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WHAT IS A LEADING LINE AND HOW DO I USE IT?

Quick Guide
Written by Jo Plumridge

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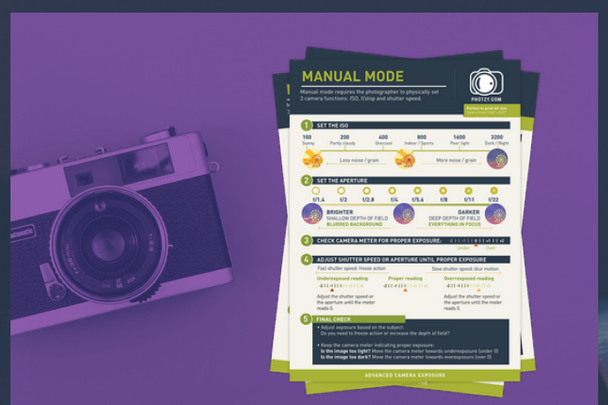

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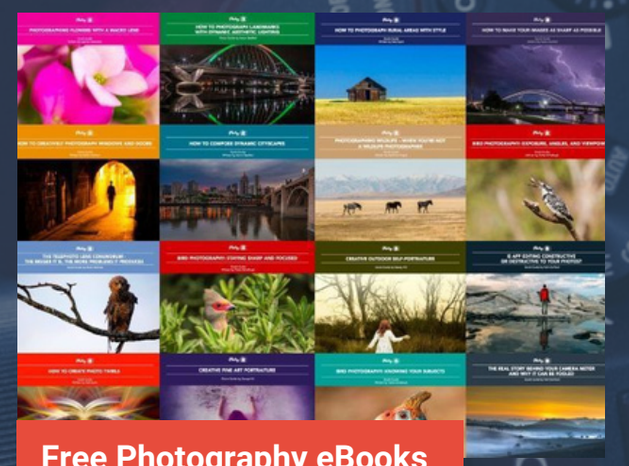

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Photograph by Majestic Lukas

A leading line doesn't necessarily have to be sharp to direct your viewer's gaze to the subject of your image.

Leading lines are one of the essential composition tools that all photographers should learn about. While the concept in itself isn't complicated, using leading lines correctly requires understanding alongside that magical photographer's eye. In this guide I'll be discussing leading lines, including what they are and how to use them to create magical shots.

Here's what we'll cover:

- What is a leading line?
- Why are leading lines important?
- Types of leading lines
- Looking for leading lines
- Using leading lines to enhance your composition
- Creating leading lines
- Further tips for using leading lines

Recommended Reading: If you'd like to improve your composition skills for better images, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide: Advanced Composition.

WHAT IS A LEADING LINE?

Leading lines refer to the technique of using lines in an image to direct a viewer's gaze through your image to the main subject. Usually, you'll find that these lines start at the bottom of the frame and guide the eye upwards, from the foreground to the background. A leading line can be anything that resembles a line and is capable of leading your viewer's eye in a certain direction.

Photograph by K. Mitch Hodge

The curving line of the coast forms a natural leading line directing a viewer through this photograph.

WHY ARE LEADING LINES IMPORTANT?

Key Lesson: Our eyes naturally follow lines to their conclusion, meaning that using them in your photography is an incredibly effective tool to help engage a viewer. One of the most vital elements of photography is creating a connection with a viewer, and leading lines are one of the simplest ways to do so.

Leading lines help to guide your viewer through your composition. This means you can use them to draw attention to the parts of the image that matter (i.e. the subject). They're also helpful for guiding the eye away from areas you don't want so much attention paid to! Leading lines help to create flow and dynamism throughout a composition and are also a simple way to create depth in an image.

TYPES OF LEADING LINES

- Vertical lines are often used to convey strength and stability. You'll often see vertical lines used in architectural photography, where the goal is to get perfectly vertical and parallel lines.
- Diagonal lines are particularly effective as leading lines, as the human eye is naturally drawn to them. Diagonal lines that lead at a sharp angle away from the edges of the frame work best, invoking a sense of movement and helping to lead the eye from the foreground to the background of your image.
- Converging lines are lines that aren't parallel and are slowly moving together. They are a very good way of drawing the viewer's attention to a focal point of a photograph.
- Curved lines, such as the sweeping curve of a shoreline, work well in landscape photography and help to give an image a softer feel.
- Implied lines are those formed by a person, animal, or even an object whose line of sight points towards the main subject of your photograph.

