# Understanding Composition

There are two aspects to photography – the technical side of things, in terms of how you make your camera do what you want it to do, and the artistic side of things, in terms of what you choose to take pictures of and how you frame a shot. This part is what's known as 'composition' - as in, how do you 'compose' the elements of the shot to create the most pleasing image?

The first thing to say about composition is that it is entirely subjective – any form of art is all about what the viewer likes, so there are no completely wrong or right answers. Having said that, there are some obvious things to consider, like making sure you don't chop people's heads off, or their feet if it's supposed to be a full length shot. But when it comes to landscapes, how do you decide what elements stay in the shot, which ones are left out, and how the elements you choose are positioned in relation to each other, and to the edges of the image? This is where the art of composition really begins.

There are a set of 'rules' which photographers tend to go by, although I prefer to call them guidelines, as none of them are set in stone But they do give you a place to start, even if you then decide to break those rules . . . and who doesn't occasionally?! Some you may have heard of, and some you may not – but I'll start with one of the most common ones:

1. The rule of thirds
This guideline is literally that – a set of physical guidelines! The theory is that an image will look more balanced, and so more appealing, if the key elements of the shot are placed 1/3 of the way into the frame – from any side, rather than smack bang in the middle as people have a tendency to do. The grid looks like this:
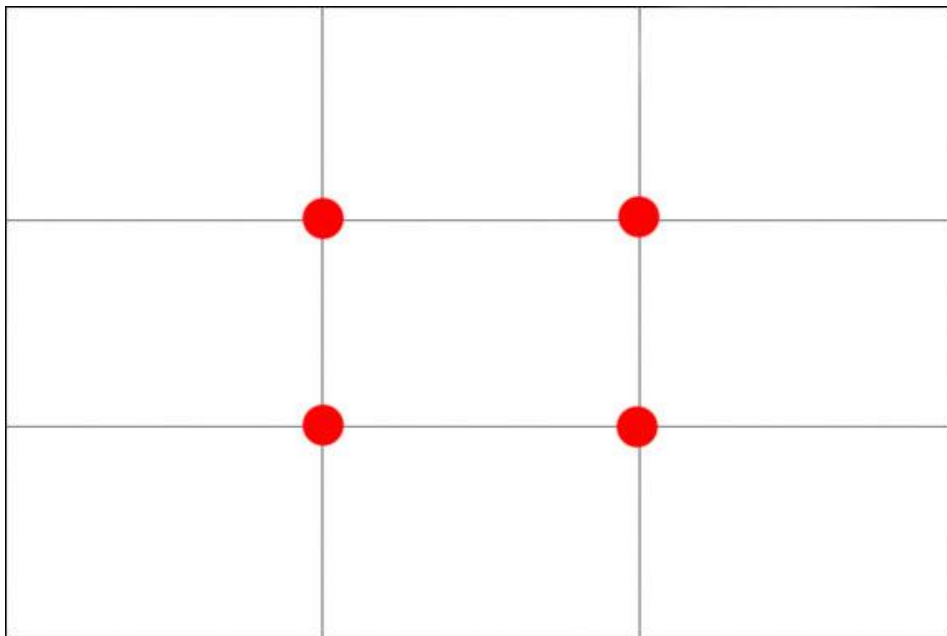

So, when framing your shot, the idea is to make sure that any key elements are placed near one of the red dots, or at the very least, along one of the lines. A horizon for example would span the full width of the shot, but technically it should be 1/3 up from the bottom of the frame or 1/3 down from the top, not right across the middle. I say 'technically' as sometimes there are very good reasons why a horizon line does end up in the middle!

This sunset shot over the sea, taken from a cruise ship, is a good example of the rule of thirds, and the decisions you have to make when framing a shot. In this first composition, the sun – the focal point of the shot - is right in the middle. But the horizon is 1/3 of the way up from the bottom of the frame, and we can see a good amount of the lovely sky – so actually this works better than some other shots where the focal point is in the middle. Having said that, the water is the least interesting part of the shot, and I think it takes up too much of the frame.


