

Day 17: Concentrate on The Most Important Part of the Picture

The 3 elements of the picture

1. Background: This is the easiest part, and is often determined by your location.
2. Subject: We have covered this previously
3. Foreground: Often the most difficult part.

Why foreground is so important

- The foreground is what invites the viewer into the picture.
- It is often what separates compositions from mere snapshots.
- It is often the most neglected part by beginners.

How to Concentrate on the Foreground

- Avoid taking pictures from standard height.
- Try getting low
- Get immediately behind something
- Find subjects or patterns to use
- Be sure the foreground is in focus

Composing Back to Front

Here is a method for composing your photos that will help you put these elements in perspective:

1. First, set your background. Think of the background as the base layer of your picture.
2. Next, place your subject in the picture.
3. Finally, invite the viewer into the picture. Spend some time trying different angles and perspectives.

Additional Commentary

In today's lesson, we'll look at another way to think about your picture. It will naturally lead you to think about your picture as a cohesive unit and also force you to concentrate your efforts on where they are most needed. Typically - and especially in scenic shots - that will be the foreground. There is a particular order in which you should think about these different parts of the picture, so we'll conclude with a process for setting up your picture in this way. You might find that adopting it improves your compositions.

The 3 elements of the picture

All pictures really boil down to 3 parts. Those parts are the subject, the background, and the foreground. All are important, and if any one of them is not right, the picture will not turn out well. But these 3 parts are *not* of equal importance. The importance and the order of these parts to the picture are probably not what you think. In fact, it may be the opposite.

Beginning photographers seem to concentrate entirely on the background. When it comes to landscapes, city scenes, and the like, the background essentially *is* the subject, and there is no foreground. Therefore, our 3 parts of the picture are jumbled into one part. The picture is just a snapshot.

After a while, however, this situation naturally improves. As we gain more experience, we start thinking more about the subject. If nothing else, we will typically include a center of interest to hold the picture together and give it a point. Still, the foreground is often neglected.

As a result, our pictures - while much improved - still seem to be missing something. That missing something is usually a well-thought out foreground. But it is often very difficult for the photographer to take the next step and start focusing on the foreground. Whereas the transition to adding subjects to the picture seems to come naturally, the next step takes real effort. If you can achieve it, however, the result is that the picture is dramatically improved and it appears like a complete composition.

As you are standing there with the camera up to your face, how do you go about placing these elements in the picture? Which part do you think about first? In other words, how do you compose the picture?

The answer is to compose your photos with a "back-to-front" approach. This is where you establish the background first, then place the subject, and finally concentrate on the foreground. It seems counter-intuitive, since it would seem that the subject should be the first thing you think about. However, it seems that my best pictures come from this approach. Further, the more I have listened to masters of photography, the more I find they use this approach constantly.

We'll go through each element individually, and then come back to how to use all of them together.

Part 1: The Background

The background of your photo is the easy part. In fact, you have usually done 90% of the work to choose your background before you even picked up the camera. It is determined partially by your location. You have presumably gone to a scenic place you want to photograph. Odds are there will be a nice background to work with. Consider the following settings:

- **Typical Landscape.** Over half the time, the background of a landscape photo is the sky. If the background is not the sky, it is usually trees, although it could be mountains, water, or desert depending on your location. The point is that it is largely determined before you even picked up the camera. It is determined by your prior decision about where to go photograph.
- **Urban Setting.** Where you are standing in an urban environment largely determines the background. It could be a wall, it could be a street view, or it could be an overlook. In any case, the place you went to take the picture largely determines the background.

That's not to say, of course, that you have no control over the background. You do. You can move around to change the perspective or order of things. You can zoom in or out (with your lens or your feet) to exclude items from your picture. Although the location determines the background on a macro level, you control it on a micro level (these micro changes can have a big impact on your picture, so don't let my use of the word micro diminish the importance of these smaller changes).

Going back to our landscape example, if your background is the sky (as it often is), you might be stuck with it, but you can shift your position, angle, or focal length to include more or less of it, and also to arrange any clouds within the picture. Using our urban example, you can often simply turn to use a different building or street as your background. Still, you will find the background will be pretty similar. You will not have urban decay in one direction and a paradise in the other.

