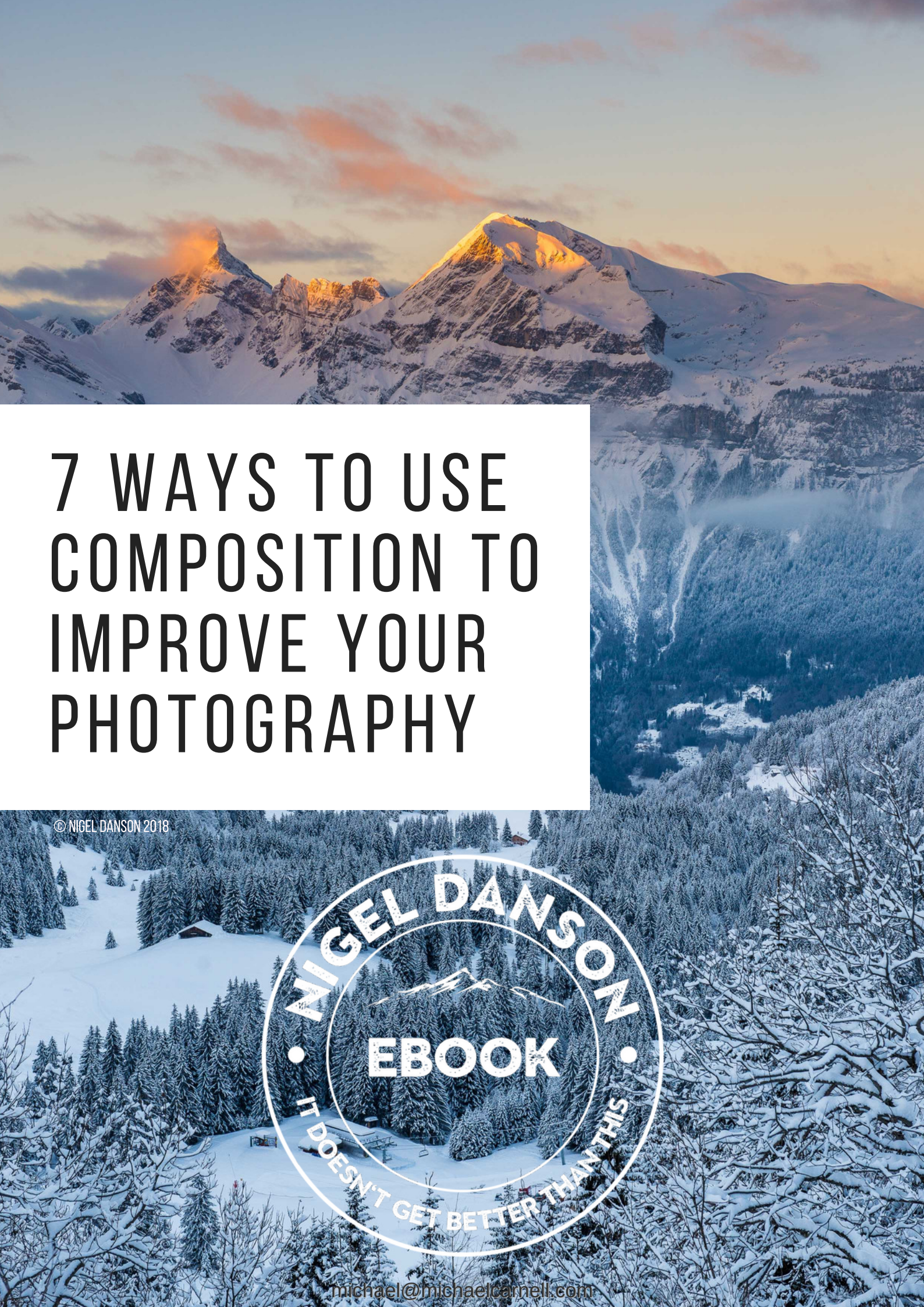
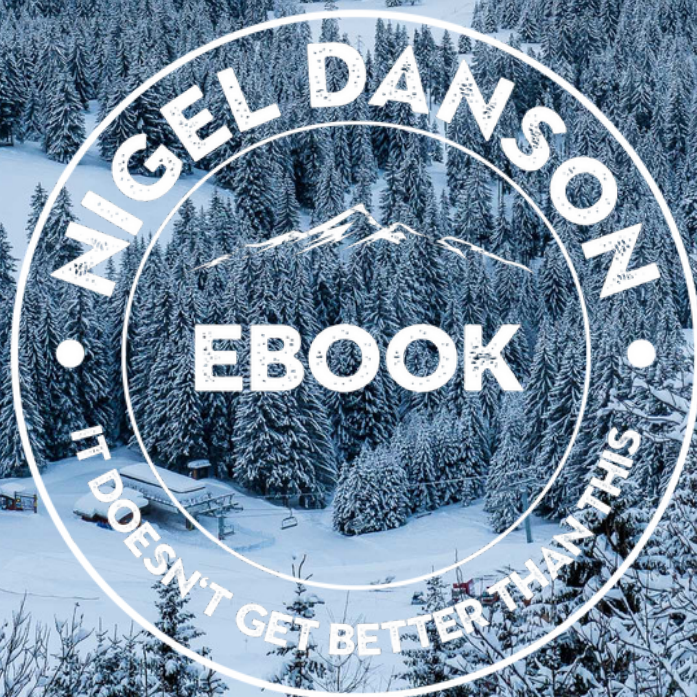




