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Formal and informal balance in photography

Knowing how to properly compose your pictures is what will make them stand out from the crowd. While photographic technique is also important, if you don't manage to find a great composition, then your photo won't be all that great. They might still be good pictures since you know how to shoot but unfortunately, they'll be missing a certain je ne sais quoi. Whenever people ask me what is the most important thing that I think of when I'm out on the field, the answer is always the same: the composition. It's not something you can correct with post-processing and there is not a magical formula for every situation. Sometimes, you just have to go out there and scout the location until you find a composition that works. This may require seconds, minutes or hours... who knows. However, it's one of the most exciting phases of doing photography – an unpredictable period for which you can't fully prepare. While it's not possible to scout for compositions without actually being in-field, you can prepare yourself by studying some of the theory beforehand. In this article, we'll take a look at one of the most important rules for composing a powerful image, namely the balance. By the end of this, you should have a good idea of how you can use balance in composition, simply by placing all the subjects and elements within the right position to draw your viewer's eye into the frame. See also: Landscape Photography Composition Techniques | The S Curve Composition alone is an argument that is not as well-considered as it should be amongst photographers, let alone the importance of balance in making a strong composition. You may not be aware that in every image you have already taken, you have already made a subconscious decision as to whether you will capture a balanced or imbalanced image. Making a subconscious decision implies that you weren't completely aware of the consequences of your actions. The logical conclusion to draw here is that if you have a complete understanding of balance in composition, then you'll be able to make wiser and well-informed choices in the future. Every time you take an image, you are making a decision about where to place the elements. Photo by: 'Leonardo Papèra'. So what's the difference between placing your subject in the centre or on the left? Should you use a symmetrical composition or the rule of thirds? However you choose to balance your composition will have an effect on the atmosphere and emotions that you'll be able to convey to your viewers. When we talk about balance in composition, we refer to a whole range of options that will help you to choose where to place the subjects and important elements within your frame. They'll mainly be balanced or imbalanced. In some situations, you'll be "forced" to opt for a balanced composition while in other situations, you'll have to go for an imbalanced composition. There will be times when there will only be a single way in which you can make a photo work. There are a nice number of situations though in which you'll have the power to choose what type of composition you want to use. This is where the balanced vs imbalanced dilemma comes into play. How you choose to compose your image will affect the overall atmosphere and mood. Photo by: 'Leonardo Papèra'. Even though there are no rules that will help you to choose which you should go for, you can start by thinking about what kinds of emotions you want to evoke with your images. Are you wanting to convey a calm, serene atmosphere, or something that is more drastic and dramatic? In the first case, you might want to go for a symmetrical shot, which will feel much more peaceful to your audience. Meanwhile, if you are looking to evoke strong and specific emotions, then you might do better by venturing into the realm of an imbalanced composition. Let's explore the different types of balance for composition in a bit more detail. #1. Symmetry The first type of balance we'll talk about is symmetry. My bet is that many of you are already familiar with the concept of symmetry. So, how does it apply to photography? Symmetry can be made with reflections. Photo by: 'Leonardo Papèra'. In a symmetrical photo, both the upper and lower (or left and right) parts share the exact same level of importance. As you can see from the photo above, one of the best situations in which you can apply symmetry in photography is with reflections. You can use symmetry to create a "mirror effect" of the lake's reflection, simply by placing the horizon in the middle and creating two perfectly balanced parts within the frame. Reflections are just one example – you can find symmetry in pretty much every environment if you search for it! Generally, the aim of creating a symmetric photo is to convey a peaceful and calm atmosphere. Your viewers will be pleased to see the subjects of the photo equally disposed in the two sides of the frame. #2. Asymmetrical Balance The second type of balance is asymmetry, of course! Asymmetrical balance, to be precise. This may come as a surprise to some of you but symmetry is not the only way to compose a balanced shot. Even with the use of an asymmetrical composition, you can still balance the different parts of the image. Asymmetrical compositions can be balanced