
COMPOSITION, THE PUZZLE THAT COMPLETES A PHOTO

Quick Guide

Written by Kent DuFault



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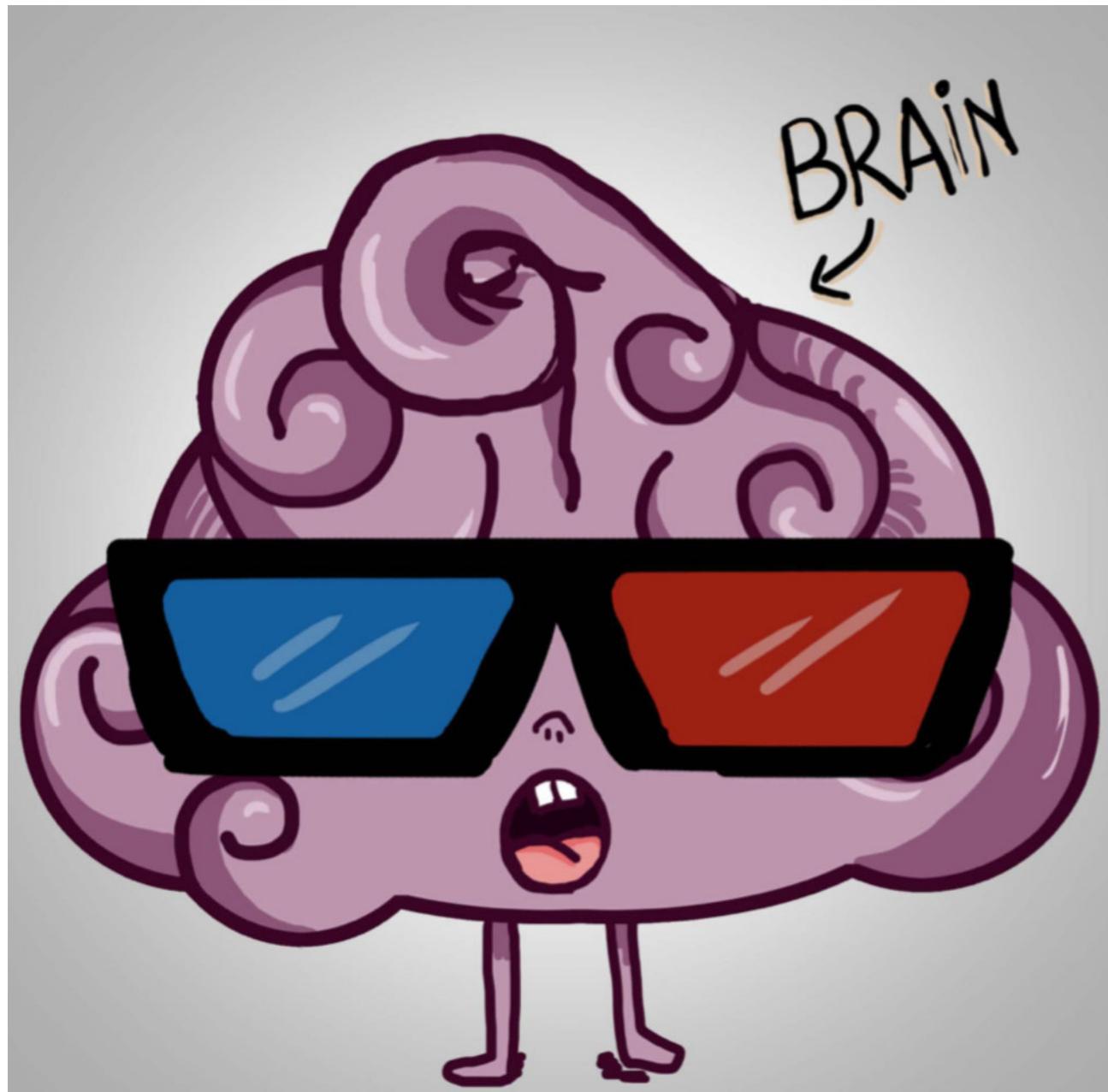
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Artwork by Clarisa Ponce de Leon

Why is photo composition so dang important?

Composition is **essential** because we must fool the brain of a random spectator that views our photographs!

From birth, our brain is trained to see the world in three dimensions. We have two eyes placed on opposite sides of our heads. They send visual stimuli to our brain, which produces a three-dimensional image.

There is nothing magical about composition.

Whenever you compose a picture, you are trying to inform the brain of someone else who wasn't there of what you found interesting.

When you raise the camera to your eye, you are, in fact, subconsciously composing a picture.

The magic (your photographic superpower) comes in the knowledge of **HOW** to compose your photographs in a pleasing fashion to others, how it communicates your message, and how it derives an emotional response.

That's why composition is important, and now you know why!

Here is what you will learn:

- The importance of composition in photography
- Producing a solid message versus a weak one
- The definition of composition



Photograph by Callum Hill

- The relationship between composition and story
- Why leaving a mystery in the photo story is good
- Using the concept of intent
- Weaving a path and telling a story at the same time

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to improve your composition skills for better images, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide: [Understanding Composition](#).

Composition is simply the arrangement of elements within your photograph to make it appealing to the broadest audience possible.

When starting out, this will take thought and practice. As your skill level increases (much like riding a bicycle), it will become second nature – an unconscious reaction to events that unfold around you.

