A BRIEF
GUIDE TO COMPOSITION

Photographic Composition

The term **composition** refers to the content of a photograph; specifically, the way everything in the photo is laid out.

This includes the subject matter, the relative size and positions of objects within the photo, lighting and tonal balance, colour, etc.

If you Google "Photographic Composition" you'll find dozens of articles listing "Rules".

Some of them sound quite interesting but I think many are too complicated.

For example :

What are the 6 elements of composition?

9 Top Photography Composition Rules You
    Need To Know

18 Composition Rules For Photos That Shine

20 Composition Techniques That Will
    Improve Your Photos

35 Photography Composition Rules and Tips

35 is just too much ! So I'll simplify it a bit.

The Rule of Thirds
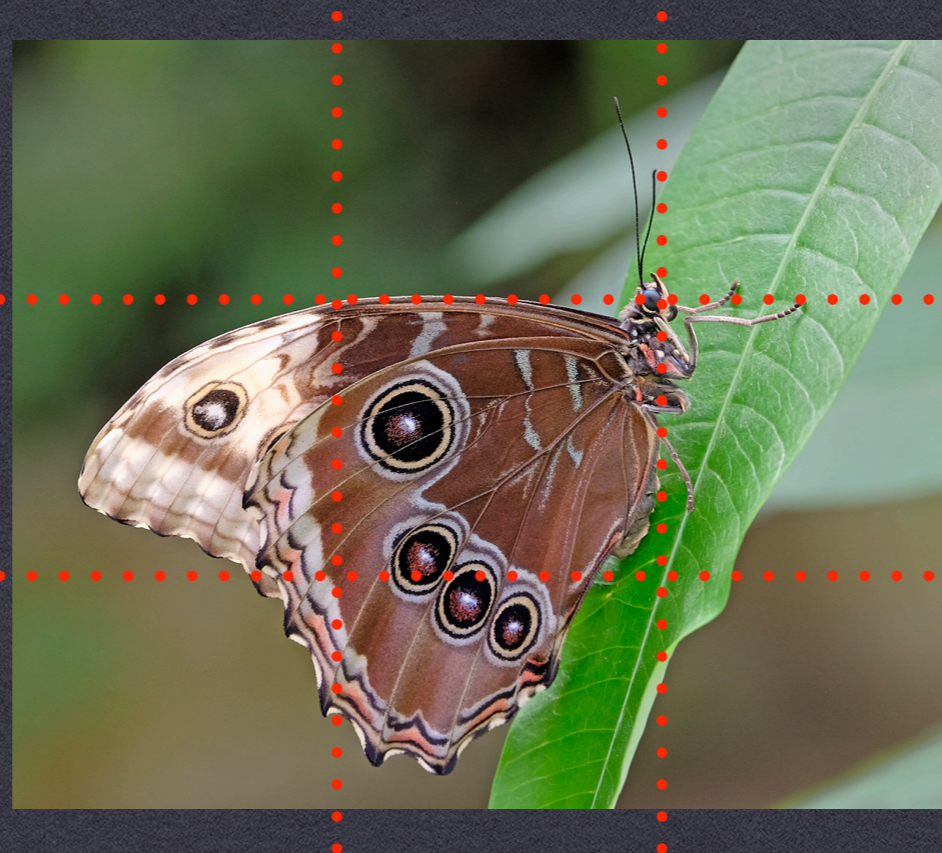
This is usually the first one suggested. It involves drawing an imaginary grid over the image, with two vertical lines and two horizontal lines, all evenly spaced apart.
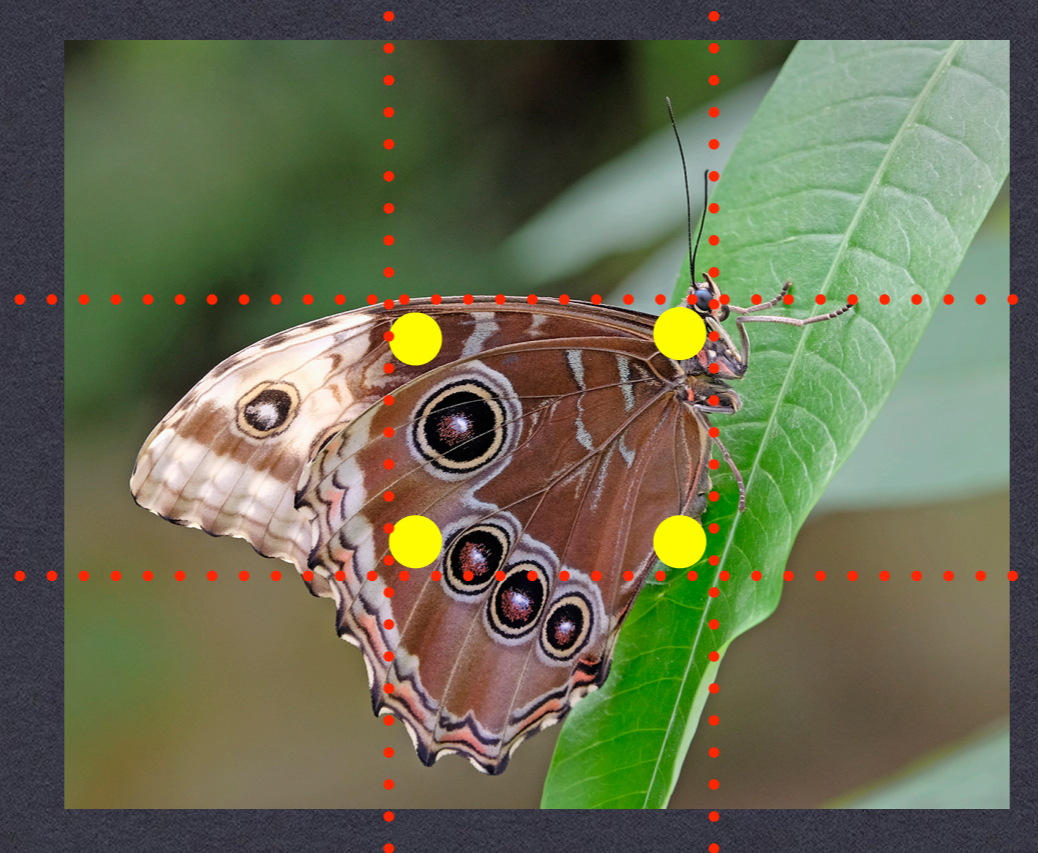
The Rule of Thirds