7 WAYS TO USE COMPOSITION TO IMPROVE YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY

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WHY IS COMPOSITION IMPORTANT?

One element that all amazing photos have in common is this elusive element of great composition.

I spoke about the 4 key elements in all photos in my video last year from the Lake District -

[4 Landscape Photography TIPS to Create AWESOME Photos](#)

These are Composition, Light, Subject and Timing.

Most of my portfolio grade images have all 4 of these points. However, without good composition, even those images taken in perfect light conditions would fall down - they wouldn't be great at all - they'd just be a capture of that scene and wouldn't have that extra something special to them.

Think of composition like the blueprint of the image – it is what holds all the elements together and allows the users to enjoy the photography but more importantly tell the story.

There is no perfect composition. In fact composition is your take on the scene.

However, I don't like rules as this quote to the right points out so well. I hope to inspire people to try new things with this eBook and not just follow rules. Then you will go out and create unique and interesting photos.

4 KEY ELEMENTS IN ALL PHOTOS

COMPOSITION

LIGHT

SUBJECT

TIMING

“TO CONSULT THE RULES OF COMPOSITION BEFORE MAKING A PICTURE IS A LITTLE LIKE CONSULTING THE LAW OF GRAVITATION BEFORE GOING FOR A WALK.”

EDWARD WESTON



START GETTING IT RIGHT IN THE FIELD



There are many times that I have looked at an image when I have got back into Lightroom and wished I had moved a little bit to the right or to the left. One of the really important things in composition is to be able to use these techniques while you're actually taking the photo. So when you get back to Lightroom you're just making small changes to the photo rather than cropping right in or thinking this photo is just not going to work. I wasn't low enough or high enough or I should have included this extra tree.

WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO DO?

Composition plays a critical role in photography but it is the most difficult element. We are trying to

- Create a **unique** photograph
- Create a **pleasing** image
- Get the viewer's eye to **flow around the image** and spend time enjoying it
- Show great **drama** in the image
- Tell a **story** with the image
- Avoid **unwanted conflict** where the viewer doesn't know where to look.

WHAT IS COMPOSITION?

Composition is how all parts of the scene come together to form the final image:

- how the sky interacts with the land
- how the subject (trees etc..) are positioned in the image
- how the light interacts with the image
- how you reproduce the feeling of that image
- how all that comes together in the image to produce that final photo that tells a story

“THERE'S NO WORSE THING THAN A SHARP
PICTURE OF A FUZZY CONCEPT”
ANSEL ADAMS



Sunset over El Capitan - Nikon D800 70-200mm F2.8 lens
1/13s | F/9 | 200mm | ISO 80 | Tripod

1) HOW TO LOOK FOR A COMPOSITION

How do you go about looking for a composition when you arrive at a scene?

Ideally you will be doing this when you are scouting a scene. However, that can't always happen and quite often you get to a new location and the light is brilliant.

The first thing to do is - don't rush.

Light conditions may be changing and sometimes you need to get a move on so that you don't miss that moment when the sun rays appear.

But generally, you will achieve the best photos when you take your time and explore the area before you even get your camera out.

