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***Digital Photography
Composition***

FOR

DUMMIES®

by Tom Clark



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About the Author

Tom Clark is a successful commercial photographer in Miami. After receiving a Bachelor of Arts in Commercial Photography, he moved to Miami and began his career by assisting local photographers on fashion, editorial, and portrait assignments. Tom also assisted some of the city's top architectural and interior photographers and worked on set with many of the top photographers in New York, Los Angeles, and Europe for fashion, editorial, and celebrity portraiture. With the combination of his experience on set and his education, Tom successfully made the move from photo assistant to photographer. Today he shoots for a number of local and international publications on a freelance basis, and he provides commercial advertising services to clients of all sizes.

What aren't discussed in Tom's commercial success but are possibly the root of his inspiration are the long trips into the wilderness, up mountains, and to the seas where getting the perfect shot is an exploration and nights are filled with campfires, starry skies, and long exposures. To check out Tom's work and see his *Photo of the Week* (which highlights his most interesting recent captures), visit his Web site at www.tomclarkphoto.com.

Dedication

For my dad.

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Introduction

If you want to create interesting and aesthetically pleasing photographs, you need to understand great composition. You have rules (which can, of course, be broken) to guide you, decisions to make, and techniques and tools to get the job done. Put all these together, and you give purpose and meaning to your photographs.

After you realize why some photographs look better than others and more successfully tell their stories, you can create amazing images wherever you are and in any conditions. You can approach any scene in many ways, and each photographer will do so differently. You want to be sure that you approach a scene with the confidence of a person who understands how to compose great images — and has fun doing so.

Whether you're an amateur, pro, semipro, hobbyist, scrapbooker, traveler, artist, or someone who just received a camera as a gift, knowing more about composition will make your photographs better. Besides, if you're going to take pictures, they may as well be good ones.

About This Book

Photographic composition is a complex topic that covers a wide range of theories and competing schools of thought. Many photographers carry separate opinions when it comes to defining what's most important in creating great compositions. Some feel that following the rules is essential, and others feel that to be unique you need to break the rules. In this book, I provide a thorough coverage of the rules (because in order to break the rules successfully, it helps to know what they are). I also do my best to give you the information necessary to determine when to go with the rule book and when to go with your gut.

In this book, you find information that covers composition from all angles. I designed each chapter to present valuable information that can improve your ability to see potential in what you're photographing and to capture that potential with your camera. Combining ideas from multiple chapters makes you a more dynamic photographer, but you certainly can take one chapter at a time, focusing on one skill or technique until you're moved to expand your compositional repertoire.

Ultimately, you make the decisions about what good composition is. Use this book to introduce new ideas to your creative thought process, to enhance your decision-making skills, and to understand the technical information you need to achieve the results you want.

And remember that this book isn't designed to be read from cover to cover. You can jump in wherever you need the most help without feeling like you've skipped a beat. No chapter relies on your knowledge of any preceding chapter to make sense. You may want to practice the ideas in one chapter before you move on to the next, but you're going to find everything you need (or directions to further information) anywhere you start reading.

Conventions Used in This Book

In this book, I use the following conventions to make sure the text is consistent and easy to understand:

- ✓ For each photograph, I include the following information:
 - **Focal length:** This number shows the angle of view provided by the particular lens used. It determines how much of your scene is captured when composing a shot.
 - **Shutter speed:** This number indicates how long it took to complete the exposure (usually measured in fractions of a second). It determines how precise the moment of capture is, and it's particularly important when photographing subjects in motion.
 - **Aperture:** This number shows how much light the lens let in at the time of exposure (measured by an f-stop). It helps to regulate your depth of field, which determines how much of your scene is sharp or blurry.
 - **ISO:** This number displays how sensitive the digital sensor is to light during the time of the exposure. A sensitive ISO rating (determined by a higher number) can produce a properly exposed image more quickly and with less light than a less sensitive rating (determined by a lower number).

You can find this info beneath each photo. To save space, I give you just the numbers — no labels. So when you see “35mm, 1/250 sec., f/11, 320,” you'll know that I'm referring to the focal length, shutter speed, aperture, and ISO. The specs are always in this order.

- ✓ All Web addresses appear in `monofont`.
- ✓ New terms appear in *italic* and are closely followed by an easy-to-understand definition.
- ✓ **Bold** highlights the action parts of numbered steps and the key words in bulleted lists.

When this book was printed, some Web addresses may have needed to break across two lines of text. If that happened, rest assured that I've added no extra characters, such as hyphens, to indicate the break. So when using one of these Web addresses, simply type in exactly what you see in the book as though the line break doesn't exist.

What You're Not to Read

If you're in a hurry to start taking amazing photographs, you may want to skip around this book to areas that most appeal to you. No problem. If you are in a big hurry, here's a tip: You can skip the sidebars (those gray-shaded boxes) and any text marked with the Technical Stuff icon. The information you find in these places may interest you and add something to your work, but it isn't necessary for understanding how to compose beautiful photographs.

