

Crafting Creative Compositions: An Alliterative Guide to Advanced Artistic Achievement

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Many self-proclaimed “fine art” critics turn their noses up at color natural landscape photography, claiming that it is more “eco-porn” than art. They view landscape photography as relatively unsophisticated, suitable maybe for post cards and calendars, but not for display in distinguished galleries and museums. And you know what? I think that, to some extent, at least, they’re right on the money.

Now, before you grab your pitchforks and torches, let me state my case. Too often, we landscape photographers rely on the spectacle of the scene to impress viewers, gravitating to the most dramatic scenery and awesome color and light. But the photographer isn’t creating the scenery or the drama of the moment; in fact, Mother Nature does most of the work. It’s like photographing sculptures—someone else already made the tough artistic choices, and the photographer is just making a record for posterity. We end up chasing great moments, waiting for Mother Nature to provide some pizzazz, and pumping things up in Photoshop if she doesn’t. Contrast this approach with that of the famous landscape painters of the nineteenth century: they could have made their paintings as bold and dramatic as they wished, but instead they often relied on subtler color and tonal palettes, and less dramatic landscapes. In fact, some of the most famous paintings of that era focused on the quaint and modest landscapes of the Hudson River Valley in upstate New York—without a single towering sea stack, thousand foot waterfall, or fourteen thousand foot peak to be seen. Unfortunately, it often seems that our approach is more closely aligned with those kitschy posters of dolphins leaping out of blue seas set against a background of rainbows arcing over waterfalls tumbling down giant seaside cliffs.





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“Gothic Rainbow” Gunnison National Forest, Colorado: Who doesn’t love a rainbow? If one is good, then two are even better! But how much of the appeal of this scene can be attributed to the photographer, and how much to Mother Nature? All it needs is a leaping dolphin or two . . .

So how do we shake off the eco-porn moniker? *Composition* is the key. Composition is what makes the difference between the artist imposing his or her vision on the scene, rather than the other way around. It’s what makes the difference between an image fit only for a post-card, and something good enough that even a fine-art snob might take notice. Composition is the most difficult part of photography, but the ability to organize our environment in a coherent fashion is what separates us from the animals (that, and opposable thumbs, which help immensely when operating camera controls).

But this leads to my second point. Regrettably, there’s not a lot of compositional variety in nature photography, much to our detriment as artists, and much to the petty delight of the fine art intelligentsia. Typically, landscape compositions seem to fall into one of the following three basic categories:

1. *The Rule of Thirds*: This venerable “rule” of composition has been around since antiquity, guiding millions of aspiring virtuosos including classical sculptors, Renaissance painters, and modern performance artists. That means it must work, right? Well, yes, it can work pretty well, but . . . it is a bit formulaic, and let’s face it, *everyone* uses it. Of course, part of the reason that the Rule of Thirds is used so often is that there are plenty of ROTzis (Rule-of-Thirds Nazis) out there to make sure every one of your shots conforms, whether you like it or not. Resistance is futile!

2. *Leading Lines*: This very powerful compositional style can make you an overnight internet wunderkind. It consists of using bold lines that lead from foreground to background. You may soon begin to notice, however, that not every landscape lends itself to this composition style. This realization typically occurs only when you hit rock-bottom, such as when you try to use a pathetically tiny fallen twig as a leading line. Besides, after a while you might even begin to notice that leading lines are perhaps a little too *obvious*. In fact, they are often rejected by painters for this very reason.

3. *Put Something in the Foreground*: This compositional “style” usually consists of a pile of rocks, seaweed, dung, or something—*anything*—haphazardly plopped in the foreground in an attempt to create . . . well, to create a *foreground*, because the photographer was told at some point during his or her formative years that “you always need a foreground in your image.” Well, guess what? You don’t.



