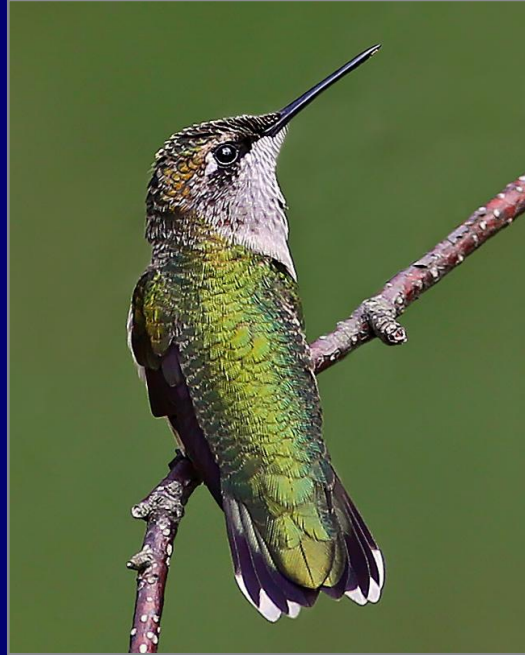


Fill the Frame vs. Breathing Room

If subject isn't photographed straight on, use both!



vs.



Negative Space – Empty Space

Draws attention to the subject by providing and defining the breathing room



“Negative Space” vs. “Fill the Frame” – You get to decide!

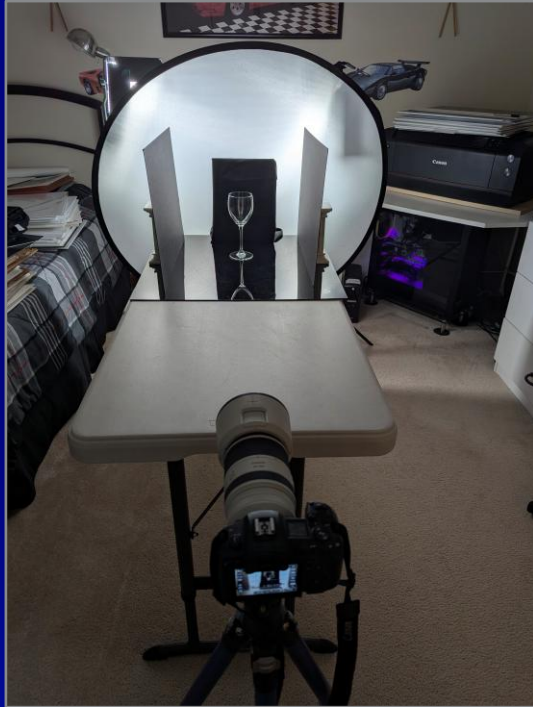
Minimalist Photography – Extreme Negative Space

Emphasizes simplicity and ample negative space.
Focuses on shape, color and form.



Minimalist Photography – Extreme Negative Space

Behind the scenes setup!



Golden Ratio – Golden Spiral

Definition: A compositional technique where the subject is placed within a frame using a specific ratio of approx. 1:1.618

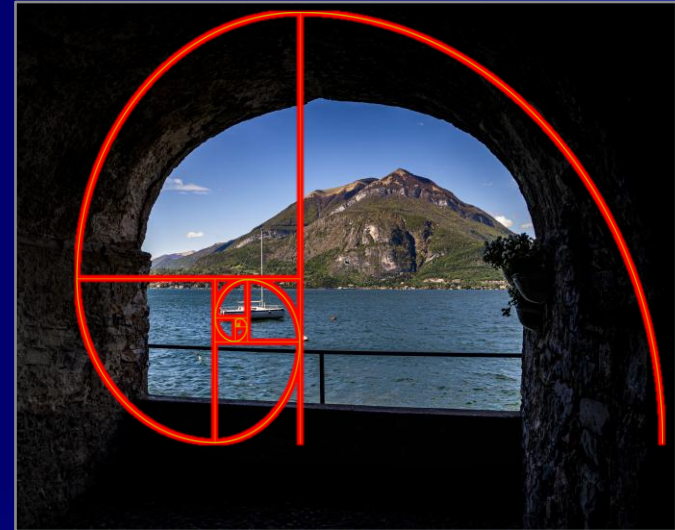


Follow natural curves to
create balance and
harmony



Golden Ratio – Golden Spiral

Put the subject in the center of the spiral and key elements along the curve



This creates a natural flow and guides the viewer's eye through the image.

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Direction of Subjects – Face Into the Frame



Direction of Camera - Shooting from above down on the subject can make a subject seem weaker and dominated

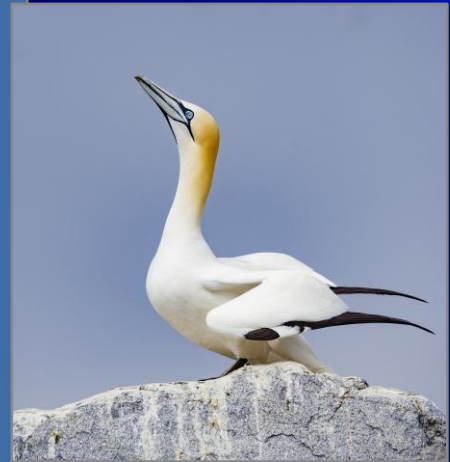
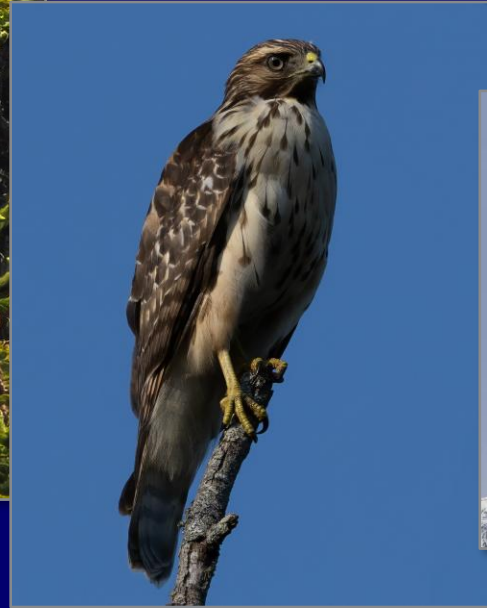


Why are you looking
down on me?



Better to look me in the eye!

