Landscape Photography

From Snapshots to Great Shots

Learn the best ways to compose your pictures!

Get great detail in your subjects!

Rob Sheppard

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DEDICATION

To all of the beautiful and amazing natural landscapes of our world. They deserve the best from all of us as photographers and lovers of beauty. And of course, I also dedicate this book to another beauty, my wife of many years, Vicky.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I suppose my love of nature started with my dad being transferred to Minnesota when I was a child; he took us camping and fishing into the beautiful places of Minnesota, so I thank him for that. I have no idea where my interest in photography came from—it started when I was very young (I built a darkroom when I was 13) and no one else in my family or friends were photographers.

This book would not exist without the encouragement and wonderful support of all the folks I've worked with at Peachpit: Ted Waitt, Susan Rimerman, Elizabeth Kuball, Lisa Brazieal, and others who have worked on the book but whom I haven't met. This has been such a great group of folks who have made this book a true pleasure to put together.

I also thank all my students in my classes and workshops, such as those at BetterPhoto.com and Light Photographic Workshops. They're such a wonderful resource of questions and photographic ideas. I'm always learning new things from the way they photograph and approach the world. From beginners to expert photographers, they're all amazing.

I also want to thank Steve Werner and Chris Robinson with Outdoor Photographer magazine. They've long been friends and supporters of my work, and they both have always made me think. I've learned so much from both of them.

Even though I never met them and they've long passed from the scene, I really do appreciate all that I learned from Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, Ernst Haas, and Andreas Feininger, photographers who inspired me as I "grew up" as a photographer.

Finally, I have to acknowledge my wife who always supports me. It is such a joy to have a life partner who acknowledges and accepts me as I am. I also thank my professor son, Adam, who makes me think about how we communicate to others, and my sports-information daughter, Sammi, who keeps me thinking about photography and how it affects others.

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Introduction

One of the earliest photographs that I remember taking was of Gooseberry Falls in Minnesota as a teenager. I have gone back to that location again and again over the years, even after leaving Minnesota for California. Early impressions can definitely affect a lifetime of work. You'll even find Gooseberry Falls State Park images in this book.

Growing up in Minnesota was challenging at times as I was learning to become a nature and landscape photographer. Minnesota has no towering mountains, no roaring rivers, no geysers, no skyscraping redwoods, and no dramatic deserts. Yet, I think that this gave me an education in working with the landscape that forced me to find good pictures, not simply make snapshots of spectacular locations.

Throughout this book, you'll find all sorts of landscapes. I've tried to include images of landscapes from throughout the country, not just from the dramatic West. Certainly, there is a long tradition of Western landscape photography starting with William Henry Jackson in the 1870s. That was also promoted by the wonderful photography of Ansel Adams.

My growing up in Minnesota really encouraged me to go beyond simply pointing my camera at the obviously dramatic landscapes. Good landscape photography goes beyond such subjects. It requires a sensitivity to light, perspective, composition, and more. If you learn to work with these aspects of landscape photography on any landscape, all your pictures will improve. Your photography will definitely go from landscape snapshots to landscape great shots.

Sure, a bold, dramatic landscape is nice, but sometimes that great subject can distract you from getting your best images. We've all been distracted by beautiful scenes that so overwhelm us that we forget that we can't cram that beautiful scene into our camera. We can only create a photograph that represents it. We have to interpret that scene because the three-dimensional, wild scene itself cannot be forced into the small, two-dimensional image that is a photograph. Only an interpretation can bring something of that landscape into a photograph.

I really want you to feel successful when photographing landscapes. I want you to be able to get excited about any landscape, not just a landscape you see once every few years on vacation. Our world is filled with wonderful places all around us that deserve to be photographed every bit as much as the icons that we've seen so many times.

That isn't to say that photographing iconic landscapes can't be a lot of fun and a wonderful way of using your photography. But these landscapes are simply not available to most of us most of the time. The techniques in this book are designed to help you bring the most out of landscapes wherever you are, whether that's an iconic national park visited rarely or a nature center near where you live.

The landscapes in your area are important, no matter where you live. They provide a sense of place. You honor that sense of place by getting great photographs of those locations nearby. You also feel more connected to your landscape when you go out and explore it photographically.

No matter what you do, take a lot of pictures. A great thing about digital photography is that once you own the camera and memory cards, you can take as many pictures as you want without any film or processing costs. Those costs used to be a lot and could restrict how many shots professionals took. Now you don't have to have those restrictions. Experiment with the ideas in this book. I've included assignments at the end of each chapter and I would like you to try them out! Make sure to join the book's Flickr group and share your results with other readers: www.flickr.com/groups/landscapesfromsnapshotstogreatshots.

Don't be afraid to experiment with new ways of taking pictures and expect some failures. I think that's how we learn. I can't tell you how many pictures I've tossed out over the years because I tried something new. But I learned from every one. And I still do.

