



COMPOSITION

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*With grateful acknowledgement of notes from:
David Eaves/ Anthony Pioli/Rex Darby/Nat Coalson*

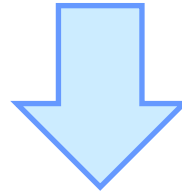
CREATING GOOD PICTURES

Image capture

Good composition

+

Correct technical settings
(exposure etc.)



Post processing

Improve composition by:

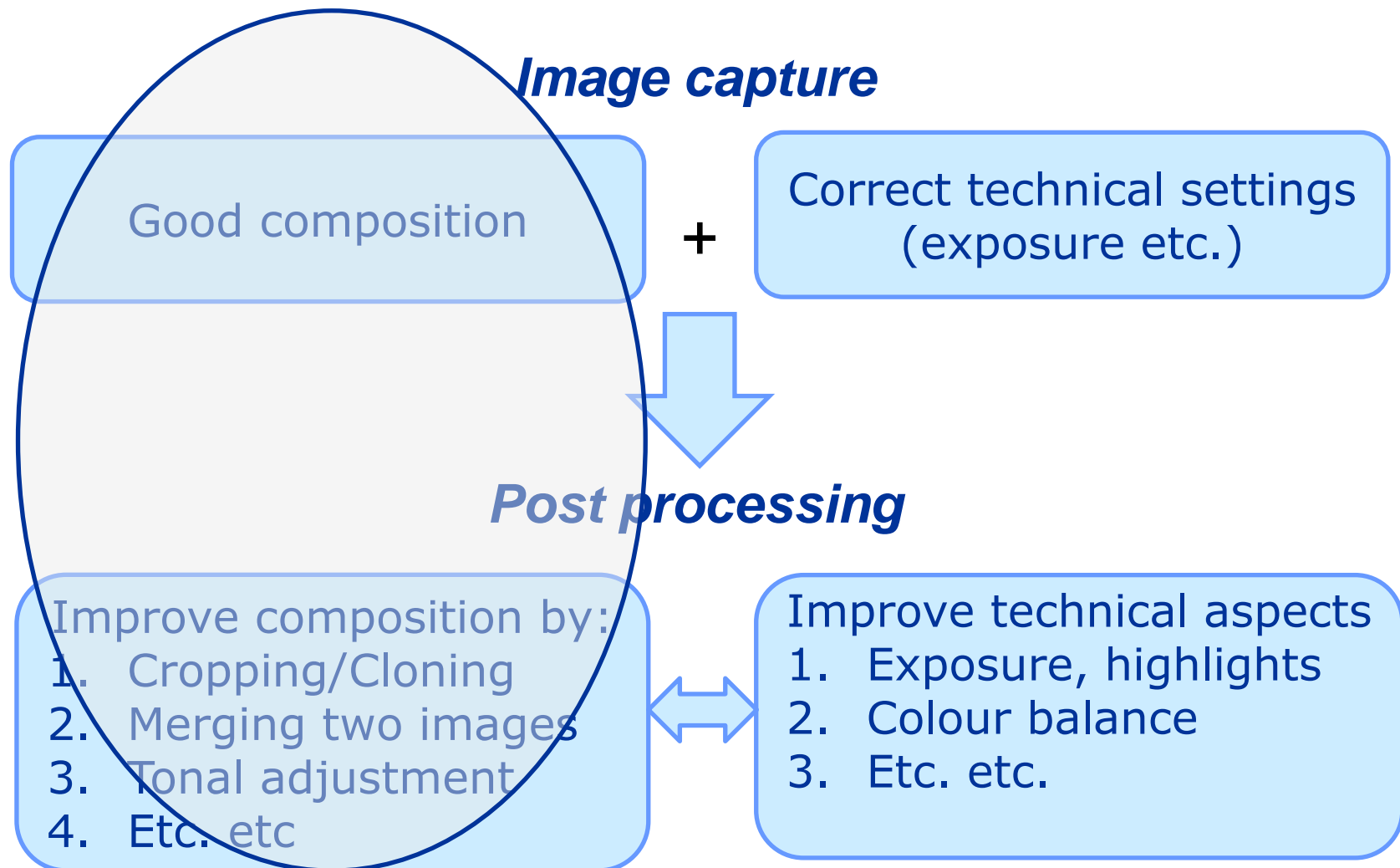
1. Cropping/Cloning
2. Merging two images
3. Tonal adjustment
4. Etc. etc



