

Day 15: Simplify!

Today we take our first step into the world of composition!

Before We Begin: Don't Skip Steps! and Don't Revert!

- Think of photography as a hierarchy.
 - Remember to set up your Location, Lighting, and Exposure first.
 - Once you have those right, it is time to think about composition.
- Avoid reverting to Auto and Firing off snapshots
 - This is where the rubber hits the road. You are now deciding what to shoot, and it can be overwhelming if you arrive someplace and have no idea what you want to shoot.

Step 1: Identify your subject

- First thing you need to do is identify a subject.
 - Just yourself: "What is my subject here?"
- Sometimes it is easy. Sometimes it is a place, a bridge, a person, a flower, etc.
- But it doesn't have to be a thing. It can also be an idea or an emotion.
- It can be any unified thought or message - as long as they fit together.

Step 2: Fill the frame

- Here's a simple approach to this:
 - If things in your frame support your subject, they stay in.
 - If not, they are out.
- As an experiment think about how many pictures you wish you got wider versus the number you end up cropping. I'll bet you crop way more (I do). That tells us that getting closer is a good idea.

Photography as a process of exclusion

- You don't just put a super wide angle lens and capture everything in front of you. That never works and we don't even try it.
- So we are doing the process of exclusion already - we just need to get more intentional about it.
- You start with a messy 3-dimensional scene in front of you, and your job is to create a pleasing 2-dimensional object.

Additional Commentary

When someone looks at your photo, you have a split second to impress them. They have to know what your photo is about quicker than the bat of an eye. That has always been the case, but never more so than now when people are bombarded with images.

Therefore, you have to get your point across in that split second. The only way to do that is to simplify your images so that your audience knows exactly what you are trying to get across.

If you have been around photography for any length of time, you've heard photographers tell you to "get closer" to your subject. Often that is their way of telling you to simplify. You need to figure out what your subject is and focus in on it. Once you identify your subject, you start excluding everything that isn't your subject.

Photography as a process of exclusion

If that sounds odd, understand that photography is inherently a process of exclusion. This will make a bit more sense to you with a little explanation.

Let's start by addressing a technique for taking pictures that never, ever results in a shot worth looking at. That technique is simply attaching a super wide-angle lens to your lens and taking a picture of everything in front of you. It just never works. It isn't interesting. Even if you are in an interesting place, the picture will not be something anyone wants to see. The picture tells your viewer nothing. My guess is that you already know this. Most of us just know this intuitively. Some of us have tried it on occasion and seen that it doesn't produce anything worth looking at. Either way, we're all pretty clear on this point.

What does that tell us? It tells us that you are already using a process of exclusion for creating your photographs. If you aren't just photographing everything in front of you, it means you are making a decision about what is in and what is out. You simply must be doing the process of exclusion already. Now we just need to get more intentional about it.

How do you do that? By identifying your subject first, and then filling the frame with it. Composition is necessarily tied up in the process of choosing your subject. Let's talk now about how to do each of these things.

Step 1: Identify your subject

The first thing you need to do is identify a subject for your photo. Sometimes this is remarkably easy. Sometimes the subject is a place. Often it is a discrete object, like a bridge, a person, a flower, etc.

Other times, the subject of your photo won't be a thing but an idea or feeling. It may not be a person, but an emotion. It doesn't have to be complicated. It can be as simple as "enjoying our vacation" or "beautiful sunset." This process causes you to think about the idea of your photograph, which you can then isolate.

This notion of subject as emotion is particularly applicable when it comes to taking pictures of people. Having a person as the subject is beyond commonplace and potentially quite boring. Adding an emotion as the subject makes it much more interesting.

Identifying a subject does not necessarily mean photographing one solitary thing. It does not mean you can't have more than one thing in your picture, as long as they fit together. Rather, you just need to focus on having one unified thought, idea, or message in your picture. If that sounds vague and mushy, it doesn't have to be. All you need to do is ask yourself, "What is this a picture of?"

Sometimes you won't know what the subject of your photograph is when you put the camera to your face. Very often, you will just think, "*This is a beautiful place and I want to take a picture of it.*" But if you just take a picture of a scenic view, you have a snapshot. It might be a nice snapshot, but it is a snapshot just the same. This step will cause you to take a moment and identify a subject or theme of your photograph.

Step 2: Fill the frame

Once you have identified your subject, your next task is to fill the frame with it. In other words, get closer to your subject or zoom in. While you are framing the picture, just ask yourself if a part of the picture supports the subject. If it does, it stays in. If it doesn't, it should be removed.

This is something new photographers have a hard time with. They tend to want a lot of background in the photo as well. This seems to be because they want to add context to the photo, but it is not necessary because humans are perceptive and can place the subject with very little help in the way of background.

Don't be afraid that you will later wish you had more background. You won't. To see this, try this little mental exercise. Consider all the pictures you have in your library. This about how many you have cropped. There will probably be a lot of them. Then consider how many you



wish you had gotten wider. I personally cannot think of many pictures that I wish I had taken from further way or with a wider angle. My guess is that you will be the same.

Day 15 Assignment

A Walk in the Park

Description:

Head to the nearest park and take photographs. Identify subjects for photos and fill the frame with them.

Keys to Success:

- Identify subjects by asking yourself: What is this a picture of?
- Remember a subject can be one thing, many things, or an intangible thing.
- Exclude extraneous elements by asking yourself: Does this support my subject?
- Don't revert. Use all the exposure, focus, and shooting techniques you have used so far in this course.

Upon Completion of this Assignment:

A local park is not the easiest place to pick out potential subjects. The idea is for you to have to work on picking them out. If you can do it here, you will be in good shape for doing so on your next photo outing.