

12

.....

Week

HOW TO COMPOSE

Over the centuries, a set of compositional “rules” for images has been developed. However, sticking too slavishly to these rules can result in repetitive compositions, so it’s important to see them as guidelines rather than commands.

In this module, you will:

- ▶ **learn about composition** and why it matters;
- ▶ **get to grips with the “rules” of composition**, including the use of odd numbers, the rule of thirds, and using lead-in lines;
- ▶ **create your own image** using the rule of thirds;
- ▶ **turn things upside down** by breaking the rules;
- ▶ **check your images**, paying attention to viewpoints, directing the viewer’s eye, and aspect ratio;
- ▶ **refine one of your images** by cropping it;
- ▶ **reexamine** what you’ve learned about producing powerful compositions, and see if you’re ready to move on.

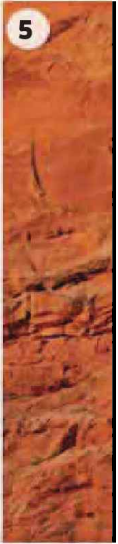
Let’s begin...





▶ TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Looking at composition



Learning the “rules” of composition enables you to communicate your message with maximum impact. Look at these photos and match the image with the description.

A Sense of scale: Placing a recognizable object next to a large feature helps indicate scale.

B Using odd numbers: Odd-numbered groupings help hold the viewer's interest in the frame.

C Positioning the horizon: Placing the horizon in the upper third of the picture draws attention to the foreground.

D Frames within frames: Using natural forms can draw the viewer's attention to key areas.

E Off-center subjects: Placing a subject to one side can create a more dynamic composition.

F The right aspect ratio: Pick a format that suits the subject—such as panoramic for landscapes.

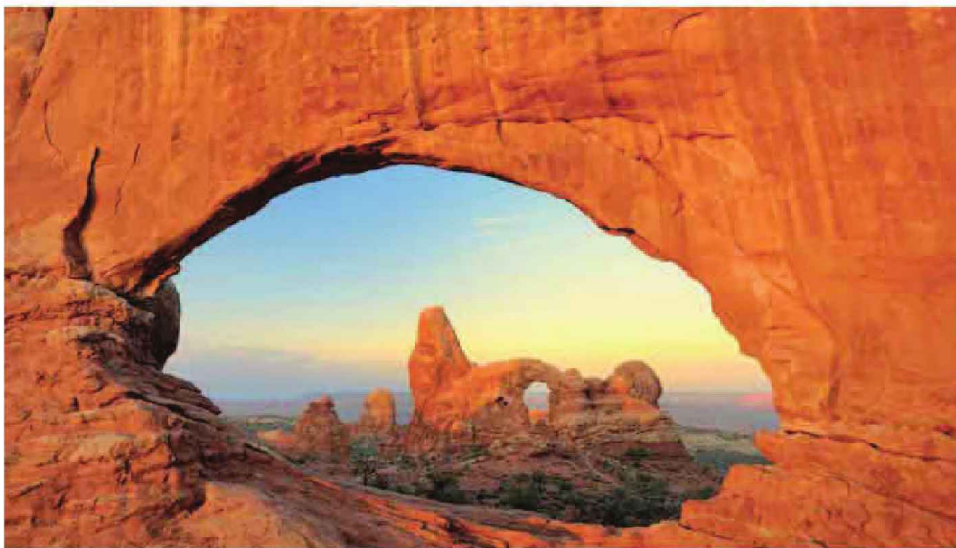
G The rule of thirds: Dividing the frame into a grid using two horizontal and two vertical lines will help to place key elements.

H Lead-in lines: Use lead-in lines to encourage the “reading” of an image from the bottom to the top.

