

4 of the Most Common Composition Mistakes in Photography



I've seen photographers make lots of mistakes when it comes to composition. That's not a criticism – we all get things wrong from time to time. But recognizing mistakes and putting them right is a key part of improving your composition skills. In that spirit then, here are the most common composition mistakes and errors that I've seen photographers make.

Mistake #1: Learning the rule of thirds – and nothing else

The rule of thirds is basic composition theory and it's important to understand it. But the mistake some photographers make is never trying to learn anything else about composition.

For example, take a look at the photo below. The tree is located on an intersection created by dividing the frame into three, according to the rule of thirds.



But is the rule of thirds the only principle of composition used in this photo? No, it isn't. Let's look at the other factors.

- There is negative space around the tree. It gives the subject room to breathe and creates a sense of space.
- The tree is the main focal point and there is nothing to compete with it.
- The hills in the background are faded due to the weather conditions (it was raining when I took the photo), adding a sense of depth.
- I used a long exposure (125 seconds) to blur the water and the leaves of the tree, adding a sense of motion or time passing to the photo.
- I converted the photo to black and white to create drama.

As you can see there's much more happening in this photo, from the point of view of composition, than simply placing the tree on a third. Once you understand how these ideas work you can use them in other photos and improve your composition skills at the same time.

Mistake #2: Not including foreground interest

This is a common mistake in landscape photography and some documentary photography. That's because photographers in these genres often use wide-angle lenses, which usually include lots of foreground detail in the composition.

The idea of foreground interest can be a hard concept to grasp at first but it makes sense when you start to think about it.

For example, this photo was taken with a 14mm lens (a wide-angle on an APS-C camera). It tells a story about the couple in the market. Using a wide-angle lens helped to include context – the piles of vegetables in the foreground that the couple was selling. The vegetables provide foreground interest and support the story.



The same idea also applies to landscapes made with wide-angle lenses. In the photo below the ruins is the main subject. The flowers in the foreground add interest in the bottom half of the frame.



Mistake #3: Not paying enough attention to the background

Sharp backgrounds are common in documentary styles of photography and can help tell a story about the main subject. For example, in the photo below the main subject is the three men in the photo – the barber, his customer, and the man looking directly at the camera.



The detail in the background supports the main subject and helps tell its story. We can see every detail, from the wall behind the men to the barber’s tools and products. These details are an interesting and important part of the photo.

Sometimes the opposite approach is required and you need to blur the background out to remove distractions. Part of the skill of being a photographer is knowing when to blur the background and when to keep it sharp. In some portraits (like the one right, made with an aperture of f/1.8) you can use a wide aperture to blur the background and remove details that might distract from the model.



Mistake #4: Not working the subject

The final common composition mistake I see photographers make is failing to work the subject. This means that you take as many photos as you can until you've exhausted all the creative possibilities. Sometimes you only need to take three or four photos for this to happen. At other times you may take 20 or 30. Either way, the idea is to explore different viewpoints and compositional possibilities.

The reason this works is that the first point of view you use is not necessarily the best one. If you have the opportunity, it's a good idea to try different points of view, different focal lengths, and maybe even different aperture and shutter speed settings.

This is where you can think through some of the concepts discussed earlier in the article. A good question to ask yourself is, "How can I make the photo more interesting?"

Perhaps you need to pay more attention to the background. Maybe you need to include some interesting foreground detail. Perhaps the photo would benefit from including some negative space or using a slower shutter speed to blur parts of it. The answers depend on the subject and how much time you have to explore it.

Example of working the scene

Here's an example. Below you can see four photos I made of an interesting building, each one utilizing a different point of view and composition. They were part of a sequence of 25 photos I made before I felt there was nothing else I could do.







Conclusion

There are many mistakes that it's possible to make when it comes to the composition in photography, but these are the most common that I've seen. What composition mistakes have you seen people make, or are you guilty of making yourself?