Improve technical aspects

1. Exposure, highlights
2. Colour balance
3. Etc. etc.

CREATING GOOD PICTURES



WHAT IS GOOD COMPOSITION

The arrangement of the various elements in a picture in a way which creates a striking and/or pleasing image for the viewer

- Many of those people with innate artistic ability can do this naturally
- However note that what is “*striking and/or pleasing*” to one may not be so to another
- But even for those who are less artistic there are some basic composition “rules” which can create images which most people like
- **But rules can always be broken creatively**
- In the end the image should be one that you enjoy

*“Express yourself not just record the subject”
Rex Darby*

TO FIDDLE OR NOT TO FIDDLE IN POST PROCESSING

- Some prefer to get the whole image as right as possible in camera (*but even Ansel Adams did lots of post processing*)
- Others do considerable post processing to create the final image from one (or often more) original images
- For most purposes this is a matter of personal choice - the final image is whatever you wish it to be regardless of where it started
- However, it usually helps if the initial image capture is good

Note: For nature (and some other external) competitions there are strict rules on what you can and cannot alter in post processing

WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO CAPTURE IN YOUR PICTURE?

- Train yourself to “see pictures” whenever you are out with the camera
- What are you trying to show in the picture? What is the main point of interest?
 - A mood or emotion
 - A landscape (dramatic, different or just pleasant)
 - A striking pattern
 - People in their environment or in a dramatic situation
 - An animal in its environment or showing natural behaviour
 - ????
- Look for *different images, unusual angles, striking poses, interesting expressions, or dramatic lighting*
- Avoid clichés, “chocolate box” or “record shot” pictures
- Try getting in close (and then closer still!)

Will the viewer be able to see what you saw in the picture?

COMPOSITIONAL DESIGN

<https://www.natcoalson.com/>

- What is the picture of and how to convey to viewer?
- How can we emphasise this?
 - What is essential
 - What is interfering
 - What can I eliminate
 - How to direct the eye?
- Understand how visual perception works
 - Bright area first
 - Oval/horizontal
 - Clear sharp objects
 - "Shapes" to guide the eye e.g three objects in a triangle
 - Patterns

COMPOSITION - THE BASICS 1

■ Distractions

- What is the main point of interest?
- Does the subject clearly stand out from the other elements in the picture?
- Do elements in the image compete with each other
- Does the background distract from the main subject?
- Is the image too complicated or overcrowded
- Watch out for bright spots, particularly towards the edge of the picture, which can draw the eye out of the frame and away from the subject?

■ Confusing - Will the eye of the viewer be able to properly “read the picture”

- Is there an obvious point of focus for the eye to come back to?
- Does the composition naturally lead the viewer’s eye around the picture?
- Or - does the composition tend to lead the viewer out of the picture? For example people walking or looking out of the image
- Do you need figures in a landscape to provide a sense of scale?

COMPOSITION - THE BASICS 2

- Wasted space
 - Are there large areas of wasted or boring space?
 - Is there a lack of foreground interest in a landscape?
 - Exception when “negative space” is used creatively to enhance the picture
- Avoid sloping horizons – get right in camera or adjust post
- Basic compositional “rules”
 - There are classical compositional arrangements which have been known by artists for many years, which work equally well in photographs – ***get to know and use them***