ANSWERS

- E/1: Woman on a bicycle
- F/4: Scottish landscape
- G/7: Yellow flower in bloom
- H/8: Trees flanking a road

- A/3: Hiker on a mountaintop
- B/6: Sardines in a bowl
- C/2: Pebbles on Hough Bay, Scotland
- D/5: Rock arch in Arizona



NEED TO KNOW

- The “rules” of composition are just guidelines, and should not be applied to every picture—following them too closely may lead to dull and predictable work.
- Remember Leonardo da Vinci’s take on composing pictures: “simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.”
- Chaotic and disorganized pictures ask the viewer to work too hard to make

- sense of them. As a consequence, there’s a danger that the viewer will give up and move on.
- Successful compositions allow the eye to travel around the frame in the intended order, pausing at points of interest along the way.
- Remember, the fastest way to alter a composition is simply to move your feet.



Review these points and see how they relate to the photos shown here



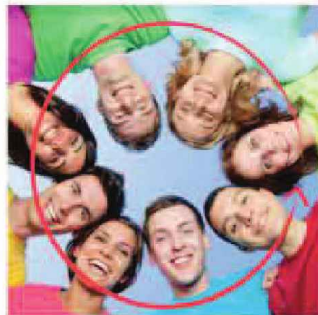
▶ UNDERSTAND THE THEORY

The “rules” of composition

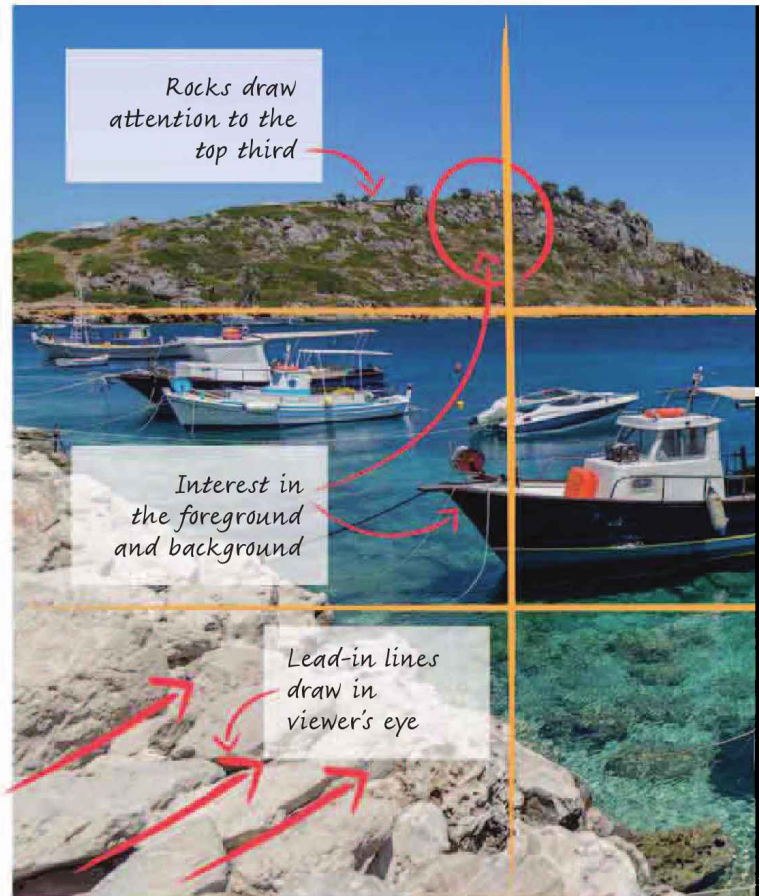
Creating a well-balanced, aesthetically pleasing photograph can be a challenge. Painters have the luxury of starting with a blank canvas, allowing them to add or subtract components with ease. Photographers, on the other hand, often have to work with what’s in front of them. Many artists claim that composition requires a “natural eye”—an innate knowledge of where to place objects for maximum impact—but in reality this “eye” can be developed by studying the work of others. If you spend time attending exhibitions, analyzing why one arrangement succeeds and another fails, you will begin to see that many successful compositions adhere to certain “rules.”

