



PUTTING “SNAP” IN YOUR SNAPSHOTS A Beginner’s Guide to Better Pictures

Good pictures don’t just happen: they are made, with care and forethought. That’s true not just for the professional, but for the beginning photographer.

So how can you put “snap” in your snapshots? If you’re a beginner, or use a point-and-shoot camera, how can you put professional impact and dynamic quality into your shots?

The same way a professional does. By thinking of:

Interest

Technique

Composition

Interest means the picture has some winning quality—humor, emotion, character, charm, unusual lighting, a beautiful scene—that lifts it out of the ordinary and gives it wide general appeal. A shot of two children posing for the camera will interest only their families; but a shot of the same children, absorbed in play or a shared joke, can have universal appeal.

Technique relates to camera handling, such as focus, exposure and shutter speed to stop action.

Your pictures should be sharp and well-exposed. So learn how to use your camera. Read the instructions, practice using each feature—so that the purely mechanical functions become familiar. This advice covers even the easiest point-and-shoot. Remember that some of the greatest pictures were made with very

simple equipment. The real camera is your eye.

Your most important consideration, however is:

COMPOSITION

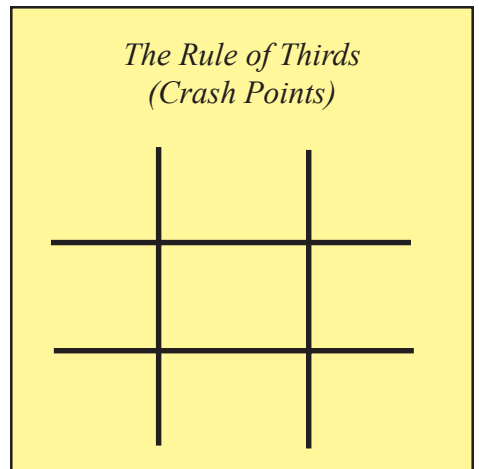
Good composition means that picture elements are arranged to produce a unified, pleasing, harmonious whole. This definition applies to all successful images regardless of subject—beautiful landscape or thrilling rodeo ride, lovely portrait or a devastating fire scene. To put “snap” in your snapshots,

Learn the basic rules of composition.

They include:

1) **The Rule of Thirds.**

Picture a Tic-Tac-Toe layout. Its nine squares are divided in three horizontal rows and three vertical rows.



The Rule of Thirds holds that your main subject, your “center of interest” should be placed on or near one of the four points where the horizontal and vertical lines intersect. These are also called “crash points.”

Why this off-center placement? Because it tends to create a more dynamic and appealing image. It suggests life and motion. It gives your subject room to “move” into the picture. If you’re shooting a portrait, place the model’s eyes (our most compelling feature) at or near one of the crash points.

In contrast, the subject placed at dead center usually (but not always) seems static, lifeless. Some subjects, however, **should** be centered. Very formal and religious scenes, such as a cathedral altar, usually need center placement to emphasize their formality.

The Rule of Thirds also favors a one-third, two-thirds balance between background (or foreground) and subject. For instance, you might give an interesting sky one-third of the picture area in your horizontal landscape or seascape; the same one-third/two-thirds ratio would apply in a vertical image, perhaps an outdoor portrait or an architectural study.

The reason for this is that most (but not all) images which give equal space to background and subject/foreground look divided in two—and that also usually looks static.

2) Leading Lines.

Every picture has lines, real or implied, and the thinking photographer uses them to create mood in an image. Leading lines take our eyes into the picture, a must for good composition.

Diagonal lines, such as a rustic fence, are dynamic; they suggest action, tension.

Converging lines, as in a straight road or colonnade, guide us into the distance.

A *curving line* can be particularly effective when placed on a diagonal.

The *S Curve*, as in a curving railroad track or meandering stream, can create both a graceful and dynamic composition.

The *C Curve* made by the wake of a power boat or the vapor trail of an airplane makes a sweeping and powerful image.

Diagonal lines seem to have more impact when they run from the lower left of the picture frame—probably because we read from left to right.

3) Other lines.

Other lines convey their own moods. *Vertical lines* suggest power, strength, stability, order. *Horizontal lines* convey a feeling of calm and peace.

Circular composition goes back to classic painters, and is the implied line in many mother-and-child portraits today. It conveys a sense of serenity.

The *triangle* is an often-seen dramatic line: think of the fire hose against a building in flames, or the pile-up in a football game.

4) Orientation (or format).

Should your image be vertical or horizontal? That usually depends on the subject. A tall subject—a tree or grove of trees, a skyscraper, a single flower, most portraits—will probably look more appealing as a vertical. A landscape often looks better as a horizontal.

The format you use should eliminate anything that doesn’t enhance the subject, such as empty areas and eye-catching distractions.

Frame the subject both ways, and if in doubt, shoot both.

