

# Livingston Camera Club – Photography Basics

## Composition

Following on from “Light”, you’ll most likely already have your ISO set according to the conditions and the effect you’re hoping to achieve in your photograph – i.e. if you want to freeze the action in a fast-paced sports event, you’ll have set a fairly high ISO of maybe 800. You’ll also be able to set your White Balance to suit the ambient lighting in your location – Sunny, Shade, Tungsten, etc.

The next thing to think about before you can accurately set your aperture and / or shutter speed (depending on the mode you’re using on your camera) is the composition of your shot.

Picture the scene:

You’re on holiday, idly strolling along the beach with your camera. The sun is low on the horizon, the palm trees are nicely silhouetted and the warm red rays of the sun are beginning to play and dapple across the gently lapping waves. The sky slowly turns from azure to indigo; high-up fluffy pink clouds are catching the last of the light. You take the bold step of turning the camera to manual, raise the view finder to your eye and enthusiastically fire off a dozen shots on full auto, like a retired Colonel at a grouse shoot on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

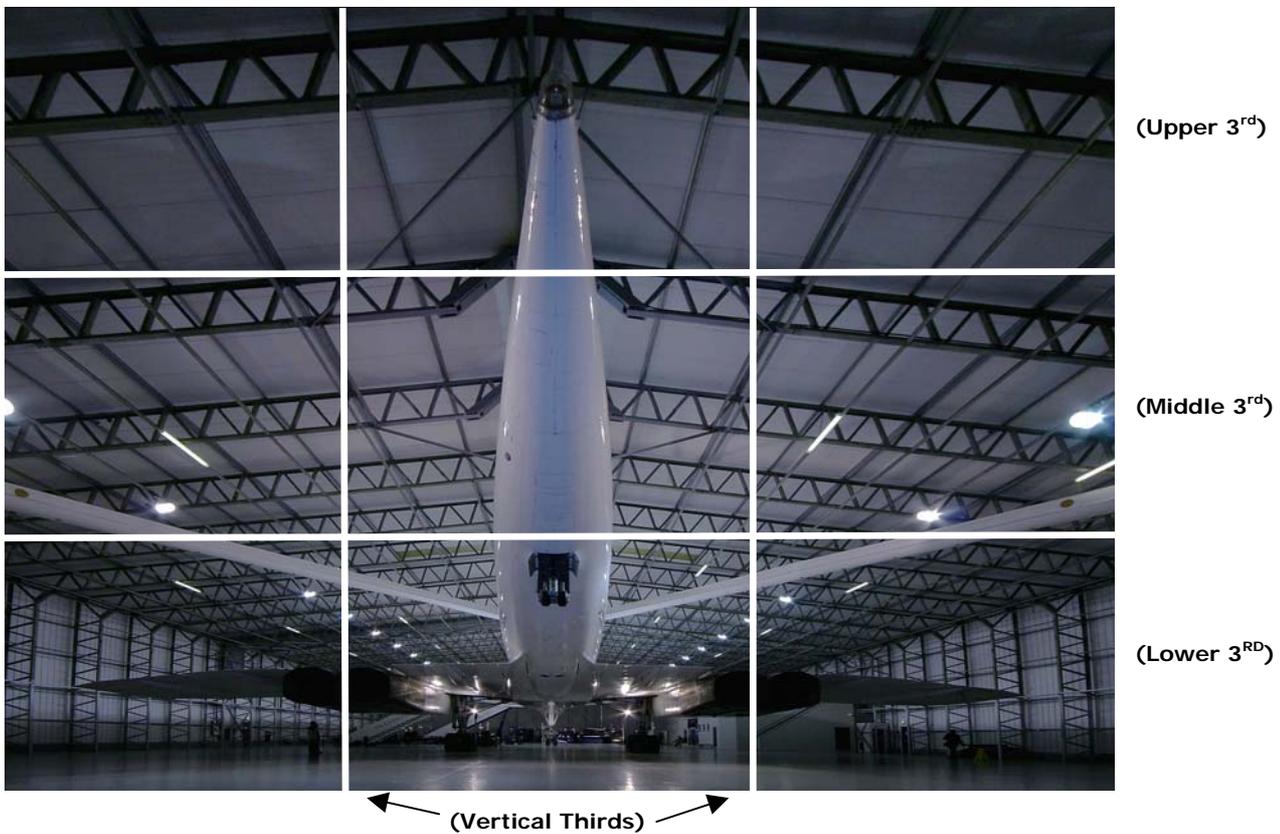
Returning home, you excitedly download your images and think, ‘yes-got it!’, then you notice the horizon is off at an angle and the tops of the trees have been partially cut off. Instant disappointment, and although you edit the image, straightening and cropping as best you can, you know that the dead cert. 18-20 point landscape for the next composition has been reduced to a simple record shot. All the same, friends and family will marvel and coo at it, wishing they’d been there instead of stuck at home with rising petrol prices and falling snow and you’ll rue what could have been and plot your return...