Like this.

   The theory is that the places with most visual impact are the four points where the lines cross.

The Rule of Thirds

I prefer the balance of points just inside the crosses but either principle works.

The Rule of Thirds

You can instead place your main subject on just one of the thirds.

The Rule of Thirds

It's quite common in a landscape to place the horizon on the upper or lower third rather than across the centre of the image. This lets you emphasise either the sky or the land / sea.

The Rule of Thirds

But it's perfectly acceptable to place the horizon across the centre if that looks best.

The Rule of Thirds
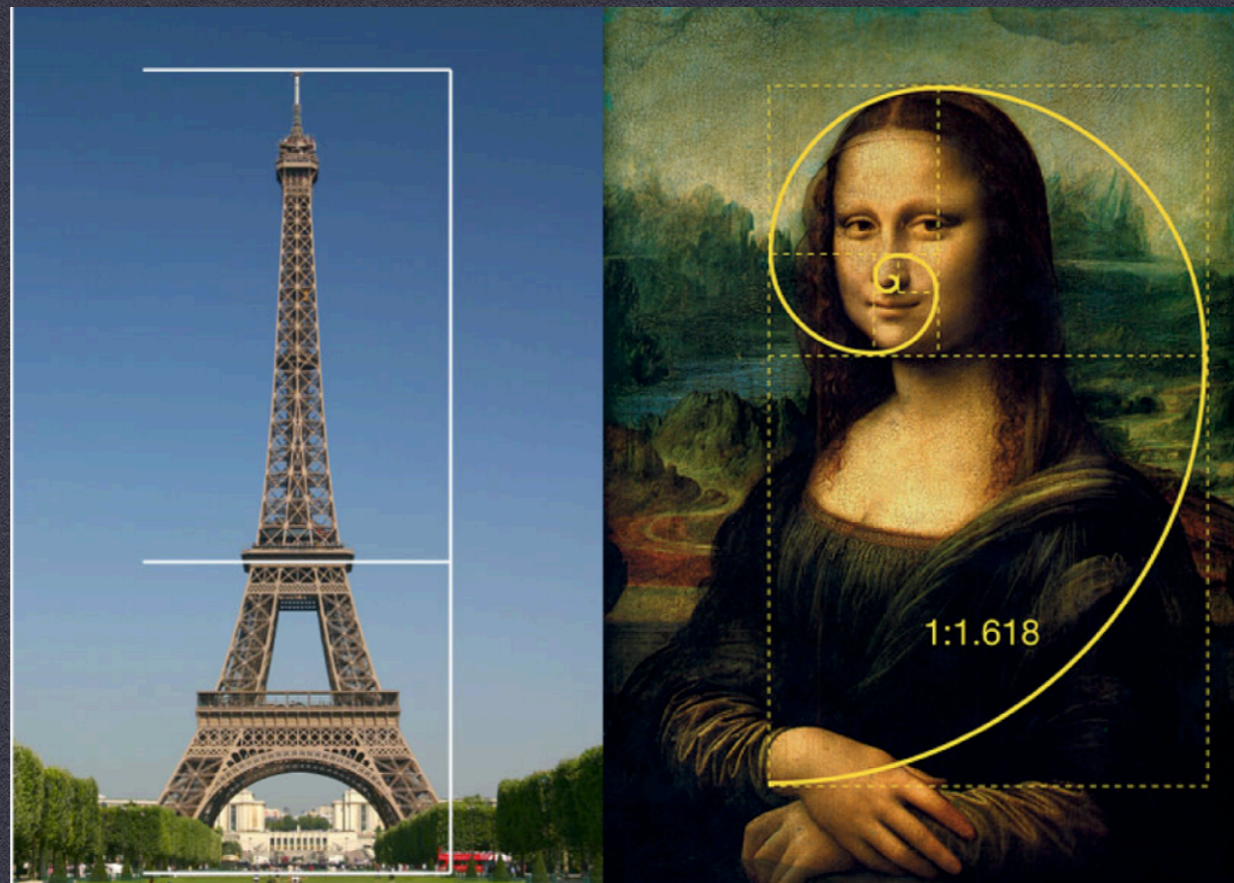
Often it's best **not** to place your subject just touching the horizon or other line but to place it above, below or definitely breaking that line.

The Golden Ratio / Mean / Spiral / Triangle …

   This is a similar idea but much more complex and is based on a ratio of 1.618.
   Unless you have a master's degree in maths or you like causing yourself grief forget it!

Lines and Leading Lines

Lines direct one's attention within an image.

Lines and Leading Lines

Converging lines are even more effective in drawing the eye to the where the lines meet. For example, railway lines, fences, limbs, etc.

Lines and Leading Lines

Lines from corners pull the eye to a focal point.

Leading Lines <u>with</u> The Rule of Thirds

Depth, Foreground Objects and Frames

There are ways to increase the impression of a 3-dimensional scale on a 2D image.

For example, include an object in the foreground.

Depth, Foreground Objects and Frames

Such as a boulder.

Depth, Foreground Objects and Frames

Such as a boulder.

Depth, Foreground Objects and Frames

Or some other feature.

Depth, Foreground Objects and Frames

The rocks near the front add scale and depth.

Depth, Foreground Objects and Frames

As an aside, some think that leading lines are more effective from the left.
Do you find the flipped image more comfortable?

Depth, Foreground Objects and Frames

Near objects add depth, context and a frame.

Depth, Foreground Objects and Frames

Trees as frames.

Balance (of colours)

Colours in an image are enhanced by choosing harmonising or contrasting colours as well.

Magenta petals stand out against their opposite colour, green.

Balance (of colours)

When the light is low and colours are muted colour contrast is less effective. In bright light the beacon stands out (as it was designed to!).

Balance (of colours)

Sometimes a background of a harmonious colour enhances the mood of a picture.

Balance (of tones and mass)