In this next crop, I have moved the sun to the left, on the l/h grid line, but maintained its position in the middle of the depth of the frame. So we still have the dark sea, and also a fairly dark and less interesting part of the sky on the left. To me, this already feels more 'balanced' vs the one with it in the centre, but it's still not quite right.
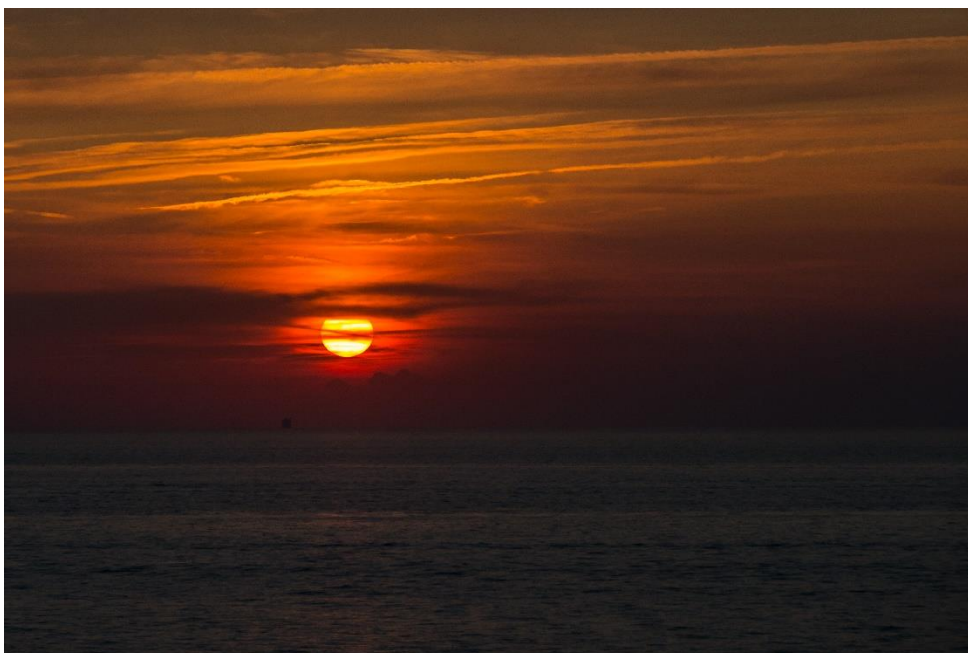
In the next crop, I have moved the sun to the right, but kept everything else the same. So we still have the dark sea, and also a fairly dark and less interesting part of the sky on the left. So neither of these is ideal, but we're getting there!

I've now made the decision to move the sun to the bottom left 'red dot' position on the grid. This gives us more of the great sky colour and texture, and less of the water – but still leaves enough of the water to show that it was a sunset over the sea – which is an important part of the story behind the image. But the right hand side of the shot is still a little uninteresting, as there is less detail in the sky – so while I like the feel of the sun being positioned here in relation to the frame of the shot, it's still not perfect.
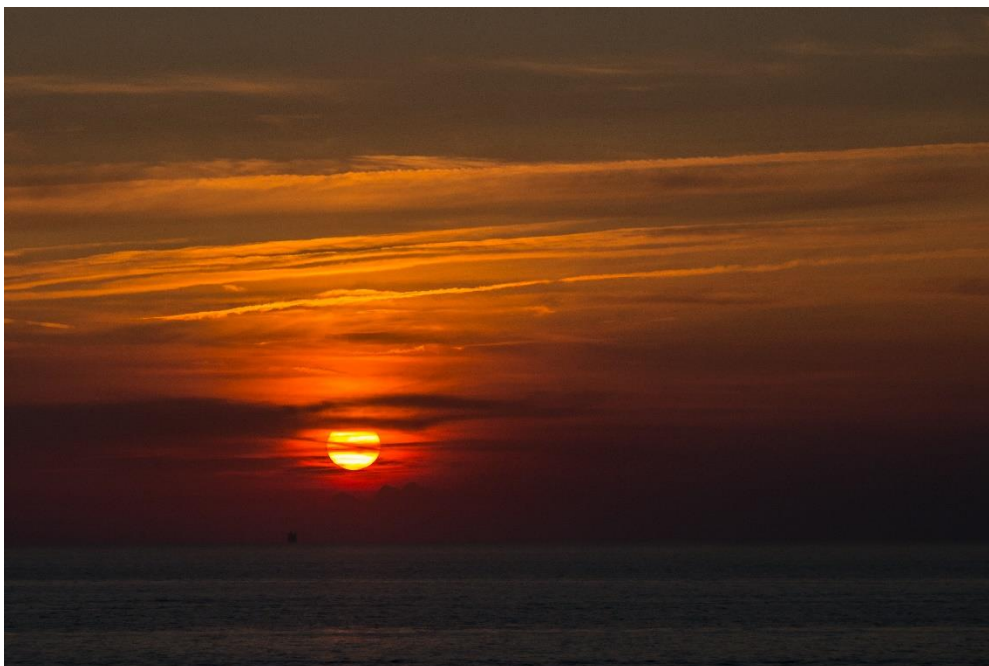
So, the logical next step is to move the sun to the bottom right hand red dot. This works better because there is more sky detail on the left, making for a more interesting overall image. This one is my preferred choice – but as we said earlier, it's all subjective, so you may prefer a different one! It's also fair to say that, if there had been more light on the water from the sun, making that a more interesting part of the shot, I might make a different decision.

