

THE COMPOSITION CHECKLIST



**10 Ways to Make
Stronger Compositions
for Photographers who
Hate Rules but Love
Great Photographs**

David duChemin



DESIGNED FOR MOBILE

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a cap and a jacket, smiling. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a tree trunk.

**I want to help
you make the
best photo-
graphs of your
life.**

**I'm David duChemin. I've been
a photographer for 30 years. I
consider teaching a calling and
want to help you make stronger
photographs without gimmicks
or shortcuts. You can find more
from me, including 1000 free ar-
ticles about the craft we both
love, at CraftAndVision.com**

Principles Are Better Than Rules

Rules make things simple. But boring. They are the opposite of creativity. There's a better way to simplify things and that's with an understanding of basic time-honoured principles. This small checklist is a simple prompt towards some of the fundamental principles of composition and a powerful starting point while you're making images and are paralyzed by all the options. Yes, there are more than 10, and you can go so much deeper, but this is a strong way to start. **Stuck on composition? Run through the possibilities these 10 ideas create.**



Orient Your Frame

I don't know who first called a vertical frame a "portrait" orientation or a horizontal frame "landscape," but I want to punch them (gently) in the nose. Forget that. Instead, ask yourself if the orientation of the frame reinforces the main direction or energy of the subject. A vertical frame tells the reader to read vertically. Does that support the lines or relationships in your image, or does it stop the flow? Go in the direction of the flow.



Isolate Your Subject

Take a good look at the real heart of your image. What one idea or relationship of elements can the image absolutely not work without? Now try to exclude all else. Shallow depth of field can do this. So can a longer lens, or your position relative to the subject. What can you do in this moment, with the gear you have, to simplify this frame and give it the most impact possible? Find your one idea and exclude the rest.



Consider the Depth

Though images are 2-dimensional, the photographer still has to consider the depth of a scene. How does your foreground relate to the background? Could you move and get that lamp post out of the way? Could you get lower and separate the horizon from your foreground? Could you get close to the foreground with your wider lenses and thereby make the background elements smaller?



Watch Your Edges

I know, we're all in a rush to get that perfect moment, but it's all for nothing if the resulting image is unfixably cluttered or you get things intersecting the frame and cutting off the path of the eye around the frame. Take a moment, scan the frame. Is anything touching? Is anything clipped that shouldn't be? Could pulling back just a little give you more negative space and less distraction around the frame itself?



Let the Eye Move

The eye moves around a frame in much the same way we move around a room and, generally, we want that to be uninterrupted. Tight spots that prevent the flow of that motion around the frame tend to feel tight, unwelcoming. We get stuck when what we want to do is move. Keeping important elements away from each other can help with that flow. It's not a rule, just one way to keep the eye exploring the frame longer.



Find Your Balance

Every element in the frame has a certain amount of visual weight. If you drew a line down the middle of your frame, would the important elements on one side have a counterbalance on the other side to keep it all from feeling too heavy or tippy? There are different kinds of balance, and some images work best when imbalanced or with more tension, but asking yourself if the frame is balanced is best done with the camera in your hand, not later.



Consider the Energy

Is energy an important part of your scene? Is the lack of energy, as in a serene landscape, more important? Either way, consider the effect of your choices on that energy. Too much tension won't help a serene scene. A square frame probably won't help one that's meant to feel dynamic. Use frame orientation, aspect ratios, slow shutter speeds, choice of moment, or perhaps colour to give more energy to the image. If the energy is important, compose for it.



Find the Contrast

One of the things that makes a great image, that grabs our attention, and is an important element in storytelling, is contrast. It is often the case that the stronger the contrast, the stronger the image. What can you do to increase that contrast? Can you isolate the contrasting elements more clearly with your lens choice, your chosen perspective, shutter speed, or waiting for a stronger moment? Find the contrast, then exaggerate it.



Place Your Moment

The best moments photographically are not only about *when* something happens, but *where*. Remember, it's not only important that you catch the moment, but that you place it in the frame in such a way that it means something, creates energy, tells a story, or even gains enough separation from the background that you can tell what's going on. Think not just in terms of capturing your moments but of intentionally placing them relative to the frame.



Move Your Lines

Every line in a photograph matters. It leads your eye or intersects with other lines to create shapes. Tree branches intersect with heads, parallel lines lead into the depth of the image, diagonal lines give energy. We often forget that it's our position with the camera relative to those lines that places them where they are in the frame. Move your lines and place them intentionally by moving yourself and the camera. If the lines aren't doing what you want, move.



Orient the Frame



Isolate Your Subject



Consider the Depth



Watch Your Edges



Let the Eye Move



Find Your Balance



Consider the Energy



Find The Contrast



Place Your Moment



Move Your Lines

Is analogue more your style? Print this page nice and small then drop it in your camera bag!