

## INTRODUCTION TO PHOTOGRAPHY

Summer Session – 2009

[http://www.photography101.org/basics/photographic\\_composition.html](http://www.photography101.org/basics/photographic_composition.html)

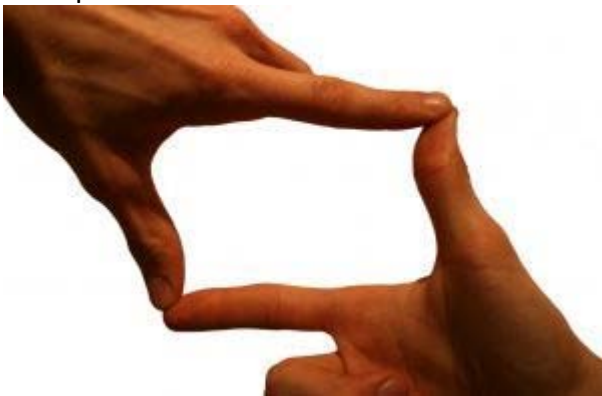
### COMPOSITION

Composition is what separates generic point-and-shoot photography from actual planned and thought out photography. Without knowing how to properly compose a picture, you may have a \$3,000 camera, but will still be taking bland pictures. A camera is a tool, and no matter how simple or complex a tool is, the effectiveness of this tool relies on the operator. For an example, let's use one of the simplest tools, a hammer. This hammer has the full ability to drive a nail perfectly straight without bending it or smashing your fingers in the process, but if you don't know what you're doing, you can end up with a disfigured nail and a disfigured thumb to boot. That nice shiny camera may be excellent at reproducing your photograph on a digital or film medium, but you may not be using the camera properly, or 'hitting the nail on the head' so to speak.

The primary things to think about when composing a photograph are your subject, your surroundings, and your positioning. Before taking a picture, ask yourself, 'What do I want to accomplish with this photograph?'. Create a goal or objective, plan it out, then make that plan work. There are two basic ways to do this; position your subjects, or position yourself.

A good way to teach yourself composition is to read up on the subject, then study others photographs, asking yourself questions such as 'What was the subject in this picture?', 'Did the photographer do a good job of making the subject the primary and immediate point of interest?', 'If not, what could have been done to change that?', 'Is the background visually pleasing, are there any distractions?'. Of course there are tens of questions which you could ask, and these are just a select few, but reading this article will give you an idea of what to look for.

One good technique to get a feeling of what a scene would look like as an actual photograph is to make a frame out of your hands and view the scene through this frame. This effectively gives you a sense of border, and also blocks out items which may be otherwise distracting you from the actual scene at hand. Below is an example of this.



Viewing potential photographs through a 'hand frame' can give you a good feel for the end result.

## **SUBJECT**

All good pictures start with a subject. Before taking a picture, decide what you want the primary subject or point of interest to be. Generally, the picture should be taken in a way that makes the subject the first thing which is seen in the photograph. Your subject should be the primary point of focus and should be crisp and clear. Ideally, there should be nothing in the photograph that draws more attention than the subject itself. If, for example, you were to photograph a beach scene with a lighthouse as your subject, and a viewer is more drawn to a sandcastle on the beach, you've done a poor job of making your subject clear. Obviously, there can be, and many times are, multiple subjects in one photograph. In this case, the objective is to obtain harmony and balance between all subjects. Do you want them both to be equally attractive, do you want one to pop while the others are slightly more subtle? These are all questions which you must address, and plan accordingly. When choosing a subject, don't look at the photograph as the photographer, look at it as another photographer critiquing your work.

## **FRAMING**

Frames can be basically any item that encloses or surrounds your subject. This could be branches of nearby trees or even a solid frame such as a cut-out in a wall. Take note of your surroundings, and keep an eye out for objects that would make for an image-enhancing 'frame'. Take shape, texture, and color into consideration, frames which contrast sharply with the subject of your picture can make for beautiful photographs. Use frames with care, as misuse can create cluttered or visually unappealing pictures.



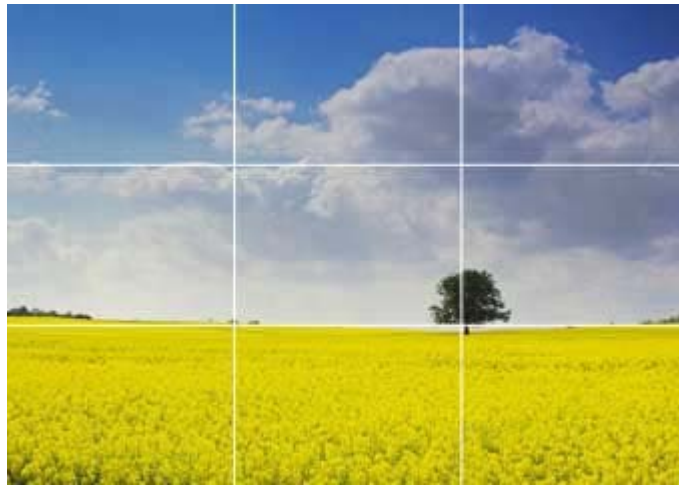
A good example of framing, this picture would be rather bland without the frame. With it, however, it is a stunning picture. Photo by mnadi.

## **BALANCE**

Obtaining the right balance between your subject and other aspects of the picture is extremely important. You don't want other parts of the photograph distracting from your subject. Things that you should pay attention to are color, contrast, size, and symmetry. Generally speaking, asymmetrical photographs are more appealing than symmetrical photographs. Placing your subject off-center usually has more of an impact and is more pleasing to the eye than having your subject smack dab in the middle, which brings me to the Rule of Thirds

## **RULE OF THIRDS**

The Rule of Thirds is a photographic composition technique that most if not all advanced photographers employ quite a bit. The basis of this rule is that a photograph is divided into 9 equal sized sections, with 2 lines vertically and 2 lines horizontally. The four intersections of these lines are a good guidepoint for where your subject should be centered. These points (and lines also) also work as guides for other aspects of the photograph, for example, a horizon may look better when lined up with one of the lines. Also, when photographing people, a good use of the rule of thirds in many circumstances would be to line a person's body up with a vertical line, and line their eyes up with a horizontal line. This is likely one of the most important compositional techniques, as many photographers feel that a centered subject is not as interesting (in most situations). It is, however, recommended that you treat this 'rule' as more of a guideline though, as there are many circumstances where a more appealing photograph can be produced without the use of this rule. The rule of thirds goes all the way back to 1845, where it originated as a rule for composing scenic artwork.



