

Tom's Tips –  
**Composition, Light,  
Exposure**

Techniques and Thought Exercises To  
Improve Your Photography

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# Introduction

- Creativity ↔ Technique
- “Photography is progressive in nature ... and relies upon layers of understanding from a solid foundation up.” --- Alister Benn\*
- Share our curiosity and successes
  - Highly interactive
  - No question too simple or “dumb”
- A good review
  - From my experience – mostly outdoors – to you sharing yours
  - Fits with Cognitive Composition
- If you take away two or three things that improve your photography → success!
- *Regardless* of your current capability – set the bar a little higher – challenge yourself



\* Noted nature photographer who's company is dedicated to encouraging individual creativity



# Composition → Light → Exposure

- Great photographs are at a minimum –
  - Well exposed and focused
  - Have interesting light
- But **photographs** start with **COMPOSITION**
- Composition – big topic
  - A process for organizing the frame to meet your vision
- Types of light and implications for your vision
- Exposure – techniques for realizing your envisioned image
- Throughout will be “tips” – key reminders
- Warm up both hemispheres – right and left ☺
- Cameras don't take great photographs → Great photographers do

www.photoblog.com › learn › photography-composition-rules ▼

## 15 Of The Best Photography Composition Rules - PhotoBlog

Discover 15 **photography composition** rules for gorgeous photos. Instantly take your photos to the next level with these rules of **photography**.

expertphotography.com › the-complete-guide-to-photography-compo... ▼

## The Complete Guide To Photography Composition: 78 Tips

Jump to **Composition** Techniques From the **Great Photographers** ... - His view on **photography** was capturing a decisive moment. A **great** tip that ...

medium.com › photography-secrets › beginners-guide-to-photograph... ▼

## Beginners Guide to Photography Composition - Medium

Jan 10, 2018 - **Composition** is one of the most important aspects of **photography**, ... It's simply the **best** way to get started thinking about **composition**, and it ...

photolemur.com › blog › 35-composition-tips-for-taking-stunning-la... ▼

## 35 Photography Composition Rules and Tips | Compositional ...

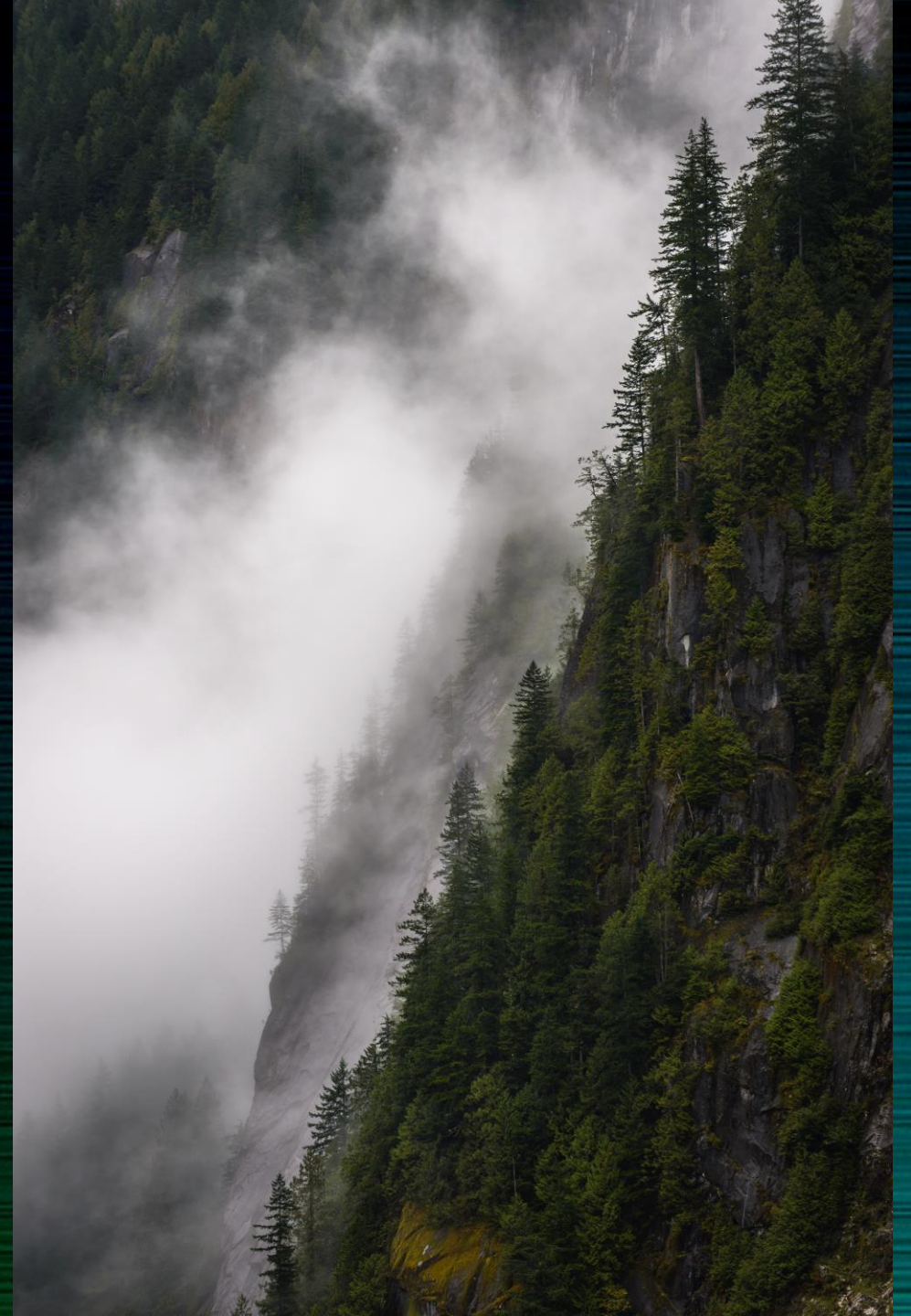
Apr 18, 2018 - **Photography Composition** Rules 📌 There are some basic guidelines which are ... **Excellent** lighting makes **good** landscape **photography** **great**.