Most of all, have fun. Enjoy your time outdoors in this beautiful world around us. Discover the possibilities of landscape photography wherever you are.

ISO 100
1/100 sec.
f/16
15mm
(APS-C)

STRUCTURING YOUR IMAGE TO COMMUNICATE ABOUT A LANDSCAPE

A lot of things have been written and discussed about composition for as long as people have made pictures, way before photography. Composition is simply about the organization of an image within the image frame, from edge to edge, but exactly how you organize a photo is not so simple.

Ultimately, composition is about communication. What you include in your photo, what you exclude, and how you arrange what's in the frame tell a viewer what you think is important about a landscape.

In this chapter, I cover many possibilities for composition. You'll learn why it's so important to get things out of the middle, as well as when the rule of thirds helps (and when it doesn't). You'll learn about foregrounds and backgrounds, the importance of edges, and what to watch out for in distractions.

PORING OVER THE PICTURE

The composition has some abstract qualities from the way the textures on the left and right create shapes that contrast with the water in the tidepool.

Because the tide had gone out, small tidepools formed in the sand. That, combined with patterns in the sand from wave action, is what makes the scene interesting.

This is a photograph about light, pattern, and texture on Florida's Atlantic Coast. It was shot before dawn, when there can be some beautiful light. (You never know what you'll get until you're on-site, of course.) If I had waited until the sun rose in the sky, I would've missed this beautiful beach scene. The clear sky and slight clouds at the horizon resulted in a much less interesting sunrise than the time just before it.

The color of the sky balances the color of the water in the tidepool.

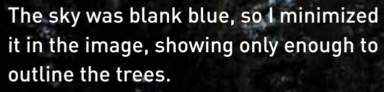
ISO 100
1/2 sec.
f/16
10mm
(APS-C)

PORING OVER THE PICTURE

I happened to be in northern Minnesota just after a week of rain, so the streams going into Lake Superior were full. I grew up in Minnesota, and the North Shore of Lake Superior is still one of my favorite places for landscape photography. For me, the photograph wasn't simply about capturing this part of Gooseberry Falls; it was also about water—and lots of it—rushing over the falls. That's what I wanted my composition to communicate.

I used a wide-angle lens, but I didn't step back to show the whole falls. I got in close to emphasize its drama.

I shot with a fast shutter speed to reveal the pattern in the water and add that to the composition.



The sky was blank blue, so I minimized it in the image, showing only enough to outline the trees.

ISO 100
1/500 sec.
f/6.7
14mm
(Four Thirds)

GETTING OUT OF THE MIDDLE

One of the deadliest traps for good landscape composition is to center things within your viewfinder. This can mean a centered horizon, a centered boulder, a centered tree, centered flowers, whatever is a strong visual element in the middle of your picture area. I won't tell you that a centered composition will *never* work—sometimes it does. But most of the time it's a lazy way of composing a landscape, and it isn't very effective.

Researchers have actually done some studies on how people look at images. They used cameras to map the eye movement of a viewer across different images that were used for the test. The researchers discovered that when an image was strongly centered, viewers had a tendency to look at the most centered part of the scene and not look much at the rest of the image; they quickly got bored with a photograph and wanted to move on. When the image had strong pictorial elements (such as a horizon or a strong subject) away from the center of the picture, researchers discovered that viewers tended to look all over the picture; they spent more time with the image and liked the picture better.

So, you can see immediately that one of the ways that you can improve your landscape pictures is to make sure that you don't have your landscape all lined up and centered in your composition (**Figure 4.1**). In this section, I'll give you some ideas on how to think about getting less-centered images, but as soon as you even start *thinking* about getting things out of the middle, your pictures will improve.

ISO 100
1/90 sec.
f/9.5
108mm
(Four Thirds)

FIGURE 4.1
A glorious sunrise over Utah's LaSalle Mountains doesn't need a big chunk of black mountains covering the bottom half of the photo. The photograph is about the sky, and its connection to the mountains needs only a sliver of mountains across the bottom of the photo.

THE RULE OF THIRDS: WHEN TO FOLLOW IT AND WHEN TO IGNORE IT

Once you start studying a bit about composition, you'll hear about the rule of thirds. The rule of thirds is a guideline that is designed to help you get your subject and strong visual elements such as horizons out of the center of the picture. It gives you a framework to simplify your choices for strong positions within a composition.

The rule of thirds starts by dividing your picture into horizontal thirds (**Figure 4.2**). This results in two lines at the intersection of the thirds. Visually, these lines work very well as positions for horizons. When the horizon is placed at the bottom-third line, you have a very strong emphasis of sky in the photograph with less of the ground (**Figure 4.3**). When the horizon is placed at the top third, the ground is emphasized and the sky is deemphasized.

