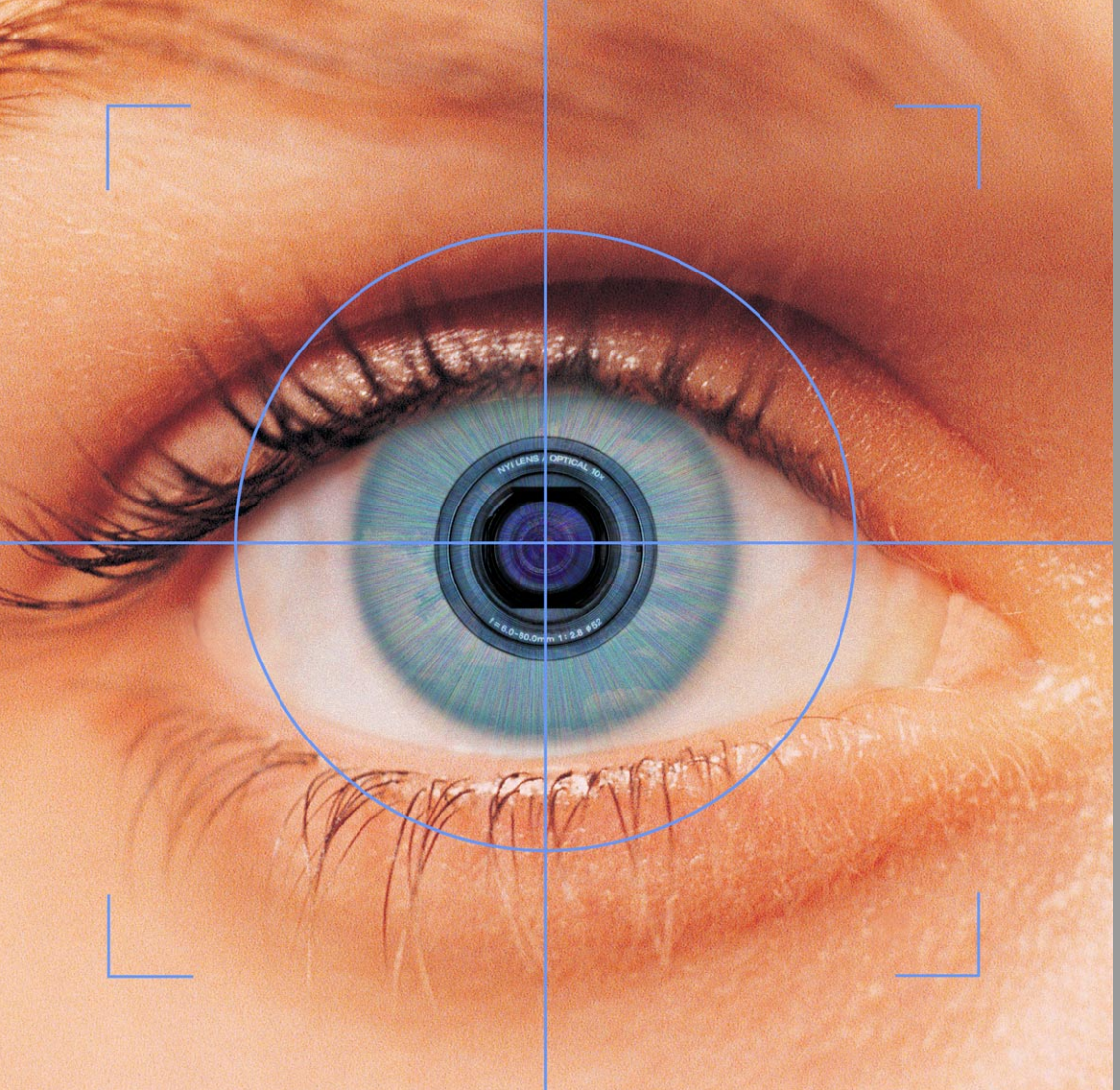

digitalphotography
the complete course

New York Institute of Photography

Digital Eye 2: Developing Your Eye

Unit Two
Lesson Nine

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Developing Your Eye.

In Unit One, we introduced you to the idea of the "digital eye" and suggested that you would soon be able to use that eye in coordination with the digital darkroom to produce images unlike anything that has ever been made. Using the Three Guidelines for Great Photographs—have a clear subject, focus attention on that subject, and simplify—together with your camera and digital imaging software, the possibilities would be yours to envision and pursue.

