Photo Composition Tip 1: Simplify the scene
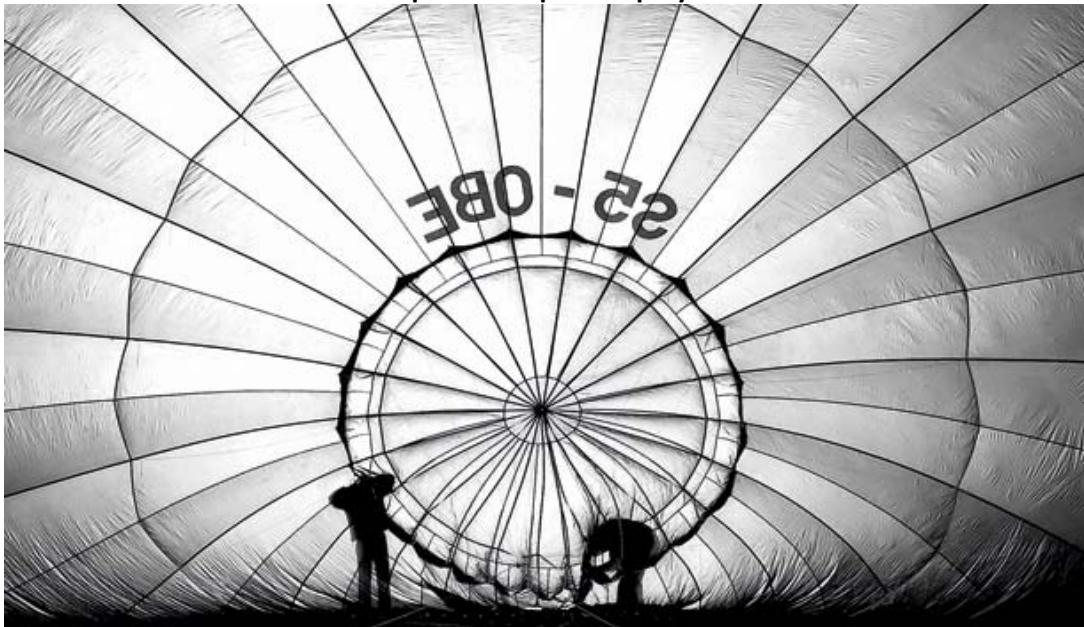

When you look at a scene with your naked eye, your brain quickly picks out subjects of interest. But the camera doesn't discriminate – it captures everything in front of it, which can lead to a cluttered, messy picture with no clear focal point. What you need to do is choose your subject, then select a focal length or camera viewpoint that makes it the centre of attention in the frame. You can't always keep other objects out of the picture, so try to keep them in the background or make them part of the story.
Silhouettes, textures and patterns are all devices that work quite well in simple compositions.

Why it works…

PICTURE POINTERS

The simpler the shot the bigger the impact
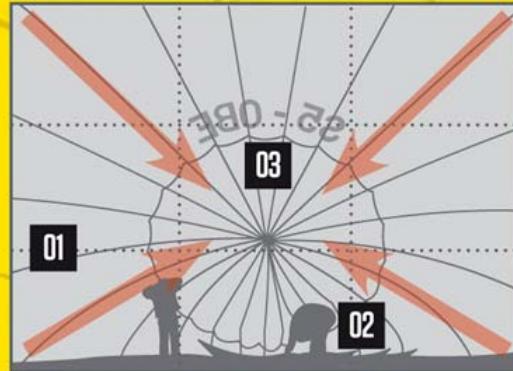
01 Move in close to cut out other parts of the scene.

