

Composition Case Study #08

ADVANCED COMPOSITION

Oftentimes when you're out shooting pictures, you have to work fast to capture the moment. There isn't time to 'organize' the composition of the shot, and perhaps you don't even want to, as it might destroy the moment.

This image is a great example of this type of moment.

Two things will happen to you as a photographer in a situation like this.

The first is that you will compose your shot immediately, based upon your knowledge and training, as you shoot the picture.

The second is that you will use post-production to 'firm up' your original intent for composition.

Examine this image. Traditional thinking would suggest that there are a couple of problems with this shot.

The first problem would be the boy on the far left. He is cut off right on the edge of the frame. However, there is room where one could easily crop him out.

The second problem is the boy in the background. His unusual body language makes him quite noticeable. If a person were adept at post-production, they may be tempted to remove him.

In this case study, I'm going to make a point that both of those boys are absolutely necessary to the success of this photograph.





From your studies, you know that a photograph should have a strong cohesive subject. The composition should also form a path through the picture and provide the viewer a stopping point.

This photograph is tricky in that respect.

What usually indicate the subject are the composition and the placement of critical focus.

Think of critical focus.

Inside the red oval, we have four equally focused faces, all of which have strong expressions. They are all vying for attention equally.

Despite the fact that we do not want to miss a detail on any of these beautiful girls as we take in the photograph, our experience with the image is better when we have a final resting spot.

Composition is going to have to create a path and a stopping point using visual weight.



A composition path typically leads the eyes into a picture. However, occasionally, the path is lateral – going from one side to the other. That's the case here.

The girl on the far right is out of focus. The boy's extended arm is a focal point. The boy on the far left creates visual tension by being cut off. These three elements result in a natural flow of right to left.



This flow indicates that the girl within the red circle should be the stopping point. She also has several other elements that are working in her favor to be the stopping point.

Take note that I said "the stopping point." That's because in this case the subject really is the group of four girls together. They are all in critical focus, and they all have strong expressions. But we still need a stopping point for the path, and that stopping point is the girl in purple.

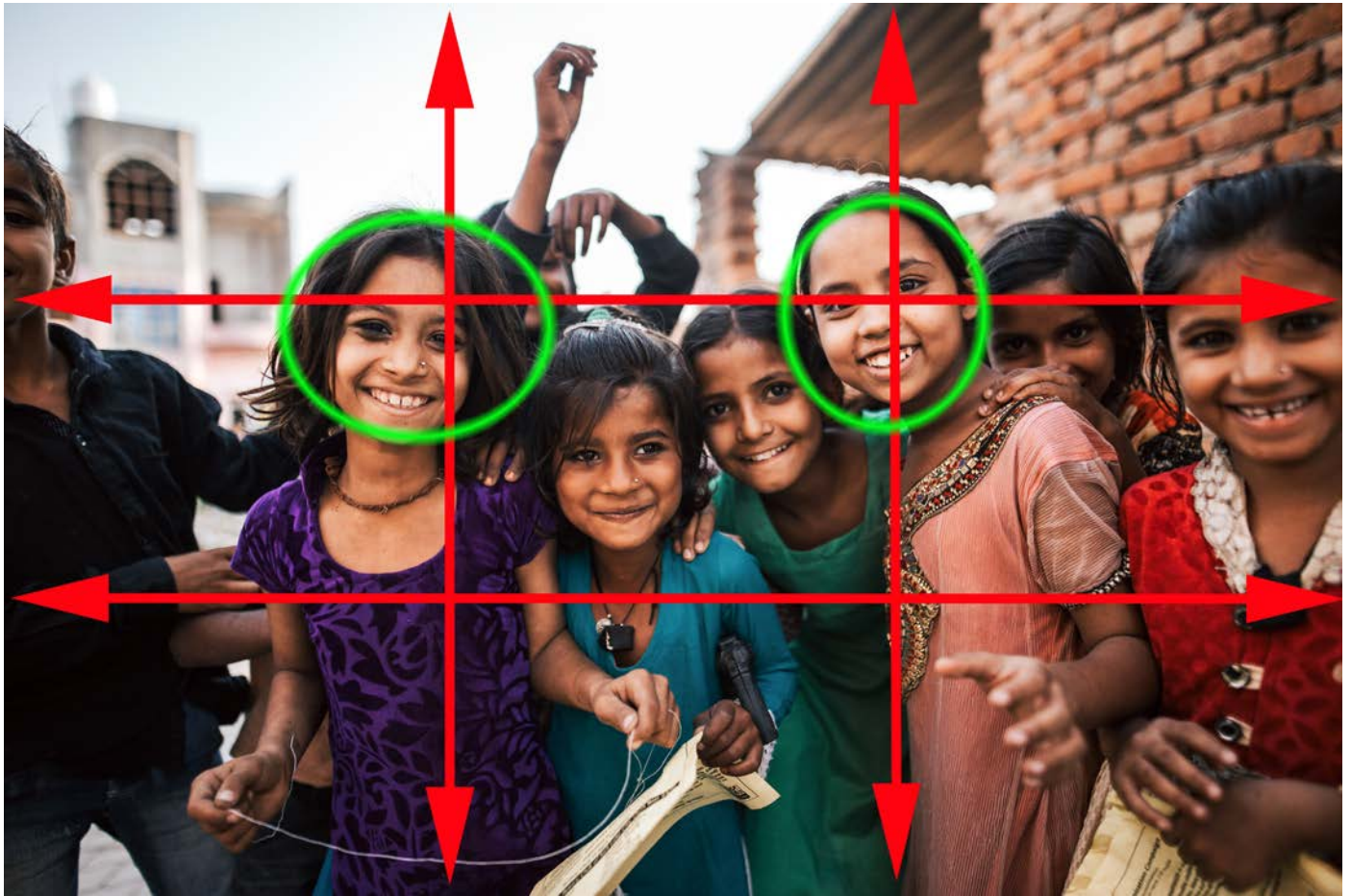


The other elements that work in favor of the girl in purple to be the stopping point are her extended hands and the string that she is holding.

They form a triangulation to her face. They also create a strong contrasting shape that, while very visible, follows the natural flow of the shot.



So, why is that cut-off boy important to this composition?



When applying the Rule of Thirds to this image, we can see that two girls fall onto the sweet spots of the grid: the girl in purple and the girl in pink.

In fact, the girl on the right actually holds a slightly stronger position.

This is where the two boys carry critical jobs within this composition.



We've already established that the girl in purple has good placement, a strong triangulation, and a strong shape.

By adding two things, she overcomes the girl in pink as the strongest visual element.

Firstly, the arm of the boy in the background is a leading line pointing directly toward her.

Secondly, the boy on the left creates visual strength on the left side of the frame, because he is cut off.

Now, one might be thinking...

"No. That kid on the left has got to go."

Let's look at what happens.



Using the Crop Tool Overlay in Photoshop, I have shown you what happens to the Rule of Thirds by cropping the boy from the left.

Our strongest potential stopping point has now lost visual weight, because she has been pushed off of the sweet spot for the Rule of Thirds, and there is no longer a strong visual pull to the left that was created by the boy's presence.

The status of the girl on the right hasn't changed. She is still resting on the sweet spot for the Rule of Thirds.

What's happened here is that we have lost our path through the shot.

Would this picture be awful? No. It would be adequate.

You're not here to learn how to compose adequate photographs. You want to compose great photographs, and sometimes that means breaking some rules—even leaving a boy cut off on the edge of the frame!