

# COMPOSITION

**FREE  
GUIDE**



## LESS THAN 15 MINUTS

Introduction	2
Always one main motive	3
Rule of thirds	4
The golden ratio	5
Foreground, middle and background	6
Diagonals	7
Composition to one side	8
Mow the lawn and empty the bin	9
It's all about the light	10

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## Introduction



Photography is all about showing a picture. As the photographer, you can do that in thousand different way, and that is why photography is a process of choices. It is a process of choices, of composition, to pick what to include and how to include it. It really is no art to take 100 different pictures of one motive. The art is to take that single picture that tell your story.

Composition and motive are closely connected elements. You use composition to present the elements in the picture, and elements in your picture are: Motive, surroundings, light, colors, lines etc.

Composition is obviously important. I have seen too many pictures with a composition so poor that the overall expression of the picture and the impression of the motive got disturbed. That is bad: a motive should really move you – and that is in fact what “motive” means. It comes from the French: “Motif” which derives from “motivus” (Latin): Causes motion.

This guide will provide you with a number of different types of composition. I hope that they will offer you good inspiration to make even better images and if you, while reading the guide, stop and think “this sounds a lot like the stuff I rea about compositions in paintings and such” you are right. Most of the different types of composition has been around since time of painters and paintings. But it is okay. Really. Because even though the technology has changed, we have not changed our way of perceiving a picture.

Note that I differentiate between composition and cropping. You create composition when you photograph, you crop when you sit in front of your computer working with your picture.

I will present six different types of composition plus some remarks about how to “Mow the lawn and empty the bin” and “It’s all about the light”.

## Always one main motive



One of my most important rules of photography is that an image must have a main motive, but only one main motive. Landscape images without any elements sticking out a little might be nice and okay, but they very seldom win any awards or even remarks as “great”, “super”, “astonishing” etc.

Look at the image above. I guess it is very clear that the heart is the main motive. My main story is the story of the “heart tracks” laid out in many parks and woods. My secondary story is that of spring and anemones. Had I just wanted the story about spring and anemone to be the main story, I would have taken the picture elsewhere – without a post and a heart.

I have underlined the main motive using two methods. Firstly with the composition. The image is composed and cropped with the heart close to the Golden Ratio (see page “Golden Ratio”). Secondly with the Depth Of Field (DOF). The red heart and the post is sharp but the rest of the image is a little unsharp. The sharpness leads your eyes and your attention to the heart, because the eye prefer to see sharp motives.

If there were two posts in the composition, the second post would not be in the opposite side. I would have moved to one side and made the two posts appear to be close. One sharp and one unsharp. If your have one post in left side of the image and one post in the right side of the image, your eyes will “jump” from side to side, never finding rest in the image. It is just like putting two candles in the window. They just look best close to each other.

## Rule of thirds



To say it very very simple: Never place the horizon in the middle of your image. It makes the image very static. Never do that (unless a really special reason...). The rule of thirds is a very simple and yet very useful and powerful guideline to a better composition.

The rule of thirds simple state: Place the horizon one third from the top of your image or one third from the bottom of your image. If the sky is more interesting than the ground, then you place the horizon one third from the bottom. If the ground is more interesting than the sky, then you place the horizon one third from the top.

Above you can see that I have placed a grid dividing the image into thirds. The horizon is placed in the top third, because the story of the image is a story of the crop – the season. The field is my main motive and therefore the field is taking up most space.

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## The Golden Ratio



The Golden Ratio derives from ancient mathematics and studies and is also named The Devine Ratio because it is considered to be the most beautiful and perfect ratio. The Golden ratio is quite simple: You just part a line into two pieces and keep the ratio between the small (b) and the large piece (a) as the ratio between the large piece and the total line:



The Golden Ratio can be seen in many places in nature and has been broadly used in art and mathematics too; just think about David Brown's novel about Da Vinci. Illustrated as a curve, the Golden Ratio will produce a spiral as shown in the image above. Images composed close to the Golden Ratio will appear to be very well composed, harmonic and very often even beautiful.

Look at the image of the Swiss landscape close to Arvenbüel, above the Wahlensee. The mountain in the background (Leistchamm/Leistkamm) stands more than 2,000 meters tall and as you can see, I have composed the image to follow the line of the Golden Ratio. The mountain marks the middle line of the image and follows/reflects the Golden Ratio and the nearest house is very close to the center of the spiral.