I often look through my iPhone as I'm wandering around a new location. It allows me to frame the scene and helps me to see it a little bit differently. I might also take some photos with my iPhone. Then when I finally find something I think may be interesting I'll get my camera out, but still not put it on its tripod. Only when I've found exactly where I'm going to compose the image do I finally get my tripod out.

IMPORTANT REMEMBER TO (IN THIS ORDER)

- 1) Just wander around for 10-15 mins (no devices)
- 2) Maybe consider getting your smart phone out and taking some images to better visualize the scene
- 3) When you are getting closer take out your camera and put the lens on that you think will work best
- 4) When you are really close to the right point set up your tripod
- 5) Remember if you move to another location – leave your tripod and recompose with your camera in hand

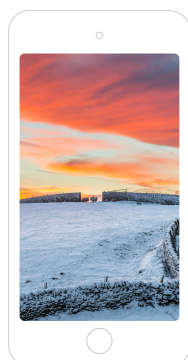


Winter Sunrise - Nikon D800 24-70mm f2.8 Lens
1/100s | F6.4 | 50mm | ISO 64 | Tripod

In this image the first thing that attracted me to the scene was the sunset. I had to find something to anchor that sunset to - a point of interest. I saw the opening in the wall and then the sheep came through and became a great point of interest for the scene.

Next you need to think about how are you going to track the attention of the viewer to that point of interest.

In the sheep picture I used the wall. I include the bottom of the wall that sweeps round into the sheep which I placed right smack bang in the centre of the image. This breaks quite a lot of compositional rules but actually works really well for this particular image. I actually put subjects in the centre of the photo quite often now and think in the correct situation it can be really powerful.



USE YOUR PHONE

YOUR PHONE CAN REALLY HELP TO FIND A GOOD COMPOSITION

- EASIER TO QUICKLY TRY THINGS OUT
- A GOOD FOCAL LENGTH FOR LANDSCAPES
- EASY TO SEE HOW A 3D LANDSCAPE CAN LOOK IN 2D
- THE SCREEN IS BETTER THAN ON YOUR SLR
- AUTO HDR IS GOOD TO SEE WHAT A 'FINAL' IMAGE MAY LOOK LIKE

THE SUBJECT DOESN'T ALWAYS EXIST THOUGH

The other thing to consider when you think about the point of interest is that it might not always be an object like these sheep, or a wall, or a tree - it might just be an area of the image that you want to attract the viewer's attention to.

So for instance, in this shot that I took in Yosemite, I was again attracted to the light and the beautiful mountains but I couldn't really find an individual thing within this shot that really would attract the viewer's attention.

I felt that the background and the layers that were right in the top left corner of this image were the things that were really powerful in the scene. That became my point of interest and I tried to anchor that point of interest and create focus on it by using the light.

The diagonal lines of the light cast across the rock to lead your eye all the way up to that distant layered mountain range in the background.

This ended up being my favourite photo from this summer trip to Yosemite NP.



Last Rays of Summer, Yosemite - Nikon D800 16-35mm F4 Lens
1/400s | F6.4 | 30mm | ISO 64 | Handheld

Remember

When looking for a composition

F.L.I.C.S

FOCUS attention

dramatic **LIGHT**

point of **INTEREST**

think about the **CORNERS**

SIMPLICITY is key

2) LOOK FOR PATTERNS

My 2nd tip is all about patterns in the landscape. When composing your image, look for patterns in the landscape.

Patterns can be found in so many different places. They can be really pleasing on the eye and give an area in the image for the eye to rest. Look for them in grasses, sky, trees, mountains, rocks and all around the natural environment.



Farewell Highlands - Fuji XT2 10-24mm F4 lens
10mm | 1/100s | f6.4 | ISO 100 Handheld

Patterns allow the viewer to slowly move to the point of interest in the image which might be a mountain in the background as in this image here that I took in Glencoe.

You can see that the patterns are repeating in the grasses at the bottom and although that is a big element of the image it really draws your eye up into the mountains in the distance and it also reflects some of the shapes in the mountains and that really helps to gel the image together.



Emerging Forest - Nikon D810 70-200mm f2/8 lens
1/800s | F7.1 | 116mm | ISO 64 | Handheld

I have used patterns in this image as well. You can see that the patterns of the trees really help in this image.

The strong triangular shapes in the trees in the foreground are reflected in the background trees as well. And then there are strong diagonal lines from the light rays coming across which really add to the power of this image.

