

consciously manipulate the formal arrangement of carefully selected content are able to accurately communicate their ideas about a subject. The manipulation of a photograph's formal arrangement is in large part a direct result of the technical elements that create camera-made images. That first element is framing.

## FRAMING: THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPHIC ELEMENT

Photographers who have had some basic training and practice in photography should fully understand metering and exposure in ambient light situations, as well as the attributes of their particular traditional, digital, or hybrid (meaning a combination of the two) media. Beyond that, they are most interested in creating images that apply their technical knowledge in a meaningful way, and they do so by using the elements of design and composition. But even photographers who know the basic rules of two-dimensional composition don't necessarily understand how to apply those rules toward orchestrating content within a photographic frame. This chapter explores the principles underlying framing in the camera's viewfinder and addresses the borders of the resulting image.

If the principles governing proper metering and exposure are new to you, see Appendix B for more detailed explanation. As this is not a design text, if the elements of design and rules of basic composition are new to you, I recommend independent research using any of the excellent textbooks available on the topic.

## AFFECTING VISUAL QUALITY AND PHOTOGRAPHIC MEANING THROUGH CONSCIOUS FRAMING

Photographic images—images made from the action of light—are contained within a frame. The frame can be defined as the outermost boundaries of the photograph, the structure which circumscribes the photographer's decisions regarding image content. Framing and borders combine as the first element of photography because they intersect as the transition point between the world and the image at every stage of the image-making process. Framing begins in-camera, continues through the cropping stages, and completes with borders created in the traditional or digital darkroom.

Every camera imposes a frame; it is a constant element of photographic images regardless of camera format or lens

choice, determining the specific segment of space and time that will exist within its borders. As soon as you place the imposed frame of a camera's viewfinder between the world and your eye, you actively engage the first unique technical element of photographic image making that directly affects the visual outcome of the image. You place the camera in front of your eye, and the world, which has no boundaries, is suddenly confined to the square or rectangle of the camera format's viewfinder. In the words of Stephen Shore, "The photograph has edges; the world does not. The edges separate what is in the picture from what is not ... the frame corrals the content of the photograph all at once" (1998, p. 28). Here's the rub: the frame defines what viewers will see as the image content regardless of the attention paid to it by the photographer. Too often the transition from "seeing" to "seeing through the camera" is not present enough in the photographer's mind; therefore, thoughtful framing must be developed as a very conscious act.

A visually literate viewer assumes the entire content of the frame to be *intended* by the photographer; through framing the photographer tacitly states that all content should be addressed toward determining the meaning of the image. In this respect, framing the contents of a photograph is like

composing a work of literature; conscientious authors don't add random words to sentences or unnecessary sentences to paragraphs. For instance, while reading a novel, how would you respond if there appeared non-sequiturs which only served to misdirect you with regard to the story line, and in the end the author notes that he or she didn't intend the extraneous sentences to be treated as part of the novel at all! Just as meticulous readers interpret each sentence (indeed each word) of a novel in order to derive meaning, meticulous viewers interpret every aspect of a photograph's content to derive meaning.

At some point in the process, photographers decide what to include and what to exclude from the final image. Framing refers to in-camera decision making, within the imposed frame the camera provides. Photographers make framing decisions based on what they determine to be the important aspects of the scene until the precise moment of exposure (or capture); once exposed, the captured image contains all the content that it will contain. For this reason (and for ethical reasons in fields such as photojournalism or forensic photography) the best time to make framing decisions is while the camera is in your hand and the scene unfolds in front of you.

When framing the content of an image, photographers should ask the following questions:

- Does all the content in the frame contribute to the meaning of my image and lead the viewer to understand what I am trying to communicate about my subject?
- Does any content in the frame distract from communicating about the subject or theme of my image? If so, how can I eliminate it?
- How can I organize the frame so that the appropriate content emphasizes the subject and all other content supports it?

The frame does more than include and exclude potential content; however, *it plays an indispensable role in organizing that content*. In *The Nature of Photographs*, Stephen Shore describes some of the visual outcomes of framing through an attribute he calls “flatness.” He says, “When three-dimensional space is projected monocularly onto a plane, relationships are created that did not exist before the picture was taken. ... Any change in vantage point results in a change in these relationships” (18–19). In this concise quote, Shore touches on three important aspects of framing: *vantage point*, *juxtaposition*, and *picture planes*. What follows is a discussion of those three aspects of framing,

because they directly affect the visual organization and hierarchy of image content.

