

FOCUS ON

PETER ENSENBARGER

# Composing Photos



FOCUS ON  
the fundamentals



# ***Focus On Composing Photos***

# The *Focus On* Series

Photography is all about the end result – your photo. The *Focus On* series offers books with essential information so you can get the best photos without spending thousands of hours learning techniques or software skills. Each book focuses on a specific area of knowledge within photography, cutting through the often confusing waffle of photographic jargon to focus solely on showing you what you need to do to capture beautiful and dynamic shots every time you pick up your camera.

Titles in the *Focus On* series:



# ***Focus On Composing Photos***

**Peter Ensenberger**



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## **Dedication**

To my parents, who probably didn't realize when they gave me my first camera that they also gave me a direction in life.

## **About the Author**

Throughout his career, Peter Ensenberger has crossed photographic boundaries to explore different styles and diverse subjects. After studying fine art photography in college, he went on to win awards as a staff photojournalist for several newspapers. More recently, he served 25 years as director of photography for Arizona Highways, the award-winning nature and travel magazine. His responsibilities for the magazine covered a wide range of roles—photographer, photo editor, writer, and project manager. Peter left Arizona Highways in 2009 to devote full time to his own photography business. Currently, he resides in Tempe, Arizona, where he is a freelance photographer for Black Star, an international photo agency based in New York. Corporate and editorial assignments make up the bulk of his work, with an emphasis on travel and lifestyle. In addition, he leads group and individual photo workshops to Arizona's most beautiful and remote locations.

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*Peter Ensenberger*

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# Introduction

PHOTOGRAPHY IS A universal language capable of communicating to a wide audience. But photography also is a very personal affair. No two of us approach it exactly the same way. You bring to bear your own personal experiences and influences every time you push the camera's shutter-release button. Each image captures a moment in time seen through your eyes, processed by your way of seeing the world.

That's the appeal of photography as a form of self-expression. It allows each of us to artfully interpret the world around us or create our own alternative reality. For many, it's our principal creative outlet, producing images that can be easily shared with others.

With the advent of digital technology, photography has grown into one of the most popular hobbies in the world today. It's the most accessible of all art forms. As a fun and affordable pastime, photography truly is the art of the masses.

Those committed to improving their skills and techniques may enjoy lifelong partnerships with their cameras, producing photographs to be proud of. If you're persistent and willing to push yourself to achieve loftier goals, your images will begin to reveal a personal style all your own.

A good first step in refining your style is learning the fundamentals of composition that have stood the test of time. It's worth noting that many of the world's great photographers had no formal art training. They developed their visual sensibilities through observation and perception. Aspiring photographers should follow their lead.

Defining the artistry of composition, photography pioneer Edward Weston cut straight to the heart of the matter with an economy of words. "Composition," he said, "is the strongest way of seeing."

All around us, the elements of composition—objects, lines,

shapes, colors, and shadows—coalesce in apparent disarray. By raising your awareness of the orderly way these elements fit together, you'll realize the strongest way of seeing. Learning the basics of good composition helps you recognize the essential components and design artistic arrangements from the chaos. You'll produce better photographs that combine balance, simplicity, and style.

For anyone whose design skills are not intuitive, practicing the fundamentals of good composition will lead to informed decisions. It's helpful to understand the reasons behind the so-called rules of composition. Whether you're a beginning student of photography or someone who has been working at it for a while, improving your compositional skills will help you create photographs that are visually pleasing and stand up to critical scrutiny. Knowing the basics allows you to quickly recognize the potential in any



scene, design an aesthetically pleasing composition, and then capture it the best way possible. With a little practice and repetition, applying the rules of composition will become second nature to you.

First, the rules of composition are meant to create balance and visual harmony in any work of art, be it a photograph, painting, or sculpture. Better photographs can result from knowing the rules of composition, and it's okay to bend or even break the rules with good reason. Sometimes disregarding the rules introduces dynamic tension to good effect. But it's important to know and practice the basics before deviating from them.

Second, the purpose of good composition is to orchestrate the viewer's eye movement as it explores the image. Critical placement of compositional elements effectively leads the eye into and through the scene, containing it within the boundaries of the frame and eventually leading the viewer's eye to the focal point—the composition's visual payoff. The longer viewers are engaged by the composition, the more of the image they will see.

Another important basic step in every photographer's education is learning to work with light. Composition and light go hand in hand. The prominence and placement of highlights and shadows become important compositional elements when properly incorporated in your photographs. Using the prevailing light to its best advantage in any situation will have an immediate positive impact on your images. Making sure that the direction and quality of the light favors your subject is sometimes more important than the subject itself. Conversely, a poorly lit subject can ruin the success of even the best composition.

Much like the human brain's left (analytical) and right (intuitive) cerebral hemispheres, photography has opposable sides—the technical and the creative. The technical side is restricted by absolutes. For each desired result, there is a required action. If you need more depth of field, adjust the aperture. If you want a lighter exposure, change the shutter speed. Understanding photography's technical process is straightforward and can be easily learned.

