Finding and Composing a Photo

Learning the Art of Photography

So far, in this book, we’ve been studying the theory behind all of the different parameters that affect the creation of an image, as well as the controls that you have for manipulating those parameters. I have been calling this the craft of photography. Photographic artistry, on the other hand, is the process of using these craft skills to represent a scene—whether it’s a portrait, still life, event, landscape, or abstract—in a way that evokes some of what the subject makes you feel.

Craft and artistry inform each other. Understanding how you can manipulate depth of field, light and shadow, and perspective will change how you see the world and visualize shots. As your craft skills change and improve so will the way that you see the world—with or without a camera—and that will change the photos you make.

Art and craft are essential to good shooting. In this chapter, we’re going to focus on the artistry side of things and explore how you find, visualize, and compose an image.

There are a lot of decisions that go into making a photograph. Do you blur motion or not? How much depth of field do you want? Do you need detail in the shadows? Detail in the highlights? Where to crop? Is the frame balanced? What focal length is best? What camera position? More headroom? Less headroom?

Some of these decisions are technical and some are expressive, but when you group all of those questions together, the process can become intimidating and overwhelming. One way to find a path through all of these decisions is to remember that your job as a photographer is to guide your viewer through the image that you’re making. If you do your job well, the viewer will, without thinking about it, know what the subject of your photo is and what the subject’s relationship to the background is. In a particularly successful image they will have seen that subject and its relationship to the background in a new, hopefully interesting way. So, if you’re feeling confused about, say, that best focal length choice, ask yourself if one focal length does a better job of bringing attention to the subject of your image. Framing each of the decisions you have to make within that question can often make it easier to know what the best choices are.

Looking Versus Seeing

Does this sound familiar? You’re trying to get out of the house in a hurry, but you can’t find your keys (or your sunglasses, your wallet, your goggles, or whatever). You look on your desk, through the pockets of all of the coats you’ve worn recently, on the kitchen table, in the bathroom, and then you start all over again. You retrace your steps to determine where you might have been when you last had the keys. Finally, after 20 minutes of increasingly maddening searching, you find them sitting in plain sight in the middle of your desk—the very first place you looked.
This frustrating situation happens because, while it's very easy to look at the world, it's far more complicated to actually see it. While people generally use the words “look” and “see” synonymously, for a photographer there are very important differences between the two terms.

How is it that you can look at the desk where your keys are sitting, but not see them? The answer has to do with what you learned in Chapter 1, “Eyes, Brains, Lights, and Images.” While it’s easy to think of the eyes as being just like a camera, they differ from a camera in one very important way: they're attached to a human brain, which dramatically alters our perception of what we’re seeing. Not seeing the keys on the desk in front of you is a prime example of this phenomenon. Although it might be frustrating, there’s a good reason why your brain evolved to work this way.

Consider the process of running a typical errand in town, either in a car or on foot. As you travel about, you will be acutely aware of dozens or even hundreds of cars, and possibly dozens or hundreds of people. Not to mention bicyclists, baby strollers, and many other things. If the day goes well, you will navigate successfully alongside, in-between, and past all these cars and people without ever colliding with one. Although you will engage in a complex choreography with these objects, when you get home you will most likely be hard-pressed to describe the details of the majority, if any, of these vehicles or people.

There might be one or two cars (or people) you took note of because they were particularly attractive or unusual looking, but you will have perceived most of the cars you looked at as simple generic objects. Upon returning home, you might not register any of them as specific types of vehicles, and instead would report that “traffic was really heavy today.” In a sense, you’re not seeing the trees for the forest.

To keep you from being overwhelmed with visual information, your brain tends to edit or abbreviate your visual experience. Consequently, when crossing the street, rather than seeing a large metal box resting on four wheels, with a clear glass window on top, six dead grasshoppers stuck to the grill, an ILUVNY license plate, and a middle-aged woman in curlers at the wheel—all good potential photo subjects—you very often just register “car.” By reducing a visually complex world down to simple icons, your brain lets you quickly get on with your day, albeit in a way that possibly makes the world less visually interesting.

Getting back to the lost keys. While we all like the idea that our eyes are objective—seeing is believing, and all that—the fact is that your brain projects an expectation onto the world. In other words, sometimes we see what we already believe, not what is there. When you look at the desk, your brain expects that the keys aren’t there, and so you don’t see them. This is why someone who’s not so familiar with your desk might walk into the room and see the keys immediately—their expectations are different. (Optical illusions work by intentionally pushing against the brain’s known expectations.)

Children are different. Because the world is a new place for them, they lack expectations and therefore perceive far more detail. They have to see such details because they haven’t yet learned to abbreviate the visual complexity of the world down to simple symbols like “desk.” As a photographer, you don’t want your brain to abbreviate your experience. The visual complexity of the world is the raw material for your images, so you want to see every detail. In other words, you want to learn to see again, as you did when you were a kid.

One of your most difficult goals as a photographer is to learn to spend less time looking and more time seeing. As you learn to do this, your level of photographic artistry will increase, regardless of your current level of craftsmanship.

**EXERCISES FOR SEEING**

Just as musicians can train their ears to recognize pitch, intervals, and chords, photographers can train their visual senses to be more open and receptive to the world. In other words, you can practice seeing.
One of the easiest ways to stir up your visual sense is to go somewhere new. When you first get to some place foreign or new, you often notice lots of details, like “the doorknobs here are up higher,” or “the paving stones are square, not rectangular.” This is partly a survival mechanism—you’re a little more wary than usual, a little more alert, so all of your senses are more active. But this also happens because there’s lots of new stuff to see—stuff your brain isn’t sure how to abbreviate yet. You don’t yet have expectations for it to project onto the world.

This is often why a lot of people think they need to go somewhere when they want to practice their photography. They’ve recognized before that, when they travel, they see more photos. Next time you are in a new place, experiencing that charged visual sense, pay close attention to what it feels like. At those times, you are seeing, rather than looking, and once you’ve identified that feeling, it can be a little easier to find it again.

The other lesson to be learned from that experience is that it’s not the place that matters—it is how you see. You should not have to travel to find interesting pictures, and you shouldn’t count on traveling to activate your visual senses, because sometimes it won’t happen. In fact, the odds are that if you can’t shoot in your own backyard, then you’re not going to do much better in an exotic location, because what makes good photography is a good visual sense (see Figure 9.01).

Here are some exercises to get your sense of seeing going, without having to travel.

**Warming Up**

Don’t assume that you can work at your job all day and then step out the door and suddenly be a photographer. You wouldn’t expect to exercise or play a musical instrument without warming up, and your sense of sight can also benefit from some warm-up exercises. It can take time to calm down from the everyday stresses of life and open yourself up to your visual sense.

When you first step out the door to go shoot, take a picture. It doesn’t matter what it is—take a picture of your foot, the light pole across the street, a manhole cover, anything at all. That first shot will remind you of the physicality of shooting. You’ll feel the camera in your hands and remember the handling of it. Most importantly, you’ll look through the viewfinder and be reminded of the frame shape and what the world looks like when it’s cropped down to only what your camera shows, flattened to two dimensions. All of this will help you get out of the distractions of your everyday life and into seeing and thinking about images.

