

Understanding Photography

By
Dane Wilson

Lesson Four: Exposure Tricks and Composition

Version 1.0
Revised July 16, 2006

Fill Flash

Most modern cameras have a built-in flash or the ability to add on a flash unit. In automatic mode, the flash is turned on by the camera when the light levels are too low to take a photograph without the extra light that a flash provides. This is the only way that most people think they can use their flash, to take photos in low light situations.

In fact, the flash can be used to improve photos even when there is sufficient light to take a photograph. The flash can be set to fire no matter how much light there is. In this mode, the flash is used to supplement the natural light, reduce some of the harsh shadows that occur in bright sunlight, or improve the flat lighting that occurs on overcast days. This filling in of the shadow areas, using a flash as a supplemental light source, is known as “fill flash”.

Photo without fill flash.



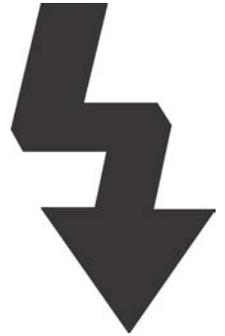
Photo with fill flash.



A typical photographic situation might include a person who is wearing a hat outdoors on a sunny day. The brim of a hat usually casts dark shadows over the subject's face. Using a flash to provide additional light can lighten up or remove the shadows making the person's face visible. Another common use for fill flash is when the subject is backlit. You can increase the exposure (see exposure compensation later on in this lesson) to expose the subject correctly but then the background lighting often turns out too strong.

To take a photo using fill flash, you will need to set your camera to fire the flash on every photo regardless of light. Some cameras call this "fill flash mode" and it's usually represented by a lightning bolt symbol. You'll want to switch your camera from its automatic or flash-off modes to fill flash mode before taking your photograph. Refer to your camera's manual to determine how to change your flash mode.

More advanced cameras also have the ability to control the power of the flash so that the resulting photos can still look natural. Take a few shots changing the power of the flash in order to get the best effect. Some advanced cameras allow a separate flash unit to be fired by wire or wirelessly, not just when attached to the camera. If you have one of these, the flash can even be held off to the side of the subject's face or aimed up under the subject's chin and nose to more effectively remove shadows. Sometimes it's helpful to have an assistant hold the flash when using one off the camera.



A typical fill flash icon

Photo without fill flash.

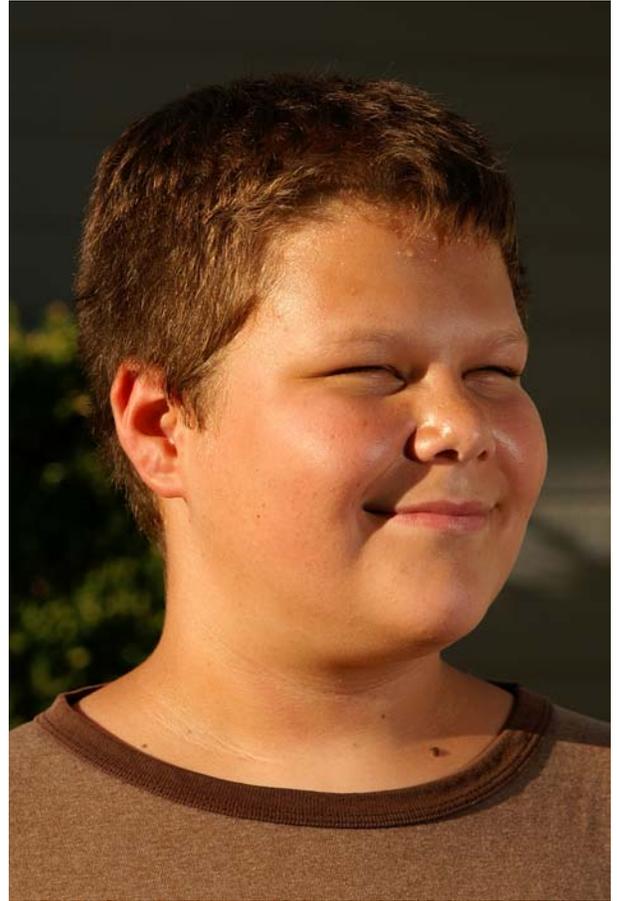


Photo with fill flash.