But first we have to train that eye, like an athlete working out to improve his or her performance. Because even with all the wonders of the digital darkroom, our final images are still only as creative and interesting as the eye that first envisioned them. Your images will never be better than your ability to "see"—to recognize the opportunities for powerful pictures in the world around you and to compose those pictures in the viewfinder. Even with digital imaging software and all of the little miracles it can work, it's nearly impossible to turn water into wine. We've got to have something good to start with. From there, we can make something wonderful.

In this section of our Course, then, we will assume you have mastered Guideline One—you know, for the moment at

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least, what subject or theme you want to photograph. Now let's focus on mastering Guidelines Two and Three—let's work on emphasizing the subject and simplifying the photo to produce images that really work. We'll consider what a photographer can do before he or she takes the photo and look at the possibilities offered by digital imaging software to edit and strengthen an image after it's been captured.

Unlike most of the other lessons in the Course which were written by the Digital Photography team you've already met, this lesson was created and photo edited by Anne Townsend, one of our staff writers.

Eight Ways To Emphasize Your Subject.

When we want to emphasize something in a text, we underline or circle the relevant passage. When we make an argument, we sometimes repeat our point or use our voice to express the importance of what we are trying to say—and to make sure the other person hears and recognizes our argument.

In the same way, we have to find a means to emphasize the subject or theme of our photographs.

What Exactly is Emphasis?

One dictionary offers this definition: "Special attention given to something so as to make it stand out."

But how do we do that visually?

We have a number of photographic tools at our disposal for emphasizing the subject or theme:

1. The placement of the subject in relation to the objects around it and in relation to the frame.

2. The size of the subject relative to its surroundings within the frame.

3. Selective focusing and lighting.

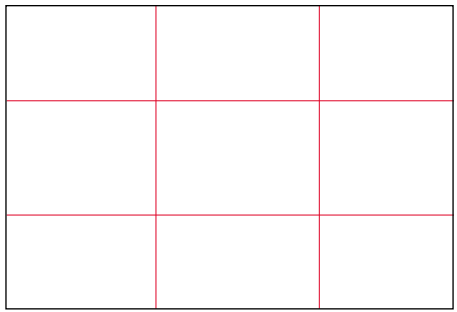
4. Light and shadows.

5. Color.

It is imperative that we understand how these tools can help us and develop a facility for using them effectively. Only then can we make truly good photographs.

1. Emphasis Through Placement.

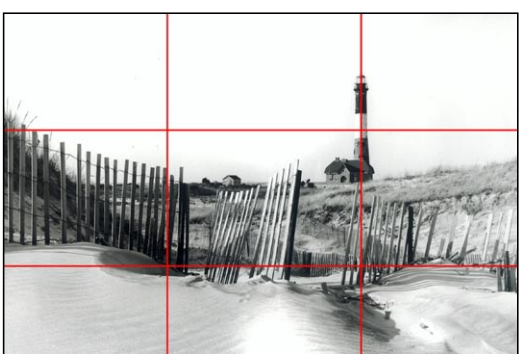
Our subject is just one object, person, group or theme situated within the larger unedited panorama of the world. As photographers, we must decide how to edit that subject from the larger continuum by using the boundaries of the viewfinder to select and position it within a frame. The ability to determine where to place the subject within the frame of the viewfinder can determine the success or failure of a picture.



Usually the subject is emphasized by placing it near the center of the frame. But how near? The traditional rule of composition goes like this: Imagine dividing the image into nine boxes: Three evenly-spaced vertical sections and three evenly-spaced horizontal sections. The subject of your photo should be located approximately at one of the intersections of the dividing lines or simply along one of the lines.

Look at this beautiful black-and-white photo of a beach scene. We've used red lines to divide the image into more or less equivalent horizontal and vertical thirds. Notice how the lighthouse is located along one of the dividing lines and at one of the intersections. And the weathered fence in the foreground—it's nicely asymmetrical and aligned along the bottom horizontal dividing line.

This compositional technique offers a pleasant balance and informal looseness that would not be felt if the subject were dead-center. Imagine the lighthouse in the middle of the picture. It wouldn't look nearly as good.



