

# Composition

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Composition refers to how the elements on screen (actors, scenery, props, etc.) appear in respect to each other and within the frame itself. The goal of composition is to create an image that is attractive or that at least captures and keeps the audience's attention and effectively communicates the production's message. Throughout the years, a series of composition "rules" have been established. However, the word "rules" is not really appropriate for composition; they should be treated as guidelines.

When looking through a camera, it's very easy to pay attention to what you *know* rather than what you *see*. While you may think it's obvious that the focus of the shot is on the tiny figure in the back of the scene, the audience might focus on the big empty room in the foreground. One way to "short-circuit" your brain and pay attention to your eyes, is to methodically check the following:

## Headroom.

If there is not enough space between the top of a person's head and the top of the picture (too little "headroom"), the frame will seem to crush down on the subject, and parts of the head may be cut off by the television overscan. If there is too much space, then the image becomes unbalanced and the audience's attention goes up to the space to see what is there (Figure 7.40). The subject's height in the frame alters the feeling of the picture's vertical balance, so when taking shots of people, always look out for the headroom. It will be considerable in a long shot and will reduce correspondingly as the shot gets closer. As a very rough guide, keep the eyes at about a third of the screen height from the top of the picture. However, headroom is influenced by whatever else is visible in the top of the picture.



**FIGURE 7.40**

The first image has too little headroom, the second image has too much headroom, and the last one is correct. (Photo by Josh Taber.)

## Framing the subject

Framing the subject can add depth to the scene. The frame could be a tree, a fence, or, better yet, something that adds meaningful context to the subject. It is important that the frame not detract from the subject or message.

## Cropping

There are no rules to how you should crop a shot. While you might be tempted to have a subject's entire head in a shot, you can often get more dramatic power by moving in closer and cropping them. The same holds true for scenes or actions. A close-up shot of a hand flexing and tensing as it wields an ax can be more dramatic than a long shot of an entire lumberjack.

## Leading.

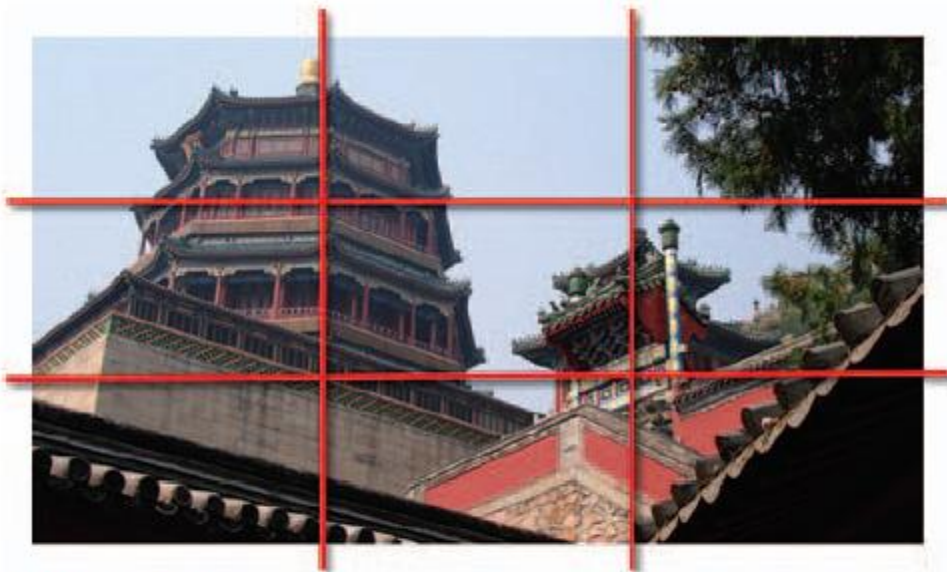
In dialog scenes, if a character is speaking to someone off frame, you'll want to *lead* the speaker by putting some empty space in front of him or her. Leading is also a good way to create tension.

Leading lines is when the lines within the image lead the viewers' eyes to what the director wants them to look at.

## Rule of Thirds

The rule of thirds is a useful aid to composing the picture. Divide the screen into thirds both horizontally or vertically (Figure 7.34). The main subject should be on one of those lines or, ideally, on the intersection of two of the lines. The thirds rule suggests that the main subject should not be in the middle of the image (Figure 7.35). Instead, it should be placed before or after the center of the image, depending on the effect the director would like. Keep in mind that the "thirds" is merely a guideline; sometimes it may be closer to a fifth or somewhere in between.

Ultimately, the subjects' position depends on their size, shape, tone, the background, and their relative importance. Good camera operators instinctively compose shots with these features in the back of their minds.



**FIGURE 7.34**

The thirds rule suggests that the main subject should not be in the exact center of the image. (Photo by Sarah Owens.)



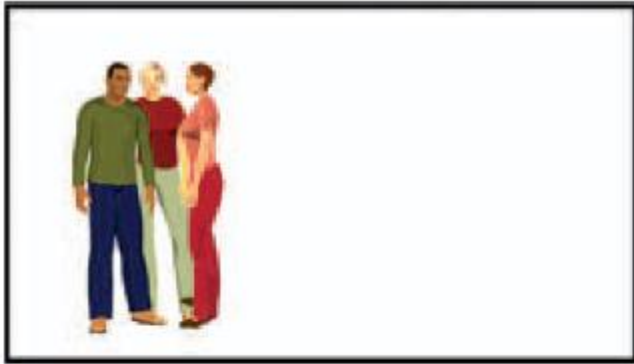
**FIGURE 7.35**

While placing the main subject in the exact center of the image allows formal balance, it can be boring. By placing the subject slightly to the left or right of the frame's centerline, the image becomes more dynamic. Notice that the structure is also framed by the lantern in the foreground.

## Good balance

Looking at a well-balanced image, we see that it has a settled, stable look. An unbalanced shot, on the other hand, has an insecure, uncertain feel to it. Sometimes that might be just what the director wants. An unstable, incomplete look increases tension and creates dramatic impact. An easy way to achieve this is to make the picture top heavy or lop-sided. Usually shots are arranged so that they look balanced and complete.

Other subjects within the frame can significantly impact the balance. The impact of other subjects depends on their relative sizes and tones. Obviously, a large subject a long distance away may appear smaller than a tiny object close to the camera. It is the effect that counts. A large subject on one side of the frame can actually be balanced with several smaller ones on the other side. It is all a matter of their relative sizes, tones, and distance from the center of the frame (Figure 7.41). The key to interesting, well-balanced images is not shots that are continually, monotonously centered every time, but shots that are balanced across the frame, depending on the tones and proportions of the subjects we see there.



A



B



C



D

**FIGURE 7.41**

A group that would look lopsided and unbalance the picture. **(A)** can be counterbalanced by another mass in another part of the screen **(B)**. If centered **(C)**, the picture is balanced, even without other subjects, but continual centering gets monotonous. Different sized masses can balance each other, but take care not to split the audience's attention **(D)**.