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PRACTICAL COMPOSITIONAL TOOLS • CHOOSING TRIPODS



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Practical Compositional Tools

Paul Lukas shares three practical compositional tools that can enhance visual storytelling and help photographers create more impactful and considered images



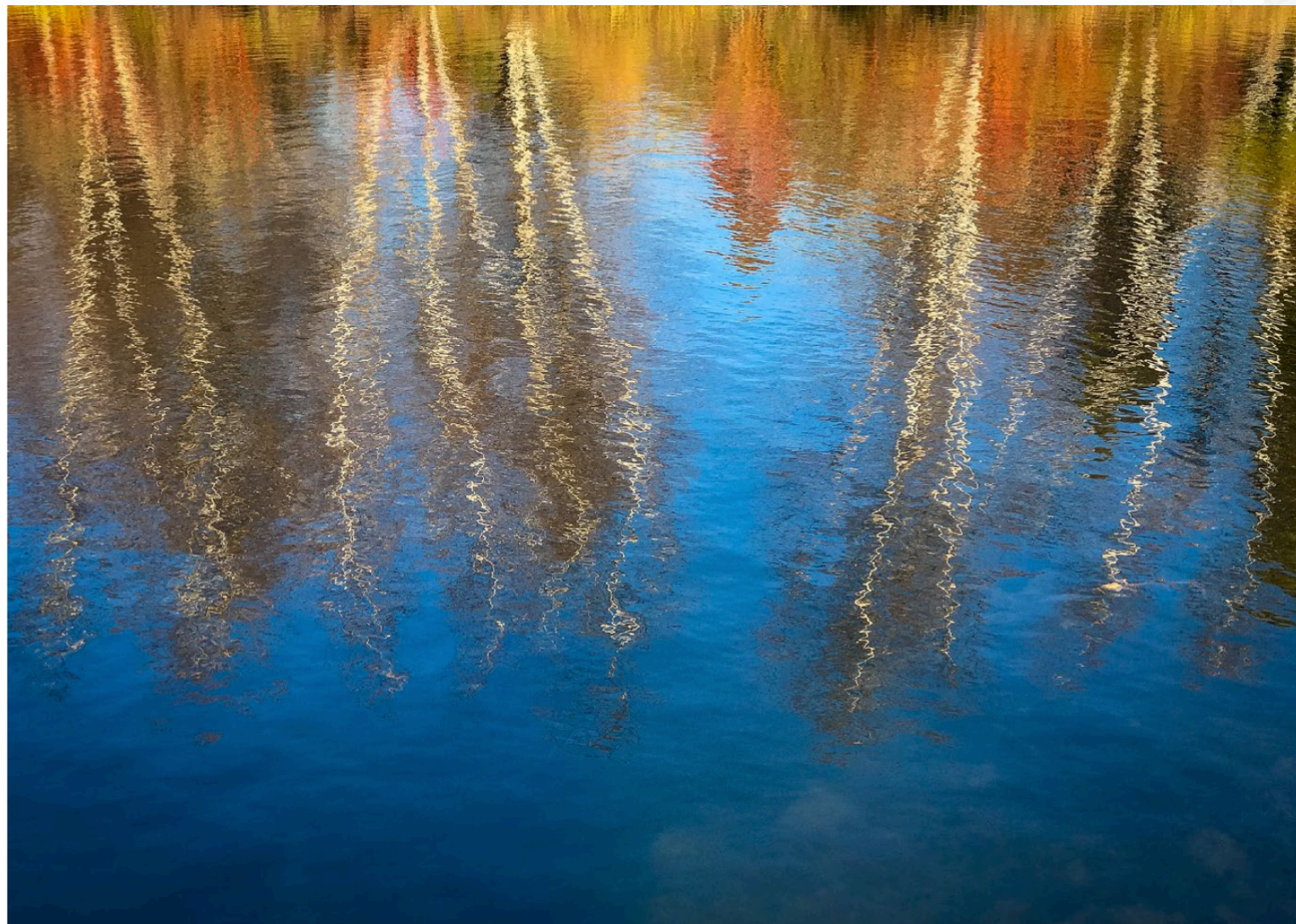
Practical Compositional Tools

The most important piece of photographic equipment you possess is your imagination. It is essential to recognise that the way we perceive the world differs significantly from the way a camera captures it. The human brain functions as a complex and highly selective filter, enabling us to focus on what is most relevant, whether it be a visual element before us or a sound in our environment.

The camera, by contrast, lacks this filtering ability. It records everything indiscriminately. As a result, we often visualise a compelling image in our mind, only to discover after capturing it that the resulting photograph appears cluttered or lacks coherence. Even with a well-considered composition, an image can often seem flat or lifeless. This is a common trait of photography: images do not always match our visual memory or the emotional resonance we experienced at the time. Fortunately, image-editing tools can help refine the digital negative by adding depth, contrast, and vibrancy, allowing the photograph to more closely reflect our vision.

