

Module # 1 - Component # 5



Basic Composition

Preface

This course was written by world-renowned wildlife photographer Daryl Balfour, and has been the basis for a regular feature published in Africa Geographic. This is the first time his material has been available over the Internet, and in course form. In addition to the invaluable insights and tips on a vast range of topics, this course is filled with hundreds of examples of his own work demonstrating various techniques, common mistakes and moments of brilliance. Each Component also includes a quick self-assessment.

Introduction

A few years back I was asked to assist with the judging of an annual wildlife photography competition. After a long day of looking at hundreds of slides, most good, some very good and several of them superb, there was one glaring fault that knocked many out of the running for prizes. Poor composition!

With the technological advances of modern photographic equipment over the past decade, there is little reason why even the most novice photographers cannot get **sharply focused and correctly exposed shots** today. Add some of the new, sharp, fine grained and highly saturated films to the equation, along with ever-increasing access to wild areas and wildlife, and there's no reason why most, with a dollop of **good luck** such as being in the right place at the right time, cannot get those elusive award winners.

Technical perfection is within the grasp of virtually anybody prepared to make the outlay for a modern, hi-tech, quality camera system. (Though this is not to say that you must have the latest and best equipment to make great images. Far from it.)

Virtually every image that made it through to the last day of judging in the competition referred to above was technically perfect. Only a few of them were **creatively excellent**, however, and this is where the judges separated the wheat from the chaff. While all the judges had differing ideas about **photographic excellence**, we all agreed on certain simple criteria, among the most important of which was the creative control of composition.

AutoFocus

Interestingly, one of the major shortcomings we detected in a large number of otherwise very good images was directly attributable to the use of one of the major technological advances in cameras in recent years - **autofocus**. Until fairly recently, most autofocus cameras had only one autofocus area - dead center in the viewfinder. This resulted in many photographers simply aiming that spot at the subject they wanted to focus on, then pressing the shutter release to take the picture. Result: correct focus, correct exposure, bad composition with the subject centered in the frame, often **resulting in dead, out of focus and boring foregrounds**.

The Rule of Thirds

One of the simplest and most basic rules of composition is commonly known as "**the rule of thirds**". Artists have used these rules, or guidelines for centuries to create a **well balanced painting**, and have been adopted by photographers. Quite simply put, the center of the frame is generally a dead spot, whether you are creating a portrait, landscape, action image or even a motion blur. For a **more dynamic composition** you need to **lead** the viewers' eyes into the picture, usually

from left to right, from bottom up or top down.

To understand the rule of thirds think of your camera's frame or viewfinder as being divided into **three equal divisions** left to right and top to bottom. When composing your photograph, try to place the subject, or at least an important part of the subject, at one of the intersecting points of these divisions, **irrespective** of whether you are shooting a **vertical or a horizontal image**, keeping the focal point of the image off-center. Many camera manufacturers offer an after-market accessory-focusing screen with a grid etched onto it, intended for use in architectural photography, but a great aid in composing general images too. (Nikon's inexpensive new F80 body even has an "on demand" grid screen that can be switched on or off with the custom features control.)

A portrait of an animal facing to the right, for example, should have the subject placed in the left of the frame, leaving room for it to look into the vacant area in the right, creating a dynamic tension in the mind of the viewer and raising the question: " I wonder what it is looking at?" A more straightforward portrait, with the subject facing directly into the camera, should be framed with the eyes, or the most important (closest) eye, at one of the intersecting lines of the division of thirds.

Horizon Placement

One of the most **common compositional errors** is that of placing horizons running **dead center** through the frame, typically leaving a lot of **dead ground in the foreground**. Try **tilting** the camera up to include more sky, particularly if it is a dramatic, cloudy sky, or down if there is more interest in the foreground, placing the horizon in the bottom or top third of the image. Remember to always make sure your **horizons are level**. Nothing can spoil a good shot quicker than a camera leaning to one side and skewing the horizon. Focusing screens with etched grids can be a huge assistance here too.

Don't stick rigidly to the rule of thirds either. Like most rules, it is made to be

broken from time to time. Perhaps a "rule of sixths" would be better suited to some situations. If there is a really dramatic sky and very little of interest in the foreground, the horizon could be placed right at the very bottom of the frame, including a mere sliver of the landscape and the massive sky. And occasionally too, such as when there is a mirror reflection in still water for example, a dead center horizon can also work. Use these rules to your advantage, but don't follow them slavishly.

Helps and Hindrances

You will probably also find that compositional rules are a lot easier to comply with when using shorter lenses, and in fact I believe that a **fixation** with long telephoto lenses and tightly framed images is **limiting** a lot of photographers' creative abilities. Sure, tight shots are important, but so are the images that show the subject in the landscape, giving it a sense of place.

With every autofocus camera that I know of, you can **lock focus** by holding the shutter release button slightly depressed after attaining focus with the subject centered on the focus spot or bracket. Once you have your focus you can lock it and then recompose your shot. Of course the more modern cameras, with an array of several focus areas, make composing a lot easier. My Nikon F5s, F100s and the latest F80, for example, have **five different selectable focus areas** that make focusing and composing using the rule of thirds so much easier.

So remember, technological advances in photographic equipment may have made photography far more accessible; technically correct photographs still require practice and skill.

Daryl Balfour

Daryl Balfour is regarded as one of the world's leading wildlife photographers and authors, and while he specialises in African subjects he is also known for his work in a wide range of other areas. He studied zoology at university level, and later became a newspaper investigative and photo-journalist. However, in 1989 he became a full-time professional wildlife photographer, and enjoys sharing his knowledge and experience with fellow travellers. This has led to him also working as a specialist safari guide, taking VIP guests to remote regions, particularly on photo safaris.

Daryl lives with his wife Sharna in Swaziland and South Africa, but their expeditions throughout Africa and much of the rest of the world take them away from home for up to 10 months a year. These travels include trips to remote parts of Africa, Alaska, Canada and Antarctica.

A regular contributor to Africa Geographic magazine, Daryl has contributed articles on areas, plants and animals as well as specialist pieces on photographic techniques. His photographs have also appeared in publications such as National Geographic, International Wildlife, Outside, BBC Wildlife, GEO, Outdoor Photographer, Animan, Tier and Getaway.

Daryl has authored a number of best-selling coffee table books featuring his stunning photographs, including:

- Simply Safari
- African Elephants - A Celebration of Majesty
- Chobe - Africa's Untamed Wilderness
- Etosha
- This Is Botswana
- Rhino - The Story of the Rhinoceros and a Plea for its Conservation
- Okavango - An African Paradise

Both Daryl and Sharna have contributed, as principal photographers, to many other major books, including The Spectacular World of Wildlife (Reader's Digest) and Wildest Africa (New Holland). They were featured lecturers at the prestigious North American Nature Photography Association's annual summit in Las Vegas, USA in 2001.

Daryl continues to write, lecture, guide and of course photograph, and we are very proud to present his Wildlife Photography Course here on WildlifeCampus.