

**STEVE MCCURRY  
LESSON 21 – COMPOSITION**

**THE RULES OF COMPOSITION**

**“A lot has been written about composition. And a lot has been written about my composition.”**

Good composition is a key element in photography but it is notoriously difficult to define. In this lesson, Steve explores composition in his work over the years.

**“I think you should be free of any rules or any kind of guidelines and just find your own way. I think that rules are meant to be broken.”**

Steve takes an almost ‘devil may care’ approach to composition, it’s important not to focus too heavily. By no means is composition unimportant, it is wholly important to study the greats, but your composition should be a product of your own style. There’s no right way in terms of composition. His philosophy is to focus on the content and the story, often leading to great photos that are ambiguous and unusual in nature.

**“sometimes if things aren’t quite right...maybe you’ll find that rather than have the subject move, you move”**

Steve explains how the right shot may not necessarily come easily and uses examples of his own work to show the experimentation and movement required to compose a great photo.

## STEVE MCCURRY PROJECT LESSON 21: CREATE DIFFERENT COMPOSITIONS IN A SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS

**“You’ll find your own style and your own sense of composition by practise, by hard work, by looking at your scene from different angles. And this is really the ultimate key to success is to be out photographing, practise, practise, practise”**

Try making your first instinctive compositions more balanced by moving around your subject. Sometimes try the other side of where you’re actually standing. It’s important to look at the situation, your subject, in lots of different angles and maybe you’ll find that rather than have the subject move, you move!

Look at some of Steve’s pictures in this lesson and explore variations of these compositions in your own series. Then move around your subject seeing new angles and versions of your first composition. Don’t just stand in one place...move around constantly until you feel you have a compositional balance that appeals to you.

## TRANSCRIPT

A lot has been written about composition. And a lot has been written about my composition. But I have to tell you that I think you should be free of any rules or any kind of guidelines and just find your own way. I think that rules are meant to be broken. Sometimes great pictures are ambiguous. Sometimes pictures have a sense of mystery. Sometimes it's good to be thrown off balance. Sometimes it's good to be surprised. And the unexpected is always wonderful.

But I think, in terms of composition, you shouldn't feel encumbered to photograph this way or that way. I think you should experiment. I think through trial and error you'll find your own way, your own signature style. But there's no right way in terms of composition.

I think it's important to study composition. I think it's important to look at how some of the great masters in photography or painting, how they solve problems of composition. But I think when you're out actually shooting, you should be completely focused on the picture, the story, that you're photographing. If you're thinking too much about the rules of composition, it's taking your mind off of the picture. Sometimes great pictures don't rely on composition. They rely on content and a great story.

So it's important to remember, that when you're composing a picture, sometimes if things aren't quite right, you need to move. Maybe the composition will become more clear, more balanced if you just move around your subject. And sometimes the picture's on the other side of where you're actually standing. At the moment, it's important to look at the situation, your subject, in lots of different angles and maybe you'll find that rather than have the subject move, you move.

This is a picture of fishermen in Sri Lanka off the southwest coast, place called Walgama, which was so fascinating to me was this very unique way of fishing on these sort of very narrow poles. It's something which they've been doing for centuries. But this practice is really kind of coming to an end with the modern world we live in.

But I knew that this was going to be an important picture because it's such a unique way of fishing. I thought the only way I could really do it properly was to actually get

into the water with them. And I was sort of standing on one of these rocks near the beach. And I went there maybe four different occasions. I went there a few mornings. I went there a few afternoons, trying to find the right light, the right situation.

But what I figured out quickly was, to get the best picture, I actually needed to move into the water. And the best place in the water was kind of perched on this rock. The view from the beach wasn't very good. And I realized that the best angle was from this rock, which was a bit precarious because as the waves came in the water would pick me up and drop me back down and hopefully I would be back on this rock.

But I think that what I've really learned from this picture was that I really had to move around the situation, where I had to really move around these fishermen. And the best angle really wasn't on the beach. But it was inside the water perched on this rock.

One of the most fascinating situations I've ever seen is this ship-breaking industry. This picture's from the coast of Pakistan near Karachi. And what they do is they haul these enormous great ships up on the beach. And then they set about cutting them apart for scrap metal. And in this particular ship-breaking yard I visited, there must have been 20 or 30 of these huge ships ready to be cut apart.

So what I thought as I was walking up and down the beach, I found this one man who was kind of looking out into the scene. And so you had this enormous ship. And this tiny little man which I thought was a nice sense of scale. But it was really surreal how these ships were lined up on the beach. It was like a graveyard for these freighters and tankers and large ships. And this is an industry which continues until today. They have large ship breaking yards in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and other parts of the world.

I made this photograph about 2 o'clock in the afternoon when the sun was still fairly bright. But I kind of shot it from the shadows, which I thought was a much more pleasing way to approach it. Literally any time of the day is perfectly fine to photograph. It just depends on how you use the light. And in this case, I got into the shadow area to block that direct sunlight. And I photographed this very small figure in front juxtaposed with those enormous ships in the background.

So I think you'll find your own style and your own sense of composition by practise, by hard work, by looking at your scene from different angles. But it will take a lot of

practise. And this is really the ultimate key to success is to be out working, photographing, practise, and eventually things will come together in a really wonderful way.