

Learn the best
ways to compose
your pictures!

Composition

From Snapshots to Great Shots

Get great detail
in your subjects!

Laurie Excell
John Batdorff
David Brommer
Rick Rickman
Steve Simon

Composition: From Snapshots to Great Shots

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Introduction

Taking your photography from snapshots to great shots begins with having a solid understanding of your camera and lenses so that you can intuitively move from one camera setting to another, capturing the moment as it unfolds. Although this is a book on composition, I start at the beginning, with the camera, and provide you with the building blocks to establish a strong foundation for making photographs rather than simply taking them. I cover the basic camera settings I use that enable me to capture peak of action or to chase the light as it dances across the landscape. The lens you use directly impacts your photographic style. Having a lens that complements your vision of the world is part of the process of making great shots, so I spend some time discussing lenses, to give you a better grasp of what lenses do and why you may need one type of lens over another. And, finally, I cover some essential accessories and filters that I carry in my bag to further enable me to make the images you see in this book.

Understanding light and exposure is probably one of the biggest roadblocks to making great images. In Chapter 2, I explain the exposure triangle and how aperture, shutter speed, and ISO relate to each other. Knowing which exposure combination to select gives you the creative control needed to bring your vision to life—from capturing great depth of field with everything within the frame in great detail, to isolating your subject and making it pop, to capturing peak of action or implying motion through the use of creative blur. For more in-depth coverage of exposure, check out Jeff Revell’s book *Exposure: From Snapshots to Great Shots*.

Light is what gives your subject shape, form, and texture; it has quality and quantity. Light is what gives your images mood, drama, and emotion. Without light, there would be no photographs. Knowing how to capture that light can be the difference between a simple snapshot and a great shot. Shadow and light lead your viewer's eye through your image and to your subject. One of the first things I look at when bringing the camera to my eye is the play of light on the scene before me and how I can use the light to make a dramatic image.

After you have read the first three chapters and have gone through the settings on your camera and worked through the assignments, you then need to take a look at the way you arrange the elements within your photographs—in other words, explore your composition. You have probably heard many of the “rules” about what makes a good composition. I like to think of the rules more as suggestions to making better images that capture your viewer's attention, giving them a sense of what you saw and felt the moment you clicked the shutter. Chapter 4 discusses the use of lines, shapes, and patterns to direct the path your viewers take through your images to get to the subject. I cover leading lines, straight lines, S-curves, and the way they come together to create graphic elements of shapes and patterns.

Continuing down the composition path, Chapter 5 discusses color, the use of complementary and contrasting colors, and the emotional impact that the variety of colors have on your viewers.

I wrap up my part of the book in Chapter 6, with discussions and illustrations of spatial relationships and subject placement—from frame-filling to environmental compositions, placement of horizon lines, vertical versus horizontal orientation, camera angle, perspective, and much more.

After completing the first six chapters, you will have a much better grasp of what makes a compelling image and how to take your photography from snapshots to great shots. But wait—there's more. The additional chapters in this book are written by four outstanding photographers, who have expertise in various photographic fields. They have graciously contributed their perception of composition and how it relates to their subjects, using their outstanding images to illustrate the points they make. In Chapter 7, John Batdorff covers black-and-white composition; in Chapter 8, Rick Rickman discusses sports and action photography; in Chapter 9, David Brommer takes you beyond the rule of thirds; and in Chapter 10, Steve Simon discusses the compositional dance.

So what are you waiting for! It's time to get started on your journey from taking snapshots to making great shots.

Don't forget to share your results with the book's Flickr group!

Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshotstogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshotstogreatshots)

4

ISO 100
30 sec.
f/22
42mm lens



Lines, Shapes, and Patterns

LINES, SHAPES, AND PATTERNS MAKE UP THE VISUAL PATH THAT LEADS YOUR EYE THROUGH THE FRAME TO THE POINT OF INTEREST

Composition is the art of arranging the elements within your frame into a pleasing image. It's up to you to determine what your subject is and to arrange the elements within the frame accordingly. Lines and shapes are important elements in composition. Lines draw your viewer into (or out of) the frame. They give direction. An S-curve (a curve that is shaped like an S) gently meanders through the frame, leading the viewer deeper into the frame, whereas a straight line is more direct. Curved lines are soft; straight lines have a more rigid feel.

Do you use a straight line or a diagonal line to reach the subject? Both will take the viewer there, but each has a different impact. Merging lines create a sense of distance, or vanishing point. Shapes are the result of a series of lines that come together to form a circle, square, triangle, and so on. Just like lines, the shape of your subject creates its own dynamic whether it's round, square, triangular, free-form, and so forth. Lines often lead to shapes, giving your images form. Patterns are repeating lines and shapes that make up an image.

PORING OVER THE PICTURE

Lines and shapes come together to create graphic elements in a photograph. The Conservatory of Flowers in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park is a perfect subject to illustrate lines (both straight and diagonal), shapes, and form all in one image.

The soft shape of the clouds contrasts nicely with the hard lines and shapes of the building.

The many converging lines within the image create a multitude of shapes—square, rectangle, triangle, curves.

I found that converting the image to black and white made an even stronger graphic photograph.

A series of lines draws the viewer's eye through the photograph beginning in the lower left (1) and leading diagonally to a vertical line moving upwards (2) towards the next horizontal line moving to the left (3) and continuing on throughout the frame.