USING SHAPES

To create a composition that captures and holds the viewer’s attention, you need to trap their gaze within the frame. One way of doing this is to organize the elements in a triangular or circular formation so that the eye takes in the main components and then returns to the beginning again.

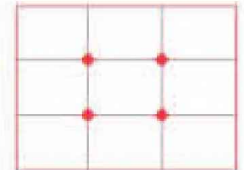


The viewer’s eyes move from one subject to the next, eventually returning to where they started.



THE RULE OF THIRDS

This compositional technique involves dividing the frame into a grid using two horizontal and two vertical lines, and then placing major points of interest where these lines intersect. Many cameras come with a grid display to help you achieve this.



“ **Photography** is all about light, composition and... **emotion.** ”

LARRY WILDER



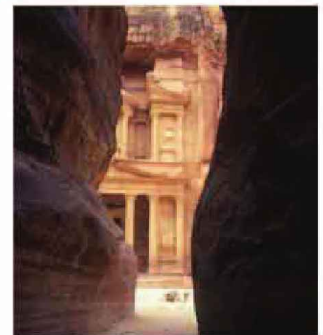
POSITIONING THE HORIZON

Placing the horizon high in the frame suggests that the foreground should take precedence, while also giving a sense of depth as the eye travels to reach the sky. In contrast, placing the horizon low in the frame implies that the sky is the most important feature, and conveys a sense of isolation.



USING NATURAL FRAMES

Surrounding your subject with a natural frame created by elements such as branches, rocks, or a bridge is a great way to direct the eye to key areas while concealing any distractions.



THE RULE OF ODDS

When your brain is presented with an even number of objects, it automatically sorts them into pairs and then quickly moves on. If the objects are positioned side by side, the eye falls in the gap between. To persuade the eye to travel to the right place and then stay there awhile, you need to include an odd number of objects in your compositions.



BREAKING THE RULES

Once you've learned the "rules" of composition, it can be liberating to break them. Placing the horizon in the center of the frame works well if you're trying to capture a symmetrical reflection, while freezing a subject as they are leaving the scene places the emphasis on where they have been rather than where they are going.

