

# CREATIVE SECRETS

## SIX TIPS FOR BETTER COMPOSITION

SIMPLE, FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES FOR MAKING STRONGER PHOTOGRAPHS.  
BY RUSSELL HART

Composition's touted Rule of Thirds shouldn't be a rule at all. Creative photographers routinely break it: They often place horizon lines perilously close to the top or bottom edge of the frame, or put them right in the middle, positions that the Rule of Thirds would deem unbalanced or static. Creative photographs often place important elements of a scene close to the sides of the frame rather than a comfortable one-third of the way in. They may even crop those elements with the edge of the frame—cutting off the top of a head or showing just a fragment of something that's mainly outside the field of view. Conversely, effective photographs may center the subject, another violation of the Rule of Thirds. Our point? Imposing an imaginary grid on your subject can seriously cramp your style. So here are some compositional strategies far simpler than trying to locate the Rule of Thirds's four floating points.

**Frame, don't aim.** Your camera is not a gun. Rather than simply centering whatever caught your eye, put it in context: Move the camera (continued on page 84)

**Composition 101** "Do not place the main point of interest in the very center of the photograph. It should preferably be located somewhere in the upper half."  
—POPULAR PHOTOGRAPHY, MAY 1937



Photographer **Sam Abell** is not one to shoot and run. The *National Geographic* veteran takes time with his subjects, usually photographing them in more ways than one. These variations include composition: For this street scene from the Greek Island of Santorini, Abell first made a picture that included a memorial statue on the left of the frame and the windows of a taxi at the bottom (above). He then moved in closer and lower for a second shot, eliminating the statue and windows (below).

### TWO VIEWS

The result is more abstract and ambiguous, with fewer perspective cues creating a flatter image in which foreground and background seem to merge. This enlightening pair of images is taken from Abell's new monograph, **The Life of a Photographer** (Focal Point/National Geographic, \$40). A visual master class, the book pairs images of a single subject that differ in light, season, the moment itself, and, as here, composition. We think the tighter view is more mysterious and interesting. And you?



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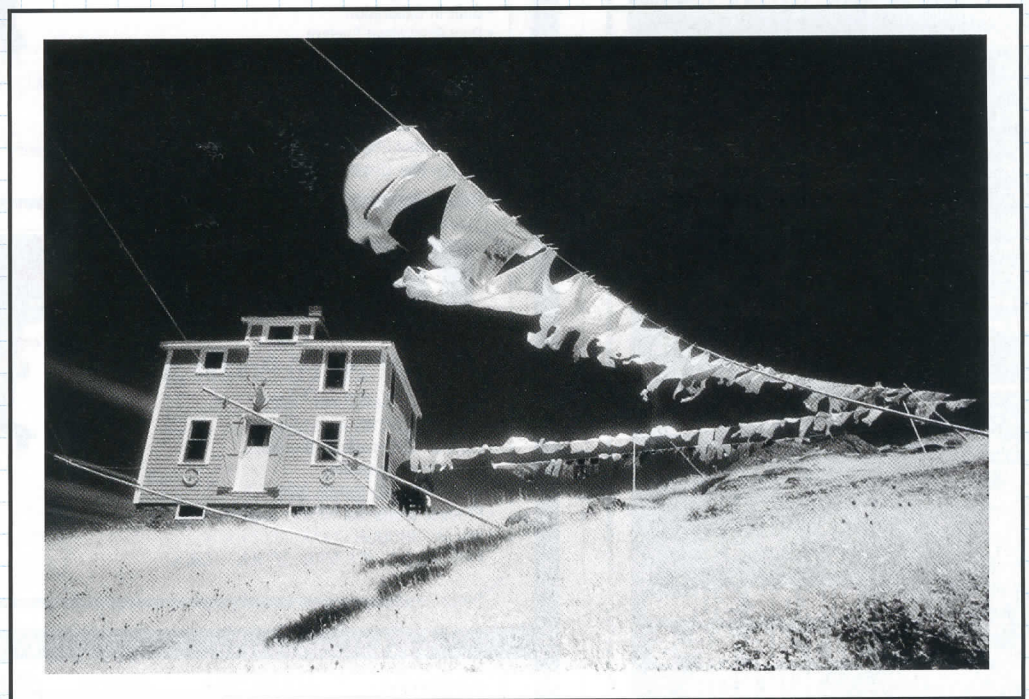
## IN THE BALANCE

Placing your main subject **off-center** can create a more dynamic composition, but don't do it arbitrarily. Shot with a 50mm normal lens, this photograph (right) puts the antique figurehead at the left of the frame so that the oval mirror is fully included and the window woodwork **bisects** the image.