A wide range of compositional tools is available to help craft compelling images: light direction, time of day, lines, curves, colour, focal length, depth of field, and the so-called rule of thirds, among others. Landscape photographer Will Clay prefers to call these compositional strategies tools rather than rules, and I agree. Tools encourage creativity and intention, while rules suggest constraints and the risk of

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failure. There are no absolute rules in photography; experimentation is essential, and no one should suggest otherwise.

Let's now explore three practical compositional tools that can help you create stronger, more engaging

images. These are easy to remember and simple to implement, making them relevant across all genres of photography. The three tools are: **Trip Around the Frame**, **I Need My Space**, and the **Tool of Thirds**, a concept introduced by Will Clay. >>



Pay particular attention to objects that are too close to the edge. A subject pushed up against the border can create visual tension or appear unintentional

pushed up against the border can create visual tension or appear unintentional. Consider giving those elements a bit of breathing room. Everyone appreciates a little space, including your compositions.

Also, assess the exposure across the frame. Are there areas that are overly bright or too dark? Will they draw the eye away from your main subject? If the sky is included, ask yourself whether it contributes to the composition, and how much. If not, minimise its presence or exclude it entirely, as I did on a recent shoot when a cloudless sky offered little interest. I chose instead to focus on the details within the scene, carefully positioning foreground elements and allowing key subjects to breathe within the frame.

A lot was happening in that image, but I made every effort to reduce distractions at the edges and corners. That final check around the frame helped ensure a cleaner, more intentional composition, one that fully supported the story I wanted to tell. >>

>> Trip Around The Frame

One of the simplest yet most effective compositional tools is taking a trip around the frame. Once you have composed your image and are about to press the shutter release, pause for a moment and let your eyes travel slowly around the edges and

corners of the frame. This brief visual inspection can make a significant difference in the final result.

Look for anything that feels out of place. Is there an awkward branch or distracting object sneaking into the frame from the side? Can you recompose slightly

to eliminate it? You might remove it later in post-processing using tools such as Lightroom's Generative AI Remove, but it is best to address it in-camera whenever possible.

Pay particular attention to objects that are too close to the edge. A subject



» I Need My Space

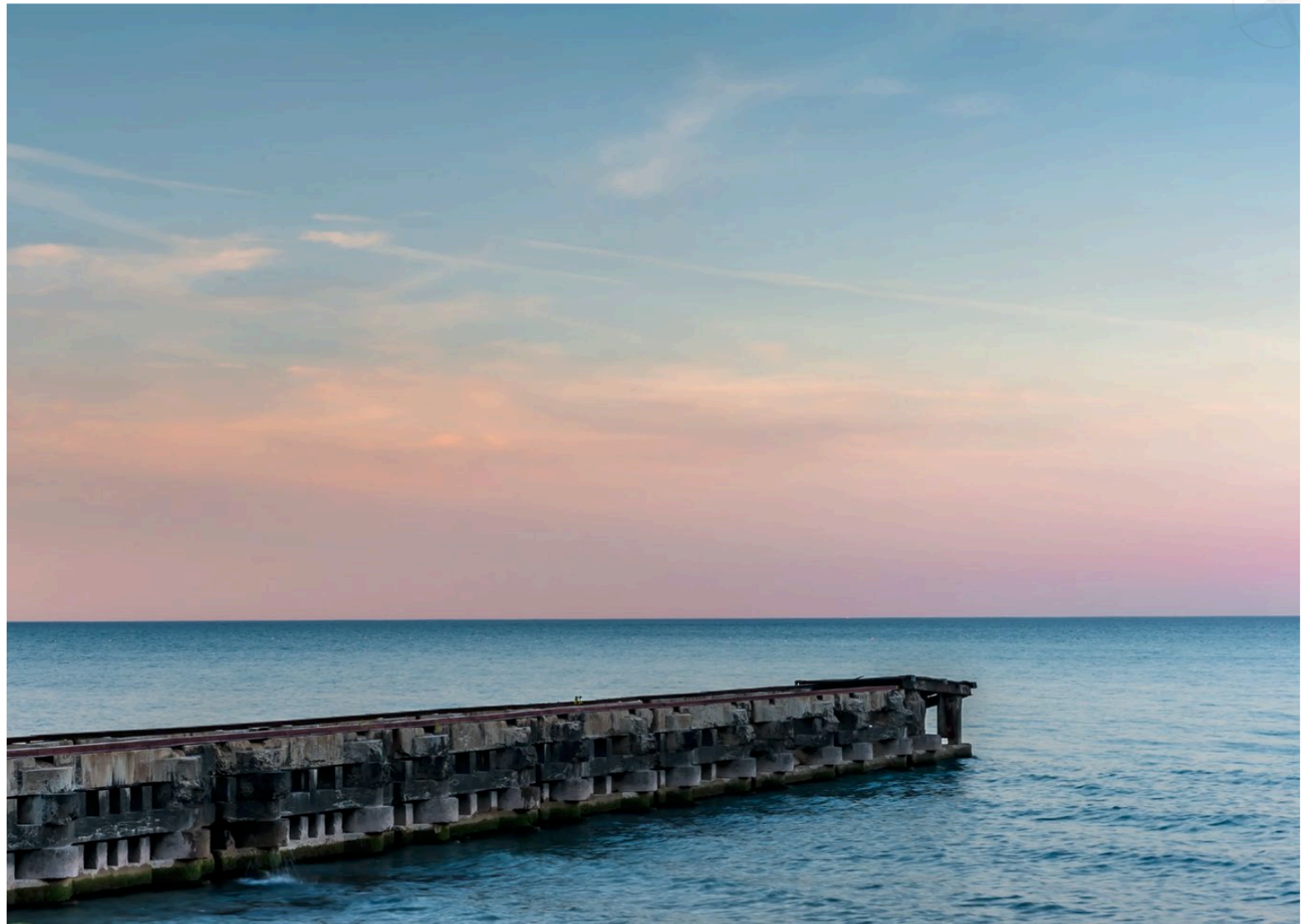
Space is a powerful element in composition. A simple adjustment in the positioning of your subjects or background elements can significantly change the visual impact of a photograph. Before pressing the shutter, take a moment to assess the edges of your frame.