Foolish Assumptions

Before I could write this book, I had to make some assumptions about you, its reader. For example, I assume that you

- ✓ Want to get a reaction from the people who view your images
- ✓ Are familiar with the basic functions of your camera and have some experiences using them

How This Book Is Organized

Photographic composition is all about organization: The way you organize elements in a frame determines how people view the image. Similarly, writing a book requires you to stay organized as well. So, each part in this book gives you valuable information related to a specific topic. Each part works on its own or can be combined with information from another part. The following sections give you an overview of what parts this book contains.

Part I: The Basics of Composition

This part introduces you to photographic composition and explains why it's a necessary skill in producing interesting and aesthetically pleasing images.

It covers the topic of training your eyes to see things from a compositional standpoint and discusses the abilities and equipment you need to consistently create beautiful photographs.

Part II: Elements of Photographic Design

Certain key elements are the building blocks of composition. This part shows you ways to put these elements together when composing an image. I tell you about critical factors like lines, shapes, patterns, and color, and I introduce you to the “rules” that have arisen from the blood, sweat, and tears of photographers who came before you.

Part III: Arranging the Key Elements to Compose a Successful Shot

A well-composed photo has various parts — or elements — that work together to create a cohesive message. I provide you with an overview of these elements in Part II, but in this part, I delve into each in more detail. You find out how to use focus, perspective, background, and lighting to tell your story. I also show you ways to use framing techniques to keep viewers’ eyes on your image. I round out the part with a chapter on the other compositional ideas you can use to make sure your subject headlines the show.

Part IV: Composition in Action

Your subject matter typically determines how you compose an image. For instance, you compose images of people differently from images of architecture or landscapes. Each chapter in this part discusses how to handle a common subject by combining the elements of design and the photographic techniques you find in Parts II and III. And after you’ve taken your photos — whether they’re portraits, still-life images, or abstracts — you can polish them using the postproduction improvements I tell you about in this part.

Part V: The Part of Tens

This part provides three short chapters in which I share important aspects of my experience as a photographer to help better your understanding and execution of interesting photo compositions. You discover ways to give yourself assignments that will enhance your photographic composition skills, find inspiration, and compose one scene in various ways.

Icons Used in This Book

Icons are a beloved tradition in the *For Dummies* series, so why buck tradition now? I use the following icons to direct your eye to specific types of information within the book:



The text that appears next to this icon presents the information that you'll rely on again and again when photographing. This is the stuff that experienced photographers know cold.



In some instances, I dive a little further into a technical topic to give you greater detail that you may find interesting. You're welcome to skip these divergences; you won't miss anything crucial.



Whenever I give you information that saves you time, money, or photographic frustration, I mark the text with this icon.



Some practices send your composition into a tailspin that even postproduction editing can't fix. Whenever I tell you about possible errors or missteps, I highlight the information with this dangerous-looking icon.

Where to Go from Here

As I mention earlier, you don't have to read this book in any particular order — the way you proceed is totally up to you. You can simply pick a topic that you're interested in and dig in. For instance, if you're antsy to start applying your photographic skills to shooting landscapes or another specific subject, flip right to Part IV. If color has you baffled, Chapter 6 has the information you need. Need an introduction to or refresher on camera settings? Head for Chapter 3. And if you're a beginner, an overachiever, or someone who just can't stand the thought of missing something, turn the page and keep reading until you hit the index. Whatever you do, don't delay. Get started on your journey toward successfully composed images.

6

Digital Photography Composition For Dummies ---

Part I

The Basics of Composition



In this part . . .

The difference between good photography and mediocre photography is composition. Until you grasp the ideas behind successful compositions, your photography can go only so far. This part alerts you to exactly what composition is, why it's so critical for making images, and what skills and equipment you need to begin creating knockout compositions.



Photographic Composition: The Overview

In This Chapter

- ▶ Reviewing photographic composition
 - ▶ Developing the skills that lead to great compositions
-

The world is full of beauty, and the world of photography is full of limitless potential to reveal that beauty. Any particular scene or scenario can be conveyed in countless ways that are equally compelling, and each photographer chooses a composition based on her own unique values and ideas. What a viewer takes from your photographs — how he understands your message — depends mainly on your ability to compose clear and interesting images. Every time you take a photograph, you're communicating with whoever looks at it, and getting your message across has a lot to do with your fluency in the language of photography.

Some people say that great photographs can be captured with even the cheapest point-and-shoot cameras and that photography is all about the photographer's eye, not the equipment or technique used. This thought is true on certain levels of standards, but why would you stop at just having a good eye? Photography and composition is about more than just pointing your camera at something that looks interesting. Discovering how to take your good eye to the next level and back it up with a thorough understanding of the equipment and techniques available advances the quality of your photography to much more impressive levels.

In this chapter, I give you an overview of what role composition takes in photography and show you what techniques you can use to improve your images' compositions.



