

# 7 Deadly Compositional Sins

Forget about adhering to the rules of composition and instead focus on staying clear of the pitfalls of a particular scene or situation

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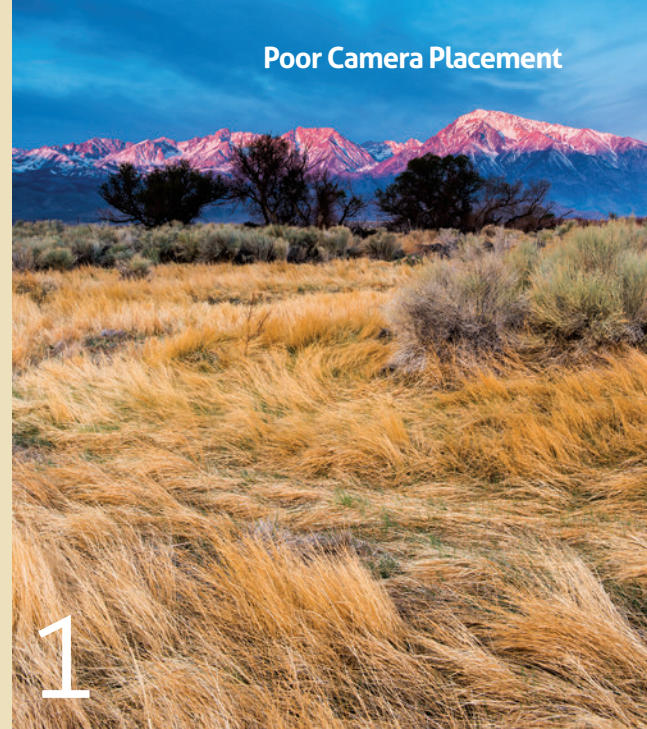
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Most of us have heard of the “rules” of composition, but how many of us have ever contemplated the “sins” of composition? Despite the fact that many photographers enjoy the technical aspects of the craft, at its roots, photography is no different than painting or drawing. The same fundamentals of art that apply to creating a work with a brush or a pencil also help determine the success of a photograph, and as artists, we all can learn something from a little trip through art history.

Throughout history, there have been many different versions of the “little box that collects light,” and, today, without a doubt, we live in the golden age of these light-collecting boxes. With modern photo gear, photographers can produce work that was considered impossible even five years ago. But while our cameras have advanced to amazing heights, nothing has really changed in terms of what makes a successful image. Fundamentals of art that worked for Leonardo da Vinci while he was painting the “Mona Lisa” in the early 1500s are still very much alive today, even while shooting a camera at 10 frames a second.

When non-photographers look at a successful image, they say things like, “Wow, you must have a great camera!” But did people say, “You must have a great brush, Mr. da Vinci”? If the talent of the painter created the painting, why do people believe it’s the camera and not the photographer that makes the photograph? Alfred Stieglitz, Ansel Adams and Edward Weston all worked during their lifetimes to push the public perception of photography from a skill of merely capturing reality to the craft of interpreting reality and creating “art.”

Poor Camera Placement



**1 Boring camera placement.** Camera placement is the simplest way to change the overall feel of a photo. We’re used to seeing the world from the human eye-level perspective. Thus, placing the camera at a different level or angle creates drama and the photos immediately capture our interest. Imagine how much bigger and more grand a fall aspen grove looks from the viewpoint of a mouse, or how much more dramatic a runner in a landscape looks if the photographer is standing on top of a truck. Putting the camera in an unexpected spot adds excitement to images and makes people stop and look.

With this thought in mind and today’s technology to play with, the obvious next step is drone photography, where, for less than the price of many lenses, you can strap a camera on a remote-controlled quadcopter and get shots from the bird’s-eye perspective. The sky is literally the limit!

Good Camera Placement



Simple, Clean View



**2 Overcomplicating the image.** All too often, we see photos of amazing landscapes or wildlife, but there are objects in the frame that distract from the subjects. The most common example of this is something that doesn’t belong in the background. Backgrounds should complement the subject and help set it apart from the rest of the scene. When there are distracting patterns, branches or bright spots, these complicate the image and draw the viewer’s eye away from the subject.