with something interesting in the foreground. Photo by: 'Leonardo Papèra'. Let's use the photo above as an example. I placed the mountains (which would commonly be considered the main subject of the image) in the upper right side of the frame. By placing them in that position, I had to be considerate of the fact that I would not be leaving the opposite side (bottom left corner) completely empty, otherwise the image would be too unbalanced. Similarly, there would be nothing to lead the viewer's eye to the mountains. Hence, the different components of my image would not be harmonious. To work around this, I got down low and close with a wide-angle lens to these lovely yellow flowers. By placing them within the empty portion of my frame, I was able to obtain a nicely balanced, asymmetrical composition. Always remember that in order to create an asymmetrically balanced photo, the different parts of the composition should receive the same amount of attention from the viewer, so be careful about where you put your subjects. With correct placement of your subjects, you'll be able to spark more attention from the viewer. The image will feel more dynamic in comparison to a symmetrical photo, which will generally appear to be more static. #3. Tonal Balance Another way to balance your compositions is with the use of colours. If you familiarise yourself with colour theory, then you'll be able to gain a jump start at deciding which colours to use to enhance your compositions. Colours can also create balance. Photo by: 'Leonardo Papèra'. There will be times when even if a composition may at first seem imbalanced due to the placement of subjects, it can still have the overall look of being perfectly balanced. How can this happen? Well, sometimes, colours will fill up areas of the frame that might otherwise look empty. Look at the photo above. If the cyan tones in the background were of a warmer colour, then the shot would probably appear to be missing something. Simply by using colour with a combination of cold and warm tones, I was able to balance the composition, despite the asymmetrical placement of subjects. See also: How to Use Complementary Colours in Photography #4. Ideal Balance This kind of compositional balance is probably the most difficult to achieve, since the message you want to convey with the photo should be crystal clear and strong enough to render the empty parts of the frame interesting. Ideal balance involves incorporating a message that is stronger than your subject into the composition. Photo by: 'Leonardo Papèra'. In the image above, the feeling of solitude and loneliness is probably not strong enough to make up for the lack of subjects in the rest of the frame. The colours help in this specific case, otherwise a large part of the composition would still look empty. You can use this kind of balance when the message you are trying to convey with your picture is stronger than the composition itself. The subjects gain importance thanks to the underlying messages that are attached. A few examples of messages that will work with ideal balance in composition are pollution, global warming, poverty or happiness, celebration and victories. See also: 11 Tips to Help You Capture Stunning Landscape Photographs #5. Imbalance Sometimes, an imbalanced composition will work better than a balanced one. If your aim is to transmit a dynamic feeling or evoke some other specific powerful emotion, then an imbalanced composition is probably what you'll be looking for. An aerial image of a coastline using an imbalanced composition. Photo by: 'Leonardo Papèra'. Take the shot above as an example. It's an aerial image of a coastline. I wanted to give the impression that the tongue of land coming into the frame at the upper right quadrant was some sort of "island" in the middle of the sea bed. I also wanted to transmit a feeling of solitude, abandon and emptiness. For these reasons, I placed the main subject – that is, what should attract the eye of the viewer – in the upper right-hand corner. As I already said, the main goal of creating an imbalanced composition is to create a sense of instability, of movement and tension all around the frame. You should use imbalanced compositions with care though when used well, they can transform an otherwise boring photo into a really powerful one that is capable of evoking strong emotions. While there isn't a general rule about when to use an imbalanced or balanced composition, my suggestion is to always try different compositions for the same subject and see which one works better. See also: Aerial Photography in Iceland | Drones vs Helicopters and Planes What is the Importance of Balance? When choosing the compositional balance of your pictures, you are actually deciding upon the kinds of feelings that you intend to transmit and what kind of atmospheres you want to create with your pictures. It already feels a bit more important now, doesn't it? Balance is important when it comes to conveying strong atmospheres and moods with your images. Photo by: 'Leonardo Papèra'. It's not about the balance (or imbalance) of the composition in itself – rather, it is more about making a conscious choice and having the power to decide what your photos will look like. There is an enormous difference between pictures taken by photographers who understand the