Composition – much more than just a series of tips




# Vision – Be Inspired

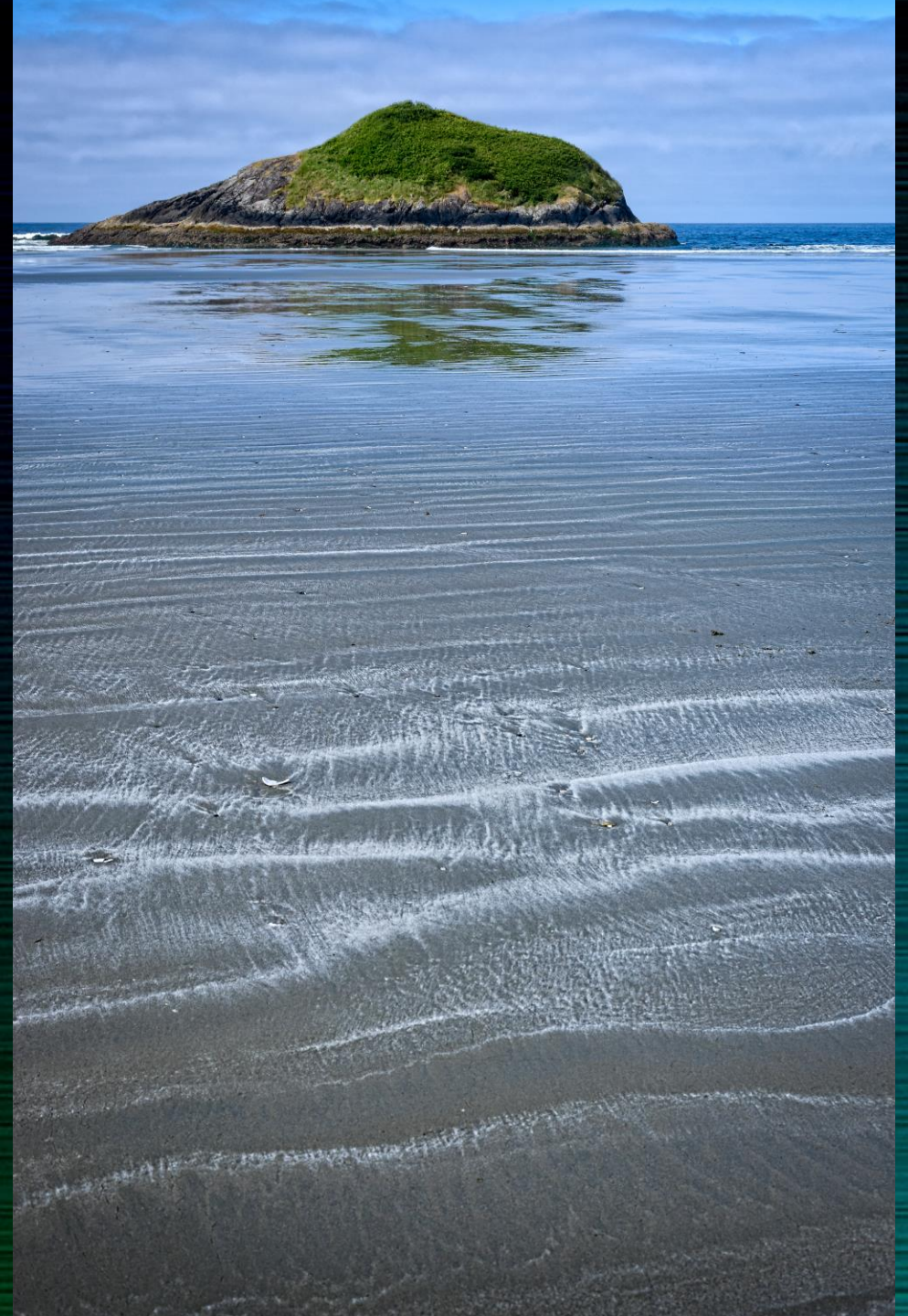
- Compelling photography – *starts* with vision – and *creativity*
  - before – during – and after image capture
- Begins with an *interaction* – you and something
  - A shape, pattern, or color combination
  - An emotion
- AND a desire to *connect with a viewer* – share an experience
- *Creativity shapes that interaction*
- *Seeing creatively* is a skill – it can be *learned*
- Find what you are drawn to – begin to make it your own – your vision
- Tip: Find and *evaluate* excellence – photographs, paintings, graphics, cinematography
- Tip: Plagiarism is good for learning – try and recreate excellent images