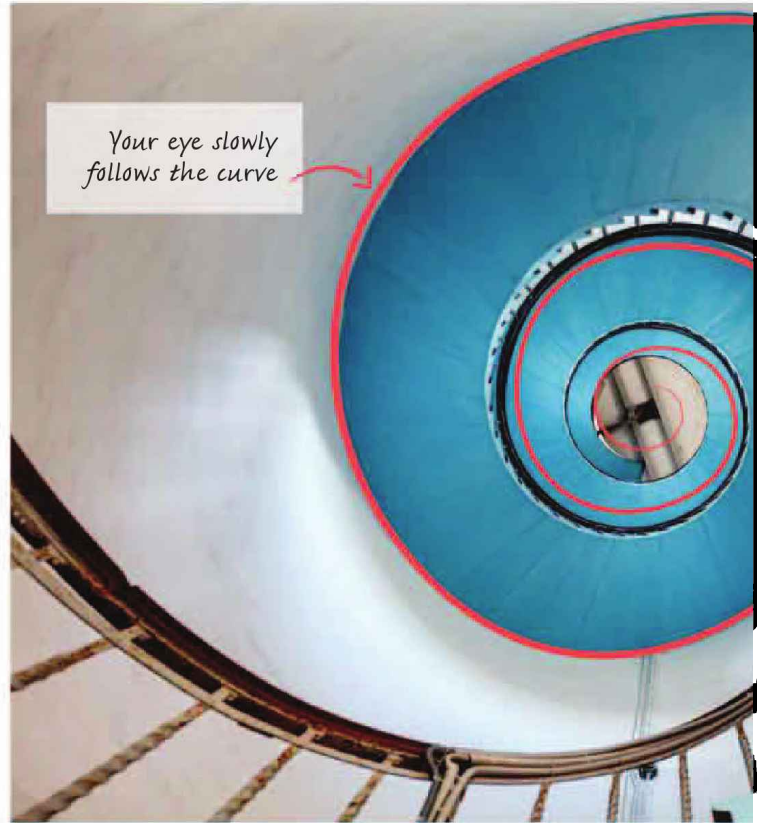




▶ UNDERSTAND THE THEORY

Lines, curves, and diagonals

When lines are used in a composition, they guide the viewer's eye around the frame; they can also elicit strong emotions. Vertical lines, for example, move the eye from the bottom to the top of the picture, conveying a sense of stability and permanence. Lines can be found everywhere, from the curve of a bird's neck to the zigzag of a country road. Some lines are obvious—the diagonal of a boat's sail, for example—and some are implied: loose boulders on a beach, for instance. Lines can be continuous or broken, long or short. When you use them in your composition, it's important to be aware of their aesthetic and emotional impact.



LEAD-IN LINES

A lead-in line is a clear entry point into a picture. It usually starts at the bottom of the frame and guides the eye into the composition toward the main subject. Lead-in lines can come in the form of roads, walls, flowers, and rivers—anything that directs the eye swiftly and effectively.



HORIZONTAL LINES

When you study an image featuring a horizontal line, you feel calm and at peace (depending on its content). Sunsets over the sea, reflections in still bodies of water, and fallen trees direct our eyes from left to right, taking in details along the way.

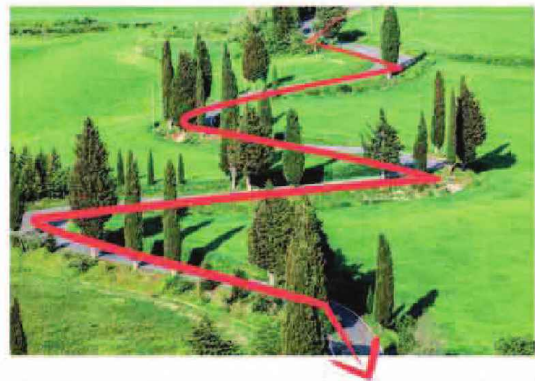


Pro tip: Once you've gotten to grips with the rule of thirds, take a look at more complicated compositional guidelines, such as those based on the Fibonacci sequence devised by the 12th-century Italian mathematician Leonardo Pisano.



ZIGZAGS

When the course of a road or a river zigzags through the frame, it suggests rapid motion. In these instances the eye darts from side to side, pausing at each turn or bend looking for points of interest. Be aware that jagged or irregular lines can sometimes cause tension.



CURVES



Waves lapping at the beach, spiral staircases, and sand dunes all create curves that can add motion and grace to your compositions. These lines suggest slowness and beauty, encouraging the viewer to take their time exploring the image.

VERTICAL LINES

Pylons, skyscrapers, trees, and fence poles can create striking verticals. These lines indicate stability and permanence. When you look at an image with vertical lines, your eye usually travels from the bottom to the top.



DIAGONAL LINES

If you want to stress speed or motion, diagonal lines are ideal. Full of energy, these lines rush the eye to the edge of the frame. Human-made diagonals are common, but you can also create your own by tilting your camera.



BLACK & WHITE

Line, shape, and form can be exaggerated by converting color images into black and white. Many argue that monochrome requires a different mind-set than color work, but experimentation can yield excellent results.





▶ LEARN THE SKILLS

Using the rule of thirds

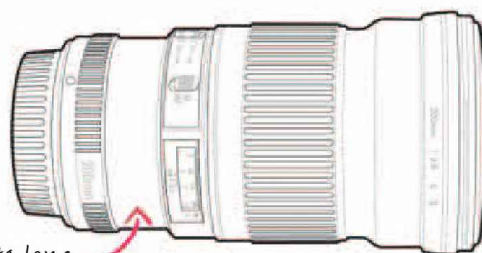


The rule of thirds is a popular compositional technique which states that key elements should be positioned where a series of imaginary lines intersect. Camera manufacturers are aware of this rule, and most dSLRs come with grids that can be overlaid on your image in the viewfinder.