A good example of employing the use of the Rule of Thirds in a landscape photo.

## **COLOR AND CONTRAST**

A subject which is light will have much more impact when placed against a dark background, but a dark subject against a light background may be distracting. The only way to get a feel for colors and contrast is to experience it first-hand, as there are so many different situations which have different applications of this.

## **POSITIONING**

A photo may be able to improved many measures by just taking a few steps forward or backward, or to one side, or by moving up or down. If you have good accessibility to the location, you may want to consider getting the shot from a completely different angle. In still life shots, positioning the subject also can work wonders. In pictures in which a subject is moving, it is generally more pleasing to have a subject appear to be moving into the scene instead of moving out of it.

## **LINES**

Lines and edges of all types can be worked into a photograph to increase the effect. Diagonal lines are beautiful and visually pleasing and can have a large impact on your photograph. Diagonals are also generally considered more visually pleasing than horizontals. Repeating lines and parallel lines can also have beautiful effects. Lines which are leading to an object are generally more appealing if you get that object in the shot. For example, if you are photographing a field enclosed by a wooden fence with horizontal lines, you may want to attempt to get one or more of the fence posts that the lines lead to in the shot.



# Rule of Thirds in Photography

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The rule of thirds is one of the most basic composition guidelines in photography. The rule of thirds makes use of a natural tendency of the human eye to be more strongly drawn towards certain parts of an image.

## What is the Rule of Thirds?

The rule of thirds is an imaginary tic-tac-toe board is drawn across an image to break it into nine equal squares. The four points where these lines intersect are strongest focal points. The lines themselves are the second strongest focal points.

## How Do I Use It?

To use the rule of thirds you need to imagine the grid on all of your images as you compose them in the viewfinder. If you have an autofocus camera You can use the autofocus points as references to help you imaging the grid. If you use an LCD screen to compose your images you can make a rule of thirds grid out of a clear sheet of window cling material. Another option is to draw the grid on your viewfinder (not lens) although this may not be easily removed and should be avoided if at all possible. With a little practice you will be able to effectively imagine the grid placement as you shoot.

## Does it Matter Which Point I Use?

Which point or line you place your subject on does matter. While any of the points/lines will add emphasis to your subject, some are stronger than others.

When an object is alone in an image, the strongest position is the left hand line. An exception to this is for cultures where information is read right to left, in those cases the right hand line will be strongest.

When a subject is not alone there is a hierarchy of image strength. The subject in the foreground will naturally have more strength than the subject in the background. However, the rule of thirds placement can emphasize or reduce this strength. The bottom right point is the strongest for multiple subjects and the upper left point is the weakest. This theory is often used in movies to convey the emotional dominance of one character over another. Placing a background subject on the right and the foreground subject on the left will confuse the eye and lead to confusion in the viewer about which subject is dominant. This technique is very useful for emotionally-charged images.

Another general rule (although this rule can be broken in certain circumstances) is that your subject should be placed on the opposite line of the direction your subject is looking towards. [For example](#), a portrait where the subject is looking to the left should place the subject body on the right.

## How Does the Rule of Thirds Work in Portraits?

While most good portraits appear to be simply a centered torso they are following the rule of thirds. In the case of [single portraits](#), the subject's eyes are placed along the top rule of third line. In multiple subject portraits the subject faces are placed on the rule of thirds lines. This is why a multiple-row posing generally works better than a one-row posing.

The [rule of thirds](#) is one of the most basic composition guidelines in photography. The rule of thirds explains what part of an image the human eye is most strongly drawn towards first. An imaginary tic-tac-toe board is drawn across an image to break it into nine equal squares. The four points where these lines intersect are strongest focal points. The lines themselves are the second strongest focal points. Take a look at these images to see some images that use the rule of thirds.



### [Good Use of Rule of Thirds](#)

This image shows a good use of the rule of thirds to place the subject along a focal line and also places the face at a line intersection.



### [Fair Use of Rule of Thirds](#)

This image places the subject's eyes along a focal line which is a good use of the rule of thirds. However, this image could have been made even stronger by placing one eye at a line intersection as well.



### [Good](#)

### [Use of Rule of Thirds](#)

This image makes good use of the rule of thirds by placing the tower along one line and placing two line intersections on the rainbow.



### [Good Use of Rule of Thirds](#)

This image places the butterfly's body on one line and also uses intersection points on the wings to increase impact.



### [Poor Use of Rule of Thirds](#)

While this image places intersection points on the subject, they are poorly placed. The bottom right intersection on the back of the body leaves the head to be lost in the rest of the image. This drastically reduces the potential impact of the image.



### [Poor use of rule of thirds](#)

This image completely misses the mark. The subject is basically centered and one intersection point actually falls on a bright spot from the background.

## Composing people pictures



At the heart of composing good people pictures are a few basic decisions: what picture format to use, where to position the subject within the frame, what other picture elements to include, where to position those elements, and which camera angle is most effective.

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### Horizontal vs. vertical format

The majority of people pictures are horizontal in format probably because it's easier to hold a camera horizontally. The horizontal format does work best for most group pictures. However, a vertical image can be very effective for pictures ranging from full-length portraits to tight facial close-ups. The unexpectedness of a vertical format can also give an image added impact.



## Subject placement

To hold the attention of the viewer, give your pictures a bold and dramatic arrangement. Avoid putting your subject directly in the center of the picture unless you are striving for a formal arrangement in which the subject firmly commands attention.