Rules governing the creative side, on the other hand, are open to interpretation. They serve more as guidelines than doctrine, providing a framework within which we can evaluate the effectiveness of visual design. There are no absolutes that, when faithfully executed, will guarantee a well-designed photograph, and even a perfectly composed image can be deadly dull if the story is boring. Your creativity is the X-factor in elevating your photographs above the ho-hum.

Photography's greatest assets are its abilities to visually communicate ideas and to bring a heightened awareness of beauty to our daily lives. When ideas and beauty combine successfully with sound compositional techniques, a photograph can achieve the level of art.

## Getting started

You'll need a few essential tools to get started. And with the wide array of photographic equipment available, you've got some important choices to make. Those choices should take into account your current



*Critical placement of compositional elements and using the prevailing light to its best advantage will have an immediate positive impact on any image.*



*A zoom lens allows you to easily select the best perspective for any subject. Good optical quality is vital to capturing sharp images rendered with accurate color and contrast.*

skill level and the level to which you aspire. Knowing this helps you select equipment you'll be comfortable using now, but it also allows room for growth. Your equipment's sophistication level should increase right along with your improved technique.

Photography magazines and online forums are saturated with facts and opinions about the latest-and-greatest gear on the market, and user reviews can be invaluable in making informed choices on equipment you are considering for purchase. But buying the newest and best camera will not necessarily result in better images. In short, cameras don't make good photographs; photographers make good photographs.

You already possess the most important piece of "equipment" you'll need to become a better photographer—it's between your ears. Studies estimate that 80 percent of the human brain is wired to process visual data. By honing your visual-awareness skills, you can train yourself to recognize the potential in every photographic situation. And you don't even have to download the latest firmware updates!

Of course, the camera is the primary tool you'll be using. It makes sense to start with a fairly basic model offering intuitive operation and one- or two-step controls with user-friendly menu functions. Advanced equipment with complicated features can become an impediment to the image-making process, so don't feel like you need to spend a lot of money on bells and whistles. The easier the thought process for your camera's operation, the more likely you are to be successful at it. And the more success you have, the more you'll enjoy your photographic experiences.

In the beginning, set aside time to use your camera every day, if possible. Read and reread the user's manual until you are able to operate all the camera's functions without referencing the instructions. There are no shortcuts to learning your camera's operation. Hands-on experience is the best teacher. With repetition comes familiarity with your camera's functions, allowing the image-making process to become more fluid. Ultimately, the goal is to make the camera an extension of you, operating almost automatically in

your hands. This frees your mind of technical concerns so you can concentrate on the artistic side of the process.

The next tool you'll need in your equipment bag is a lens. If you're currently using a point-and-shoot camera with built-in lens, the choice has already been made for you. However, most digital single-lens-reflex (DSLR) cameras allow for interchangeable lenses. Zoom lenses offer the most versatility, including features such as auto focus, "fast" aperture, close-focus capability, and broad focal-length range. A zoom lens with coverage ranging from wide angle to telephoto provides the most options in one package. Zooms also are budget friendly, with one lens taking the place of several fixed-focal-length lenses.

Only the best optical glass should come between you and your subjects, so don't skimp on quality when purchasing a lens. Good optical quality is vital to capturing sharp images rendered with accurate color and contrast. Optics can vary widely among lenses and brand names, so a little research is

well worth the time invested in selecting the proper lens for your needs. Buying the best lens you can afford will help ensure good image resolution.

Another tool essential to image sharpness is a sturdy tripod. Mounting the camera on a solid base prevents camera movement during exposure and helps maintain sharp edges on your subjects. It's difficult for even the steadiest of hands to hold the camera perfectly still at shutter speeds of 1/60 of a second or slower. Photographers who pay extra for the sharpest lenses and then handhold their cameras may negate the advantages of buying expensive glass.

Tripods, like lenses, call for quality. Beware of cheap, flimsy tripods with weak leg joints. They

don't provide proper stability or stand up to the rigors of use, so you'll be replacing it every time it breaks down. Paying more for a sturdy, carbon-fiber tripod with a solid ball head and a quick-release mechanism is a wise investment that should last you the rest of your life. If you've spent your hard-earned cash on a good camera and lens, you don't want to risk mounting them on a shaky tripod.

Using a tripod also has the advantage of slowing down the image-making process, which reduces mistakes and wasted exposures. Mounting the camera allows time for you to closely scrutinize a composition and tweak adjustments to framing. It's difficult to steady the camera in your hands long enough to identify problems

and make nuanced corrections. By slowing down, you're more apt to notice subtle distractions around the edges and corners of the frame, where attention to detail can mean the difference between a good composition and a mediocre one. Other tripod benefits include precise leveling of your camera and alignment of parallel lines in your compositions.

Camera, lens, and tripod—by utilizing these three tools as your basic setup and becoming proficient in their operation, you'll be ready to delve into the creative side of photography. In this book, I have attempted to explain the artistic approach in a straightforward manner. Now it's time to play with the spatial relationships within your camera's viewfinder.







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