**Make an Assignment**

Photography takes practice, and you need to do that practice regularly. If you wait to shoot until you’re on vacation, then you probably won’t be doing a lot of shooting. As mentioned earlier, good pictures can happen anywhere, but only if you’re open to them, and that openness comes with practice.
One way to make yourself practice, and to breathe new life into familiar locations, is to give yourself an assignment. You can choose a subject—old cars, doorways, local flowers—or maybe a phrase or a word—contentment; no pain, no gain; a penny saved. The subject matter or word doesn’t have to mean anything to anyone else, and you can interpret it any way you want. The idea is simply to give yourself some way to frame your view of your location. Having a specific point of view or photographic goal will often make you see familiar ground in a new way. I like shooting trees, so I keep an ongoing tree project (see Figure 9.02). Often, going out with the idea of shooting trees takes the pressure off; I don’t have to worry about finding subject matter. The world is a big place, and limiting it can make shooting much simpler.

A project can often be an inch wide and a mile deep. Set a limited goal to give yourself direction and then explore that goal in great detail.

Look at Other Photos

Lately, when teaching classes, I’ve noticed something strange: very few aspiring photographers know much about the history of their chosen discipline. While aspiring writers will be able to easily name their favorite writers and books, few photography students can name a favorite photographer or famous, important works of photography. Familiarity with great works, though, is an easy way to improve your own shots.

Fortunately, we live in an age where it’s very easy to get access to the most famous, celebrated photos ever shot. Go to the library or bookstore, or do some Google searches, and find work by some of the great masters: Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paul Strand, Ansel Adams, Diane Arbus, Alfred Stieglitz, Walker Evans, or Dorothea Lange. If you prefer to see more recent work, check out the photos of Pentti Sammallahti, Sally Mann, and Keith Carter (see Figure 9.03).

Spend time looking at their images with an eye toward seeing how those images make you feel and also toward determining what was done technically to create the image. Pay attention to the composition of the images and try to think about what the photographer had to do (or wait for) to get the shot. Try to think about what exposure was used to achieve a given effect. See if you can determine anything about the focal length that was used. Does the image encompass a wide field of view? If so, then you know they were using a wide-angle lens. If it’s a narrow field of view, then you can assume a telephoto lens. Once you have an idea of the focal length, then you can start to figure out how close to their subject they were standing. If you find they had to stay far away from a portrait subject,
you might then wonder about how they communicated with their subject and maintained a necessary rapport. By reverse engineering the photographer’s problems and solutions, you’ll learn a lot about how they saw a scene and what choices and decisions they had to make to turn that scene into a finished image.

This type of study will help with your craft skills but it will also train your eye. You’ll begin to develop a broader photographic vocabulary. You won’t necessarily know it’s happening, but you’ll be training your visual sense to recognize good organization in a scene, and that’s critical for being able to compose your own shots.

Sitting down with a book of photos is a great way to continue to practice, even when you can’t get out to shoot.

**Sketch and Draw**

Sure, this is a photography book, but photography is a visual art form, and sketching and drawing can help a lot with getting your visual sense going. If you’re like me, you probably insist that you can’t draw. The goal, though, is not to produce a gallery-worthy masterpiece, but to become more attuned to your visual sense. Don’t worry about drawing a perfect picture or even a good picture.

During the process of drawing something, you have to look at each shape and line that makes up that object. When you do this, you will cease to see it as an object and will begin to see it as lines and shapes. Whether or not you do a good job of recording those lines and shapes is irrelevant, because the process can activate your visual sense in a profound way. Even just 10 or 15 minutes of concentrated effort can make you see the world in a different way.

**Pay Attention and Do What Works for You**

Finally, one of the best ways to learn how to get warmed up and to get your visual sense going is to simply pay attention to what it feels like when you are seeing effectively. Once you’re tuned in to how it feels, you might find your own process for getting into the zone. Don’t be worried about what it takes to get you there—if it works for you, that’s fine.

For example, sometimes when I go out shooting I get so focused on the idea of success that I pressure myself to a completely ineffectual place. Once I’m wrapped up in the idea that I have to get good shots, then I’m no longer present and seeing. So lately, I’ve been trying an exercise: I take the card out of my camera and go shooting. With no memory card, there is no going home with good shots. Instead, all I can do is find shots and visualize them.

**About Practice**

Yes, I’ve been harping on practice a lot, but it’s an important concept, so I’ll mention it again: practice. Practice a lot. Not only will the craft and theory you’ve been studying become second nature, but you’ll also get better at seeing and recognizing potential images. If you want to take it to the extreme, you can act like photographer Joe Buissink. If he doesn’t have a camera but sees an image he would like to shoot, he says “click” or snaps his fingers. This “shooting without a camera” keeps him in the habit of seeing graphically, acknowledging when there’s a shot he wants to take, and thinking about how he might compose it.

Practice is the key to all creative endeavors, and in the case of photography, practice is not just about memorizing how shutter speed and aperture work, but also about practicing composition, seeing, and interpretation.
in the camera. This often reminds me of what it feels like to simply be out seeing, without the pressure of what final images I might end up with.

And don’t worry, even if you take a great picture without a card in your camera, that’s fine. There will always be more great pictures.

Additional Exercises
There are other exercises that will help stimulate your visual sense, get you out of your everyday modes of looking at the world, and possibly help you see more detail, and more photographically. You can find more in the free Complete Digital Photography exercise workbook, at CDPbook.info.

LEARNING ABOUT LIGHT
Beginning shooters often ask how to find things to shoot. They think that they must seek out interesting objects, landmark locations, or stunning vistas. The fact is that landmark locations and stunning vistas usually make fairly boring pictures because those places have already been photographed so much and in so many different ways. A better way to find images is to find good light.

All good photos begin with light. Very often, it is simply the light that compels you toward a scene, not the actual subject matter. For example, you may choose to shoot a landscape not because the landscape itself is particularly compelling, but because the light playing off it is. Good light can turn an otherwise pedestrian scene or subject into something interesting, as you can see in Figure 9.04.

Figure 9.04
While the top image is not especially interesting, as the light changes, the scene becomes increasingly dynamic (bottom). The quality of light is very often the defining characteristic of a scene.

Conversely, a potentially good subject can be either boring or interesting, depending on the type of light you shoot it in (see Figure 9.05).

Figure 9.04 is also an example of a subject that is not in itself interesting. It's the light that makes a compelling scene, which means good photo subjects can occur anywhere, not just in exotic locales or around big landmarks.

As you learned earlier, your eye packs far more luminance-sensitive cells than it does color-sensitive cells. As such, it is much more sensitive to contrast than it is to color, so light with strong contrast is usually far more compelling than flat light.

Sunlight yields more contrast when it is shining from a low angle, so early-morning and late-afternoon light is far more interesting than the light of midday. Low-angle light casts longer shadows, which makes for surfaces that have more texture and visible detail, as you can see in Figure 9.04. In the middle of the day, when the sun is shining straight down,
there is very little shadowing, resulting in a flat, boring look.