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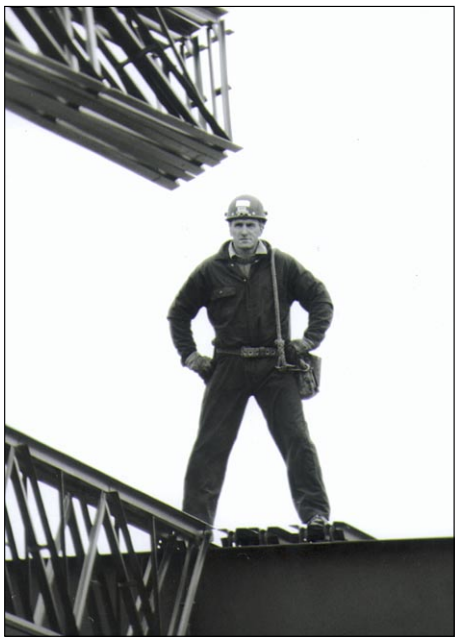
Rules Can Be Broken.

This does not mean, of course, that positioning your subject dead-center is always inappropriate. Look at this photo of an iron worker with his hands on his hips.

Why does this photograph work? What makes it so powerful? The iron worker is standing more or less in the center of the image, looking slightly off to the side. His position in the frame coupled with his physical stance communicates a sense of determination, strength, even defiance. If the photographer had chosen to position him to the side, the image would have communicated something entirely different. Imagine the man off to the side and more of the beams and work environment showing. The photo may have communicated something about the way in which work or technology can sometimes overwhelm or dwarf the individual. But here, it says something entirely different. It says: within this environment of iron beams and tough work, this man continues to stand firm against the challenges that confront him.

So sometimes a head-on shot is the best way to depict a moment of confrontation or intensity.

Ultimately, where you place your subject—whether dead-center or to the side—helps you to communicate something about your subject. So keep in mind what you feel or wish to say about the subject when setting up the composition.



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What do you think of this photo of a Buddha statue meditating near a river?

Aesthetically, it works well, with the Buddha positioned off to the right near one of the imaginary dividing lines. But we like the way the position of the statue within the frame helps to communicate a story too: the movement and madness of the rushing river in relation to the contemplative figure, which sits unaffected and unworried, suggests the possibility for the individual to find serenity and peace within the self, no matter the craziness and chaos of the world around it. The photographer considered what he wanted us to think or feel about the subject and composed accordingly.

Obviously the photographer's deliberate choice to use a slow shutter speed to blur the stream's rushing water creates a nice contrast between the statue's well-focused detail and the background.

All in all, unless you have a good reason to place the subject way off-center or dead-center, you're best off following the time-honored rules of composition: place the subject slightly off-center—whether left or right, up or down.

A Note On Cropping While Composing.

While we're talking about setting up your composition in the viewfinder or on your digital camera's LCD monitor, let's briefly discuss cropping.

A big debate among photographers has always been—should I crop after I take the shot? This is a very personal decision and you will need to decide for yourself. For some of you, it may be a creative principle to confine the majority of your cropping to the viewfinder. Others may be more inclined to crop freely in the traditional darkroom or with the help of Photoshop, or even with a pair of scissors!

If you fall into the latter category, no problem, but consider this: cropping effectively with your viewfinder means less time spent cropping after the shot has been taken. We encourage you to crop (i.e., compose) as much as possible before the photo is taken. Decide then and there what you want the image to look like, then click the shutter.

Always pay attention to what is in the viewfinder. That goes without saying. But attend to what is just outside of the viewfinder as well.

As you make your decision about what to include and what to exclude, keep in mind that once you take the picture, there's no going back. You're taking a photo of a soccer player—are his feet in the frame? Double check. Photoshop may be incredible but it can't help you perform reconstructive surgery! And it shouldn't have to—we want to use Photoshop to enhance rather than reconstruct our images.

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Look at this photograph of a man sitting on a sidewalk in New Orleans. Now, pretend you're the photographer confronted with this scene. You want to take a picture and maybe your first thought is to zoom in. You take the photo (previous page). Then you realize how empty the sidewalk is and how that emptiness echoes this man's condition. You step back and recompose the shot to include the man and the sidewalk. In fact, the sidewalk is part of the subject. You take a second photo.

This one is much stronger, we think. And it leads us to another lesson—move around your subject. Consider all the possible angles. Shoot multiple images to make sure you get the best shot from the best angle.