**Rule of thirds:** In candid pictures of people, it's often wise to follow the traditional rule of thirds. Imagine a pair of lines dividing the picture into thirds horizontally and a second pair dividing it into thirds vertically.

Place the most important visual element—usually the face (or eyes in a close-up)—on one of the points where the lines intersect.

**Open space:** When a person moves across your camera's field of view, the final image usually has much more impact when the subject is off-center. Leave the open space in the direction in which the subject is headed. Similarly, if a subject is looking off to the side, it's best to leave more space in that direction.



## Backgrounds

Indoors or outdoors, a plain background will focus attention on your subject instead of a dozen other things. Indoors, avoid distracting furniture, toys, patterned wallpaper, and bright lamps. Outdoors, don't let tree limbs, utility poles, wires, signs, and other people distract attention from your center of interest.



## Point of view

As you compose your picture in the camera viewfinder, think about what you want to include, other than your subject that will make the picture better. Simply changing your point of view can dramatically alter the mood of a picture.

Eye level: Shooting at eye level, either head on or at an angle, is usually best for most people pictures. It's the way we most often look at the world, so it conveys realism. Too low an angle in a close-up exaggerates the size of the nose, mouth, and chin. Too high an angle—often the problem in photographing children and seated subjects—exaggerates the size of the head compared to the rest of the body. When you photograph children, you may need to kneel or even sit on the ground.

High and low angles: At times, however, you'll want to use a different angle to create a certain effect. For example, in a full-length portrait, an eye-level view makes a subject look shorter. A picture taken from a squatting position more accurately indicates height and can lend an aura of authority and power. Even a high angle, which is generally unflattering, can sometimes add drama or eliminate a distracting background.



### Close-ups

Close-ups convey a feeling of intimacy and focus attention on your subject.

More distant views tend to emphasize the foreground and include too much that is confusing and distracting to the viewer.

As you look through the viewfinder and move toward your subject to fill the frame, notice how you eliminate things that don't add to the picture. Even though you can crop your picture later if you plan to enlarge it or manipulate it on a computer, it's usually better to crop carefully when you take the picture.



# Photography Composition - An Introduction

**This article is an overview of the various composition techniques use in photography.**

## Contents

- [The Rule of Thirds](#)
- [Simplicity](#)
- [Leading Lines](#)
- [The Natural Frame](#)
- [Contrasts](#)
- [Point of View](#)
- [Rhythm](#)

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Creating a beautiful photograph isn't as difficult as one might think. Some people can instinctively compose their images without any knowledge of photography composition rules. Others might need a little help and think things through before it becomes second nature.

In this article, we'll look at some basic composition techniques that will dramatically improve your images. By applying one or many of the following rules, your photos will go from looking amateurish to professional. You will also understand why some of the previous images you took work so well and why you and other people like them so much.

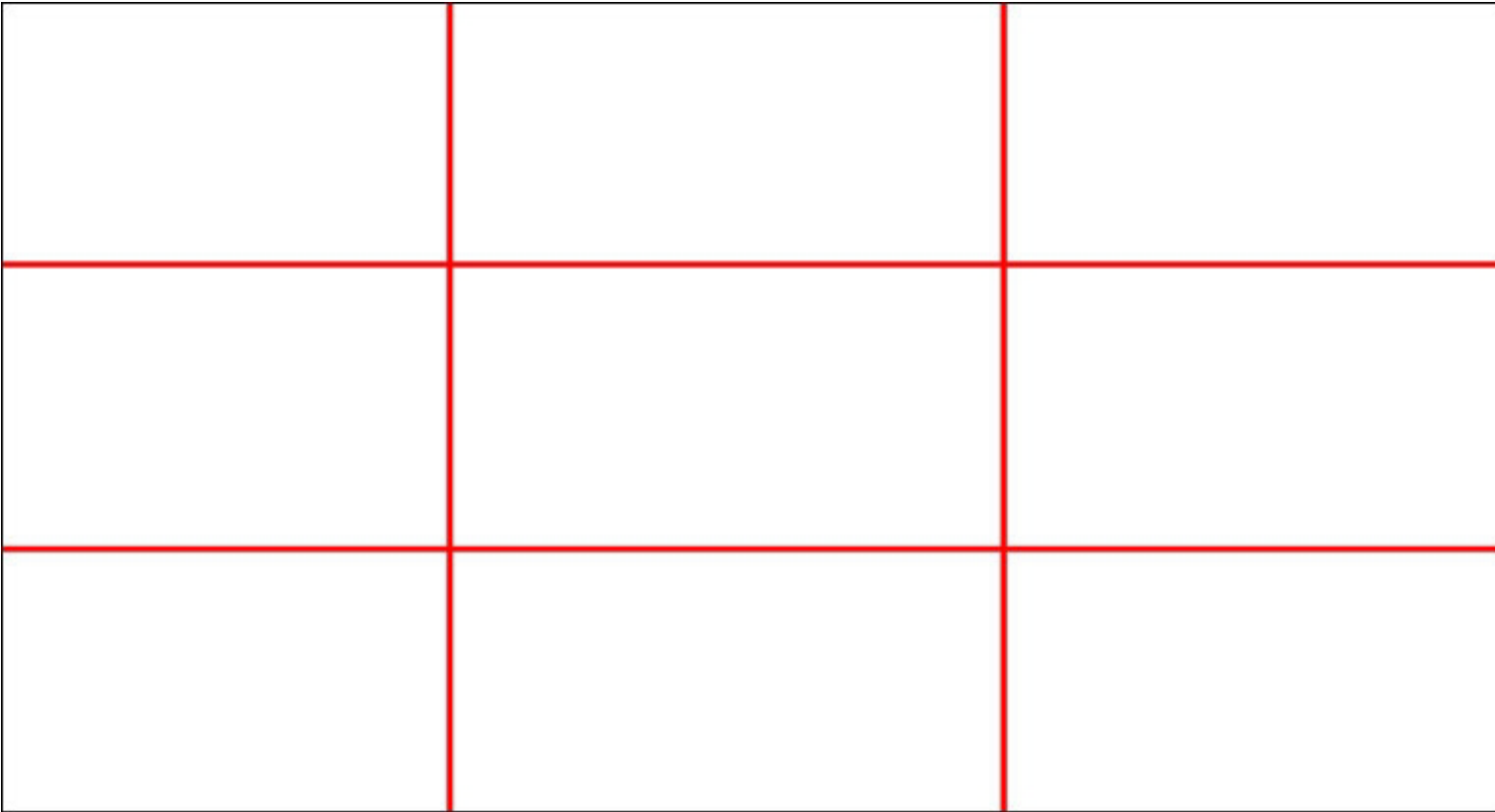
Before we get started, let me point out that these rules are only guides to help you create beautiful images. You can apply more than one rule in your photos.... or none at all! Remember that rules are made to be broken... sometimes. :)