02 Silhouettes and shapes make strong subjects.

03 The balloon's radial lines draw you into the frame.

Photo Composition Tip 2: Fill the frame
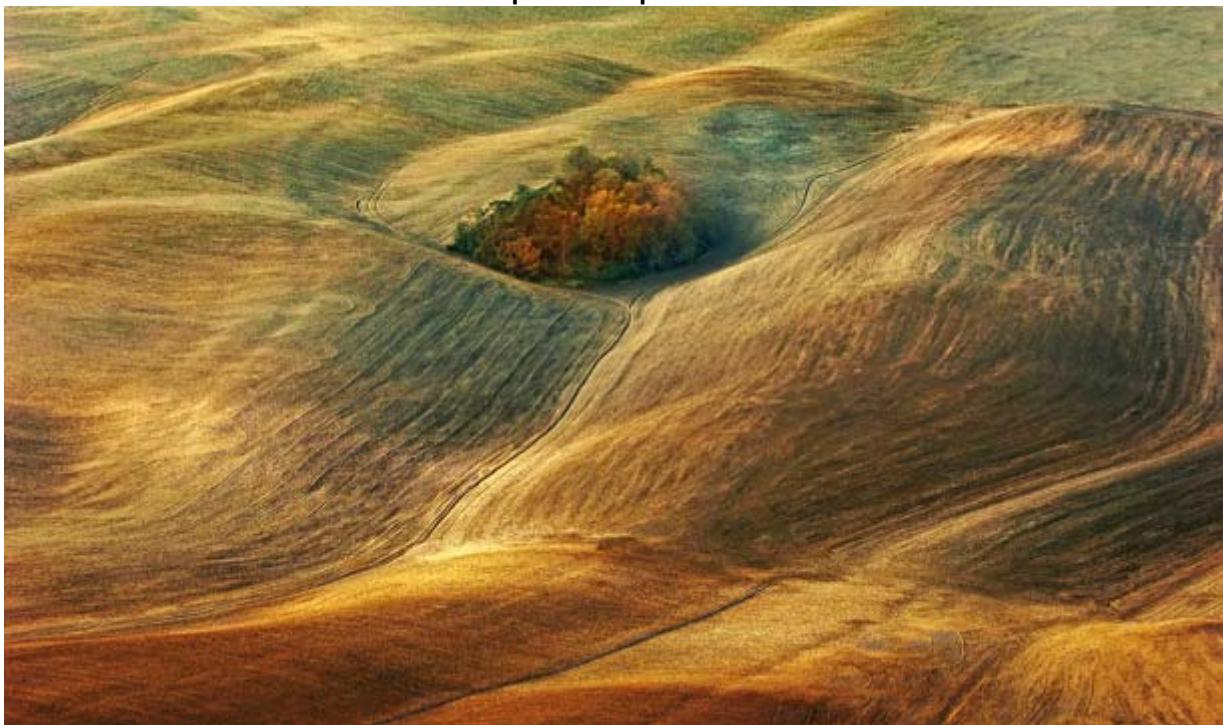
When you're shooting a large-scale scene it can be hard to know how big your subject should be in the frame, and how much you should zoom in by. In fact, leaving too much empty space in a scene is the most widespread compositional mistake (learn how to Replace boring skies in Photoshop). It makes your subject smaller than it needs to be and can also leave viewers confused about what they're supposed to be looking at.

To avoid these problems you should zoom in to fill the frame, or get closer to the subject in question. The first approach flattens the perspective of the shot and makes it easier to control or exclude what's shown in the background, but physically moving closer can give you a more interesting take on things (see our list of Digital camera effects from A-Z).