You’ll often work with existing light in two ways. When you find an area of particularly compelling light, stop to see if there’s any type of picture to be had. As you explore the area, you might find a texture or subject that is worth shooting, since it is in good light, or you might find that a subject wanders into your good light (see the image on the left side of Figure 9.06). Conversely, if you’re out and about and discover an interesting subject, try to assess if better light will fall onto it at some point (the image on the right in Figure 9.06).

Early morning and late afternoon light have a very different color than midday light. While it will vary depending on atmospheric conditions, where you live, and the time of year, you’ll generally find the light at dusk and dawn to be warmer. Late afternoon light is especially warm and colorful, and can be ideal for landscapes and portraits (see Figure 9.07).
The light of the early morning and late afternoon changes very quickly, which can work both for you and against you. If you see something that isn’t particularly well-lit, wait. The light will change very soon. At other times you’ll likely see something in ideal light, and find yourself having to work quickly to get the image before the light is lost.

In the spring and fall, when the sun doesn’t climb very high in the sky, you’ll find good light during more of the day. The specific hours will vary, depending on your latitude.

All that said, rain or overcast skies don’t mean there aren’t good photos to be had. Sometimes, too much contrast can be a bad thing, as it can serve to make your image harsh. Also, shooting when there is less contrast affords you the opportunity of later adding more contrast where you want it (see Figure 9.08).

Figure 9.06
In the image on the left, I came across a splash of light that I liked, because it mixed nicely with the texture on the street, and because of the shadowy detail in the background. I waited until someone walked into the light, and then took this shot.

With the image on the right, I wouldn’t normally be interested in taking a picture of this statue, but the light was hitting it such that it lit up bright white, against the darker background. I shot several frames until I found one that had people in the foreground in interesting positions, but it was the light that drove the shot.

Figure 9.07
These images differ in terms of their shadows and the clouds in the sky, but note the difference between the morning light on the left and the warmer afternoon light on the right.
How a Good Photo Happens

It’s the rare painter who pulls over during a cross-country road trip to quickly dash off a painting of a friend standing in front of a vista. Similarly, you don’t often see choreographers decide to knock out a little ballet about the office party that they just attended. As photographers, though, we regularly use our medium to capture and document such moments. I consider these times to be examples of “taking” a picture. Sure, you might quickly change your position to get a stronger composition or better light, but for the most part, in “snapshot” situations, you’re simply capturing photos of straightforward subjects. This is different from the process of crafting a more “serious” photo when, depending on the subject matter, you might adjust everything from the content of the scene to your camera position to your exposure and lighting. I consider that process to be “making” a picture. This may seem an obvious distinction, but I believe it’s important to acknowledge that a serious photo is usually crafted. A lot of photographers, even experienced photographers, can forget this. It’s easy to think that a skilled photographer perfectly pre-visualizes the photo they want, takes a single frame, and nails the shot. In reality, though a photographer may occasionally get lucky and capture a great image with a single frame, 99% of the time, a skilled photographer gets great shots by working hard to make shots great. They pose

Look Through Your Camera

If you find you’ve been walking around for a while and you aren’t seeing anything that you want to shoot, even though the light is good, you might simply be in a location that isn’t providing good subject matter. However, it might also be that your eyes and brain just aren’t seeing things photographically. If you’re not seeing compelling subjects, lift the camera and look through the viewfinder. The frame of your viewfinder crops the world in ways that you can’t visualize when you’re walking around, and those crops often reveal interesting compositions.

Also, remember that you may have to shoot your way through some unusable — if not outright bad — images before your photographic senses get working. If you are willing to suffer through this process, you may find yourself seeing more things to shoot.

If you try all this and still aren’t finding images, then either there really isn’t anything worth shooting, or your photographic juices just aren’t flowing. Don’t let this discourage you. Relax, give it a rest, and come back another day.

Figure 9.08
Just because it’s overcast doesn’t mean you can’t get good shots. Many situations fare better without high contrast. This image was shot under completely overcast skies.
or position their subjects, they finesse lighting, they try different focal lengths and camera positions, they adjust and change their compositions and they shoot different exposures to facilitate different types of postproduction effects. Street and landscape shooters wait for natural light to change, or for situations to develop, they struggle with focal length choices, and work hard to try to pull interesting compositions out of a complex, ever-changing world. Good photographers experiment and, most of the time, their experiments fail. If a photographer is lucky enough to come away with a successful frame, they most certainly also have dozens—or hundreds—of unsuccessful ones to go with it.

Photography is no less of a serious medium than painting or dance, so don’t be taken in by the idea that you should always be able to quickly and easily produce great photos. Producing a great photo is hard, and it takes work. I don’t say this to intimidate you, but to remind you that, if you come home at the end of a day of shooting, and don’t like the images that you took, that doesn’t make you a bad photographer. It just means that what you’re trying to do is hard, and sometimes you succeed and sometimes you fail. Most of the time, success is the result of investing time and work into making a good photo. If you go out with the idea of simply taking photos, rather than making them, you’ll likely not come back with fantastic results.

**Finding An Impulse**

We’ve already talked about the difference between looking and seeing, and perhaps you’ve experienced the frustration of not being able to find interesting subject matter. For most of us, shooting some familiar place—around the house or in our neighborhood—is very difficult. I live in San Francisco, a very pretty city, and a good photographic destination. Even so, shooting in my neighborhood can be very hard for me because my visual sense is “dead” to the things around me. Everything nearby is familiar to me, and therefore I don’t
see any of it as interesting. Meanwhile, visitors come and shoot great photos that I walk right past every day. So how does one learn to see? Or improve one's ability to see? I think a lot of it has to do with being aware of how good subject matter is recognized and then built up into a photo.

We decide to take a photo because something about a scene has captured our attention. I think there are three different things that spark stimulation of our attention. First, there's simply interesting subject matter. Figure 9.09 is an example of a photo that I took entirely because the scene in front of me was interesting.

I was hiking through these dunes and saw this woman running on the ridge, in front of the clouds, and the sight of her doing that compelled me to take a photo. I actually took several, because I didn’t know what the best location and pose would turn out to be. Portraits, shots of landscapes, shots of objects or events or performances—such photos all fall into this “obvious subject matter” category.

Then there are times when you take an image because of the light. Figure 9.10 shows an example of such a moment. The backlit fog, the bright light on the trees, the shadowy background—at another time of the day this scene wouldn't have been interesting. In fact, you could argue that the trees themselves are not interesting at all—it's the light on them is compelling. I'll often find myself recognizing that the light has turned perfect, and so I will start scurrying about to find some way to exploit that light to make a good photo.

Finally, there’s simple geometry—what you might consider “pure composition.” I took the image in Figure 9.11 for no reason other than that I liked the arrangement of the lines and forms. Of course, I had to arrange them in the frame so that they look like this, and there were other arrangements I could have made, but what led me to take this photo was not interest in the sidewalk or gate or anything else in the frame, but rather the fact that those things could be arranged into an organization that I found pleasing.