1 Attach a suitable lens

Since the rule of thirds can be applied to just about any subject, choose a lens based on the effect you're trying to achieve. To show the close relationship between the house and the landscape in the picture below, you should use a telephoto lens, which will flatten the perspective.

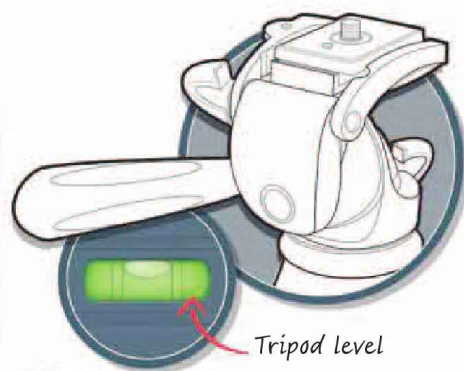


Telephoto lens



2 Mount your camera on a tripod

Use a tripod and a level to make sure everything is straight, allowing you to concentrate on composing your picture.



Tripod level



6 Activate the grid

If your camera has a Live View facility, enable it and activate the 3x3 grid display. Use the grid to position key points of interest where the lines intersect. If there is no Live View facility, compose the shot by eye.



Put the subject where lines meet



7 Select an AF point

Focus on your subject either by manually focusing or using AF (manually select an AF point or place the subject in the center of the frame, lock focus with a half-press of the shutter button, and recompose).



Select an AF point



8 Shoot and review the results

Take a few shots, study them, and consider whether the balance of elements is right. If not, consider cropping the shot in post-production.



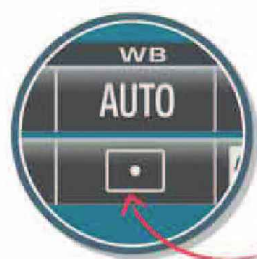
Examine your shots in Playback

Where to start: The rule of thirds can be applied to almost any subject—even a shaft of light can be positioned where the grid lines intersect. Try using it on solid objects as well as less obvious elements, such as shadows and highlights.

You will learn: How to set up your camera for using the rule of thirds, how to engage and use your camera's grid, and how to focus on an off-center subject.

3 Adjust the metering mode

Select a metering mode depending on the subject and the light conditions. In this case, there is strong sunlight on the house, but the fields behind are much darker. Such stark contrast may cause the camera to misjudge the exposure and overexpose the picture.



Use Spot or Partial metering to meter from the image's midtones

4 Choose the lowest ISO setting

For smooth, noise-free images, select a low ISO speed (such as ISO 100 or 200). When light levels drop and you're tempted to boost the ISO to compensate, consider using a larger aperture or a slower shutter speed instead.



Keep the ISO as low as possible

5 Select the aperture and shutter speed

Choose the aperture and shutter speed combination that suits the subject and your desired end result. When you are shooting landscapes, use Aperture Priority mode and select a small aperture to keep the foreground and background sharp.

Aperture Priority mode



Farmhouse sits comfortably in lower third of image.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED?

- Your camera's grid display will help you to utilize the rule of thirds, although you may need to help the camera decide where to focus when there's an off-center subject.
- Using a tripod is not only useful to avoid camera shake and align your subjects, but also frees you up to refine your composition.

Be sure to save your best images





▶ PRACTICE AND EXPERIMENT

Using composition

Dramatic compositions are rarely accidental; they are usually the result of an experienced eye and sound technical knowledge. To hone your skills, it's worth working through a few exercises. The following assignments look at positioning your subject in the center of the frame, grouping objects, and using the camera in horizontal as well as vertical positions.



EASY

30 MINUTES

BASIC + tripod



INDOORS OR OUTDOORS



A SUBJECT THAT WILL FIT INTO THE CENTER OF YOUR PHOTO

Placing a subject in the center of the frame may be breaking the “rules,” but for this exercise we will be doing just that.