"PATTERNS CREATE SIMPLICITY AND HARMONY IN AN IMAGE"

3) LINES AND SHAPES

The third thing to think about when composing an image is lines and shapes and how those lines and shapes can create effortless movement around the image.

Most images have something called visual weight. This is where your eye naturally lands when you look at an image. Imagine that you just placed a person in the middle of the image and the rest of it was all white. The viewer would just go to the person, look at the person and then leave the image. What you want to be able to do is to use lines and shapes to allow the viewer to navigate around that image - so they might end up looking at one particular part of the picture but they don't just go straight to it. Or if they do go straight to it, they are able to then go from it to different elements in the image. That's why we use things like the s-curve and leading diagonal lines going through an image as they become really powerful to create that movement through the image.

strong
diagonals
leading to
the lake



symmetry
of the shapes
helps to add
balance

Llyn Idwal - Fuji XT2 10-24mm F4 lens
1/40s | F6.4 | 10mm | ISO 200 | Handheld

USE DIFFERENT ELEMENTS TO LEAD AROUND THE IMAGE

In this image from San Francisco I've intentionally put the subject, which is the tower of the Golden Gate Bridge, off to the right hand side. I've used the path to lead the viewer down to the bridge and then there's another diagonal line that leads you through to the city in the background. I'm using the shapes and the triangles within this image to lead the viewer through the image.

Diagonals help to create drama in an image and give a very different feel to vertical lines.

I always try and move around a location to find a strong diagonal.

Other shapes that are pleasing in images are

- The S curve (look for a river, path or maybe a shape in the sand?)

- Triangles - especially if you can repeat them such as in the previous image (the mountain and the foreground create 2 triangles)



Golden Sunrise - Nikon D810 24-70mm F2.8
1/30s | F10 | 48mm | ISO 125 | Tripod



In this image I have again used a triangle to frame the subject which is the photographers on the hill. The strong shapes and diagonals help you wander around the image and result in eventually seeing San Francisco in the background.

Photographers - Nikon D800 70-200mm F2.8
1/200s | F7.1 | 90mm | ISO 160 | Handheld

4) MOVING FROM 3D TO 2D

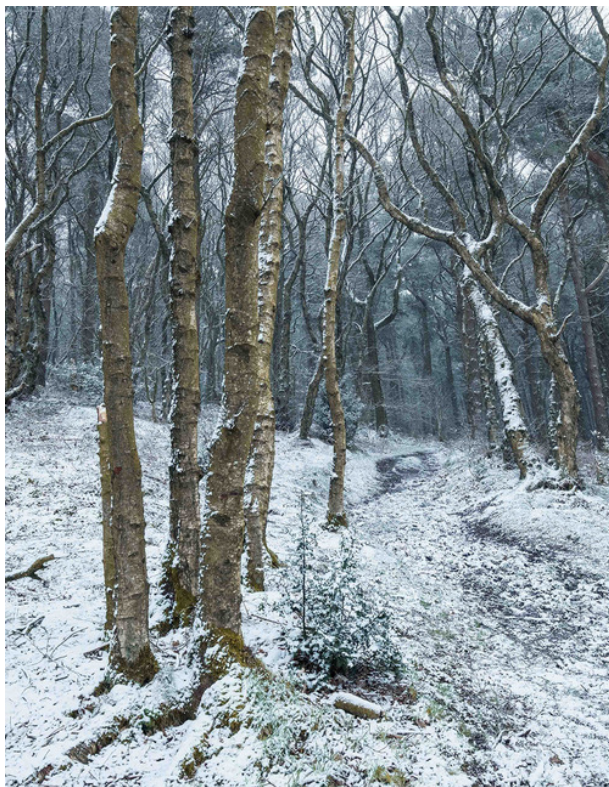
The fourth top tip is so important because it's why many images don't work,

As you take a photo you transform a 3D scene as you see it with two eyes to 2D as you see it on the screen or print. As well as stereo vision that allows you to see the world in 3D you have peripheral vision. When you are moving around a location things are changing in the foreground compared to the background and you're seeing the vast landscape as it is. Your brain interprets the image very differently than when you take the image with your camera in two dimensions. So what you're trying to do as a photographer is to take that 3D image and turn it into 2D to be able to tell that story and create the feeling of when you were there.