On that note, to complete the set, I also considered how the shot might look if we moved the sun towards the top of the frame and made it more about the sea, to create the feeling of being 'in the middle of nowhere' - which is how it can feel on a cruise ship. For me, this doesn't work as well, but had there been more light from the sun on the sea, it might have done.

What this exercise shows is that there are all sorts of different reasons as to why you might frame a shot in a particular way – but of course, very often you don't have time to make all those decisions. So a lot of comes down to what 'feels right' at the time. When you're out shooting anything, but especially landscapes, try to think about what the focal point of your shot is, and then position it on each of the four red dots and see which works best.

If it helps, on most cameras you can also bring up a set of grid squares to help you position your focal point correctly, and to make sure your horizon is level – which is vitally important! There's nothing worse than a wonky horizon – and while you can straighten it afterwards, it's better not to have to. These grid squares can usually be found in the 'display' menu or similar, you should be able to find them by Googling the phrase 'Find grid lines on . . .' and then your camera made and model.

Before we move on, here are a few more examples of shots which make use of the rule of thirds:


2. Leading lines
These are literally lines within the image which 'lead' the eye into the shot, and towards the area of the image that you want your viewer to look. In the lavender example above, you will see that the lines of lavender are 'leading' your eye towards the tree and the mountains.

Once you start to look for them, you can see them everywhere! Streets, paths, rivers and so on – whether curved or straight. There are so many natural or man-made elements which create perfect leading lines – drawing the viewer into the shot, and helping them to feel as if they could step in and become part of the image.

With the rule of thirds, you are more likely to decide on something that you want to shoot, and then compose the shot to its best effect - but leading lines are slightly different, as they tend to be more the purpose of the shot from the beginning. You can't create them if they are not there to start with, but once you have identified some, and decided that they would make a good image, you can then adjust your position to ensure that they create the most impact!

The best way to explain this is just to show you some examples, as follows:
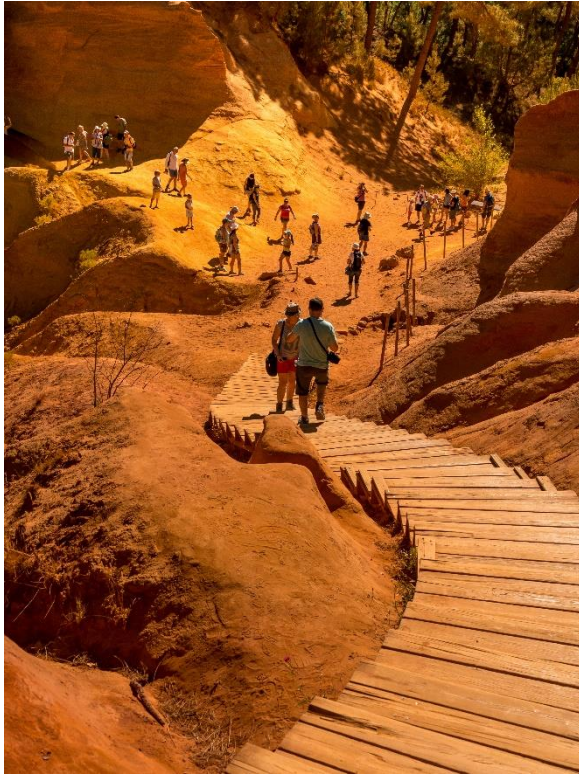
In each case, there is a key element of the shot that takes you from the frame into the middle and entices you to want to know more about what is round the next corner. This help you to engage with your viewer and to make them respond emotionally to the shot in some way.