■ **Choose** your subject wisely: when the point of interest is in the center of the frame, it takes the viewer’s eye straight there, but they will need something else to hold their attention. Ideal subjects include the petals of a flower radiating outward, or a brightly colored beach ball on the sand.

■ **Use** the grid display on your camera to make sure your subject will be positioned right in the center of the frame.

■ **Note** how breaking the tried and tested rules has altered your feelings toward the subject.



USE VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL ORIENTATION

EASY

30 MINUTES

BASIC + tripod



INDOORS OR OUTDOORS



A HORIZONTAL SUBJECT

The horizontal format mirrors the way we see the world, so we often frame scenes in this way. But turning the camera on its side can create striking, and often unusual, compositions.

■ **Find** a subject that will fit in the frame both horizontally and vertically.

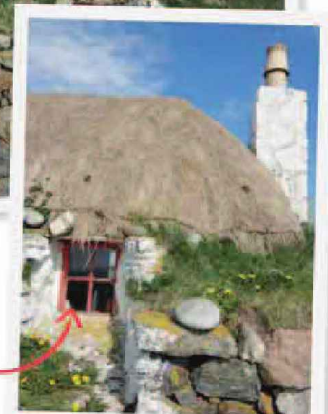
■ **Mount** the camera horizontally on a tripod.

■ **See** how much space is not taken up by the subject and how any lines or shapes interact.

■ **Turn** the camera to the vertical position, and note how the structure of the photo has altered.



Horizontal image of cottage



Vertical image of cottage

Pro tip: When you are faced with an off-center subject, you have three focusing options: focus lock, selectable AF points, or manual focus. Experiment with all three until you find the one that works best.



Stunt bike in the center of the image grabs attention

i ELECTRONIC GRIDS AND LEVELS

If your camera has a Live View facility, you can call up a simple grid to show you when you have achieved (or broken) the rule of thirds. Many cameras also feature an electronic level. This screen-based tool works just like a builder's level, detecting when the camera is misaligned, and turning from green to red accordingly.

The electronic level will tell you when the camera is level



u MAKE UP THE NUMBERS

EASY

30 MINUTES

BASIC + tripod

INDOORS OR OUTDOORS

AT LEAST THREE OBJECTS OF THE SAME SORT

Groups containing an odd number of objects tend to be more aesthetically pleasing than those containing even ones.

- **Place** an even number of bowls on a table: two is a good starting point.
- **Note** how your eyes jump from one bowl to the other, mentally pairing them up, before you lose interest.
- **Add** an extra bowl, and observe how the brain spends longer sorting the bowls into satisfying groups. Repeat with other objects.



Objects arranged in odd numbers hold attention.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED?

- Breaking the rules—for example, placing your subject in the center of the frame, giving your horizon a tilt, playing with the horizontal and vertical orientation, or freezing a subject walking out of the frame—can lead to striking images.