Photos without fill flash.



Photos with fill flash.



Exposure Compensation

As we've discussed in prior lessons, most modern cameras have built-in light meters that determine the proper exposure automatically for you. Even though modern metering systems are pretty effective, there are times when they don't quite get it right. The result might be a photograph that is too dark or too light. It is at these times when you need to override what the camera has determined is proper exposure.

There are many ways to override the exposure setting on your camera. The easiest is to use a method known as exposure compensation. Most reasonably advanced cameras have a way to change the exposure using a dial, buttons, or a menu setting. Cameras that provide exposure compensation controls typically allow you to increase or decrease exposure in small increments.

Photo at exposure set by camera.



Photo with +1 exposure compensation.



To use exposure compensation, consult your camera's manual on how to set your particular camera. If you take a photograph that appears overall too dark, you can add some positive (represented by a plus sign such as $+1/3$, $+1/2$ or $+1.0$) exposure compensation to lighten things up. Conversely, applying negative exposure compensation (represented by a minus sign such as $-1/3$, $-1/2$ or -1.0) will darken your photograph. Experiment and judge the results for yourself.

Photo at exposure set by camera.



Photo with -1/3 exposure compensation.



After you are done using exposure compensation, remember to reset your camera to its normal position or all your subsequent photos will get the same compensation, whether they need it or not.

Related to exposure compensation is “exposure lock”. Many advanced cameras also have this functionality. If your camera has this, it is usually activated by pressing a special button or it may simply be locked by a halfway press of the shutter release. Check your camera manual to determine which. Exposure lock works very similar to focus lock. You point your camera at an area in your subject to take the initial meter reading. You then typically press the exposure lock button to lock the exposure reading then recompose the image and take the photograph.

If a bright sky or other backlight is making the other portions of your photo too dark, point your camera down so that the sky is not dominant feature, or zoom in on one of the foreground objects when taking your meter reading. For people, move in close so that their face fills the viewfinder before you make the meter reading.

If exposure compensation doesn't give you the results that you want (for instance, the background becomes too bright), try using the fill flash technique instead.

Note that auto-focus cameras may also lock the focus when the shutter is pressed halfway. Read your camera manual carefully to find if exposure lock is available on your camera and how to use it separate from the focus lock function.

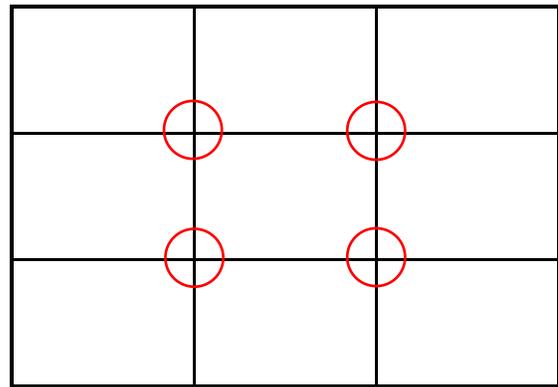
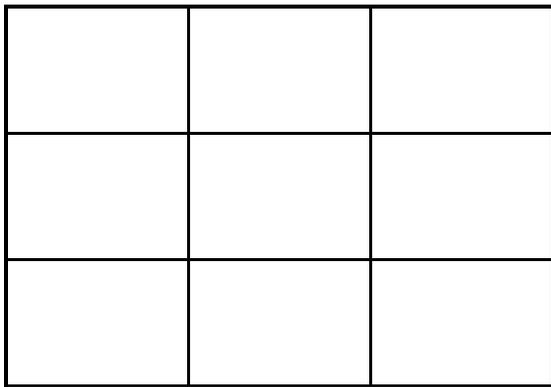
Composition

Photographic composition is the positioning of the subject matter within the photograph. A lot can be said about composition that would take more space and time than this lesson can accommodate. In the end, the goal of composition is to produce a photograph that is pleasing to the eye, brings attention to the subject and takes an ordinary photo and turns it into a piece of art.