One thing to bear in mind here is that, if at all possible, your 'leading line' should not take the viewer right through your shot and out of the other side, so try to frame the image in such a way as to avoid this if possible. That could simply mean moving left or right, or positioning yourself so that the far end of the 'line' is hidden behind something further forward, leaving more of an air of mystery!

This moves us on nicely to the next compositional 'rule' . . .

3. Point of view
It's not unsurprising that most picture-takers shoot an image with the camera to their eye, or held out in front if using an LCD screen - and more often than not they are standing up. So the majority of images that you see have been shot from this height above the ground. Which is fine, if that's the best angle for the shot – but there are many instances where a different point of view would create a better image.

There are only really two options here – get higher, or get lower. Getting higher of course involves something to stand on or climb up, so not always possible. But getting lower is far easier, unless your knees are going to start complaining, which I quite understand!

Having said that, while there might not be such a dramatic effect, sometimes a shot can be improved by simply taking a step or two left or right. When you decide to take a picture, look at all of the elements in the scene before you press the shutter. Would they be arranged in a more appealing way if you moved slightly left or right? Could you hide an unattractive road sign in the

distance behind a wall, or a car, or the person you're taking a picture of? Even more importantly – are you sure there isn't a tree, or a signpost, or a beach umbrella, sticking out of the top of someone's head? We've all done that! But just a step left or right could have fixed it. So just be aware of everything that's going on in your shot, and not just the main focal point.

a) Getting higher
Going back to the higher and lower points of view, we'll start by thinking about getting higher. But of course this has to be done safely, so don't do anything daft (though I can't promise I haven't done just that on occasion!). A great example of this approach is Charlie Waite, a very well-known and highly regarded landscape photographer - who never goes anywhere (within reason) without his trusty stepladder. He says that there are many occasions when he simply wouldn't have got the 'perfect' shot he was looking for, if it hadn't been for that extra foot or two of height.

It might seem odd that this could make so much difference, but it's not until you actually try it that you see the effect. If you're shooting a landscape, there are various elements disappearing into the distance, and each one becomes a narrower section of the overall image as it gets further away. By adding height, you make each of these sections deeper, and so they become a greater part of the image.

Imagine standing on a beach taking pictures of the view out to sea. From a normal eye-height viewpoint, you get a set width of sand, sea and sky. But if you climb up a nearby cliff, each of those elements becomes deeper 'top to bottom', and so becomes a greater part of the shot. It's hard to show examples without having gone out and shot something specifically for comparison, but these images should give you an idea.

So, firstly – a shot from Portballintrae Beach in Northern Ireland, taken at standard eye height.


This was framed to maximize the sky, but even so, you can see that the water takes up a relatively small proportion of the overall depth of the image – and even if I had included more foreground and less sky, the water would still only be about 1/5 of the image depth.

In this next shot, I had climbed up a bank, probably about four feet high, and you can see that the 'depth' of the water as part of the image is now much greater. I'll be honest, the tide was coming in and this has accentuated the effect, but it's still quite a difference!

