Photographic Compositional Formulas

Through the use of compositional formulas you will begin to see your subject through the camera’s viewfinder differently, not simple placing a subject in the center of the frame and snapping the photograph. You begin the practice of composition through “Light” producing shapes formed by shadows and highlights producing “visual contrast” that helps create movement through your image. Followed by “Angle” producing a different point of view than we normally see walking through our world. Focus and Movement are also other compositional factors that you are practicing, sharp focus or the lack of sharp focus / blur or stop action can also bring attention to a certain area of a picture. The compositional formulas we will study for this assignment are: spot/line, shape/pattern, foreground to background relationships, backgrounds, framing devices, balance, and the rule of thirds.

(1) **Spot:** a single small object “a spot” (shape does not have to be round) against a neutral or contrasting background, could be a highlight reflecting off of any subject (completely white in the photograph) or a black bird flying against a cloudy sky. With more than one spot the eye can play connect the dots which can create movement through image.

**Line:** is a shape longer than it is wide, may be actual or implied, can create visual shapes, and moves the eye through the image. Psychological theories: horizontal (calm/stability), vertical (stature/strength), diagonal (activity/motion), curved (gracefulness/slowness).

(2) **Shape:** is any defined area, can be two or three dimensional, can connect with other shapes to form a larger and different shape, changing tonal values across the shape can create dimension, single object draws attention, while two or more shape draws comparison, can develop into positive and negative space.

**Pattern:** is repetition of shape, spot, or line, unites elements in a scene, and can create fast movement in the image.

(3) **Foreground/Background Relationship:** creates size relationships, gives a visual path for the eye to follow from a beginning edge of a photograph to the opposite side or center of the image, gives a feeling of depth.

**Note:** Backgrounds are part of the picture that is easily forgotten. Eliminate visual clutter in backgrounds by moving the angle of the camera or selective focus. Use backgrounds only when it contributes something to the image, it can add time, sense of place, information about the subject, give scale or vice versa, and some backgrounds are what the picture is all about.

(4) **Framing Devices:** photographing the main subject through other object found in the scene, placing line and shape at the edge of the image frame creating size relationships and depth. Also a way to visually play one object off of another changing the context of the image.

(5) **Balance:** equal amounts of darks and lights, dark space is more heavy than light, large is heavier than small, objects place at the edge of the frame has more weight than at the center, placement of horizon line a picture needs more weight at the bottom, usually the viewer can detect a unbalance image easier than a balanced image.

(6) **The Rule of Thirds:** draw imaginary lines dividing your picture area into thirds horizontally and vertically. Important subject areas should fall on the intersection of the lines or along the lines. For example, a person’s face might be located on the upper left intersection (theoretically the strongest).