

# Compositional Elements

*Tips & Tricks For Enhancing Your Compositions*

# Incorporating Composition Elements

## Free Ebook

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Creating strong, compelling images is a goal we all share—images that stand out from the crowd and evoke a deep sense of thoughtfulness. These images aren't just aesthetically pleasing, they're a true reflection of your creative process. The days of being a "snapshot" photographer are behind you; it's time to evolve into a methodical observer and artist. By fully integrating the lessons in this Ebook, you'll change the way you see and capture the world forever.

## Becoming A Thoughtful Artist

Creating a great work of art, mastering a craft, or even absorbing the depth of a book all require time, patience, and intentional effort. Growth comes from a continuous cycle—learning, applying, refining, and repeating—until proficiency is achieved. The techniques and concepts I discuss in this eBook follow the same principle; they demand consistent practice and repetition.

This eBook serves as a stepping stone in that journey. When I read a similar guide eight years ago, it sparked what has since become a lifelong pursuit—learning to observe the natural world with a methodical and thoughtful approach.

Throughout this eBook, I'll provide key elements to look for when composing an image. These visual cues will vary depending on location, lighting, time of day, and even your emotional or physical state. Over time, they will become second nature—so ingrained in your process that you'll recognize them effortlessly in the field.

For now, however, it may be helpful to take notes and refer to them during your outings. This methodical approach is one I practiced for years, and I can confidently say—it pays off. This is just the beginning into this realm of photography, one that is a life-long pursuit.

## A New Way Of Thinking

Throughout this Ebook I will be showing you elements that you should be on the lookout for on every single outing. These elements are designed to enhance your compositions, draw attention to your subject, lead the viewers eye throughout your scene and to simplify your compositions. Simplifying your compositions is one of the best things you can do for yourself. The best works of art out there are extremely simple, yet very methodical.

The purpose of this book is to help you understand not only the basics of creating compelling composition but to open your eyes to a much more interactive way of experiencing the outdoors and to jump-start your current way of photographing. It is time to become a methodical, introspective photographer and to view the world through a new lens.

# Natural Framing Elements

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While in the field, I am constantly looking for natural frames. This will almost always create a more methodical approach, draw the viewer in, and make a profound distinction of what your subject is. Using this method should simplify your overall scene/composition, not complicate it.

Be thoughtful and look closely.

If the viewer cannot make a distinction of the subject, or the "star of the show" then the eye will wander aimlessly and will be lost.

## Types of Frames

Nature offers an infinite array of natural frames, each uniquely enhancing a composition. Some are bold and unmistakable, while others are so subtle that the viewer may not consciously recognize their presence. Mastering the art of identifying and incorporating these frames requires practice, patience, and a refined eye. As your skills develop, your use of natural framing will become more seamless and sophisticated, adding depth and intrigue to your images without appearing forced.

Natural frames can take countless forms, varying in size, shape, and prominence. For example, they might include:

- An arch. Think of Mesa Arch in Canyonlands National Park.
- A tunnel or a cave, looking out.
- Trees that surround your subject.
- A literal window frame, looking outside.
- Rocks that represent a square-like foreground.
- A canyon with large walls on either side.

## Positives For Using Framing Elements

- Create a clear and concise photograph.
- Easily determine your subject.
- Keeps the viewer's eye within the desired location in the frame.
- You take a methodical approach to determine your subject and surrounding objects to draw you in.
- Simplifying your image and your subject.

## Things To Watch Out For Using Natural Frames

- Keep it simple! You're using this framing to simplify the image.
- Do not let it distract from your subject. Make it add to your subject.
- It can be easy to over-complicate using a framing element.
- Keep the framing simple, watch the edges of your frame for distracting elements.
- Do not impede this framing element over your subject. Keep space between the two so there is no overlap. Clear and concise

## Examples On The Next Page

# Framing Examples

## U-shape Foreground - Framing the landscape



## Why It Works

Using this natural U-shaped foreground as a framing element helps guide the viewer's eye while preventing it from being drawn too close to the edges of the image. This approach encourages a balanced composition, allowing the focus to remain on the quality of light illuminating the rocks and cliffs, the formations below, the glowing clouds, and the distant peak.

Additionally, this natural leading line creates a continuous, circular movement within the image. The viewer remains engaged, constantly exploring the scene without feeling overwhelmed or encountering a definitive endpoint, resulting in a more immersive and dynamic visual experience.