Objects that sit close to the edge of the frame tend to carry more visual weight than those nearer the centre. A large subject—such as a tree trunk—cut off along the vertical edge can dominate the viewer's attention. Consider whether this adds to or detracts from your vision. You might want to include more of the object or exclude it altogether. Stepping back, switching to a wider focal length, or the other way round, can help you reframe the scene more purposefully.

Also, watch for visual convergence: moments when objects within the composition touch or nearly touch, especially around natural lines, such as the horizon. Elements that crowd or overlap unintentionally can make a scene feel compressed. Even a slight shift in camera position can create separation and give your subjects the breathing room they need to stand on their own.

In one composition, I took care to leave space between two small foreground rocks and between a larger rock and the reflection of a willow tree (see article cover image). That deliberate spacing brought clarity to each element and helped maintain a visual rhythm throughout the frame.

This principle applies equally in portraiture. For example, make sure your subject's head is positioned in an uncluttered part of the background. There



is little worse than discovering a lamppost or tree appearing to sprout from a relative's head.

Another example: when photographing a pier meeting the horizon, try placing the pier tip slightly below, directly on, or just above the horizon, and see which

variation provides the most balance. The key is to experiment with spacing. It is not about rules; it is about finding the proper relationship between elements that supports your creative intent. »



>> Tool of Thirds

The tool of thirds is a valuable guide to improve your compositions by helping you decide where to position key elements within the frame. Often referred to as the Rule of Thirds, I prefer the term Tool of Thirds, following the example of my

mentor, Will Clay. In his book *Opus One*, he encouraged thinking of compositional strategies as tools rather than rules. Tools offer creative options. Rules, conversely, suggest strict boundaries. There are no rules in photography, only methods that can support your creative aims.

To use the tool of thirds, divide your frame into three equal sections both vertically and horizontally. This forms a grid of nine rectangles and four intersection points. Placing essential elements near or along these third lines, or at the points where the lines cross, can produce a more

Most mirrorless cameras allow you to display this grid in the viewfinder or on the rear screen

balanced and engaging composition. It is not essential to align subjects exactly on the lines. Often, being close to a third line or crossing point is sufficient to create a compelling image.

Most mirrorless cameras allow you to display this grid in the viewfinder or on the rear screen. Take advantage of this feature in the field to experiment with positioning.

In one image I captured at Lake Marmo in the Morton Arboretum, I noticed a single golden leaf floating on the lake. Its soft movement across the blue surface, with green pine reflections around it, created a striking contrast. By chance and timing, the leaf aligned with a cross point in the grid, beautifully anchoring the image.

In another image, I focused on the sky and clouds. To add grounding, I included a rock in the bottom right corner, allowing the horizon to sit near the lower third of the frame. While I might have preferred even more sky, this balance between foreground and background helped strengthen the overall composition.

Whether you are working in landscapes, portraits, street photography, or still life, the tool of thirds is a versatile and valuable guide. Try experimenting with different placements for your subject. Imagine a single tree as your focal point: there are numerous ways to position it within the frame using this method. If you are using a digital camera, take a few moments to explore multiple compositions. You may be surprised by how much impact a subtle shift in placement can have. >>

>> Summary

While there are no absolute rules in photographic composition, there are useful tools to help you craft stronger, more purposeful images.

In the example photographs throughout this article, I applied several of these compositional tools to guide my creative choices. You are free to combine them—or not—to best serve your vision. The main point is to be aware and intentional.

When you encounter a subject worth photographing, keep these points in mind:

- Take a trip around the frame: Before pressing the shutter, scan the edges and corners of the frame. Look for distracting elements or anything that feels unintentionally cut off.

- I need my space: Watch for convergence—subjects or objects touching each other or crowding the frame. Give elements some breathing room to improve clarity and balance.

- Tool of thirds: Consider placing your main subjects along the thirds of the frame to create a more visually engaging composition.

These tools are simple, adaptable, and effective across all genres of photography. The more you practice, the more intuitive they will become. So practise early, practise often, and let your creativity lead your work.



Paul Lucas believes that exceptional landscape photography does not require exotic locations. His work is deeply influenced by masters such as Ansel Adams, Paul Strand, Edward Weston, and Will Clay in the Chicago area.

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