USE YOUR LENS AS A COMPOSITIONAL TOOL

- Different focal length lens provide a different perspective which can be used creatively
- A long telephoto lens compresses perspective and can even be used for interesting landscape images
- A medium telephoto (85-100mm*) can often be good for portraits
- A standard 50mm lens is closest to normal eye range and can be used for street or people shots
- 24-35mm can provide slightly wider view which is also good (better?) for landscape and streetscape pictures
- A very wide angle lens (11-24mm)
 - Can “open up” perspective but needs foreground interest
 - For people shots - getting really close often provides interesting composition
 - Can be challenging if lots of converging verticals (cityscape)
 - But extreme wide angle can also provide deliberately distorted view for creative effect



** All lens focal length refer to full frame camera – adjust for crop cameras*

OUTDOOR LIGHTING CONDITIONS

- The lighting and time of day have a substantial impact on the image mood and quality
- Usually best in early morning or evening which provides a more interesting light and better definition on subject

“The golden hour”



- Midday lighting is often flat and uninteresting
- Try to avoid harsh direct lighting which creates difficult to handle highlight/shadows
- Most shots usually better in diffuse or shady light
- Use “fill in flash” to minimise harsh shadows

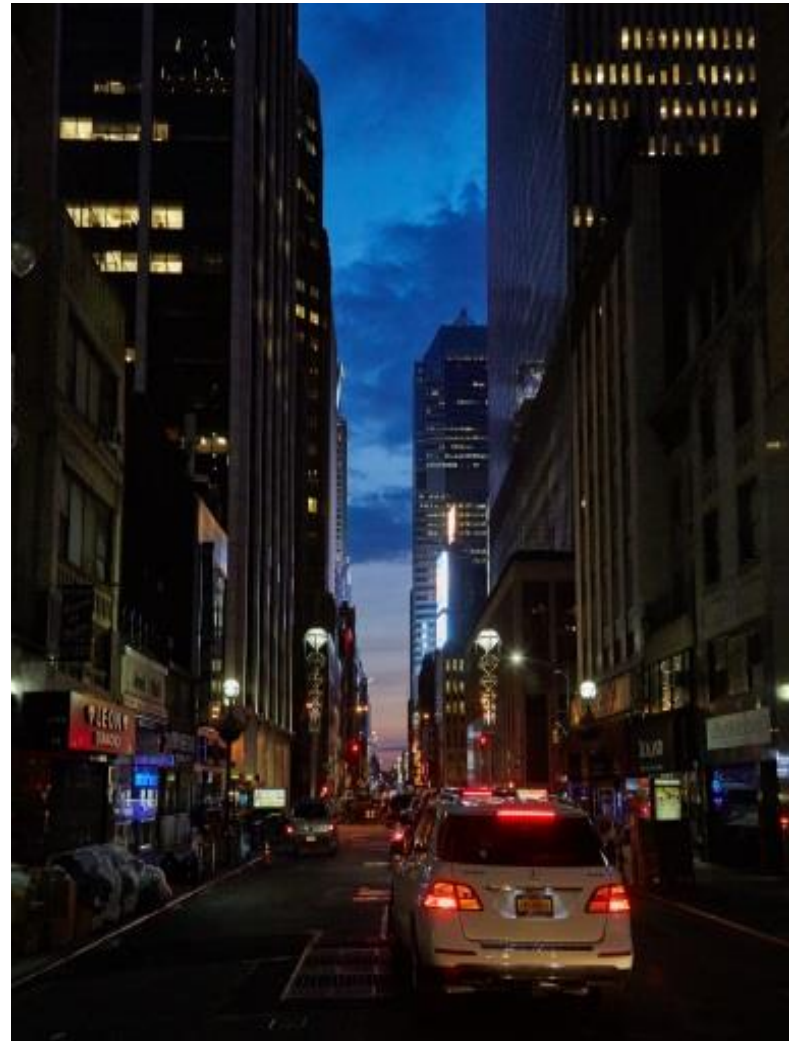
REMEMBER THE OPTION TO CHANGE COLOUR TEMP

What time of day was this taken?



NIGHT/EVENING SHOTS

For “night” shots often better just before complete darkness since provides some colour and definition in the sky



WHAT TO DO ABOUT SKIES?

