

Compositional ROT

By Chuck Palmer

A Series on Composition

If you've been a photographer for a few years, read photography art books, or attended photo seminars, you have no doubt heard it before. But I will say it again. The most critical ingredient for consistently creating captivating images is seeing creatively. It's not about the camera. The problem is that it takes practice to develop your creative vision but what exactly do you look for when you are practicing? How can we improve our ability to see the extraordinary photograph in the ordinary scene in a practical manner?

Although our creative vision develops from many influences and experiences, one aspect of creative photography is composition. How we decide what to include and what to exclude, and how we frame our image is deeply linked to our creativity and our personal perspectives. How we view our composition is the key to create our most remarkable photos.

With this in mind, I decided to write a series of articles that break down some key components of composition in a way that can be easily applied to your photography. This is the first article in the series. . . Let's explore compositional ROT

First a few words about "rules".

Let's unpack what has been described as the first "rule" of composition, and possibly the most talked about compositional tool. But before we unpack The Rule of Thirds, let's get a few things straight about compositional "rules".

When we think of a "rule" our minds may wander back to elementary school where we got into a lot of trouble for not following the rules. We might think that since we have a "rule" of composition it must be absolutely followed to achieve a successful photograph. Obey the rule and you get a remarkable image. If you disregard the rule, your image will be terrible. Nothing can be further from the truth. Art is a creative expression. To be creative, we express our imagination and innovation. So, to consider any "rule" of composition as unbreakable is clearly crazy thinking. There are no rules, only remarkable images.

A more practical way to think about the Rule of Thirds is to regard it as a guiding principle, as is all principles of composition. The Rule of Thirds merely provides us a way to analyze our scene and allows us to creatively adjust the composition according to our personal tastes. The Rule of Thirds is a convenient starting point.

So, what exactly is the ROT, and how can we practically use it?



The “Rule” of Thirds (ROT)

The ROT is a compositional design principle that aims to achieve balance and interest by suggesting we position important elements in certain areas within our frame. We do this by subdividing our frame into thirds vertically and horizontally. Envision a tic-tac-toe grid overlaying your image.

As you can see in the image above, there are four unique “power points” where the two lines intersect. The ROT suggests the power points offer the strongest focal interest within the frame. And the imaginary vertical and horizontal lines are the second strongest focal points in an image composition. So, the ROT suggests that we should consider placing our most important image elements (subject) along these lines, especially where they intersect. The theory developed by studying Master Artists suggests that if we follow the Rule of Thirds, our images will be more dynamically balanced and will draw our viewer’s attention to our primary subject. That being said, the notion that a compelling composition is as simple as placing your primary subject on one of the cross hairs is ridiculous. Good compositions of interesting subjects require a lot more than merely aligning elements on an imaginary grid.

Although you will find all sorts of reasons why the ROT works well in a composition from many reliable sources, the power of the ROT probably comes from two things. First, it forces us to un-center our main subject. While there is nothing wrong with a central composition, a subject dead-center can be boring and calming to your viewer. So, composing our subject off-center can add energy and interest to our images. The ROT encourages us to make our images stand out from the beginner center-weighted snapshots.

Second, the ROT forces us to create negative space. By incorporating areas in our frame with low visual weight, we create a juxtaposition that makes our primary subject stand out even more, making our images even more interesting which causes our viewers to linger longer in our photo.

Some practicalities

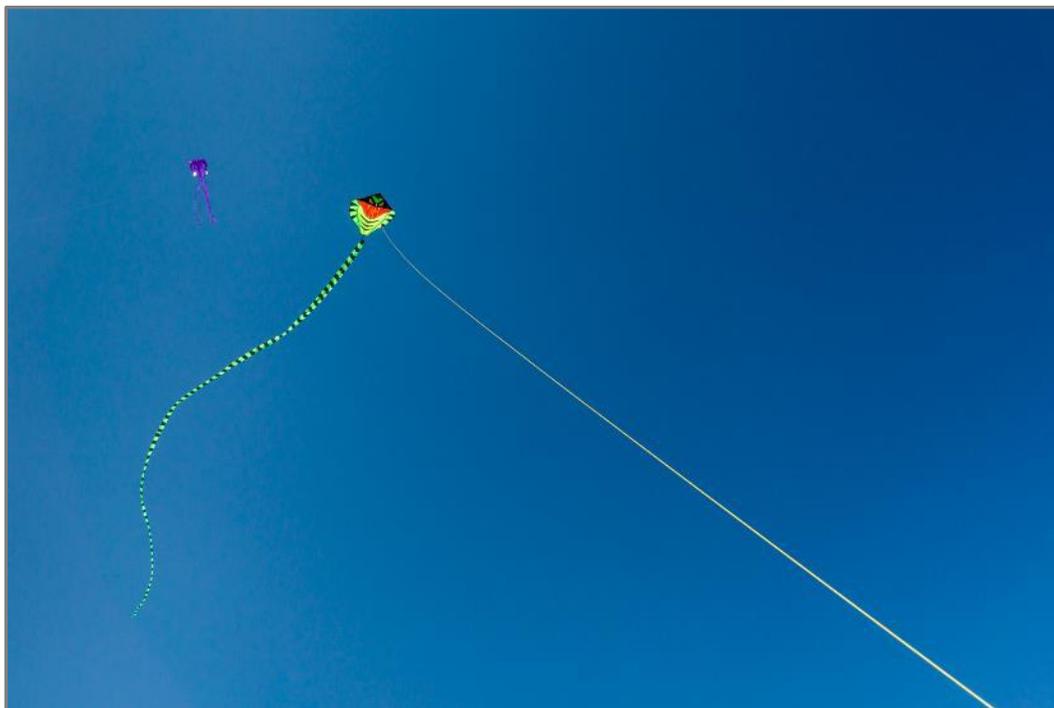
Now that we have a basic understanding of the Rule of Thirds, let's look at some practical ways we can apply this compositional tool to our photography.



