



The Art of Visual Language

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As photographers, our images are powerful tools having the ability to communicate things to our viewers. Think of all of the powerful images that you have seen in your life. Photography has elicited social

change, opened our eyes to places we may never visit, helped to save the special places and special creatures of our world and so much more. One of the reasons images have this power is because they have the ability to cross all barriers, language, age as well as social barriers.

Everything we include in our work adds or detracts from our message. Our images are made up of light, shapes, lines and color. Knowing how each of the elements affects the viewer helps us to better communicate our message through our images.

- Snapshot – An informal picture taken quickly, typically with a small handheld camera.
 - This is how we all start in photography: simply framing up a pretty view or subject – pushing the shutter button and taking the picture
- Eventually, we evolve into making photographs, using the tools of our trade, such as lenses, filters, photoshop and other things, to make images that communicate something to the viewer.
 - The first step is understanding that a camera changes reality at the most basic level. It takes our 3-dimensional world and compresses it into two dimensions
 - Additionally, as we grow as photographers, we understand that we have many other choices to make that effect the final look of our images. These are things such as f-stop, shutter speed, lens choice, perspective, and many others.
- Some of the choices...
 - Wide-angle – exaggerates distance
 - Telephoto – compresses distance
 - Perspective – big foreground adds depth
 - Large aperture – shallow depth of field helps to isolate subject
 - Small aperture – larger depth of field
 - Fast shutter speed – Freezes action
 - Slow shutter speed – gives painterly effect to motion
- Once we start making conscious choices about each of these factors to bring our own creative vision to our work, we truly become photographers.
- The Geek and the Artist
 - On the Geek side we have things like aperture, ISO, telephoto lenses, hyper-focal distance, all of the technical things and equipment that we must all master to be great photographers.
 - On the Artist side we have things like light, color, shape, composition and all of the creative stuff to consider.
 - A great photographer will master both of these seemingly opposing disciplines. A great photographer will touch your soul with their artistry without distracting you from their message with technical flaws.

- The Frame
 - Our images are what we send out into the world. They must speak for us. The viewer does not have or care about the back story behind the image.
 - By including something in the frame, we are saying “This is important, look here. I want you to see this!”
 - What we choose to include in the frame sets the message – If we frame the image tight on a beautiful group of wildflowers alongside a stream, that is one message. If we zoom out farther and include the chemical plant spewing wastewater into the stream above the wildflowers that is a completely different message.
- Visual Language – all of the elements that we include in our images have an impact on the viewer.
 - Color is one of the most powerful influencers, having an effect on the viewer on an emotional level.
 - Green – happiness, renewal, a very relaxing color
 - Blue – security, trust, spirituality, a very calming color
 - Yellow – optimism, happy, a very high energy color
 - Orange – vitality, and happiness, a very warm color
 - Red – passion, danger, energy, love, the most powerful color
 - Harmonious colors – colors of a similar palette and tonality
 - Have a calming effect on the viewer. These combinations enhance a feeling of restfulness and serenity
 - Contrasting colors – colors opposite each other on the color wheel: blue and orange, red and green, purple and yellow.
 - I am always on the lookout to include contrasting colors in a composition. It is visually interesting with a high energy level.
 - Repetition
 - Can be used to draw the eye around the frame
 - When taken beyond a certain point, it becomes a pattern. Our eyes delight in wandering through patterns.
 - I like to use an anchor point for the viewer to take a rest from aimless wandering in my pattern shots.
 - Conceptual contrast can be used to add additional layers to your images: things like young and old, big and small, life and death etc.
 - Use lines to draw the viewers eye through the frame.
 - Horizontal lines draw the eye left to right through the frame.
 - Putting the main horizontal line at the bottom of the frame helps to anchor the image
 - Placing it high in the frame can add tension, as well as emphasize the foreground.
 - Vertical lines lead the eye vertically through the frame. You can use them to lead the viewer to the center of interest of the picture.

- Diagonal lines are often more interesting because they don't run parallel to the edges of the frame.
- Leading lines can be used to pull the viewer into the image.
- Straight lines pull them in fast
- Curved leading lines invite them to take a slower visual stroll through the image.
- Shapes: our images are made up of shapes. They are powerful visual elements.
- Circles are the most powerful shape. They will draw the viewers eye. Use them as anchor points in your images.
- Triangles are very powerful compositional tools. I use them often. If you go to an art museum take note of how many paintings have compositions based around the triangle.
- Rule of thirds is a great compositional aid. It states that if you divide the 35mm frame into thirds on the vertical and the horizontal, where these lines intersect is a powerful place to place the center of interest in your composition.
- The Golden Ratio is a compositional aid based on the Fibonacci sequence that goes back to the renaissance period. It is no surprise that when you overlay the Golden ratio over the Rule of Thirds, they are very similar.
- Secondary elements: adding a second complementary subject to your composition can do different things.
- Fill negative space
- Draw the eye through the frame
- Help to tell a story
- Subject vs subject matter
- Often times these are very different, especially when you're trying to illustrate a concept or feeling
- Think of a sleeping swan: the subject might be peace or tranquility, but the subject matter is a swan
- You will better communicate your message of tranquility if you are thinking of that instead of being caught up by the subject matter... the swan.
- Putting personality into your portraits.
- If you shoot a lot of birds and mammals, chances are you are doing a lot of portraits
- Think about trying to add something of the subject's personality into the portrait such as cuteness, ugliness, humor etc
- The extra ten percent
- We all make a lot of pictures but much like fisherman, we are looking for the trophies: the images with that "extra 10 percent". It can be anything...
- A turn of the subject's head pulling the viewer into the image

- A great subject in dramatic light
- Showing the viewer something they could not see with their naked eye. An extreme close-up etc.
- Handling a subject in a unique and creative way
- For those curious about the snowflake images, the [blog posting is here](#).



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