- For landscape and some other subjects you need to consider what to do about the sky
- If it is interesting maybe it can be a key part of the image
- If it is boring (flat grey, burnt out white, deep clear blue?):
 - At capture stage
 - Recompose without the sky
 - Take in raw and hope to recover sky detail later
 - Use a graduated filter
 - In post processing
 - Crop the sky out
 - Add a new sky in Photoshop

- Interesting skies can make a picture
- Poor or bland skies can ruin it



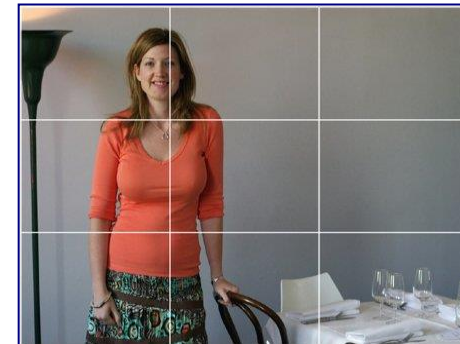
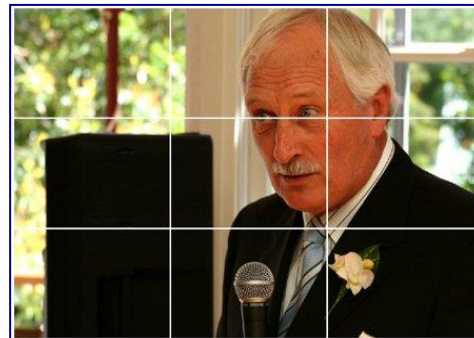
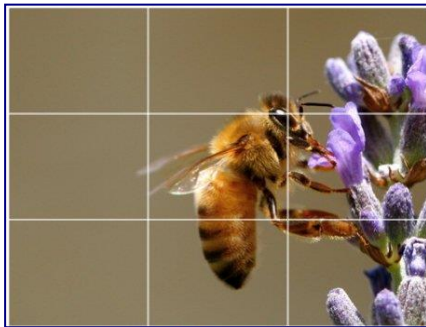
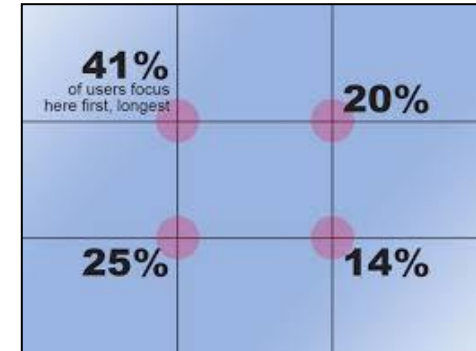
NATURE COMPOSITION

- Nature photography has some particular challenges
- Most competitions do not allow significant post processing so initial composition is critical
- Whatever the subject a good background is essential
 - Shallow depth of field to have nice blurred background
 - *or*
 - Showing the natural environment but without clutter and mess (no distracting elements)
- Particularly for shallow depth of field (macro or for stopped wide open telephoto) it is critical to get the correct:
 - Point of focus- e.g. the eyes/head
 - Alignment of subject with the camera to get as much of the subject as you can in focus

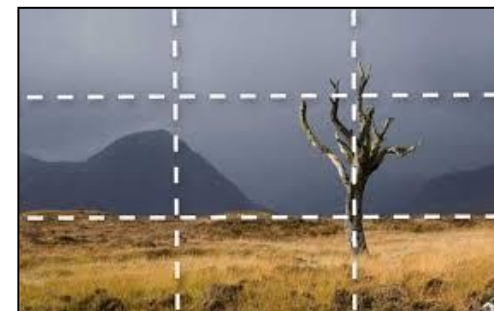


ARRANGEMENT OF THE SUBJECT

- The classical way to arrange subjects within the image – “Rule of thirds”
- Position the main subject at the intersection point on a 3x3 grid