ISO 100
1/200 sec.
f/8
32mm lens

1

3

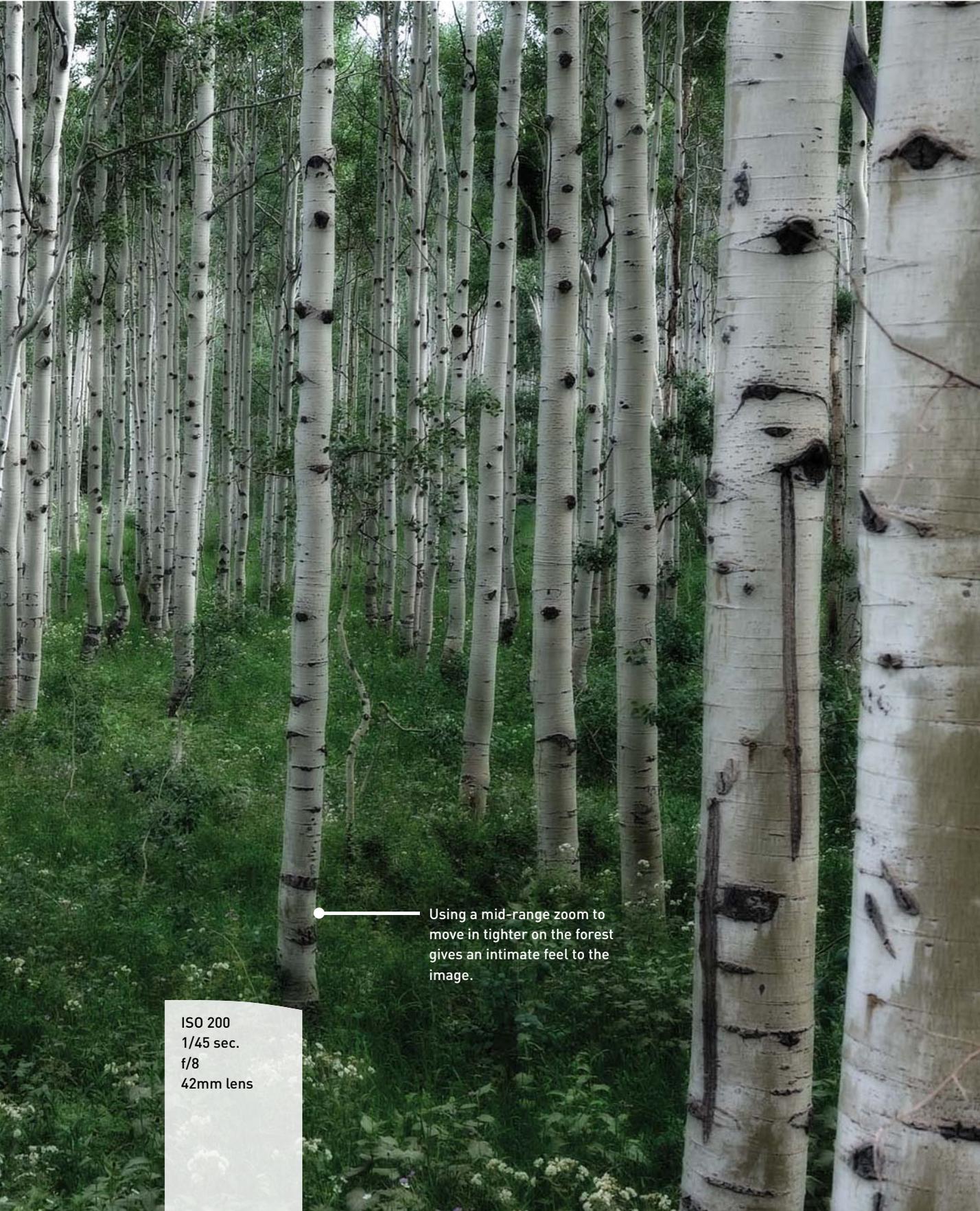
2

PORING OVER THE PICTURE

Moving in close on the foreground trees in a quaking-aspen forest increases the feel of visual depth by creating a vanishing point of trees getting smaller and smaller as they recede into the distance. A simple composition of straight lines becomes a compelling image that invites the viewer to take a walk through the forest just as I did when I made the image.

Diffused light (Chapter 3) brings out the detail, color, and texture of the trees.

Vertical lines signify strength and power. Photographing them in a horizontal composition adds a feeling of expanse to the composition.



Using a mid-range zoom to move in tighter on the forest gives an intimate feel to the image.

ISO 200
1/45 sec.
f/8
42mm lens

CURVES

Curves create a gentle, meandering path that leads the viewer through your image to the subject (**Figure 4.1**). Curves are lines but with a softer feel to them. With an S-curve, the path to your subject is not as direct as a line, so it gives a sense of peace and calm. S-curves are great leading lines to a subject (**Figure 4.2**), and they are such strong elements that they can stand alone as the subject itself (**Figure 4.3**). Whenever I see an S-curve, my eye follows it to see where it leads and to see whether it will make a good photograph.

FIGURE 4.1

Centering myself in the middle of the path and using a fairly small aperture (Chapter 2) for increased depth of field creates a composition that invites the viewer to step into the frame and wander down the path and through the forest. I find S-curves to be friendly lead-in lines in composition.

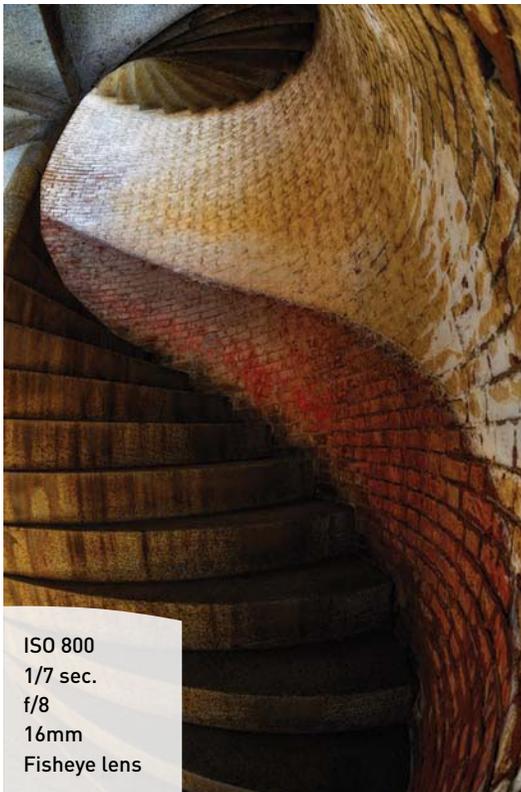


ISO 200
1/45 sec.
f/8
62mm lens



ISO 200
1/350 sec.
f/11
550mm lens

FIGURE 4.2
The curve of a great blue heron's neck leads from the left side of the frame to the fish he has clamped in his beak, creating a very natural pose.



