

Day 19: Use Graphical Elements to Create Stunning Compositions

Variety of Graphical Elements to Use in Your Pictures

- Shapes:
 - Add form to your photos
 - Create a sense of space and substance
- Lines:
 - Direct the viewer's eye
 - Draw the viewer into the heart of the frame

Some Examples of Leading Lines

For use everywhere:

- Roads - these very common, so you can always find them. They can lead you into the heart of the picture.
- Paths - work the same as roads.
- Look for patterns on the ground - these are commonly used in sand or other non-paved surface.

Urban scenes:

- Look for lines of objects in a row.
 - A good example is a row of lightposts.
 - Anything from boats to barstools can be used.

Rural/Countryside shots:

- Coastline and water can create diagonal lines into the picture
- Where there is no physical object, look for shadows to use.
- You can also create your own lines by adding water trails through use of a long shutter speed.

After the shot

- Darken the sides of the picture to accentuate the lines
- You can also brighten the lines themselves

Additional Commentary

There are a lot of different graphical elements you can use in your pictures, but to me there is no more important tool in composition than lines. They are extremely powerful in that they eye will virtually always follow an actual or implied line across the picture. Because of this tendency, many lines are referred to as *leading* lines. They are actual or implied lines that control the eye of the viewer through the frame.

I focused this lesson on leading lines, and in this commentary I want to add some additional thoughts on their use.

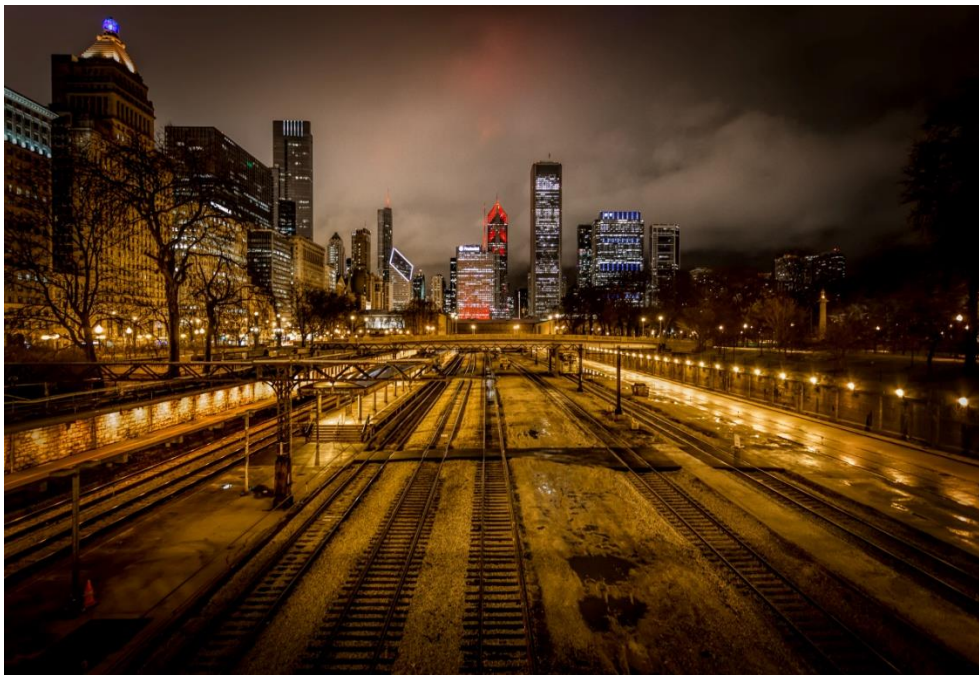
1. Plan for opportunities

Step one in using lines in your picture is to find them. They are everywhere, but you've got to look for them. In fact, it is a good idea to plan a few shots ahead of time so that you can consider what to use as a leading line. When you are considering your location or doing the virtual scouting that was discussed in previous lessons, take a minute to consider how you might incorporate lines into your picture. Leaving it to chance when you are out shooting will often result in the idea of leading lines being overlooked while you are focused on other things.

When you are thinking about possible lines leading into the frame, think about roads and paths, which are some of my favorite things to use. They are present everywhere so you almost never have to search for them. The edges of the road will converge in the distance, thereby pointing the viewer to the center of the frame.