Here are the photography composition rules what we'll look at in this article:

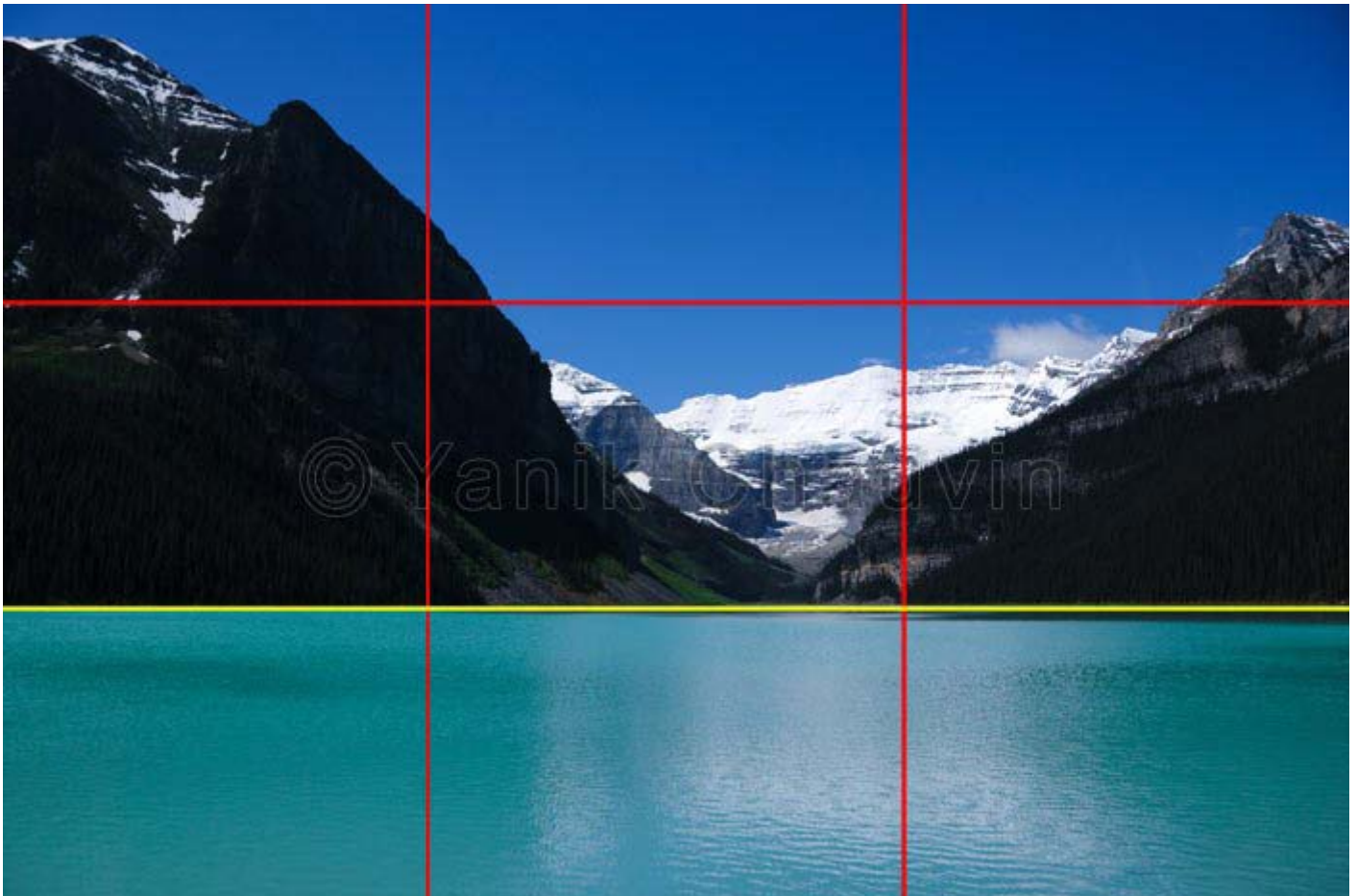
- The Rule of Thirds
- Simplicity
- Leading Lines
- The Natural Frame
- Contrasts
- Point of View
- Rhythm

