

Photo Creation System Cheat Sheet

Supplemental information for the Composition, Color & Light Course.

Watch the course first or this cheat sheet will not make sense.

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Dave's Photo Shoot System

This system is used during each shoot to ensure the best shots.

Combine it with the **Composition Creation System** provided in the next section.

Step 1: Experiment & Generate Composition Ideas

Composition is a numbers game. I'd estimate 1% of my total photos end up being edited and added to my portfolio.

1. **Use the Composition Creation System** below with this section.
2. **Arrive a few hours before “the good light”** to generate ideas for compositions by experimenting with a large volume of photos.
3. **Remove the pressure of the perfect composition** during this phase. Let ideas flow.
4. **Without a tripod, walk around and take experimental practice shots**, using the Composition Creation System.
5. **Visualize where the light will hit the landscape during the actual shoot.**
 - For example, there is light on the foreground now, but will there be when the light is good later? Does this change the composition's value?
6. **Don't worry about the perfect settings.** Only the composition idea matters.
7. **Aim for 10-20 composition ideas.** Let the ideas flow!

Step 2: Review & Select Your Favorites

1. **Take a break to review the practice shots**, and select your favorite 2-3.
2. **Rank these 2-3** from your favorite to least favorite.
3. **Delete the rest.**

Step 3: Refine Your Favorite Compositions

Refining your favorite composition ideas is much more valuable than unrefined versions of many different compositions.

1 world-class composition from a shoot is all you need.

1. **Do this an hour or two before** “the good light”.
2. **With your tripod**, go to your LEAST favorite of the 2-3 compositions from Step 2.
3. **Visualize where the light will hit** the landscape during the actual shoot. This takes practice to get used to! It's essential.
4. **Refine & adjust the composition** idea until it's exactly how you would like it to look when the light is good.
5. **Dial in the camera settings and go through the image capture process**, step by step, so you're not guessing when the light is good. This is your trial run to increase confidence.
6. **Ensure you know exactly how this image will be captured.** This includes camera settings and techniques such as exposure bracketing or focus stacking.
7. **Repeat the same process** until you finish your favorite composition.

8. **Leave the camera & tripod** in place at your favorite composition.
9. **Review the capture process in your mind** as the light starts to become ideal. Have confidence in your ability to capture the image. You have prepared!

Step 4: Capturing the Image During the “Good Light”

1. **When the light is good**, work on your favorite composition until it is the best you can make it.
 - Don't rush. Be methodical. Have confidence.
 - Wait as the light changes to make sure you definitely got the best shot.
 - It will yield much better results to work on your favorite shot until it's perfect, even if this is the only shot you get from the shoot.
2. **Upon successfully capturing your favorite composition**, move on to the second if there is still time.
3. **Repeat this process if necessary** for your third favorite composition idea.

Dave's Composition Creation System

Combine this system with the Photo Shoot System above, to find the best compositions in a specific area.

Step 1: Define the Most Interesting Objects in the Scene

When you look at a landscape and think, “WOW, I’d really like to shoot that!”, there are usually 1-3 main objects in the landscape that made you stop.

- If you removed these objects you would not have stopped.
- They are the first things your eyes are drawn to in the scene.
- Define what they are in your mind.

Here are some of the common examples:

- Extreme weather, clouds, fog, light rays
- Good light, sunrise, sunset potential
- Massive scenes that show scale, such as:
 - Mountains
 - Trees
 - Sand dunes
 - Waterfalls
 - Rivers & streams
 - Layers
 - Canyons

- Vivid colors or designs, flowers, foliage, rock patterns

Step 2: Connect the Most Interesting Objects & Keep the Eyes Moving

Ensure the eyes can easily move from each of these interesting objects (Step 1) to the others. Connect these objects using:

1. Transitions
2. Movement
3. Leading Lines & Flow

Transitions

- Ensure the eyes constantly have something new to look at without becoming bored.
- Move the eyes around the composition.
- You can also add transitions in photo editing. Being able to visualize how you will add photo editing transitions, while in the field, is essential to creating great images.
- Don't complicate this topic! Anything can work.

Here are some examples of transitions that can be found in the field or added in photo editing:

- High / low saturation
- Dark / light
- High / low contrast
- High detail / low detail

- Color Harmonies, for example, red flowers to blue water, would be a complementary color harmony transition.

Movement

Movement is used to bring dynamic feeling to a still-frame photo.

Use it to move the eyes from one interesting object (Step 1) to another.

Shutter Speed is essential in showing movement.

- **Take multiple shutter speed variations** for each composition & pick your favorite when editing.
- **Shorter shutter speeds** will show more texture & detail.
- **Longer shutter speeds** will average out and smooth parts of the image, creating leading lines.
- These attributes can be used as transitions or leading lines if /as required.