Why it works…
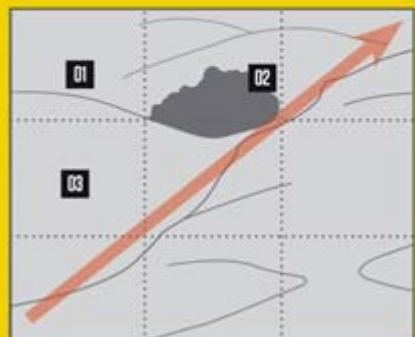
**Photo Composition Tip 3: Aspect ratio**
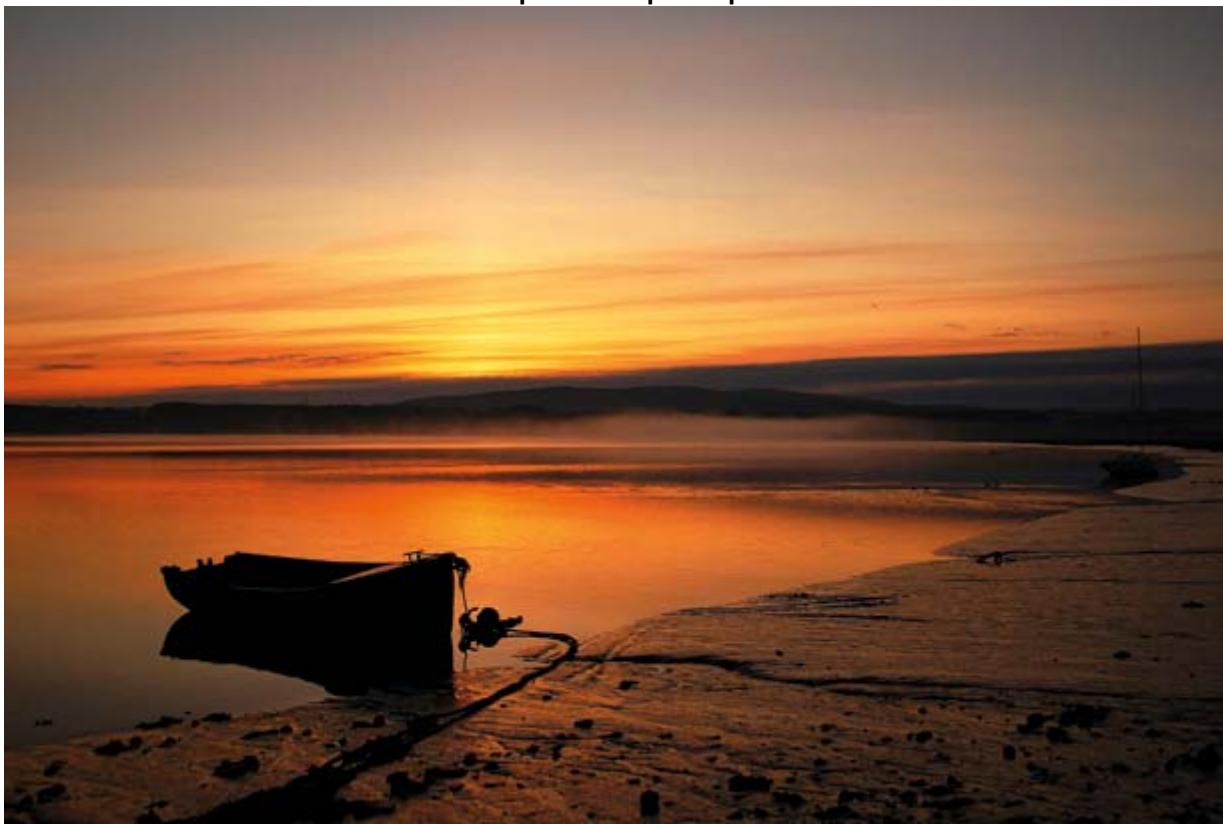
It's easy to get stuck in a rut and take every picture with the camera held horizontally. Try turning it to get a vertical shot instead, adjusting your position or the zoom setting as you experiment with the new style. You can often improve on both horizontal and vertical shots by cropping the photo later.

After all, it would be too much of a coincidence if all your real-life subjects happened to fit the proportions of your camera sensor. Try cropping to a 16:9 ratio for a widescreen effect, or to the square shape used by medium-format cameras.

Why it works…

PICTURE POINTERS

Not sure whether horizontal or vertical is best? Try both!

01 You can crop the shot later if a subject is too tall to shoot.

02 Turn the camera and try an upright shot to get different – and sometimes much improved – results.

03 Remember that your camera's aspect ratio might not be the same as the paper you print on.
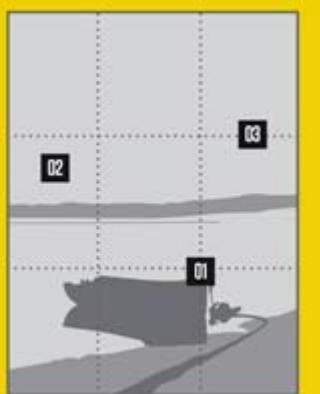
Photo Composition Tip 4: Avoid the middle

When you're just starting out, it's tempting to put whatever you're shooting right in the centre of the frame. However, this produces rather static, boring pictures. One of the ways to counteract this is to use the Rule of Thirds, where you split the image up into thirds, both horizontally and vertically, and try to place your subject on one of these imaginary lines or intersections. This is an overrated approach, though.

Instead, move your subject away from the centre and get a feel for how it can be balanced with everything else in the scene, including any areas of contrasting colour or light. There are no hard and fast rules about achieving this kind of visual balance, but you'll quickly learn to rely on your instincts – trust that you'll know when something just looks right.

Why it works…
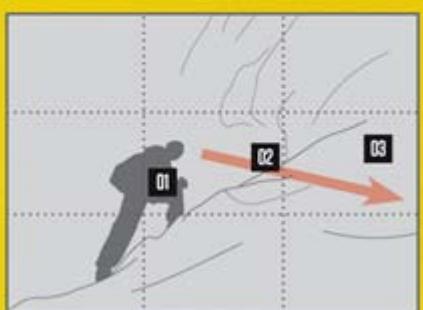
Photo Composition Tip 5: Leading lines

A poorly composed photograph will leave your viewers unsure about where to look, and their attention might drift aimlessly around the scene without finding a clear focal point. However, you can use lines to control the way people's eyes move around the picture.