Each time you find a location that works, take a photograph. But keep moving around the subject until you have explored all the possibilities. Then you are much more likely to come out with a truly interesting photo.

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2. Emphasis Through Relative Size.

In addition to wondering where to place your subject in the frame, you need to consider how big you want your subject to be relative to the space and objects around it.

When considering the possibilities you may wish to play with some of the following questions:

What do you want to say about your subject? What aspect of your subject do you most want to emphasize? What kind of feeling do you hope to convey to the person viewing the image?

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Look at this photograph of a man standing on the edge of a spit of land near some icebergs. Let's pretend we're the photographer looking through the viewfinder. That's our friend over there and we're trying to decide how to photograph him. We already have plenty of close-ups of him, so now we want to show him in the context of this wild, frozen environment we've traveled a long way to visit.

We decide to play with the man versus nature idea and look for a way to suggest how inhospitable this environment can be to human habitation. We also want to show off the incredible landscape. We decide that the enormous icebergs off in the distance are a beautiful and powerful element of the environment that will help us to evoke—through their size relative to our friend in the foreground—the feeling we're looking for. We compose the scene in our viewfinder and snap the shutter at a moment when our friend's posture and position suggests contemplation.

The result: a photograph that uses relative size to emphasize the relationship between man and nature, the beauty of the environment, and the contemplative mood of the frozen landscape.

Now, let's look at a completely different kind of photograph. This portrait of Octavio, a Colombian man, uses the "fill-the-frame" strategy to emphasize the subject.

Let's again pretend that we're peering through the viewfinder. We see a man sitting with his hands covering his face. We could take a photo that would include his entire body, maybe some of the background. Or we could use our zoom lens to get in close for a tight shot of just his face and hands. Why do we choose the latter option? Because we think that the power of the subject is in the gesture, in the way that his worn hands are covering his face in an act suggesting fatigue or sorrow.

Whatever your subject, keep this compositional possibility in mind: You can emphasize your subject by making it larger in relation to the other elements included within the frame.

By the way, when beginning photographers take candid portrait photos of relatives or friends, they often stand back too far, and the subject of the portrait becomes just one of many objects in the photo. It's easy to make this mistake and to overlook the way in which relative size can create emphasis within the photo.

©NYI Student Gloria Elena Restrepo

When you take that kind of photograph, get in close and dominate the frame with your subject's image unless you have a good reason to do otherwise. Do you really need to include that lamp or that chair the subject is standing near? Probably not, so you might as well get rid of it by moving in closer—or using a longer lens—to make your subject stand out in size.

Remember to always ask yourself, "What is the subject of this photograph?" In the photograph below, the subject isn't our friend, it's our friend in the landscape.

In the other photo (right), the subject is Octavio, not his surroundings, which have been minimized.

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3. Emphasis Through Framing.

Perhaps you want or need your subject to be somewhat small and you therefore have to figure out some other means of focusing our attention on the subject. One method for accomplishing this is to use a "found" frame—tree branches, the bars of a gate, or maybe a doorway—in other words, lines or shapes that direct our eyes in such a way that we cannot help but pay attention to the subject, even if it's size does not dominate the photo.

This use of a frame within the larger frame of the picture has the added benefit of giving the two-dimensional picture a feeling of three dimensions, a sense of depth and of layers, which can be very interesting.

This photograph of a young couple on roller blades demonstrates an effective application of this guideline.

The lines formed by the swingset in the foreground serve to isolate the couple and direct our attention toward them. They're small, but we still feel that this photo is about them and about the privacy of their shared moment. If we had moved in for a closer shot, that sense of privacy, amplified as it is by the empty space around them, would have been violated. We would have ended up with an entirely different kind of "couple" photo—perhaps one that would have emphasized their sense of pleasure and energy (imagine their faces) instead of their self-enclosed world within a world that we see here.

Framing is a technique that can be used with great effectiveness to improve outdoor pictures of large, relatively distant objects, such as mountains, monuments, or buildings. A common frame is to include the branches of a nearby tree—think of those photos of the Capitol Building that feature cherry blossoms in the foreground. The branches give a sense of space and depth to the photo. They say, in effect, I'm here and the subject is there. Framing is frequently used in travel and architectural photography, but it can be used creatively with good results in many other situations.