## ORGANIZING THE FRAME: VANTAGE POINT, JUXTAPOSITION, AND PICTURE PLANES

When photographers capture an image they do so on the picture plane; that is, the flat, physical surface of the media on which the image is captured. By orchestrating the frame’s contents through careful consideration of *vantage point*—the distance and position of the camera in relation to the subject—the photographer dictates the hierarchy of information and the visual flow of the image.

In choosing vantage point carefully, the photographer also changes the perceived spatial relationships among various content and dictates how three-dimensional space will be depicted in the two-dimensional image. Will the picture plane minimize the illusion of depth, or will it emphasize that illusion? The answer should depend on how the sense of depth (or lack thereof) in the pictorial space will affect the viewer’s reading of the image. (We will take a closer look at this attribute in the section on picture planes.) In addition to creating spatial hierarchies, vantage point can assist you in communicating specific ideas about the subject or content

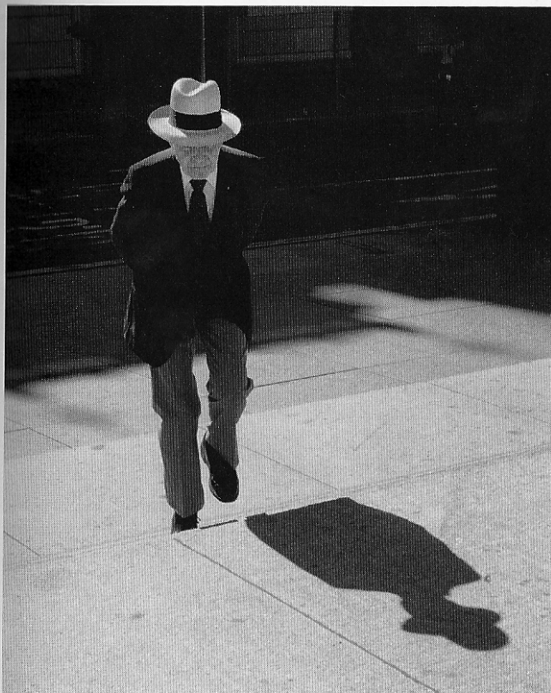


PHOTO © DAVID BECKERMAN, *STEPS OF THE MET*, NEW YORK, 1994.

In this photograph, David Beckerman uses vantage point to great advantage in framing the man's light face and hat against the dark background, while including a secondary figure (the man's shadow) that mimics his subject's own form. Also, in pointing his camera downward to include the man's broken shadow, he balances the composition and leads the eye into the bottom of the frame. [www.davebeckerman.com](http://www.davebeckerman.com)

in an image. For instance, if you were making a portrait of someone you admire, and whom you want the viewer to admire, you might adopt a lower vantage point and *literally look up* at the person when making the portrait, or place them above (from your vantage point) the other content in the frame; conversely, if your intent were to diminish or demean the subject of the portrait, you might literally adopt a vantage point which looks down at the person.

Additionally, by changing vantage point, the photographer organizes the way various aspects of the image content are *juxtaposed*—the relationship and interaction among discreet contents—and these changes alter the image structure and its subsequent meaning.

"In the field, outside the controlled confines of a studio, a photographer is confronted with a complex web of visual juxtapositions that realign themselves with each step the photographer takes. Take one step and something hidden comes into view; take another and an object in the front now presses up against one in the distance. Take one step and the description of deep space is clarified; take another and it is obscured. In bringing order to this situation, a photographer solves a picture more than composes one" (Shore, 1998, p. 23).



Juxtaposition is a key component in any language; just as words are juxtaposed with other words in order to create more complex and specific meaning, the contents of photographs are juxtaposed with other contents in order to add complexity and meaning. The work of Elliott Erwitt provides a classic example of the nature of juxtaposition; the contents within his carefully, albeit spontaneously, composed frames often reference one another in extreme or visually obvious ways in order to create the humor or irony he calls attention to. The work of Alexandre Orion uses juxtaposition as well and can be viewed in the Portfolio Pages of this chapter.



The third organizational aspect of the frame is the picture plane—the flat, physical surface on which the image is captured. When the binocular perspective of our vision is removed, one of the three primary types of spatial organization emerges onto a picture plane because of the way that three-dimensional space is ordered when flattened through a single lens perspective. The three types of picture planes are: *parallel*, *diagonal*, and *overlapping*. They delineate the way depth is organized in the pictorial space, and perhaps as important, they dictate the pace at which the viewer's eyes move into and through that space to read the image.

