

Day 16: Follow the Rule of Thirds

About the Rule of Thirds

- The Rule of Thirds is a way to divide your picture into thirds, both horizontally and vertically. It is a tried and true rule that makes the composition more pleasing.
- The intersections of the lines are particularly important points of your picture.
- The Rule of Thirds will also help you identify your subject because you'll have to think about it in order to place it.

Practical Application of the Rule of Thirds:

- Vertically (the horizontal lines that run across your picture):
 - Put the horizon line on the top third line when your focus is on the ground.
 - Put the horizon line on the bottom third line when focus is above the horizon (i.e., the sky, or to emphasize the wide open nature of the place).
- Horizontally (the vertical lines running up and down the picture)
 - Place important items to one side or the other along third lines.
- Intersections
 - Of course, sometimes you will also use it both horizontally and vertically.
 - The places where the lines intersect are particularly important. Consider them power points where you will put the most important parts of your pictures.
- Use the Rule of Thirds when photographing people as well. Place them to one side and generally have them looking into the picture.

Additional Tips for Using the Rule of Thirds

- Camera have an aide to using the Rule of Thirds: There are usually grid lines available.
- Despite it being called a "Rule," you can ignore the Rule of Thirds:
 - I have ignored it plenty of times and been happy I did.
 - But first, master the rule. Selectively ignore it later.
- Even if you don't use it, helps to think about your picture and where you are trying to draw the viewer's eye.

You Get a Second Chance To Apply the Rule of Thirds

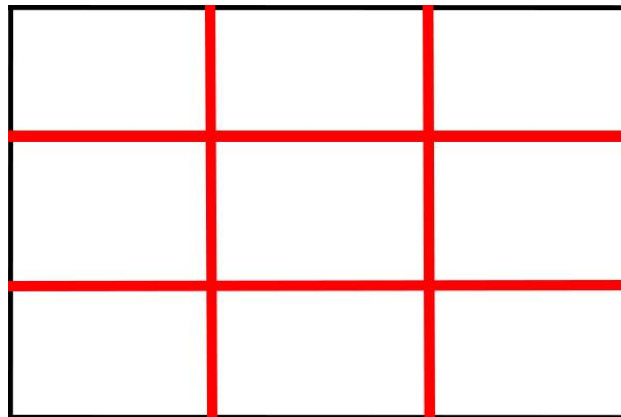
- When you are in post processing, you can crop your picture. When you do, a grid line will appear and guide you to using the Rule of Thirds.
- We all want to get it right in the field, but things move fast there, so you can take your time at home and get it just right.

Additional Commentary

In today's lesson, we are going to consider how to arrange things within your picture. To do so, we are going to follow an age-old rule for doing so, which is called the Rule of Thirds.

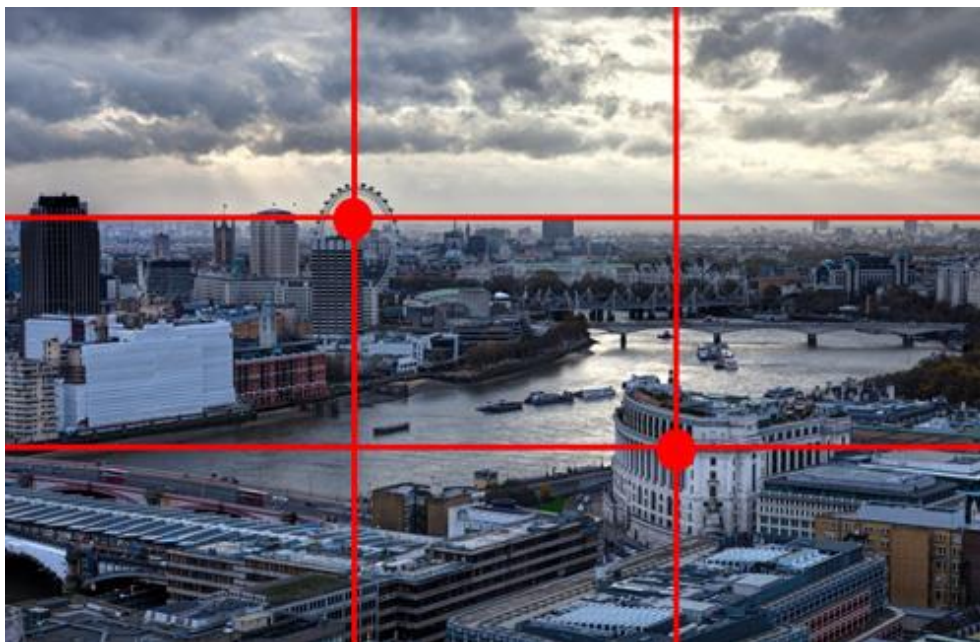
About the Rule of Thirds

The Rule of Thirds says that you should divide your photo into thirds horizontally and vertically and place important items along the lines. As a result, your picture gets divided up like this:



In fact, your camera might already have a grid overlay on your LCD much like the one above. If it isn't already there, you can probably call it up by going into the camera's menu (check out the manual to see how to do that).