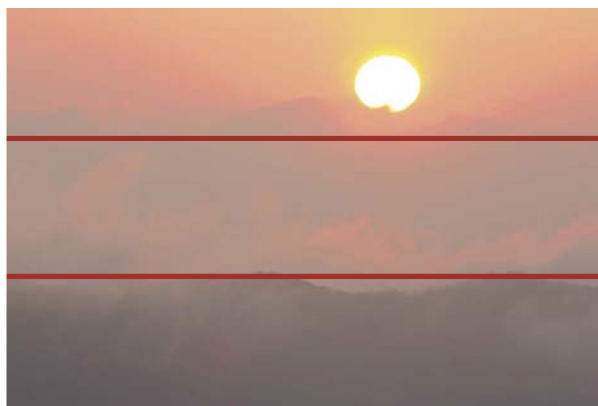


FIGURE 4.2
The rule of thirds starts by dividing the picture horizontally into thirds.

FIGURE 4.3
In this image of sunrise over California's Santa Monica Mountains, strong horizontal elements of the picture line up closely with the rule of thirds.

The rule of thirds goes further by dividing the picture into thirds from left to right (**Figure 4.4**). This results in two vertical lines at the divisions, which become useful places to put strong verticals in a landscape. Which side you put your photographic element on will depend a lot on the scene, but because we look at things from left to right in the Western culture, there is a difference in the way that a composition looks when the strong element is on the left versus the right. In **Figure 4.5**, there is a strong visual element on the right which creates a dynamic image that goes against our Western way of looking.

FIGURE 4.4
The rule of thirds then divides the picture vertically into thirds.

FIGURE 4.5
Here the strong vertical of Balanced Rock in Arches National Park lines up closely with the rule of thirds.

Next, put the two horizontal lines and two vertical lines together over the picture (**Figure 4.6**). They intersect at four points and are very strong positions for composition (**Figure 4.7**). Landscapes often have things that are larger than these points, such as a horizon or Balanced Rock, but when there is something that has a strong presence in the picture that can work at one of these points, this can create an attractive composition.

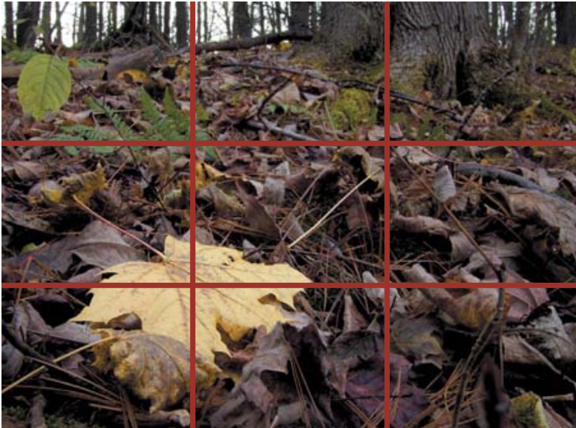


FIGURE 4.6
Now the horizontal and vertical lines come together to help with placement of a strong visual element in the landscape.

FIGURE 4.7
In this small-scale landscape, the yellow maple leaf contrasts strongly with the late fall landscape and is placed at one of the intersections of the horizontal and vertical lines.

A lot of the ideas about composition come from the art world where they've been refined for centuries. The rule of thirds has been taught to painters and other artists for a very long time because it works. However, there are two challenges that come from the rule of thirds:

- **You lose the subject.** If you start paying too much attention to the "rules," you can lose sight of the actual subject. The rules become more important than what's being painted or photographed.
- **Photography is not painting.** Art forms like painting and sketching are very different from photography. They start with a blank canvas where everything is added to the composition as appropriate.

Let's look at those two ideas in a little more detail because they have a strong effect on composition. I once had a student in one of my workshops show an interesting landscape photograph for a critique. This image had about one-third sky, one-third trees, and one-third ground with grass and garbage. That's right—the bottom part of the picture actually had trash in it that didn't seem to fit the rest of the picture at all. So, I asked the student why she had included the trash in the composition. She said she had to because of the rule of thirds!

That little story points out how the subject can be lost when distractions take away from the subject. Sometimes people try so hard to find a rule of thirds for their landscape that they don't fully see the subject itself. It's easy to miss important things that should be in the photograph simply because they don't fit the rule of thirds.

It's also important to understand that photography is not like painting or sketching. As landscape photographers, we have to deal with what's in front of our lenses (**Figure 4.8**). We can't simply place rocks, flowers, and trees where we want, as we could if we were working with a blank canvas. Sure, some photographers use Photoshop to change a scene, but even that is difficult to do compared to what the painter does in creating his or her work.

Sometimes a scene just needs a different composition. The sky might be so fabulous and so outstanding that all you need is the barest sliver of landscape with it (**Figure 4.9**). On the other hand, the sky might be awful, so you'll need to show only the top edge of the landscape so that the viewer can understand something about the place.