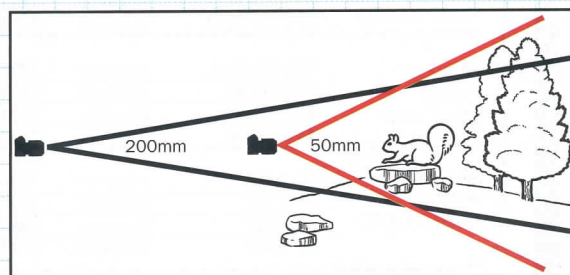
## NEW POINT OF VIEW

Another way to add drama to a scene is to photograph it from **a low angle**, but again, do this with purpose. Here (below, right), shooting from a crouched position placed the windblown laundry against a red-filtered sky, which separates it visually from the house.



## GO THE DISTANCE

Why move in physically rather than zoom in to make your subject fill the frame? Because shooting from a closer distance with a wider-angle lens lets you keep the main subject the same size in your photograph but include more of the background, as shown in this diagram (bottom). So when you see something you want to shoot, don't just stand there and zoom in. Here, a picture shot from far away at a **200mm** setting crops off the tops of the trees behind the main subject (narrow angle). Moving in closer with a **50mm** setting (wider angle) allows you to keep the main subject the same size in the frame but include the tree-tops. Remember: The only way to change the size relationship between foreground and background is to change your physical distance from the subject.



(continued from page 80) so that other interesting, relevant foreground or background elements are included in the frame and/or distracting things are cropped out. This may require placing the main subject off-center in the frame, a photographic strategy often used to make an image more dynamic. Be sure to press your eye firmly to the camera so that you can clearly see—and use—the whole viewfinder.

**Put people's heads at the top of the frame.** Like most humans, photographers are engaged by faces. But a face can be so compelling that you forget about where you're putting it in the frame—and it ends up in the middle, with dead space above. Unless there's a compositional argument for placing a face lower in the frame (say, to include something important in the background behind it), make it a habit to lower your camera angle so that the subject's face and head move toward the top of the viewfinder.

**Make your subject fill the frame.** That much-repeated Robert Capa quote about the need to get closer is true, more or less. Many pictures fail simply because the photographer didn't get close enough to the subject. If you're afraid you'll miss "the moment" in the time it takes to change position, go ahead and shoot—then move in closer and take another, tighter picture. Don't rely on after-the-fact cropping to make a subject fill the

# SECRETS

frame. In addition to degrading image quality, it doesn't allow you to change the relationships between the main subject and the background.

## Move in, don't zoom in.

Effective composition requires legs. Unfortunately, the convenience and quality of modern zoom lenses have led a lot of photographers to use zooming as their main compositional tool. At times a longer focal length is necessary: When getting closer might distract or scare your subject, when doing so simply isn't physically possible or safe, or when you want to shoot from a distance to "compress" elements in the scene. But whenever you can, moving closer rather than zooming tighter usually makes a picture more interesting because it lets you adjust the visual relationships between things in the frame—for example, to create more depth between the subject and the background. When you just stand there and zoom, those relationships don't change.

## Change your lateral position.

Shifting your position sideways to photograph something does more than simply allow you to shoot it head-on. If you've ever taken a picture in which the subject's head seems to be impaled by a telephone pole or sprouting a tree, a step sideways might have been the remedy. Small changes in lateral position—sometimes just a few inches—can prevent objects at different distances from overlapping in confusing and unattractive ways. Bigger moves can entirely change a subject's background, replacing a cluttered or drab background with one that's simpler and/or more colorful.

## Change your vertical angle.

When you're about to take a picture, chances are you don't give much thought to moving up and down, thus changing the height from which you're shooting. You probably take nearly all your pictures from your own standing eye level, whether it's 5 feet 2 inches or 6 feet 2 inches. But no photographic rule commands that eye level is the best height from which to shoot a subject. Photographs of children are usually much better when they're shot at kid's-eye level; a low angle can also make an ordinary-sized subject look monumental or minimize receding planes in order to simplify or flatten a scene. A high angle can also simplify a subject by lessening the overlap of objects at different distances; it literally helps you see over one object to the next. To get higher, consider standing on a chair or stepladder or climbing up on a car or into a tree. Just don't sue us if you fall.

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FLASHPOINT	1220	252	2.6 Sec	5.25 lbs.	6v	<b>\$279<sup>95</sup></b>
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