# Composition: Visual Awareness

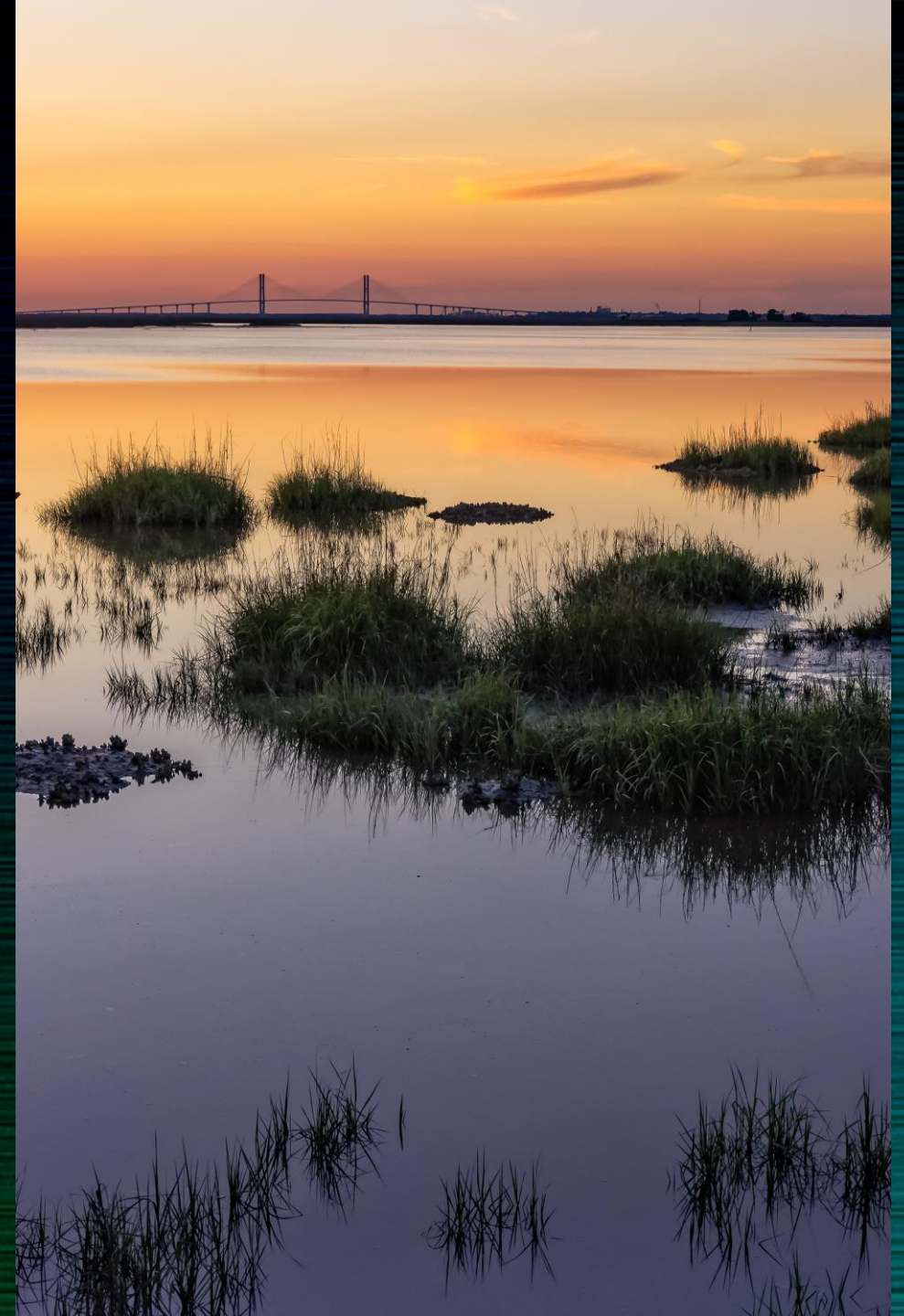
- Vision → Visual space → photographic arrangement
- Identify the *visual space* – train your eye
- Become *visually aware*
  - Figure, ground, foreground, background, secondary objects
  - What draws your eye – color, pattern, light, mood
- Composition - NOT *just* a series of rules (rule of thirds, leading lines, simplicity, ...)
  - Each “rule” brings an awareness – but may limit our vision
- Goal – make it a photograph – more than a picture or snapshot
  -  Find a subject → point camera at subject → snap picture
  - Do work the elements into an arrangement that supports your vision
- **Tip: Composition = a design for the visual experience**
  - **What experience do you want to share when your photo is looked at?**





# Composition: Observe

- Observe the **visual space** within the **frame**
- Observe all elements in the frame
  - What's to left of subject? Right? Up? Down?
  - What grabs your attention? What may be obscured?
  - Patterns, textures, colors
- Evaluate great paintings for “flow”
  - A painter starts with a blank frame – what was *added* to make your eye flow and create the desired effect?
- Tip: Evaluate how your eye flows through the frame – including the sides
  - How do objects interact with the side – give room to breath
- *Tip: Observe first – you cannot order or change what you do not recognize*





# Composition: Figure and Simplification

- Where / what is the figure (subject)
  - What story(s) or vision do you want to share
  - *Prior study and preparation* will enhance the process
- Simplify the broad set of visual material
  - Subtract items to get to a more limited set (i.e. the ground)
  - Utilize creative controls to form more limited set
    - timing, camera position, framing, shutter, aperture, focal length
- Tip: Pre-edit and learn what not to shoot
  - Identify what works for your vision – time of day, type of light, location, perspective
    - Scouting can save much time later – and have you there at the critical time
  - The opposite of blazing away
- Tip: Simplify – change your perspective, orientation, use your exposure triad





# Composition: Find and Accentuate Patterns

- We naturally *find* and respond to visual *patterns*
  - In 3 dimensions – we constantly identify patterns
    - lines, forms, shapes, textures
- Viewing a photo – more difficult to find patterns
  - Lost the ability to see “depth” – now in 2 dimensions
- *Compose* so that patterns are *easy* to find
  - Patterns draw the eye – the viewer naturally finds interest
  - No patterns – viewer may skip right past
- Patterns are everywhere – become more aware with practice
- Tip: Compose without clutter and incorporate patterns
  - Lines, forms, shapes, textures lure your viewer in
  - Guides the viewer exploring your photo









# Composition: Control The Strongest Visual Cues

- Not all visual space is equal – some elements carry more weight than others
  - Multiple varying elements will clash
    - Varying colors will compete for attention
    - Objects of different size, shape, depth
- Control the space
  - Isolate a specific theme or unique pattern *through framing choice*
  - Simplify → shallow depth of field and/or perspective
- Tip: Ensure the strongest visual cue is your primary subject
  - Strong visual cues trump simplicity
    - Extreme bright colors, light traps, strong shapes will draw your eye
    - No matter where in the frame
  - Eliminate secondary cues through perspective, choice of focal length, shutter speed
- *“The ability to bring order from chaos has become one of the skills most admired in photography.” – Michael Freeman\**

*\* Smithsonian Magazine photographer for three decades*







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# Composition: Think In Terms of the Frame