In some cases, shooting from below can make a subject seem more powerful or in charge

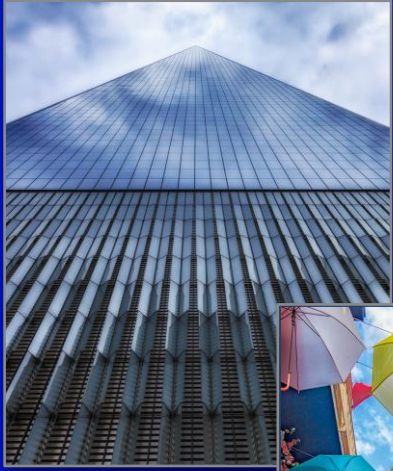


Viewpoint – Shooting Down, Level, or Up

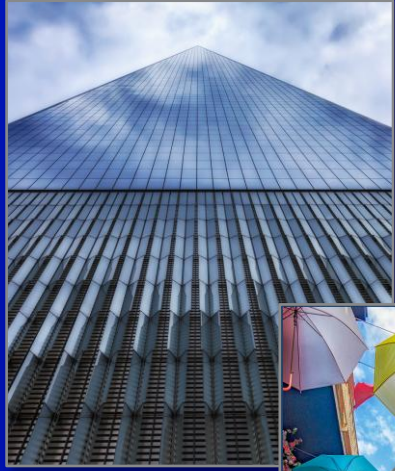
What story are you trying to tell?



Perspective – Looking Up



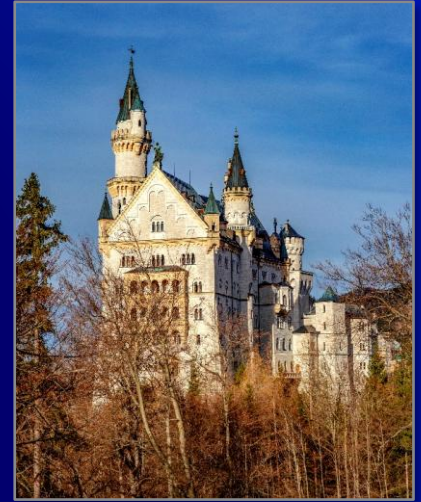
Perspective – Looking Up or Down



Different Angles Give Different Perspectives



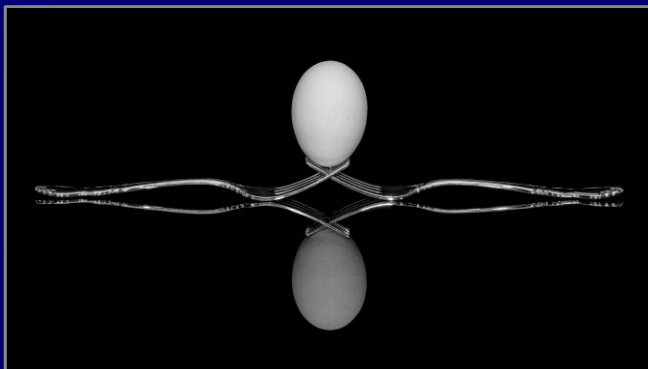
Capture Many Angles Work the Scene!



Tip: Take a variety of angles of the subject, especially if you can't take it again! Also consider creating a shot list of things you want to make sure you photograph.

Reflections – In Mirrors, Acrylic, Glass...

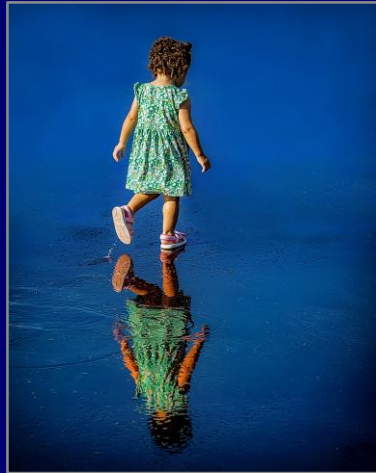
Reflections add interest and depth!



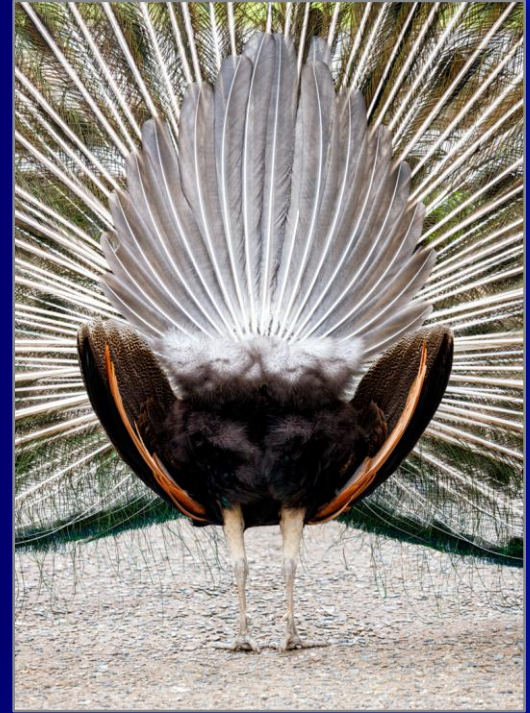
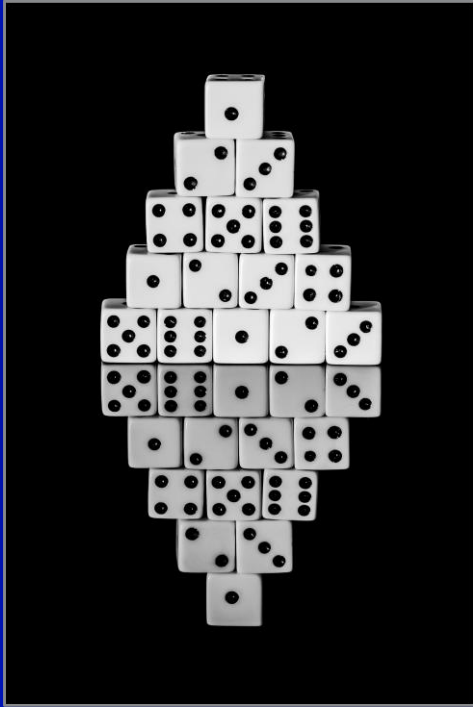
Reflections – In the Water at Night



Reflections – In Water in Daylight



Symmetry – Adds Order and Balance



Symmetry – Adds Order and Balance

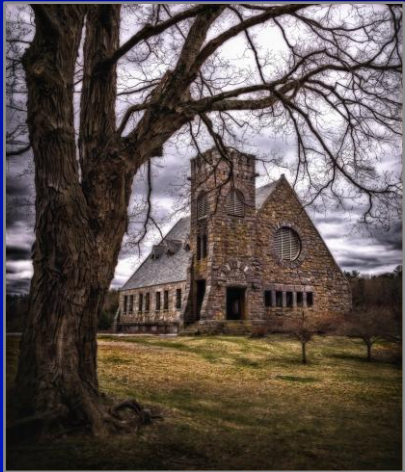


Tip: Remember to look behind you!

These two photos were taken in the same place looking opposite directions!