In composition there are many things to think about and there are just as many pitfalls for the unsuspecting photographer! We’ve all seen holiday shots of granny on holiday with; a love-struck garishly dressed pair of over-amorous teenagers in the background, the classic “man with plant / tree / hat stand / lamp post / etc, growing from his head”, the idyllic, quiet country setting with the huge pylons yomping across the scene, so we know the kind of things to look out for, but...

... that’s not all we need to consider when composing our latest masterpiece - a digital camera will take a photograph just slightly larger than what you see in the viewfinder. If your camera has live-view, you’ll be able to see on the LCD what’s going to be shot but, whether or not you have this, make sure to look all around the edges of your viewfinder to see if you’re going to include something you don’t want or, equally damaging to a good shot, exclude or cut something that you do want – that roaring lion won’t look quite the same with just 3 paws if one is accidentally left out of shot!

To help in understanding Composition we can break it down into different elements.

The most commonly used “rule” of composition is the “**Rule of Thirds**” as demonstrated in the shot below – Concorde, taken at the National Museum of Flight at East Fortune. **The Rule of Thirds** separates the composition of an image into 9 distinct locations (or three horizontal bands and three, corresponding vertical bands) using four, equally spaced lines with junctions (or meeting points) where the lines cross over at 90<sup>o</sup> to each other.



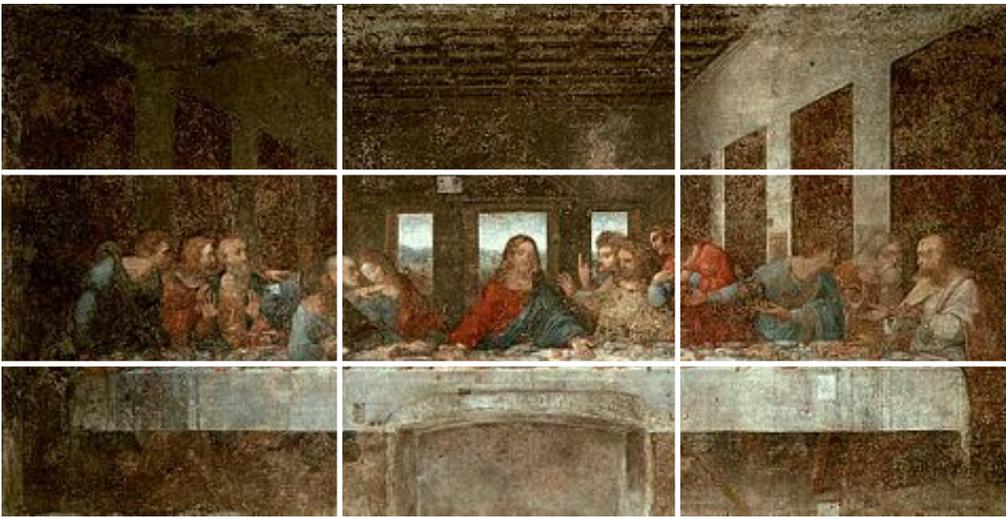
In this image the horizontal thirds are each split into three component parts. In the upper third the tail section sits centrally and splits the (mirror) images of the roof beams on either side into the upper thirds, both left and right.

The middle third is, again, separated by the now widening fuselage. This acts as a lead to the lower third and in keeping with the upper section the middle has a left / right split, with mirrored patterns of roof beams, the addition of three roof lights (on either side) and the introduction of the ventilation system as a diagonal lead in line, taking the eye to the centre of the image (more on lines and patterns later).

The Lower Third continues with the theme of roof beams, lights and diagonals, but now much more compressed and numerous, taking us to the vanishing point and the artificial horizon created by the rearward edge of the wings. The true horizon, created by the floor, is reduced to a sliver of light and dark reflections, occupying only a quarter of the lower section. The main fuselage, wings and nose wheel (just visible in the distance and echoed by the part retracted rear wheel) form a rough cross in the central section of the lower third and is flanked by the jet engines on the lines of the vertical thirds.

Phew!! How much composition can one image have!

So why the **“Rule of Thirds”** for composition? Well it has been around for quite some time as an artistic tool. After all, before the invention of the camera, drawing and painting was used to record a scene or event. Primitive man, as hunter gatherers, recorded the animals and rituals of their day, daubed in ochre and red on cave walls. Although the Ancient Greeks, Romans and Goths (to name a few!) were aware of the importance of lines, curves and angles (more so in architecture than art) refinements came along later. In the late medieval period, around the 14<sup>th</sup> century, we finally get a sense of organisation in art but it is to the exponents of the Renaissance period in the 15<sup>th</sup> century that we turn to, for the basic rules of composition and lighting. With scale, distance, vanishing points, the rule of thirds, lead in lines and even a little out of focus background, just as if a larger aperture had been used, we can appreciate the finer, aesthetic points, of composition.