There are different ways to address this.

TEXTURE

The texture on the tree is brought to life by the snow and it allows you to see the 3D shape. You can use texture with light as well. If you have a rock and low light then the texture is brought out in the surface and helps to create more form in the subject.



Fuji XT2 10-24mm F4 lens
1/75s | F8 | 16mm | ISO 320 | Handheld

FOG

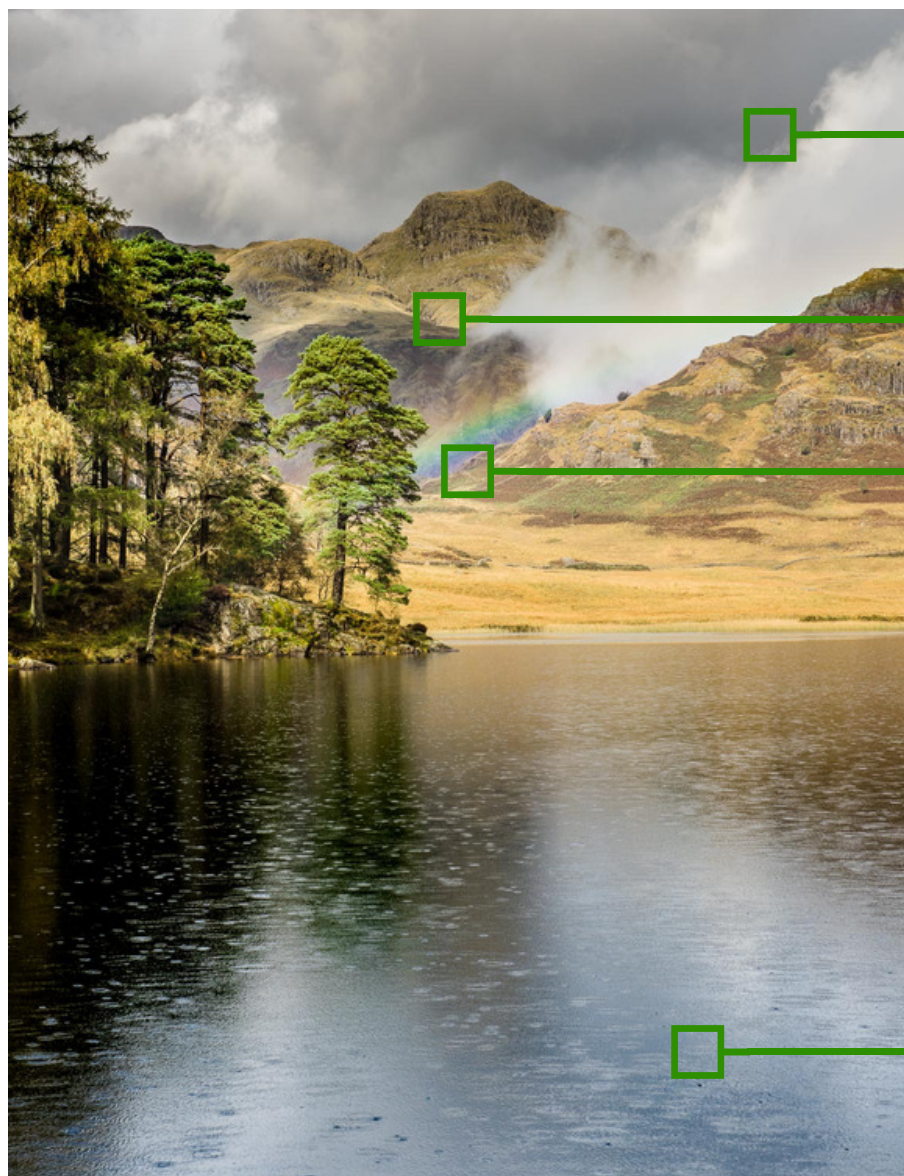
The fog in this 2nd image helps to create layers in the image that then draw your eye through the image giving it a 3D nature. Try going back to a local woodland when it is foggy, you will be amazed how much easier it is to find a good composition.



iPhone X
Handheld

THINK ABOUT LAYERS TO HELP WITH CREATING DEPTH

This image of Blea Tarn works because there are layers in the image - so there's the foreground which is the water dropping on the lake, then there is the mid-ground which was the tree, but then that's separated from the background by the rainbow.



