Digital Photography – Level 4

Image Composition

The basics of Photography

We are now going into image composition. What is that? It is how the image looks in the final picture. This is important because you would like every image to be perfect and displayed the way you think in your mind it should. Well to be honest, most pictures taken will end up not being what you thought it was going to turn out as when you took the picture. So here are some basic rules to follow to help you take pictures that you will cherish.

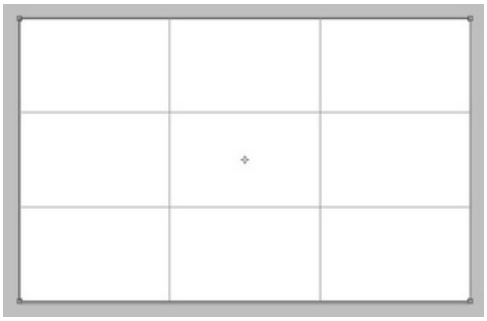
Rule of Thirds

Perhaps the most well know principle of photographic composition is the '**Rule of Thirds**'.

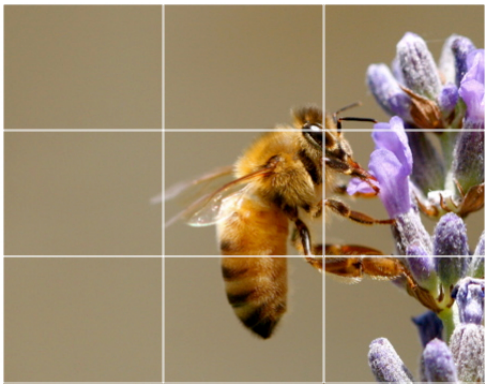
The "Rule of Thirds" one of the first things that budding digital photographers learn about in classes on photography and rightly so as it is the basis for well balanced and interesting shots.

I will say right up front however that rules are meant to be broken and ignoring this one doesn't mean your images are necessarily unbalanced or uninteresting. However a wise person once told me that if you intend to break a rule you should always learn it first to make sure your breaking of it is all the more effective!

The rule of thirds is the simplest rule of composition. All you do is take your frame and overlay a grid of nine equal sections. This means you split the vertical space into three parts and the horizontal space into three parts. Here's what that looks like:

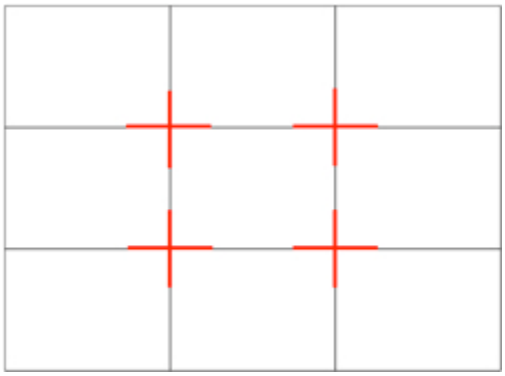


Generally you want to place important elements where the grid intersects. Here is an example:



What is the Rule of Thirds?

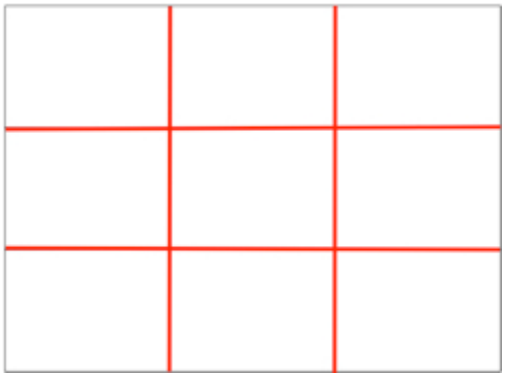
The basic principle behind the rule of thirds is to imagine breaking an image down into thirds (both horizontally and vertically) so that you have 9 parts. As follows.



As you're taking an image you would have done this in your mind through your viewfinder or in the LCD display that you use to frame your shot.

With this grid in mind the 'rule of thirds' now identifies four important parts of the image that you should consider placing points of interest in as you frame your image.

Not only this – but it also gives you four 'lines' that are also useful positions for elements in your photo.