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Look at this photograph of a pagoda in the Chinese Gardens of Singapore. Notice how the photographer used the branches of a tree near him as a frame for the tall pagoda off in the distance. The subject is more clearly defined and contextualized by the frame than if it had been shot straight-on minus the vegetation, don't you think? We wouldn't have gotten as strong a sense of the pagoda's place in the garden as we do here. Not to mention that the image would have looked really flat!

©Anne Townsend

In this landscape picture, the photographer used the leaves from sugar cane plants to give a sense of depth to this Ecuadorian view. Because sugar cane is an important agricultural product of Ecuador, the use of the plant as a frame adds another dimension—not just aesthetic, but editorial—to the photograph.

Here's an interesting picture taken through a partially inflated hot-air balloon. The photographer kept the shadow of the person on the other side of the balloon in sharp focus and threw the foreground—part of the balloon—slightly out of focus in order to use it as a frame. Our eyes are drawn to the bright light and the person's shadow on the other side, but we are also intrigued by the way the frame strongly situates the moment within the context of this hot-air balloon event.

To summarize, in cases where the subject does not dominate because of its relative size—or where it is distant and you want to give a sense of depth to the photograph—consider framing the subject to focus our attention on it and to add an element of three-dimensionality to the picture.

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4. Emphasis Through The Use of Converging Lines.

The use of converging lines is similar to the framing technique we just described. The idea is the same: Use lines that converge from each of the four corners of the frame to point like arrows at your subject. The converging lines will form a tunnel that compels our eye toward the subject. We covered this phenomenon in Lesson Four.

Be selective about your use of converging lines, because they can get gimmicky if used without good reason. As with any other form of emphasis, consider whether the use of converging lines and the effect that it will have on the viewer is in keeping with the spirit of your subject—whether it says something or makes you feel something about the subject that is as you intended.

Here the photographer used converging lines—in this case, the slats of a fence—to direct our attention to a young boy.

But converging lines can be the subject themselves, too, as shown here in this photo of buildings (which, by the way, our photographer took by lying on his back in the plaza between the buildings).

5. Emphasis Through Selective Lighting.

Darkness and light are excellent tools for adding drama and mystery to your images, and learning to work effectively with both is imperative to producing compelling pictures.

The Italian Renaissance Masters used the term "chiaroscuro," a combination of the Italian words for "light" and "dark" to describe images—principally paintings and drawings—in which the sense of form and space is created through an interplay of light and dark tones. In photography, the contrast of highlight and shadow areas is all-important in giving a sense of form, surface and depth.

The first thing to understand is that a good photograph is not just about having a well-lit subject. A strong photo is about the effectiveness of the relationship between light and shadows in the image. Does the relationship enhance or otherwise emphasize the subject?

This may seem obvious, but it's easy to forget the power of both light and shadows when you're in a hurry to photograph something and just want to get an image that is not over- or under-exposed.

©NYI Student Lee Byong Soo

When you are considering how to "light" a subject, ask yourself—what kind of mood do I want to create?

In this wedding picture, the photographer has used selective lighting to isolate the bride and groom from their surroundings, thus emphasizing their union and the exclusivity of their new partnership. The light source in the center of the image, hidden below the bouquet bathes both people in a warm circle

of light. The dark edges and background redirect our attention onto the couple.

It's worth pointing out that many contemporary photojournalists are using shadows to "light" their subjects. These photographers throw much of the frame into darkness so as to better enhance the subject, which is lit, or partially lit. This technique creates a wonderful and mysterious kind of spotlight effect that can be very dramatic. It may not be a "clean" shot, but it is often very powerful.

Admittedly, this photo of a cat hanging out in the sunlight doesn't count as hard-hitting journalism, but it's a good example of what we mean.

Photoshop offers useful tools for enhancing the light and shadows of a photograph. Stay tuned for a how-to discussion in a later lesson.

For now, remember to use lighting as a creative tool. Whenever you look into your viewfinder or LCD monitor, look at the light and shadows. See the light. Try to understand its properties. Keep in mind that a good contrast of light and dark can add drama to a picture.

©NYI Student Kurt Robertson

6. Emphasis Through Selective Focus.

Whenever we take a photograph, we have to go through the process of deciding: Okay, what should be in focus and what shouldn't be in focus, and what do I need to do with my camera to make all of this happen?