Everything in the frame should be there for a reason and in some way help to tell the story of the subject rather than detract from it. If the image were a pencil sketch, would it include that branch, bright spot or power line? If not, then it shouldn’t be in the photo, either. Remember, less is more. Keep it simple and clean. Of course, there are times when you can’t move a tree or mountain, but if these things can’t be incorporated into the image, it may be time to walk away and shoot something different.

# 3

## Lacks Strong Leading Lines



## Good Use Of Clean S-Curves

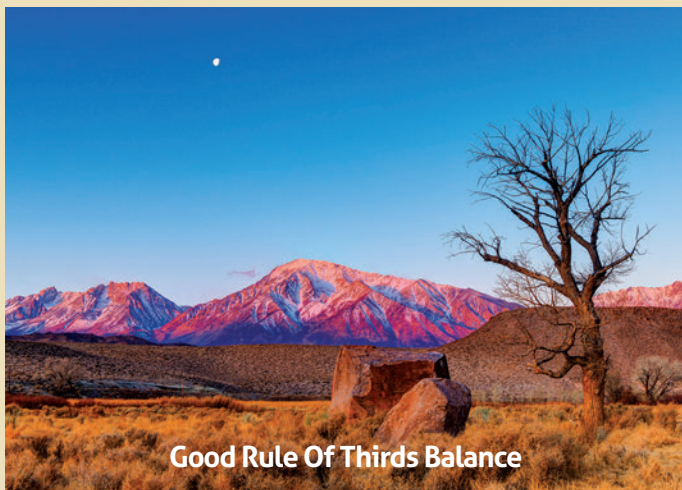


**3 Lack of strong lines.** Lines help move a viewer's eyes through the frame and create motion. Well-placed lines allow an artist to control the viewer's experience—what's seen, and most importantly, what's not seen. With conscious placement of leading lines, diagonals and S-curves, images take on a 3D feel and force the viewer to slow down to see where the image leads. Ideally, the good use of lines makes a viewer stop flipping through photos on the phone, tablet or magazine—and pause. When a viewer pauses long enough to have an emotional response, the photo is a success. In a world where images are undervalued and our brains are over-stimulated, this pause is a great indicator of a strong photograph.

## Off-Balance Visual Weight



# 4



## Good Rule Of Thirds Balance

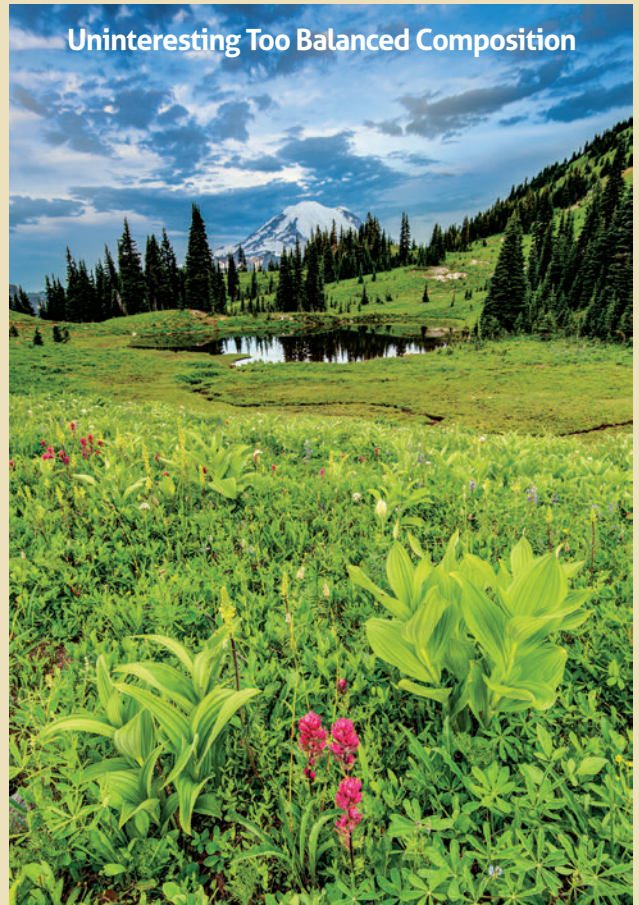
**4 Awkward visual weight.** While a photo can't actually be put on a scale, "visual weight" is key to the success of an image. Visual weight is the term referring to the area that draws the eye within a composition. The majority of the time, this "weight" is also the photo's main subject. Depending on the positioning of the subject within the frame, the photo can seem off-balance or too "visually heavy" on one side. In order to balance this visual weight, often a sub-subject needs to be added to the frame so its weight can "pull against" the weight of the main subject. This works best when this sub-subject helps to tell the story of the main subject, and the most successful images often create this balance using leading lines to connect subjects that are strategically placed using the Rule of Thirds.