The theory is that if you place points of interest in the intersections or along the lines that your photo becomes more balanced and will enable a viewer of the image to interact with it more naturally. Studies have shown that when viewing images that people's eyes usually go to one of the intersection points most naturally rather than the center of the shot – using the rule of thirds works with this natural way of viewing an image rather than working against it.

Perspective

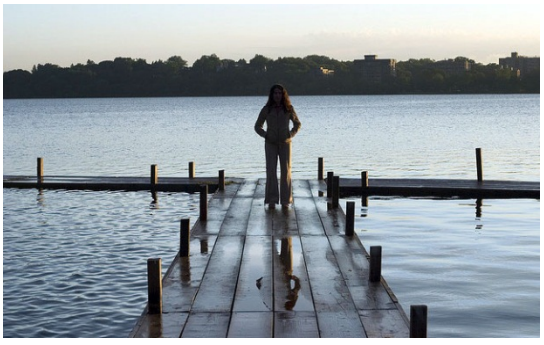
Photographing your subject straight-on is sometimes the right choice, but you can create visual impact by moving the camera left, right, above, and below. When you're beneath the subject it often makes them/it appear more powerful to the viewer. Conversely, when you're above the subject it makes them/it appear more diminutive. You can use this to an extreme for a powerful impact, but it's also a very good subtle technique for portraits. Slight positioning above or below the subject can subconsciously imply aggressiveness and passivity (respectively) without being too, uh, obvious...

Additionally, left and right positioning isn't as direct and can often make a photograph feel more honest and candid. When capturing a moment, whether it's staged or not, photographing the subject head-on can often seem a little awkward and end up being less-effective.

Of course, you can also combine different positioning elements to create other effects. Try taking photographs of the same subject from different perspectives and see how people interpret them. This is a good way to understand the effects your choices have on the end result.

Use Shapes and Lines to Draw the Eye to a Specific PointP

The viewer's eye doesn't magically end up looking at one of the intersections in the rule of thirds grid, it's just more natural. That said, if you have a reason to draw the eye elsewhere you can accomplish that pretty easily by choosing where you place shapes and lines in your photograph. A shape doesn't mean a literal, detail-less shape, but in the sense that a building could serve as a rectangle. Roads often make nice lines in landscapes. When you're composing your photograph, consider the shapes and lines and where they draw your eye. If they're taking you out of the photograph or away from the primary subject, you'll probably want to consider a different composition. Let the roads lead where you want the eye to go.



Perspective can even make a road straight ahead appear like a triangle and draw the eye into the horizon. Whatever the case may be, make sure your shapes and lines are taking the viewer where you want them to go.

Frame Your Subject with ObjectsP

A subject against a white background can often be simple and effective if you have a good subject. If you have a boring subject, like an ordinary house, a blank background (like a clear sky) isn't going to be very compelling. Instead, try framing your subject with surrounding objects.



With the house, for example, using nearby trees (or what remains of them) may help. You'll want to make sure the trees don't create lines and shapes that draw your viewer away from the subject (the house), as previously mentioned, but often times they can be helpful in making your photograph more interesting and helping to draw the eye where you want it.

Make Your Choices for a Reason

You don't have to follow any of the "rules" of photography to end up with a good photograph. What's probably the most important is that you make your choice for a reason. When you take a picture and choose where something goes in the frame, know why you're doing it. An example of a rule-breaking image would be to have a person facing left and placing them in the left third of the photograph.

You might choose to do this because you want to draw the viewer's eye away from the subject and make them look at the space behind the subject's head. In the background, something's happening that's slightly out of focus. You could argue that this is a way of depicting a subject trying to remember a past event, or being lost in a half-memory. This may or may not be the most successful way of getting such a message across, but it's a reason to try breaking one of the "rules" you'd generally adhere to when composing a photograph.

If you're just trying to take a pleasing picture, the rules are your friend. On the other hand, if you're trying to convey something with the photograph, figure out how you want to convey it and compose your image accordingly. This may or may not involve breaking the rules, but you increase your chances of ending up with a compelling image if you choose a specific composition for a specific reason.

Digital Photography Level 4 Requirements

1 – What is the rule of thirds?
2 – What is the rule of perspective?
3 – Why is framing important?