“In our modern world of automatic cameras, which focus for us and adjust the exposure in an ever more perfect way (most of the time), the biggest difference between a good photograph and a mediocre one is the composition.”

Orientation
Horizontal vs. Vertical Photographs
By Liz Masoner, About.com

Horizontal photographs are photographs that are wider than they are tall. Vertical photographs are photographs that are taller than they are wide. Cameras are designed to take one type of photograph, horizontal. This follows the way that human beings see the world. Our eyes are set horizontally across from each other, giving us a view that is wider instead of taller. This allows us to be more aware of our surroundings through peripheral vision. However, in photographs our vision is limited by the edges of the frame so that peripheral vision is eliminated. While this would be dangerous in real life, having no peripheral vision in photography helps the photographer to focus attention on the intended subject by limiting the field of vision. Since a photograph cannot selectively focus once taken (like the brain can selectively focus on a live scene), this limitation of the field of vision is extremely important to photographers. By turning a camera sideways, photographers achieve a vertical photograph in order to further limit the field of vision.

Horizontal photographs are the most common photographic orientation because the camera is designed to take photographs this way. Many photographers do not think to turn the camera sideways to take a vertical image. Horizontal images are roughly the same format as how we see the world and have some distinct properties.

Horizontal images are best used:

* When the subject is horizontal
  When your subject is wider than it is tall, a horizontal image compliments the subject.

* To allow the subject to move horizontally
  When your subject is moving from one side of the frame to the other, using a horizontal format in conjunction with the rule of thirds visually allows the subject room to continue moving. This will amplify the sense of motion in the image. This is also true of subjects looking to the side. Having open space to the side allows the subject’s gaze to continue farther than is possible in a vertical image.

* To convey a sense of space
Horizontal images can be used to suggest a sense of largeness in landscapes. If a small subject is placed in a large field they can also be used to suggest loneliness.

Vertical photographs are less common than horizontal photographs because they require the photographer to take the extra step of turning the camera sideways. Many photographers do not think to turn the camera sideways to take a vertical image. Vertical images are a photographer's way of attempted to imitate the brain's natural selective focus ability.

**Vertical images are best used:**

- When the subject is vertical
- When your subject is taller than it is wide, a vertical image compliments the subject.
- To allow the subject to move vertically
- When your subject is moving up or down, using a vertical format in conjunction with the rule of thirds visually allows the subject room to continue moving. This will amplify the sense of motion in the image. This is also true of subjects looking to up or down. Having open space to the top of bottom allows the subject's gaze to continue farther than is possible in a horizontal image. Remember also that when a subject is moving deeper into an image or moving towards the camera that this appears as "up or down" movement when converted into a 2D image. This is why many leading lines images work very well as vertical images.

**Composition**

Composition is probably the most important thing to get right in photography in my opinion. Nowadays slight errors in exposure can be corrected on the computer but composition is very hard to put right unless you are a Photoshop expert. Sure, you can crop your image and chop off the edges to get a better composition but you are then removing part of the image and therefore restricting what you can use it for and the size you can print it. The idea is to compose your image correctly in the camera so you maximize the image potential.

Some people are born with an eye for composition; they can see shapes and how to position them in the best way. For most people though, this is skill to learn and takes a bit of practice. With digital though you have the advantage of being able to take lots of different compositions of the same image and pick the best until you begin to learn what works and what doesn't. A valuable lesson, and something I would advise doing for any shot. Take several photos of the same subject with different viewpoints and see which ones you prefer.

So how do you learn composition? Well there are guidelines that artists and photographers can use which are generally accepted as ways to get a pleasing composition. These are just guidelines though, you don't have to follow them if you find a style which suits you better.
Fill the frame

One of the easiest ways to improve your photography is with careful attention to framing. Look into the corners of the viewfinder to see what is there. Do you need all that background? Can you get closer to your subject or zoom in? Would the picture look better as an upright or landscape?