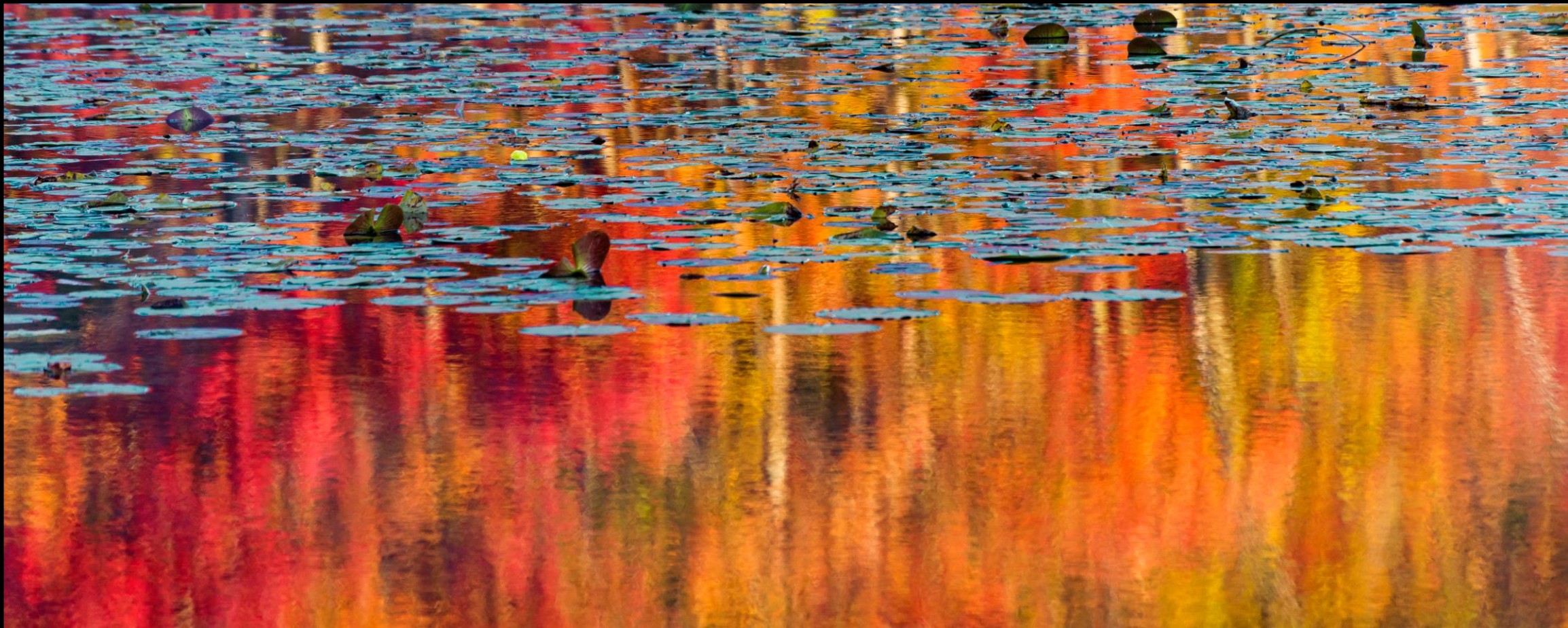
- When ready to take an image – *what do you set as the four corners of the frame?*
- Use the viewfinder – right?
- Convenient, BUT – seeing via viewfinder constrains your creativity and control
  - There's the frame → try and fill it
- Tip: First set the frame without the viewfinder – look at the scene and decide what exactly you want to capture
  - Where do you want the corners to be?
  - Then use the camera as the *tool* to capture your vision
    - Use positioning, focal length choice, frame orientation, aspect ratio, shutter speed, aperture
  - *Include post-processing* in your vision (crop, multi-frame, B&W, focus stacking)

















# Composition: Make Entry Easy

- *Invite the viewer in!*
  - Lure the viewer into the frame!
- *Lead-ins* make the process easier
  - Simple visual clues guide you into the frame
  - Lines leading into frame from edges
  - Foreground figure looking toward center
  - An archway or natural frame
  - Vignette – via shading or focus
- A good entry will not save an overly complex photo – remember to simplify
- **Tip: Provide an entry to your composition**
  - Lines and cues provide an easy way to enter the frame and create interest













# Composition: Leave Room For Interpretation

- Finally – the true art of composition is in *ambiguity*
  - A *great* composition is more than just a set of directions for the viewer
- You want to excite and involve – make the viewer an active participant
  - Easy to grasp is just as bad as too complicated – a bored viewer will leave
- Ambiguity – 10 people might give 10 different interpretations
- Tip: Excellent composition while visually simple – often contain an element of ambiguity or intrigue
  - Example – Ginnie's bird with a twist













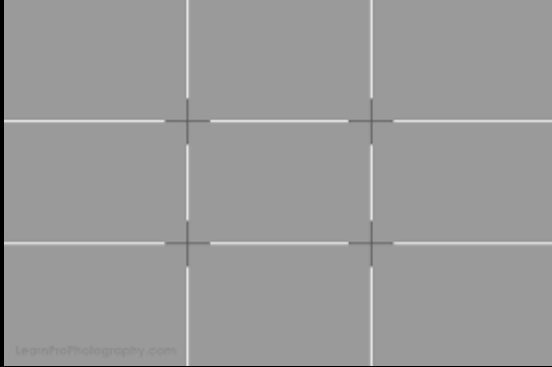
# Lines, Shapes, Patterns, Colors – Oh My!

- What about *composition* rules or techniques –
  - Rule of Thirds, Leading lines, Patterns, Balance, Color Theory, Golden Ratio, Angles, Amputation, ...
- Composition “rules” are proven to create viewer interest
  - Lures the mind to “evaluate” the visual information in the frame
- Creativity and “rules” form a natural tension
  - To break them you need to know them first
- Let’s quickly review of some of the key ones –
  - It deserves a whole presentation





# Rule of Thirds



- Place compositional elements on lines and / or intersections
  - First written down in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century
- Creates more tension, energy, interest
- Why? Invites your eye to other parts of the image
  - If figure is centered – the eye in moving quickly meets the frame edge
- The viewer lingers longer







# Lines, Shapes, Patterns

- Boundaries between contrasting tones or colors  
→ form lines
  - Intersecting lines form shapes
- The brain is programmed at a fundamental level to follow lines and find interest in shapes
  - A thin shape, like a road, the stem of a plant, or a tree branch → a line
  - Repeating lines may form shapes and patterns
- Utilize these to draw the viewer in and create interest
  - Lines lead the eye to focal points









# Orientation, Cropping, Mood

- Line orientation can convey mood
  - Horizontal – stable, calm
  - Vertical – strength, power
  - Diagonal – dynamic, motion, change
- Choose lines carefully to reinforce your story and communicate the mood you want to tell
- Strong verticals give height to your image, and diagonals add depth
  - Try a different angle allowing straight lines to travel from corner to corner in the image.