All of these photos start with such a recognition, which I prefer to call an impulse. Sometimes impulses are strong and obvious—there was no doubt that there was a photo to be made from the woman on the dunes. At other times, though, impulses can be vague and fleeting. Figure 9.11 was not terribly obvious. I walked past the scene and had a nagging feeling that I had missed an image, so I went back and looked through the viewfinder and discovered that there was good raw material there. Then I began to put the image together.
You’re actually “seeing” all the time. As discussed earlier, the problem is that your brain abbreviates a lot of what you see, so that you don’t have to pay attention to it. But more than likely, interesting things are often registering in your awareness—the problem is that you’re not paying attention to them. This is good news. It means that you don’t necessarily have to “learn” how to see, because you’re already seeing. The trick is to learn to pay attention to the impulses that your eyes might be sending you.

Here are some things you can do to improve your ability to feel photographic impulses:

- **Don’t look for photos.** When you’re out shooting, don’t look for “photographs.” The world doesn’t look like a photo—it has depth and movement and doesn’t have a big frame around it. If you wait to shoot until you see a finished photograph, you won’t do much shooting. Instead, concentrate on recognizing things that are interesting: compelling subject matter, an interesting play of light, interesting geometry. If you’re open to what’s interesting, rather than what’s a “good photo,” you’ll see more potential shots. Once you’ve identified something interesting, then you can figure out how to turn it into a photo.

- **Know that impulses can be faint.** Sometimes, when walking down the street, something in the corner of my eye will give me a brief sense of “there’s something interesting over there.” But then I might have to cross a street or get out of someone’s way, and so the feeling gets lost and the awareness of the potential image passes. Your subconscious photographer isn’t always loud. If you have even the slightest sense that there might be a possible photo in a particular direction, you should raise your camera and investigate.

- **Don’t rule out an impulse until you’ve tried to work it.** In addition to a built-in, subconscious photographer who can send you impulses about possible photos, you also have an internal, often quite loud, editor who is happy to tell you that those impulses are stupid ideas. Before you decide that the editor is right, try framing some shots with your camera. The world looks very different through the viewfinder, and sometimes the full potential of an impulse doesn’t present itself until you look through the viewfinder and start experimenting.
There are times when you know what your subject matter will be. Perhaps you’ve decided to shoot a portrait of someone, or you’re going to shoot a still life of some kind. All the same impulse ideas still apply in these situations. Even something as “straightforward” as a portrait can generate photographic ideas. So try to pay attention when something tugs at the corner of your awareness and says “the shot would be better from over here,” or “this light is nicer.”

As we’ll discuss later, you probably already know most of what you need to know about what makes a good photo. Improving your photographic skill is largely about tuning in to feelings and impulses that you’re already having. You’ll never stop refining your ability to do this, but it’s an internal process. “Learning to see” is really about learning more about your own senses than it is about learning things about what you’re photographing.

BUILDING THE SHOT

Once you’ve identified an impulse and decided that there’s a possible photo to be made, it’s time to start building. There are a lot of decisions to be made, and possibly a lot of things to try, and the first thing you’ll want to do is square away some simple technical concerns:

- **Shooting mode.** By now, you should be comfortable with your camera’s modes, and should have an understanding of what each one does. When you’re ready to build a shot, you need to decide which mode is most appropriate. For many shots, Program mode might be fine. To choose a mode, think about whether you need depth of field or motion-stopping control, then pick a mode that will facilitate the control you need.

  Quite often, the subject matter or style of shooting will dictate a mode immediately. For example, when shooting an event, you may walk into the room and realize the light is very low, and that you will need to choose a mode that allows you control of shutter speed, to guarantee sharper images. You’ll probably stick with that mode for the duration of the shoot. Or perhaps you’re off to shoot a social occasion with good lighting, and you decide to choose a mode that will allow control of aperture, so that you can opt to blur out the background behind people.

  For some subjects, you may try several modes as you work the shot and change your idea of what it should be. For example, you might start out in Program mode, and then realize later that to capture the image you want, you need more control.

- **White balance.** We’ve covered white balance extensively, so you should already know that when you move into any new lighting situation you need to think about which white balance setting is required. (This is less crucial when shooting raw, as we’ll see in Chapter 11, “Raw Shooting.”)

- **ISO.** As we’ve already discussed, you always want your ISO to stay as low as possible, to keep noise down. For most situations, Auto ISO will probably work fine, but in lower light you might want to manually select your ISO, especially if there’s moving subject matter that demands a faster shutter speed.

Choosing a Camera Position and Focal Length

Once you decide to start building a photo, you need to decide where to stand. You may think: “Don’t I just shoot from where I spotted the scene? After all, that’s where I had the impulse.” Most of the time, the fact you were able to recognize a scene from a particular location doesn’t mean you’re standing in the best location to shoot that photo.

Obviously, standing closer or farther, or off to one side or the other, can make a big difference in your shot. But camera position also affects your choice of focal length, and those two things can have a huge impact on the sense of space in your scene.
Focal Length
When you zoom, many things change in your image besides the field of view and magnification. As you go from one focal length to another, you will alter the sense of space and depth in your composition. This means that focal length choice is another creative option at your disposal because it allows you to radically change the arrangement of things in the frame.

It’s easy to think of your zoom lens as a big magnifying glass and, to a degree, it is. As you zoom in, your subject appears larger and larger. However, a few other things happen to your image when you zoom.

As you go to a longer focal length (zoom in), your field of view gets narrower. The human eye has a field of view of about 50° to 55°. This is considered a normal field of view, and any lens that produces a 50° to 55° viewing angle is said to be a normal lens.

More important, though, is to pay attention to the way your perception of the depth in your scene changes. Consider the images in Figure 9.12.

In these two images, the subject remained in the same place, but I stood at different distances and used a different focal length to keep the images framed identically. As I moved back and zoomed in, the depth in the image became compressed, resulting in the background elements appearing closer. Notice how much closer the tables and chairs look in the second image. The result is an image that has a far more intimate sense of space than the first image, which has a more expansive sense of space.

Controlling depth and perspective in your scene is yet another creative option you have available. As you build a shot, you’ll want to consider how you want to represent that space. Do you want it cramped and claustrophobic? Or deep and expansive? Even if you don’t have such a preference, you should consider how different shapes in the frame intersect and relate to each other. Camera position and focal length choice have enormous creative impact on your image.

Focal Length and Portrait Distortion
At some point, you’ve probably looked at a photograph of yourself and thought: that doesn’t really look like me. One reason for the poor result might be that the photographer used a wide-angle lens. Shooting a portrait with a wide-angle lens can be problematic because you stand closer to your subject when you use one. Check out the portraits in Figure 9.13. The image on the left was shot with a slightly telephoto lens and really does look like the person. The image on the right is not such a good likeness. The nose is too big, and the ears...
have been rendered too small. In addition, the distance between the nose and ears is too long. (Of course, while the picture on the right is less literally correct, it might be a better expression of the person's character. This is a creative, interpretive choice you get to make while shooting.)