The most common mistake people make when taking pictures is not filling the frame with the subject. If it's a photo of granny waving from the doorstep, let's just see granny and the door, not half the houses in the street with a small granny shaped blob in the middle. I think the culprit for this phenomenon is the focusing aid in the centre of the viewfinder. Most cameras have some sort of circle or rectangle etched onto the glass and we are inclined to think, in our less thoughtful moments, that this is the whole picture area. Take a moment to glance around the viewfinder to see what you have got at the edges and especially in the corners. Watch out for clutter in the background, that lamppost growing out of granny's head. Make sure that everything in the viewfinder is there because you want it to be.

Rule Of Thirds

How many of you have seen or taken pictures where you have positioned the main subject right in the centre of the image? A fair few I would imagine. Now there is nothing particularly wrong with that, and sometimes it works well but generally, putting the subject right in the middle doesn't look quite right and doesn't quite sit well in the mind for most people.

The rule of thirds refers to dividing what you see through your view finder or on your screen into a three by three grid, dividing the image into thirds. The idea is to have the main focal point, the horizon or intersecting lines on the thirds eg positioned on the dividing lines.

Leading The Eye or Leading lines

Leading the eye into the picture or towards the main subject is another composition technique. Using something in the image to take the viewers eye through the picture to a point can make an image much more interesting. For instance, if you had a meandering river with a boat on it in the distance, using the curves of the river to take the eye into the picture to the boat can work really well.

Eye to eye

Being at the same “level” as a subject will help the viewer feel more connected to the subject. If we were trying to make something look imposing we might want to shoot the subject from a lower angle, or to make a small subject seem small by shooting from above. For the most part, try and shoot your images eye to eye.
Looking Into The Image

If you take a picture of someone, then having more space into the area the person is looking works better than having them looking out of the image. It’s nice to see what the person might be looking at. The same with animals too, if they are looking at something then give them room in the image to look into.

Distracting Objects or Highlights

Any object that looks out of place in the image or is particularly bright, or for that matter particularly dark, will distract the eye and make the person viewing the image focus on that rather than the main focal point of the image. So watch out for reflections, highlights, brightly colored objects and other things that might distract the eye.

Odd Numbers

Having 3 or 5 of a certain object can work better than 2 or 4 of the same object. Odd numbers tend to sit better with the brain. If we see even numbers then we start to look for even spacing and things can look wrong. For instance, a picture of 3 ducks paddling across a pond will be, to most people, more pleasing than if there were 4 ducks paddling across the pond.

Cropping Example

Here are three photos of a rusty old boat winch on Brighton beach. Having decided to photograph it, I have to decide what I want to say. Basically I want to say 'here's an interesting old bit of metal and it's rusty'. In the top photo I have filled the frame with winch edge to edge but does it really show the decay? We cannot really see the rust in sufficient detail.

In the second photo we can see much more decay and really see the texture, which I think is the thing which attracted me to the object in the first place. When we look with our eyes we tend to see details like this and our brain filters out what is on the edge of our vision. When composing we must be aware of the edges so we can tidy them up.

Too close? Well that's up to you though it does have a certain impact. There are no hard and fast rules, only suggestions. A walk around the subject to look at it from different angles will always pay dividends. Use the zoom to compose the
tightest possible crop that still shows everything you want. If you don't have a zoom lens then just get a little closer.

**Can't I leave the cropping 'til later?**

If you are printing your own pictures then you get a second chance to get the cropping right but, don't rely on this to make up for sloppy camera technique. If you crop your pictures afterwards in the computer or in the darkroom, you are throwing away quality. You are wasting some of those precious pixels that you paid so much for. What's the point in having a camera with twelve million pixels if you are only going to use three million of them?

**Assignment Two**

Leading lines are a very powerful way to control where a viewer looks within your image. Man made lines like railroad tracks, natural lines like shorelines, and even "created" lines such as a line of birds flying can be leading lines. By using leading lines in conjunction with other compositional rules, shoot a short series of images.