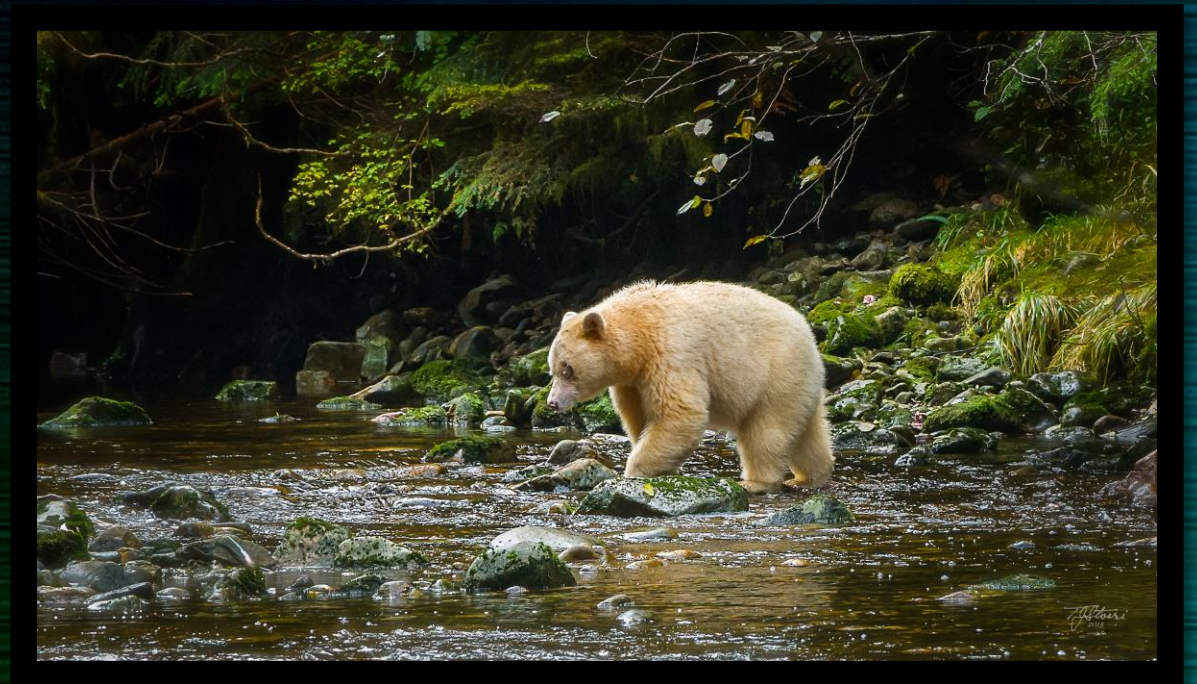




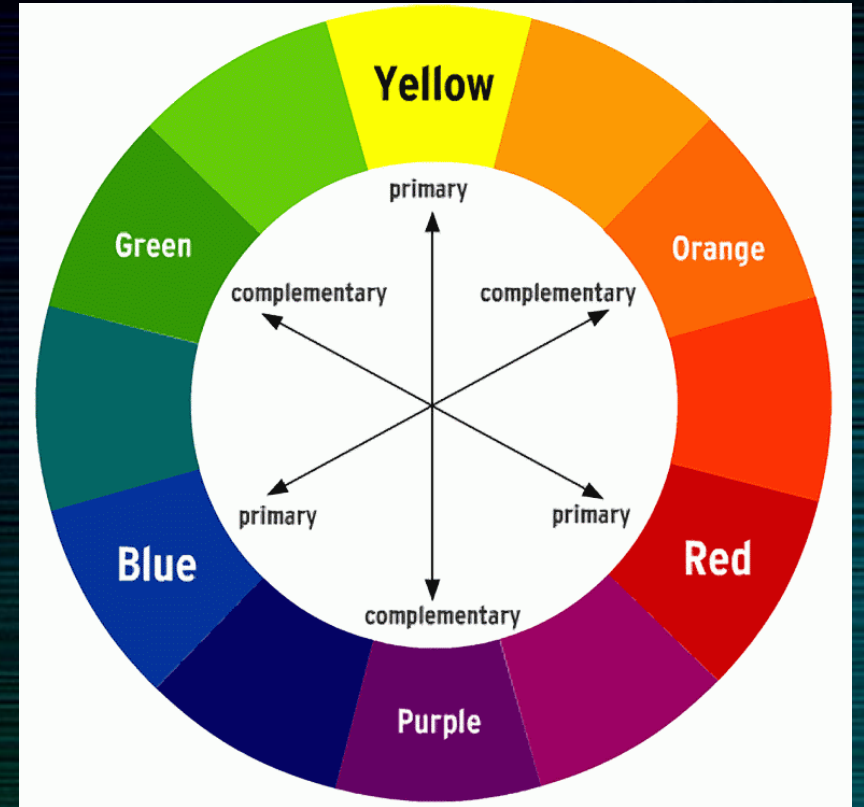


# Balance, Color

- Both are powerful tools and large topics
- **Formal** balance – elements are **uniform** in shape and often symmetrical about a point
- **Informal** balance – one or more **dissimilar** elements are **balancing** on each side of a given point
- **Color theory** – a different dimension to use
  - Certain colors attract viewers – others repel
  - Color harmonies – human eye finds appealing









# Composition Framework

- Vision – Be Inspired
- Visual Awareness
- Observe
- Figure and Simplification
- Find and Accentuate Patterns
- Control The Strongest Visual Cues
- Think In Terms Of The Frame
- Make Entry Easy
- Leave Room For Interpretation