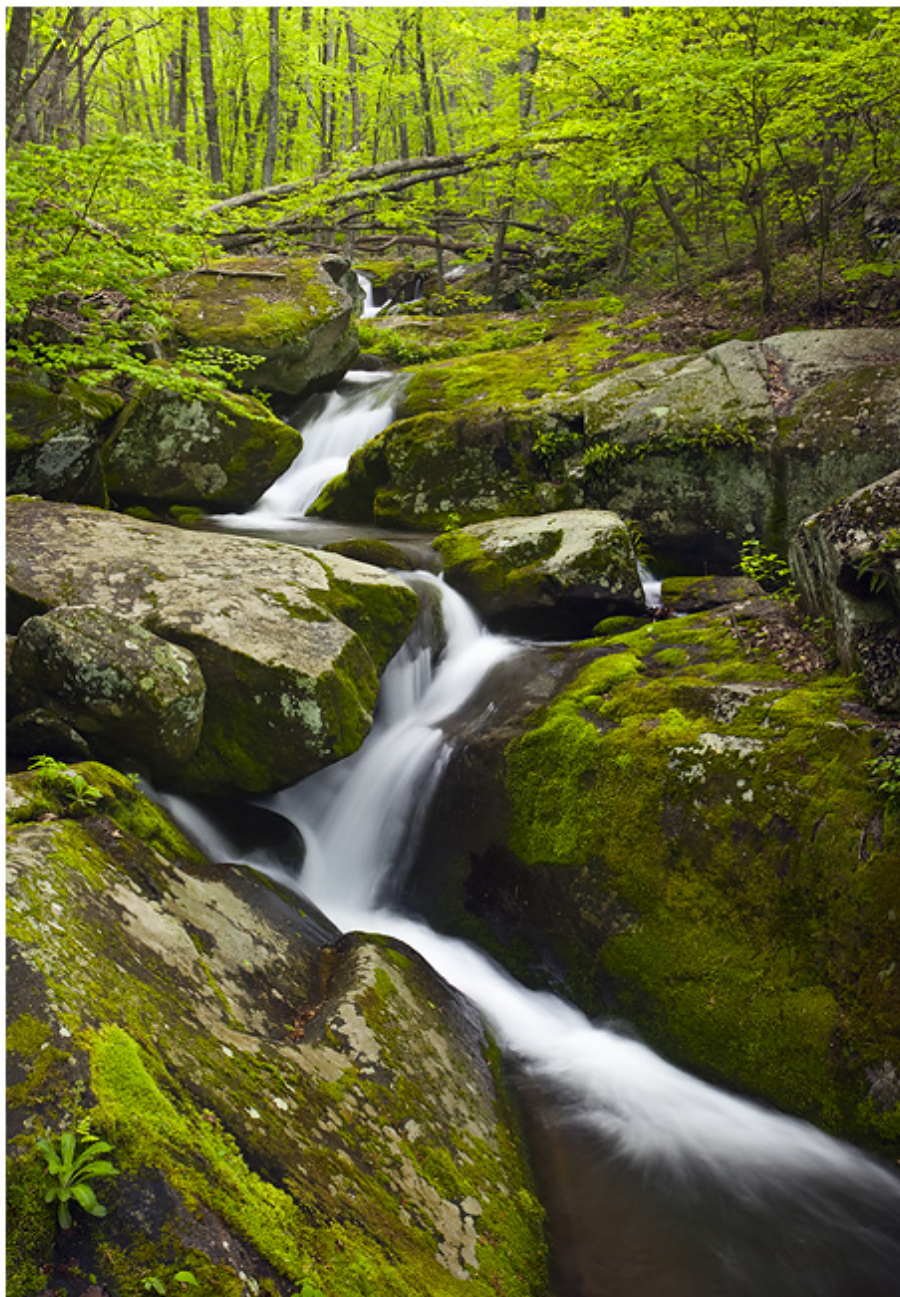
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“The Egg Factory” Bisti Wilderness, New Mexico: The sandstone formations of the Desert Southwest are truly amazing, but merely scouring the desert looking for nifty rocks does not an artist make—nor does reflexively using foreground elements.

Fortunately for the enterprising nature photographer, there exist many other compositional techniques to choose from—if you are willing to try something a little different. I’ve listed three of my favorites below, all of which are sufficiently “high-brow” to impress even the most ardent art sophists. In fact, the following techniques have arguably reached their apogee in the hands of street photographers, who make their artistic living by photographing the everyday mundane stuff people see when walking around; study the work of [Henri Cartier-Bresson](#) and you’ll likely understand these better than I can ever explain or demonstrate. Now, keep in mind that these techniques aren’t necessarily exclusive of other styles of composition—you can use them in conjunction with the Rule of Thirds, Leading Lines, or that Foreground Popping style if you wish. Furthermore, the distinctions between these techniques can be a bit on the fuzzy side, so don’t worry too much about classifying your shot one way or the other. That’s the great thing about composition—anything goes, so long as it works!

Shape-Based Compositions

Some compositions rely on powerful shapes, or the interaction of multiple shapes, to create compositional structure. A simple example is an s- or c-curve created by a river or undulating dune crest. That's what I like to call a *power shape*— basically any simple, graphic shape that holds the eye. Other examples of power shapes include triangles, zig-zags, circles, and swirls. You'll find power shapes in advertising, road signs, and tattoos all the time, simply because they work—they attract attention and appeal to people on a primal level.



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“Zig-Zag” Shenandoah National Park, Virginia.

More complex variations of shape-based compositions rely on the interaction or repetition of multiple shapes. A simple example would be a shot of an aspen grove, which repeats the linear shape of the trees throughout the image. Even *more* complex variations repeat shapes but in less obvious ways, often creating abstract shapes resulting from the interaction of

multiple elements in the scene.



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“Sunset” San Juan Mountains, Colorado.

The image above is all about shape repetition. The shape formed by the stream is repeated and mirrored by the shape of the cloud. Both shapes are triangular, and are further reinforced by the shape of the mountain in the background. There is also an abstract crisscross pattern formed by the lines of the stream banks which continue into the clouds. For this photograph, I intentionally dispensed with the Rule of Thirds, because using it would have ruined the image’s shape-based symmetry and flow. Take that, ROTzis!