That leads to another point about backgrounds. Setting up a background is intuitive even for beginning photographers. In fact, when we are just starting out, often it is *all* we are thinking about. We see a nice view and assume it must translate into a nice picture. Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't, but the point is that the background is on our minds even when we aren't expressly thinking about it. Further, even where you are just walking around with your camera, and are not in a place chosen specifically for photography, you will usually be attracted to the background first. It is usually what causes you to put the camera up to your face in the first place.

As a result, you should frankly spend very little time thinking about your backgrounds. Much of the work is done for you when you chose your location, and in any case your brain is automatically thinking about the background already. Often a second is all you need.

That said, the background is what you should think about first. Think of it as a base layer on your canvas. Knock it out and then move on to the next steps.

Part 2: The Subject

The next step in composing photographs is to define the subject. We have spent a lot of time already thinking about subjects.

Sometimes your subject is easy. If you are photographing a person, for example, they are the subject (although you will typically want to take it a step deeper than that and look for some facet or emotion of the person to draw out). If your subject is a tangible thing, then that is pretty easy as well.

Even when you are photographing a scene rather than a definite subject, you will pretty quickly realize that you need to focus on a subject instead of just a grand scenic vista or city overlook taken with no real purpose. At that point, you will begin looking for a point or a center of interest. That center of interest is something that anchors the photo.

Even where the subject is less concrete, it is still usually something you can readily understand. The subject might be something like a shadow or an implied leading line (more about these in an upcoming lesson). These things, while not tangible things in the picture, still work as compositional elements that can provide a point to the picture. Other times you have to work at finding a subject. You have to find that center of interest in the grand scenic landscape photograph. You have to find that pattern or leading line. Anything can be a subject, but you have to have one.

The good news is that this is another part of photography that our brains understand readily. We know we need a subject. Very early on, we can just feel that the picture is wrong if there isn't a subject. Therefore, while it does take some effort, it comes naturally. Once you make the connection, defining the subject doesn't usually take a lot of time when you are photographing.

After you have established the background (but before you start thinking about the foreground) is usually the best time to think about your subject. With your background set up, your canvas is ready for you to place the subject. You'll have to find the subject first, and then place it within the frame. Spend some time on this. A few test shots may even be in order.

Part 3: Concentrate on the Foreground

We have now worked our way from the back of the photo (the background) through the middle (the subject) and are now at the front of the picture. This is where many photographers run into problems. When my own pictures fail, this is often the cause. A great foreground is often what turns a snapshot into a composition. You should spend well over half of your time concentrating on the bottom third of your picture.

The first step in creating a great foreground is actually spending some time thinking about it. Once you take that step though, how do you actually go about doing it? There are a lot of ways, obviously, but let me tell you a few things that may help you go about it. One key is to avoid a normal perspective. Taking a picture while standing at normal height is the kiss of death. Shoot from different vantage points. Very often, the best way to make your foreground better is to get low to the ground (often getting right behind something) when you take the picture. This will cause the viewer to feel as though they can walk into the picture, and this will add interest to it.

Sometimes, getting higher than a normal perspective works as well. That is easier said than done. There isn't always a higher vantage point, and we won't always have a stepladder handy. In a pinch, attach your camera to your tripod or monopod and hold it up high over your head. Take the picture with a remote shutter release. That technique can be quite imprecise, but it will keep you from using a normal vantage point.

Finally, don't let your foreground be blurry. If you are using a wider aperture such that depth of field is an issue, set your focus point closer to you. As mentioned earlier in the course, a rule of thumb is to set the focus point 1/3 of the way into a picture. Faced with the choice of a blurred background or something blurry in the foreground, keep the foreground sharp.

Taking this final step will vastly improve your photos and will turn your picture into a true composition. But it isn't easy. If you find yourself struggling with this aspect of composition, that is normal. Further, it isn't something you learn once and then you're done. You have to keep working at it.

Composing Back to Front

There are essentially two ideas that I hope you will take away from today's lesson:

- Set up your photos in 3 parts, working from back to front,
- Spend most of your time on the front part.