Mist separates the 2 distant peaks and adds further depth to the image

Shadow on mountain helps to further separate tree from background

Rainbow helps to separate tree from mountains and create '3D image'

depth caused by foreground water droplets

Blea Tarn Rainbow - Nikon D810 24-70mm f2.8
1/125s | F9 | 70mm | ISO 160 | Tripod

This image is also a great example of **perseverance** and the need to remain in one location for a good length of time. People often ask me how many photos I take to get a good shot. The question should be how many compositions do I set up as this is where it is easy to make a mistake. I usually plan and take 2-3 compositions in a photographic trip (this could be over a 8hr period). Then I quite often take 20-30 shots of that composition as the light changes.



A lot of the images in this eBook were taken during one of my YouTube videos. I have created a webpage on my site with a list of them all - www.nigeldanson.com/compositionimages

5) TELL A STORY

Number five is to tell a story about an image and why you are taking it. You're trying to convey to the viewer the mood and the feeling and to tell a story of when you were there.

These are two images that I've shown quite a lot of times but are really great images that I'm very proud of. They don't come along that often. The first one is from a wild camp in Snowdonia. It was taken at 4am and I feel it tells the story of the morning well. The second one is the River Brathay which was taken on an amazing foggy morning. It was just at the end of autumn when winter was coming.

Try and visualise how you will process the images



Fuji XT2 10-24mm F4 lens
2.1s | F8 | 14mm | ISO 200 | Tripod

The trees were still laden with those glorious colourful leaves, the mist was rising from the river in the foreground, between the trees. I wanted to get across the feeling of a cold autumn morning. These are the mornings I love at the start of winter. By carefully processing the white balance I was able to get both sunrise warmth and cold frost feeling.



Nikon D810 24-70mm f2.8
1/20s | F7.1 | ISO 80 | Tripod



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USE COLOUR TO HELP TO TELL A STORY AND IMPROVE COMPOSITION

Colour is also really important in telling a story in an image. Get colour right and it is one of the most powerful compositional tools. It is something that I use massively in the majority of my images. It could be a dash of colour to draw the eye or the lack of colour to get across a mood within an scene.



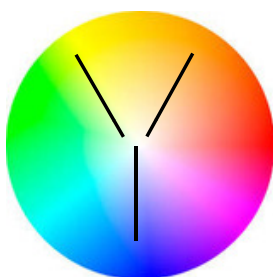
SUNRISE IN THE ALPS - Nikon D800 24-70mm f2.8
1/400s | F6.7 | 70mm | ISO 250 | Handheld

This image that I took when I was in the Alps a few years ago shows how colour really helps. The black and white is an OK image but as soon as you add colour to this image it becomes a completely different story. You can see there is a cold feeling to it apart from the little bit of sun that has just risen in the top of the peaks. It makes it look like these peaks are really magnificent and towering above everything else in the valley which is really cold in the foreground. Your eye is drawn to the colour on the peaks as well.

Think about the colour wheel

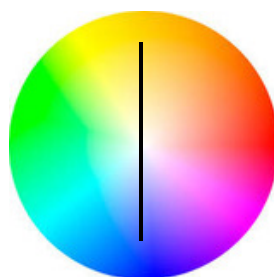
split complementary

colours in a y-shape often work well in threes



Complementary

Opposite colours work well together



Analogous

Colours close to each other create simplicity in an image





SNOW CHALETs - Nikon D200 - 17-55mm f2.8
1/800s | F8 | 52mm | ISO 200 | Handheld

Blue tones and a splash of orange on the chalets create a visually pleasing image as they are opposite sides of the colour wheel. I used the colour to draw your eye to the subject (the chalets) and then you move around and see other elements in what was a stunning morning to be out skiing.

THE ABSENCE OF COLOUR ALSO HELPS COMPOSITION AND STORY

In this scene from Skye accentuating the monochromatic sky helped to add drama to the image.

This was the end of 2 days of continuous rain. The weather could not have been any worse on my trip to Skye.

I wanted to reflect this in an image and took this shot. I felt the similarity between the grey rock and sky colour reflected the mood but having the orange grass finished the composition. As a pure black and white this image wouldn't work. It is that one colour on its own that makes it.