*NOTE: The nearest house in the image above serves as "entrance" to the image – didn't you start there....?*

## Foreground, middle and background



Composition of images is an old discipline. Ever since the ancient Egyptians, composing images has looked for ways to create perspective and depth. One of the techniques is to work with a foreground (with a noticeable element/motive), a middle (with some elements to show distance) and a background (with creates a backdrop for the image).

It is just a matter of creating three dimensions in a world (canvas) with only two dimensions.

Look at the image above. Here we have an open landscape in a wild life park (Dyrehaven) north of Copenhagen in Denmark. The foreground is an old large trunk laying in some stinging nettles. The middle is an area of grass and the grove. The background is the edge of the wood and the sunset colored sky.

This composition creates a lot of depth. The trunk is laying “into” the image using a diagonal and that enhances the expression of depth.

And I have added a little (extra) sharpness to the trunk and the stinging nettles. Sharpness will often make elements appear close to the viewer.



## Diagonals



I love a good line and I love to use the natural lines of the motive. Whenever I compose an image I look to use those lines that caught my eye in the first place. In my opinion diagonals are meant to be used. Simply just meant to be used. They create depth in the image and they lead your eye into the image at once. Just look at the image above.

A grey country road leading into the rural landscape flanked by a yellow rape field to the left and a green oak (I think) field to the right. It is all very simple, and it is all so effective.

The line is created exactly from the tarmac in both left and right hand side. Not from “just about” and not from “almost”. When you have the possibility to crop the image to a perfect match, you really should use that possibility. But you don’t need such a clear line to create lines in your image. Two or three stones on a beach, two or three trees in a field or something else is very often enough to indicate a line.

Your eyes and your brain is very quick to pick up such indications and so are all your friends’ eyes and brains.

*NOTE: When you make use of roads and such you should avoid that the lines “run out of the side of the image”. Make sure such lines stay in the image. If the road ends in one of the sides of the image, it will lead your eyes out of the image instead of into the image.*

## Composition to one side



Sometimes you might find it hard to compose an image using any of the other composing techniques described in this guide. And sometimes you might not even think that any of the other composing techniques will make the most out of your image. Images of shores might cause such thoughts.

Above you find such an image. Here you have a shore, the horizon and you have a wonderful morning sky with the most delicate colors. It is very clear to see that the bulk of elements are concentrated in the left hand side of the image: The shore with bushes and trees. The image is composed to the left.

When you compose your image to a side there is a risk that the image will turn out to be too heavy to that side. Above you can see a thin line of trees in the horizon. This line acts as counterweight and is situated just about one third from the top.

Composing to a side is not about having all elements concentrated in one side. Composing to a side is about having a majority of elements (or graphic weight) in one side and balancing it out with something simple in the rest of the image.

Often you will find that composing to a side works best having the weight in left hand side. That is most likely because we are used to “read” images as we read text: From left to right. But never get stuck in rules. By all means: Try out right hand side concentration too – sometimes it is just the thing needed to lift your image into a whole new league.



## Mow the lawn and empty the bin



Most photographers love to show images of motives *as they looked*. Many photographers hate to spend time photo shopping to *clean* up the scene. Some photographers spend more time composing their images than post processing them.

The image above is showing a part of the largest moving dune in Denmark: Råbjerg Mile. It is about 20 meters high, cover about 1 square kilometer land and hold about 3,500,000 cubic meter sand. In the image you see sand, sky, clouds and some sunrays. You also see footprints – not mine.

If you would have seen a sand shovel, a twig or something else in the image, that would have been very “loud” and probably taken all focus away from the elements: Earth (sand), Wind (clouds) and fire (Sunrays).

You can avoid polluting your image with different techniques: You can clone the unwanted elements away at home using your photo editor, you might be able to recompose (photograph from another angle) or you can physically remove unwanted elements before you photograph. I removed a twig from the sand before taken the image.



## It is all about the light



Composing images is not just about composing the physical elements (motives) in the image. Composing light is just as important – if not more.

It is of course very easy to see the importance of light composing when we look at night photography. Here you have to make sure that there is light enough to show the viewer the elements in scene. Remember that objects glowing are much more visible than objects merely reflecting light. Just look at the difference between the building with the blue light and the post holding the red flares.

Sometimes you even have to decide if the light itself or the element beaming the light is the motive. Look at the image: Is the building in the background with blue light a motive or is it the light?

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