This is not just my own idea, but also how many great photographers work. The method forces you to set up your photos with care. It forces you to concentrate on the parts you might

otherwise overlook. And it sets up your composition so you are ready if an extra element comes your way.

Give it a try and I think you will see immediate benefits. But remember to keep working at it. This process is not natural or intuitive for most of us.

Some Examples

To make sure you have it, let's go through some examples.

Let's start with this picture of Western Lake near Seaside, Florida.



In this shot, I started with a great background - that being the rising sun with the interesting clouds in the sky. I was at a lake, so I knew that was going to be central to the picture. The trick was trying to piece something together out of this. For this particular shot, I used the lily pads in the front. That gave me a foreground element that kept the picture from being largely blank water.

Whereas the Western Lake shot above has a great background but not much of a subject, let's switch that up. Here is a shot of a fishing pier in Galveston, Texas:



I was out before sunrise, and knew I would be using the sky as my background. When I arrived at this location, it was obvious that the pier would be central to the shot. So already I had two elements of my shot established. That left the foreground. I didn't want blank water serving as my foreground, so I walked around and got behind the rocks you see in the picture. I got low so as to accentuate them.

When you are in the field, this may seem counterintuitive. You'll see sitting there looking at a nice sky and a well-lit pier. It is natural to think to yourself, "Surely I want my picture to consist almost entirely of that pier and the sky. Why would I want to fool around with these rocks in the foreground? This will just dilute my subject." That's totally understandable, but the problem is that it leaves you without a foreground. Adding the foreground makes for a much more complete and interesting picture.

While sometimes you can find rocks, lily pads, and other natural elements to use as a foreground, sometimes you have to create one. A great way to do that is through reflections. Here is a shot I took of the skyline of Dallas, Texas:



I live near Dallas, so I have taken many, many pictures of this skyline. Most of them failed. Perhaps "failed" is too strong a word, but they were not as interesting as this one because of a lack of foreground.

In any event, let's go through our process. We'll start with our background, which is simply the sky. Because it is night, that is largely blank, but cannot be helped. It is a given. Next, we move on to our subject. That is obviously the skyline. Skyline shots are always trickier than they look, because you need to decide what to keep in and what to exclude. You have to think about the shape of your picture, the balance, and other elements (but we'll get into those later). For now, all we need to think about is our subject, and that is obviously the skyline.

That leaves us thinking about foreground. Most of the time, you will struggle with this in skyline shots. As previously mentioned, I have struggled with this for most of my shots of the Dallas skyline. In this particular case, a friend of mine alerted me that the Trinity River was flooded, which presented a much different look to the skyline shot, so I went to take a look. I was able to use the reflection to get a nice shot. As most cities are built along rivers, lakes, and coastlines, this is a standard technique you'll be able to use in your own shots.

That's not to say you should only look for reflections. They are just one of many elements you can use. Another element I like to use in my shots is lines leading into the heart of the picture. In this way, your foreground does double-duty, both adding interest to the picture and also leading you to the subject. Here is an example of a shot I took in Chicago that does that:



I could go on for hours with other pictures, but I think you get the idea. What I want to leave you with is that these are just a few examples of things you can use. Composition is a personal choice, and there are millions of different things you can do. The point isn't that you should use reflections, or rocks, or railroad tracks. The point is just to set you to thinking about what you might use when you confront your own scene.

Day 17 Assignment

Invite the Viewer In

Description:

Photograph a landscape scene, but arrange your shot(s) using "back to front" composition. Concentrate on the foreground and create a sense that the viewer can walk into your picture.

Keys to Success:

- Start by deciding on the background of your shot, which will largely be determined before you leave home since it depends so heavily on location.
- Once you decide on a subject, spend all your time on the foreground.
- Try getting low. You might also try getting right behind something. Look for patterns on the ground as well.
- Watch out for blurred foregrounds due to inadequate depth of field.
- You might have to walk around while looking into the viewfinders (or at the LCD) to find a suitable foreground for your shot.

Upon Completion of this Assignment:

This is often how the best landscape shots are created. By mastering this technique, you will be inviting the viewer into your picture, and it will result in much better compositions.