In the context of an actual picture, applying the Rule of Thirds looks something like this:



Notice the dots over the intersection of some of the lines. When using the Rule of Thirds, these points are considered particularly powerful or significant. When possible, place important parts of the picture on these points.

Don't get hung up on placing things exactly on a third line. This is meant as a general rule of thumb and not as a precise rule. Frankly, the rule of thirds could really be boiled down to "don't center things in your picture." That goes for subjects and horizon lines in particular.

Practical Application:

We'll talk more about using the Rule of Thirds in just a minute. Before we do that, it might be helpful to see it in action. Let's go through some pictures that show the application of the Rule of Thirds in a variety of contexts.

Horizontal Lines (vertical stacks)

First, let's take a look at the use of the Rule of Thirds on the horizon. Beginning photographers generally place the horizon line right in the middle of the picture, and this is generally a pretty poor place for it. The Rule of Thirds says you should place it at the top third line or the bottom third line.

How do you decide which line to place the horizon line on? Consider what your picture is about and what you are trying to accentuate. Do you want your viewer to pay more attention to the sky or the foreground? If what is on the ground is more important to you, then place the horizon line on the top third of the picture so that 2/3 of the picture is of what is one the ground. Here is an example of that:



The focus of the picture is clearly the outcropping and cliffs near the bottom of the picture. For this reason, it makes sense to make that part of the picture take up 2/3 of the space, rather than the sky.

Here's another example:



Although the sky is interesting, this is not a picture of the sky. It is a picture of the features along the coast. Therefore, again, it makes sense for the majority of the space in the picture to consist of those features.

Now let's consider when you might want to put the horizon line on the bottom third of your picture. There are several different circumstances when you might want to do this. The first is obviously when the sky is the focus of the picture.



In this picture, the sky is of much more interest than the flat water underneath it. You have the rising sun, interesting clouds, and lots of color in the sky. In such situations it is natural that you will want the sky taking up the majority of your picture. Placing the horizon line on the bottom third line will make that happen.

Other times, there will be things in your picture that are above the horizon line, which are the subject of your photo. Two examples are buildings and trees. Here is an example with buildings above the horizon line:



In this picture, the subject of the photo is clearly the buildings that make up the skyline. It only makes sense that you place the horizon line near the bottom of the photo so that the buildings can take up the majority of the space in the photo.

Finally, there will be times when you want to create a sense of wide open space in your photo. In these cases - irrespective of what your subject might be - you should place your horizon line near the bottom of the photo.



None of this is to say that you need to include any portion of the sky in your photos though. Many great photographers don't. I tend to include a lot of sky in my photos and my examples will reflect that. But don't let that make you need to include the sky in your outdoor photos. When you do, however, thinking about the horizon line in this fashion will help you greatly. If there is no horizon line, you can still use the principal of dividing the picture into thirds and putting the most important elements in $2/3$ of the picture.

Vertical Lines

Of course, the Rule of Thirds doesn't work just with horizontal lines. It also works with vertical lines. This has more to do with where you place your subject or center of interest in the picture. Consider this example:



The focal point of the picture is clearly the Golden Gate Bridge. As such, you may be inclined to center it. However, placing it off to the side - on one of the vertical third lines - makes for a better image.

You can also apply this rule in nature. There are fairly obvious examples, such as this one:



In this picture, taken in Monument Valley, you have one solitary thing. Rather than center it, you just place it off to one side to create a more dynamic looking photo.

Other times, it won't be as obvious. You will face a scene and have to decide where things go. The subject may not be clear. Lines may only be implied. In those cases, you'll need to decide on your subject and how you want to present it, then move around until you get things lined up properly. Consider this example, which is of a stream that flows into Booth Falls outside Vail, Colorado:



When you are standing there, you will see the stream and a lot of trees. There is no obvious way to organize the picture. When you think about using the Rule of Thirds, however, it makes things clearer. In this picture, I used the stream as a line running down the right third line of the picture. Doing so presented some additional benefits for me as well. It allowed the stream to flow through the picture at the bottom. It also allowed me to use some of the taller trees to frame the scene on either side. You just have to move around to find the angle that works best for you.