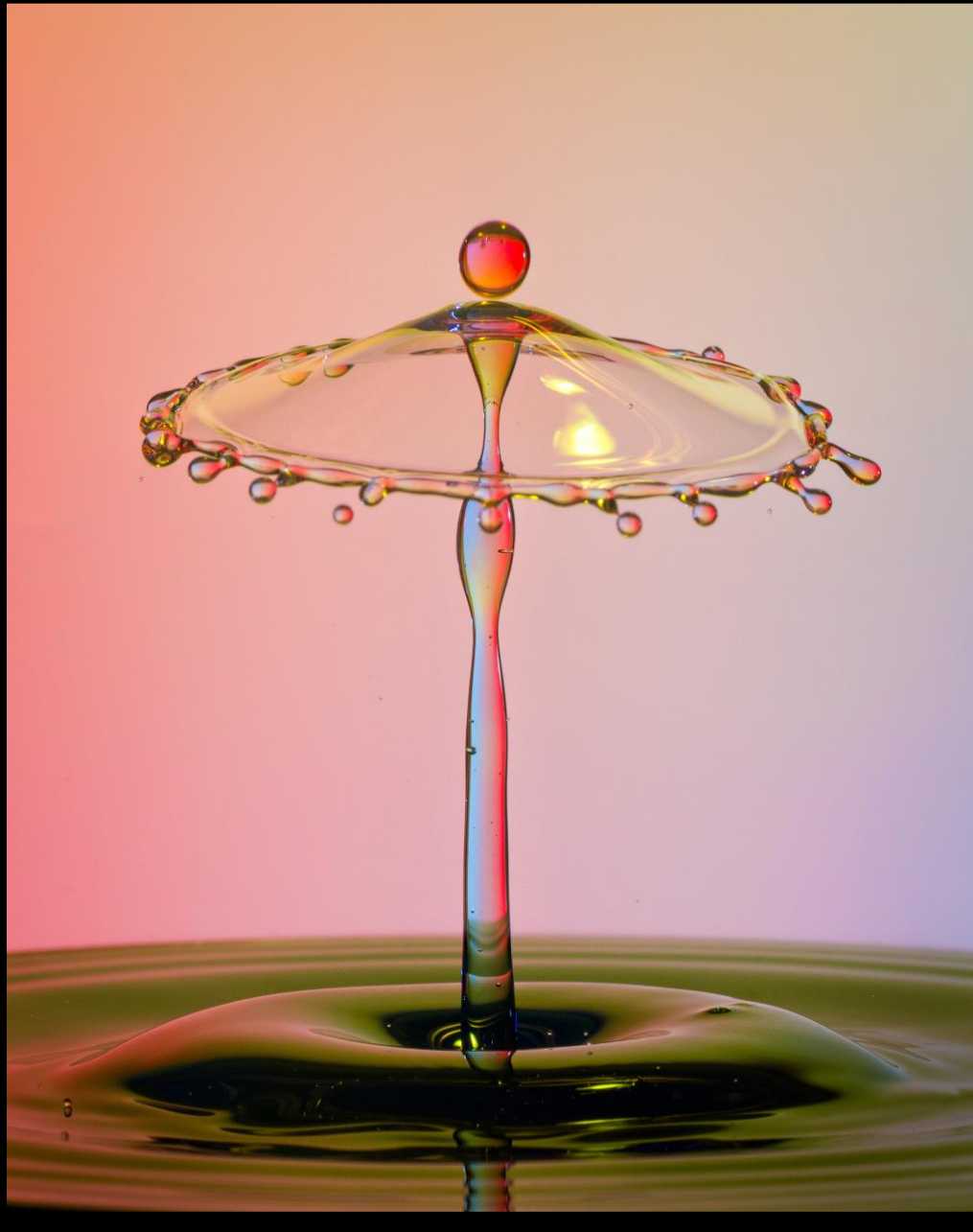


# Visualization and Technique

- *Photographic technique* is needed to enable the capture of your visualization – your composition
  - Camera skill – post processing skill – knowledge of “scene to sensor”
- Creativity and technique go hand in hand
- A *balance* is important for improvement
  - Documenting what’s in front of you is fine
  - Capturing that “impact photo” takes balance
- ***Tip: Good technique enables artistic creativity***









# Know The Light

- Key to visualizing the scene to sensor and frame
  - Light and its effects
- There is no such thing as bad light
  - Just different at different times of the day
  - Differing light enables differing compositions
- Not all light has the same *quality*
- No amount of editing can fix an image taken in poor or uncomplimentary lighting conditions
- Tip: Evaluate the light as part of your visualization – before or at the point of composition





# Types of Light and Implications – Hard / Soft

Hard Light	Soft Light
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Single light source – small or far away</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Several light sources</li><li>• Diffusing light through barrier or via reflectors (clouds, paper, walls, reflectors)</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Well defined dark shadows</li><li>• Definition of shapes and texture</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Soft shadow or no shadow</li><li>• Better depicts colors and features</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dramatic – depth effect</li><li>• Less tonality</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• More even light – calming</li><li>• More tonality</li></ul>

- Tip: Use / observe the type of light to compliment your photographic objective – shape / modify the light to your objective by time of day, weather, or reflectors/diffusors, location



# Types of Light and Implications – Natural/Artificial

Natural Light	Artificial Light
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sunlight</li><li>• Daylight, twilight, blue hour, golden light</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All kinds</li><li>• Flash, florescent, LED, tungsten</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Less controllable</li><li>• Varies with time of day, weather, season, geographic location</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• More controllable</li><li>• Hardness, distance, intensity, angle</li><li>• Light color</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You shape your photo objective to the available lighting</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Many options – you control how it impacts your photo objective</li></ul>

- Tip: Use / observe the type of light to compliment your photographic objective – shape / modify the light to your objective by time of day, weather, or reflectors/diffusers, location



# Further Light Tips

- Weather
  - Cloudy weather produces soft light and is generally preferred for most objectives
  - Storms and fog create potential for spectacular effects
  - Moist air softens distant segments in an image creating perspective (landscape)
- Time of Day
  - Softer light early or later in day and warmer light
- Dappled light under trees produces very nice soft light



