

A POINT OF LIGHT ALMOST ALWAYS WORKS WELL, UNLESS...

By Kent DuFault

Let's take a moment to dissect the composition of this picture.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/VLF1CAeGNNA>

Trevar Chilver - Nikon D7000, 34mm setting on a zoom lens, f/4.5, 1/250th, ISO 140

What is the subject of this photo? Is it the sunset? Or, is it perhaps the tree? Might it possibly be the landscape overall? If the image's subject is the overall landscape, what is the purpose of the sunset and the tree?

In my opinion, the tree is the subject, and the sunset is a focal point. Do you see it that way?

What about the bird? Did you notice the bird? It could be a secondary focal point, but I see it merely as a distraction- what I call an eye snag- because it doesn't have enough visual weight within the framework of the composition.

This shot is a cookie-cutter example of a 'point of light' focal point.



Key Point:

A bright point of light creates an excellent focal point because it virtually always attracts immediate attention. But what about after that? Does it have a purpose? Is it improving the shot by creating a focal point and adding an element of the story? **The best focal points have multiple jobs.**



Assignment:

Create a portfolio of sunset images that use the sun as a focal point **and** an element of the story. This is going to push your creative boundaries a bit. A simple point-and-shoot shot of a sunset will not work. Instead, consider all of the elements within the frame. Start by identifying your subject and then move on to the focal points and other aspects of composition.



Photography by Kent DuFault

Nikon F4, 105mm lens, Kodachrome 64 film, ISO 64

Let me show you an example.

In this photo, the subject was the schooner. I was also on a boat. You can imagine how everything was fluid and moving. I could have eliminated the sunset by letting it fall behind one of the ship's sails. However, I knew it would create a fantastic focal point. I carefully chose the sun's positioning so that it didn't

overwhelm the boat as the subject. I did that by placing it on the edge of the mast where it was about to become obscured from view. The combination of boat, people, clouds, and sunset create a very compelling story. I made specific choices that improved the outcome, and my focal point was critical to that outcome!



<https://unsplash.com/photos/Gl3vCuntN90>

Piotr Musiol - Sony DSLR-A580, 30mm setting on a zoom lens, f/4, 1/400th, ISO 100

It's clear that the sheep is the subject of this shot. This is an excellent example of a poorly placed sunset as a focal point.

Essential: What is the purpose of a focal point? Its purpose is to direct the eyes toward the subject, or it should be the subject.

In this example photo, the focal point (the sunset) clearly draws the eyes away from the subject and not toward it.

Placement of your focal points within the space of the frame, and relative to your subject positioning, is critical to your success.



Assignment:

Take a variety of sunset photos using the sun as a focal point. Experiment with placing the sun in different areas within the frame. Try a lot of various angles and lenses. When you have achieved a nice variety of images (at least 50)- view them as a group. I use Adobe Bridge for that purpose, but Lightroom works well too. Pick five of the fifty images that strike you as being the best. Then, try to determine what about those five images makes them better than the rest of your shots. (Hopefully, it is your placement of the focal point within the space of the frame!)



Photograph by Kent DuFault

Apple iPhone 6 Plus, 4.15mm lens, f/2.2, 1/15th, ISO 125

I completed the exact assignment that I just gave you while visiting Santa Monica, California.

I chose this photo as my favorite shot from the group. Let me tell you why.

- The subject of my photos was Santa Monica, California (this was created while on a photo assignment about the city).
- The Ferris wheel is an icon of the Santa Monica Pier, an iconic location within Santa Monica, California.

- I tried many different angles, but the subject became more about the Ferris wheel and less about the city when I was too close.
- This shot embodies the location, and the Ferris wheel is a perfectly placed and easily recognized focal point!

Let's talk about other styles of 'points-of-light' focal points.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/7eRRVsfGd4E>

Salome Guruli - No EXIF

This very clever shot incorporates **two focal points** that are points of light, and it does this through the careful use of backlighting.

The sun's positioning at the edge of the frame would be a big problem- an eye snag-**except**, by carefully positioning the woman's hair, a second focal point has been created that has more visual strength than the sun.

Why is that?

- Warm colors advance and cool colors recede within our perception of a scene. This is a proven visual concept. The sun is cool in hue, and the woman's hair is warm in hue. Therefore, she advances (carries more visual weight), and the sun recedes. If you close your eyes and then open them while looking at this photo, they will immediately go to the sun because it is the brightest point within the frame. But then, just as quickly, they will move to the woman where they will come to rest on her as the subject because she advances (due to warmer colors).

- Secondly, areas of deep contrast always carry more visual weight than low contrast. Up by the sun, the contrast is diminished due to lens flare and haze. The deepest contrast occurs between the woman's hair and the surrounding background!



Assignment:

Create a portfolio of images where you use backlighting as a point-of-light focal point. Some suggested subjects would include people, flowers, trees, windows, and other semi-transparent subjects. Keep in mind the concept of advancing and receding colors due to color temperature.

Does a point of light focal point always have to be small and bright within a photo frame to be effective?



https://unsplash.com/photos/T2vkCx_b04E

Leo SERRAT - Canon EOS 700D, 24mm lens, f/6.3, 1/125th, ISO 200

Absolutely not!

This image is a superb example of a point of light focal point that is subtle yet highly effective.

Just out of curiosity, would you have considered this photo of Glacier Point as making use of a focal point if we weren't discussing it?

What is the subject here? Is it the overall landscape, or is it Glacier Point?

This example could be debated.

However, I tend to think that the entire landscape is the subject, and the beautifully lit Glacier Point area within the frame is a focal point. I say that because the composition encourages exploration of the entire frame.



https://unsplash.com/photos/T2vkCx_b04E

Leo SERRAT – Edited by Kent DuFault - Canon EOS 700D, 24mm lens, f/6.3, 1/125th, ISO 200

In this composition of the same picture, the lighting still provides a point of light focal point, but now the visual weight has been shifted, and the focal point is now also the subject.

Do you see the difference?



https://unsplash.com/photos/T2vkCx_b04E

Leo SERRAT – Edited by Kent DuFault - Canon EOS 700D, 24mm lens, f/6.3, 1/125th, ISO 200

Did you notice that the photographer included a secondary focal point? I didn't see it at first! This brings up a very crucial piece of information about focal points.

Important: If you include a focal point within your photo, make sure that it is visible. It isn't working for you if viewers must hunt for it.



https://unsplash.com/photos/T2vkCx_b04E

Leo SERRAT – Edited by Kent DuFault - Canon EOS 700D, 24mm lens, f/6.3, 1/125th, ISO 200

It took only a few seconds of post-processing with the Adjustment Brush and the Cloning Tool (in Photoshop) to bring that second focal point to a more useful visual weight. (It's still a bit weak, though.)



Assignment:

Practice including lit portions of a scene as a focal point. You can't use sunsets here or any bright pinpoint light sources. Think of this shot (above) and how the lighting provided a focal point. Stretch your thought process and your composition skills.