

## CAPTURING COMPOSITION

Effective composition gives the eye a comfortable visual environment for exploration—free of pointless obstruction, dead ends and misleading directional cues. Painters *create* composition; photographers *capture* it. Unless a photographer is working in a controlled environment (such as a studio), he or she must work with subject matter as it presents itself. Some scenes readily offer strong compositional possibilities; others require an inventive viewpoint or camera angle to best capture their aesthetic potential. Either way, the trick is to *recognize* good composition when you see it through the viewfinder or on your camera's LCD. A photographer who is able to consistently recognize and capture instances of good composition is known as having "a good eye." Some people are born with a good eye (and sometimes *two*); others can develop their eye(s) through study, practice, learning from others, and by taking note of how great artists and photographers compose their images. If you feel that you are currently lacking in this type of artistic sensibility, don't be discouraged: Apply what you know and strive to expand your awareness of effective composition with every picture you take.



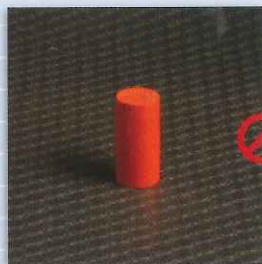
**Visual delivery.**

Think of an image's **content** as its cargo and **composition** as its means of delivery.

If you are new to the ways of composition, start by considering the basic axioms of eye-pleasing aesthetics presented on this spread and the next. Don't let the simplicity of these guidelines fool you: Evidence of their use is apparent in the work of great painters, designers, cinematographers and photographers of all levels of skill and experience.

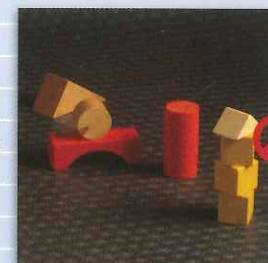
**Incorporate as much compositional knowledge and instinct you currently possess into every photo you take. Creativity and artistic sense grow with use!**

**1. Unequal spaces.** Unless a static presentation is desired, vary the amount of space between your main subject and the image's edges. This gives the viewer's eye something extra to consider and play with while looking at the image. The distances between the main subject and other elements of the composition should also be varied if dynamic conveyances are desired.

**2. Avoid bad tangents.**

A bad tangent occurs when the edges of two elements in a scene barely touch one another. In this set of examples, lowering the camera angle eliminates the bad tangent and simultaneously gives the cylinder strong dominance within the scene. (see Visual hierarchy, page 94). Get in the habit of scanning your viewfinder or LCD in search of bad tangents whenever you are considering a shot.

**3. Unify.** Avoid vantage points that portray a scene's elements as a scattered bunch of objects. Not all elements in an image need to be grouped together, but search for a point of view that gives the overall composition a feeling of unity. In these samples, the physical arrangement of objects is the same; only the camera angle is different.



**Symmetry (see page 86).**

Seek or create symmetrical compositions to convey notes of strength and order. (Note how the axiom of unequal spaces has been ignored here in favor of an intentionally static presentation.)

**Asymmetry (see page 88).**

Casual and chaotic themes can be delivered through loosely structured arrangements. Be mindful of bad tangents, good groupings and varied spacing within any compositional arrangement.

**Framing (see page 90).**  
Try using certain elements to form a visual "frame" around another element. Framing, whether it is obvious (as in this sample) or subtle, helps direct and contain the viewer's attention.



**Lines and curves (see page 102).** Be on the lookout for pleasing associations between linear and curved elements within a scene. Photos of these details could be representational or abstract.

**Repetition (see page**

**114).** Consider including instances of repetition in your images to attract attention and convey harmony. Repetition can be used to create interesting patterns and visual textures.



Effective composition streamlines the delivery of any photograph's visual and thematic message. Whenever possible, apply your ever-evolving compositional skills and instincts to the photos you take—whether you are capturing a portrait, working in a studio, photographing a landscape or taking pictures at a friend's birthday party.