Converging lines give a strong sense of perspective and three-dimensional depth, drawing you into an image. Curved lines can lead you on a journey around the frame, leading you towards the main subject.

Lines exist everywhere, in the form of walls, fences, roads, buildings and telephone wires. They can also be implied, perhaps by the direction in which an off-centre subject is looking.

Why it works…
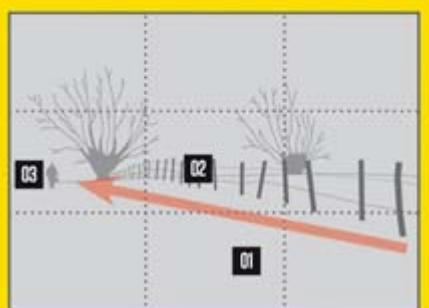
Photo Composition Tip 6: Use diagonals

Horizontal lines lend a static, calm feel to a picture, while vertical ones often suggest permanence and stability. To introduce a feeling of drama, movement or uncertainty, look for diagonal lines instead.

You can need nothing more than a shift in position or focal length to get them – wider angles of view tend to introduce diagonal lines because of the increased perspective; with wide-angle lenses you're more likely to tilt the camera up or down to get more of a scene in.

You can also introduce diagonal lines artificially, using the 'Dutch Tilt' technique. You simply tilt the camera as you take the shot. This can be very effective, though it doesn't suit every shot and is best used sparingly (see our 44 essential digital camera tips and tricks).

Why it works…

PICTURE POINTERS

Diagonal lines give a strong sense of movement and force

01 The perspective given by a wide-angle lens creates diagonal lines automatically.

02 Low viewpoints make you tilt the camera upwards, which strengthens diagonals.

03 Here, the photographer has left space on the right of the shot for the horses to move into.
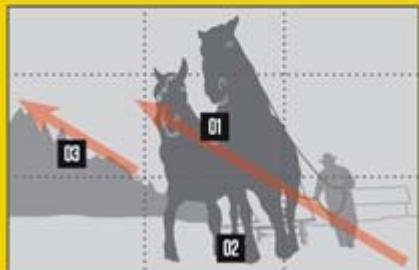
Photo Composition Tip 7: Space to move

Even though photographs themselves are static, they can still convey a strong sense of movement. When we look at pictures, we see what's happening and tend to look ahead – this creates a feeling of imbalance or unease if your subject has nowhere to move except out of the frame.

You don't just get this effect with moving subjects, either. For example, when you look at a portrait you tend to follow someone's gaze, and they need an area to look into (check out our Free portrait photography cropping guide).

For both types of shot, then, there should always be a little more space ahead of the subject than behind it.

Why it works…

PICTURE POINTERS

This car's position in the frame is no accident
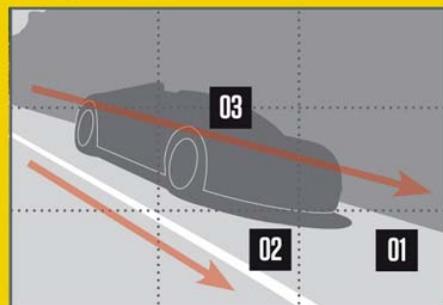
01 This speeding car needs space to move into, or the shot would look wrong.

02 Note the strong lines in the road, reinforcing the sense of movement.

03 The photographer has used a tilt to emphasise the strong diagonals.

Photo Composition Tip 8: Backgrounds

Don't just concentrate on your subject – look at what's happening in the background, too. This ties in with simplifying the scene and filling the frame. You can't usually exclude the background completely, of course, but you can control it.

You'll often find that changing your position is enough to replace a cluttered background with one that complements your subject nicely (find out how to Fix background distractions in 3 steps). Or you can use a wide lens aperture and a longer focal length to throw the background out of focus.

It all depends on whether the background is part of the story you're trying to tell with the photo. In the shot above, the background is something that needs to be suppressed.