I like to look at a scene and try to understand what's truly important about the scene, not what's important about my art technique. Then I compose the image to show off what's important about the scene, making sure I'm using my composition to clearly communicate this for a viewer.

FIGURE 4.8
Storm clouds breaking over the Columbia River between Washington and Oregon makes a dramatic land-scape that isn't easily put into the rule of thirds. The contrasts of land, clouds, and light are what matters.

FIGURE 4.9
The landscape here at Cades Cove in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park would be pure black against the sunset, so there is little need to include more land than needed because that would mean loss of the sky.

WHAT'S YOUR PHOTOGRAPH ABOUT?

One thing that can really help the photographer is to ask this very important question: What's your photograph about? The answer isn't simply the subject that's in front of you. It's more than that. And the question shouldn't be seen as a challenge, but as an aid to looking at your composition.

This also can help you clarify and refine your composition to what's really important. **Figure 4.10** isn't simply a photograph of the redwoods; it's about tall trees in a dense forest, and the composition uses the trees at the edge, as well as the light, to show that. There is no ground showing because the photo is not about the ground.

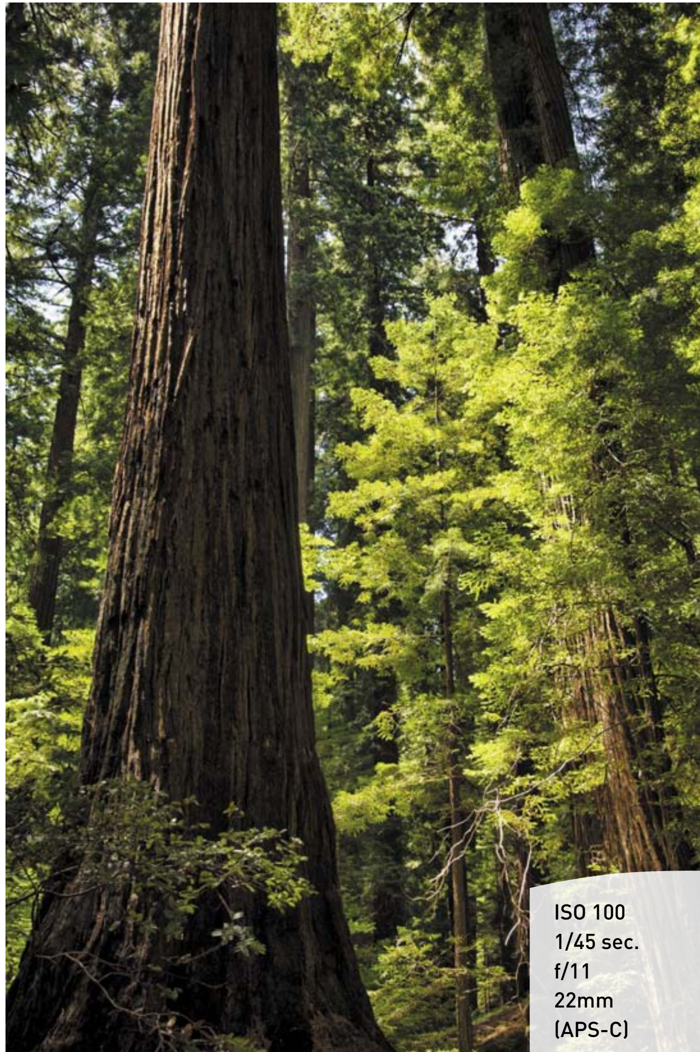


FIGURE 4.10
This photograph is about tall trees in the redwood forests of Northern California, and the composition is designed to reflect that.

Too many photographers try to throw everything into their compositions of the landscape. They see this beautiful scene in front of them and try to capture the entire scene in the photo. The image is often disappointing because you can't put an entire scene into a small picture. You have to decide what's truly important about that scene and then make sure that your photograph reflects that.

What's your photograph about? With experience, you'll answer this question very quickly and intuitively. But if you've never asked yourself this question before, you should stop, pause, and really think about it. Your landscape won't be moving so if you take a moment to figure out what your picture is really about and what you want to emphasize about it, you'll find that your composition will come together much more readily.

PAYING ATTENTION TO RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are important, whether you're talking about life or landscape composition! As soon as you start thinking about things like the rule of thirds, you're thinking about visual relationships within the image frame. But visual relationships go beyond simply getting things out of the middle of your picture. How picture elements within your composition relate to each other affects how clear your composition is and how well it will communicate to your viewer.

Painters learn all sorts of ways that these relationships can help structure and define the composition, and these techniques apply to photography as well. For example, leading lines are strong visual lines that lead the eye through the photograph. Diagonals and S-curves are other ways of defining a composition with lines that help the viewer understand the relationships in a picture.

Balance is something that you hear a lot about with composition. Balance is about the relationships of visual elements within your landscape photograph. The rule of thirds uses a very simple sort of balance, where two-thirds of the image visually balance one-third of the image or a subject at an intersection of the thirds balances the space around it.