One of the most powerful and ever-present compositional elements a photographer encounters is the horizon line. When it comes to deciding where to place the horizon in a photo, remember this: *Avoid the middle ground.*

Get in the habit of positioning the horizon line either well above—or well below—the vertical center of your images.

Two compositional eye-irritants exist here: a dead-center horizon line and a bad tangent (DEFINED ON PAGE 77) between the cans' lids and the horizon. Raising the camera a few feet solved both of these issues (opposite, top).



A high horizon compresses the sea and sky into the upper portion of this image.

The garbage cans now have clear dominance over this deserted beach scene.

*Note also how the shadows lend compositional help by leading the viewer's eye toward the main subjects.*

A vantage point that gives strong prominence to the threatening sky was chosen for this shot since it seems to explain the lack of surfers and volleyball players in the scene. *I enjoy taking pictures when the weather is not conducive to the "normal" state of things in a particular place—the resulting photo opportunities are bound to be unique.*



As mentioned in the Composition Primer (PAGES 76-79), varying the amount of space between a photograph's main subject and the edges of the image gives the viewer's sense of aesthetics extra fodder for consideration and enjoyment.

Still, don't fret if you snap an otherwise good photo where the main subject is stuck lifelessly in the center of the composition. After all, that's just the sort of thing image-alteration software is designed to help you take care of.

*Good composition should start with the viewfinder or LCD, but it doesn't end there: Always consider your cropping options after you've downloaded your images into the computer.*

Save multiple versions of a photo if you see more than one cropping solution you like as you explore alternatives. SEE **CROP AND AGGRESSIVE CROPPING**, PAGES 34-37.

Dead center is not the most visually interesting spot for the bird to perch within this image. Another problem with the composition is that the bird seems "lost" within the overall image; if it is to be the star of the photograph, then it should dominate more clearly.

Though still a simple composition, this cropping delivers dynamic visual conveyances through the varied spacing between the subject and the edges of the image. The tighter cropping also gives the bird clear hierarchy over the scene's territory. SEE **VISUAL HIERARCHY**, PAGE 94.

Consider quirky solutions as well. Sometimes an unorthodox cropping can add notes of humor or intrigue to an image's presentation. Here, the photo has been tightly cropped, horizontally flipped and angled slightly to make it look as though the bird is peeking inquisitively into the frame.

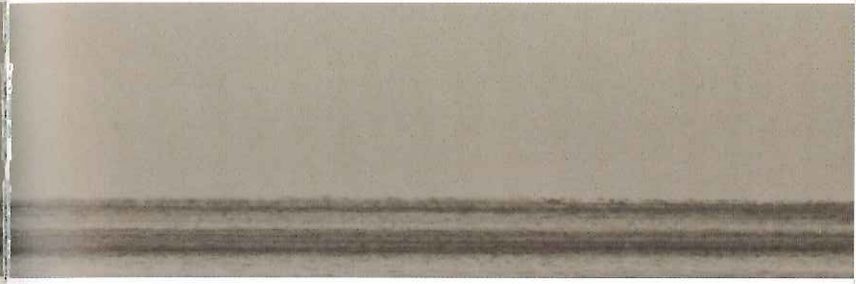




A photo's cropping is part of its composition, and it's all too easy to get stuck in a rut when it comes to image proportions.



*Why not try something new every once in a while and experiment with extreme horizontal or vertical croppings?*



Symmetry, like a basic shape, is easy on the brain: It is a fundamental visual arrangement that does not challenge the viewer's comprehension.

Whether it is naturally occurring or contrived, symmetry lends a sense of compositional well-being to an image. Sometimes this conveyed sense of security is desirable—sometimes not. SEE ASYMMETRY, PAGE 88.