ISO 800
1/7 sec.
f/8
16mm
Fisheye lens

FIGURE 4.3

An S-curve is such a strong element in composition that the curve itself can be the subject, as in this image of a curved staircase at Fort Point in San Francisco. Using a Fisheye lens emphasized the curvature of the staircase. Hand-holding the camera at 1/7 sec. required a faster ISO to gain enough depth and sharpness.

LINES

All images are made up of a series of lines, shapes, and forms (**Figure 4.4**). Lines are what lead viewers into the frame and to the subject (also known as leading lines). When artfully composed, an image will have leading lines that direct the viewer's eye where you want it to go. They may be bold and noticeable, creating a direct path to the subject, or they can be subtle and less obvious. Straight lines convey a sense of strength and power and often have a static feel to them. Diagonal lines also signify power, but rather than being static, they convey a sense of motion within a still photograph.

FIGURE 4.4

Lines, circles, and shapes make up this graphic image of an old church. Black and white emphasizes the graphic quality.



STRAIGHT LINES

Straight lines can pass through an image horizontally or vertically. A horizontal line going through a photograph can create a sense of calm, giving a static feel to an image (Figure 4.5). I find straight, horizontal lines in a photograph to be dividing lines or barricades, keeping the viewer on the outside looking in. Depending on what you are trying to accomplish, a horizontal line can either make or break an image. On the other hand, a vertical line can give a sense of strength and height, leading me directly into the frame with no question as to where I am trying to direct the viewer's eye (Figure 4.6). When making a bold composition with a straight line leading towards the subject, I like to center myself on the leading line to give the image symmetry and power. Vertical lines can be leading lines, or they can be the subject itself, as in the case of the tree trunks covered in snow, in Figure 4.7.

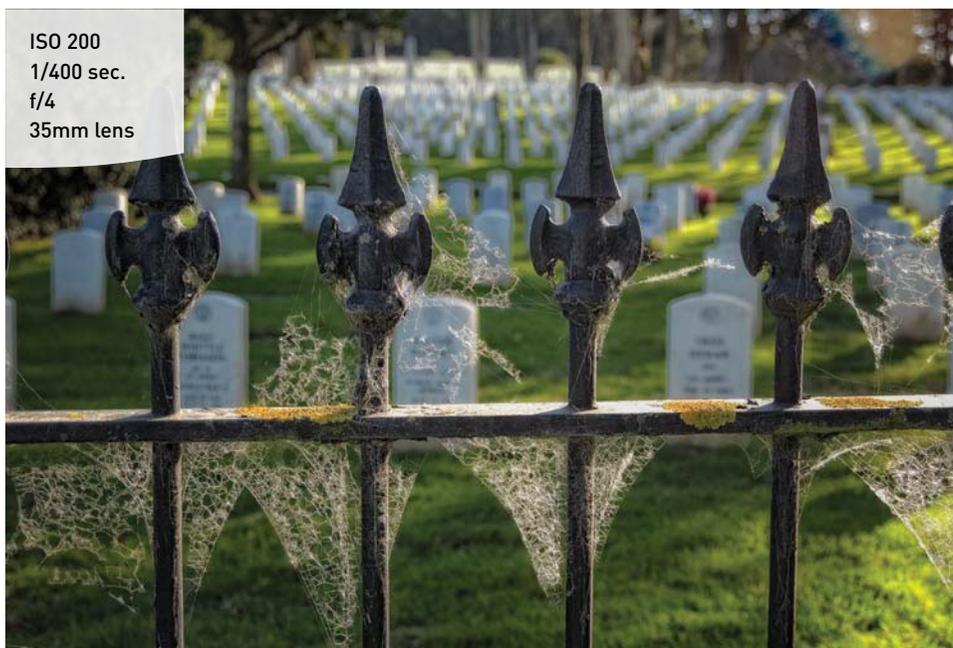


FIGURE 4.5
The spider-web-covered fence blocks me from entering the cemetery, which creates a strong message. Using a wider aperture to blur the background further emphasizes the fence, with just a hint of the cemetery beyond.