Balance is much more than simply the rule of thirds. Images will look in balance or out of balance based on how the objects within your composition relate to each other. This concept can be hard to explain because it's so visual. One thing that can really help you with balance is to look at your image on your LCD as a photograph. Do strong visual elements of your image overpower the rest of the picture? That can put the composition out of balance. Do strong visual elements seem to have something balancing them in another part of the picture? That can help put the composition into balance.

All this comes down to how you structure and define a composition to control the viewer's eye (**Figure 4.11**). In Figure 4.11, there is a strong relationship between the simple bottom of the photo and the highly detailed top part of trees. Then, as you look closer, notice the relationship of the background trees to the larger, more defined leaves, which also create a visual relationship to the falls. In addition, there is a strong relationship to the rocks on the right, both to the falls and to the trees.

Remember: As soon as you get key parts of your picture out of the center, you're encouraging your viewer to look over the entire photograph. How you create visual relationships within that photograph affects the way that people look at your image.

FIGURE 4.11
The falls in Tennessee's Frozen Head State Park have a strong relationship with their surroundings in this image.

ISO 100
1 sec.
f/11
15mm
(APS-C)

CONSIDER THE FOREGROUND, MIDDLE GROUND, AND BACKGROUND

Foreground, middle ground, and background are three very important parts of any landscape composition and are critical to the visual relationships of any photograph. Not all landscape photographs will have all three—for example, a mountain against the sky doesn't have any foreground—but how you work with these areas has a big effect on what your picture looks like.

Foreground is the area immediately in front of you that sets the stage for the main part of the landscape. Background is that part of the landscape that is the most distant from you. Middle ground is everything in between.

Relationships between these three areas are largely affected by how much space you devote to each area within your photograph (**Figure 4.12**). This space is strongly affected by your height and angle of view toward the landscape. I think it's fun to see some of the old photographs of Ansel Adams standing on top of his car. He actually had a platform there where he could set up a tripod and get some height to the landscape. He did this deliberately to spread out the relationships of foreground to middle ground to background.

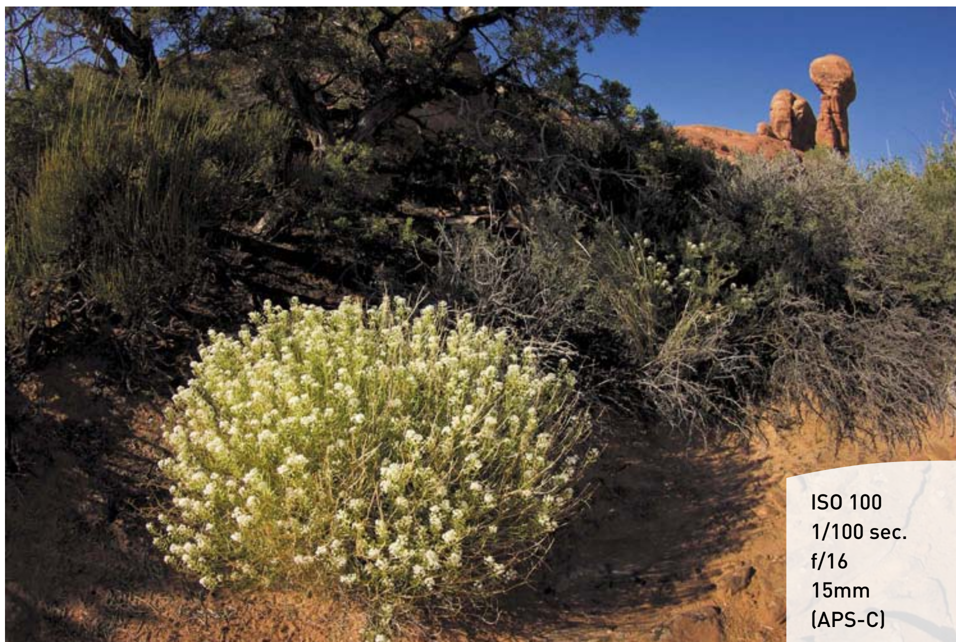

ISO 100
1/100 sec.
f/16
15mm
(APS-C)

FIGURE 4.12
This image is totally about the relationship of foreground to background with a strong middle ground in between.

Landscapes don't always look their best at our eye level. Changing your height to the landscape changes relationships in the composition. Sometimes even a slight change in height, whether that's lower or higher, will make a huge difference in how much shows up in the foreground, middle ground, and background of the picture.

Getting a higher view like Ansel Adams did might help you get better foreground-to-background relationship (**Figure 4.13**). Sometimes that, indeed, does give you the most interesting view of your landscape. Look around—you don't need a platform on top of your car. Sometimes a rise of only a couple feet can change what appears in your foreground. That can help you get rid of something that's distracting in the foreground or create more of a visual distance between foreground, middle ground, and background.