## The Rule of Thirds

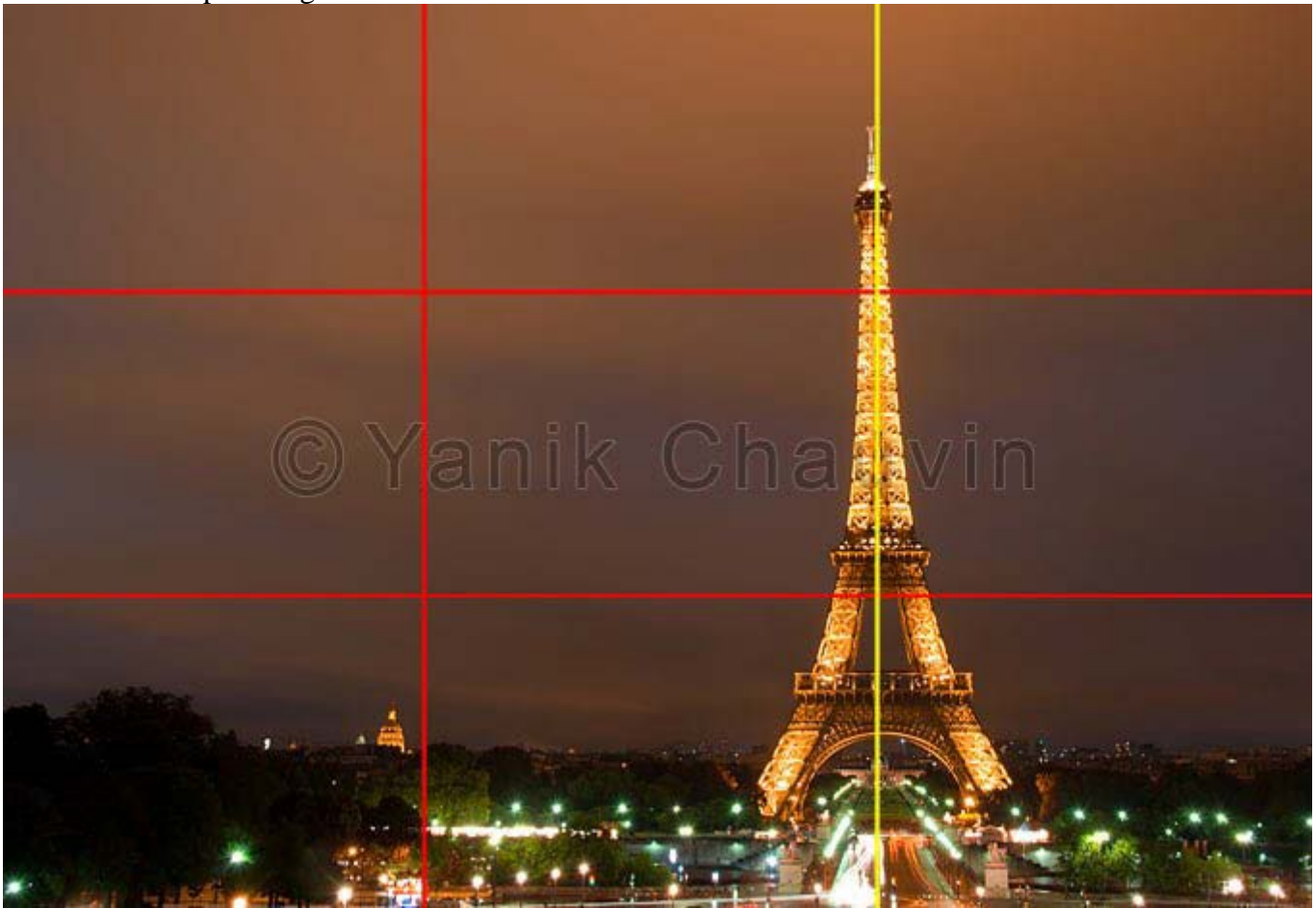
The rule of thirds is probably the most popular rule out there. It's based on the Golden Mean (or golden ratio)[\[1\]](#). Simply put, you draw 2 imaginary lines (both horizontal and vertical) at equal distances from each other essentially dividing your image into thirds, hence the rule of thirds. Basically, the rule is based on the theory that the eye is naturally drawn to those "thirds" and the points at each intersecting line. Here is an example:



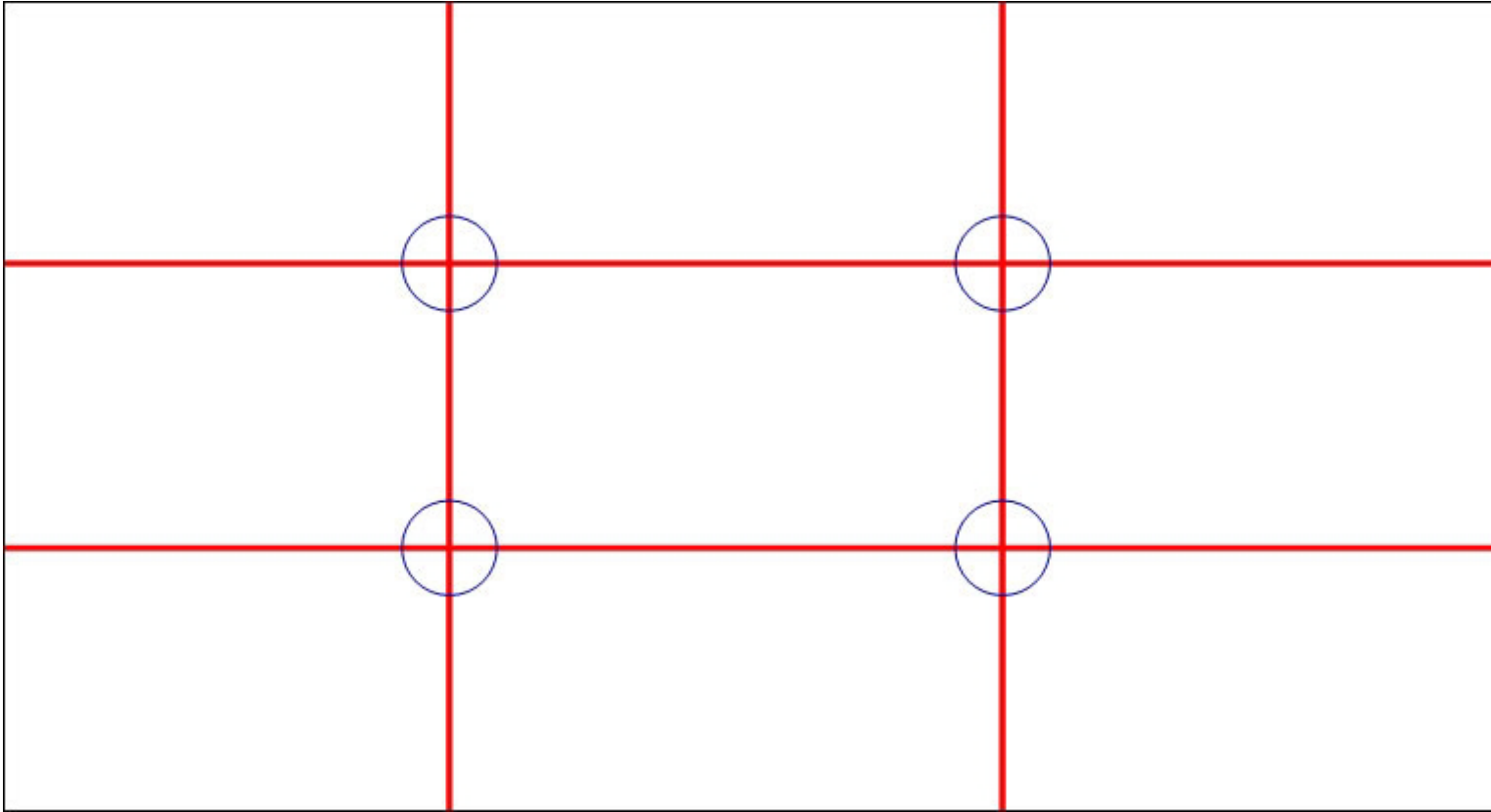
As a rule, you should use these lines to guide you in composing a photograph that may have horizontal or vertical lines. A good example of this are landscape photographs. Most landscape photos will have a horizon (horizontal line). Try to compose your image without placing your horizon in the middle of your image but instead on either the top or bottom third as shown here.