## Why It Works

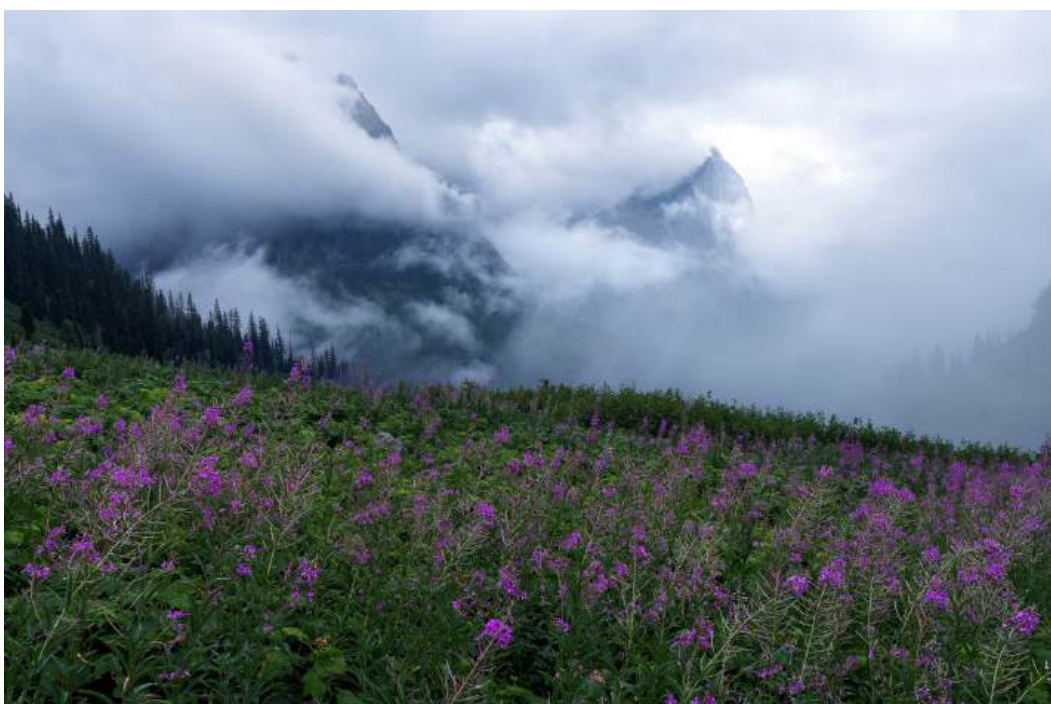
Trees provide a powerful natural frame for your subject. By strategically aligning these trees/lines, you direct the viewer's attention straight to Angel's Landing, ensuring the composition remains focused and intentional.

This framing creates a visual tunnel, keeping the eye contained within the scene rather than drifting toward the edges. The structured yet simplified composition allows for a deeper appreciation of the subtle variations in light, enhancing the overall impact of the image.

## Verticle Lines - Framing Angels Landing



## Angled Lines - Hillsides & Clouds



## Why It Works

The ridgelines on either side of the frame tells you to look toward the center of the image. As does the cloud formations on both sides. We have these angled lines pushing the eye toward the center of the image, framing our subject; the mountains.

Again, these lines are all working in unison. A methodical approach that can always be enhanced in post processing to bring those elements to life.

# Leading Lines

Leading lines are one of the fundamental techniques for creating thoughtful compositions.

They are often the first compositional element introduced because they are readily identifiable—whether observed in the field or in the work of other photographers and painters.

A leading line, as the name suggests, is a line within the composition that begins in the foreground and directs the viewer's eye toward the subject. The power of leading lines lies in their ability to guide the viewer seamlessly through the scene, creating a natural flow within the image. This technique is particularly valuable in landscape photography, where the natural world often presents chaotic elements without clear structure. By employing leading lines, you can impose a sense of order, directing the eye to specific points of interest and improving the visual coherence of the image.

## **Types of Leading Lines**

There are many types of leading lines. This could be a tree stump leading to the sky, as shown on the cover of this eBook. It could be a stream, rocks pointing in a direction, a reflection, or mountain ridge lines leading to the same point as your subject or clouds streaking in uniform lines.

## **Positives Of Using Leading Lines**

- This adds depth to your image: takes you from the foreground to the background.
- Guides the viewer's eye through the entire scene.
- Simplifies your image (in a very positive way)
- Adds a dramatic sense to an image. Especially when you get really close to the leading line.
- Take the viewer for a visual ride through your composition.