Framing Adds Depth

Use Elements to Draw Attention to Subjects



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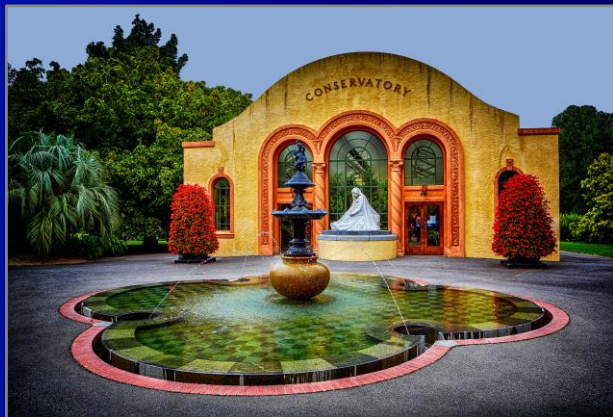
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Utilize Color for Attention, Interest and Emotion

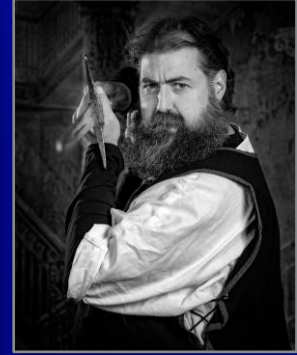
Red works well to guide the eye!



Use other colors too!

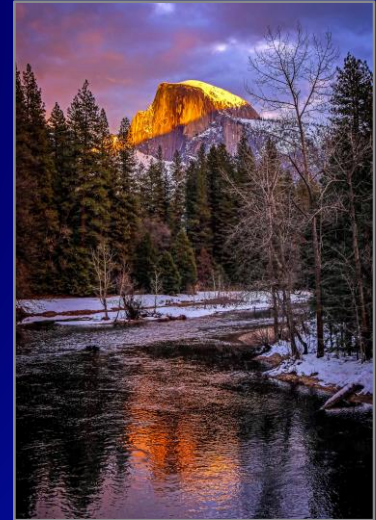
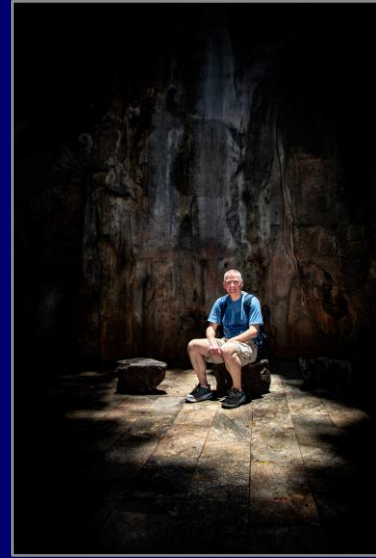


Brightness & Contrast – Eye goes to brightest spot



Lighting Your Composition

Light highlights the Subject!

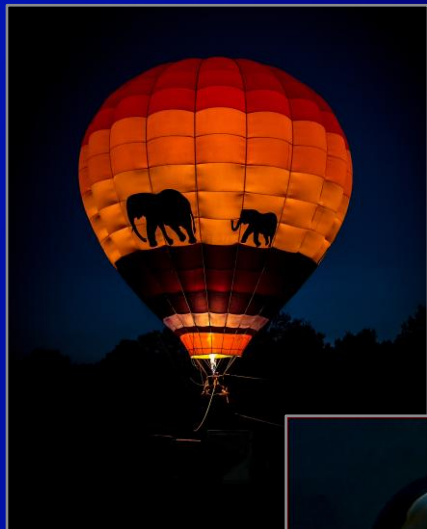


Tip: Look for good light and then find something to photograph!

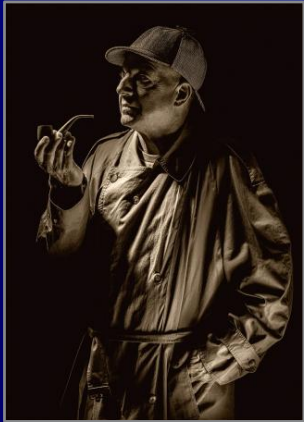
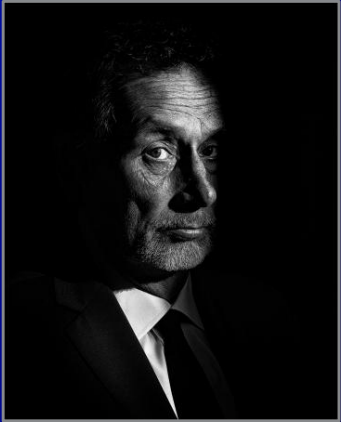
Look for Natural Light!



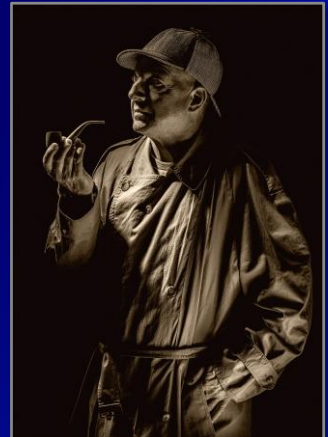
Lighting the Way from Within!



Creative Artificial Studio Lighting – Flagpole Programs



Creative Artificial Studio Lighting – Monochrome



Creative Artificial Studio Lighting – Color



Creative Artificial Studio Lighting – BILD Conference, NYC



Creative Artificial Studio Lighting – BILD Conference, NYC

Projected Background Image



Creative Artificial Outdoor Lighting Too!