*In real life, people tend to be intrigued by objects that are found in an unexpectedly symmetrical form or arrangement. Photographs taken of these unusual instances attract notice.*

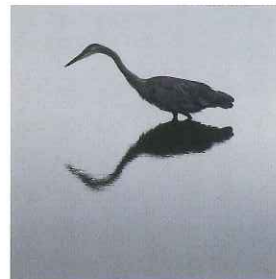
Symmetry need not be mathematically perfect to be eye-catching—the tree on the opposite page is a good example of attractive, free-flowing symmetry.

The symmetrical forms of a wading blue heron and its reflection combine to create an elegant impression. ▶ ◻

An asymmetrical image of symmetrically arranged objects. ◻ ▶

Organic symmetry—perfect in its imperfection. ▶

*I'd been having lunch near this tree for some time before I finally noticed its appealing and nearly symmetrical form. It's all too easy to look at something without seeing its aesthetic qualities. As a result, many outstanding photographic opportunities are missed. With practice, we can all hope to become better observers, and image-takers, of the world around us.*



Symmetry comforts; *asymmetry challenges*.

Symmetry is yin; *asymmetry is yang*.

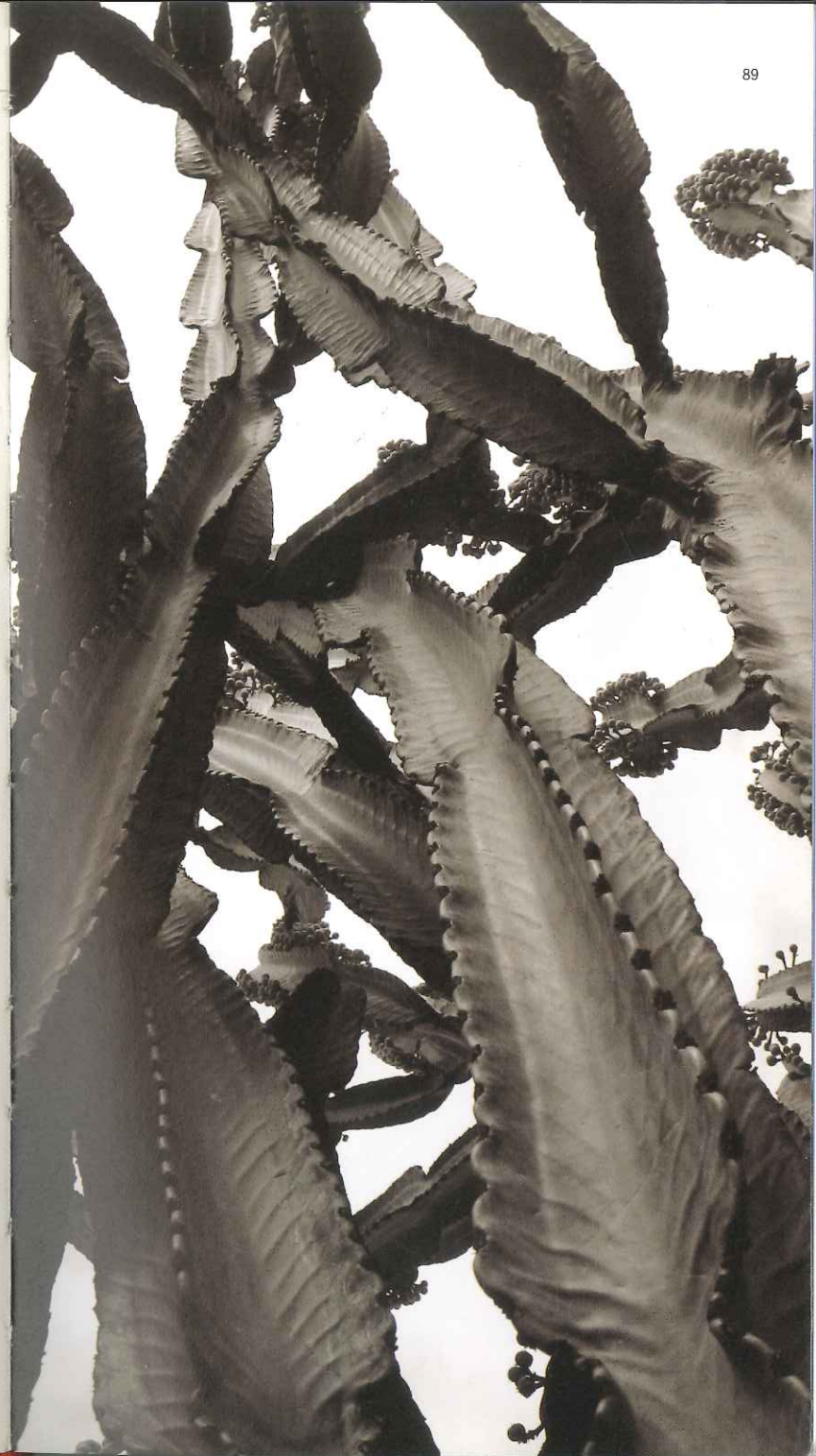
Symmetry is an easy environment for the eye to navigate. *Asymmetry is a visual wilderness—sometimes friendly, sometimes threatening.*