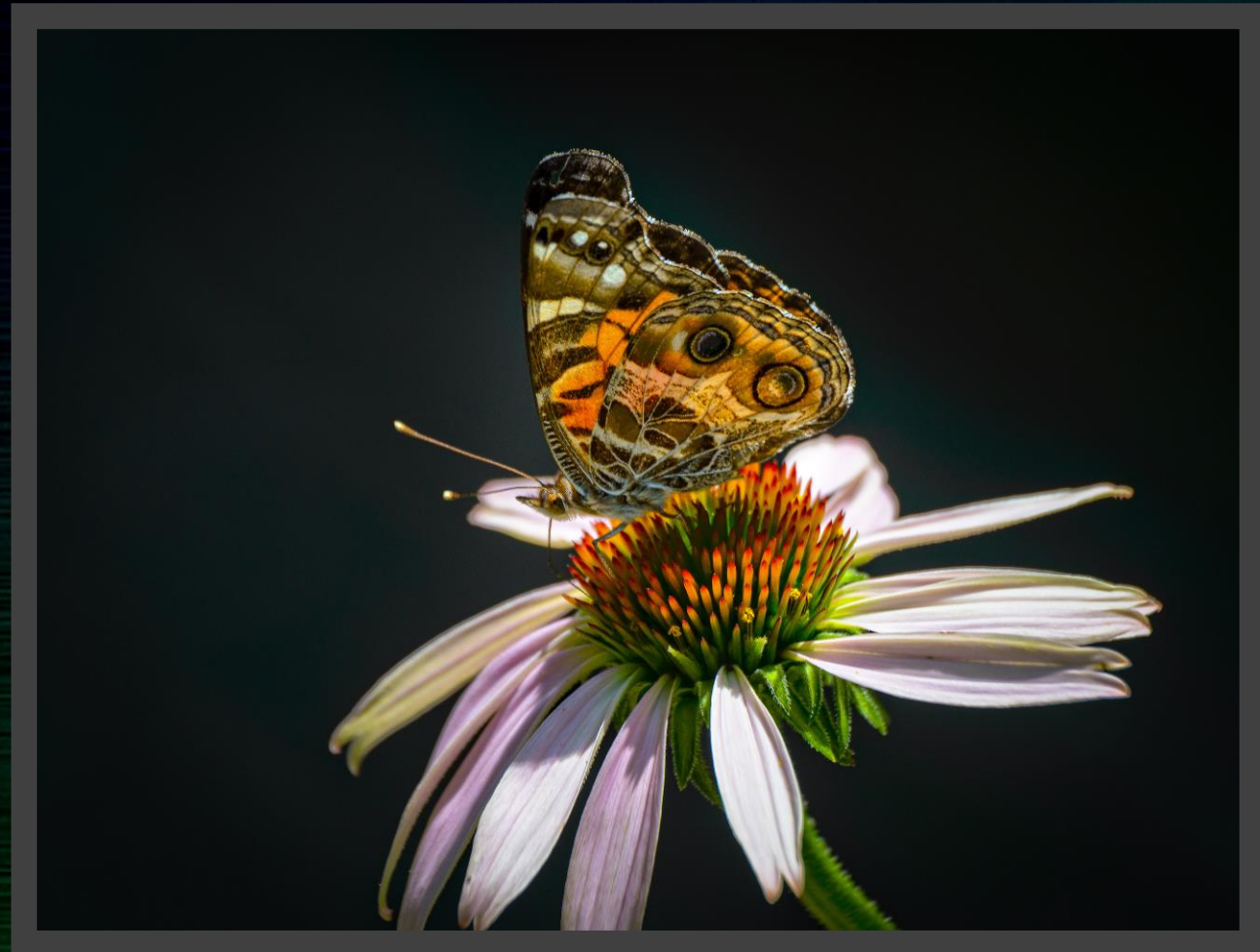






# Exposure Technique

- The camera is the tool – what “knobs” effect the light capture
- Exposure triad: ISO – Aperture – Shutter
  - Aperture and shutter control the amount of light hitting the sensor
  - ISO determines the sensitivity (gain) of the sensor to light
- ISO: Sensor gain and noise
- Aperture: Depth of Field, Diffusion effects, Bokeh
- Shutter: Motion effects
  - Flash effects
- **KNOW YOUR GEAR !!**