## **What To Watch Out For**

- Be mindful of the foreground's prominence. An overly dominant foreground can detract from the main subject, diminishing its visual impact.
- Select leading lines that direct attention toward your intended focal point. Lines that veer toward the edges can inadvertently lead the viewer's gaze away from the subject.
- Select leading lines that direct attention toward your intended focal point. Lines that veer toward the edges can inadvertently lead the viewer's gaze away from the subject.
- Opt for leading elements that are both straightforward and engaging. Overly complex or cluttered lines can confuse the viewer and disrupt the composition's harmony.
- Ensure that the leading lines facilitate a smooth visual journey from the foreground to the background. Excessive color or contrast can be distracting; aim for a cohesive flow that naturally guides the eye through the scene.

## **Pay Close Attention**

If your leading line gets interrupted by an object, that object will hold a TON of visual weight. Think of standing in the middle of the road, photographing the yellow lines leading through a city. But as you take the photo a car 20 feet ahead of you parks on the lines. No longer will the image be about the depth of the line leading through the city. It is all about the vehicle.

Take a look at the first image on the next page. This happens but is used in a thoughtful way.

# Examples of Leading Lines

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## Line Leading To The Tree - Then To Distant Cliffs



### Why It Works

I used this curving snow drift to guide you to my subject, the tree. This tree interrupts the line, attracting more attention.

The line then continues to the forested hill-side, to the well-lit cliffs then back to the beginning again. A great visual flow.

\* Wavy, curvy lines give a sense of calm, gentleness to images. I took full advantage of that feeling here.

## Strong Foreground Lines Lead To Subject

### Why It Works

Really leaning into the strong colored lines of this foreground was a no-brainer here. What really works with this foreground is how I spaced the whiter lines evenly throughout the foreground to lend more balance. This also helps to create simplicity.



## Using Clouds & Stream To Draw You To The Mountain



### Why It Works

There is quite a lot of lines going on here. Each line is working in the favor of the subject: Mt. Reynolds.

From the curving stream (kept darker) to the reflection in the stream. To the clouds directly pointing to the mountain and even the hills to the left and the right of Mt. Reynolds. Every line is directing attention to the mountain.

# Including Layers

Consciously adding layers is one of the most important tools in creating very compelling photographs. This is something that does not get discussed often, yet, it is a profound tool you can use while out in the field. When discussing layering some think that it is the simple way the landscape is which in some ways they are correct. When it comes to setting up a composition though, it is not overlooked.

## **The Three Types of Layers**

1. **Foreground:** The ground which you stand on.
2. **Middleground:** Roughly 50 feet ahead of you, spanning to the distance.
3. **Background:** The furthest away objects. Which is often times your subject.

This concept may seem intuitive—even if you’ve never consciously considered it—because it feels inherently natural. However, achieving a well-balanced composition is not as effortless as it may appear. When you approach layering with intention and precision, you’ll be amazed at the depth and energy it can bring to an image.

Scenes with three distinct layers often have the potential to feel cluttered or chaotic. The key is to use layers that seamlessly guide the viewer’s eye from one to the next, creating a sense of flow and cohesion. Thoughtful placement of objects within each layer is essential—positioning them strategically to enhance the composition while minimizing distractions. Mastering this balance will transform complex scenes into visually compelling ones.