Typically, portrait photographers use a slightly telephoto lens, which almost always yields a more flattering look. A slightly telephoto lens will guarantee that people's noses don't look too big, their faces aren't elongated, and their eyes don't bulge. Well, no more than normal.

**Geometric Distortion**
Most zoom lenses exhibit some form of barrel or pincushion distortion when zoomed to either of their extremes. With barrel distortion, horizontal and vertical lines will bow outward. Pincushion distortion bows lines inward. These distortions will show up as curves and warps around the edges and corners of your image (see Figure 9.14).

If you see unacceptable distortion when using the extremes of a zoom lens, reposition your camera and select a new focal length. If the distortion isn't too bad, you can likely remove it with your image-editing software, as you’ll see later.

**Shooting Shallow Depth of Field**
Depth of field can be a critical decision when building your shot. Making the decision to shoot with a shallow depth of field (to blur the background in your image) or deep depth of field (to ensure everything is in focus) will dictate a few choices as you build up your shot.

You can control the depth of field in your image by changing aperture size. Because larger apertures yield shallower depth of field, if you want to shoot with very shallow depth of field, you should choose a lower-numbered f-stop.
Figure 9.15
The depth of field in both of these images is exactly the same. However, the depth of field in the bottom image seems deeper because we’re using a wide-angle lens, which requires us to stand closer to the subject to get the framing we wanted. Because of that, the objects in the background are so small that you can’t see that they’re as soft and blurry as the background of the top image.
However, the only way that shallow depth of field is apparent is if there’s something in the background that is noticeably soft and blurry. In other words, having larger, easier-to-see objects in the background will make your shallower depth of field more apparent. This means that you’ll usually want to choose a longer focal length, and corresponding camera position (see Figure 9.15).

**Depth of Field with Point-and-Shoot Cameras and Smartphones**

If you have some experience with 35mm or larger formats, it is important to realize that, because of the tiny sensors found on most point-and-shoot digital cameras and smartphones, their depth of field is much deeper than you might be used to.

On a typical point-and-shoot digital camera, the depth of field produced by an f/5.6 aperture works out to be more like the depth of field produced by an f/16 aperture on a 35mm camera. On smartphones, the depth of field will be even deeper. This is great news for users who want really deep depths of field. However, photographers who are used to being able to separate foregrounds from backgrounds using very shallow depths of field might be frustrated (see Figure 9.16).

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**Figure 9.16**

Because of their small sensors, most point-and-shoot cameras and smartphones are not capable of capturing very shallow depth of field. Although this is great for maintaining sharp focus, you might be frustrated if you want to intentionally blur out the background.
How Shallow Should You Go?
When you want to shoot with shallow depth of field, it’s tempting to crank your aperture open all the way, but this is not always the best choice. As depth of field gets shallower, your background becomes more blurred and abstract, but too much abstraction may not be the best choice (see Figure 9.17).

Figure 9.17
It’s important to consider just how much you want to blur out the background when shooting with shallow depth of field. You may not want background details to go indistinguishably blurry. Note the difference in background blur with these three apertures.
Your other concern when shooting with shallow depth of field is focus. As depth of field gets shallower, focusing can become more difficult. For example, if you’re shooting with a very wide aperture — f/1.8, for example — then your depth of field might be so shallow that if you focus on someone’s nose, their eyes will be a little soft, as shown in Figure 9.18. When you shoot with extremely wide apertures, understand that accurate focusing becomes critical.

If you’re in a situation and you need to shoot very quickly, you might not want to shoot with super shallow depth of field, simply because you’ll have to take more time worrying about focus.

If you have a very fast lens, (that is, one with a wide maximum aperture, say f/2 or lower) it’s a good idea to do some tests and shoot the same scene with different apertures, to get an idea of how much change happens from one aperture to another. At the wider end of your aperture range, you should see quite a change. Take particular note of how bright points of light enlarge, and what shape they take on.

**SLR Depth-of-Field Preview**

Until you press the shutter button on an SLR, the iris in your lens remains completely open, regardless of the aperture choice you’ve made. This gives you the brightest possible scene in the viewfinder. When you press the shutter release to take a picture, the iris closes down to your desired setting and then reopens to full wide after the picture is taken. Obviously, all these actions happen in a fraction of a second. However, because the iris is wide open until you shoot, the viewfinder always shows you the depth of field that you’ll get with your lens’ maximum aperture. If you’ve chosen a smaller aperture, then the depth of field in your final image may be greater than what you see when you look through the viewfinder.

![Figure 9.18](image1.png)

*Figure 9.18*  
When shooting with extremely shallow depth of field, be very careful about focus. Here the subject’s head was turned slightly, leaving her right eye slightly farther away from the camera than her left. At this aperture, that tiny distance was enough for the right eye to fall out of focus.

![Figure 9.19](image2.png)

*Figure 9.19*  
Most SLRs have a depth-of-field preview button, which shows the actual depth of field in your scene. Not all DOF preview controls are in these locations. Check your camera manual for details.
If you press the depth-of-field preview button (after metering and setting your desired aperture), the aperture will close down and stay closed as long as you hold the button (see Figure 9.19). This allows you to see the image through the actual aperture size that will be used when you take the shot. However, with the iris stopped down, your viewfinder will become much dimmer, which can make it hard to see your image at all, much less notice depth of field.

**Focal Length Only Appears to Affect Depth of Field**

There is a long-held, long-taught belief that longer focal lengths yield a shallower depth of field. This isn't true. Longer focal lengths yield an apparently shallower depth of field. You can learn more about this by reading *Focal Length and Depth of Field*, which you can find in the Chapter 9 section of the companion website at CDPbook.info. For all intents and purposes, though, when you want an image that appears to have shallower depth of field, use a longer focal length.

Give your eyes time to adjust to the dimmer viewfinder, and if need be, cover your other eye with your hand to give yourself as dark a viewing environment as possible. As your eyes adjust, you should be able to get a better sense of the depth of field in the image.

**Mirrorless Camera Depth-of-Field Preview**

Mirrorless cameras have electronic viewfinders, so the brightness of the image in the viewfinder is controlled electronically. Most mirrorless cameras offer a depth-of-field preview feature, but it’s usually either always on or always off. You usually access this setting via a menu command, although it’s rarely called something straightforward like “depth-of-field preview.” On Sony cameras, for example, it’s called Live View Setting Display; on Fuji cameras, it’s called Preview Exp./WB in Manual Mode. Check your camera’s manual for details on whether your camera has such a feature, and how to activate it.

**COMPOSITION**

The last step in building a shot is composition, perhaps the most important of the process. Composition is a topic that you will return to throughout your photographic career. Your ideas and taste in composition will continually change and as you strive for different types of compositions you may find that you will need to exercise different technical skills.

While I say that composition is the last step in the process of building a shot, it’s difficult to say that composition happens at a particular time. From the moment you have the impulse to take a photo, you’re already composing. Even as you think through aperture and focal length and camera position decisions, you’re probably already thinking about how you want to frame your scene.