The dark mass on one side of the left image unbalances it. Moving just a few steps to include the tree regains balance as well as increasing the impression of depth.
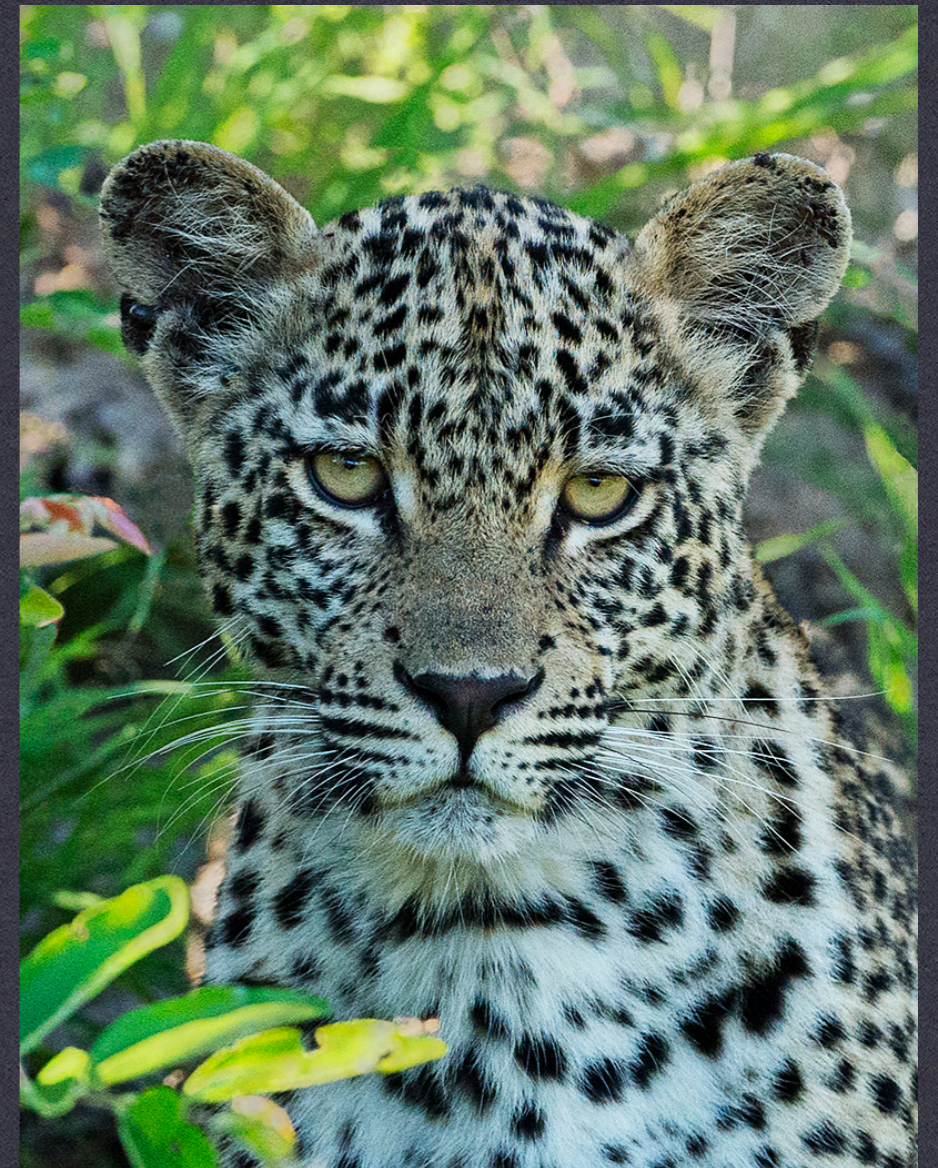
Symmetry

A symmetrical balance, either horizontally or vertically, can be very strong.

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Focus

Changing the focus point changes the effect.

Focus

As long as your chosen part of the image is sharp it can help if other bits aren't sharp.

Focus

As here with the main subject out of focus !

Focus and Backgrounds

Phones, compact cameras or small apertures create busy, distracting backgrounds.

Focus and Backgrounds

Blurring areas around your subject concentrates attention on it.

Focus and Backgrounds

Or find a plainer background.

Focus and Backgrounds

A plain background is less distracting but often some detail in the surroundings adds to a story.

Focus and Backgrounds

The busy background is what led me to set up this picture. The grocer looks lost in all that stock.

Focus and Backgrounds

Another example of a busy background. Also, the subject's smack in the middle but I like it.

