Basic composition

Almost anyone can take a picture, and most of you probably have, but after a critical look at your photos you would probably find there is a lot of wasted space. Now that you are entering the profession of military photojournalism, the focus of every photograph should be, “does this photo belong in the publication?”

Using correct compositional techniques will ensure you give emphasis to the subject of your photos. This will give your photos more clarity and get more people to stop and look at them.
Composition

Composition is a pleasing arrangement of subject matter elements. The results of good composition are a photo that will capture the viewer’s attention, make a clear statement and be pleasing to the eye.

U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Alvin Williams

U.S. Navy photo by MC1 Class Rachael L. Leslie

U.S. Army photo by Spc. Eric Cabral

U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Alvin Williams
Center of interest

The center of interest is the subject (who or what) and the dominant or largest in focus element of the photograph. It’s the focal point of the action. Photographs should only contain one center of interest.

- Simplicity is gained by eliminating all distractions to isolate your center of interest, giving it the most attention.

The published image to the left is a strong photo, however there is a lot of dead space around your center of interest that doesn’t add to the meaning of the image. The cropped photo above tells the same story, which is more clearly about the Coast Guardsman.
Focus

Your center of interest should have the primary focus in your photograph. To focus is to render an object in sharp detail. A lack of focus distracts from the image and can confuse the viewer.

When your center of interest, or subject, is a living thing, always focus on its eyes. The eyes are what draw the reader into the photograph just as eye contact is used in a face-to-face conversation – to extract more of the meaning or emotions “behind” the eyes. Also, if needed, focus on the eye closest to the camera so the photo does not appear out of focus.
Rule of thirds

The rule of thirds is used for placement of your subject in the frame. The rule of thirds is achieved by mentally dividing the frame into equal thirds horizontally and vertically, then placing your center of interest (and other important subjects of your photograph, if needed) in or near one of the four intersections created by the divisions. This allows the subjects that have direction to be able to “move” into the frame.

Example of a horizontal shot using the rule of thirds.

![Image of example shot using rule of thirds](U.S. Air Force photo by SSgt Angelique M. Perez)
Rule of thirds

Example of a vertical shot using the rule of thirds.

Direction

The rule of thirds allows subjects that have direction to move into the frame.
Format

There are two primary formats for photographs—horizontal and vertical.

- Use a horizontal format when the subject matter is wider than it is tall.
- Use a vertical format when the subject matter is taller than it is wide.
Format

For basic composition, whether in horizontal or vertical format, the horizon line in photographs should be straight. The image below is referred to as a dutch angle and is used in artistic photography, but it is not suited for photojournalism.

Photo courtesy of Defense Imagery
Perspective

The principles of perspective refer to the apparent size and depth of an object within the image. The perspective in which you shoot the photo can affect what the photo says.

Camera angles are the position of the camera in relation to the subject.

1. Low viewpoints make your subjects appear tall or powerful.
2. High viewpoints make your subject appear small and non-threatening.

**Low angle**

**High angle**

U.S. Marine Corps photo by LCpl Robert Morgan

U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl Neill A. Sevelius
Basic shooting sequence

In this lesson you have learned about many of the important techniques that will help you photograph a basic shooting sequence.

The basic shooting sequence for a photo assignment includes a long shot, medium shot, close-up and extreme close-up. This sequence allows for complete coverage of the subject.

- The long shot introduces the subject and includes the subject’s environment or surroundings.
- A medium shot narrows the scope of the story, shows part of the subject and includes the action.
- The close-up photo shows detail of the subject’s face and clear action of the hands.
- The extreme closeup shows close detail and does not show the subject’s face.
Conclusion

Well composed photographs are what separates an average photograph from a great one and it starts with the photographer. Using the basic techniques covered in this lesson will greatly improve the quality of your photos, resulting in better, newsworthy images for your publication.
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