Unlike the real world, a photograph is bounded by a frame. When looking at a photo, the viewer reads the contents of that frame to try to determine and understand what it is you’re showing them. No matter how compelling something is, it won’t necessarily be obvious in a photo unless you guide the viewer to it. The simplest definition of composition is that it’s the way you frame your scene, but good composition means much more than simply choosing a way to crop the world.

In a good composition, the viewer will know precisely what the subject of the image is. In a bad composition, the viewer’s eye will wander and search, and if pressed, people may not be able to identify the subject of the image. Good composition can also reveal things in the scene that viewers might not notice on their own—repetitive patterns, a play of light and shadow, or even a feeling about the particular moment you’re photographing.

There are a lot of composition theories, but I think the easiest way to grasp good composition is this: a well-composed photo is one that is organized. In a well-com-
posed image, the viewer quickly — sometimes immediately — knows where to look because the elements in the scene are organized well.

Consider the mess of trees in the image in Figure 9.20.

It's difficult to figure out where to look in this image because, compositionally, all parts of it are equal. In other words, there's no real organization to it. Now consider Figure 9.21. This is the same mess of trees, but organized. Your eye has a better idea of where to go in this image. The stream bed helps anchor the scene, while the tilt of the trees gives your eye direction.

The good news is that you're already experienced with composition. Any time you arrange the furniture in your house, decide where to hang a picture on the wall or select an ensemble to wear to an engagement, you are composing visually. And what you may have learned from those experiences is that when things are composed well, it feels right. We all have an innate sense of good composition just as we all have an innate sense of the pentatonic scale in music. Some have an easier time accessing their compositional sense, but you can train yourself to use it.

Earlier, you looked at some simple composition rules — fill the frame, lead your subject, and don't be afraid to get in tight. There are no recipes for good composition, but simple guidelines can give you a starting point when you're not sure where to begin.

In this chapter, we're going to explore some compositional ideas. In addition to being sturdy compositional guidelines that you'll use for the rest of your life, they provide a good foundation for practice, and as you practice more and more you'll train your eye to have an innate "feel" for good composition.

Four Things All Good Compositions Have

Not every image will have all of the compositional ideas that we will discuss here. But all good compositions will have these four elements: a subject and background, a sense of balance, a point of view, and simplicity.

A Subject and Background

This may sound simple, but it's one of the most often-violated compositional rules. A photo needs a foreground and a background. Or, to put it another way, a subject and a background. What's more, the relationship between those two things is very important.

In Chapter 2, you learned about the idea of filling the frame. Choosing what to fill the frame with is an important part of good composition. For example, the left-hand image in
Figure 9.22 shows a person standing in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. I have filled the entire frame, and you can see the bridge and the man’s whole body, but the image doesn’t really have a strong subject. In fact, the bridge is as much the subject as the guy, who serves little purpose other than to provide a sense of scale.

A better composition would be to go in tighter, as in the right image in Figure 9.22. Here I’ve filled the frame with more of the person, and you know now that he is definitely the subject of the image. Yes, I’ve had to crop the bridge, but the image still plainly conveys the person in his environment. If you want a picture of the bridge, that’s a different subject and a different photo, and you probably don’t need a person at all.

In most cases, it’s safe to say that you shouldn’t try to take a single picture that encompasses everything in a scene. Sometimes, all you’ll end up with is a picture with no discernible subject or purpose.

There will be times when you’ll come across a beautiful or compelling vista that will be strong enough to stand on its own as a subject. In other words, it might be both a subject and a background. No matter how obvious the subject, though, the frame will need to be organized. Figure 9.23 shows a landscape that is, itself, a subject. It’s hard to say that there’s a foreground and background. In terms of the composition, though, the light on the water could be considered the subject of the image. It’s where your eye starts, and because your
eye has a starting point, the image ends up organized. Your eye doesn’t wander and you don’t feel lost in the image.

Very often, when we speak of the “subject” of the image, what we really mean is something that can anchor the frame—a starting or stopping point for the viewer’s eye. In Figure 9.24, the rock serves as a nice starting point for the image, and from there the eye can follow the dark strip of the ground to the tree. Is the rock the subject of the image? Or is it the tree? You could argue that either way. What’s important to understand is that there needs to be a recognizable organization to the image so that the viewer has a sense of how to read the photo.

A Sense of Balance

Elements in your composition have different weights. A heavy element on one side of the frame might need to be balanced by an element on the opposite side of the frame, as with the birds in Figure 9.25.

Balance in a composition works just like it does in the real world. You can think of the center of your image as having a fulcrum. Visual elements in the frame tilt the balance from one side to another. In a complex frame there can be many elements weighting both
sides, so finding balance can be tricky. Of course, you also have to balance the frame from
top to bottom. In Figure 9.26 the horses are positioned so that the lone horse on the right
balances the ones on the left. Meanwhile, the cloud in the upper part of the frame balances
the horses at the bottom of the frame.

Balance can be complicated and you don’t have to balance one thing with the same kind
of thing. When it comes to balance, all that matters is the size, tone, and position of some-
ting in the frame. For example, you can balance tones against each other—dark against
dark or dark against light, as you can see in Figure 9.27. The strong darkness of the truck is
balanced by the daylight shape on the left side of the frame.

Placing something in the dead center of the frame can also create a balance, as shown in
Figure 9.28  
Balance can even be created by placing an element in the center of the image. Here the sloping hills on either side serve to create an even balance.

Figure 9.29  
This bent light switch caught my attention, but shooting it from my normal point of view—which happens to be the exact point of view of how I saw it—doesn’t produce a very compelling image (left). By changing my point of view and getting under the light switch and shooting up, I can create a much more interesting image (right).

Figure 9.28. In this case, center framing works fairly well because of the hills on either side that guide the viewer’s attention to the middle of the frame.

**A Point of View**

All images have to be shot from somewhere, and where you choose to shoot from determines the point of view of your final image. It’s very easy to shoot all of your images from the same point of view—that is, a point usually somewhere between five and six feet above the ground. But this default point of view—the one that you spend all day looking from—is not always the best point of view for creating a dramatic, compelling image.
Consider the light switch shown on the previous page (see Figure 9.29).

Because of my choice of point of view, it’s difficult to tell what the subject of this image is, and the photo is generally boring. But with a simple point-of-view change, I can create a much more interesting picture.

Changes in point of view don’t always have to be as dramatic as this example. Sometimes, just taking a step or two in one direction or another can create a change in point of view that yields a better image. As you can see in Figure 9.29, I didn’t just change location, I also changed altitude, bending down low and pointing upward.

In most circumstances, good shooting means lots of movement. After recognizing a subject, you should move around it, above it, below it, as you try to find the point of view that yields the best image. This is something to check from time to time as you’re shooting. If you’re not moving very much, then you need to think more about point of view.

**Simplicity**

There are many ways that the world can be annoying, but for photographers, one of the biggest is that there’s too much extra stuff in the world.
Painters have it easy because they start with nothing and add only the things they want in their scene. Photographers, though, have to figure out how to compose with (or in spite of) power lines, street signs, parked cars, people who walk into a shot, moving cars, trees that have one branch that’s pointing in the wrong direction, and so on and so forth.