1. *Parallel picture planes* emphasize the two-dimensionality of the image; in them the image content is parallel to the picture plane, so there is no real sense of depth or receding space in these images. On the one hand they can be viewed as quiet and meditative, and on the other stagnant and boring. One common means of limiting or eliminating the sense of receding space in a photograph

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PHOTO © DAVID BECKERMAN, *MAN AND WOMAN, SUBWAY, NEW YORK, 1993*.

This photograph illustrates one aspect of the nature of juxtaposition. By framing both the people whose attention is passively downward and the sign whose eyes intently peer back at us as, David Beckerman juxtaposes two contentual elements, which bring to the forefront the active nature of our own gaze upon others.

is to approach content straight on, such that from your vantage point three-dimensionality is minimized.

2. *Diagonal picture planes* provide the sense of receding space that is created when the photographer's vantage point is at an oblique angle to the content of the image. In this way the content forms a real or implied diagonal line through the image at an angle to the picture plane. Images framed in this way convey a sense of rapidly receding space, aided by the increased size of content in the foreground in relation to the diminishing sizes toward the background.
3. *Overlapping picture planes* contain a sense of depth due to image content overlapping from foreground to background. In these cases, the viewer perceives space as receding due to some content being in front of other content from the camera's point-of-view. Since overlapping occurs from the point of view of the camera, care should be taken to insure that the vantage point helps to clarify the image. Common problems



PHOTO © DAVID BECKERMAN, *BECOME YOUR DREAM*, NEW YORK, 2005.

This image uses a parallel picture plane by facing the content of the frame head-on. It creates a confrontational image, with unavoidable connections created between the background high-rise buildings and the hand-scrawled *Become Your Dream* graffiti in the foreground.