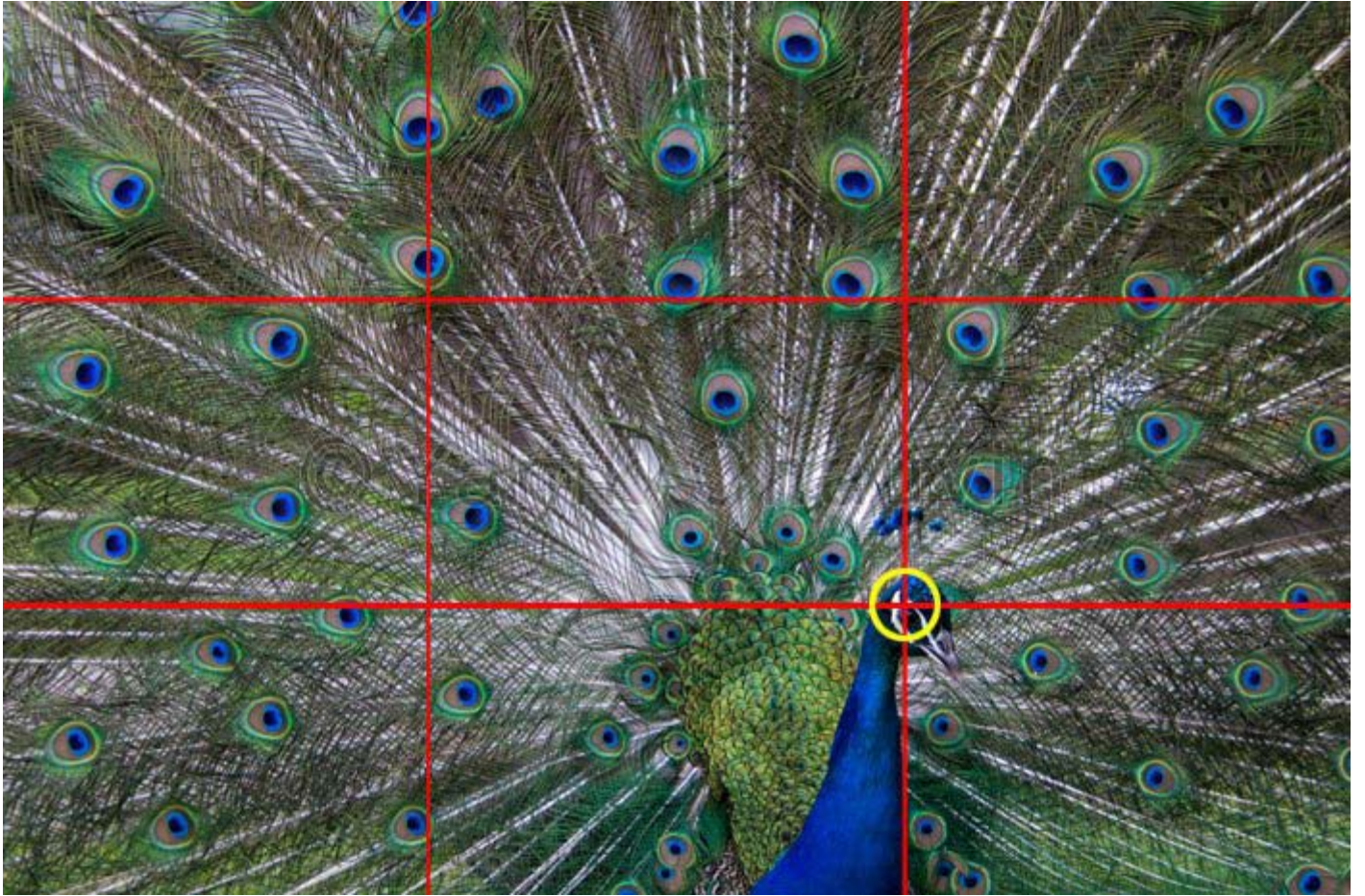
Here is an example using it on a vertical line.