▶ ASSESS YOUR RESULTS

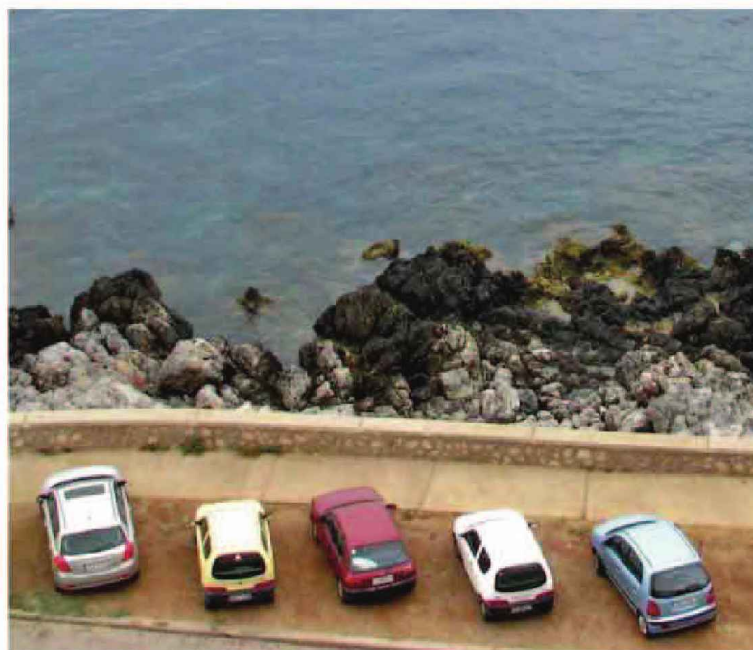
Reviewing your shots

Now that you've learned the basic "rules" of composition, it's time to assess some of your favorite photographs. Whether your picture succeeds or fails will depend on where you place key points of interest, and how well the viewer's eye is guided toward them.



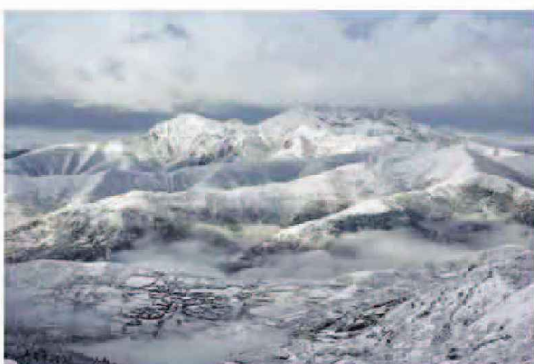
Have you found the best viewpoint?

Investigate all the possible viewpoints: crouch down low or climb up high. By taking a high viewpoint, this image has made what could be a dull view into something more interesting.



Is the positive and negative space balanced?

Parts of the frame that don't contain content are called negative space. These areas emphasize the subject and provide a place for the eye to rest. This shot of Michelangelo's *David* works well because there is space for the statue to stare into.



Does the picture have a sense of depth?

A photograph is a two-dimensional object, so conveying a sense of depth can be tricky. You can imply depth by letting objects overlap. For example, in this image of a mountain range, the peaks appear as layers, transporting the eye back toward the clouds.



Have you experimented with both landscape and portrait formats?

You can miss opportunities if you only ever hold the camera vertically for portraits and horizontally for landscapes. Here, the landscape format focuses on the face, drawing attention to the man's expression.



Learn the rules like a pro, so you
can **break them** like an **artist.**

PABLO PICASSO



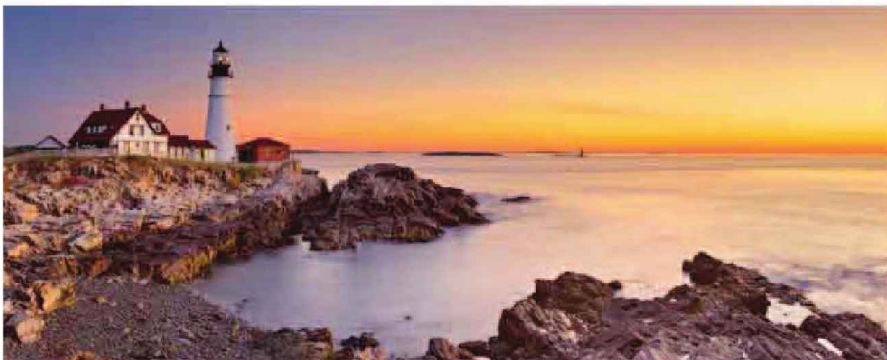
Does the picture adhere to the rule of thirds?

Following the rule of thirds is a great way to give your photos balance. The positioning of this macaque adheres to this “rule,” but the photographer has also left space for the animal’s line of sight, which draws our attention to the macaque in the background.



Do any lines direct the viewer’s eye?

Lead-in lines usually start at the bottom of the frame and guide your eye into the picture to its key focal points. But in this shot the curve of the river guides the eye from left to right, and then back again. Rules are made to be broken.