One of your most difficult compositional tasks is to reduce the clutter in a scene so that the viewer is not confused about what to look at, and so that his or her eye finds its way through the image to your subject.

If you work to fill the frame, as we discussed earlier, you’ll have a head start on reducing the clutter in your scene. One of the easiest things to try when looking for the right composition is simply to get in closer (see Figure 9.30).

It’s very rare that you won’t get a better picture by moving closer to your subject (see Figure 9.31). This is often the easiest way to simplify your composition and remove unwanted elements.

When you’re in a crowded area, getting closer often means separating yourself from the crowd and moving toward a scene. This can make you feel like everyone is looking at you, but in reality, they most likely are not. These days, everyone is used to seeing people with cameras. More importantly, though, so what? They notice you for a few moments and then go on with their day, while you go home with an interesting photo.

**Examining Images for the Four Elements**

It’s worth spending some time with images you’ve already shot, or images from your favorite photographers, and analyzing them for the four elements we’ve been focusing on: subject and background, balance, point of view, and simplicity. Look for balance, and take note of how it was created. Is the subject clearly defined? And if so, how did the photographer make you see the subject? Is there anything extra in the image? And is the point of view one you would have thought of? Looking at images this way can help you begin to develop the habit of looking at scenes in the real world this way, and that will translate into better compositions.

**Other Compositional Ideas**

There are many other compositional ideas around which you can build images: repetition, thirds, leading lines, and much more. Here are a few examples.

**Repetition**

Repeating patterns are often very interesting, like the repeating pattern of the fence you saw in Figure 9.08 (page 139). Figure 9.32 shows another image with some simple repetition.

Repetition can create a sense of visual rhythm in a scene, and that rhythm can be satisfying and a way to guide the viewer’s eye to your subject.

Related to repetition is the rule of threes. Obviously, a single object has no repetition, while two objects aren’t enough to imply a repeating pattern. Four or more is sometimes too much complexity. (You want to keep your images simple.) Three is often a good sweet spot for repetition. It’s enough to establish a rhythm, but not so much that the image becomes complicated (see Figure 9.33).

Often, if you find three things, you have the makings of an image. Explore the scene and see what you can work up. (The rule of threes isn’t to be confused with the rule of thirds, which we’ll talk about next.)
Thirds
In a rectangular frame, a sense of balance and proportion can be created by composing around thirds. That is, if you think about dividing your frame into thirds, both horizontally and vertically, then placing elements at the intersections of those divisions usually creates a nice sense of proportion (see Figure 9.34).

I say that it “usually creates a nice sense of proportion” because in some images this isn’t true. Depending on what else is in the image, composing around thirds may not work. People often refer to this as the “rule of thirds,” but again, you shouldn’t think of composition as a recipe or set assortment of rules. Sometimes composing around thirds yields a good result, and sometimes it doesn’t.

Note that if you’re shooting with a square frame, then working with thirds probably won’t work. When composing for a square, think about balancing the corners of the image.

Leading Lines
Lines aren’t just used as interesting subject matter; they can also serve to guide the viewer’s eye around your frame. In Figure 9.35, the curving rail serves to guide the eye directly to the person walking toward the stairs.

Remember, the point of composition is to organize your frame in such a way that the viewer immediately understands what the subject is. Leading lines are a great way to make the organization of your image clearer.

Center Composition
A lot of people think that if they put their subject in the middle of the frame, they’re shoot-
ing an uncreative, boring picture. While worrying about the rule of thirds, balance, and all of these other concepts, it’s easy to forget that, sometimes, the best composition is to leave your subject in the dead center of the frame (see Figure 9.36). And while many photography teachers tell you that this is the big no-no, composition-wise, I don’t always agree: it is possible to get too creative, so don’t forget the value of simple composition.

**Light and Dark**

You’ll often build compositions out of light and dark, not just out of geometry, so pay attention to light and dark elements within an image, as they can make great compositional elements.

Remember, too, that a completely black shadow is sometimes just what an image needs. You don’t always need to see detail everywhere in an image, and choosing what to show and what to hide is part of what makes a composition compelling and an image easier to read (see Figure 9.37).

**How a Good Composition Is Made**

Typically, you’ll craft an image in one of two ways: you’ll see an interesting thing and figure out how to compose it, or you’ll recog-

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**Why Are So Many Examples in Black and White?**

You may have noticed that a lot of these composition examples are in black and white. With color removed, pure composition becomes much easier to see and study. For your own composition exercises, you might consider working in black and white. Without the distraction of color, you might have an easier time focusing on some of the compositional ideas discussed here. We’ll talk more about this in Chapter 19.
nize a compositional idea — repetition, leading lines, and so on — and work to see if there’s an interesting image that can be built around that idea.

Sometimes, as you look through the viewfinder, you’ll simply feel the composition as you move around, change focal length, and consider depth of field. If you practice the ideas we’ve discussed in this chapter, you’ll find yourself able to “feel” your way through a composition more often.

At other times, you might not have any idea of how to compose your shot. In those instances, you might need to think your way through the process of composing. Start by thinking about camera position and focal length; then look through the lens to see how the sense of depth and space in the scene changes as you change position and focal length. Next start thinking about subject and background, and about geometry, pattern, repetition, and thirds. These can serve as guidelines as you explore the scene through your camera lens.

**PRACTICES FOR BETTER SHOOTING**

While practicing how to see may seem abstract, it is something you can work at and improve. You will continue to explore and refine your composition skills for the rest of your life as a photographer. To help you along, there are some practices you can employ to improve the quality of your images.

**Seeing In the Camera, Not Through the Camera**

The brain has an amazing ability to focus your attention on something within your field of view. So much so, that it becomes very easy not to notice all the other things that are in your field of view.

For example, while walking downtown in San Francisco one day, I spotted the scene shown in Figure 9.38.

![Figure 9.38](image)

While walking down the street in San Francisco one day, I came across the scene below.

There’s no real composition, and no clear subject in this shot. Mostly, it looks like a photo of an empty parking space. Granted, this is often a photo-worthy event in San Francisco, but while standing at the scene, what struck me was the building with the tall facade in the distance. I found that building compelling for some reason, and then noticed that the strong, rectangular shape of the building was complemented by the round turret of the building across the street. I found that relationship interesting.

In other words, my attention was focused on a very small part of my field of view, and I completely ignored all the clutter around it. Holding a camera up to my face didn’t change this perception — my brain continued to focus my attention on one small part of what was in the frame, even though the framing included all that extra, unnecessary stuff. When shooting, it’s very important to pay attention to the entire image that is being shown in the viewfinder, not just the small part that your brain might be paying attention to. This is a return to the idea of making an effort to fill the frame with your subject. In Figure 9.38, my frame is filled with far more than my subject.

The best way to guard against this is to trace your eyes around the edge of the frame before you press the shutter button. This will force you to pay attention to other elements in your shot, and will also help you notice any strange intersections in your composition, such as telephone poles sticking out of people’s heads and that sort of thing.
Work the Subject

Earlier, we discussed point of view, and how you need to move a lot to find the best point of view for a particular shot. Working the shot—shooting lots of coverage of a subject—is a critical part of getting a good image.