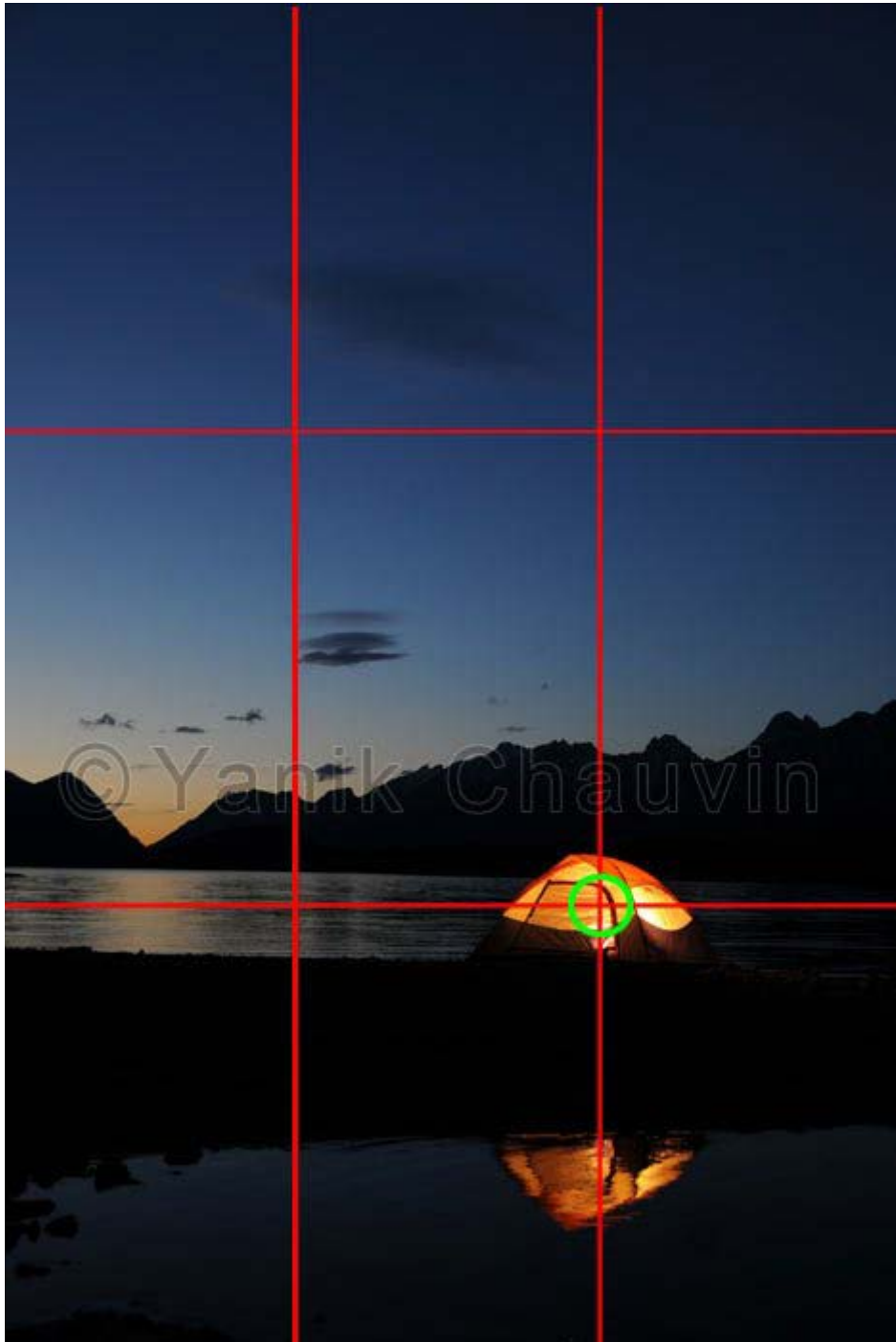


You'll also be using the rule of thirds at the points where the lines intersect with each other as seen here:



This applies very well for portraits or when you have a clear distinctive subject. Here are a few examples.





## Simplicity

Even before the rule of thirds, I personally think that simplicity should be the first thing you think about when composing a photograph. Try to keep your image "clutter free". Remember that you want to draw your viewer to the main subject of the photo as quickly and instinctively as possible. Here are 2 tips to help simplify your composition.

**1- Get in close.** To easily remove some of the distractions around your subject is to zoom in on it. Once you think you're close enough, zoom in even more! This is a simple yet very effective way to simplify your image. Here's an example.



**2- Simplify your background.** You don't always want to get in really close to compose your image so the next thing to do is to remove the "clutter" from your background so that the eye isn't distracted away from your main subject. You can do this with 2 different approaches. The first one is to choose an even background. This could be a single-colored piece of fabric or paper or an even-textured surface like a brick wall.



The second technique is to have a blurred background where all the elements blend into each other to form a blur of colors. A blurred background is created by using shallow depth of field (DOF)[\[2\]](#). Here's an example.



## Leading Lines

There are many reasons why we can use leading lines in our composition. Let's look at the 3 major ones.

**1- Creating Depth.** Using leading lines like a road or a path for example, can add a 3D effect to an otherwise 2D image. It will create the illusion of depth like in this image of a road in Western Canada.



**2- Focus on the Subject.** You can use leading lines in your image to lead the viewer towards your main subject; basically guiding the eye to the focus of your image.



**3- More Dynamic.** Leading lines also make your images more dynamic. Usually, that will be achieved with diagonal lines like the image above or this one of my "Mafioso Birds".



## The Natural Frame

You can also use an element inside your frame to act as a frame. To be considered a frame, the general consensus is the the framing element should cover at least 2 sides of the photo. It could be on either sides or in a L or U shape. It could be be almost anything. Most commonly used are trees or window frames.

The natural frame will bring depth to the photo as well as bring emphasis on your main subject. Here are a few examples.





## Contrasts

If you want to make your main subject stand out, it needs to be different from the rest of the image. It can be different in many ways. Most commonly, you'll find a lightness/darkness contrast and/or strong color contrasts. To help with lightness/darkness contrasts, you could convert your file into black and white or a single color. As for color contrasts, complementary colors<sup>[3]</sup> work really well. Here are 2 examples.





