Michael Freeman’s Photography Foundation Course

The Photographers Eye: A Foundation course in Composition

Lesson 1
Course Notes

With Michael Freeman
Introduction

Composition is nothing less than the underpinning of photography. Henri Cartier-Bresson, the master, wrote, “This recognition, in real life, of a rhythm of surfaces, lines, and values is for me the essence of photography; composition should be a constant of preoccupation, being a simultaneous coalition – an organic coordination of visual elements.”

Composition is the way in which photographers turn real, chaotic life in front of them into images within a frame. As such, composition begins with a clear understanding of what the subject is, what it means to you, and what you want to say about it. Cartier-Bresson again: “You can’t compose gratuitously; there must be a necessity, and you can’t separate form from substance.”

Hello I’m Michael Freeman. This Foundation Course will equip you to create distinctive, meaningful images that express your personal way of seeing, an essential first step on the path to developing your own photographic style. In keeping with other Foundation Courses, and tracing back to the original Basic Course at the Bauhaus, this courses gives a thorough grounding for pursuing photography seriously.

It covers all aspects of composition, far beyond the idea of simply making a vaguely satisfying image by following so-called rules (least of all the trivialised rule of thirds).

It is designed to be the basis for further courses of any kind in photography. There are two course books to accompany this, my The Photographer’s Eye and its companion volume The Photographer’s Eye: Graphic Guide. You will need to have access to these either with your own copies or from a library. There is also an e-book version of The Photographer’s Eye available from the publisher by clicking here

Michael Freeman
Course Curriculum

Week 1: The Job of Composition

Composition has a purpose in both art and in photography, otherwise it’s just an exercise. It has three possible jobs: Create Order, Direct the Viewer, Create Interest. Depending on the subject and on the photographer’s style and ability, sometimes just one of these three dominates, but there are also images in which two or all three play a part. The examples used to demonstrate these will also underline that universal rules are anathema to meaningful composition. Rather, individual photographers develop preferences for certain methods.

Week 2: Frame and Framing.

The frame is the bounding shape, artificial and yet the accepted tradition of imagery since painting left walls to become objects. This is the bounding area within which you decide what to include, and what to exclude. Framing the shot is the part of composing that deals with the broad sense of what part of a scene to enclose, how it divides, and where a main subject goes. The shape of the frame, its format, has a strong influence on composition, with the added complication that digital photography allows extending the frame in any direction.

Week 3: Contrast and Balance

One of the most fundamental concepts in imagery is that of contrast—contrast between elements and parts of the image, from brightness and texture to sensation and meaning. In one sense, images exist because of contrast. This in turn leads to the concept of balance, in which the audience’s values play a part in deciding whether relationships in a composition are comfortable, elegant, interesting or challenging. We explore different kinds of balance, from static to dynamic, and finally the conceptual balance between content and the graphics of the image.

Week 4: The Viewer’s Eye

Photography is today’s most widely used form of visual communication, and the role of the audience cannot be ignored. Photographs have a life only when put on display. We look at the psychology of perception as an aid to composition, and consider the different visual weight of subjects. Attraction and repulsion. Expectation (gestalt) and its influence on closure, rhythm, pattern and texture. Perspective and depth in two dimensions.
Course Curriculum

Week 5: The Graphic Elements

The pure geometry of the image uses a visual vocabulary which is usually broken down into the following. Points (one, two, several), Lines (horizontals, verticals, diagonals, curves, eye-lines), Shapes (triangles, circles, rectangles) and Vectors (moving parts and anticipated movement). Even when separated from content, they have definable effects. When reviewing other photographers’ work, Cartier-Bresson famously and idiosyncratically used to view the images upside down for this reason.

Week 6: The Photographic Elements

The mechanics and optics of the camera and lens create their own graphic elements and effects in the image, and additional visual vocabulary unique to photography and which has become understood and accepted by everyone. Here we look at these in the following order. Focus (deep, shallow, tilted), Shutter and Motion, Focal length and the family of lenses, from wide-angle through standard to telephoto, seen both as an influence on the graphics of the image and as giving more deep-seated sensations and character.