To carry on from the previous example, after coming across the scene I described earlier, I zoomed in and started to take some pictures of the two buildings I had spotted. I shot several different frames from slightly varying distance, some with cars passing in front and some without. You can see a few of the results in Figure 9.39.

A quick check of my shots on the camera’s LCD screen showed me something I was having trouble seeing through the viewfinder: the two buildings were too far apart to reveal the contrasting geometries that had struck me when I first saw the scene. This is an example of my brain focusing my attention on something in the scene that wasn’t being captured by my composition.

So I moved across the street and tried a few more frames, and finally ended up with a composition I liked, the one in Figure 9.40. I was visualizing the scene in black and white, so I chose an exposure that would allow me to render the final image in a particular way. (We’ll look at that process in more detail in Chapter 19, “Black-and-White Conversion.”)
It would have been easy to stop after the first few frames and conclude that there wasn’t a good picture to be had. I only came away with a keeper because I worked the shot. Figure 9.41 shows another example, a series of images of the great jazz drummer Jack DeJohnette. This scene had to be worked for quite a while to find a combination of interesting composition, good facial expression, and dynamic movement. (The smeary effect was creating using a Lensbaby, a cool special-effect lens for SLRs and mirrorless cameras; you can learn more about them at lensbaby.com.)

Very often, you won’t know which idea is best until you get home and look at your images. The more you work your shot, the more choices you’ll have when you get to post-production.

Don’t Be Afraid
It may sound strange to talk about fear when speaking of shooting photos. After all, unless you’re shooting in particularly harrowing conditions, there’s no real risk involved in photography. Nevertheless, most people still employ risk-management behavior while shooting. To get good images, you have to have the courage to try something new, to experiment, and to consider compositions and ideas you might not have shot before.

Why are people afraid to try new shots? Sometimes, it’s because they’re in public and are afraid of looking stupid. Don’t worry about this. Most people in public are so busy worrying about whether they look stupid that they don’t have time to notice what you may or may not be doing with your camera.

More often, the fear of trying new shots is the fear of coming home to find that you shot bad photos. This is an awful feeling because it usually makes you question if you have any photographic skill. When you work a subject, as described in the previous section, you will get a lot of unusable images, possibly some stupid ones, and maybe even some bad ones. And none of that has any relationship to your skill as a photographer. Working a subject is just like sketching, and just as not every line in a sketch is the correct line, not every photo you take is the correct photo, but like the lines in a sketch, your incorrect photos serve to help you zone in on the keeper shot. Painters don’t worry about what their sketches say about their painting skill. Similarly, you shouldn’t worry about what your “sketch” photos say about your photography skill.
Of course, sometimes the idea that you’re working simply doesn’t yield a good photo, no matter how you shoot it. You simply have to accept that this is just how the creative process works: sometimes you have a good idea, and sometimes you don’t. The times you don’t are no reflection on whether you’re a good photographer or a bad one.

The fear of coming home with bad photos will often lead you to stay in a photographic comfort zone. When shooting in your comfort zone, you’ll take the same kinds of shots that you’ve been pleased with in the past. The problem with staying in your comfort zone is that you’ll eventually get bored with it and begin to feel like you can only shoot one type of photo. This will lead you right back to thinking you have no photographic skill.

If you find yourself shooting the same types of images, or always composing the same way, then make a deal with yourself: go ahead and shoot that image that you’re comfortable with, and then force yourself to try some different compositions. Get in closer, use a different focal length, try a different angle. This way, you’ll still come home with an image that works, while your experimentation might teach you something new and help to expand your zone of comfort.

You won’t get that keeper image if you don’t have the nerve to try some new ideas. So shoot a little extra—shoot on impulse and take chances. You can always delete them later.

**Shooting Practice: Try to Fill Your Card**

It’s easy to overthink the process of seeing. Earlier I mentioned that you have a built-in editor. You’re probably familiar with that editor’s voice: it’s the one that tells you that the photograph you’re considering is a stupid idea, or a cliché, or that you’ve already shot an image like it. Or maybe you haven’t heard that voice very often recently, because you haven’t seen many photos that you thought were worth taking, so you haven’t bothered to raise your camera.

Over the years, I have come to believe that when you go out shooting, you should aim to fill your entire media card with images: you should shoot as many frames as you possibly can. Good ideas, bad ideas, stupid ideas, clichés, it doesn’t matter—shoot them. If you aim to fill your card then you’ll probably find that your internal editor can’t get a word in edgewise, because there’s no time for it. What’s more, if you’re aiming to fill your card, your goal will change. It will no longer be about capturing great photos, but simply to get more photos and that will force you to shoot.

I’m not saying that quantity equals quality, but because this drive will force you to shoot, you’ll have the camera up to your eye more, and that means you will be more likely to stumble into a great photo, or to spot one that you hadn’t seen before.
Media cards are large these days, which means the odds of completely filling one are probably pretty slim. If I've got an hour to shoot there's no way that I'll be able to fill the 1,600 images that will fit on my card, so instead I try to keep a rhythm of around one a minute. If a minute has gone by and I haven't shot something I'll raise the camera and look through it and try to make something happen. Most of the time I get garbage, but sometimes I find something I hadn't seen before.

Recently, I shot for an hour or so in an industrial park and came back with about 200 frames. When I looked through them I found the four images shown in Figure 9.42, shot in different places, at different times during that hour. I was not trying to find these similar compositions; it was just something my eye was seeing, something that I wasn’t consciously aware of. I feel like this only happened because I was focused simply on keeping my pace up.

EQUIPMENT DOESN’T MATTER (USUALLY)
Photography gear is so cool and so much fun that it can be very easy to think that buying more of it will make you a better photographer. It won’t. Don’t get me wrong: some cameras take images that are much sharper and possess much more vibrant color than other cameras. For certain types of work, these technical specifications are imperative. But still, you can take a good picture with any camera. For example, Figure 9.43 shows a three-image panorama that was shot with a first-generation digital camera that had a resolution of less than 1 megapixel.

It was not possible to take a razor-sharp, finely detailed image with that camera, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t possible to shoot other types of images that worked fine. If your gear has weaknesses, it might be possible to exploit them.

If you are editing an image and find a technical flaw you feel truly compromises the image—maybe the edges are soft, or the high-contrast areas suffer from distracting color fringes—and this flaw continues to plague you in more and more shots, then you might want to invest in some different gear. Or, if you find that what would have made the image great is if you’d been able to shoot with a wider angle or shallower depth of field, then expanding your lens toolbox might be a reasonable idea. But if you think that any one piece of gear is going to make you take more interesting photos, you’re wrong. Henri Cartier-Bresson, one of the most influential photographers of the 20th century, shot most
of his images with a 35mm camera and a fixed 50mm lens. No autofocus, no auto metering, no auto winding, and only one focal length. Today, the camera on a typical smartphone offers more features and flexibility than the camera Cartier-Bresson used, and with generally better image quality.

If you want to take better pictures, spend your time worrying about light and seeing, not practicing gear envy.

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