If conditions are right, you can even do a neat little trick with your camera and tripod to get a higher angle. Turn your self-timer on, and then hold your camera and tripod over your head to gain some height. This works pretty well with digital because you can quickly look at what you shot and decide if you need to change the positioning of the camera and tripod head to get a better photograph. It does require shooting with a fast enough shutter speed that you don't have problems with camera movement during exposure, though.

ISO 100
1/8 sec.
f/16
14mm
(Four Thirds)

FIGURE 4.13 Climbing to the top of some rock-covered hills gave a great perspective on the Buttermilk Area near Bishop, California.

Getting a higher view is not necessarily the only way to change these relationships. Sometimes it's more interesting to get a lower view, especially if you want to emphasize something unique in the foreground (**Figure 4.14**). So often, you'll see groups of photographers at a scenic location with their cameras all set up on tripods at eye level. That's convenient, but it isn't necessarily the best way to compose the scene. Sometimes the camera needs to be as low to the ground as possible.

You also can do another neat little trick with your camera in some locations where you think a low angle might be really great, but you can't actually get there. Instead of raising the camera and tripod up high, try it down low. I've put my camera on self-timer and then held my tripod over the edge of a bridge to get a lower angle.

The point is that you need to look for angles as a way of affecting your foreground, middle ground, and background relationships. And go beyond height. Often it helps to move left or right, either avoiding certain things in the foreground or adding other interesting foreground elements to your composition.

ISO 200
1/350 sec.
f/13
12mm
(Four Thirds)

FIGURE 4.14
A low angle emphasizes the penstemon flowers in the foreground of this stark Yosemite National Park granite dome.

USE YOUR EDGES EFFECTIVELY

The edges of your composition are critical because they provide a window for how the viewer sees the landscape. Often photographers think of the rule of thirds as simply the thirds lines and their intersections, but those thirds don't exist without the edges of your picture.

The edges of a composition are easily neglected. Because we have a tendency to focus strongly on the most important parts of the scene, we don't always look at the edges. Yet what happens at the edge is visually quite important because the edge of your picture is such a dominant part of it—after all, it defines where the picture begins and where it ends.

Frequently what happens is that things just end up somewhere near the edge without your making a conscious decision as to how to place visual elements relative to that edge. That can be a mistake because visual elements can be weaker or stronger depending on their relationship to the edge.

Use edges deliberately. Check the edges of your photograph and see what's happening there. If you have an important visual element in your composition, watch what happens to it as it gets close to the edge. Usually you want to give a little bit of space so that the object floats free of the edge (**Figure 4.15**), or you want to use the edge to deliberately and definitively cut through the object at the edge (**Figure 4.16**). These two different ways of relating an object to the edge of the image give very different results.

A very awkward way of using an edge in a composition is to have a visual element just touching or being close to touching it (**Figure 4.17**). That uncomfortably ties the visual element down to the edge because the viewer isn't sure how to look at it. It also can tie part of the picture to the edge of the picture where it shouldn't be attached. Viewers want you, as the photographer, to help them understand your landscape, and you'll communicate most clearly if you use the edges very deliberately.

One way of seeing this is to look at a patch of flowers in the foreground of a landscape. If you make sure to show the entire patch of flowers (using a distinct space around the flower patch between it and the edges of the composition), you'll be telling your viewer to look at these flowers as a distinct patch. The viewer will see the flowers as a contained area of flowers. But if you get in closer to these flowers and cut off the bottom left and right sides of the flower patch with the edges of your composition (**Figure 4.18**), the flowers will fill the foreground of your image. The viewer won't know that this is a small patch of flowers and you're giving an impression of lots of flowers. These two very different ways of handling the same patch of flowers change the way that the viewer perceives this landscape.

FIGURE 4.15
In this desert scene in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area outside of Las Vegas, the cacti are separated from the edge of the frame to create a distinct visual group that then relates to the background.

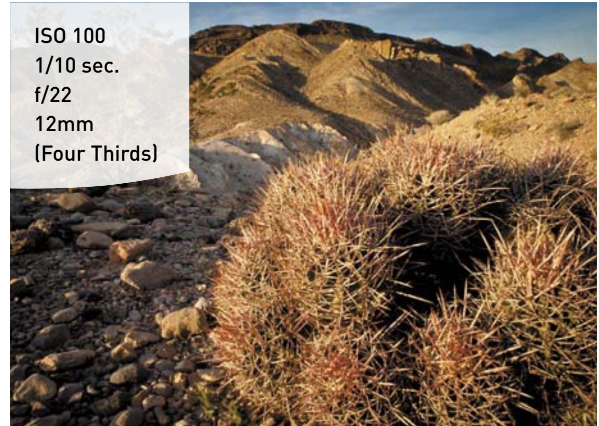


FIGURE 4.16
For this image, the cacti are deliberately cut by the edge of the composition, creating a dramatic and bold look at this stark landscape.