Horizons – In the same way beginning photographers center their subjects, they often place their horizons such that their image is split in two equal halves. While this sort of symmetry can work well for some images (especially reflections), placing the horizon on either the upper or lower imaginary horizontal lines of the ROT grid can create more interesting visual weights to the elements above and below the horizon line. As creative photographers, we get to decide what is more interesting in the scene we want to place emphasis on. . . the upper part of the scene (typically the sky), or the bottom part of the scene (typically an interesting foreground).



Vertical Subjects – Photographing vertical subjects such as a standing person or a tall building in the middle of the frame can cut the image in half, creating one of those beginner snapshots. The ROT suggests we place our main subject on or near one of the vertical ROT grid lines to uncenter our main subject, adding interest and focus.



Accentuating Space – When photographing a minimalist scene that does not contain much visual weight, placing our primary subject on one of the gridlines, or power points can create a clean dynamic image that emphasizes our main subject.



Counterpoint Balance – When creating an image with more than one subject or main character, we can use the ROT to create a point-counterpoint balance. By positioning one of our points of interest on one power point and placing the other on a diagonally opposite power point we can introduce an interesting harmony to our image. This works well for two subjects where you want your viewers to linger in your image, bouncing back and forth between the two focal points.



Portrait Position – We can use the ROT when photographing people or animals. We humans are always drawn to looking into a person's eyes. Depending on how close we are to our subject, it makes sense to compose either a person's eye or their face on one of the ROT power points.



Room to Move Into – If our primary subject is in motion, we can use the ROT to compose empty space in the direction in which our subject is moving. This gives us a sense the subject is moving forward and gives our viewers a view of where they are going.



Abstracts – If you are shooting subjects made up primarily of patterns, colors, lines, and/or textures, guide your viewers to the focal points you want them to focus on by using the ROT. Play with placing key elements on one of the grid lines.

We have reviewed several ways we can practically use the Rule of Thirds in our compositions to create more pleasing images. No matter how you go about using the ROT to your advantage, there are two key questions you may want to ask before you compose:

1. What is the main character (subject) of my image that I want to call attention to?
2. How can I use the ROT principles to draw attention to my primary subject?

Obviously, the ROT is only one of the many valuable compositional tools we can use to make remarkable images (Stay tuned for future articles). If we decide to use the ROT, key elements are placed on or near the gridlines, and/or the ROT power points. This provides us with a starting composition where we can creatively explore alternatives that will result in the best creative composition. Despite what you may hear from photo competition judges, an image that strictly conforms to ROT principles without consideration of any other compositional principles will not likely be successful. There's no magic in these power points or gridlines. Explore other composition design principles to call attention to your subject. Good composition is all about creating balance, harmony, and mood. Every scene we encounter presents us with many unique variables. Experiment! Use your imagination and composition principles. If a certain framing feels right to you, go with it. If your gut tells you to place subjects dead-center in your frame, do it. Done well, with the intent to be creative, centered subjects can result in a pleasing symmetry that is calming to your viewer.

Use the ROT to think about your own creative composition, but experiment with compositional alternatives to make your own unique image. As always, keep practicing and may only the most remarkable images be yours.

Chuck

Authors Note: This article is the first in a series on composition tools and principles. References for these articles include Composition Design Considerations, a series of articles in EV magazine by Angelo; Ioanides"; "Design Principles" by Robin Griggs Wood; The Photographer's Eye by Michael Freeman; Extraordinary Photography by Brenda Tharp and Jed Manwaring