Focus and Backgrounds

Here, either background sets the chick in its environment but I prefer the plainer background.
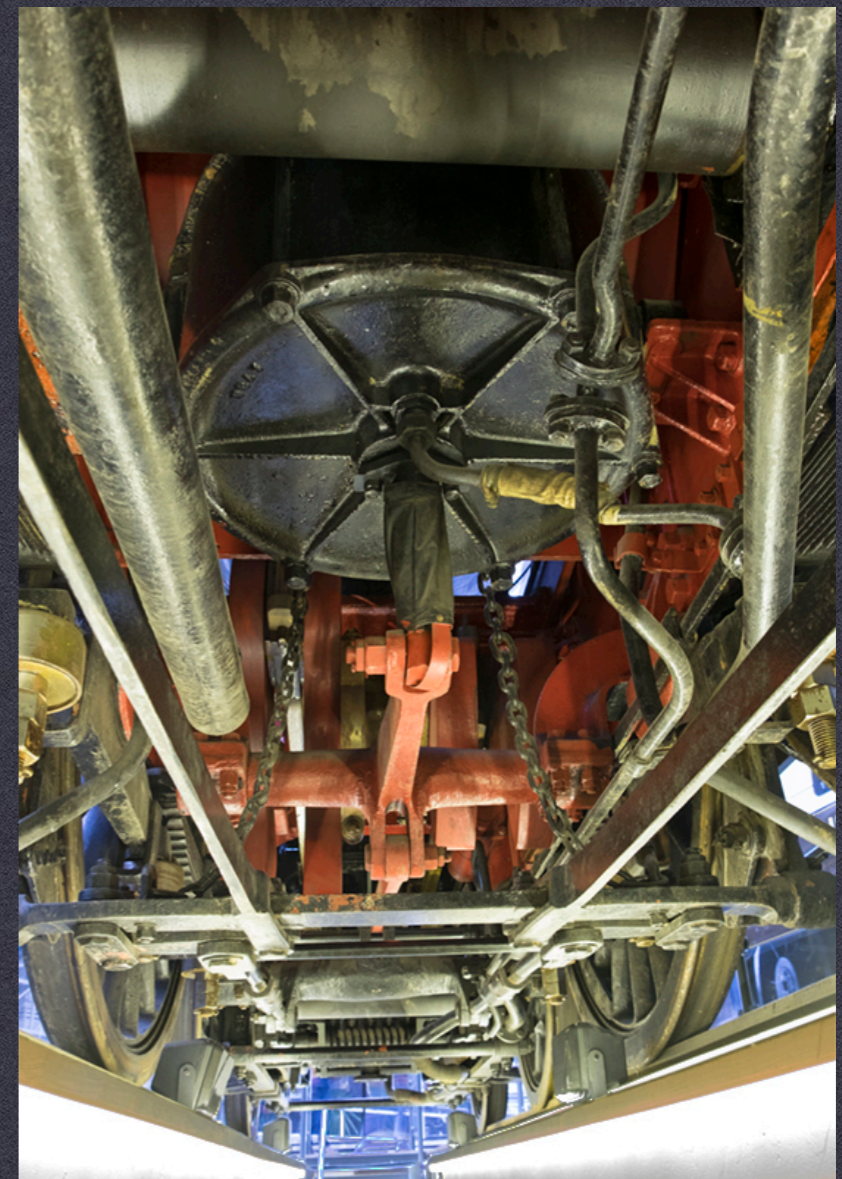
Viewpoint

Changing your viewpoint (physically or mentally) leads to quite different images.

As well as moving sideways try getting down lower or up higher.

Viewpoint

Look down or look up.

Viewpoint

Do you prefer the standard eye-level view on the left or the high viewpoint on the right ?

Space - Looking into Space
  A portrait is more comfortable with space for the sitter to look into.

Odd Numbers

Some suggest that if a number of subjects are in the frame it's best to have an odd number.

Three odd photographers.

Odd Numbers

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Three odd runners.

Repeating Patterns

The many squares and shapes present an interesting backdrop to the lone figure.

Repeating Patterns

The sets of blocks can be the main subject, on the left, or a stark background on the right.

Repeating Patterns

Circular patterns. For both I turned the centre line a little to avoid the perfect symmetry.

Textures

Any interest in these pictures comes from the lines and textures.