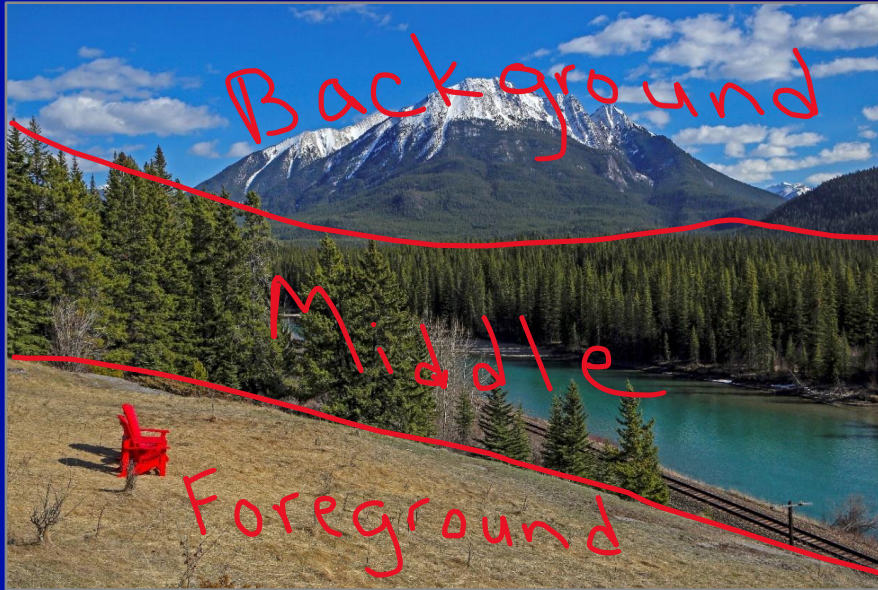
Create Silhouettes With Backlighting



Foreground, Middle Ground & Background



Foreground, Middle Ground & Background



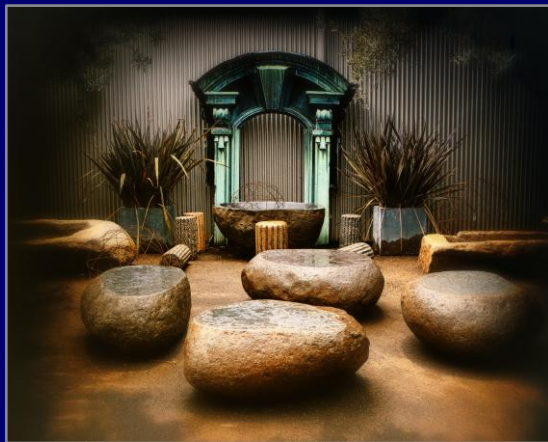
Foreground



Foreground



Middle Ground



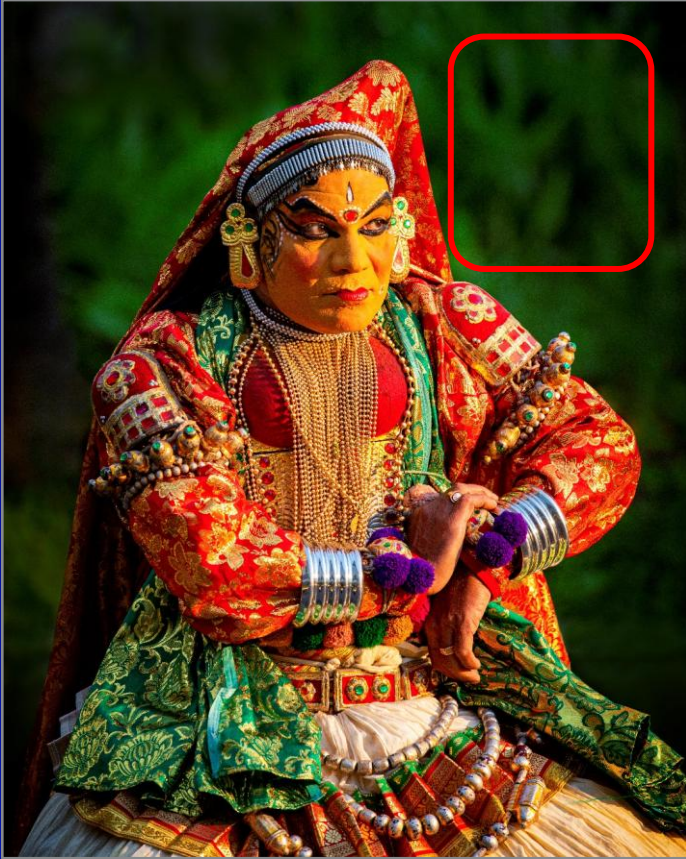
Middle Ground



Background



Background



Choose Background Color for Subject to Stand Out

In general, use dark backgrounds with light subjects and light backgrounds with dark subjects.



Utilize Dramatic Skies for Backgrounds



Dramatic Skies



Camera Depth of Field – (Depth of Focus)

The area in front of and behind a focal point that remains in focus

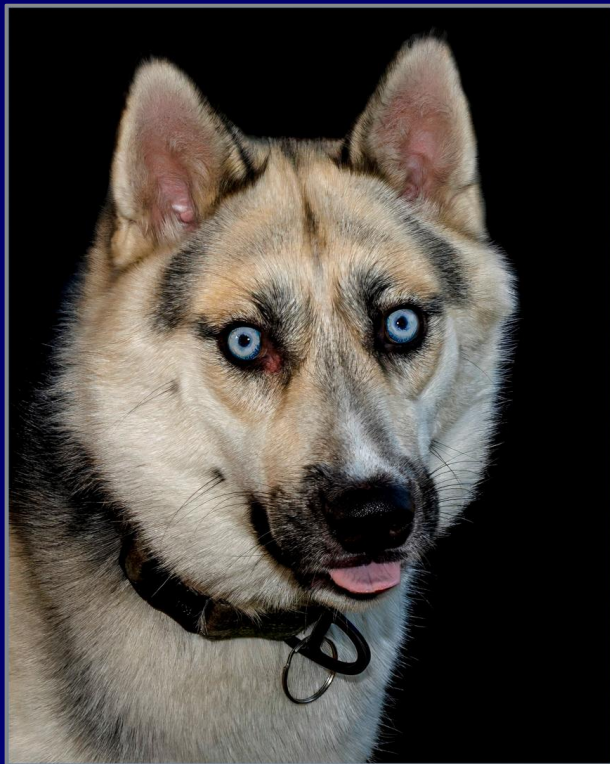
Shallow vs. deep depth of field: controls focus and creates a sense of depth.



Tip: A small aperture (lens opening) number, like f/4.0, puts less in focus. A large aperture number like f/22 puts more in focus.

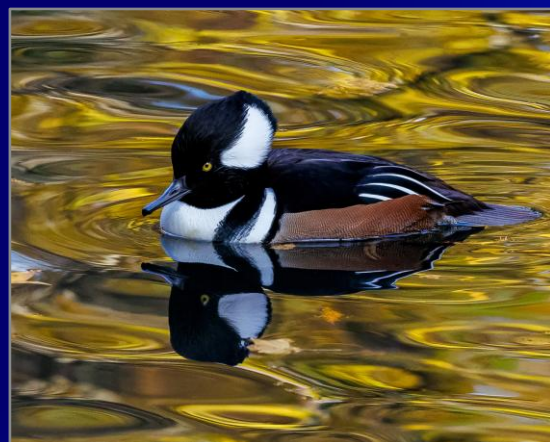
Focus Point – Your Main Subject Should Be In Focus

If your subject has eyes, focus there!



Aperture Helps Create Bokeh or Blurred Backgrounds

Distance to Background does too!