Taking that to the extreme, this tourist shot of Nice Bay was taken from halfway up Castle Rock, and you can see now that the sea is a huge proportion of the overall depth of the shot.
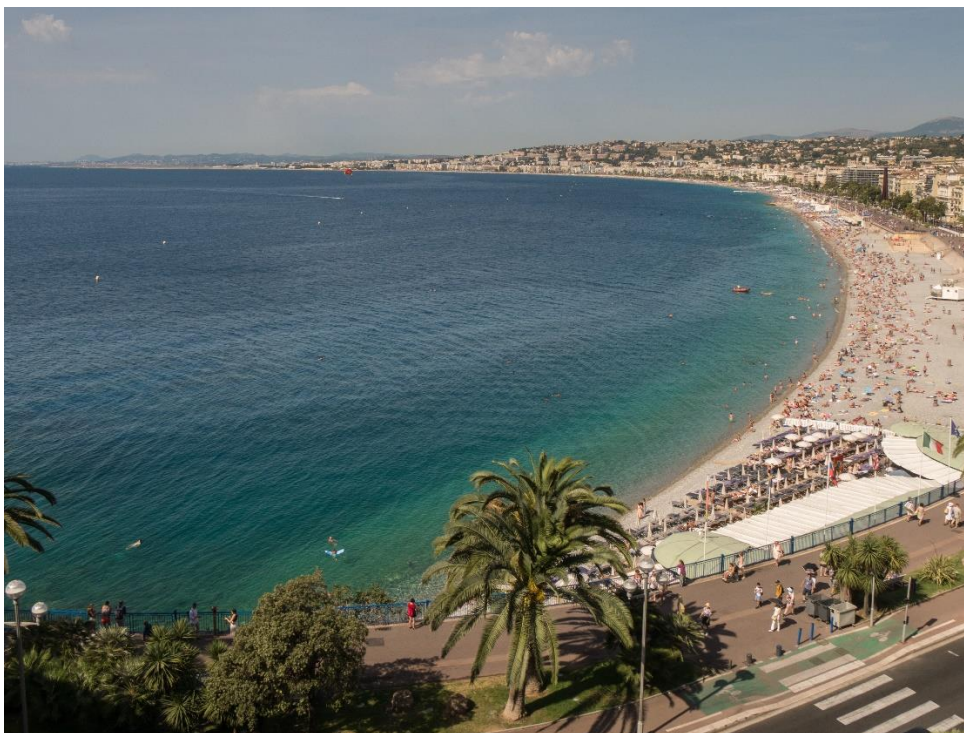
Of course, this last example really is at the top end of the scale, but it's good to be aware that even a foot or two can make a real difference.

Going back to Charlie Waite and his stepladder, I recall him talking about this lavender shot – and the fact that if he hadn't had the stepladder, then you wouldn't have been able to see the tree trunk and it would have just been the dome shape of the top of a tree above the lavender, and wouldn't have worked at all!

b) Getting lower
So this is far easier, knees permitting! There are many instances where a lower perspective can make a huge difference to a shot, taking it from something that would have just been a 'snap' to something that is quite dramatic. I'm quite well known for spending half my time flat on my face in the mud to get the 'perfect shot', but it really can be worth it. This is me shooting a ladybird for example . . .

And this is the shot I was taking. By getting level with the ladybird, I bring the viewer far more into the shot, seeing it at 'eye height' if you like – from its perspective not mine – rather than just pointing the camera straight down on it from above.

By getting lower, you remove some of the normal background and create separation between your focal point and what's behind it, which is then further away. I was also able to blur the background more effectively, as it was further away from the subject than if I'd just shot straight down. This is known as creating 'shallow depth of field' - to make your subject stand out more. If you're not sure what that is, then please read my sheet on 'Understanding Aperture', which explains it all!

The ladybird is quite a specific macro example, but the same approach works for any type of shot. This is one which I took of my friend's daughter and their dog in Campbell Park, Milton Keynes.
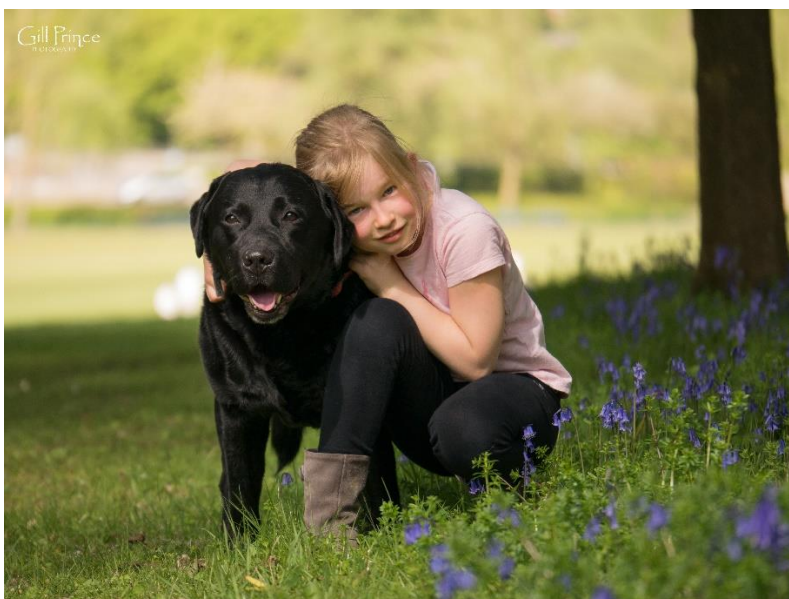
By getting down level with the two of them, I was able to create a far more interesting image than if I had just stayed standing up. They are able to look straight at me, rather than having to look up, and the background is far away and can be more easily blurred, which makes the focal point of the shot stand out far more – all of which makes the viewer feel far more engaged with the overall scene.