Diagonals

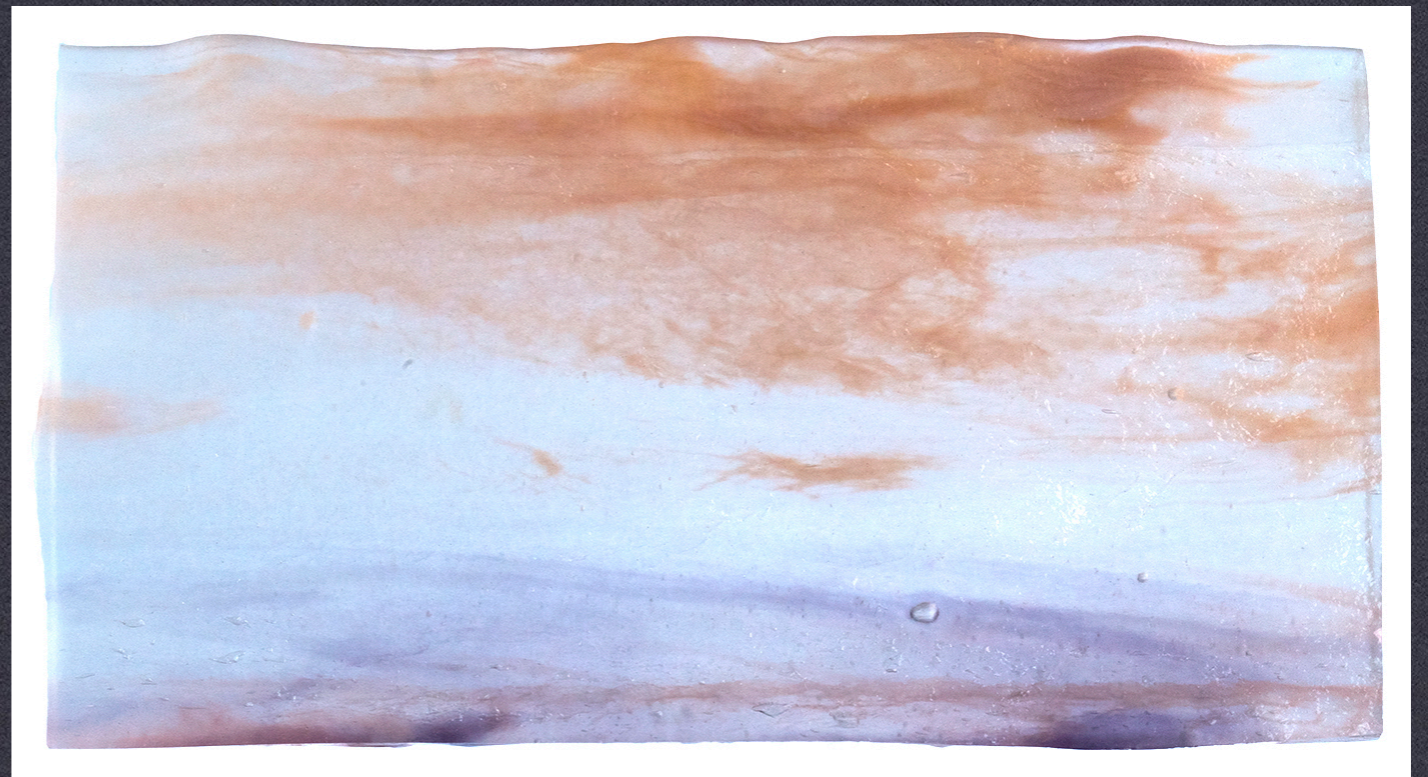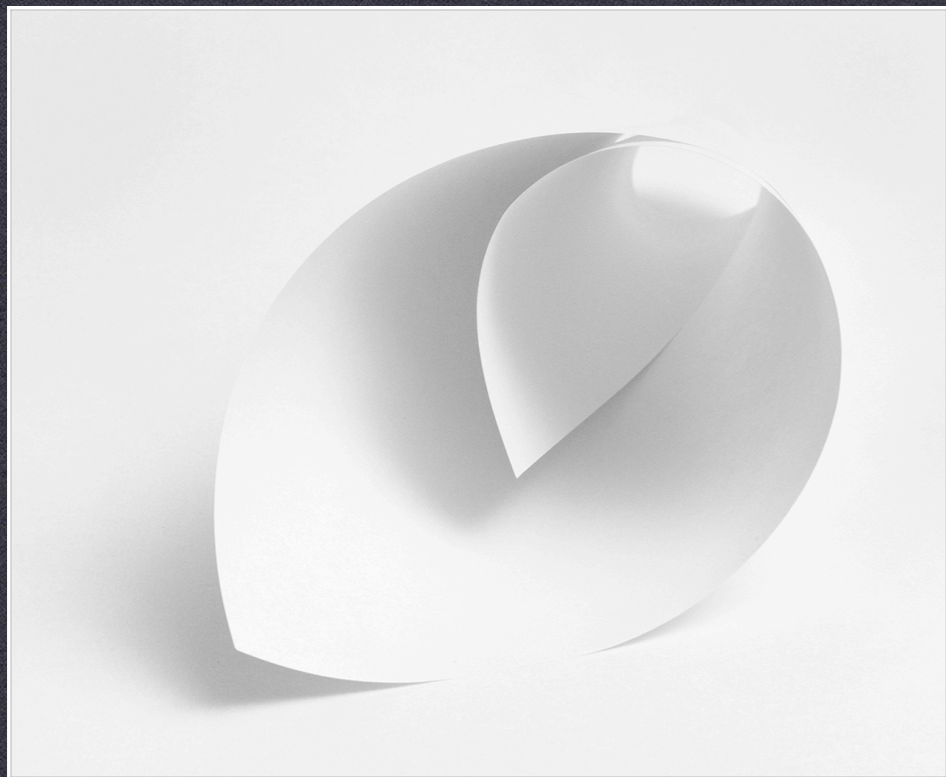   Horizontal and vertical lines are generally static whereas diagonal lines appear more dynamic.