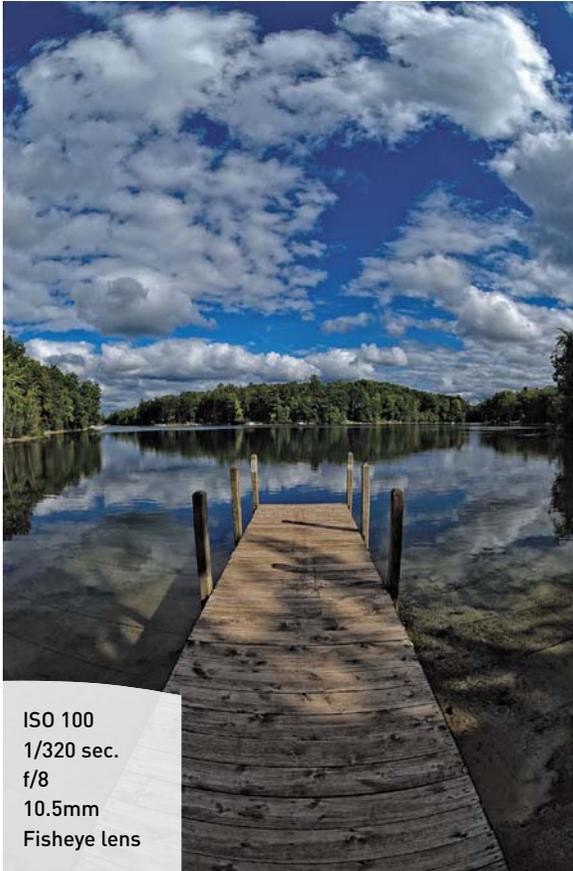


FIGURE 4.6

The dock leading to the beautiful lake scene beyond is as much a part of the picture as the subject it leads your eye towards. I used a 180-degree Fisheye lens to include as much in the frame as possible.



FIGURE 4.7

Rather than being leading lines, the tall, straight tree trunks with their branches covered in snow are the subject in this image. The contrast of white against the reddish trunks makes this a very simple yet strong composition.

DIAGONAL LINES

I like to use diagonal lines moving through the frame to convey a sense of motion that is hard to capture in a still photograph. I often use diagonal lines to lead the viewer's eye to the subject, as in **Figure 4.8**. The fence leads through the fields to Jenne Farm in the distance.

Diagonal lines can create a graphic element when they converge, as in the close-up of a dew-covered spiderweb in **Figure 4.9**. The nature of a spiderweb creates a sense of vanishing point as the drops start big and become smaller as they move towards the center of the web.

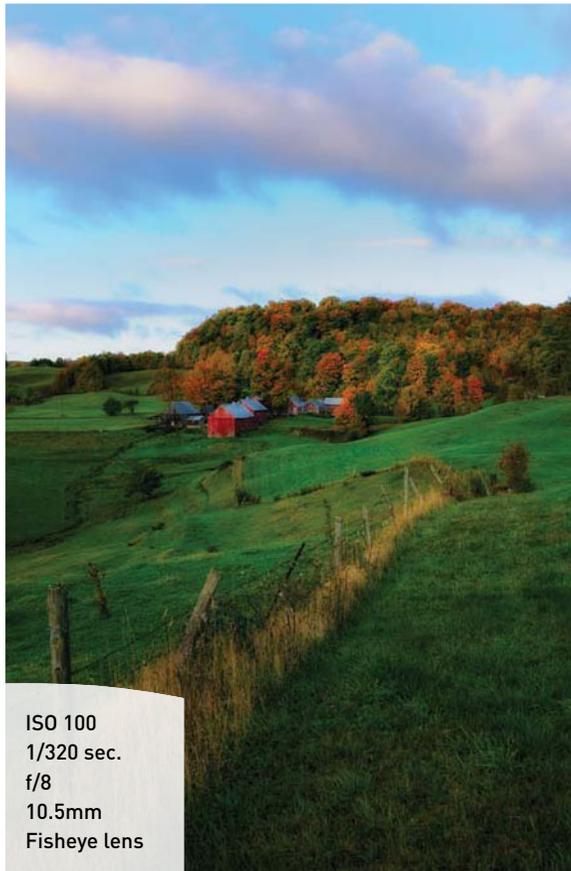


FIGURE 4.8

Diagonal lines have a feel of movement that is hard to convey with straight lines. This image of Jenne Farm, with the fence line leading to the buildings, incorporates a diagonal line that becomes curved with the rolling hills.