Another interesting aspect of changing your point of view is about context. If I had just shot this hermit crab in the Maldives from above, all you would see is sand, and he could have been anywhere, but by getting down on the sand (yes, flat on my face again!) I was able to include the sea and the sky in the shot as well, giving the viewer more of an idea of where we were. This angle also helps to show more of the detail of the hermit crab itself, which would otherwise have been obscured by the shell.

These types of low perspectives can work well for all sorts of types of shot - from flowers and small creatures, to children and any other foreground subject that you want to capture 'in its environment'.

4. Negative space
This is a bit of an odd name, and doesn't really explain it very well. In the world of video they call it 'looking room' which is slightly more self-explanatory! So what we're talking about here is making sure that, when you have a person or an animal in your shot, they have space to look, or move, into. The same goes for anything that is capable of movement – so a car, ship, aeroplane or whatever. If it could feasibly move in a specific direction, it needs somewhere to go.

Looking at the hermit crab above, you'll see I have positioned him slightly to the left of the frame – also conforming to the rule of thirds. This makes the shot work better, and feel more comfortable, because there is the perception that he is moving in that direction and so needs somewhere to go.

If we take the same shot and crop it differently, with the crab on the right, it feels unbalanced and uncomfortable – he has nowhere to go and is in effect 'walking out' of the shot. It feels negative, like he can't wait to escape, and so is less pleasing for the viewer.

The other thing to mention here is that, even if we put him right in the middle, visually it still feels as if he is 'on his way out' of the shot, not arriving into it - and again the negative perception is the same. So when you shoot an object which could possibly move, make sure it has somewhere to go!

Here are a few more examples which illustrate the different effects of negative space.

In this shot, my friend's daughter got hold of my other camera and started taking pictures, so it would be odd not to give a glimpse of what it is she might be taking. Having somewhere for her to 'look into' is really important here.


I spotted this dapper chap walking across a road in Greenwich during a rain storm. I didn't have time to frame the shot then and there, as I had to capture him before he got any closer, so it was all about cropping the shot correctly afterwards. I prefer the 2nd crop as he has somewhere to 'walk into' and the background is less distracting.

Having said that, if he was looking more 'hurried', as if he had to be somewhere urgently - then having him positioned as if he was almost rushing out of the shot may have worked better. It all comes down to what story you want to tell.

This is a good example of that approach. Either of these could work, as there is a purposeful look on the girl's face and she clearly has a plan and is going somewhere specific. So while the crop on the left is more technically correct from a 'negative space' perspective – the one on the right could work equally well, it just tells a slightly different story.

Neither of these made the final cut due to the shadow of the tree trunk on her face, something to watch out for when taking pictures of people!
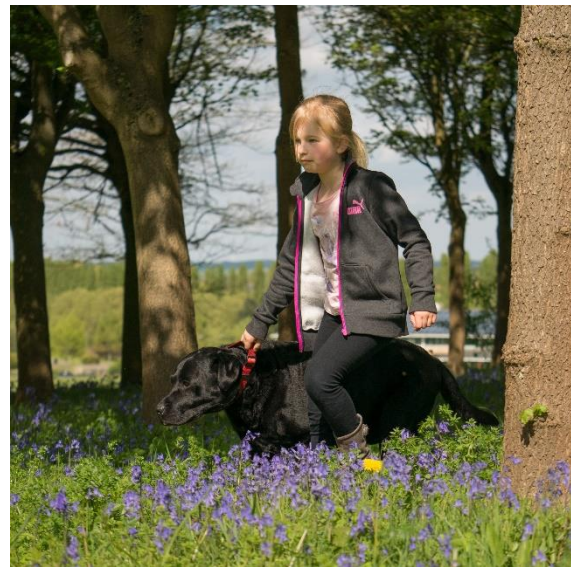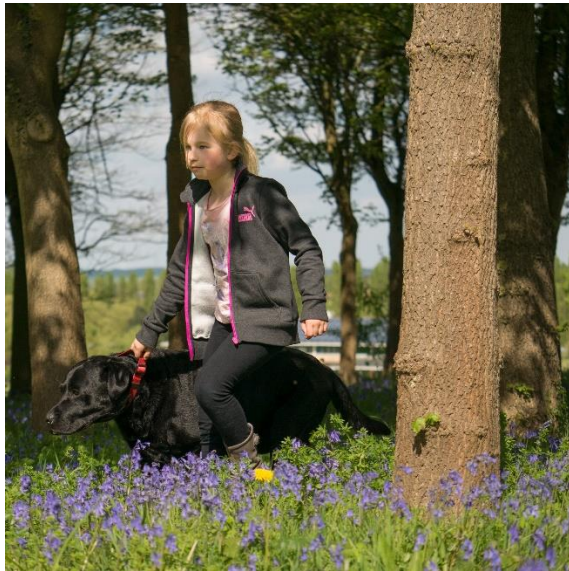
Lastly, this is an example of when having someone look 'out of the shot' is perfect for the mood of the image, as he is clearly miles away and would rather be somewhere else.

