

TWENTY POINTS OF CLASSICAL COMPOSITION

These principles are for guidance to help you to make better, more pleasing pictures. When working with them, **BE THEIR MASTER, NOT THEIR SLAVE!** Good pictures are never made on principles alone.

1. **Move in Close** – Have main subject fill the frame unless surrounding is part of the story. Move in or use a telephoto lens. Don't include anything having nothing to do with the subject.
2. **Use the thirds method** – Avoid cutting scene in half with strong lines. If sky isn't beautiful, leave it out as much as possible. Mountains look higher if you can cut them off at the skyline.
3. **Placement of the center of interest** – Never in the middle! However, not all pictures have a center of interest or should have one.
4. **Choice of vertical or horizontal** – If scene has mostly horizontal format lines, use horizontal format. If vertical lines, vertical will be more pleasing. Horizontal expresses peace and tranquility; vertical is strong and bold.
5. **Avoid a group monotony** – Don't line up in a row; have them do something.
6. **Balance your picture** – Dark objects are "heavier" visually. If all dark is on top or one side of picture, it is unbalanced and makes us uncomfortable. Avoid imbalance with larger and smaller objects.
7. **Include foreground objects** – Very important in scenic photography. Balance distant scene with something or someone in foreground. For critical depth of field it is important to use a tripod. Foreground can include framing.
8. **Use of framing** – Simplest trick in good photography. Use it to cover empty sky or uninteresting foreground. When using tree branches try to include some trunk. Framing must be sharp as well as rest of picture. Note: it is possible to use foreground very out of focus for framing; e.g. colored leaves. This is not easy to do, but is very effective when handled properly. Must be done with telephoto lens; shallow depth of field.
9. **Leading lines** – People enjoy a picture more when lines lead into picture the way we read. Opposite way is not wrong and can be pleasing, but usually it's best left to right. Never begin a line in a corner — go either above or below the corner with a leading line.
10. **Use a stopper** – A line leading in can also lead the eye out of the picture. Something is needed to stop the eye and keep it on the picture e.g., a tree or open gate.
11. **Avoid mergers** – Check and double check for merger of lines or subject with background. Easy to overlook. Mergers distract depth and perspective, merging subject and background in one plane. Use care that background makes subject stand out.
12. **Placement of a moving subject** – Subject in motion should be coming into picture — not leaving. Best left to right, but opposite is not wrong. Exception could be if you are trying to express something by other placement.
13. **Face toward the center** – Same principle as #12. Subject should not be looking out of picture. Have more space in direction person is looking. This applies to flowers as well as living creatures.

14. **Eliminate distractions** – Pick it up and move it. Hide it behind a tree or fence. If neither works use a longer lens to focus only on subject and throw distractions out of focus. Check for bits of rubbish which can ruin a good picture.
15. **Placement of a person in scenery** – For vacation photography, if person occupies more than 1/4 of the frame it is no longer a scenic picture. Have person look into scene, not at camera.
16. **Simplicity and unity** – Don't make picture too busy. Avoid too many objects or subjects. In general, simple pictures are best.
17. **Consistency.** To show height have subject in upper part of picture. To show depth have subject in lower part of picture.
18. **Trick of imagination** – To show something not in the picture, e.g. people walking out of church — only five were there, showing five in scene with one walking out of picture gives impression many people were there. Leave something to imagine.
19. **Odd and even numbers** – Odd numbers are generally more appealing than even numbers. If you can't avoid even numbers, don't line them up in a row, or space them evenly.
20. **Check color proportion** – Try not to have two predominant colors 50/50 in the picture. 20/80 proportion would be better.

In General: When you show your pictures, you are saying: “Look at this” or “Listen to me.” Perhaps the above principles would not fit with what you are trying to say. Do your own thing. Express yourself.

This collection of composition ideas was organized by the late John Kohout.