Negative Space

  Cropping in generally leads to more intense images but space around a subject, known as negative space, has value too.

High Key and Low Key

A high key picture is one with mostly light tones. It usually gives a lighter, gentler mood.
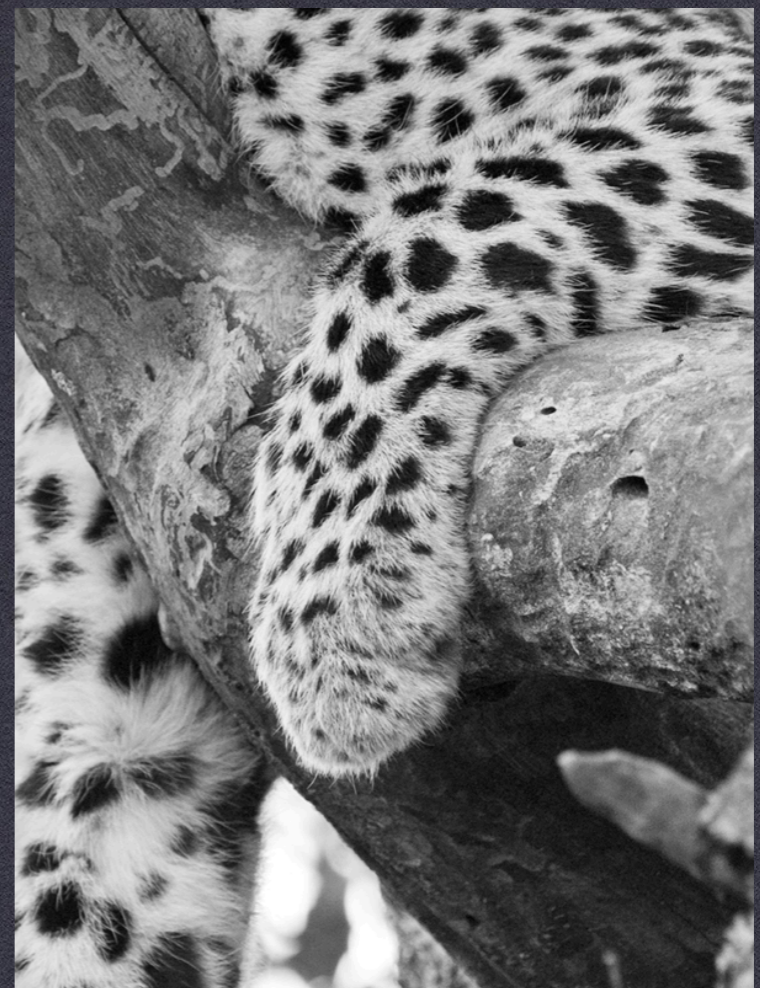
High Key and Low Key

A low key picture has mostly dark tones. It usually gives a sombre or more serious mood.

Monochrome

Shooting monochrome is a bit different as the picture elements are reduced to just shades and shapes.

Monochrome

Most of the same principles of composition apply but the right subject can be enhanced by the simplification.

Less is More

Keep your images simple, unless you're trying for a busy effect.
Leave out any elements which don't add to the image you're after.

Remember that these rules are not rules to be followed every time They are guidelines to help you get the effect you're after.

Have fun and experiment. Judges like pictures which are different. At least, they say they do.

In practice pushing the boundaries may not please everyone, but if it pleases you I'd say you're onto a winner.