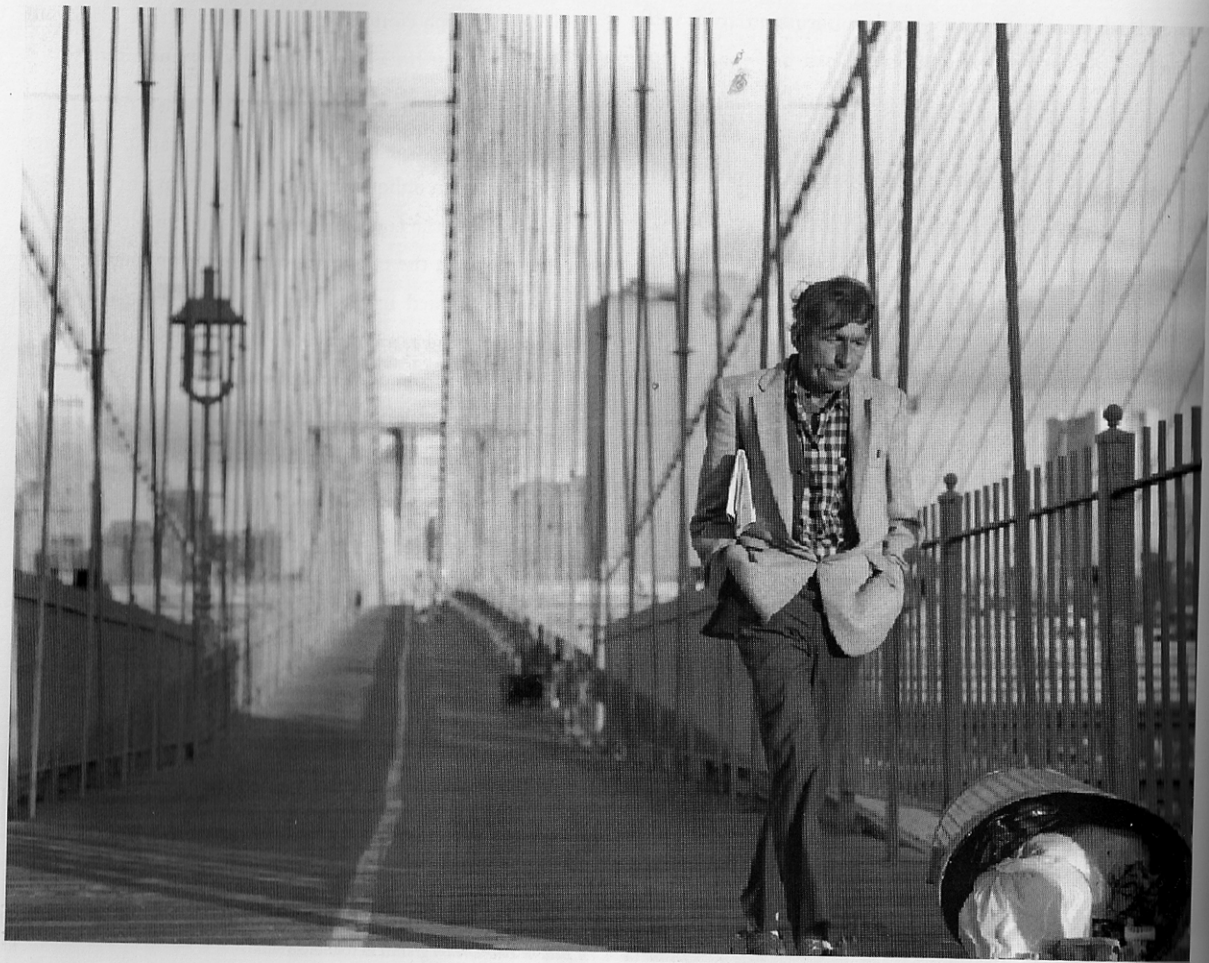


PHOTO © DAVID BECKERMAN, *CROSSING BROOKLYN BRIDGE*, 1993.

Diagonal picture plane: The image composition creates dramatic depth in receding space, since the frame's primary content is diagonal to the picture plane. The direction of the subject's movement toward the corner of the picture also activates the composition and leads the viewer's eye in that direction, where we view a significant piece of secondary content—an overturned trash can.

of inattention to vantage point when composing overlapping picture planes include tangents (when two elements barely touch and therefore create distracting visual tension) and tonal mergers (when using black and white media in particular, two independent objects that stand apart visually due to color contrast might

blend together when reduced to grayscale tonal value ... using contrast filters designed for shooting black and white film or adjusting the separate Channels in Adobe Photoshop help prevent tonal mergers from being a problem in the final image).



PHOTO © DAVID BECKERMAN, *MANHATTAN MALL*, NEW YORK, 2006.

This image uses overlapping planes at varying angles in order to juxtapose content in the frame. It well describes the crowded nature of the place, allows David Beckerman to incorporate the place name in relation to other contentual elements, and gives the viewer a definite sense of spatial relationships.

## CONTACT SHEETS: KEY TO CHOOSING THE BEST FRAME

Once the images are captured and processed, the next step is to edit, and *contact sheets*—prints with several thumbnail sized images printed on them—are an indispensable tool for image editing. They allow photographers to look at the sum of images they have created in printed form and choose from the group one or several that most successfully represent their ideas. The most effective contact sheets provide images large enough to view and are of good density, contrast, and color. There are many methods of editing images from contact sheets. I recommend first editing for technical quality: any images that are poorly exposed, out of focus, or have camera shake due to slow shutter speeds should be immediately eliminated—don't try to “fix” these problems in the traditional or digital darkroom; instead, learn from your technical mistakes and don't make the same mistakes again. Next, edit for content and formal quality: ask yourself which of those technically sound frames best convey your meaning or express your ideas about your subject. I recommend enlarging these images into work prints, hang them up, and live with them in your office or studio for a while, so that only the best images emerge in your view as successful. Your contact sheets and work prints will also reveal that even the best attempts at in-camera framing

sometimes fail to produce the desired result ... and it is then that a photographer might decide to crop.

There are great advantages to editing from high-quality printed versions of images (rather than from negatives or from digital files). It is easier to note subtle technical and formal differences from frame to frame—changes in exposure, focal length, distance, vantage point, shutter speed, and depth of field—which serve to significantly affect the image as the photographic process unfolds. In the contact sheets, the evidence of the photographer's growing awareness and sharpening of the composition of contents from frame to frame is apparent.

## CROPPING: FRAMING AFTER THE FACT

While the ideal time to make framing decisions is with the camera in hand, it's not always practical. For example, in making images “from the hip” a photographer might know to some extent what will be captured in the frame, but cannot predict it with certainty; or when shooting quickly in rapidly changing circumstances as photojournalists often do it's important to capture the moment. In these cases the decision to eliminate extraneous elements initially captured near the frame edges in the traditional or digital darkroom might help to clarify meaning of the image for a viewer.