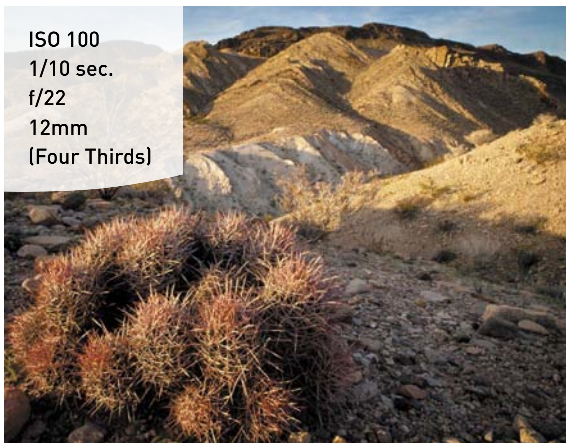


FIGURE 4.17
This is the same photo as Figure 4.15, but now it's cropped to show an awkward relationship of the cacti to the edge.

FIGURE 4.18
Is this landscape filled with California poppies? By using the edges to cut into the patch of poppies, the photo gives that impression.

WATCH FOR DISTRACTIONS

Sometimes when we concentrate on a beautiful scene, we see the impression of the scene but we don't see small distracting details (**Figure 4.19**). This can be a problem especially around the edges of the photograph, yet distractions along the edges can be extremely challenging for a composition. Things end up there and start pulling our eyes toward them instead of toward what is really important in the picture. All of a sudden, the composition has changed because the viewer is seeing relationships very differently. Unfortunately, the viewer starts to see relationships of those distractions to the rest of the picture.

When I see distractions coming in around the edges of the picture in my LCD review, I'll usually retake the picture by reframing the composition to get rid of them. Yes, I could crop out those distractions later when the picture is in the computer. But my feeling is that if I miss the distraction, what else might I have missed when I was taking the picture? Therefore, I want to reframe and more carefully look at the picture to be sure that I really do have the composition I want.

Two things to be especially careful of when you're looking for distractions are bright areas away from important parts of your composition and high-contrast areas along the edges of the picture. Bright areas and contrasty areas will always attract the viewer's eye away from anything else in the picture.

FIGURE 4.19
A bit of out-of-focus branch along the edge of the photo is a big distraction for this scene.

Long ago, I had an instructor who was very tough about looking at edges. I had to learn to always scan the edges of my image as I took the picture or I would definitely hear about it. Edges are frequently where those distractions come in, but as you read earlier, edges also are important for the way they interact with the overall composition. You can teach yourself to quickly scan the edges of your photograph and make this a habit.

Distractions for your composition don't just come from the edges. Any really bright or contrasty area, for example, is going to attract attention from your viewer. If you don't want the viewer's attention in that part of the picture, that's a problem.

Another distraction for composition is a sign. Sometimes photographers will deliberately include signs from a location in the picture to identify the location, or a sign creeps into the composition because the photographer wanted to show a big area. Signs are a problem because they're designed to attract attention. And anytime you have a sign in a photograph, viewers will try to read it. If you need a sign for a location, focus on the sign and don't try to include it with the landscape.

VALUING YOUR POINT OF VIEW

I've watched photographers come to a beautiful landscape in a national park and simply set up their cameras and tripods in the most direct view of the scene. Simply setting up in the most obvious spot is why so much landscape photography looks the same.

You have a unique view of the world—I believe that everybody does. Yes, I understand that some photographers like to go out and "trophy-hunt" landscapes. They just want to go to famous landscapes and take their own pictures of that landscape.

I don't have a problem with that basic idea. I love to go to beautiful locations that I've seen in other photographs, too. But I have a unique way of looking at the landscape and so do you. There are things that impress us about a particular landscape that may or may not impress someone else. I think this unique point of view is important.

Think about this: Not everyone will go to the landscapes that you photograph. As a landscape photographer, you're showing off the world that excites you. You and I are the eyes of so many other people. If all we do is duplicate images that other photographers have taken, our eyes and our points of view are diminished. The world has lost the opportunity to see something special that you and I can offer.

I know, you might be thinking, "But I'm just a simple photographer—I'm not a pro. What difference does it make?" I think it makes all the difference in the world. You see the world differently from the way I see it, differently from the way anyone else

sees it. And your point of view is valid and important because it enriches all of us when we have a diversity of views of our landscapes. It makes you and the landscapes more important.

So, just being aware that you have the potential of seeing this landscape with fresh eyes will help you start seeing your compositions better. Your choices about composition define both how you see the landscape for your photograph and how any viewers of your photograph will see that landscape. You're influencing other people's views of the world.