If we keep most of the image in focus, the viewer's eye will be drawn more or less equally to all parts of the image.

Sometimes that's exactly what you want. The relationship between your subject and its surroundings may be an important aspect of the image, in which case you choose to keep everything in the frame as sharp as possible. For example, if you are photographing someone working on an assembly line, you may wish to photograph using a greater depth-of-field that will not just keep your subject in focus, but also the machinery surrounding him or her.

However, if only some elements of the photo are sharp, our eye will generally be drawn to those elements. And this is how we can draw attention to our subject with selective focus. The background, in this case, may serve mostly as color or texture rather than as context or subject matter. Or in some cases, one portion of the subject will be out of focus while still being visible and comprehensible.

©NYI Student Manuel L. Urquiza

In this photograph of a man pointing two handguns at the camera, selective focus is creatively and wonderfully used to heighten the drama and to emphasize the dangerous possibilities of handguns. Who's got his fingers on the triggers? The guy is visible, but out of focus enough to keep him anonymous. The subject is not simply guns—it's guns in

the hands of others, and using selective focus like this is an excellent way of emphasizing that subject.

This photo of a high school graduation ceremony uses selective focus to direct our attention to the primary subject—the photographer's daughter—without losing the context of the ceremony itself. Look at how the woman wearing the blue flowered dress in the foreground seems to be watching the young girl. She helps to direct our attention to the subject and echoes the feeling that this is a special day when "all eyes"are on the graduating students.

What about the photo of a card game? Notice how the hand of cards is the only element of the photo in sharp focus. It suggests a moment of tension in the game. Does the guy holding the cards have the winning hand? Is the next card played going to determine the winner? The people standing behind the boy seem to be waiting with curiosity to watch the outcome of the game.

If you are shooting a subject in motion, you can accomplish this selective focus trick by setting your camera to a slow shutter-speed, focusing on your subject, then panning (following the subject with your lens) as you release the shutter. The background will be blurred while the subject

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©NYI Student William J. Welcome

remains somewhat, even if not sharply, in focus. This gives us a sense of the motion of your subject and it blurs the background, thus providing you with the selective focus "spotlight" on your subject.

Here, the photographer captured two runners in the Boston Marathon by panning to keep them sharp while throwing the crowd in the background out of focus.

With traditional cameras, the ability to use selective focus to make the background (or the foreground) soft or entirely out of focus was something that had to be controlled by the size of the lens aperture when the photo was taken. In the digital darkroom, as you'll learn when we take up Photoshop in the next Unit, it's easy to select a portion of an image that's in focus and soften it to make it appear to be out of focus.

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7. Emphasis Through Repetition.

Twentieth-century street photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson had an excellent eye for the symmetries and repetitions embedded in the ordinary, everyday world. Many of his photographs are stronger because he used this element to emphasize an idea or a subject. He also had a good understanding, we think, of the intrinsic beauty that comes with these unexpected symmetries.

If you're not familiar with Cartier-Bresson's work, we suggest you run a search on the Internet, or better yet, visit your local library.

The precise placement of objects to achieve a rhythmically repeating pattern can be the cornerstone of a photo's strength. Take this photo of an operation, for example. As with many good images, this one follows a number of the guidelines we've discussed to strengthen it. Note the use of framing to direct our attention to the man observing in the background. But note also the symmetry of the two doctors in the foreground. It works wonderfully to suggest the need for a trained, almost symbiotic coordination in the operating room to ensure that everything goes correctly.

©NYI Student John Martel

The technique works wonders for landscape photos, as here in this black-and-white image of trees beneath a cloudy sky.

You can also use repetition of different but similar subjects—as in this photo of colorful shoes, or the image of a field of wheat—to achieve emphasis.

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©NYI Graduate Richard Burdi

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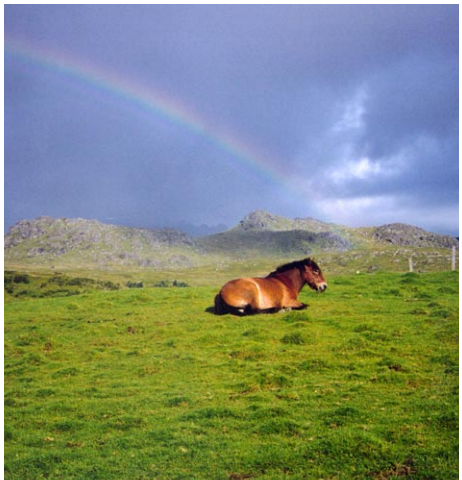
8. Emphasis Through Color.