## **Positives Of Using Layers**

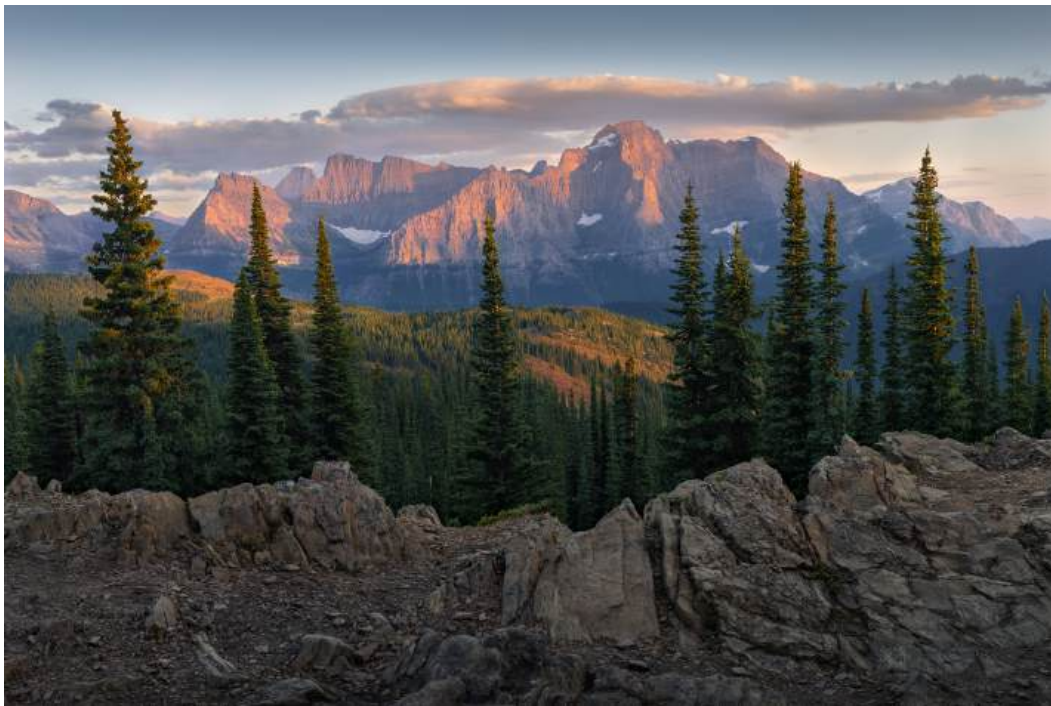
- This adds depth to your image: takes you from the foreground to the background.
- Adds separation between each objects in each layer.
- Can make for a more digestible composition.
- Gives more breathig room throughout the image.
- Can showcase height, texture, pattern and more.

## **What To Watch Out For**

- Be mindful of what objects reside in each layer. Those objects can distract you and lead you astray.
- Having three layers to line up in unison can be difficult. Find areas where they naturally flow to the next layer if possible.
- Incorporating all three layers will inherently add more to work with.

# Layer Examples

## Three Defined Layers - Separated Strategically



### Why It Works

When thinking of layers, I added this rock feature for my foreground element. I did so for multiple reasons; this adds depths **and** the shape of the rocks are similar shapes to the mountain peaks in the distance.

The three layers are very defined. The rocks and prominent trees would be the foreground. The distant green and yellow hills, with the soft-angled light is the middle ground and the mountains, (the subject) are the background.

## Each Layer Is Separated Color + Haze

### Why It Works

The hills' contours and the contrast between golden foliage and blue smoke naturally define the layers. I enhanced this by using a telephoto lens to pull the foreground closer, placing it in the bottom-right for stability. Positioning the mountains in the top-right created balance, guiding the eye smoothly through each layer.

\*The diagonal lines create a dynamic feel for the image.



## Color, Contour & Shape



### Why It Works

Again, three distinct layers are visible. The layering here is more-so defined by the color variations which is what really drew me to this particular scene.

Foreground: Vibrant yellow.

Middleground: Icefield-dark blue.

Background: Mountain top - light blue.

# Adding Separation

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Consciously incorporating layers is one of the more powerful yet often overlooked techniques for creating compelling photographs. While some may assume layering is simply a natural feature of the landscape, intentionally using it to your advantage, within your composition is another challenge.

Understanding how to arrange foreground, midground, and background elements can add depth, dimension, and a stronger visual narrative to your images. This is a technique that doesn't get discussed often, yet it's an essential tool for elevating your work in the field.

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## Positives Of Using Layers

- This adds depth to your image: takes you from the foreground to the background.
- Adds separation between each objects in each layer.
- Gives the eye more time to spend examining all of the details.
- Can make for a more digestible composition.
- Gives more breathing room throughout the image.
- Can showcase height, texture, patterns and more.

## What To Watch Out For

- Be mindful of what objects reside in each layer. Those objects can distract you and lead you astray.
- Having three layers to line up in unison can be difficult. Find areas where they naturally flow to the next layer if possible.
- Incorporating all three layers will inherently add more to work with.
- Think to simplify while framing up your compositions.