Great subjects for showing movement are:

- Moving water
- Moving clouds
- Sand being blown by the wind
- Foliage being blown by the wind

Leading Lines & Flow

Any resemblance of a line can be used to move the eyes from one part of the photo to another part of the photo.

- Don't cut off leading lines within the scene. Adjust the vertical or horizontal position of the camera as required.

- Use leading lines to connect the foreground, midground, and background of the composition.
- Use leading lines to connect the interesting objects (Step 1).

Step 3: Select the Best Lens for the Composition

The Fewer Lenses is Better: Carry the least number of lenses possible to cover the entire focal length range required for landscape photography. I only carry 2 lenses.

Know Your Lenses: When framing a potential composition with your eyes, know the optimal lens needed for the shot. This is easy with practice.

Wide Angle Lens Tips

All good wide-angle photos have an interesting foreground object.

This is used to draw the viewer's eyes into the photo.

If you don't see something that is dominant or interesting in the foreground, there is no point in setting up a composition with an interesting midground or background.

See How a Wide Angle Lens "Sees"

- Stretches composition around the outside
- Use to increase the size of interesting foreground or background elements, placed in the top or bottom of the composition.

- Shrink and compress the composition in the center of the lens. Use to shrink boring mid-ground elements if/as required.

Find interesting foreground objects that exist in your current ecosystem & fill in contextual clues about the landscape, such as:

- Water movement / reflections
- Flowers
- Ferns
- Snow
- Sand patterns
- Rock patterns

Determining the best vertical camera position is essential for wide-angle shots. It does not matter as much for telephoto.

- **Foreground:** Lower camera to enhance interesting foregrounds. Raise camera to minimize foreground attention.
 - Place one of the most interesting objects (Step 1) in the foreground.
- **Midground:** Lower camera to hide boring midgrounds. Raise camera to enhance interesting midgrounds.
- **Background:** Place one of the most interesting objects (Step 1) in the background, opposite to the foreground object.
 - Increase size of background object using wide angle lens distortion, by placing it near the top.

Telephoto Lens Tips

For scenes without a close & interesting foreground, use a telephoto lens to zoom in on the 1-3 most interesting objects from Step 1, removing any boring dead space at the bottom or top of the scene.

See How a Telephoto Lens “Sees”

- Removes depth by compressing/flattening foreground, midground, and background into one “plane”.
- Does not stretch edges or compress the center as much as a wide-angle lens.

Telephoto lenses are great for scenes with the following:

- Anything interesting in the distance given there is also something to show the scale.
- Layers in the landscape produced by:
 - Sand dunes
 - Clouds
 - Dappled & uneven light
 - Mountain peaks
 - Canyons
 - Light and/or fog in river valleys
- Small scenes such as fern designs, flower designs, or any other macro-type photography.
- Intimate scenes such as forest photography

Step 4: Add Essential Composition Attributes

Add each of the attributes below, while refining the composition. Missing just one of these attributes can ruin a composition.

Experiment with Small Changes to ensure the best compositions.

- By small changes, your camera may tilt a few degrees up or down, left or right, or the tripod might be moved left or right, up or down, just slightly.
- These very small differences will help you to compare and contrast very small changes in the composition to see which you like the most.

Balance between the foreground and background is essential.

- Composition should not feel too heavy in any of the horizontal or vertical quadrants.
 - Example: If the most interesting object in the scene is in the back left of the photo, place an interesting foreground object in the bottom right.
- Use transitions & leading lines to connect foreground & background through the mid-ground.

Scale is essential in the relationship between foreground, midground, and background.

- A mountain does not look massive unless there is a contextual clue in the foreground or mid-ground, in which to compare it.

Close One Eye When Looking at a Potential Composition: This puts the scene into a 2D perspective like the camera sees. Do you still like it?

Increase “Interestingness”:

- Split the photo into horizontal and vertical third lines, providing a grid. Don't use an actual grid on the camera, just visualize it.
- Attempt to fill each square of the grid with interesting details, such as leading lines, transitions, or foreground/midground/background objects (Step 1).
- It's not always possible, but the more the better.
- The goal is to keep the eyes moving and interested.

Remove Repetition - It's Boring:

- Cut out everything from the image that is repetitive and does not provide added contextual clues about the photo. This usually happens around the edges.

Create Depth Through Separation:

- Position camera vertically & horizontally to AVOID foreground elements extending into the midground, or midground elements extending into the background.
- When the foreground overlaps into the midground it removes depth and adds confusion to the image. Same with midground to the background.

Don't Cut Off Leading Lines: Position yourself so leading lines flow through the image and don't get cut off or end abruptly.