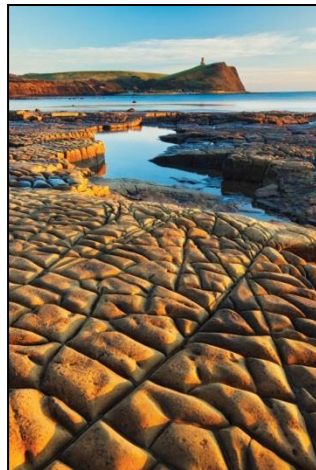


- Similarly for landscapes always place the horizon on one of the thirds

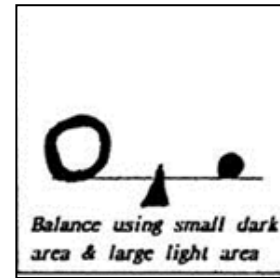


LEAD-IN LINES

- S shaped curves, diagonals or similar compositions can lead the viewer's eye into the picture or to the point of focus
- Try to find these when looking for a viewpoint



SUBJECT BALANCE



- It is often beneficial if the main subject is 'balanced' by a smaller item, perhaps on a diagonal third
- But completely symmetrical subjects, although theoretically "balanced", generally need a degree of asymmetry to be more pleasing
 - E.g. a large object of light tone might be balanced by a smaller object of darker tone.
- Three objects are often better than two
- Landscapes can be difficult
 - Work best if dark masses balance on opposite sides of the picture
 - Dark hills on one side and light sea on the other leads the eye out of the picture
- Sometimes you need an "blocking" object at the edge of the frame to keep the viewer's eye within the picture

MESSY OR DISTRACTING BACKGROUNDS

- Messy backgrounds distract the viewer from the main subject
- At capture stage:
 - Get in closer
 - Move to a different location (sometimes just a short distance)
 - Use zoom lens to minimise problem
 - Use differential depth of field to isolate subject
 - Avoid nasty juxtapositions - “poles growing out of heads”
- At post processing stage:
 - Crop or clone out distractions
 - Use differential blur or dodging/burning to isolate subject
 - Cut and paste main subject onto new background

REPLACING MESSY BACKGROUNDS



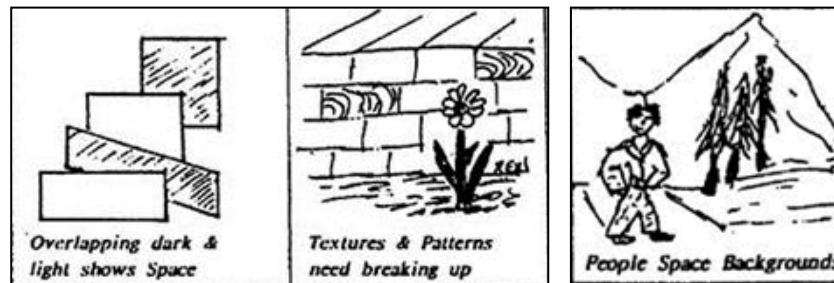
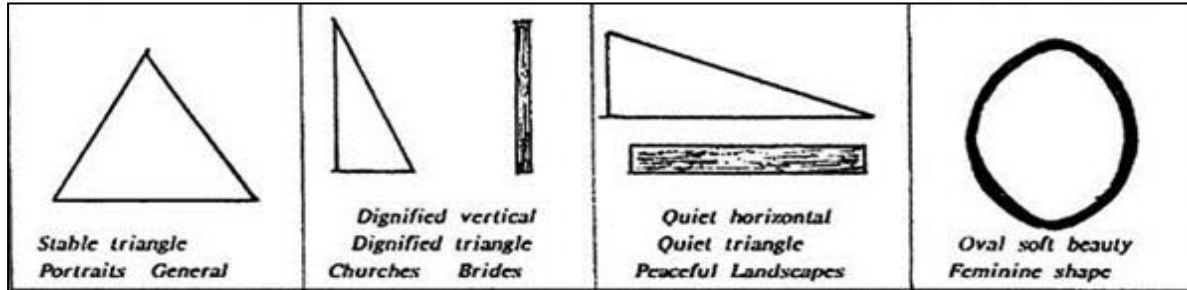
REPLACING MESSY BACKGROUNDS