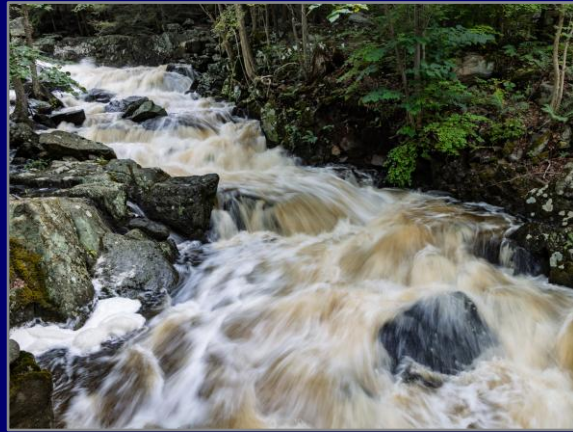


Changing the shutter speed can enhance the “storytelling” and “creativity” of the composition

Try composing a different look by changing the shutter speed!



1/20 sec



1/8 sec



0.3 sec

*Photos by Chane Cullens taken at Southford Falls State Park

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Avoid Mergers

Allow for some space between subjects when appropriate



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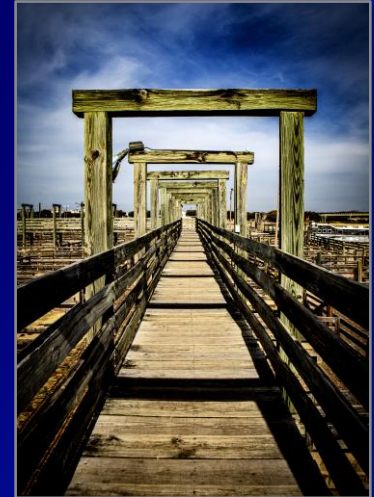
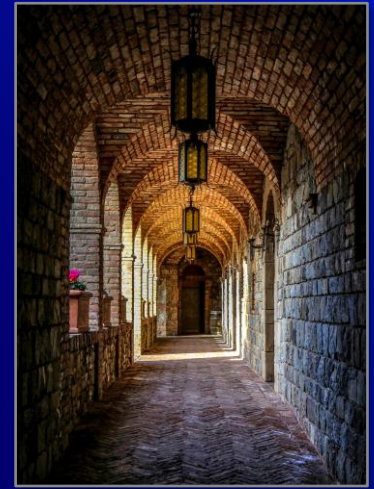
Avoid Mergers

Change your position for a cleaner background &/or foreground.



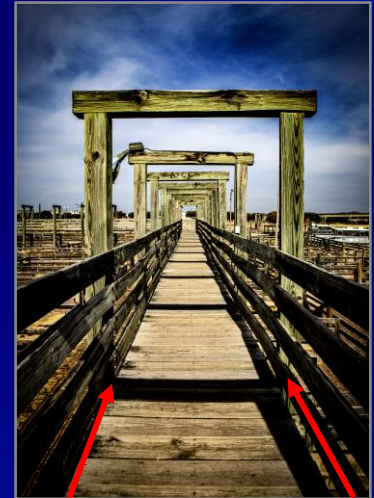
Corners – Start Lines “Near” Corners

Not “in” the Corners



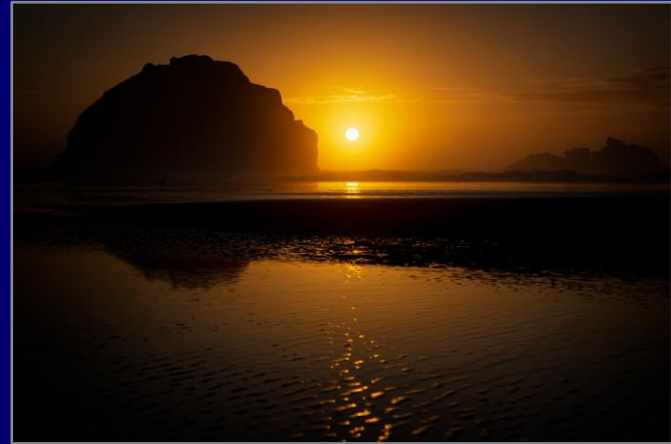
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Not “in” the Corners



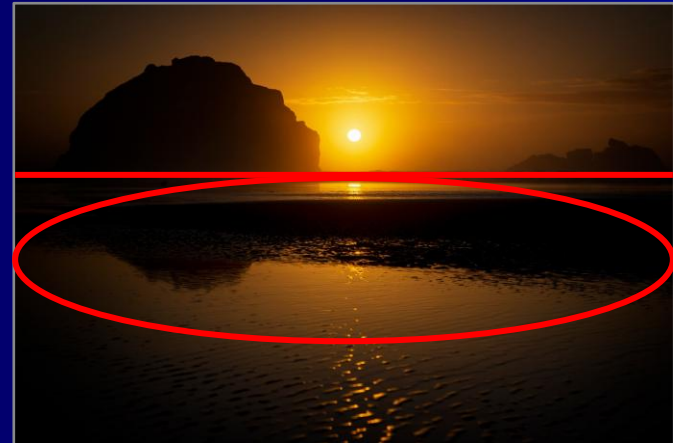
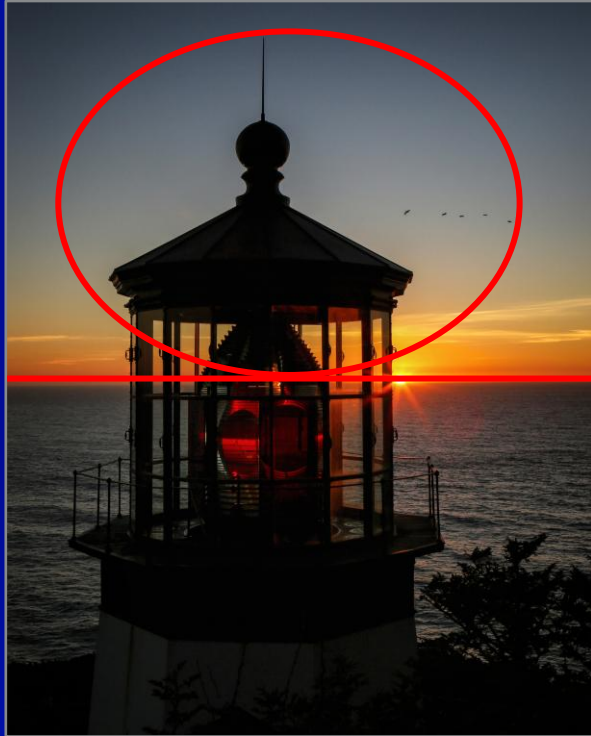
Horizons – Keep Them Level!

Low Horizon Emphasizes Sky; High Emphasizes Foreground



Horizons – Keep Them Level!

Low Horizon Emphasizes Sky; High Emphasizes Foreground



Don't "cut the subject off at the ankles"! (Or joints)

At least crop down far enough allowing for where feet should be.