When you make a decision to use color instead of black-and-white film, you usually do so for a reason. Perhaps you feel the subject is best characterized by its color or colors. Maybe the indigenous folk of a particular region are known for their brightly colored costumes. If you are taking a portrait of someone, perhaps the inclusion of specific colors helps you to say something about the personality being photographed. Or maybe you are photographing a landscape that you feel would be more powerful in color than in black-and-white.

Consider this photograph of a horse resting in a field in Norway. The light from the sun in the foreground has a lovely effect on the green and brown colors in the foreground, and amplifies the sense of contrast with the rainy clouds and rainbow in the background. The tones and variations of the colors help to strengthen the photo.



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In this photo of a person carrying a red-and-white umbrella, converging lines and the selective use of color help to draw our eye toward the subject.

Here, the use of color film and a slow shutter speed (for capturing a sense of motion) helps the photographer to capture the passion and energy of a traditional Mexican dance.

A digital image is made from three "layers" or "channels" of color—Red, Green, and Blue (RGB)—in the same way that

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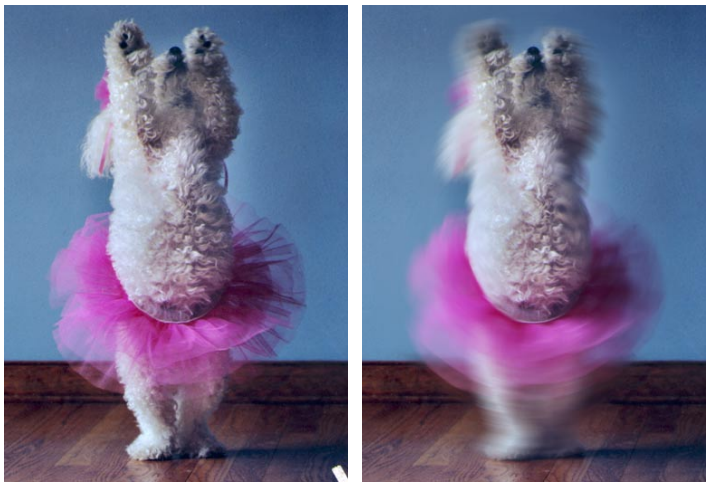
color slide film is made from at least three color layers. With digital imaging software, we are able to make adjustments to those channels, either individually or simultaneously. So whether you are taking photos with a traditional film-based camera and then scanning your images, or shooting with a digital camera, you will be able to play with color in Photoshop and you can use this feature to emphasize the subject or theme of your photo. You will be able to adjust color cast, saturation, and balance, as well as brightness and contrast.

You will also be able to use the color capabilities of Photoshop to apply spot color to black-and-white images to create emphasis.

Look at this photograph of a dog wearing a tutu. The original image is fine. But by adding motion to the photograph we heighten the feeling of humor and absurdity. The pinkness of the tutu is very girlish, too, and therefore doubly comic on the dog.



©NYI Student Carolyn Sauer

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Typically when we make adjustments to the colors in our photographs, we do so in order to enhance the image without making the colors look unnatural. In some cases, however, we may wish to play with the colors for the specific purpose of using color to emphasize our subject in a way that is unlike anything we might see in the world around us.

Like this detail of a woman's eye. On it's own, this image has a kind of mystery and drama—but we could do something more with it. Add color to the eye and we have an entirely different photograph, one that communicates something very different—it emphasizes the eye and the act of looking, whereas the basic black-and-white photo offers an attractive image, plain and simple, as the subject.

Whether you are photographing in color or black-and-white, with the tools of the digital darkroom, you will be able to use color selectively to enhance both your original black-and-white and color images.

In Conclusion...

The eight ways to emphasize your subject that we've presented in this Lesson are like new muscles. They need to be exercised to develop them and keep them strong. In the coming months, try to use each of these techniques in your photography as often as you can. And remember that they aren't exclusive. In many instances you can combine two or more of these techniques in a single photograph. As you learn to see the possibilities for emphasis in the subject before you, you're on your way to making more powerful photographs.

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