Chapter 4 Assignments

Get Out of the Middle

A great way to help you avoid middle compositions is to go out and spend some time photographing a scene where every picture keeps "important stuff" out of the middle of the photograph. Work at it. Consciously place things in your composition that are away from the center of the frame. As you do this, watch your background, too. Be sure that you don't have a horizon going through the middle when you've worked so hard to put a tree on one side of the image or the other.

Sky versus Ground

For this assignment, find a location where you have a strong horizon between sky and ground. Take a series of pictures of this scene as you vary the position of the horizon. Try taking a picture with the horizon at the bottom of the frame, and then try the same scene with the horizon at the top of the frame. Take a look at your images and see how that changed composition affects how you feel about and perceive the location.

Big Foreground

One way to help you explore the relationships of foreground to the rest of the picture is to find a location with a very interesting foreground. Take a series of pictures of this scene as you move closer to or farther away from that foreground. What you're trying to do is change the relationship of that foreground to the background because of the size of the foreground in your photo. You may need to use a wide-angle lens when you get very close to your foreground.

Work the Edges

Years ago, I took a workshop with the great Ernst Haas. He suggested an exercise that is excellent for learning to check your edges; plus, it's a bit of a challenge. Go out and look for compositions that use only the edge for important pictorial details. In other words, the middle is the only space to support those detailed edges. This isn't an easy exercise to do, but even if you fail to find perfect edges, you'll succeed in becoming a better photographer because you'll be learning to work better with edges.

Share your results with the book's Flickr group!

Join the group here: www.flickr.com/groups/LandscapesfromSnapshotstoGreatShots

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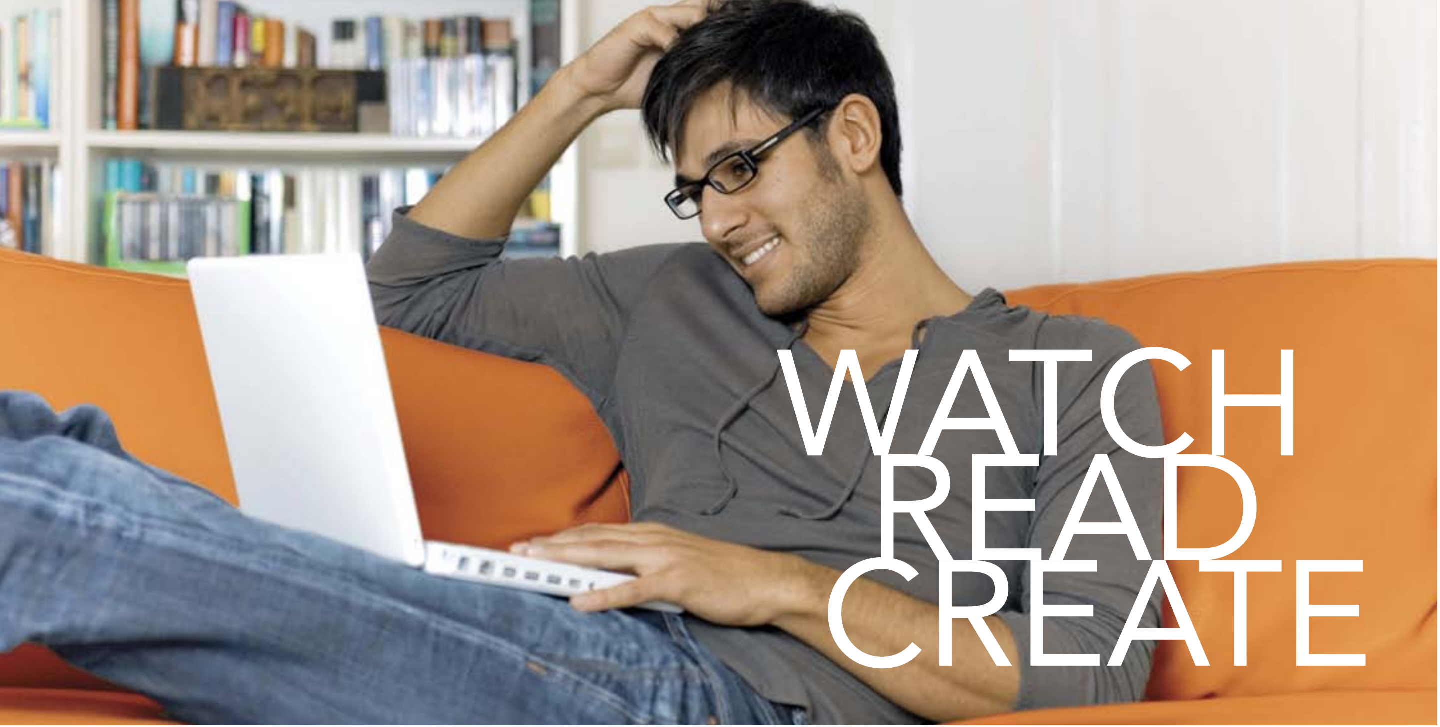

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