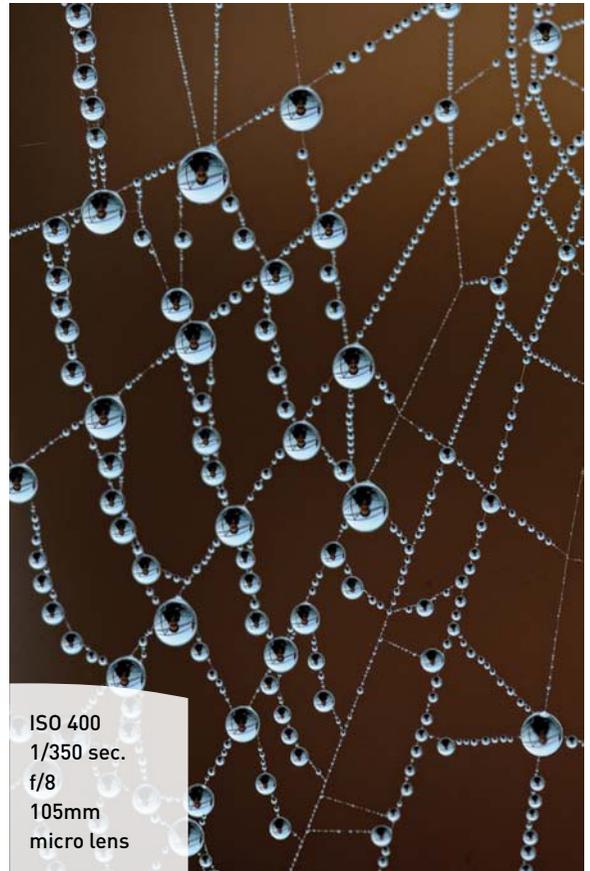


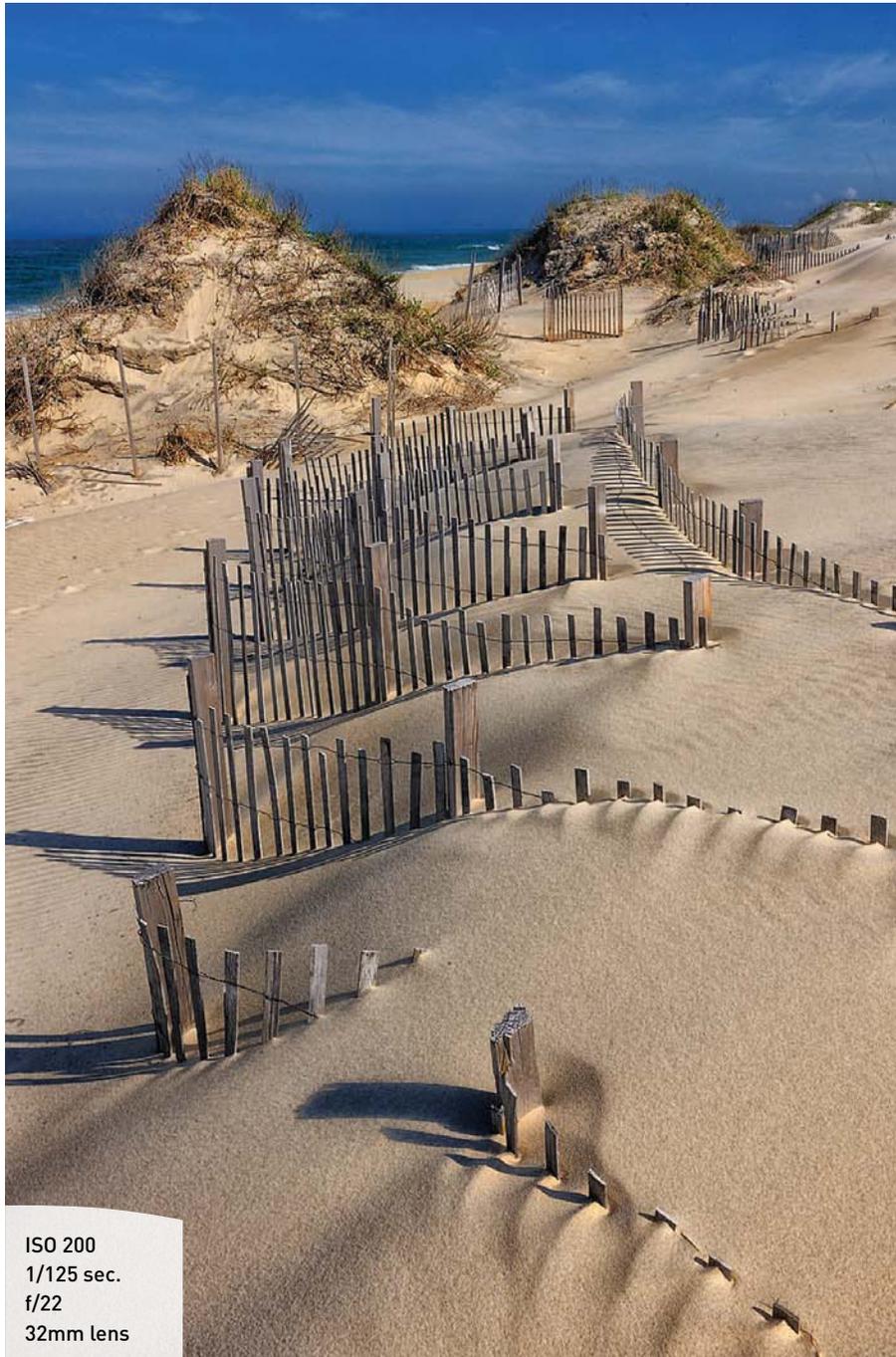
FIGURE 4.9

Shooting on a parallel plane with the spider web allowed me to use a mid-range aperture of f/8 and still have depth of field throughout. The slight breeze forced me to increase my ISO to reach a faster shutter speed. Hand-holding the camera gave me more versatility in my composition.

Diagonal lines can also be the subject, as in the image of a sand fence as it zigzags along the beach towards the ocean (Figure 4.10).

FIGURE 4.10

Moving in close with a wide-angle lens emphasizes the entry point into the frame, with the diagonal lines moving back and forth and leading the viewer to the beach beyond. The ocean and sky in the background are supporting elements in the image, to give it a sense of place (Chapter 6).



ISO 200
1/125 sec.
f/22
32mm lens

PATTERNS

Patterns are graphic images that have the same subject duplicated over and over within the frame. Repeating lines and shapes make up these patterns. Nature, in all her beauty, provides us with endless patterns to photograph.

The intricate design of a dahlia provides great patterns as petal after petal unfolds to reveal the flower's beauty (**Figure 4.11**).



FIGURE 4.11
Using a telephoto zoom, I focused at minimum-focus distance to fill the frame with the flower.

The wake from a boat created a pattern of waves that caught the light and my attention (**Figure 4.12**). I used a telephoto to fill the frame with the repeating pattern, excluding everything else.

Sometimes even the simplest subjects become compelling when another element is added, such as the icicles hanging from the rock wall in **Figure 4.13**. The vertical lines of the icicles contrast with the round rocks.

FIGURE 4.12

I increased my ISO to 400mm to be able to achieve a fast shutter speed because I was photographing the wake from a moving boat.