OTHER ASPECTS OF PICTURE ARRANGEMENT

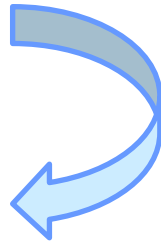
- Pictures are normally read from left to right (*and bottom to top*)
- Often best to place the centre of interest on the right
- Try flipping the image horizontally to see if composition improves

Some cartoons by Rex Darby to demonstrate other aspects



COLOUR BALANCE

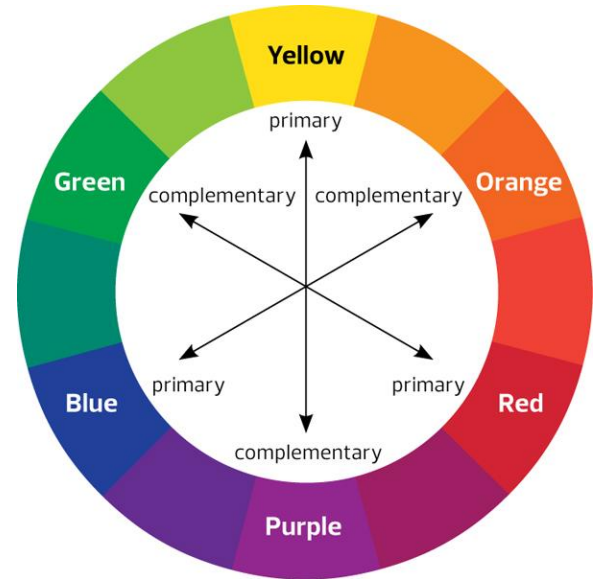
- Understand the colour wheel
- Complementary colours provide strong contrast
 - Do not have to be the same dominance in the picture
 - If equal amounts then can create tension
 - Often better if you make one of the colours less prominent than the other



- Adjacent colours are harmonious
 - Use to provide soft and restful pictures
 - Can keep the eye of the viewer looking within the picture

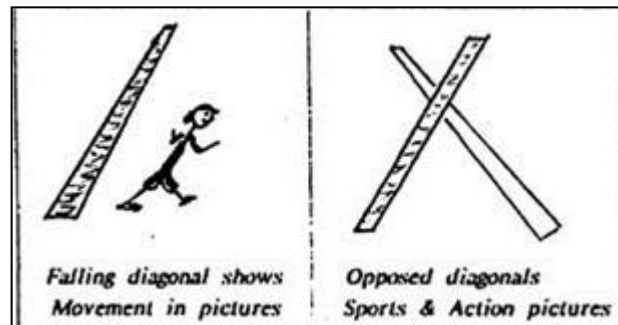


- Try different levels of saturation
- If colour doesn't work – try mono



MOVEMENT

- Conveying a sense of movement can be difficult
- Not just using about using very high shutter speed to “freeze” action
- Do wheels look like they are moving or static?
- Learn “panning” technique to create blurred background
- Or use blur tool in Photoshop to cheat
- Use diagonal composition to show movement



- Remember that moving subjects need space to move into



TOP TEN TIPS FROM REX DARBY

1. Use the thirds
2. Use strong patterns
3. Use texture
4. Use blur creatively
5. Find quiet horizontal pictures
6. Find dynamic vertical pictures
7. Use space lines and space curves to show recession through landscapes
8. Use triangles and diagonals to help construct your pictures
9. Look for pictures in only 2 or 3 tones.
10. Try to use really strong lines of composition throughout your work

And finally

Trying to remember all this when you are taking pictures can be difficult but....

- The more pictures you take the better you will become
- Try to train your photographic eye
- Look at pictures you like by other people and try to find why it works for you
- Enter competitions and get feedback from experienced judges (even if you do not always agree with them?)
- Look critically at your pictures and see what you can do at capture and in post processing to improve
- ***But rules are made to be broken***