Week 7: Composing with Light and Colour

Light and colour themselves can be used to play an essential part in composing the image. With light, its key, quality (especially including chiaroscuro) and the exposure given to it in-camera are all important for the overall visual effect of the image. Colour opens a different world of perception, and we draw on modern colour theory and the Human Vision System (HVS) to examine colour theme, colour accent, colour relationships, colour palettes (rich, muted), and finally, black and white.

Week 8: The Process of Shooting

Camerawork in its broadest sense, not limited to the technical, helps to realise the ideas already explored above. We look at ways of searching and hunting for images to bring them to realisation as photographs, and also at the concept of a repertoire of satisfying images (or at least, images that are felt to work) that each photographer develops, whether unconsciously or deliberately. We look at the techniques of reaction and of anticipation, exploration and construction, and juxtaposition, which holds a special place in photography.
Michael Freeman’s Photography
Foundation Course: The Job of Composition

Yes, Composition has a job to do. Like everything else in the process of making a worthwhile photograph, it has a purpose. It has more than one job to do, in fact, depending on the scene or the subject. And also depending on what you are trying to achieve in the image you’re about to shoot.

This is the first class in this Foundation Course, and for a good reason I want to start with understanding what exactly composition means to a photograph. Before we begin to look at the techniques and styles in composition, it’s essential to know first what you want out of it. As with any other creative activity, if you have the basic idea in your mind, it becomes much easier to turn it into an image than just trying out different techniques to see which one you like. Composition is very much about taking charge of the image.

First of all, please understand that composition is not a polite way of making sure that things go into pre-ordained places in a photograph, and that it’s divided according to genteel rules. Composition, which you could also call design if you like, actually underpins photography. It’s the way in which you, as a photographer, actually control what appears in an image from the flowing, disordered real-life scene in front of you.

Let’s start with this picture taken in a cattle camp in Sudan. It’s a young Dinka man with his long-horned cattle, but there’s more going on in the picture than just that. There’s obviously something about the timing of the shot, and about the design of it and the way the different curves interact. I’ll come back to this picture in lesson 5 when we talk about curves, but it’s enough for now to say that it’s more than a simple snapshot.

And it doesn’t follow any rule of composition like the so-called rule of thirds.
There are indeed no rules, and this is something I’ll be repeating at points throughout the course. Now you might think, hang on, surely there are things like the Rule of Thirds? Everyone’s heard of that. Well, shocking though this may sound, if there’s one thing guaranteed to make your photographs boring and uninteresting, it’s following that rule. Or following any rule, for that matter. There are techniques that have certain known effects because of how the eye and brain work, but that alone doesn’t qualify them to become rules for photographers to follow.

This is not an engineering course. It’s a creative course, and creativity depends on imagination and on entertaining an audience. The audience in this case is people pretty well like us, and we want to be inspired and surprised by the images we see. We don’t want to be bored out of our minds by seeing pictures that belong on a postcard rack. And this, as I’ll come on to in a minute, is a clue to what one of the jobs of composition is.

Now, saying that there are no rules does not mean that composition is simply a free-for-all where anything is up for grabs. It’s a creative discipline like any other, just one that hasn’t been quite so formalised as most. This is, of course, part of the problem in talking about composition, because as soon as discussions start about how and why certain arrangements or balances seem to work in an image, it’s a short step to say that artists or photographers ought to follow them if they want to be successful.

That’s something to be resisted, simply because it pushes photographers towards producing the same kind of image. Instead, one of the aims of this course is to show you the techniques that will do certain things and get certain kinds of reaction from viewers—so that you can pick and choose which ones are going to be useful for the shot you’re about to take.

Now, say the word ‘compose’ and most people will get a sense of a very deliberate and thoughtful action that’s going to take some time. There’s also a hint of rigidity, of disallowing natural expression. It sounds even a bit prissy. These feelings probably come from the history of classical painting, with very carefully worked out designs drawn on the canvas and then followed for the weeks or months it took to create a major painting.
This is the compositional framework for a famous painting, Botticelli’s Venus—or the armature as it’s sometimes known—and it was very deliberate and complicated. Fascinating, actually, but it’s got nothing to do with the normal way that photographs are composed.