SKYE SKY - Nikon D810 16-35mm F4 Lens
1/13s | F10 | 19mm | ISO 100 | Tripod

6) USE THE SPACE WISELY

My sixth tip is about using negative space and having subjects a long way off centre, or right in the centre - so just doing something a little bit different with the space.

This shot from the Alps in France is a great example of using negative space in an image. What I've done is to use diagonals that are created from the mountain to draw your eyes straight away into the peak of the mountain. I have placed it right in the middle of the image but with a strong composition like this then it's often quite good to have some negative space. This space helps to create a powerful image and improve the drama, accentuating the mountain even more.

The contrast between the negative space, and the real crispness of the sky and the mountain, and the soft clouds at the bottom really create a very powerful image.



ALPS - Fuji XT2 35mm F2 lens
1/450s | F7.1 | 35mm | ISO 100 | Handheld

A COMBINATION OF NEGATIVE SPACE AND STRONG LINES

Using negative space or placing subjects right at the edge of the image can create super powerful images like this one in Zion National Park that really reflect a story or a mood. I was in Zion National Park hiking up a cliff face called Angel's Landing. I wanted to create an idea of how high up I was and the vertical nature of the cliffs. Rather than using diagonals, I have used the verticals of the cliffs and those straight up and down lines to create a real sense of drama. You almost drop into the image. The tiny car in just the right place right at the bottom, and this negative space above it, create real drama to the image.



Reduced colour palette helps to simplify the image and adds to creating a powerful image

Sometimes verticals and not diagonals help to tell the story of a location better