Counterpoint

Counterpoint has a certain *je ne sais qua*; it’s one of those “I know it when I see it” type of things that is hard to explain, and even harder to use effectively. Counterpoint is loosely defined as an element of a scene that is set up in contrast to or

relationship with another element. For example, one element can be static and the other motion-blurred, creating contrast between the two; contrast can also be achieved using color, tone, or position. Or, the two elements can relate to one another, such as when elements converge in a scene in a pleasing way. Counterpoint can be used to create drama or tension in an image, or sometimes the exact opposite. Makes sense, right?



“Sand Star” Great Sand Dunes National Park, Colorado.

In the image above, the sun is the obvious counterpoint element. The composition was chosen to establish a counterpoint relationship between the sun and the line formed by the blowing sand, creating visual tension. The sun also contrasts with other elements in the image, in several ways: it is a round shape, opposing the linear and blockier shapes in the rest of the scene, and it is bright where other elements are darker and moodier.

Space-Based Compositions

If you think counterpoint is difficult to define, hold on to your seats for this one. Basically, a space-based composition is one that relies on the spacing and placement of various elements in a scene. A good example of a landscape photographer who excels at space-based compositions is *Arizona Highways* legend [George Stocking](#). George does much of his work in the Sonoran Desert, which is one of the most jumbled and chaotic landscapes in the world. Knowing how to spatially arrange elements in a pleasing way is critical to success in such an environment.

Let's take the aspen grove example above as a very basic illustration of this concept. Such a shot simply doesn't work if all of the aspen trunks are bunched together. Rather, a pleasing spacing between the trunks is necessary to make the image successful. One way to think of space-based compositions is that they are an effort to create order out of chaos—to take a jumbled group of elements and find a way of arranging them that makes sense. Of course, sometimes a shot can be spaced-based using only one or two elements—the placement of those elements in the scene becomes the basis

of an effective composition.



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“Convergence” Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado.

At first glance, the shot above appears to be organized using repeating shapes. The cloud and the two large boulders form (more or less) triangles, which are repeated by the distant, tiny lit stone on the far left and the stone in between the large boulders. But upon further inspection, it becomes apparent that space is what really drives this composition. Not only was spacing critical to avoid confusion caused by merging elements, but compositional structure is created by the abstract spatial relationship between the various elements in the scene. Let's look at a three more images to illustrate all of these concepts. Now, I'm no Cartier-Bresson, but in his honor I have chosen a black and white image to review first:



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“Alien Transmission” Stud Horse Point, Arizona.

This image relies on counterpoint, shapes, and space in equal measure. The counterpoint element is the brightly lit cloud above the sandstone “satellite dish.” It contrasts with other darker elements in the scene, and I triggered the shutter as the cloud passed over the dish to create an evocative visual relationship between the two elements. There is also a repetition of shapes in the scene; the rounded cloud is repeated by circular shapes in the base of the dish, and the dish is a blockier triangle shape that is mirrored by the edge of the distant butte and other caprock. Finally, spacing of the scene was critical, to ensure that the caprocks didn’t merge with other elements of the scene, and to create an abstract spatial flow from foreground to background.



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“Night Glow” Joshua Tree National Park, California.

This second image relies mainly on repetition of shapes: the triangle shape repeated in the rock in the foreground, the bush in the middle ground (an upside-down triangle), the rocks in the background, and the clouds above. An element of counterpoint is added by using contrasting colors—the warm glow on the background rocks contrasts with the blue cast of the rest of the scene, placing and reinforcing compositional emphasis where it should be. Another element of counterpoint—the curved shape of the stripes in the foreground rock—helps create additional compositional interest. An element of space is important to this image as well, as the composition was carefully chosen to create an illusion of perspective progression from foreground, to background, to sky.



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"Atlantic Dawn" Assateague Island National Seashore, Virginia.

Talk about making something out of nothing! For this final image, I had no sea stacks, no towering cliffs, no fourteen thousand foot peaks, no leaping dolphins, almost no *anything*—just water, featureless sand, and sky. What I did have was a pretty sunrise and a great abstract shape formed by the flow of the clouds, but without anything of interest in the foreground, my shot options were limited. So I waited for a wave to come in, and then waited again, and again, and *again*, and so on until I finally had a wave with the right shape. The curving form of the wave mirrors the flow of the clouds above, creating a necessary union between foreground and sky. Notice, once again, I focused more on the interaction of shapes than conformity with the Rule of Thirds.

So there you have it. Using counterpoint, repeating shapes, and space might not always be as bold and aggressive as other forms of composition. Often, such shots require a subtle and nuanced approach, which may not be appreciated by web viewers squinting at tiny thumbnails. I'm not saying that this way is the best way, or necessarily even a good way. I just hope I've convinced a few of you to put down your pitchforks and pick up your cameras instead!

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Contributing Editor **Ian Plant** is a full-time professional photographer whose photos and instructional articles have appeared in a number of books, calendars, and magazines, including *Outdoor Photographer*, *National Parks*, *Blue Ridge Country*, *Adirondack Life*, *Wonderful West Virginia*, and *Chesapeake Life*, among others. He recently co-authored two books published by Mountain Trail Press: [The Ultimate Guide to Digital Nature Photography](#) and [50 Amazing Things You Must See and Do in the Greater D.C. Area: The Ultimate Outdoor Adventure Guide](#).

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