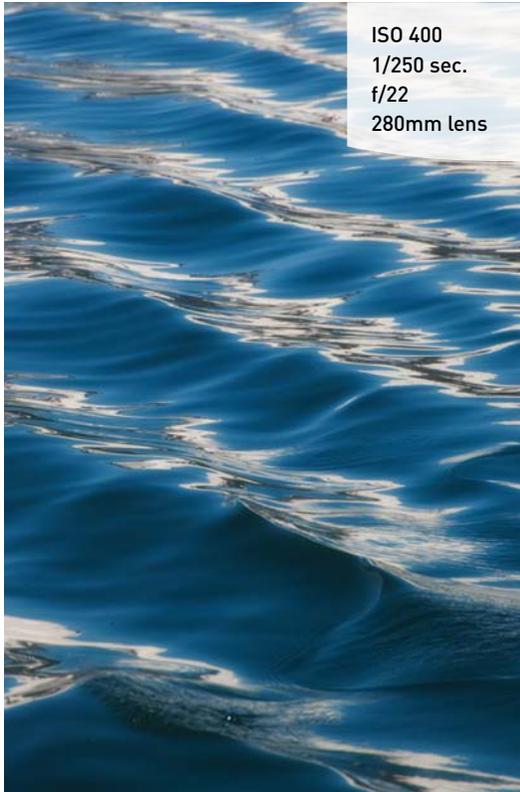


FIGURE 4.13

Icicles on a rock wall created a pattern of vertical lines. I like the warmth of the rocks and the way they contrast with the cooler, blue colors of the icicles. Blue conveys coldness in an image (more on color in Chapter 5).



FRAMING

When I think of framing, I think of my image hanging on the wall with a nice mat and frame to show it off. However, there are other methods of framing an image: in the viewfinder, using foreground elements to “frame” the subject. While photographing in Central Park in New York, my attention was drawn to two arches. I liked the way they repeated each other, giving vanishing-point feel with the foreground arch being much larger than the background arch. I patiently waited for the people to move through, when another photographer with a similar idea stepped into the frame (**Figure 4.14**). Liking the sense of scale (Chapter 6) that the photographer added to the image, I quickly clicked off a few shots. Framing can be a very effective use of elements to highlight the subject. Be careful not to use it too heavily, or it becomes the focus of the photograph.

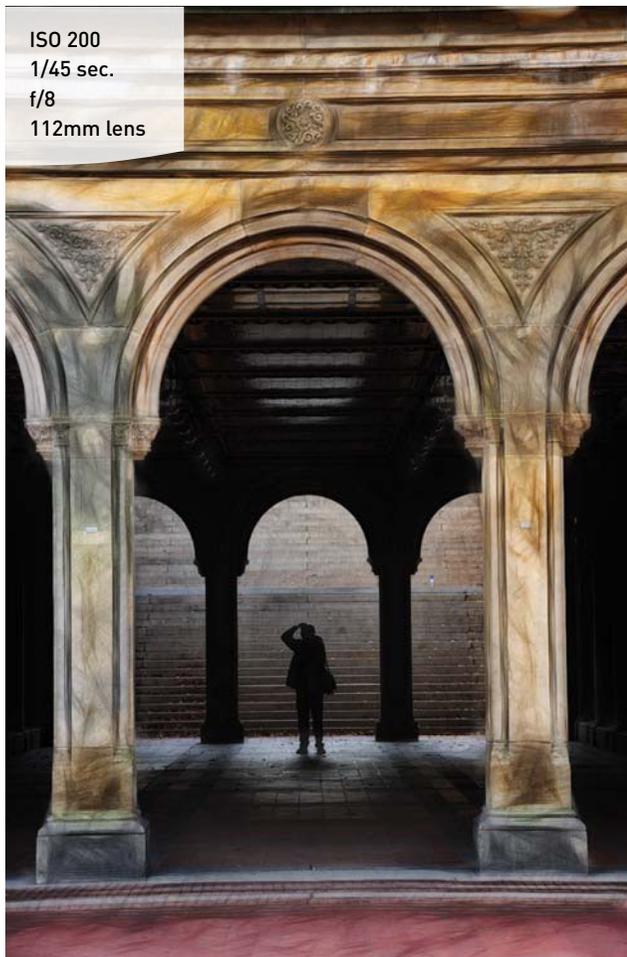


FIGURE 4.14

The photographer changed the effect of the image I was composing from a simple graphic to a framed composition. The giant arches framed the smaller photographer and added a sense of scale to the image that would not have happened without him in the frame.

Using the foliage to frame the trees in Muir Woods in California creates a sense of looking through a peephole (**Figure 4.15**).

Teardrop Arch is an iconic subject that has been photographed over and over (**Figure 4.16**). Many people use a vertical composition to fill the frame with the rock wall, using the arch to reveal Monument Valley in the distance through the arch. Looking for a slightly different composition, I turned my camera to a horizontal composition and zoomed back to include the edge of the arch. I like the effect of part of the image framed and part of it wide open. I think it adds to the sense of place.

FIGURE 4.15

I mounted my camera on a tripod to enable me to shoot at a smaller aperture to render sharp focus on both the foliage and the trees beyond and still keep my ISO low, which resulted in a slow shutter speed.