Placing the subject at the bottom of the frame creates scale and drama

VERTICAL - Fuji XT2 35mm F2
1/280s | F5.6 | 35mm | ISO 200 | Handheld

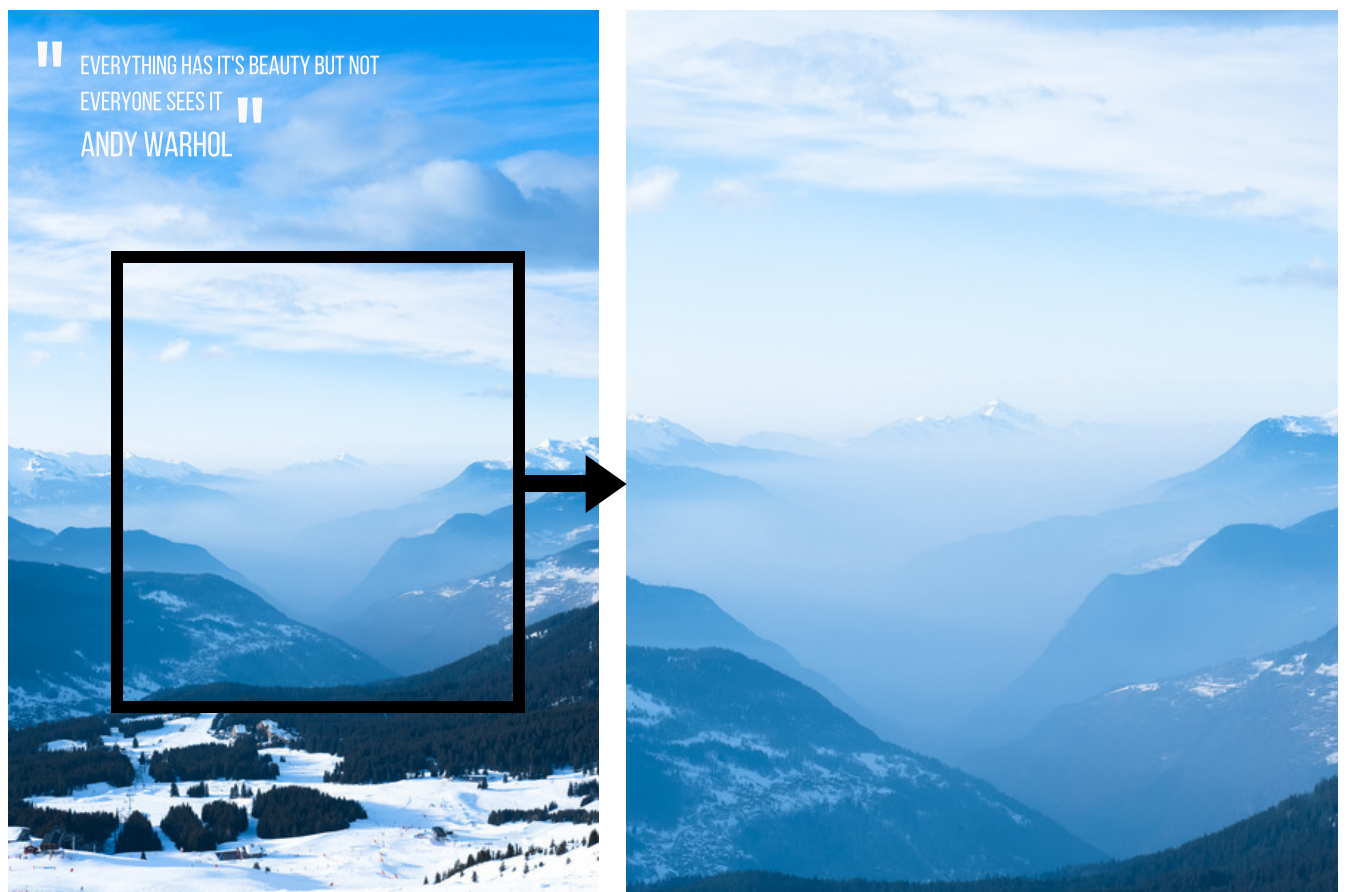
7) SIMPLE SIMPLE SIMPLE

The last tip is to ensure that you keep things as simple as possible. The best images are often the simplest.

Remove any elements in the image that allow the viewer to easily get distracted.

This is an image that I took on my final day in the Alps when I was skiing back down to the valley. It was just really a snapshot that I took with my Fuji XT2 - and after I got it back into Lightroom this is a rare occasion where I thought there's a great shot within the shot. So I cropped right in to the image and created a really powerful picture that wasn't there in the original shot because there were lots of distracting elements to it.

Ideally I would have taken it with a longer lens but with these really high megapixel cameras you can crop in a little bit tighter and find some really great images within the ones that you've already got.



Fuji XT2 10-24mm F4 lens
2.1s | F8 | 14mm | ISO 200 | Tripod

REMEMBER - If it doesn't add to the image leave it out. What you leave out of the image is actually more powerful than what you put in most of the time. When you compose the image check the edges and corners to see if there are any distractions and crop them out.

EXAMPLE 1 - A LAND THAT TIME FORGOT

I wanted to talk about 2 images and point out based on the 7 top tips why I think they work compositionally. First up is this image from Iceland. It was taken at the stunning Stoksnes. I had been there for 10 hours and thought it was likely we would get some light at the end of the day - but everything came together in this image. As I had been there for so long it allowed me to get the best composition to make the most out of the weather. Although photographically it was simple, I did think very carefully about the various elements that make up the image.

One of the strongest elements of the image is the duo tone colours. For me this simplifies the composition and adds more impact to the image

The mist changed a lot during a period of about 15 mins and I took around 40 shots. I was looking for one where the line of the mountain continued into the line of the receding mist



Nikon D810 | 24-70mm f/2.8
50mm | 1/25s | f8 | ISO 64 | Tripod

I purposely included the ocean from both sides to balance the image

I choose an area of the beach and black sand dunes that reflected the patterns of the mountains. When I processed it I also ensured the colours of the grasses and sunset matched to strengthen the composition.

EXAMPLE 2 - WISP OF WINTER

This storm was the start of 48 hours of rain in the highlands of Scotland on my 2017 trip to Glencoe and Skye. The trip was amazing on many levels and as always in Scotland the weather changed really quickly. This wasn't a shot that I had a lot of time to compose so I wanted to keep it simple and saw an opportunity with the moving clouds to create something special.

I really like how the wisp of cloud balances the image and creates a dynamic contrast to the snow covered mountains.

This wisp of cloud balances the image perfectly.

There are a few strong diagonals in the mountain and help to keep the eye looking around the photo

I have left a slightly out of focus / dark bottom part of the image to draw the eye up though into the mountain



Nikon D810 | 70-200mm f/2.8
180mm | 1/3200s | f6.3 | ISO 200 | Handheld

The other element to this image is the light and shade on the mountain. This helps to give it form and you can see the ridge that runs up the side of it. If it was taken in the middle of the day or in flat light then this wouldn't have been possible. Using light and shade to show the form of the mountain brings that 2D image into 3D.