Why it works…


PICTURE POINTERS

No matter how dull it is, you need to get the background right

01 Use a long focal length and wide lens aperture to throw busy, distracting backdrops out of focus.

02 Fill the frame – the less space that's taken up by an unwanted background the better.

03 Choose your camera position carefully, as this will affect what's in the background.
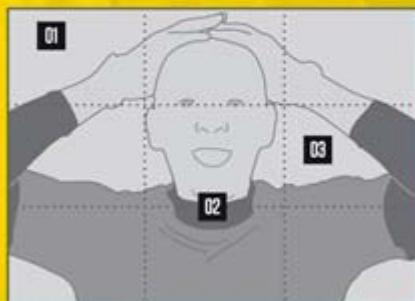
Photo Composition Tip 9: Creative with colours
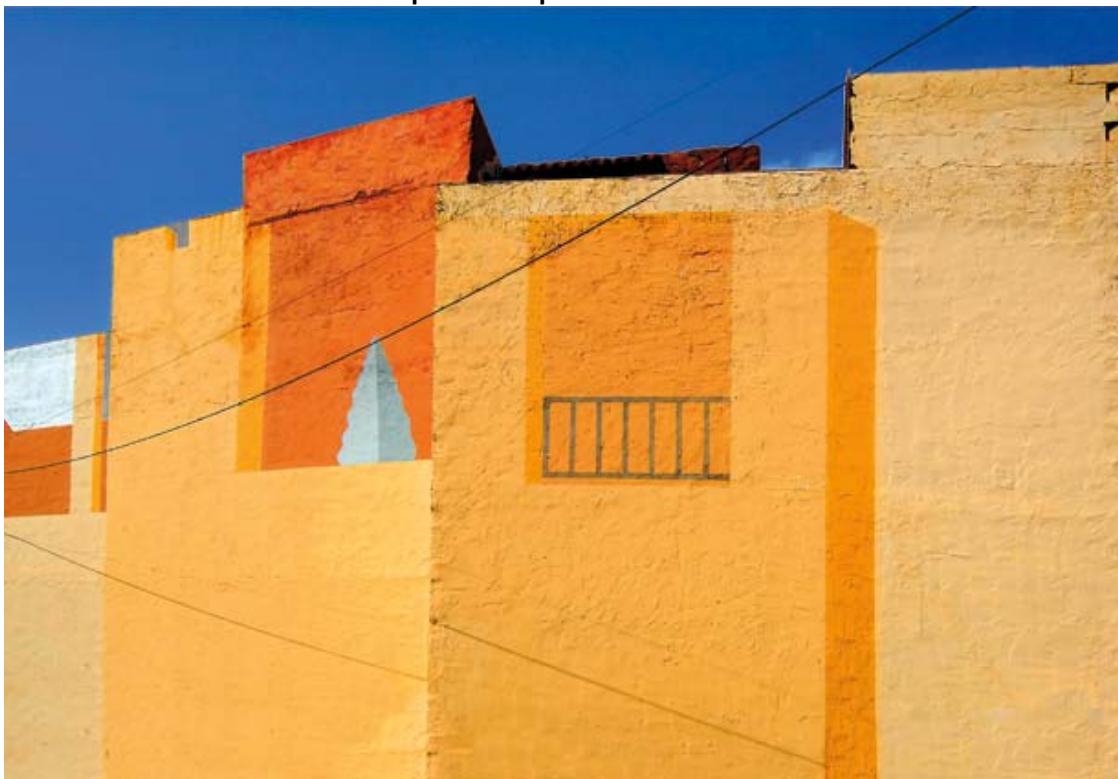
Bright primary colours really attract the eye, especially when they're contrasted with a complementary hue. But there are other ways of creating colour contrasts – by including a bright splash of colour against a monochromatic background, for example. You don't need strong colour contrasts to create striking pictures, though (find out How to conquer high contrast with auto-exposure bracketing).

Scenes consisting almost entirely of a single hue can be very effective. And those with a limited palette of harmonious shades, such as softly lit landscapes, often make great pictures.

The key is to be really selective about how you isolate and frame your subjects to exclude unwanted colours.

Why it works…

PICTURE POINTERS

Create abstract shots from contrasting colours
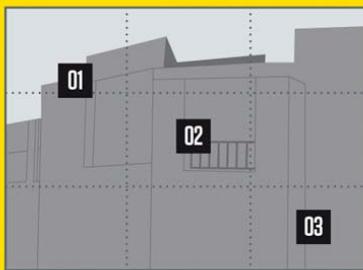
01 Blue and either orange or yellow are known as complementary colours, and produce vivid contrasts.

02 Framing is important when you're attempting to control the range of colours in a picture.

03 With the off-centre composition, the orange walls really dominate.

Photo Composition Tip 10: Breaking the rules

Photo composition is a little like a visual language – you can use it to make your pictures pass on a specific message. However, just as we sometimes use the written word to create a deliberately jarring effect, we can do the same with photos by breaking with standard composition conventions.

Doing it by accident doesn't count, though! It's when you understand the rules of composition and then break them on purpose that things start to get interesting. It's often best to break one rule at time, as John Powell does in the image above. Just remember: for every rule we suggest, somewhere out there is a great picture that proves you can disregard it and still produce a fantastic image!

Why it works…