(The Last Supper, 1498  
Leonardo Da Vinci)

Although strictly speaking more a set guidelines than set in stone (Dali, Magritte and other surrealists would go on to deliberately flaunt such conventions of composition-and too good effect too!), the rule of thirds is a good starting point in composing an image and it keeps judges happy, giving them something to wax lyrically on or to criticise as they see fit! When composing an image, close attention should be made to the location of the subject within the frame.

Also demonstrated in the shot of Concorde are the themes of **Pattern** and **Lines**. Patterns appeal to the human eye, whether consciously or subconsciously, and we surround ourselves with it – in clothing and home furnishings, for example. Many landscape shots benefit from pattern and it can be found in many forms:

- Farmer's fields separated by walls or hedges create a patchwork pattern across the countryside
- Tall, straight trees in strong light can mimic the best graphic images
- Fields of flowers may seem hap-hazard but your eye will see repetitive patterns within the apparent chaos
- Architectural photography often uses patterns of windows, lights, archways, railings, etc to catch the viewer's attention.

Try to think of patterns that might make interesting photographic subjects – you'll be amazed at how many you can find. Some images need strong colour to carry them whilst others benefit from the relative simplicity of black and white so, whilst you're looking at pattern shots,



try to think about which would be most appropriate. Sometimes you'll find that black and white helps to accentuate certain features within a shot and so make a pattern more noticeable – that's the photographer's job to record a scene whilst making the best of its features.

The shot to the left shows two different patterns – one is the railing with its shadow and the other is the blocks making up the footpath. Taken simply to record the pattern, little thought was given to the overall composition so the top of a red car can be seen above the railing, buildings can be seen in the background and are somewhat over-exposed, and the bushes to the right are something of a distraction from the uniform nature of the pattern.

It does, however, demonstrate the objective – to see and record a pattern.

You could argue that **Lines** are just a type of pattern but they're a very special kind and need thought and care when using them. You'll often hear photographic judges speak about "leading lines" or of being "led into the shot" and this is another element of composition that is sometimes subconsciously noted but is nonetheless a very powerful weapon in the photographer's armoury.

The shot of the railing demonstrates lead-in lines as the railing and the paving stones both lead nicely from the bottom of the frame and inward in a curve to the right. The shadow of the railing also leads in the same general direction so doesn't "block" the viewer making their way through the shot.

The shot of Concorde is full of leading lines, and the perspective created by the use of a wide angle lens means that they all work together to pull the viewer into the shot, again with none creating any kind of a block.

Depth of field can also be used to create thirds.



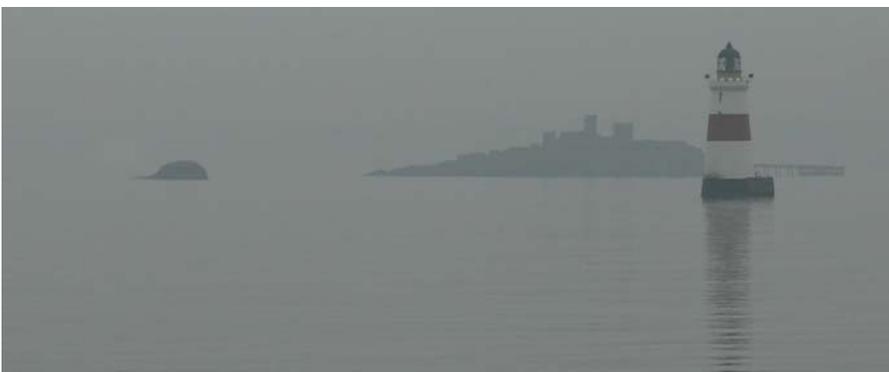
Here the picture of a Common Newt is separated into three distinct bands, both in the vertical and in the horizontal planes by the use of aperture and focal length, in this case f/16 at 105mm, at a distance of about 12" from the subject!

The lower third of the image has sharper elements of foreground interest (in this case the road surface) which lead the eye, via the leg, to the throat, head and eye of the Newt in the middle, right hand section. This in turn takes the eye out of the frame along the back of the Newt, to the diffused tail section and gravel. Yes it does sound a little more like a recipe for witches brew rather than the ingredients of composition, but you get the idea, I hope!

Try also to think about the number of elements within a composition. Odd numbers of elements, especially three and five, seem to work better and tend to lead the eye around the frame more easily.

Also consider how the composition 'reads'. A photograph of a racing-car, travelling from the left of the frame towards the right hand side works better, because this is how (in western civilisations at least) we are taught to read, from left to right. Remember to leave sufficient space on the right for the car (or other object!) to 'move into' in order to lead the eye through the frame.

Here are some more images which contain a variety of compositional elements for you to look at and dissect...



Hopefully, these images will have provided some thoughts and stimulus for you in composing your own shots and may even be helpful in going some way to explaining the basics.