Getting a Grasp on Good Composition

Artists of all types (photographers, painters, architects, musicians, and so on) know that a noticeable difference exists between good composition and poor composition. A viewer may not be educated in photographic composition, but she knows a good photo when she sees it. Similarly, you don't need to understand music theory to differentiate between a good song and a bad song. However, you're more likely to compose a good song if you understand the theory behind the music.



Understanding what photographic composition is and how it conveys a message to viewers changes the way you take pictures and increases your enjoyment in viewing the work of other photographers.

Defining photographic composition

In general, the term *composition* refers to how various parts come together to create a harmonious whole. When something — whether it's a photograph, a painting, a room, or any other object — contains multiple elements, those elements automatically develop relationships to one another. For example, where you position the sofa and chairs determines how those items work together (and whether your guests can talk to each other).

More specifically, *photographic composition* represents the decisions you make when creating an image. It includes everything that's in your *frame* — the rectangular space that's represented by your camera's viewfinder or your photograph. In a photograph, the way you reveal the relationships between the different elements in your scene makes up your composition.



The following terms are essential to understanding what makes up a scene and what your selected composition represents:

- ✓ **Frame:** Your *frame* is the rectangle or square (depending on your camera's format) that contains the scene you're shooting. You can't always manipulate a scene, but you can control how the scene is represented in your frame if you're properly prepared. Being prepared means knowing which camera angles provide the best results in a given scenario (Chapter 8) and knowing how to use your equipment to get the best results with regard to focus (Chapter 7), exposure (Chapter 3), and arrangement (Chapter 5).
- ✓ **Elements:** The *elements* of a composition are the people, places, and things that make up a scene. Everything included in your frame is an element, including the subject, the details that make up the foreground and background, and any objects, props, or details that surround the subject. In fact, compositional elements consist of anything that can be

defined in an image: shapes, forms, lines, textures, colors, tonalities, light (or the absence of light), and space. The arrangement of a scene's elements in your frame determines your composition.

- ✔ **Subject:** The *subject* is a person, place, thing, or essence (in abstract images) that gives a photograph purpose. Because an image tells a story about its subject, the goal of a good composition is to showcase the subject. Keep in mind that one photograph can include multiple subjects.

Notice the elements that make up the scene in Figure 1-1 — the snowcapped mountains, the valley with a river running through it, the body of water that the river feeds into, and the cloudy and hazy sky. The mountain on the left side of the frame is the subject in this image.



35mm, 1/250 sec., f/11, 320

Figure 1-1: Consider what each element in your frame says about your subject when deciding to incorporate it or eliminate it.

Because of the composition I chose for Figure 1-1, the mountain on the left-hand side dominates all the other elements in the scene; those elements exist in the frame to tell you more about the mountain itself — that it's in a cold climate, it's massive, and it exists in dramatic weather conditions. The various elements in this scene relate to the subject as follows:

- ✔ **The river running through the valley gives a sense of scale.** Because the river appears so small in comparison to the mountain, you can assume that the mountain is massive. By positioning the river in the bottom corner of my frame, I allowed space for the mountain to dominate the frame. (See Chapter 12 for more on scale.)

- ✔ **The background is dramatic and ominous.** The background gives a sense of depth because of the way it fades in contrast and is consumed by the haze. (You can read more about choosing an effective background for your image in Chapter 9.)
- ✔ **The clouds in the sky give you an idea of the mountain's elevation.** The mountain reaches the clouds and almost seems to divide the sky into two sections. To the left of the mountain, the clouds are much thicker than they are to the immediate right of it.
- ✔ **The body of water that the river feeds into tells you that this mountain begins at sea level.** If you started at the base and hiked to the summit, you would experience many shifts in weather. I only had to show a small amount of the body of water to relay its part of the message. Minimizing its presence in the frame gives more drama to the mountain.

Leading the eye to important elements

After years of reading, your mind is trained to automatically respond to the words on this page. You start at the top left corner of a page and scan the printed letters from left to right, working your way down. The large, bold fonts in the headings capture your attention and give you an idea of what information is on the page. You probably read those headings first and then decide whether you want to read the normal print under them. Advertisements often include fine print used to reveal information that's necessary for legal reasons without encouraging you to read it.

A photograph works much like printed text, but it can be much more complex. Your job as a photographer is to tell a story, so the way a viewer reads into an image will have a major effect on the message. Having an idea of how people look at images helps create successful compositions.

You can use any of a long list of techniques to direct a viewer's eyes through a photograph. Here's a list of ways to draw attention to important elements:

- ✔ **Pay attention to your contrast.** The area with the highest *contrast* (the most drastic transition from light to dark) usually is the first place viewers look in an image. You also can use color to create contrast. Chapter 6 gives you more information on contrast.
- ✔ **Keep your focus on the subject.** Your *focal point* is the area in the scene that you focus on with your lens. Usually this point is the subject itself. When you look at something, your eyes focus on it. And the point in an image that's in focus is most similar to how you see things in real life. So, you'll probably pay most attention to that area when viewing an image. For more information on how to focus on a subject, read Chapters 3 and 7.