LOOKING FOR LEADING LINES

When I talk about 'lines,' I'm not just talking about obvious things such as a straight path! Leading lines can be found pretty much anywhere—the key is knowing where to find them. I mentioned paths as they are a great place to start. A path, by its very nature, is always leading somewhere! Once you've mastered using a path as a leading line, here are some other things to consider (this is by no means an exhaustive list!):

MAN-MADE

- Paths
- Roads
- Bridges
- Fences
- Buildings
- Piers
- Boardwalks
- Doorways
- Windowpanes
- Things in a row (lampposts, bollards, etc.)
- Bricks

NATURAL

- Clouds
- Sunrays
- Rocks
- Tall grass
- Trees
- Shorelines and waves
- Sand dunes
- Rivers
- Hills and mountains
- Cliffs

💎 **Key Lesson:** Finding leading lines is just a case of training your eye to look for them. Next time you start to set up a shot, look around and see what leading lines you've already naturally incorporated into your image. And don't forget that not all leading lines need to be straight!

Photograph by Andy Holmes

A curving leading line can work from front to back and back to front within the same image, creating a strong composition.

USING LEADING LINES TO ENHANCE YOUR COMPOSITION

As I mentioned above, a path (or indeed a road) is a great way to start working with leading lines. Paths and roads are always leading somewhere, which means they're an easy way to guide a viewer from the foreground to the background of your photograph. Paths are also great leading lines as eventually they'll begin to converge inwards to a vanishing point (where the two lines converge into theoretical infinity). This type of shot also makes it very easy to use leading lines in conjunction with the Rule of Thirds, meaning you can produce a nicely balanced shot quite simply.

Of course, you're not limited to using leading lines from front to back in your image. Diagonal lines create a strong 'point' and allow you to really draw a viewer's eye to your subject. Or use the fact that human eyes look from left to right in an image and place a strong subject on the right-hand side of the image, with your diagonal lines converging across the image to your subject. You should, however, avoid straight horizontal lines in an image. They cut the image in half and don't lead the viewer anywhere.

Leading lines should also enhance your composition. Here are a few ideas to get you started with this:

- Position strong lines leading from the foreground to the background to create depth and perspective in an image.
- Use curving lines to lead your viewer on a journey around the image.
- Place your subject at the point where your leading lines converge so that your viewer's attention is drawn to the subject.
- Make sure your leading lines always lead to 'something,' even if it's just an infinity point. You don't want the lines to suddenly disappear out of the image, as this will just confuse a viewer.
- Lines created by repetitive structures (such as a row of lampposts or a series of archways) can create particularly strong images, as they add a great sense of depth to a shot.
- Don't forget that even humans have lines created by their bodies and faces! While not exactly leading lines, you can use angles when shooting people to create a stronger photo.

Photograph by Thomas Bennie

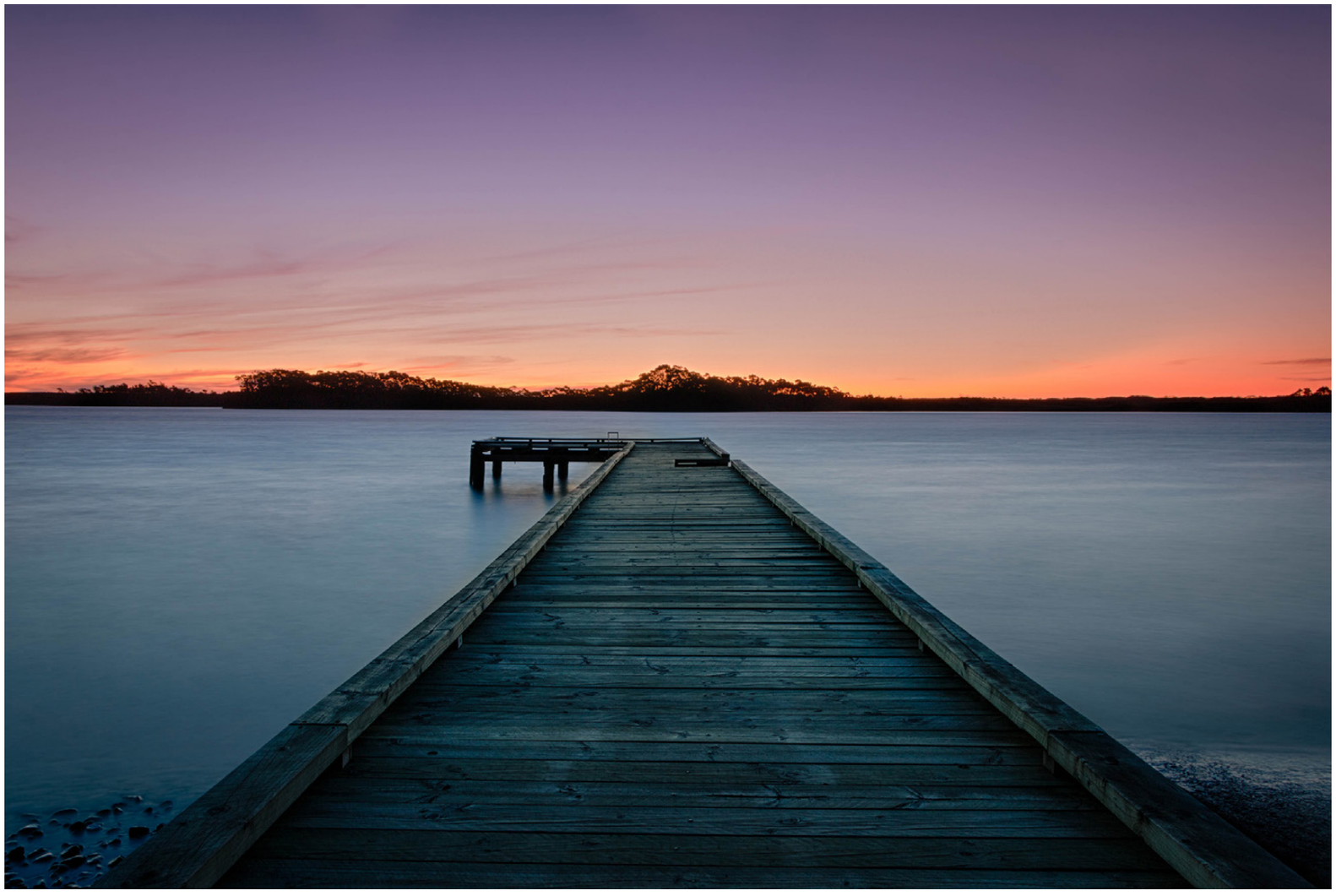
The sweeping curve of the road combined with the upward sweep of the night sky creates multiple leading lines throughout this image.