Does your aspect ratio suit the subject?

Before committing to an aspect ratio for square or panoramic photographs, consider how much negative space you need to show. This panoramic picture works because it includes a vast sweep of sea and coastline, placing the lighthouse in context. Would you have used this much negative space?

Is your main focal point obvious?

If the point of focus in a picture is unclear, then the viewer will struggle to make sense of the scene. Everything in this image suggests that the strawberries take priority, with the hands playing a supporting role.





▶ ENHANCE YOUR IMAGES

Cropping photos



Cropping is a great way to remove unwanted elements from the edges of the frame, but it can also be used to alter the emphasis of a picture, reduce negative space, and apply the rule of thirds. While the preferred solution is always to create the best image you can in-camera, cropping the image afterward allows you to address many problems. This image of a stork's nest is well



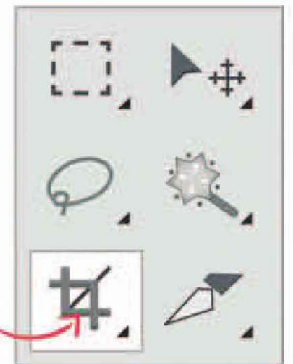
composed, but the large area of negative space is a little distracting and it would be nice to focus on the chicks.



1 Select the Crop tool

Click on the Crop tool. Move your cursor to the Options bar at the top of the screen. Select the drop-down menu on the left side of the Options bar that lists presets of common photo sizes and shapes.

Select the Crop tool from the Tools palette



5 Alter the shield

To view other options, click on the Crop Options icon on the Options bar (represented by a cog icon). Check Enable Crop Shield and manipulate the color picker and the opacity slider to make the shaded area outside the crop frame as clear as possible. To see the cropped area only, uncheck Enable Crop Shield.



Shield controls the color and opacity of the area to be cropped



7 Save or dismiss the crop

To accept the current crop, press Enter/Return or click on the Commit icon (represented by a check in the Options bar). To cancel the crop press Esc, or click on the Cancel icon (represented by a circle with a line through it in the Options bar).

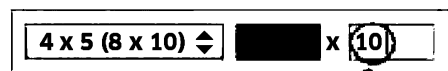


Press Enter or Return to crop your image

Pro tip: To correct a crooked horizon, rotate the image by moving your cursor outside the frame. Some software packages also allow you to overlay the image with a rule-of-thirds grid, enabling you to crop your image for greater impact.

2 Add your own preset

You can choose a preset or add your own by entering your preferred values in the Options bar, such as "8 inch x 10 inch." Open the drop-down menu again, click on the small arrow at the side, select New Tool preset, and click OK.



Type in the size you want to use

3 Create a clipping border

Click on the image and drag your mouse over the area you want to keep. Anything outside this frame will appear darker, which helps you visualize the end result.

The area to be removed will appear grayed out



4 Fine-tune your crop

Drag one of the corners to resize the crop border. You can rotate the frame by positioning your cursor outside of the border (it turns into a curved arrow) and moving it.

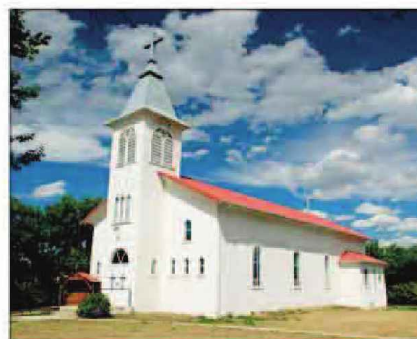
Rotating the frame allows for a different crop



A tighter portrait focuses on the chicks

i CORRECTING PERSPECTIVE

The Crop tool can be used as a basic way of correcting converging verticals. To perform this task, draw a crop selection as usual and then check the Perspective box in the Options bar. Take the top corner handles and drag them inward until the edges of the frame line up with the leaning edges of the building.



Here, the church steeple appears to be leaning backward.



The tilt has been corrected using the Crop tool.