LIGHTING

Lighting is one of the most important elements in an image. It can provide a

leading line, and add impact and drama to a picture. Every skilled photographer studies lighting and learns how to use it. In photography, there are four basic types:

Front light, where the subject faces the light, is the best known and most used by beginners;

Side- or cross-light, with the light on one side of the subject, enhances form, brings out surface textures, makes colors rich and vivid, and can cast interesting shadow patterns;

Back-light can give a subject a luminous halo, and adds life and color to translucent subjects, such as autumn leaves;

Subdued light, found on overcast days, can intensify colors (like greens) that turn pale in strong, direct light. Outdoor portraits do better in subdued light or open shade (bright light causes squinting and unattractive shadows).

The low angle of early morning or late afternoon light is preferred for dramatic colors and images; the strong *overhead light* of midday tends to “wash out” many colors and creates harsh, sharp contrasts of light and shadow.

REINFORCING YOUR COMPOSITION

Planes are the horizontal “strata” in a picture: foreground, middle ground and distance. They create spatial definition, giving depth to an image; the feeling of being able to move from the front to the back of the picture, just as a leading line can. Planes are horizontal, but can be created with objects or lines, either horizontal or converging.

A strong foreground object, located to one side, invites the viewer to look beyond. A middle ground center of interest is reinforced, in turn, by a distant background which complements

the subject and keeps the viewer focused on the subject.

Create planes with care, however, to insure the relationship between foreground, middle ground and distance.

Implied converging lines can suggest receding planes, especially if shot from a low angle.

Light can create planes. Think of receding mountain ranges which fade from dark to light as they recede.

3-D photographers make maximum use of receding planes as a matter of course to enhance the 3-D effect.

Framing your subject with nearby material can add strength and interest to your scene. The leafy branches of a foreground tree can “frame” many outdoor scenes, and keep the viewer’s eye on the subject. Use nearby arches to frame historic sites. Just don’t let the frame overpower your subject.

Change your viewpoint to get the most out of your subject. Try different approaches. Shoot from a low angle, or ground level, to achieve *distortion* and possible leading lines. Or shoot from above, for a different effect. Move all around the subject. Maybe there’s a better shot on the other side.

Move in. ...Move in... Move in

It has been said that the three most important “rules” in composition are Move in ...Move in. ...Move in..

The best pictures—those with the greatest impact—are simple and include no extraneous elements to distract the viewer.

In other words, *simplify*. Keep only the essentials for increased impact. Fill the frame with the subject. Avoid any blank areas which do not contribute to the image.

Telephoto lenses can help you zero in on a subject when you can’t get close physically.

Keep your backgrounds simple. A “busy” background, cluttered by an unrelated pattern or activity, can be ruinously distracting in an otherwise good picture. Choose neutral backgrounds for portraits; move up, down or around to find a simple background; or, if your camera allows, change aperture and shutter speed to throw the background out of focus.

Filters can enhance your images in many ways. If your camera accepts filters, the Skylight (1-A) or Haze filter can protect your lens from scratches and damage. It also cuts through smog and haze, bringing out colors. A wide range of other filters can help you control and intensify the light or color in a scene, or add mood and drama to images.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Mergers - the pole growing out of a person’s head, dark hair disappearing into a dark background—need not happen. Look *before you shoot*, and separate your subject from the problem.

Bald skies, whether cloudless blue or overcast, are bright distractions. Eliminate bald skies by shooting a “closed landscape” (no sky). Move in close for architectural subjects and portraits. Or minimize the bald sky by **framing**.

A split center of interest results when you have two subjects of equal importance in the picture. The viewer’s eye moves from one to another—the “ping-pong effect.” To avoid this, exclude one subject; or make one subject obviously dominant; or, if your subject is people, pose them close together in a shared action, so they become one center of interest.

Light traps are irritating distractions and draw the viewer’s eye from the center of interest—and our eyes are

always drawn to the lightest part of the picture! Watch for bald skies, odd light spots (especially at picture edges), a sliver of unwanted sky, a too-bright foreground, and eliminate light traps before you shoot.

Foreground barriers can keep the viewer’s eye from “getting into” the picture. A hedge or fence across the front of a scene is a barrier; *so—move*. Shoot over the fence, or find something to serve as a leading line.

Sloping lake waters don’t occur in nature. When a lake runs downhill or a horizon seems oddly tilted, you know the photographer has been in too much of a hurry. *Hold the camera level*.

Clutter can ruin a good picture. The camera won’t overlook the stray gum wrapper or the bent aluminum can. Make it a habit to clean up before you shoot. Watch for and remove clutter in nature scenes—the blade of waving grass, the light wood chip in the foreground. Look before you shoot.

IN CONCLUSION

The tips here are only brief summaries of what you can find in whole books. For further help and inspiration, join a PSA slide study group or print portfolio and study photographs wherever you find them. But by following these tips and making them part of your mental photographic equipment, you can lift your pictures out of the ordinary and start producing memorable images.

And, when the Rules of Composition have become second nature, you’ll discover that they aren’t hidebound “rules” after all, but guidelines—and that you will have the knowledge and imagination to break those “rules” creatively. Happy shooting!