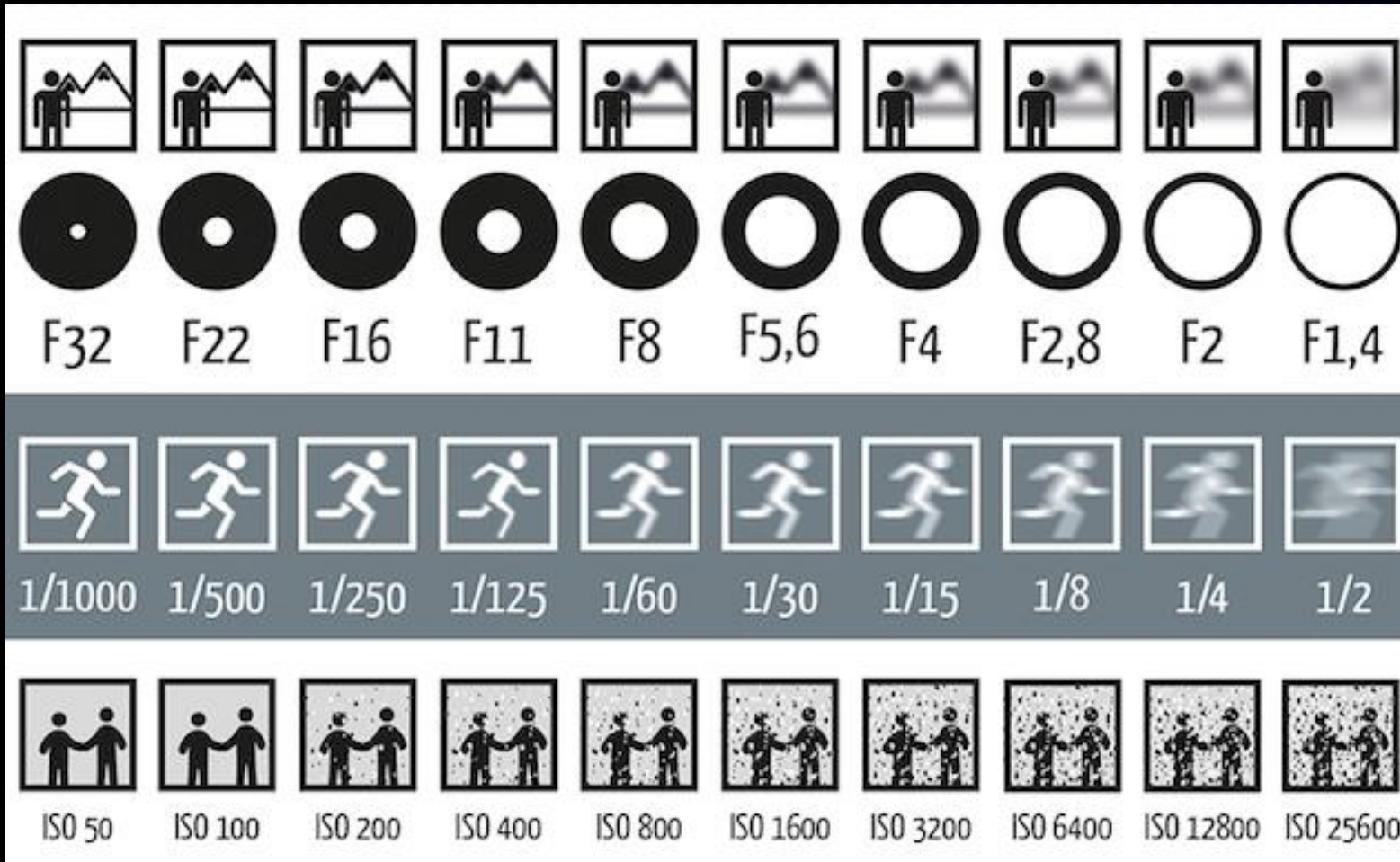








# Photographic “Stops”



- The triad is set to “stops”
- Each stop changes by a factor of 2
- Moving a stop lets in or reduces the light by 2x or by 1/2x
- So to maintain an equal exposure you can control the unique effect of each control by matching changes in stops
  - +1 stop for one part of triad requires -1 stop in another part to maintain the same exposure





# Histogram Use

- Utilize changes in the exposure triangle to move the histogram to meet your vision
- Tip: The histogram is a key tool for proper exposure
  - **Essential** for capture of all important image information
- Practice manipulation of exposure triangle until it is an ingrained skill



**UNDEREXPOSED**  
Difficult to recover in post process. Results in overly noisy photographs. Avoid underexposure at all costs. Use a lower f/number, or lengthen the time the shutter is open.

**EXPOSED TO THE LEFT**  
Generally acceptable, most common nightscape exposure with standard settings. Photo may get noisier if pushed in post process. Use a lower f/number or shutter speed if possible.

**NEUTRAL EXPOSURE**  
Safest exposure. Results may appear brighter than natural in the camera but can be easily pulled in post process. No need to change any settings.

**EXPOSED TO THE RIGHT**  
Best choice for the lowest noise but requires care not to overexpose. Results will look overly bright in the camera but can be easily corrected in post process.

**OVEREXPOSED**  
Difficult to recover in post process if highlights are overblown. Rarely occurs unless affected by moonlight or extreme light pollution. Use a lower ISO setting if overexposed.







# Tips Summary – 1

- Vision – Be Inspired
  - Tip: Find and *evaluate* excellence – photographs, paintings, graphics, cinematography
  - Tip: Plagiarism is good for learning – try and recreate excellent images
- Composition: Visual Awareness
  - Tip: Composition = *a design for the visual experience*. What experience do you want to share when your photo is looked at?
- Composition: Observe
  - Tip: *Observe first* – you cannot order or change what you do not recognize
  - Tip: Evaluate how your eye flows through the frame – including the sides
- Composition: Figure and Simplification
  - Tip: Simplify – change your perspective, orientation, use your exposure triad
  - Tip: Pre-edit and learn what *not* to shoot
- Composition: Find and Accentuate Patterns
  - Tip: Compose without clutter and incorporate patterns
- Composition: Control The Strongest Visual Cues
  - Tip: Ensure the strongest visual cue is your primary subject

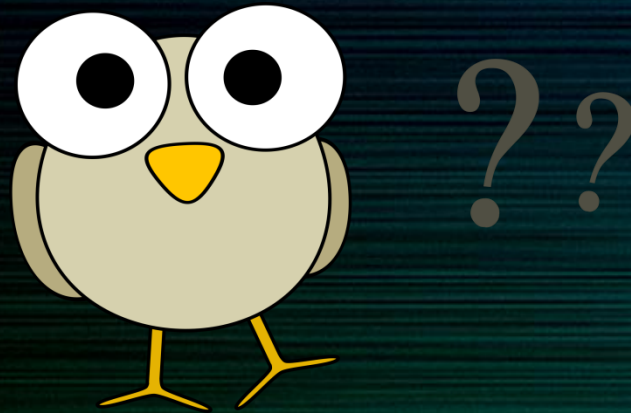


# Tips Summary – 2

- **Composition: Think In Terms Of The Frame**
  - Tip: First set the frame without the viewfinder – look at the scene and decide what exactly you want to capture
- **Composition: Make Entry Easy**
  - Tip: Provide an entry to your composition
- **Composition: Leave Room For Interpretation**
  - Tip: Excellent composition while visually simple – often contain an element of ambiguity or intrigue
- **Visualization and Technique**
  - Tip: Good technique enables artistic creativity
- **Know The Light**
  - Tip: Evaluate the light as part of your visualization – before or at the point of composition
- **Exposure Technique**
  - Tip: The histogram is a key tool for proper exposure



# Questions?





# Photo Editing is No Substitute for Photography Technique

- The camera—not the computer—is still the best photographer
- Today it is important to know how to work a photo – maybe even essential
- But there are plenty of essential things editing cannot fix
  - Recover poor focus
  - Un-blur a moving subject
- Learn how to use your camera
  - how to appreciate light
  - how to compose a great image
- Software can achieve amazing things
- AND – it takes a whole lot less time to get it right the first time – and gives a lot of self satisfaction