Although certainly not as prevalent as roads, railroad tracks also work great. You have seen this shot before, but I want to show it again because of how the railroad tracks lead you right to the heart of the picture, which are the colorful buildings in the distance:



Finally, don't overlook the use of shadow to create a line toward the center of the picture. This works well when there is no actual object to use as a line. Here you are using the contrast between light and shadow to create your own line (more about doing that later).



2. Finding and using urban opportunities

In an urban environment, you have many opportunities for creating leading lines by using rows of objects. Rows of buildings and other structures can work. Perspective will make the buildings appear smaller as they become more distant, resulting in lines pointing to the center of the picture. Fences are another good choice.

Keep your eye open for rows of streetlights, which we often overlook, but which can work great.



In addition, don't forget to look up, as the natural convergence of buildings toward the center of your frame (due to the distortion of your lens) can actually work for you in this context, and create lines that point to the center of the frame.



3. Opportunities in nature

When you are out in the wild, nature often provides you with the leading lines you seek. Creeks and coastlines offer great opportunities:



Patterns on the ground, whether it be paved, sand, or grass, can often provide markings that lead to the center of the frame.



Leading lines on the ground can be difficult if not impossible to see with the naked eye though. There are times you have to walk around with the viewfinder held to your eye (or looking through your LCD with the camera in Live View) in order to see the lines on the ground. Take test shots when you can.

4. Manufacture your own lines

Sometimes there are no leading lines to use and you have to make your own. There are many ways to do this. One of my favorites is by adding streaking lights that go into the frame:



I have mentioned moving water, and that is a great way to create lines:



Note that in these scenes there were no actual leading lines. I created them through light and water trails. Keep that in mind when you are creating your own shots. Just because you don't see lines, that doesn't mean you cannot have them in your picture.

5. Accentuate the lines in post-production

Finding and using leading lines to draw your viewer into the picture does not end when the shutter closes. Usually you can accentuate them in post-processing. The main way is through selective brightening and darkening. Oftentimes you will want to brighten your leading line to draw the viewer's eye to it. Sometimes you might want to darken other parts of the frame for the same reason. You also might want to increase the contrast in, and around, your leading lines since the eye is attracted to contrast.

Here's an example:



In this shot, I added contrast to the road leading you into the frame. I lightened the snow around the road and also darkened the road itself. That adds brightness, which your eye is drawn to, and contrast, which also draws your eye. To me, that helps guide your eye through the canyon and into the distance.

How do you do that? We'll get to that in the post processing portion of the course (which is coming up shortly). Here's a short description if you are already using post processing software:

- **Lightroom:** If you are a Lightroom user, use the Adjustment Brush to selectively lighten areas. Just select the brush, paint the area you want brightened, and then adjust the brightness to whatever degree you wish. If you want to darken the edges, a great tool is the Gradient Tool. You will have to use it separately for each edge though.
- **Photoshop:** If you are a Photoshop user, the best way to accomplish this selective lightening and darkening is through curves adjustment layers. Just create a curves adjustment layer (Layer – New Adjustment Layer – Curves). Then brighten the picture by pulling the middle of the curve upward a bit. Use whatever selection tools you are most comfortable with to mask away the brightening everywhere you don't want it (which will be pretty much everywhere except for your leading lines). To darken portions of the picture, just do the same thing on a new adjustment layer, but instead of pulling the curve



up, pull it down. Again, mask away the effect where you don't want it (which, this time will be areas away from your leading lines).

Don't worry if you aren't using post processing software yet though, we will get to that part of the course shortly.

Day 19 Assignment

Leading Lines

Description:

Create a photograph with leading lines that guide the viewer's eye. The lines can either lead the viewer into the subject of the picture or else lead the viewer across the picture.

Keys to Success:

- Decide whether you want the subject of the picture to be the lines themselves or something else.
- Lines can be either actual or implied; man-made or natural.
- Don't overlook shadows and water trails as options.
- Look for many things in a row to use as a line.

Upon Completion of this Assignment:

There are lines everywhere. This assignment will help you see them, and help you use them in your photographs.