There is vast aesthetic and thematic potential in non-symmetrical forms and compositions—from casual to chaotic.

Perfect symmetry is clearly definable. Deciding when asymmetry is “perfect” is a judgment call. A photographer can develop their artistic instinct for effective asymmetrical balance and flow in the same way that a painter or sculptor does it: through observation, study and practice. Ask experienced artists and photographers for their opinions of your most compositionally challenging images.

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*The gnarled form of this giant cactus caught my attention outside a western-themed restaurant. I had to stick the camera (and my head) well inside the plant's girth to get an angle that excluded the less-than-photogenic facade of the restaurant.*





Develop an eye for framing.

In this case, *framing* refers to the technique of surrounding your main subject (partly or in full) with other compositional elements.

*Framing helps direct the viewer's eye to an image's center of interest. It also helps keep the eye from wandering outside an image's border.*

Framing can be obvious or subtle. Some of the best examples of framing are those that are scarcely noticed.

Be careful not to allow an image's framing elements to overwhelm its main subject. (An obvious exception is when framing elements themselves are *meant* to be the main subject.)

Framing elements should have contextual, conceptual or aesthetic relevance to the main subject. Use complementary connections to build on a theme; contrasting associations to impart overtones of tension, intrigue or humor.

Look for examples of effective framing in the photos, paintings, cinematography and design. Learn from these examples and expand upon their lessons in your own photographic compositions.

An abandoned manufacturing plant framed by a disheveled security fence. Here, the main subject and its framing elements seem to thematically concur with the gloomy sky above.

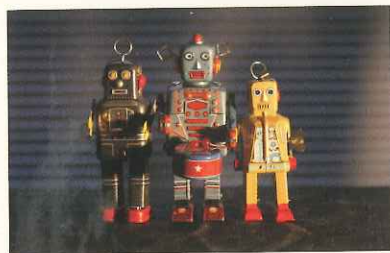
A window-casing and a chair in the foreground frame the cat's head and direct attention to its gaze (which, in turn, is directed at a group of birds outside).

Dual duty: The palm fronds in this image not only act as framing elements around the building, they also lend a sense of context by giving clues to the subject's location and environment.



When you first looked at this image, did you notice how the break in the clouds helps frame the sign in the foreground? Framing need not be overt to be effective.





Three robots, each attracting about the same amount of visual attention. At right, arrangements and lighting effects that emphasize one 'bot over the others.

Apply levels of distinction to the elements in your photos in the same way that a stage director would assign parts in a play: Grant star status to one or two; place others in supporting roles, and cast the rest as extras. *More often than not, when a composition fails, it is because its elements are fighting each other for the viewer's attention.*

Whether you are taking a picture in a studio or out in the real world, explore variations of the scene's composition; how light is used; point of view options; and where the camera is focused to strengthen the sense of visual hierarchy in the shot.