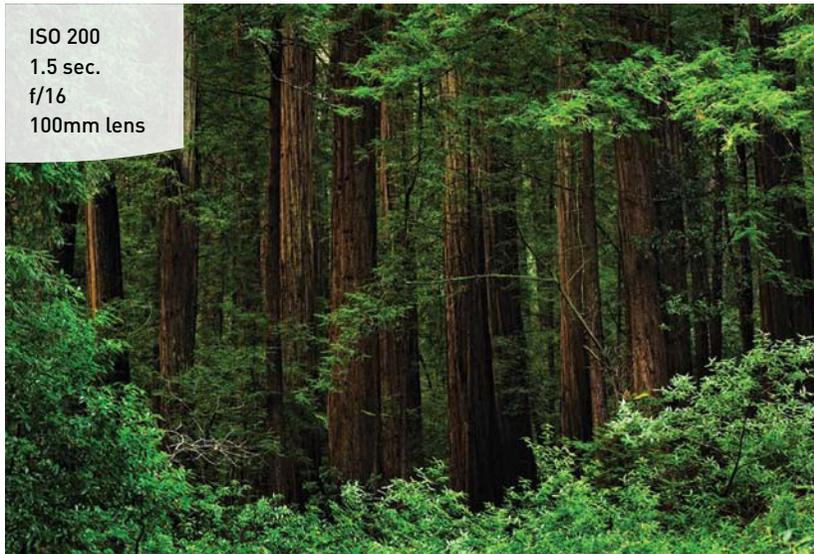
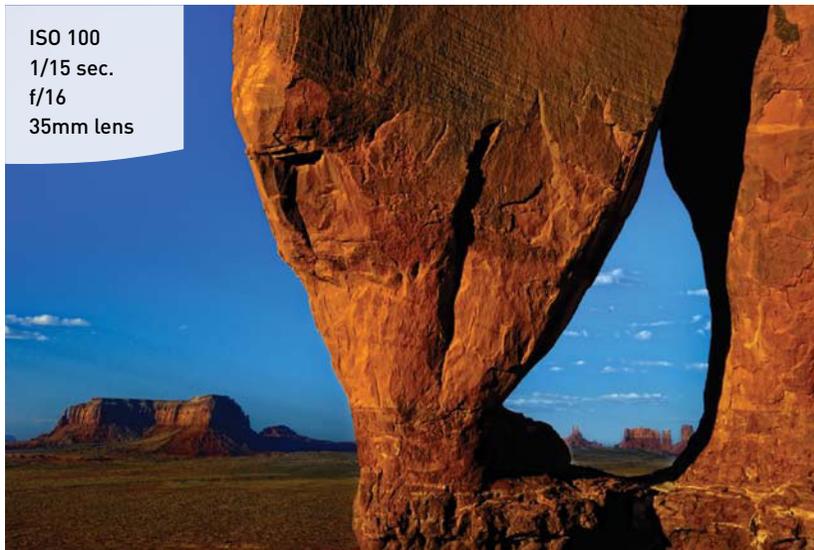


FIGURE 4.16

With no place to set up a tripod and needing a fairly small aperture for increased depth of field, I braced myself using proper hand-holding techniques to shoot at a slow shutter speed.



VERTICAL OR HORIZONTAL SHOTS?

Vertically or horizontally—which way do you turn the camera? Most cameras are set up with grips that lend themselves to being held comfortably in a horizontal, or landscape, orientation. The higher-end cameras and mid-range cameras with external grips allow the use of vertical, or portrait, composition with the same comfortable grip and shutter release. Which direction do you turn when you're composing an image? It depends on what you want to include and what you want to exclude. There is no right or wrong. Many times, it's simply a matter of preference and what you are trying to communicate in your images.

On a snowy winter morning at Bryce Canyon National Park, I was heading for my car when a lone picnic table covered in snow caught my attention (**Figure 4.17**). My first reaction was to photograph the scene in a vertical format to lend height to the tall trees. On a whim, I turned the camera back to a horizontal position and clicked a few frames. Upon reviewing the images, I decided I liked the spacious feel that I was able to capture in the horizontal orientation (**Figure 4.18**). Both images work; I simply like

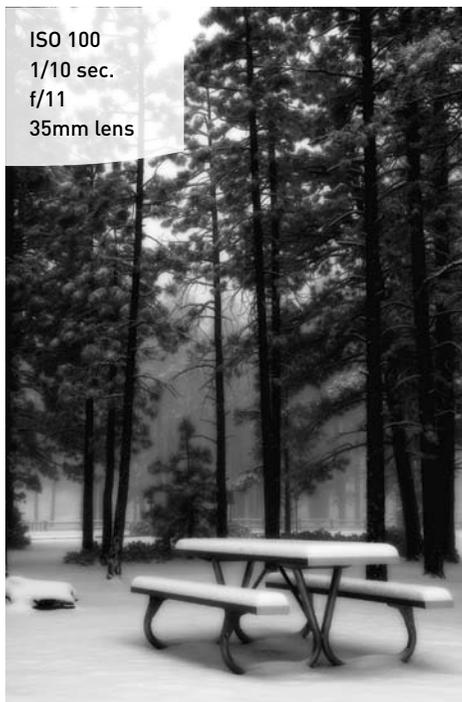


FIGURE 4.17

My first reaction to the snowy scene was to turn the camera to a vertical composition to emphasize the tall trees.



FIGURE 4.18

Here I turned the camera to a horizontal composition, zoomed out a bit more, and found I liked the more spacious feel that I was able to achieve.

the horizontal image better. Had I not turned the camera, I would have been perfectly happy with the vertical image. It was an overcast morning, and I knew when I clicked the shutter that the images would be flat, but I had black and white in mind when I was making these images. Using NIK B&W Infrared software added drama and impact to these otherwise flat-light images.

While photographing the wheat fields in the Palouse region in eastern Washington, I stopped by a historic farm that is noted for its fence made of thousands of wheels and gears soldered together. It was a beautiful, blue-sky day, with big puffy clouds floating in the sky. The question came to mind, which way should I turn my camera? Did I want to convey the vast wheat fields with the fence as a strong foreground element (**Figure 4.19**)? Or, would turning the camera in a vertical format emphasizing the blue sky and puffy clouds better tell the story? Once again, either image works, but what was I trying to communicate in my image? My goal was to capture the wheel fence, which both images do quite well. So, it boils down to either more sky or more wheat fields. I felt that the wheat fields gave the image a greater sense of place, and I was still able to include some sky and clouds. In this case I prefer the horizontal composition (**Figure 4.20**).



FIGURE 4.19
A horizontal composition gives the image a feeling of width and expanse.