It’s very different in photography. Unless you’re in a studio with a still-life to arrange, or shooting an interior, you probably have just seconds to work out the image. Henri Cartier-Bresson, who was the master of street photography, said about composition that “at the moment of shooting it can stem only from our intuition, for we are out to capture the fugitive moment, and all the interrelationships involved are on the move.”

This isn’t the last time I’ll quote from him. In other words, composition in photography is dynamic, because everything’s on the move, and it usually has to be fast. And it really doesn’t have to conform to the styles of classical painting.
This shot, which is certainly composed effectively, took a matter of seconds to decide. So what is the job of composition in photography? As I said, it’s not to conform. Well, it turns out that there are three possible jobs, sometimes alone and sometimes together. They are:- create order out of chaos, direct the viewer’s eye, and be interesting.
The real world, unbounded by any convenient frame, just goes on regardless. Often—usually—it's visually messy, even chaotic!

Well, that's life, and it's the raw material of photography. Somehow, we have to get an impression of this into a static rectangular picture frame. Specifically, we have to choose one moment, one viewpoint, one framing and freeze it. Now, looking at a busy street scene in motion, like this, is a very different matter from seeing it frozen, like this. The flow of motion suddenly becomes a jumble.

Create Order

Now look at this different scene, from the same city. The first thing that's obvious is that all the figures are clearly separated. They occupy their own space, and yet they're obviously related. They even seem to be organised into a simple geometric shape.

The result, to the viewer, is satisfying. More to the point, as viewers we can appreciate that the photographer actually managed to get the figures separated and organised. Now, I'm not saying that this is what you always have to try and do. Not at all. But you can see that it works visually, and it works because it's imposed a kind of order on the scene. It does this by means of structure. Instead of having the elements wander all over the place, overlap and fall half out of the frame, it has a kind of neatness that comes from the viewpoint, the timing and the framing. So that's the first way of creating order:-

There's also that triangle, and strengthening the geometry of an image is another way of bringing order. Geometry means mainly shapes and lines, and we'll look at these in detail in lesson 5.

Book Ref: PE 152-155
Here’s an example, a river town in Vietnam from a bridge. The back lighting’s pleasant and there’s quite a bit of time to shoot. The river traffic is busy, so maybe it’s worth waiting until we get some kind of alignment. Here, you can see it happening….. And that’s my moment. Not everyone’s choice, but personally I like things lined up in a scene like this.

But structure doesn’t have to be of just one kind. There are many different styles of composition, meaning styles of organisation. At one end of the scale is very formal and classical, like this.

Conventional and considered, with the windmill reasonably off-centre, and outlined against the blue sky with none of the clouds overlapping it.

Book Ref: PE 168-169
At the other end of the scale is what I call engineered disorder. The divisions here pull the attention apart instead of focusing it in one place. And all these faces also disrupt the attention, so that your eye jumps all over the frame. It’s anything but classical, but it clearly is deliberate. We’ll look more at styles of composition in lesson 8, but the valuable lesson here is that there isn’t just one. Fashions in imagery change over time, and very much between different personalities of photographer. There’s plenty of disagreement when it comes to style, and that’s exactly as it should be in any art. How boring if everyone agreed, which comes right back to what I said earlier—there are no rules. There can’t be in creativity.

Book Ref: PE:GG 56-57

So, creating order out of the chaos of life is the first job of composition. It’s not compulsory, but it does work.

The second job of composition is to direct the viewer’s attention to where you want it to go. It’s a way of taking charge.

Here’s one way of taking the eye across an image. Here we’re at the annual Palio in Siena, Tuscany, and the low camera position is deliberate. Flags are being thrown in the air, and after seeing it happen a couple of times, I worked out where to crouch and frame. Using a very wide-angle lens—20mm—I can get everything in from close, and at the same time from a low position looking upward I get a strong converging perspective. So although the flag is small and all the costumes are bright, the eye naturally goes up to where I want it to.
A
nd here’s another, which we’ll also look at later. It makes use of what’s
called an eye-line. Because humans are curious and nosy, we pay a
lot of attention to other people’s faces, and especially the eyes. If the
person in the picture is looking at something, we want to know what it is. It’s
a natural human habit.