Combined Use of the Rule of Thirds

Now let's put things together a little bit better. The examples we have used so far have addressed the different ways you might use the Rule of Thirds in isolation. That is, we have looked at it vertically, and then looked at it horizontally. But we haven't looked at them together. Indeed, some of the pictures used so far use the Rule of Thirds one way but not the other (notice, for example, that the horizon line of the Golden Gate Bridge picture is centered).

Most of the time, however, you'll be looking to use the Rule of Thirds both ways. In fact, it is usually at its best when used in this fashion. Let's start with this picture taken from a building called the Montparnasse Tower in Paris:



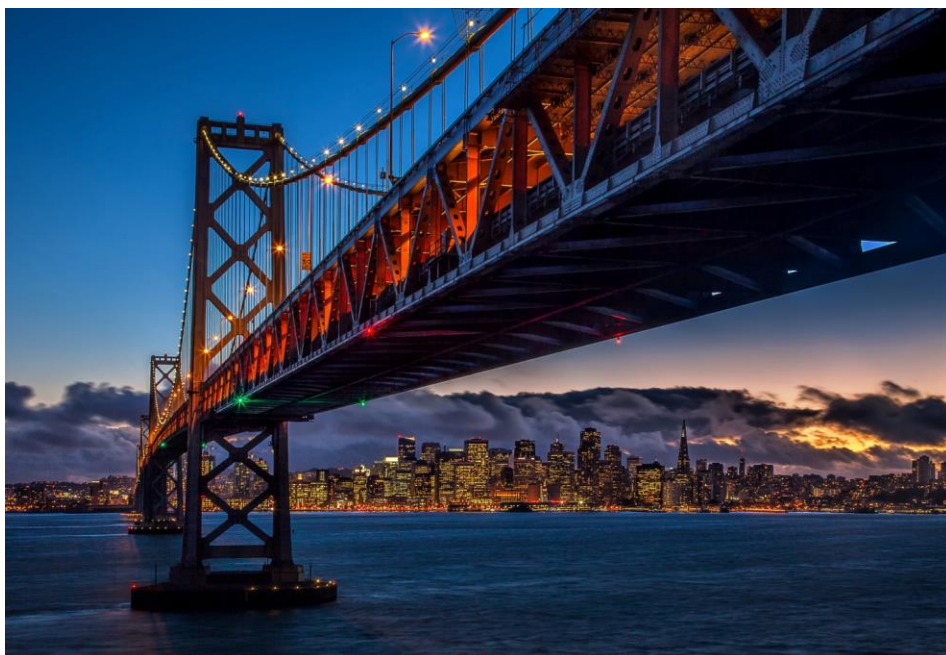
When you are standing on an overlook, often the scene before you can be a jumbled mess. No clear composition presents itself. In a scene like this one, you know you want the Eiffel Tower in your picture, but not much else. Using the Rule of Thirds can help you put together a nice composition. You know you want your viewer looking at the buildings and streets in the lower part of the picture (and not the sky) so you place the horizon line on the top third line. You also know that the Eiffel Tower is the main focal point, so you place that on either the left or right third line. In this case, I chose the right third line so that the light at the top would be shining *into* the picture and create some balance (more on balance in an upcoming lesson). Lining things up this way actually puts the Eiffel Tower at an intersection of third lines, which is nice. Ultimately, using the Rule of Thirds allowed us to take a messy scene and turn it into something interesting.

Here is a similar example in a very different context:



In this scene, to accentuate the remoteness, I wanted a lot of sky in the picture. Therefore, I placed the horizon line near the bottom of the picture. I moved the subject of the photo (the East Quoddy Lighthouse) off to the right side. That worked out well with the shape of the peninsula it sits on.

Here's one more example of using the Rule of Thirds to compose your outdoor photo. This one is a shot of the Bay Bridge and downtown San Francisco from Treasure Island:



The horizon line was placed on the bottom third of the picture since all the action is going on above that line (both the skyline and the bridge are above it). The bridge supports are placed on the left third line to allow the bridge to cut across the frame.

Using the Rule of Thirds in Shots of People

Thus far, we've looked at the application of the Rule of Thirds in landscape, cityscape, and seascape photos. These are the contexts in which I normally shoot, which is my most of my examples are these kinds of shots. Of course, there are lots of other kinds of photography and you will find that the Rule of Thirds helps you compose in them all.

Something we all do is take pictures of our friends and family. Let's take a look at some photographs that show how you might apply the Rule of Thirds in this context. You'll find, however, that it is basically the same thing as what we have already been doing.



This is a picture of my daughter Elizabeth - a budding photographer - taking photos in Chicago. As you can see, although the picture is clearly of Elizabeth, I didn't place her in the middle of the picture. I placed her off to the right - on the right third line - and that should be familiar to you by now.