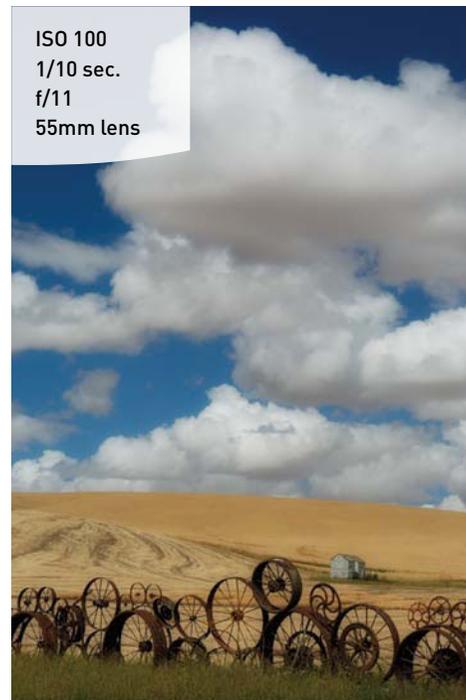


FIGURE 4.20
A vertical composition emphasizes the vastness of the sky rather than the fence and fields.

VERTICAL VS. HORIZONTAL

Next time, study both sets of images and decide what you like about each image. Do you connect with the vertical or horizontal images in the two examples? There is usually no right or wrong answer, it simply depends on the subject and the feeling you choose to convey. Lines, shape, and form all change their appearance when the camera is turned from a horizontal to vertical format.

However, most times it's pretty obvious which way to turn your camera. When a grizzly bear is walking straight at the lens, I turn the camera to a vertical composition to fill the frame with the bear, centering it in the frame for increased impact (**Figure 4.21**). And when a sandhill crane with its wings fully extended flies by, I instinctively turn the camera to a horizontal composition to include it all, from wing tip to wing tip (**Figure 4.22**).

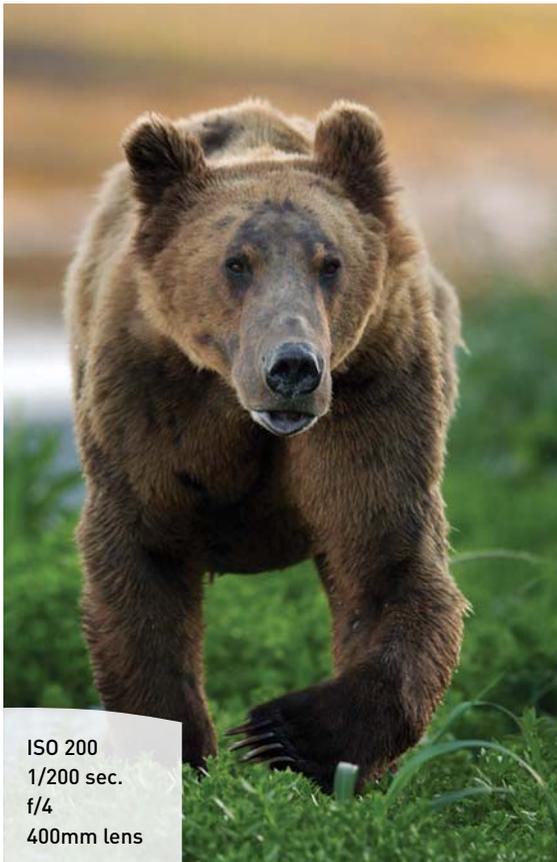


FIGURE 4.21

A vertical composition was the obvious choice with this grizzly bear.

FIGURE 4.22

The position of the wings and the body posture of the sandhill crane make a nice horizontal composition.



LAYERS

Another effective use of lines and shapes is to compose an image using layering of the landscape to create visual depth. Aerial perspective lends itself to this technique (Figure 4.23). When the sun is dropping lower in the sky, partially backlighting the scene, the distant mountains take on an ethereal look as they seem to fade away into the distance. Layering is also achieved when there are repeating patterns, like the rolling wheat fields photographed from a relatively high perspective. The undulating hills with the shadow and light playing across them produce a unique layering effect (Figure 4.24).

LAYERING

I normally select a telephoto lens when capturing an image with the layered look. I feel that the tighter composition lends itself nicely to an intimate landscape.

ISO 100
1/50 sec.
f/22
200mm lens



FIGURE 4.23
Using a long lens to compress the scene and dialing in minus exposure compensation to add drama to the layers create a very interesting effect called aerial perspective.

ISO 200
1/800 sec.
f/6.7
190mm lens



FIGURE 4.24
Shadow and light (Chapter 3) as well as color contrast (Chapter 5) all play important roles in creating the layered look in a composition.

Chapter 4 Assignments

Before moving on to Chapter 5, take some time to complete the following assignments to gain a better grasp of lines, shape, and form and the role they play in composition.

Lines

Using lines to lead to your subject, work a scene by shooting straight on with the lines moving horizontally through the image to see how a horizontal line can divide the frame and create a barrier between the viewer and the subject. Using the same subject, change position so that the line is moving in a diagonal direction towards the subject. For the final shot, shoot straight down a line towards your subject to see the dramatic impact that shooting directly towards the subject has on your images. Notice how changing your camera angle dramatically alters the effect of lines and their effect on the final composition.

Curves

Go out and look for curves that lead your eye to your subject. Find a classic S-curve and use it to lead the viewer's eye to your subject. Note the softer approach of using curves as leading lines as opposed to the preceding assignment using straight lines.

Vertical or Horizontal

The next time you are composing a scene, stop and ask yourself why you are composing it the way you are. Once you have captured the image in the orientation you first decided on, turn the camera to the opposite orientation (if you began with a horizontal position, turn the camera to a vertical position) and shoot the same scene. Compare the two images to see what qualities you like about each composition. You may be surprised that many scenes look as good or better when you turn the camera from one orientation to the other.

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