# Separation Examples

## Angles & Openings



## Why It Works

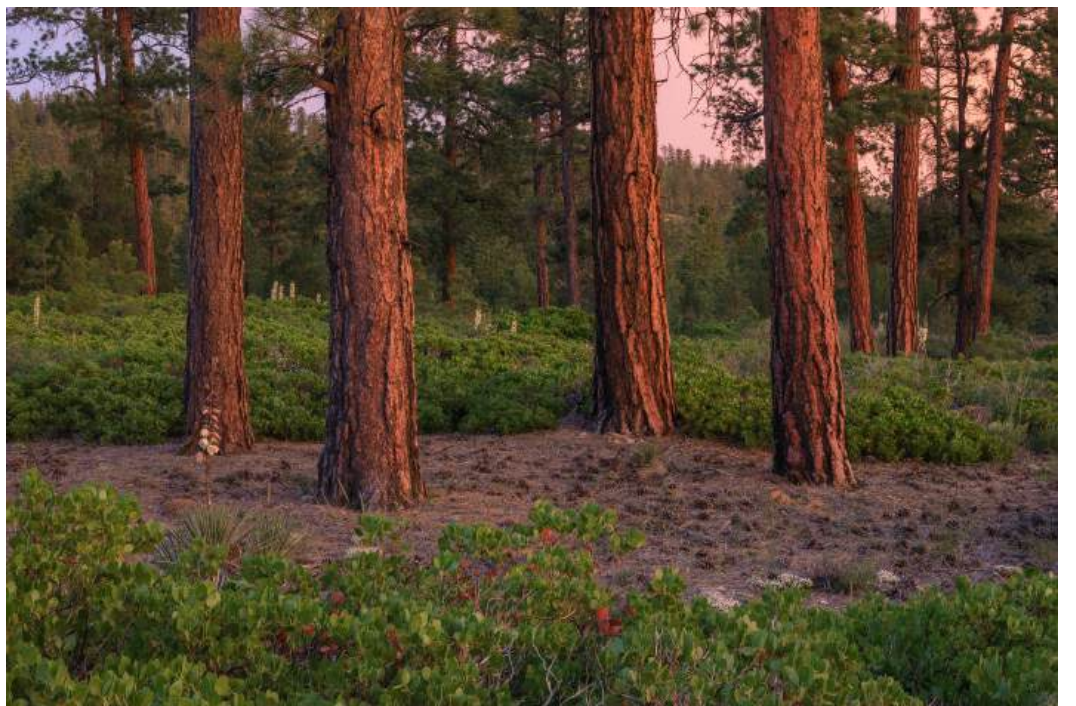
These mountains are separated not only naturally but because of the light. The red, moody lighting is high enough on the mountains that it created separation from the blue shadows and the red lighting. This took much thought and timing to wait until those red's didn't overlap and so they stood on their own, thus creating a thoughtful image.

## Why It Works

Trees and forests are easily the most difficult subject to photograph and do justice. Forests are, by nature, chaotic with no rhyme or rhythm.

Which adds immense difficulties.

Here, I set up my tripod and meticulously moved an inch or less at a time, literally. Until these trees did not overlap. Each clump of trees has its own space to breathe. Even the foreground; the green Manzanita, created separation from the closest trees by the use of color.



## Each Tree Has It's Own Space

## Thoughtful Separation - Using Light



## Why It Works

This is a bit more complicated image to explain the layers but it is all in the light. I will explain

Bottom to Top:

Notice how the direct light landed on the small ridge (far left) and the spire (center). The light is within the shadows. Moving up, the spire is lit yet the cliff behind is in shadow: showcasing separation. The large cliff face (middle right) is lit but the layers behind is in shadow before reaching the Henry Mountains behind which are lit. Each layer is revealed or hidden by the use of light and shadow.

This allows the eye to move through each layer without spending too much time anywhere specific.

# Final Thoughts

Being methodical in your approach to photography will only strengthen your artistic vision. Rather than rushing to capture a scene by firing off a series of shots, take a step back and truly observe the landscape. Give yourself a few moments to study its elements, identify what draws you in, and refine your composition around that focal point.

Learning to analyze a scene in this way takes time, but it's a crucial skill that separates a snapshot from a thoughtful image. The greatest photographers—past and present—practice this level of intentionality, and developing this habit is a significant step forward.

These composition principles are just the beginning—an entry point into a much deeper, more intricate process of creating compelling images. Behind every great photograph lies a complex web of thoughts, decisions, and creative intent. Developing a thoughtful approach to composition takes time, but it's what ultimately elevates an image from ordinary to truly impactful.

## My Teachings

On every outing with clients, I focus on building a strong foundation to help you see the landscape in a new, more intentional way—whether you're a beginner or a seasoned professional.

During my multi-day workshops, this methodical approach truly takes shape. Through constant guidance, both literal and metaphorical examples, and hands-on experience, you'll start to see noticeable growth in how you compose and compare images. By the end of the workshop, as countless clients have testified, you'll view and photograph the landscape with a completely new and creative perspective.

Explore my multi-day workshops, daily private tours, tutorials, and more by following the link below.

<https://www.hunterpagephotography.com/>

<https://www.youtube.com/@hunterpagephotography>

<https://www.instagram.com/hunterpagephotography/?hl=en>