CREATING LEADING LINES

Key Lesson: As you become more experienced with working with leading lines, you could consider 'creating' your own leading lines. To do this, you'll be using long exposures to create 'streaks' in your images. These streaks can then be used as leading lines. To create artificial leading lines, you will need to use a tripod to keep your camera steady. You'll also need a Neutral Density (ND) filter. ND filters essentially 'darken' the image down by a specified number of stops (2, 4, 6, 8 and 10), thus allowing you to keep your shutter open for longer without over-exposing your shot. This is important, as you'll need a longer exposure to create the streaks. Obviously, you can only create streaks with something that moves—water and car lights at night are two obvious examples. Experimenting with this can lead to interesting and unusual leading lines.

FURTHER TIPS FOR USING LEADING LINES

- **Use the widest lens you have in your kit bag** – A wide-angle lens allows you to capture a larger area and a more expansive scene, meaning it's easier to position leading lines in your frame. This helps to deepen your composition and gives more space for leading lines to flow through a shot.
- **Experiment with multiple leading lines** – If you can find multiple leading lines in your shot that all lead to the main subject, you'll have a particularly strong composition. But if the lines deviate from your subject, you'll confuse your viewer and potentially guide them in the wrong direction, so only use multiple lines that are going the same way!
- **Leading lines vs. paths** – Paths (not in the sense of a manmade path!) are simply lines that point towards the horizon as opposed to a specific focal point within your image. A path, therefore, isn't a leading line as it's not really directing your viewer's gaze in any particular direction.
- **Go low or go high** – Changing your angle of view can make a big difference to your leading lines. It can sharpen your leading lines and the angle at which they enter the image, helping to make them more diagonal and therefore more dramatic.



Photograph by Paul Carmona

CONCLUSION

Leading lines help to create much stronger compositions in your images and are a simple and effective way to help direct your viewer through an image. Understanding them is key to improving your photography when you're first starting out and, after a while, they will become second nature to you.

Recommended Reading: If you'd like to improve your composition skills for better images, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide: Advanced Composition.

Self-Check Quiz:

1) What is a leading line?
2) Why are leading lines important?
3) Name the different types of leading lines.
4) What kind of line should you avoid using?
5) What filter do you need to create artificial leading lines?
6) Which lens is best for creating leading lines?

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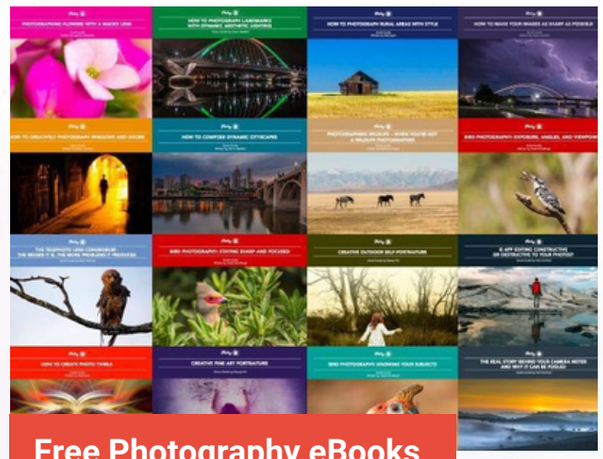

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jo Plumridge is a UK-based freelance writer and photographer. She writes photography, travel, and opinion pieces for magazines, websites, and books, and specializes in portrait and corporate photography. You can view some of her work on her website, www.joplumridge.co.uk, and follow her on Twitter at JoPlumridge.

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