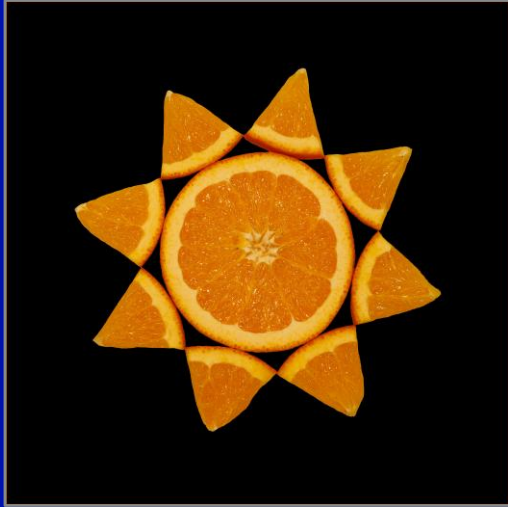


Better yet, show a foot or two!

Avoid “missing feet” when possible



Simplify – Minimize Distractions and Clutter



Composition Topics



Getting to the Subject:

- Center of Interest or Subject
- Compose to Tell a Story

Composition “Rules”:

- Leading Lines & S-Curves
- Rule of Thirds vs. Centering
- Rule of Odds
- Fill the Frame vs. Breathing Room & Negative Space
- Golden Ratio

Positioning:

- Direction & Perspective
- Reflections & Symmetry
- Framing

Setting the Scene:

- Colors, Contrast & Light
- Foreground, Middle Ground & Backgrounds
- Camera Depth of Field

Things to watch for:

- Mergers, Corners, Horizons, Ankles & other joints
- Simplify

Finishing Touches & Tips:

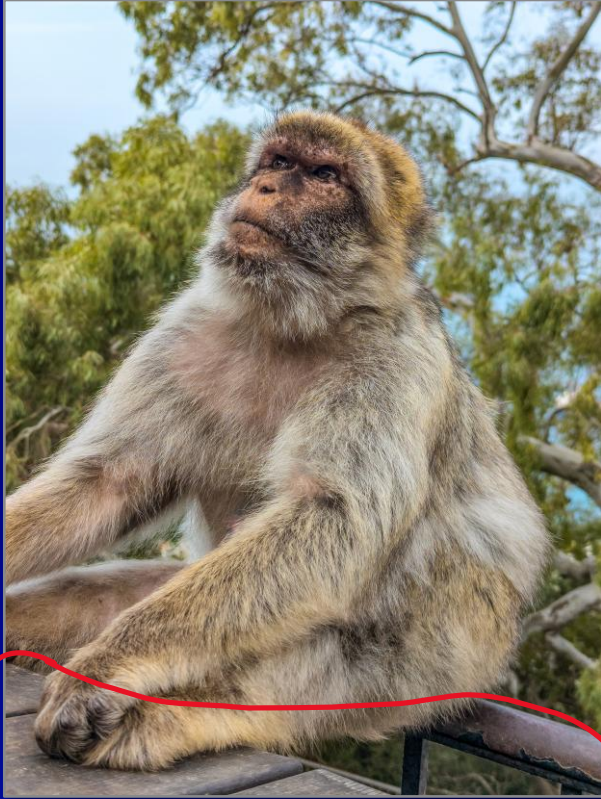
- Cropping & Vignettes
- Try Something Different!
- Have Fun with Post-Processing
- Words & Still Life Tips

Finish by cropping the photo, but not too tight!
The subject shouldn't look "Boxed in".



You left room when you took the photo - don't spoil it in post-processing!

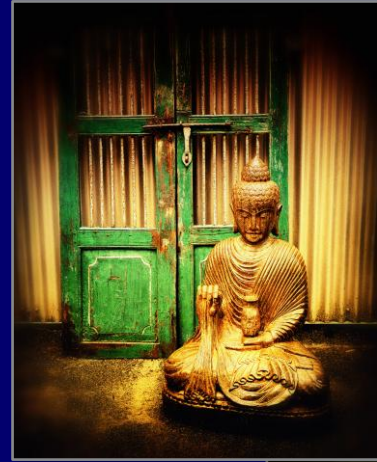
Crop out “Hand of Man” signs for “Natural Looking” or “Nature” photos!



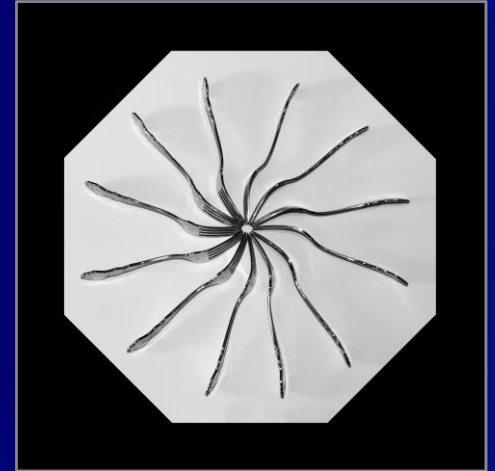
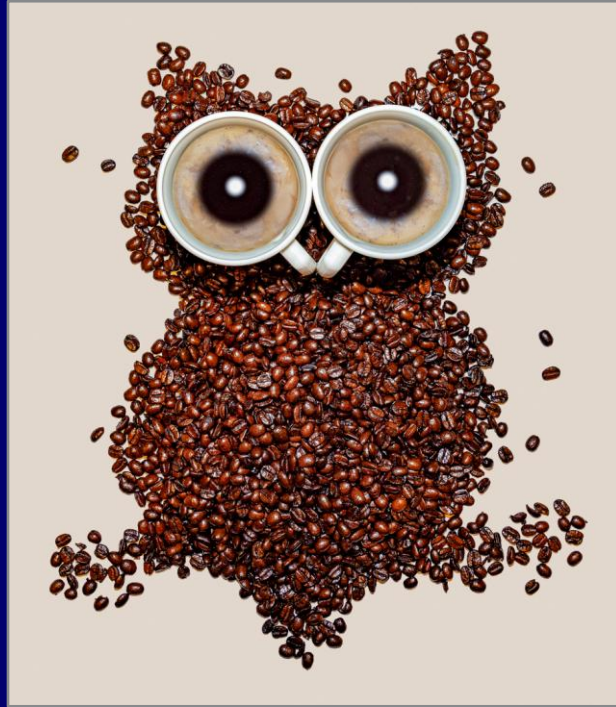
Add Vignettes to Keep Viewer in the Frame



Tip: Don't use heavy vignettes on "Nature" photos. Those should look natural.