This picture introduces one other point regarding the Rule of Thirds. When you are photographing a person, you generally want them looking *into* the picture. That is, you want them facing into the part of the picture where there is the most space. There is an implied line

running from the person's eyes. If you place the person so that they are looking out of the picture, it looks off balance. That is fine if that is what you mean to do, but otherwise you want the person looking into the picture.

To reinforce the point, here is another picture of my other daughter, Hannah, who is the thespian of the family, during her performance as Flau Blucher in her school's production of Young Frankenstein. As with the prior examples, even though the subject is clearly Hannah (there is nothing else even in the picture), she is placed off to one side and looking into the picture.



Additional Benefit

In yesterday's lesson we talked about determining your subject and then simplifying your picture based on that. An added benefit of using the Rule of Thirds to compose your pictures is that it will assist in that process. In fact, it may even force you to go through that exercise when you might otherwise skip it. Consider that in order to arrange your picture along third lines according to relative importance of elements in your picture, you first have to know what your picture is about. For example, you cannot *place* your subject until you know what your subject *is*. Your placement of the horizon line will force you to consider the relative importance of parts of your picture. In this manner, thinking about scene per the Rule of Thirds actually helps you identify what your picture is about.

Even if you don't ultimately use the Rule of Thirds to compose your picture, at least considering it helps you consider where you are trying to draw the viewer's eye. As you think about your final image while you are lining it up, you will think more and more about what your viewer sees first and then the path their eye follows around the frame. When you use the Rule of Thirds, you are forced to think about what people look at first, and many times you will put those elements at the intersection of the grid lines. Then you'll have to consider the lines themselves. Since the eye tends to follow lines (actual or implied) throughout the picture, these lines will have a big impact on where the viewer looks next. Therefore, it is a natural extension of the Rule of Thirds to start considering the movement of the viewer's eye throughout the frame. Even if you don't apply the Rule, thinking about it will lead to other aspects of composition that will have a big impact on your photos.

You Get Second Chances

The composition of your photo does not end after you take the picture. You will get a second chance at determining the overall composition when you sit down with the picture at your computer. Simply get out your Crop tool and take your time in considering the overall composition of the picture. Sitting at your computer, you have as much time as you need. You might have been rushed in the field, but now you can get things exactly right.

- Sometimes, this will simply mean making minor tweaks to your photo. You might decide that a particular line looks better on an actual third line as opposed to merely near it. Using the crop tool, you can fix that.
- Other times, this might mean a wholesale change in your picture. Again, since you are not rushed at your computer, you can carefully consider what you want the picture to be about. In addition, you may simply have ideas that didn't occur to you at the time.

This process is made easier by the fact that Lightroom (and other applications) generally show a grid overlay whenever you call up the Crop tool. Lightroom will automatically show a thirds grid when you call up the Crop tool. In Photoshop, you will have a number of choices for the grid overlay at the top of the screen when you call up the Crop tool. The Rule of Thirds will be the first choice.

Should You Use the Rule of Thirds?

Lots of people choke on the idea that there is a "rule" for setting up your photographs. After all, ultimately photography is art and in art there are no rules. In fact, most of the best and most meaningful art is done by breaking the rules. So how does the concept of a rule of thirds square with this notion?

It is like everything else: use the rule when it is helpful, don't use it when it is not. I usually try to use the rule of thirds to set up my pictures. It is an extremely handy device. Sometimes, however, it just doesn't fit. Things aren't in the right places. The scene I'm trying to capture just doesn't square with it. In those cases, the rule of thirds goes out the window. There is nothing wrong with that.

If you are just starting with photography, my advice to you is to use the rule of thirds all the time. You might almost be slavish about it. This rule has been used for a long time for very good reason. Don't try to ignore a rule until you have mastered it. In addition, remember that this is the digital age and you can take multiple shots. Take one that follows the rule of thirds and then take one that doesn't.

Day 16 Assignment

Landscape

Description:

Photograph a landscape scene, but arrange your shot(s) using the Rule of Thirds.

Keys to Success:

- Consider where you want to place the horizon line in your picture:
 - Place it on the top third line to focus on the foreground?
 - Place it on the bottom third line to focus on the sky?
- If you have a particular subject or center of interest, be sure to place it on a left or right third line as well.
- Make use of the Crop tool in Lightroom or Photoshop when you return to refine your composition.

Upon Completion of this Assignment:

You should end up with a nice landscape shot. If you live in a rural environment, you will have a leg up for this assignment; but if you live in a city there are always parks in which you can shoot. The Rule of Thirds often enhances landscape shots, so you can practice using it and get some great shots at the same time.