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## Good Use Of Uneven Composition



## Uninteresting Too Balanced Composition



**5 Too much balance.** While Sin No. 4 is all about unbalanced visual weight in a composition, too much balance can also be deadly to a photo. Understanding the nuances of this concept can be tricky, at first. A slightly uneven composition in a photo keeps the viewer's eye moving around the image and stops it from becoming bored. Having uneven numbers of subjects (typically three) helps create this visual motion and leads to more dynamic images.

This concept can be traced back to classical Greece and the idea of the Golden Mean. In the Renaissance, painters like da Vinci revived these ideas of uneven numbers in composition. Today, this rule still holds true of the strongest pieces of art. These works don't always have just three subjects, however, but sometimes the application of three unique visual elements such as light, atmosphere and subject.

6

## Too Little Space For Runner



## Adequate Space For Runner To Move



**6 No space left for movement.** In order for images to have visual motion, there needs to be space for a subject to move. The prime example of this is giving a runner a place to run onto the page rather than off the page. Before online news, when newspapers were king, much attention was paid to what direction runners were running and where on the actual page the photo was placed so the athletes didn't run

off the newspaper. This concept still applies in both individual images and bigger projects such as books or PDFs.

Focus on giving your subject a place to move, even if it's a static subject rather than a runner. With landscape images, pay special attention to where a creek may be flowing and give it a place to go. It's often a perception of motion in context that creates movement rather than an actual subject in motion.

# 7

## Good Placement Of Subject



**7 Poor placement of subject.** The final deadly sin of composition is poor layout within the frame. The Rule of Thirds was first penned by John Thomas Smith in 1797, but the concept can be traced back to the ancient Greeks and their idea that everything in nature is divided into unequal relationships. Using the concept referred to as the Golden Mean, everything from flowers to the human body can be divided into these relationships. Thus, to be visually appealing, the frame should never be divided equally, and our subjects should never be framed exactly in the middle. By dividing the frame into thirds (vertical and horizontal) and then placing the subject near one of the junction points of these thirds, we strengthen the image's connection to the rhythms of the natural world.

**Extra Credit! Rules are meant to be broken.** Once learned, these guidelines can be severely bent if the opportunity presents itself to create a fresh, new image. Just because a photo follows the rules and is technically correct, it's not necessarily engaging. Many by-the-book photographers hate to hear this, but slightly flawed images with emotional impact are often more powerful than those that are technically perfect and follow every rule.

The obvious historical example of engaging imperfection is the photo by Robert Capa of the landing on Omaha Beach during the D-Day offensive in 1944. The image is underexposed and blurred due to a darkroom error, yet it's one of the definitive photographs of the 20th century. That a photo with so many technical errors can carry such weight and capture so much emotion proves the point that while technical know-how is important, the "soul" of an image trumps all.

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*Josh Miller's images have been featured in publications throughout the world and his work is represented by Aurora Photos. To find out more about his work and his workshops, including Costa Rica in the summer of 2015, follow Josh on Instagram @joshmillerphotography or check out his website, [www.joshmillerphotography.com](http://www.joshmillerphotography.com).*

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