Let's look at a couple of example photos to help solidify the 'why' of composition.

The intention here was to show this boy enjoying blowing bubbles.

However, the unorganized composition has weakened the message considerably. Rather than appealing to a broad audience, it comes across as uninteresting (except possibly to this child's relatives).

It has little universal artistic appeal.



Photograph by Gianandrea Villa

This bubble-blowing photo has immediate universal appeal.

Why? It is superbly composed.

Here are the composition elements that work well in the image on the left:

- It has a clean background that provides color contrast and location information without interfering with the subject or her activity of blowing bubbles.
- The bubbles are repeating and provide interesting shapes that are clearly defined and easily visible against the background.
- All the critical elements are in focus, and all the non-critical parts are out of focus.
- We can see the subject's facial expression.
- The line of sight from the model points toward the bubble-blowing activity.
- The bubbles and hand are placed in the 'sweet spot' within the entire image framework.



Photograph by Gayatri Malhotra

DEFINITION

Composition – noun.

- 1) The nature of something's ingredients or constituents. The way in which a whole or mixture is made up.

Synonyms: configuration, structure, formation, framework, form, and organization.

Let's look at another example.

This shot really represents an opportunity lost. At a minimum, we can determine that something interesting was going on.

However, beyond that, we are very much in the dark. We don't know what the gathering is about. We know nothing about the people involved, especially the boy, who the photographer aimed to feature.

Leaving some mystery in a photo can be good. It stimulates the viewer's imagination. However, the photographer must include enough information to allow the viewer to formulate a story in their mind.



Photograph by Gayatri Malhotra

This photograph, by the same photographer, is a much better-composed shot.

- We now know what the gathering is about.
- We now have a clear sense of the mood and story involved.
- The placement of the man holding the sign creates a vital subject, with the background providing additional storytelling elements.
- The shape and graphics of the sign immediately establish the man as the subject.

When talking with photography students about composition, I often try to hammer home the concept of intent.

The intent should be clearly tied to composing your photos.

- 1) The photographer sees something that catches their eye.
- 2) They make a decision to photograph it.
- 3) They determine what they are trying to say about the situation that caught their eye. This is determining intent.
- 4) They compose elements of the scene to complete their intent.
- 5) They take the picture.
- 6) When post-processing, they edit to further enhance their intent.
- 7) They complete their photo.

Many photographers only complete steps 1, 2, and 7. The results are often photos that don't communicate an intended message.

Give it a try! Compose with intent!



Photograph by Kent DuFault

The image on the left is a fine example of weaving a path and telling a story with a photograph.

Let's break it down.

THE PATH:

- A robust leading line is created by the road into the scene.
- Secondary leading lines are created by the contrast between the dark trees and the sky.
- Monochromatic color sets the mood.
- The car is a focal point and creates a subject area for the overall scene.

THE STORY:

- It is a dreary day to be out driving on the road. There is a sense of loneliness and cold in the moment. Perhaps because of the conditions, there could be danger around the corner.



Photograph by Kent DuFault

Here are a few composition techniques I would like you to try. Include a story with each attempt:

- 1) Leading line
- 2) Focal point
- 3) Rule of Thirds
- 4) Monochromatic color
- 5) Depth of field
- 6) Frames



Photograph by Kent DuFault

CONCLUSION

The concept of composition can be daunting when starting out in photography. However, it's much like riding a bike. If you practice at some point, it will become automatic, and you won't even think about it anymore. Start learning with the six composition tools listed above, and when you've mastered them, go on to more complex composition techniques. Start with a good base and build from there. Most of all, have fun!

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Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) Why is photo composition essential?
- 2) What is your brain trained to see from birth?
- 3) What three superpowers do composition skills give you as a photographer?
- 4) Why is universal appeal important?
- 5) What is the definition of composition?
- 6) True or False: You should never have a mysterious unexplained element in a photo composition!
- 7) Composition and _____ are closely tied together.
- 8) True or False: You should always compose with intent.
- 9) Name four of the six beginner composition tools listed at the end of the guide.



Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (and **FREE!**) photography resources:



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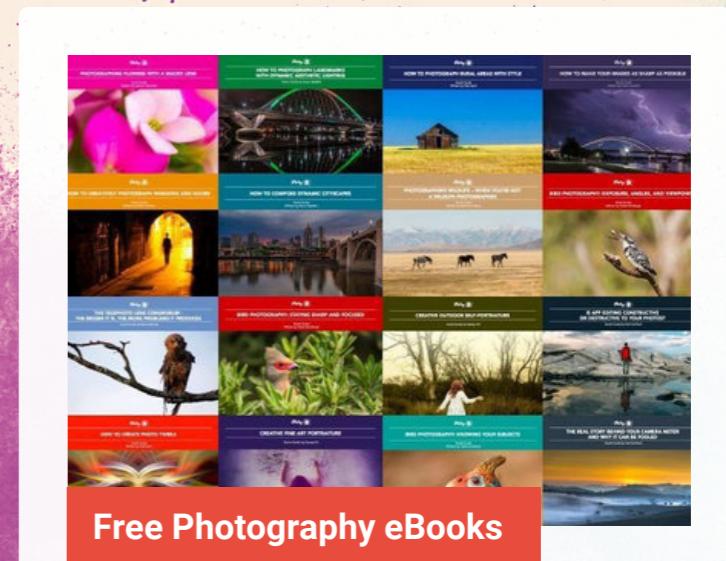
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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