To get you started, we'll discuss a couple of the basic rules of composition. Learn and practice them. Look at the photographs of established photographers. Incorporate shape, light and elements to develop your own style.

The Rule of Thirds

The most basic composition rule is the Rule of Thirds. Imagine that your viewfinder is divided into thirds both horizontally and vertically by thin lines. You will end up with a grid like this:



Where the lines intersect are four points. These off-center points and the dividing lines become targets that you can use to line up important elements of your photograph. In the case of animal photographs or portraits, the dividing lines become a good place to line up the eyes of your subject. The following example photographs demonstrate how you can line up subject elements on the intersection points or along one of the lines that divides the space into thirds.



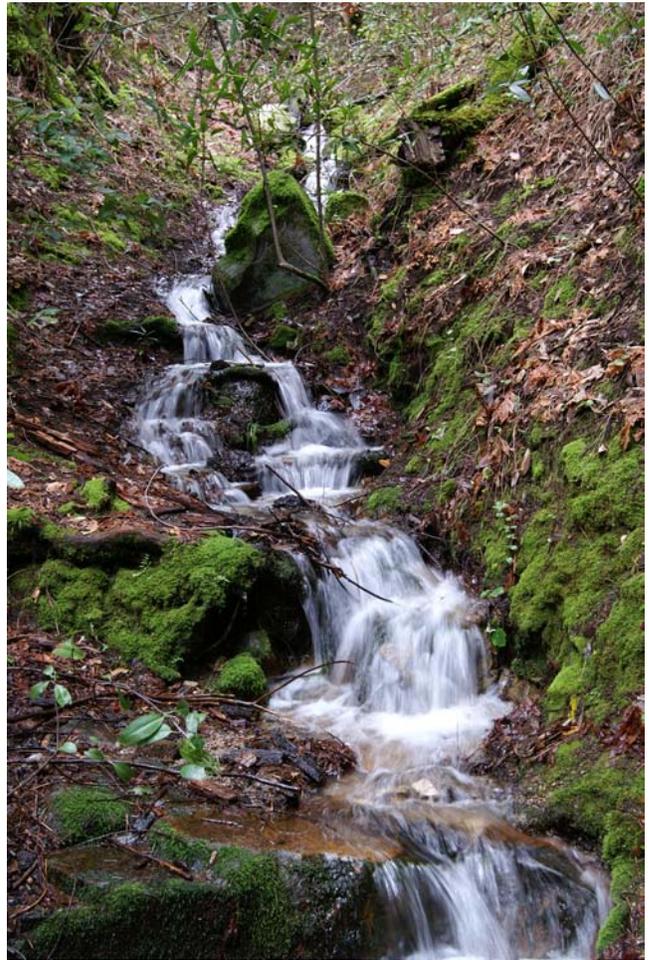


Diagonals and Triangles

While it is often easy to compose images with lines that run parallel to the edges of the photograph, it is often very dramatic to use diagonal lines to create a dramatic effect. Diagonal lines can be used to lead the viewer's eye into the photograph and even demonstrate action.

The following photographs demonstrate the use of diagonal lines and triangles in composition.





There are many other rules of composition. Some involve color, the balance of elements, the position of the horizon line, etc. There are lots of resources to learn about composition, but most of all, experiment. Study what other photographers are doing and try to employ what you learn from them in your own photographs.

Take Photos!

Study what you have learned in lesson one through four. Reread your camera manual and continue taking photos. See what happens on your camera if you use the different settings that are available to you.

Next Lesson...

Applying what you've learned...

A practical lab