So, while a moveable object should technically have 'looking room' within the shot – there are times when that rule needs to be broken. But it's definitely an exception, not the norm!

5. Natural Framing

This is a hugely important part of composition. By 'framing' the main subject with other elements of the scene, you help to draw the viewer's attention to the place you want them to look, but you also create a pleasing composition as well, making the frame a key part of the shot.

This image of the Light Pyramid sculpture in Campbell Park, Milton Keynes is a great example. There are a couple of places in the park where the tree branches frame the pyramid, and I always use this as a teaching location when running 1-2-1 tuition sessions.


Of course, the frame doesn't have to be all round the subject, it can just be a way of drawing attention to it, in the same way as leading lines do. In this shot I've framed the pyramid between the wild flowers, again highlighting it as part of the overall scene. This one is also a good example of a different point of view, as I had to get right down in amongst the flowers in order to get this angle!

Trees and leaves also make excellent natural frames, so if you're taking a landscape shot without any framing, just have a look around and see if you could move your position in order to bring a tree branch or some leaves into the top or sides of a shot, like this.

Then lastly, in this shot from Port Vell in Barcelona, I purposely stepped left and right until the hotel was perfectly positioned in the gap between the two sides of the metal framework. Which partly comes back to 'point of view' again, and making sure that all of the elements within your image work together.
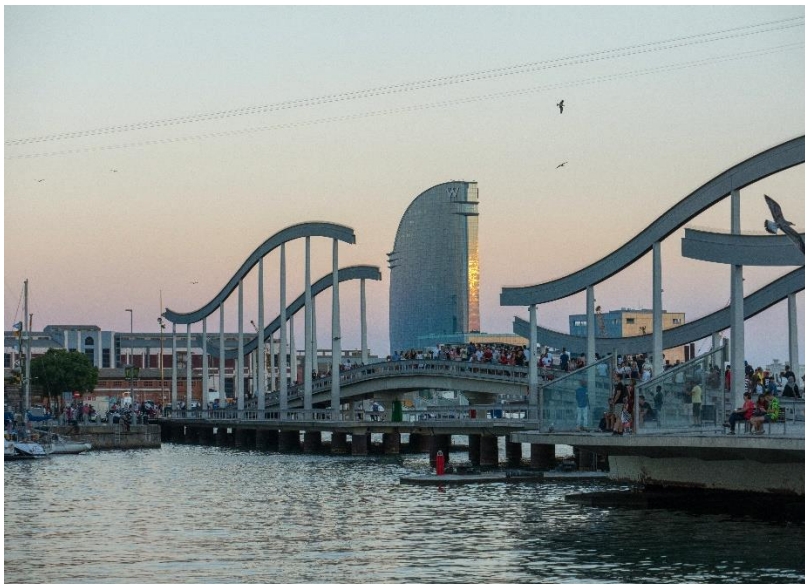
In summary then, as I said before, any of this is only a guideline, and the more images you take, the more you will find it comes naturally. The great thing about playing with composition of course is that you don't need any technical skill – so if you're just using a smartphone, or a camera on auto, you can still have loads of fun trying out different techniques!