

Some comments on composition and judging

By Geoff Adams*

These comments are opinion based on observation and experience. Such experience as I possess is outlined in the footnote at the end of this article.

Composition.

This matters, even if a judge says it doesn't. The evidence is the number of time reference is made to one or more of the various rules. Rules however, are like piecrusts, but first one must know what they are before considering breaking them.

1. Cropping/fill the frame/simplify – probably among the most common of the comments made. It is a natural tendency when starting out to include too much in the picture. The most eye-catching of images are often simple. The vast majority of photos will benefit from cropping to simplify and fill the frame, however, beware of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

With street photography, especially in an overseas travel photo, context is very important. Keep “reductio et absurdum” in the back of your mind if you start feeling that cropping will put a knife through the story of your photo. I would also suggest taking the shot with a bit more in the frame that you might need isn't a bad idea, because it allows cropping choices later, and a better chance of getting what you want in focus.

2. Rules of thirds – this is where you imagine sides of the image divided into thirds, and lines drawn through the image to indicate optimum points (9) of placement. There is another guideline which you hear less of these days – the golden mean. This ratio is about 1.6:1 and the nine space grid constructed across the image is a slightly different spacing to the 9 equal squares or rectangles in a grid from the rule of thirds. The golden mean occurs in nature, anything from the shell of a snail to the arms of a spiral galaxy. Check it out on Google or Youtube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CiS3SU4Ik0>.

While the rules are designed to get away from central placement, it is important to remember that sometimes central placement is the best option. This occurs when the subject or point of interest is so powerful, it can't be anywhere else, or is essential to the overall design.

3. Horizontal and vertical lines – I've noticed that judges pick this up quickly in shots involving water, and usually for good reason. It is an easy thing to correct. However, there might be times you want to break this rule. If you do so, break it deliberately and in such way that it adds to the story of the picture. It is less easy to do much about vertical lines, say in a tall building, without either post-processing software or a tilt lens (often attached to a large format camera for architectural work).
4. Cutting off limbs – I'm tempted to say I'll take notice of this when the Club Patron and a source of personal inspiration, Graham Burstow does. However, many is the time I have

heard a judge remark on this. Basically it means don't clip a hand, foot, top of head etc; if cropping, cut deliberately. Personally, it is something I don't tend to notice, which is probably why it gets picked up with my entries.

5. Odd and even numbers – when it comes to say the number of people, birds or objects in a photo, odd numbers are preferred over even numbers. My guess is that numbers need to be under 5 for this to be an issue. But it does get remarked on by judges, some who cite a supposed inbuilt human preference for odd numbers. This preference may not always apply. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4734449/>. <https://uxdesign.cc/odd-vs-even-number-psychology-6307047bf5de>
6. Framing/lead in lines/repetition/shapes – I've have put a few of these together because they are really about design. Personally I like framing and often do this. A photo of the emptiness along the Oodnadatta Track, is much more interesting taken through the frame of the doorway of a railway fettler's hut. I like a frame to have a shape of its own, preferably irregular or rugged, and a dark or black shape. I don't necessarily agree that detail is needed as the main subject is inside the frame, not the frame itself.

Repetition often works with mountain ranges, especially when colours are slightly different as each range retreats into the distance.

I like lead in lines and repetition to draw the viewer into a shot, and importantly, to bring attention to a small object or point of interest that mightn't be noticed otherwise. Shapes can be used to mimic or compare objects. The female nude and a guitar is one such example. The other point about these design factors is that they help create depth in a photo, which is really for landscapes and the like.

7. Backgrounds – the first thing to look for as the eye is selective, seeing what it wants to see, but the camera captures all. Experience helps one to see what is actually there, which becomes a greater pressure when needing to respond quickly – at an event or street photo for example. Selective focus using depth of field helps. If I'm doing shots where speed is of the essence, I often use the a/v (depth of field) setting and auto everything else.

I am trying to do more work in manual, but I think for rapid work, changing settings needs to be second nature and done without needing to see the camera to make the adjustments, a skill I haven't yet mastered.

8. Judges arc up about artwork – if you take a photo of a sculpture or some other piece of artwork, be prepared for a lecture on copyright. The way to avoid this, is to somehow make the image your own, by having people interact with the artwork for example. Personally, I think a sculpture that has been installed in an outside setting is often a commissioned piece paid for by the taxpayer and is fair game. But I would put it in context with its landscape and the artist can be acknowledged in a caption. The arcing up over artwork by judges, verges on virtue-signalling, but that is only my opinion.

*(Geoff has been a keen photographer for over 40 years. His background is in rural reporting and science communication, and as a development officer in local government. In the late '70s he added to existing tertiary qualifications by completing a Certificate in Photography at the then Seven Hills College of Art (part-time), which was valuable training for various photographic duties during his time in employment. He has a particular interest in events/travel/street photography/social documentary/photojournalism, and the odd landscape and nature shot, which are apparent in the article above. Toowoomba Photographic Society is his first photo club membership and experience of photo competition).