Contrasting subjects could also fit in this category, This is more of a psychological contrast than a purely visual one.



## Point of View

A very important technique in composition is your point of view. Where are you taking your photos from? As human beings, we're lazy by nature and this laziness also transposes in the way we take pictures. Most of us will be standing up and all we'll do is rotate or bend our knees a little. Now if everybody does that, do you think your image, taken the same way, will stand out? You reduce your chances greatly. Take the time to observe your subject or your subject's entourage.

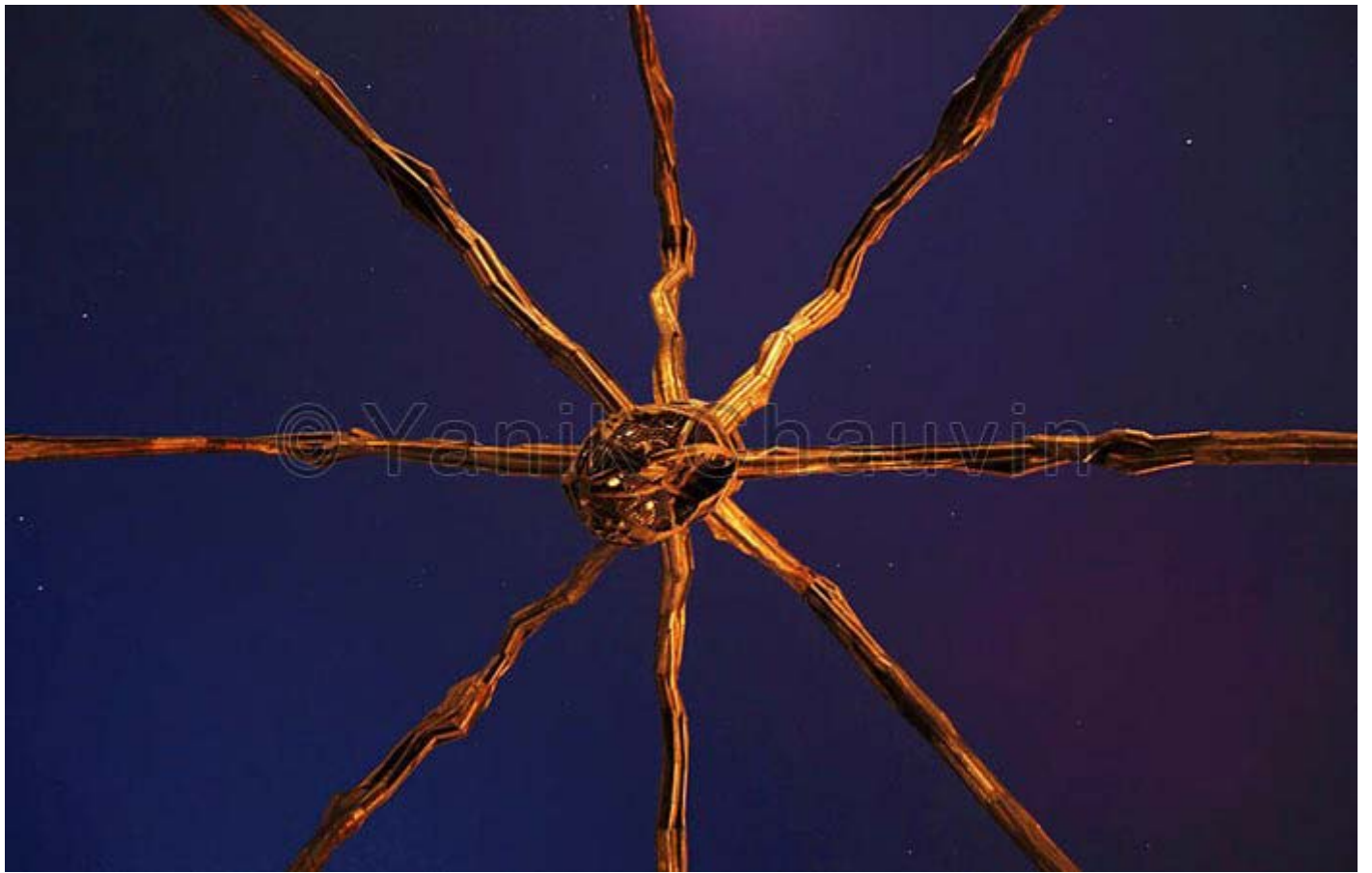
Here are the 3 most common points of view for you to try.

**1- From Above.** Get as high as you can over your subject. Look at it from above. If you can't get above it, bring it down. Use what you have around you like a ladder, a chair or even your rooftop. In this image, I was standing on a pik-nik table.



**2- From Below.** Now do the opposite. Look at your subject from below (if possible) or put it up high above you. If you're fast enough, you could even throw it in the air above you (do not use heavy or sharp objects ;)). The first image shows a typical shot of the spider sculpture and the second one is taken underneath it at dusk.





**3- At Subject's Level.** So you're shooting this cute docile chipmunk in the park. Yes you could do a shot from above but do you think that's original? How about getting eye to eye with your furry friend? Yes, that takes a small effort and you might get dirty a bit but you'll see, it's worth it!



## Rhythm

This is the last composition technique we'll look at in this photography tutorial. Rhythm is basically a repetition of a subject. This technique is used to create a dynamic impact in your image. The eye will follow the repeated subject throughout the photograph. Here's an example.



To see this and many other photography tutorials, I invite you to [visit my blog, Yanik's Photo School](#)

*\*N.B. The images have a watermark on them because most are for sale (even low res web versions) at various stock agencies. By respect for my clients, I have added watermarks. All comments complaining about the use of watermarks will be deleted as it doesn't add value to this Knol. Thank you for your understanding.*

## References

1. Golden Ratio from Wikipedia  
[Golden Ratio](#)
2. Depth of Field on Wikipedia  
[Depth of Field](#)
3. Complementary Colors on Wikipedia  
[Complementary Colors](#)