So there’s a built-in direction in a picture like this, and we can hardly help but
follow the man’s gaze. In this case, it reinforces the importance of the distant
South Indian temple, even though it’s small in the frame. In other words, I
don’t have to zoom in on the temple to make it prominent.

Book Ref: PE 82-83  PE:GG 136-137
And yet another way of directing attention is by lighting, which when you think about it is very simple. In fact, most of us would do something like this naturally. Our eyes are naturally drawn towards the light—it’s another built-in response that the human vision system has.

Book Ref: PE 106-107 PE:GG 92-93
The third job of composition is as simple as this—to be interesting, to make a picture worth looking at. Simple as a goal, but it takes imagination, because ultimately it means not being obvious. And that goes back to what I mentioned about there not being rules.

Here we’re at a funeral in an ethnic minority community in Yunnan, China. The people are called the Yi, and the women, on special occasions like this, dress in their traditional clothes, which are extremely colourful and topped off with huge square hats draped in black velvet. Now on the one hand I was recording what was happening throughout the day of the funeral, shooting in a documentary way, but at the same time for me this was an opportunity for trying to make a very graphic, geometric composition that was all about colour.

As you see here, what I was trying to do was to fill the picture frame as much as possible with black, so that the patches of colour, and the face, would pop out all the more strongly. In other words, I was taking advantage of an unexpected situation. I’d never seen anything like these costumes, and nor have most people.
On another assignment, I was photographing the Evzones in Athens. They’re the palace guard, and they wear what looks like a pleated white skirt. Here the corporal is inspecting the precision of a soldier’s dress, and what makes the shot, and gives it a touch of humour, is just his head poking into frame. Here are other shots that were part of the sequence, but the one that has the added interest is this. Again, because I was taking advantage of a slightly unusual scene and making the most of its potential.

What other ways are there for stimulating interest? It seems an open-ended question, but as I’ll show you later in the course, you can kickstart your own imagination by trying a range of know techniques. Here now are three examples of another method…
This is a hot spring spa in China, and I was shooting it as a commercial assignment. I want to introduce you to an idea from cinematography...called the reveal. You see this a lot in movies, where the camera opens on a scene, then pulls back or pans to reveal that there's something else, more important, involved. Something the audience isn't expecting. But can it be used in stills? It would certainly be valuable because when it works, it delays the viewers and keeps them longer in front of your photograph.

Here I wanted to give the sense of a dark but beautiful forest at night - a bit like Avatar, if you like. I wanted the model small, but definitely visible. We used quite a bit of artificial lighting concealed behind trees and out of frame, and by this means I could keep the model very small and yet still visible—just.

Book Ref: PE:GG 42-43

Of course, the danger of this kind of thing is that if the figure is too small or doesn’t contrast enough with the setting, the audience may miss it entirely, and then you’ve lost it completely. So there’s a slight risk here.
Another example. I was shooting for a book by Sony showing football being played all over the world, and there were a few other photographers assigned also. I was in the old Spanish colonial city of Cartagena and had a couple of our neighbours’ boys to act as models, so I could do it more or less any way I chose. A natural way would be to close right in, but as the entire book was about soccer, I knew what would be wanted was variety of location, not close-ups.

So here was a perfect location, and my final shot, in front of the side of Cartagena’s lovely old cathedral, late in the afternoon with perfect raking light. The question was, how much of the cathedral could I show and how small the 2 boys while still keeping them readable. This was the idea…..that the eye would first be caught by the great mass of the door, and then because I’d place it well to the left, I could expect that after a moment the viewer’s eye would take this route to where the boys are playing. Like I said, there’s some risk attached, but I think this one pulls it off.
In other words, both of these last two examples have played with scale, a little out of the ordinary.