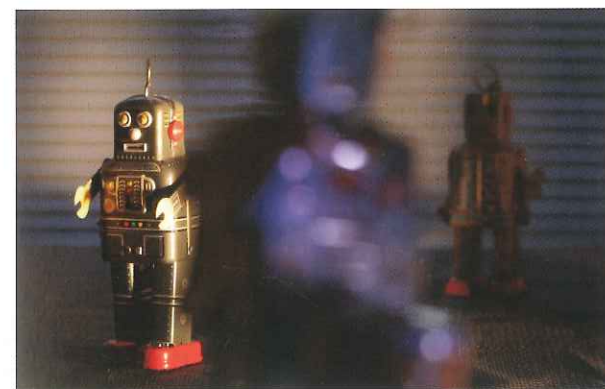
In this arrangement, the "starring" robot stands near the lens in sharp focus while its co-stars hang back in the blurred distance. Taking advantage of an SLR lens's capability to alter its depth of field made this effect possible. SEE **DEPTH OF FIELD**, PAGE 306.

A spotlight is aimed at the smallest of the three robots to grant it visual dominance over its larger associates.

An offbeat solution: Here, the brightly illuminated yellow robot is framed by the dimly-lit legs of its foreground companion.

Center of attention need not be center-stage. Here, lighting and the camera's focus are used to direct the viewer's eyes to the robot at the left of the scene.

Explore variables such as these as you search for ways of establishing visual hierarchy in your images.



Visual dominance is relative.

Sometimes less is best when it comes to an image's presentation.

Images such as this have potential as backdrops for layouts or as layers within digital compositions.



## SECTION 1: YOU: CAPTURING COMPOSITION



According to conventional design wisdom, it is improper to place a large obstruction smack-dab in the middle of a composition. Still, contemporary images often break rules such as this in favor of presenting a scene or situation in an intriguing manner. Here, a large column seems to accentuate the separation and isolation of the business travelers on either side of the image.

Most of us have been acquainted with simple geometric shapes since an early age. Geometric shapes, like instances of symmetry (PAGE 86), are easy for most viewers to wrap their head around and can lend a sense of familiarity and simplicity to a composition.

Geometric shapes are like self-contained designs within the larger composition of a photograph. Simple shapes infuse a photo with notes of order and sense.

Remember to explore different vantage points when considering a subject: Sometimes a particular point of view can transform the irregular contour of an object into a geometric shape (a cup of coffee, for example, when seen from above, can become a circle with a dark middle).

*Be on the lookout for interesting and unexpected instances of simple shapes in the real world. If they are intriguing to you, then there's a good chance that others will be attracted to the photos you take of them.*

A section of concrete pipe and a collection of bicycle wheels hung decoratively on a fence: simple geometric shapes in unexpected places and arrangements. Scenes such as these are ready-made compositions—just waiting to be photographed. SEE ALSO, **REPETITION**, PAGE 114, AND **LINES AND CURVES**, PAGE 102.



A curve is nothing more than a line that has been bent, right? Therefore, a curve is both related to, and different from, a line.

*Why does this matter to photographers who want to improve the compositional integrity of their images? It matters because it means that when you record a photograph that is basically a collection of lines and curves, you are automatically infusing the image with two major pillars of art theory: harmony and contrast.*

And all of this is really just a roundabout way of saying that since people are naturally drawn to artistic beauty, amiable combinations of lines and curves can be very hard to resist—whether these forms compose a logo, a work of art, an automobile or a photographic image.

*Try this: Choose an object in your immediate vicinity—the more mundane, the better. Use your viewfinder to search for points of view that turn portions of your chosen subject into compositions of lines, curves and shapes. The photographs you take could include the whole subject or close-up details—the images could be of identifiable subject matter or abstract. This is a good self-teaching exercise that you can do almost anytime, anywhere, with your digital camera. Over time, you might be able to collect an entire series of images such as this—a series that might make an interesting ensemble when shown together...*

Graceful associations between straight and curved lines make these images something more than mere photographic records of a theater marque and a boat's prow.