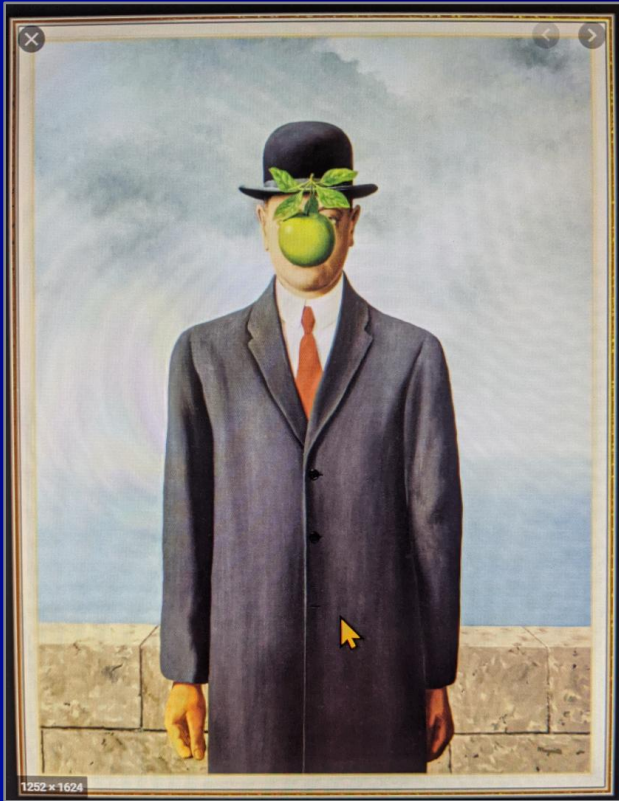


Try Something Different

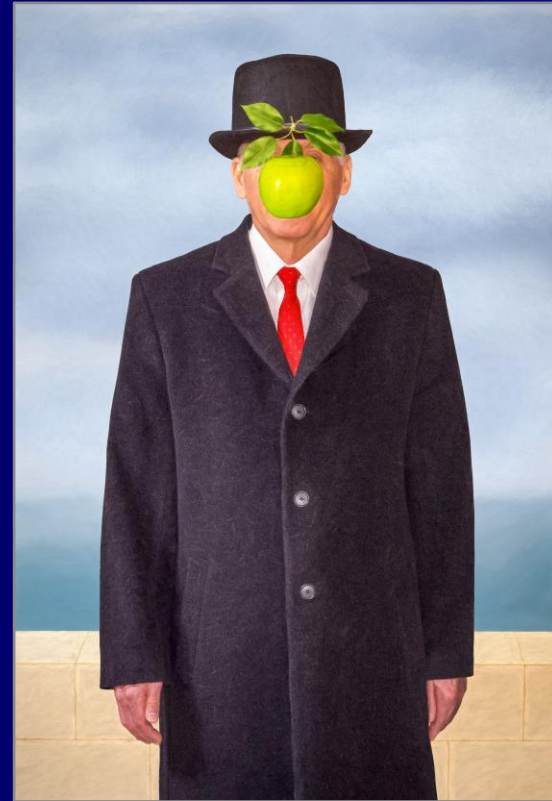


Try Recreating a Famous Painting or Artwork

Be inspired by artists; they use “composition rules” too!



“The Son of Man” painted by Rene Magritte



Recreated “The Son of Man” Painting

Try Recreating an Interesting Photo

Be inspired by other photos you've seen!



“Fire and Ice” by Erik Landegren



Recreated “Fire and Ice”

Have some artistic fun with post-processing!



A Different Look and Feel



Created the "Black Sheep" of the Family

Many photos can greatly benefit from at least some post-processing!

Don't be discouraged when first looking at your photos! Look for what they can turn into!



Original Out of Camera



After Post-processing

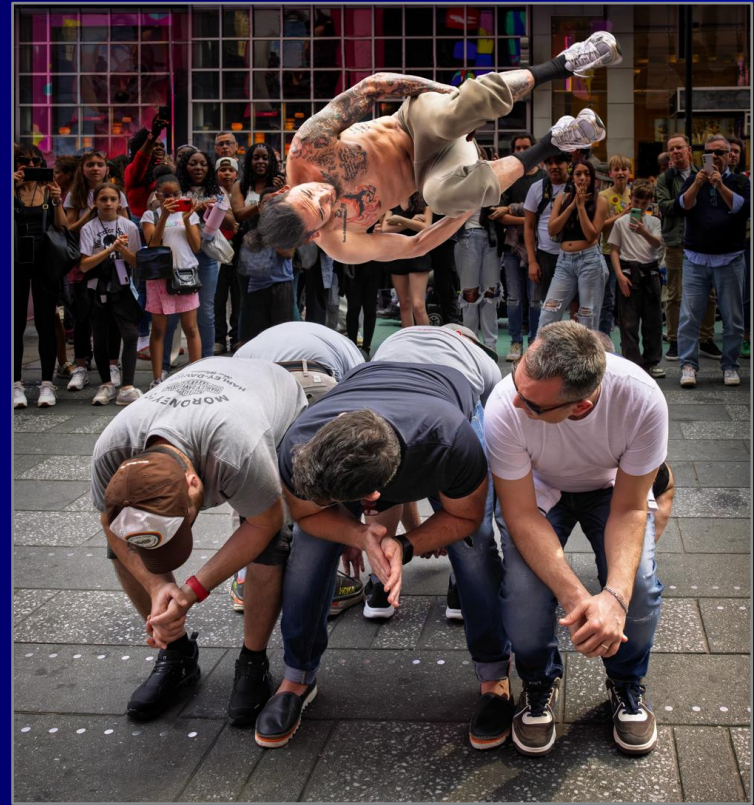
When to use words in the image?

Do they distract or help tell the story?



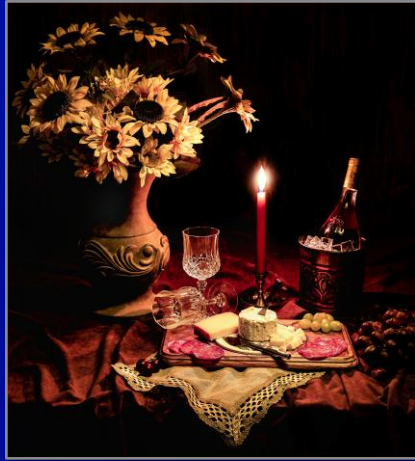
When to use words in the image?

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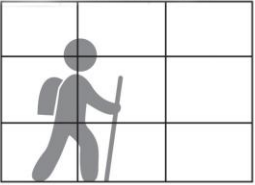


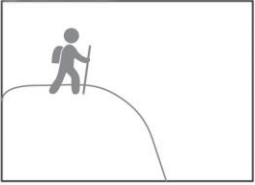
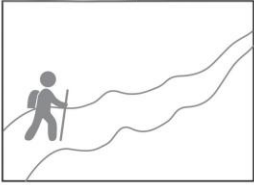




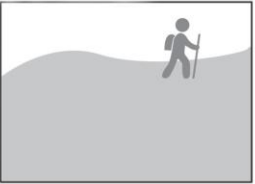



Still Life Tips – Vary Heights and Textures

Consider doing some light painting too!