What else can add interest? Here’s one that photography is particularly good at—juxtaposition. Much more on this later in the course, but for now here’s a simple little lakeside scene with a boardwalk.

Now the man and the buildings in the distance of course have nothing to do with each other, but from this camera position and at this moment, the shapes marry together graphically. It’s nothing much, but it works to add interest, and makes just that little bit more of pleasant scene.

...and there are many other ways also, which we’ll explore soon.
So, to summarise, composition has three possible jobs of work to do. Maybe just one, or could be two or even all three. The point is, there’s a purpose. At the same time, the importance of composition in an image varies.

By this I mean that at one end of the scale there may be other much more important things going on—such as a compelling news event—while at the opposite end it may be the design of the picture that carries almost everything.

In fact, it’s often useful to look at a photograph and decide in what proportion its different ingredients contribute to its success. There’s no fixed way of doing this, but let’s take the following:-

Here are what I would say are the main ingredients in any photograph:
They include
Subject
Composition
Lighting
Colour
Timing
Equipment

Some will be more important or less important in any particular image, so let’s look at how it works in practice...
Let’s take this shot from the Trooping of the Colour as an example. I’ve chosen it because everything is reasonably important except for the light. The subject counts in this shot - the annual parade of the Guards regiments in London. The composition also is key - the way it’s cropped in a way to make the most of the diagonals, and the single figure of the officer in front. Lighting - not important; it could be overcast or sunny and wouldn’t really affect the shot. Colour though, plays a role - that strong red with black. Timing obviously key - getting that knee raised enough to show the boot as the officer marks time. And finally equipment - the shot does depend on a telephoto perspective and framing, 200mm in this case. Any wider and it would be a messier image.
However, now let’s look at a shot in which composition doesn’t much matter. In this shot, of a new bridge over the Mekong in Cambodia, composition plays a very minor role.

I was shooting a story about the Mekong River, and here in Cambodia, a new bridge has gone up carrying a new highway.

It has changed everything around here, and what was once a sleepy river town depending on boats chugging up and down the Mekong, is now a booming transport hub. I needed to show something of this, and after shooting around the bridge itself, which wasn’t that special, I saw this boy pull up on his bike.

He looked up, and the expression on his face seemed to suggest part of this story, a look of puzzlement at what’s happening around him. So, the one important element is the expression on the boy’s face as he looks up at the traffic on the new bridge that has completely changed river life here. You don’t even notice the composition because it’s very low level. It doesn’t have to do any work here.

And by the way, look at how I rated the camera and lens. Not very high, and this isn’t at all unusual. Camera manufacturers would really like you to believe that it’s their gear that makes the difference. Obviously you need some kind of camera, but between the options and brands available, the equipment is rarely the most important ingredient in a photograph.
Moving up a notch, here we have a conventionally balanced composition, where the aim is simply to make a satisfying image. This farm in a valley in the north of England looks pleasing because it's been given an expansive panoramic frame, and the farm itself is neatly enclosed and pointed to, like this... the tree at left and branches at upper right do an enclosing job.

So, light is clearly key here, but composition is doing a slightly more than average job as well, as you can see.
At the far end of the scale, here's a shot in which the composition is clearly playing the major part. Otherwise it would just be a shot of bathers, though admittedly in interesting light. Compositionally, it works like this:- The subject is so-so, as I said, an Indian beach scene. Not enough in itself to grab attention. But see how the composition very powerfully directs the attention to the brightest area and gives it a strong structure. Light too plays an important part, colour a little less so, while the composition depends quite a lot on the timing - getting the bathers in a row, and the moment of two legs lifted as they step into the surf. Equipment? Not much; other than it needed a wide-angle lens of some kind.

There's a range, then, of how much composition needs to contribute to a successful image, and for convenience we can divide it into three:-

Low-level composition
Satisfying/conventional
Strong composition

To summarise, then, we've got on the one hand three possible jobs that composition can do—create order, direct the viewer and add interest—while at the same time the actual importance of composition in the mix can vary. Put them all together and there are clearly a lot of permutations.