



FIVE ELEMENTS FOR STANDOUT IMAGES

Short Guide

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We have all seen great photographs. Whether they're hanging in a gallery or reprinted in the pages of a photo book or posted in high resolution on a webpage, each of us has surely laid eyes upon a photograph deemed to be great. A photograph may be labeled great by a random smattering of individuals or by the collective opinion of the larger photography community. It might be a photograph of World War II soldiers that we consider great; or, perhaps, a photo of a mother and child, or a sparkling waterfall. Photographic greatness seems to defy categorization; virtually anything has the potential to make a great photograph.

If we take a broad and simplistic turn and define a great photo as one that stands out from the crowd, one that somehow separates itself from the plethora of average and not-so-great photos encircling it, it only makes sense that we ask what specific elements of any given great photo make it stand out.

Is it composition and framing? Exposure? What about the location or setting? Yes, each of these elements contributes to the making of a good image, but as we will see below, a great photograph is a mix of both tangible and intangible factors.



Jason Devaun

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/34316967@N04/9191493780/in/photostream/>

1. LIGHT

This may sound fairly obvious, as light is the most basic ingredient of any photograph. You simply can't make a photo in the absence of light. But in order to move beyond the basics, light has to be given a great deal of consideration. How a photographer uses light — harnessing both the quantity and quality of light, manipulating the direction of light, making measured decisions about what time of day to shoot when using natural light — demonstrates his or her understanding that this most essential element is the starting point for a potentially great photograph.

Think for a moment about the classic portrait lighting patterns such as butterfly lighting, loop lighting, or Rembrandt lighting. Each lighting pattern changes how the landscape of the face is perceived by the viewer, from slimming and flattering to soft and glamorous to dramatic. None of this would be possible without a knowledgeable use of light.



Magdalena Roeseler

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/magdalena-roeseler/10103244315/>



Aurimas
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/needoptic/11616754686/>

2. TONES

This is one of those intangible components of a standout image; it's something that we might struggle to describe coherently, but we know it when we see it and it does have meaning and importance. When a photo exhibits not just beautiful colors but beautiful gradation between all the colors in the scene, and those colors and tones serve to enhance the subject, then we are looking at a well-toned image.

A similar case is made for black and white photos, where contrast plays a role akin to color tone. If the element of tone is underused, it's probably because it is not so easy to visualize. Those who are able to visualize tones and the important role they play increase their potential for creating a great image.



Giorgio Luciani ©

Giorgio Luciani

https://www.flickr.com/photos/giorgio_luciani/4775614086/

3. THE MOMENT

Yet again, we must discuss an abstract element. Moments are elusive and unpredictable. Moments are fleeting. It's a testament to a photographer's observational skills, patience, and vigilance when we see a photograph and are seemingly magically drawn in to it based mostly upon what appears to be happening in the shot. Some photographers have attributed their "being there" to luck. While they may not be wrong in that regard, luck wasn't responsible for the particular image they were able to create. The moment is such a critical element in a great photograph because our eyes can't preserve a moment like a camera can. That frozen moment can then be shared, allowing others to experience the moment in their own way.



Alias 0591

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/renemensen/9263051322/in/photolist-f7xyrq-fwVTC6>

When the photographer captures a unique, moving, or any other significant moment, the meaning of that moment is then made available for interpretation by all of humanity.

For further evidence of the importance of the moment in photography, just consider legendary "decisive moment" photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, who stated, "To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression."



Daniel Zedda
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/astragony/5637616102/>

4. COMPOSITION

Composition is something all would-be photographers learn about from the onset of our photography education and training, no matter if that training is formal or self-guided. We are inundated with information on the importance of composition, as if it were nearly as important as lighting. And perhaps it is. Composition brings order to a photograph. How much impact can a photo have if it is cluttered and disorganized? Even if the shot contains an interesting subject and catchy colors, it isn't likely to resonate with viewers if they can't make logistical sense of what they're looking at. In this sense, composition means more than following specific rules; meaningful composition is more generally related to spacing, positioning, and lines. How does each one of these things interact with the other and with the subject? It is a matter of how the eye flows throughout the scene. Great photographs are aesthetically pleasing to the eye because the subject rests comfortably amongst its supporting features.



Mario

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/64738468@N00/2036777681/>

5. POLISHING

There have been and will continue to be heated debates about post processing. How much is too much? Should you have to process an image at all? At some point these discussions become counterproductive and the irony of the topic seems to be lost on some participants.

Post processing was a part of photography during the film days as it is now; Photoshop wasn't invented just to give digital photographers something else to do. How an image is finished or polished via post processing is the final chapter in the overall story. Great photographs are those that exhibit thoughtful processing touches which serve to complement all the other elements of the photo. Great post processing enhances, not distracts from, an already great image.



Jason Devaun

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/34316967@N04/7541170982/>

FINAL THOUGHTS

This list isn't intended to be definitive; different photographers with their own vision and approach to capturing the world may have a different set of elements that contribute to their creation of standout images. And that's perfectly okay — what matters more is that they are able to communicate their vision with the rest of us. The five elements included here are indeed present in great photos, but they aren't the only set of elements that might guide a photographer in making standout photos.

It is incumbent upon each individual to determine what elements are most important and relevant to their style of shooting and follow them according to their creative leanings. Following one's instincts is, perhaps, the ultimate means by which to make standout photographs.



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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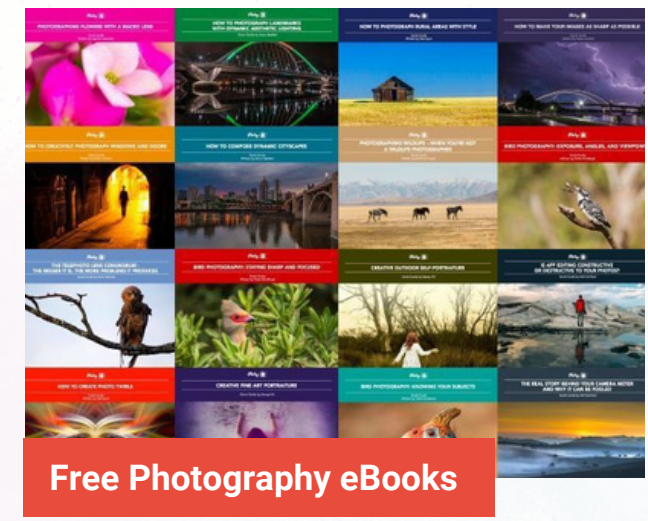
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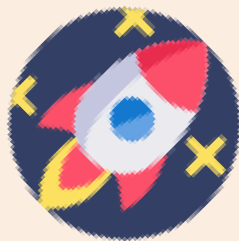
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About the Author



Jason D. Little is a photographer (shooting macros, portraits, candid, and the occasional landscape), part time writer, and full time lover of music.

You can see Jason's photography on his *Photography Blog* or on *Flickr*.

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