Basic Composition Cheat Sheet

<p>Rule of Thirds</p> 	<p>Balance</p> 	<p>Framing</p> 
<p>Perspective</p> 	<p>Leading Lines</p> 	<p>Background</p> 
<p>Reflection/Symmetry</p> 	<p>Depth</p> 	<p>Cropping</p> 
<p>Horizon Line</p> 	<p>Negative Space</p> 	<p>STORYTELLING Find a good story Include small details Plan ahead with a shot list Let images breathe</p> <p>EXPERIMENT Try a different angle Get close Show the environment Try breaking the rules!</p>

Storytelling:

- Find a good story
- Include small details
- Plan ahead with a shot list
- Let images breathe

Experiment:

- Try a different angle
- Get Close
- Show the environment
- Try breaking the rules!

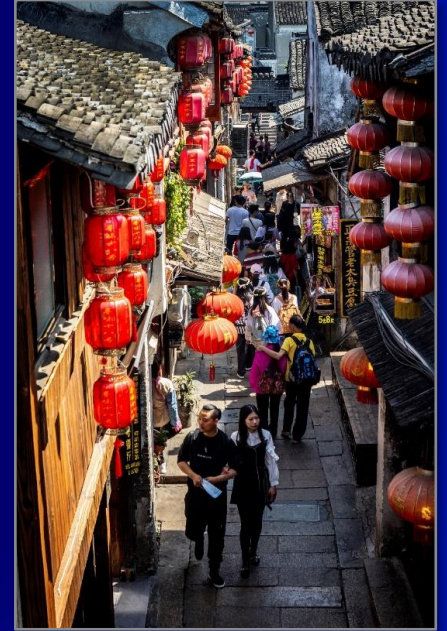
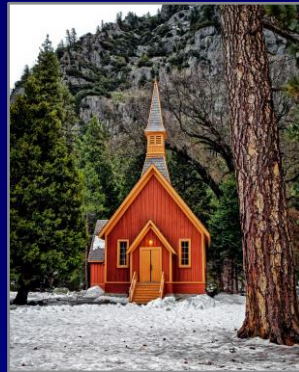
Adapted from:

[Mass Audubon](#)

[Composition Cheat Sheet](#)

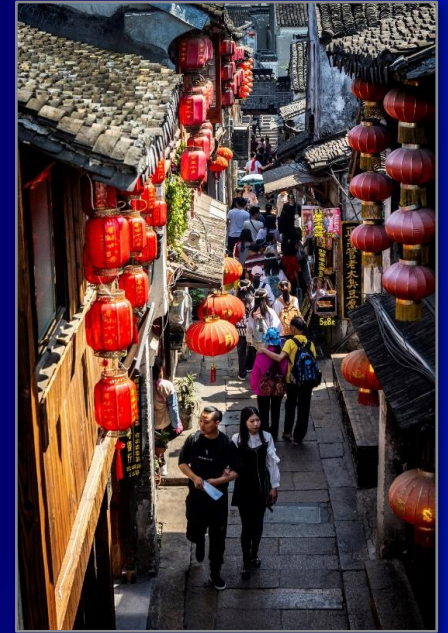
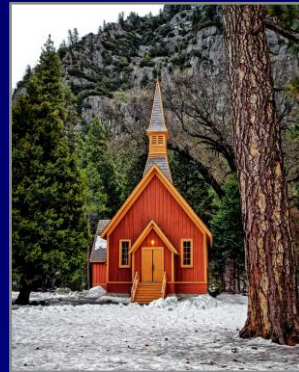
Remember “*Composition Rules*” are Guidelines!

Use them as a starting point then see which ones work for the scene. You can use more than one in your photos too! Which “rules” do you see below?



Remember “*Composition Rules*” are Guidelines!

Leading Lines, Rule of Thirds, Centering, Rule of Odds, Perspective, Symmetry, Framing, Colors, Contrast, Foreground, Middle Ground, Background, Vignettes...



Yale University Photography Tour

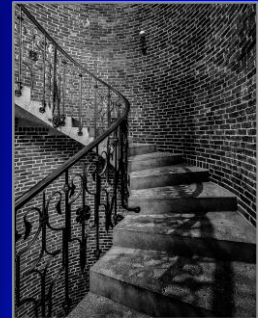
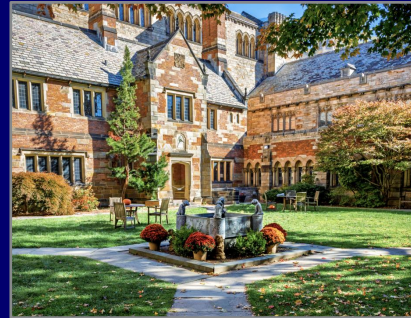
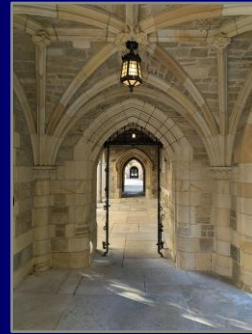
Capture the most iconic, photogenic, and historically significant locations on campus!

Organized by Connecticut Association of Photographers (CAP) – Membership Fee Only \$10

Lead by Chane & Rhonda Cullens

Sat., June 6 – CAP Member Tour Fee \$10

- 8:45 AM: Arrival and meetup at The Mead Visitor Center, 149 Elm Street, New Haven.
- 9:00 AM – 10:00 AM: Depart for a 1-hour official Yale campus tour with a guide.
- 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM: Embark on a morning photo walk to capture dynamic shadows and classic architecture.
- 12:00 PM: Join the group for lunch at Yorkside Pizza & Restaurant, 288 York Street, discuss what you want to see next! (Lunch costs not included.)
- Afternoon: Break into small groups based on specific photographic interests!
- Register by emailing Info@CCullens.com



When you're out photographing look for:

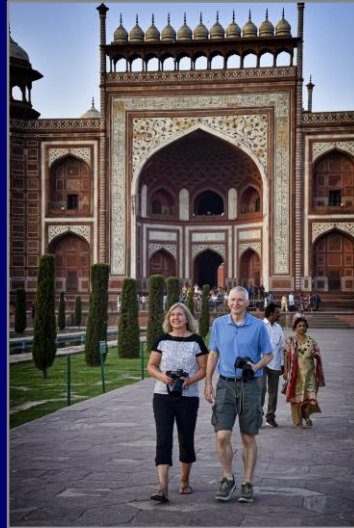
- Center of Interest
- Is there a Story?
- Leading lines
- Direction & Perspectives
- Framing
- Colors & Contrasts
- Backgrounds/Foregrounds
- Depth of Field
- Small Details
- Experiment and Have Fun!



Thank you!

Presented by:

Rhonda Cullens, *HonNEC, VP NECC*



Website: CCullens.com - Email: Info@CCullens.com

Slides at: CCullens.com/Composition-2026

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