

Composing for Effect – A Redux  
by Bill Black

Over the past several years I have written a number of articles relating to composition. By now most of us are at least aware of the *rules* of composition, which I much prefer to call *guidelines*. Still many of us are ambivalent or chose to ignore the basics of composition. Ambivalence very frequently will result in a loss of communication with the viewer and very well could result in a lower than expected score in competition. Violating the usual guidelines at times can be done. But as photographers we should know that we are doing so and understand why so that the result can provide a particular impact or statement.

You may recall the PSA program presented at our March 2002 meeting where Irving Lawres, FPSA, articulated the “Tyranny of Rules.” This humorous program clearly demonstrated how the old master painters bent the rules and yet produced classic, well-appreciated classic works of art. At our October program meeting I took this approach a step or two further when I massaged the rules of composition. I researched a considerable number of articles and came up with 47 “Thou Shall Nots” or “Thou Shalls.” Then I proceeded to show how most of those rules can be broken with the results being pleasing or dramatic.

It was pointed out in a November 2002 *Outdoor Photographer* article that composition is what leads the viewer through the myriad elements in your photograph to your idea, your impression, your mood, your feeling, in other words, your point of view at that particular moment. Hopefully, when photographing a subject your mind is not cluttered and you should be, if you will pardon the pun, focused. When sharing my knowledge of photographic techniques I usually stress simplicity and conclude with the following: “Do not put any more in the frame than is absolutely necessary. Every image should make one, and only one, statement. Anything that does not support the idea detracts from that idea.”

For those of us who enjoy reading about various photo techniques I recommend a new book entitled, “Bill Fortney’s Photographic Workshop” (Northword Press). In this book Fortney delineates ten tips for making simple, yet striking photographs. These tips are listed below together with my photo renditions for illustration.

1. GIVE IT "AIR." When showing action, always leave room for the subject to move into or out of the frame. For instance, if you're showing an animal running, a bird flying or a car speeding, leave some room to show that the subject has some place to go within the frame. In other words, if the subject is moving left, place it on the right side of the image.

2. CONSIDER THE RULE OF THIRDS. This concept goes back to the earliest days of geometry, when it was called the Golden Mean. If you divide your frame

into thirds both horizontally and vertically, intersections of the lines create points of interest. Placing the subject in the vicinity of one of these points of interest can strengthen your composition. It can be applied to both horizontal and vertical compositions.

3. **MOVE IN CLOSE.** Filling the frame with your subject leads to much more impact. It also helps avoid unwanted background objects. If your subject occupies most of the frame, there isn't room for unwanted distractions

4. **BE AWARE OF MERGERS AND HOT SPOTS.** When you're composing a photograph, be extra careful not to have elements in the frame that overlap or touch, called "mergers." For instance, if we look up through the trees to the sky and several of the trees' branches overlap and prevent us from being able to tell where one tree starts and another tree begins, this is a merger. Hot spots are simply bright areas in the background or foreground that distract us from concentrating on the main subject. Whenever we look at a photograph our eyes go to the sharpest, brightest and warmest (warm colors such as reds, oranges and yellows) areas in the image. If the brightest area isn't the subject, it is distracting from what you want the viewer to be paying attention to.

5. **MAKE YOUR MAIN POINT OF INTEREST STAND OUT FROM THE BACKGROUND.** If you have a light subject try to shoot it against a dark background. Conversely, if you have a dark subject try to shoot it against a light background. The basis theory is that the eyes go to the brightest bright and the darkest dark as well as the sharpest area of an image. Keep in mind, too, that the foreground can enhance the main subject and should lead the viewer's eye into the photograph.

6. **CAREFULLY OBSERVE THE SPACE SURROUNDING YOUR MAIN SUBJECT.** Even if you have a very strong and compelling subject, any unwanted or unneeded objects in the frame can take attention away from the subject. Distractions like tree limbs sticking into the edge of the frame or bright spots in the background can be magnets that draw the viewer's attention away from the principal subject.

7. **BE AWARE OF LINES AND CURVES WITHIN THE COMPOSITION.** Leading lines can greatly enhance the main compositional themes of your photograph. "S" curves are extremely pleasing, as are classic "C" curves. Vertical lines tend to be dignified and show power, while horizontal and diagonal lines imply movement and speed. Curves imply serenity and converging lines can give the feeling of depth.

8. **INCLUDE A SIZE COMPARISON.** Often, we make photographs that need something familiar to us to determine scale. People or animals are great additions to landscape images for emphasizing the magnitude of the scene.

9. TRY TO AVOID THE BULL'S-EYE SYNDROME. It's a common mistake of beginners to place the principal subject right in the center of the frame. Though this can work, other compositions usually work better. Placing the subject in the center leads to dull, static compositions. It is understandable why we as photographers do this; the focusing aids in the camera's viewfinder are dead center except for some of the newer cameras. This is one of the major reasons for having a grid screen in the viewfinder.

10. ODD IS GOOD. When you have groups of objects or subjects, an odd number of items is easier to compose and more pleasing to the eye (most of the time). Naturally, as with a bull's eye image, there are exceptions to the rule.

In summary, sound compositional decisions will help you direct the viewer's eyes and attention to what and where you want them to concentrate. Do not confuse your viewer else your photographic message may very well be lost. And, again, keep it simple!



**1 Alpine High** – Leave adequate room for a subject to “move” into the frame.



**2 Prince of the Tulips** – A subject is frequently more attention-gathering when placed off center with the main point of focus at or near one of the “crash” points of the Rule of Thirds.



**3 Magnificent Wood Duck** – Filling the frame concentrates the viewer’s eyes and minimizes distracting elements.



**4 Cross Star Fantasy** – Be aware of objects that cause the viewer to deviate from the main subject. Here the bright lights at the lower left attract unwanted attention.



**5 Intensity** – Make your subject stand out from the background by using contrasting colors or tones.



**6 Bavarian Frosting** – Whenever possible use the surrounding environment to help frame and complement your subject such as these snow-covered trees and hills.



**7 Figure 8** – Use pleasing or dramatic curves and lines to enhance compositional arrangements.



**8 York Cathedral** – If convenient, include an object of familiar size to give scale to an image. Here the priest is dwarfed by the enormity of the cathedral’s transept and window.

**Julie Framed** – A bull’s eye placement draws one’s attention to the main subject, but frequently presents a static composition. In this image the model’s eyes are slightly above horizontal center and oriented at a diagonal, contrasting to direction of the lollipop sticks.

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**10 Rock-bound Daisies** – Small, odd numbered objects are easier to arrange, generally offer more choices when composing a pleasing image.

