Basics of Composition

(adapted from Tony Northrup's "How to Create Stunning Digital Photography")

Here we present you with a few common composition guidelines. However, they are just guidelines to help you better think about composition--they are by no means rules that must be followed, feel free to disregard them and follow your own artistic instincts.

The Rule of Thirds: Instead of centering your subject in the frame, place the subject one-third of the way through the frame. For example, here are two examples of photos with two different crops: centered (top) and using the rule of thirds (bottom).

Figures 2-1 and 2-2: The rule of thirds makes pictures more interesting by creating negative space.

In Figure 2-1, the eagle's eye is placed at the intersection of two thirds lines.

In Figure 2-2, the temple is roughly aligned with the right third, the sky is roughly aligned with the top third, and the water is roughly aligned with the bottom third.

There are many other known visually pleasing proportions such as the golden spiral, etc.

The Rule of Space: The images in the figure above also demonstrate a second rule--give your subject room for movement. If the subject is moving or looking in a direction other than the camera, leaving room in front of them helps prevent the picture from feeling crowded.

Simplifying: Eliminate distracting elements from the picture by moving around the subject to find a non-distracting background, move closer, zoom in or crop the picture. One way to simplify is to attempt to fill the frame with your subject without crowding the subject by placing it too close to the edge of the frame.

Lines: Your eyes are naturally drawn to lines in a photograph. You can use lines to draw the viewer's eyes to key elements, create patterns, and divide a picture. Lines can be architectural elements such as railings or walls, geographical elements such as shorelines or horizons, or organic elements such as trees or people. It can be helpful to align these with composition gridlines (eg. rule of thirds lines) to generate visually appealing images.