different types of balance as opposed to photographers who don't. A well-crafted composition will make the viewer feel exactly the way that the photographer wanted to them to feel when looking at the image, whilst a random composition may struggle to evoke any type of response from the viewer at all. See also: 9 Tips to Improve Your Landscape Photographs Tips for Using Balance in Photography The first and foremost tip that I can give you for using balance in your compositions is to not get into the rut of employing the same type of balance each time. A big mistake that many photographers make is to find a compositional balance that might fit with a good percentage of the situations in which they generally work, then to use this balance across all of their images. Why? Because normally, it works. Don't do this! Always keep your mind open and experiment whenever you find yourself shooting a subject. You should look at different ways of balancing your compositions, even when you visit places that you've already been. Before you take a shot, try to stop for a moment and think "what if?" by looking for different ways of composing the scene. To sum it up: Get out of your comfort zone. Be as objective as you can when shooting. Photo by: 'Leonardo Papèra'. Another recommendation that I can give you for using balance in your compositions is to be as objective as possible when shooting. This might be difficult to do, as sometimes you may feel overwhelmed by the subject of the scene and skip the part where you think about the composition. The adrenaline rush, the beauty, the light... it's easy to be awestruck, I know! Although it may be difficult to be objective, just try to apply this notion whenever you can! See also: 25 Tips for Creative Beach Photography Conclusion The argument of balance in the composition is not one that you should take lying down. If you want to excel in the genre of photography that you are practicing, then you should develop an understanding of the different types of balance and which one of them fits best for the scenes and subjects which you will photograph. Balancing compositions isn't easy but can lead to great improvements in your photography. Photo by: 'Leonardo Papèra'. It's not easy but with a bit of experience, you'll quickly see some big improvements in your pictures, as you learn to place all of the subjects right where they should be! I genuinely hope that this article helped you a bit to improve your knowledge about balance in composition and that you'll be happier with the outcomes from hereon! About the author: Leonardo Papèra is a landscape photographer based in Italy. You can find more of his work on his website or by following him on Instagram. Would you like to improve your composition skills in-field and on-location? Join us on a winter photography workshop in Iceland! Experience the Land of Fire and Ice, swathed in the enchanting beauty of snow. Is the visual weight on one side of the photograph about the same as the other? How about top to bottom and diagonally? There are two kinds of balance in photography: formal and informal. Understanding both—and knowing how to them—is an important part of composition. Let's dig in. Balance has been a part of composition since long before photography came along. It's an integral part of most renaissance paintings. It's also a slightly slippery concept. It relies on an idea called "visual weight" that is, in and of itself, a metaphor. The idea is that different objects in a scene all have different visual weight. People, brightly colored things, high-contrast objects, and unusual subjects, for example, all have high visual weight. Other things like large areas of space, sky, water, or ground, have low visual weight. The only way to get a handle on it is to see it in action and play around. Formal or Symmetrical Balance Formal balance is symmetry. It's where the frame is split in half, either vertically or horizontally, and both sides are given equal visual weight. Have a look at this portrait. It's essentially perfectly symmetrical along the vertical axis. Both sides of the image have equal visual weight. There is nothing that pulls our eyes to one side of the image or the other. Here's another portrait where, again, the model is central, so it's pretty much symmetrical. And one more. As you can see, formal balance can work well with portraits. It gives a sense of serenity, seriousness, and solidity. I deliberately used formal balance in the following shot of a Soviet statue in Transnistria because I wanted it to feel like it had stood for years—since it had. Formal balance is pretty easy to grasp: put the subject in the center. So let's move on to the trickier concept of informal balance. Informal or Asymmetrical Balance Informal or asymmetrical balance is where you balance the image by juxtaposing objects with similar visual weights rather than just balancing everything symmetrically. Let's look at some examples. In this photo, I have enough visual weight to balance the mountains and clouds nicely. You still get a sense of the scale, but the image doesn't feel empty. People are visually very heavy so they can often balance a lot. Here's another similar idea. Will, the skier, is even smaller in the frame but is still balancing the huge mountain behind him. Let's look at this in reverse. Here's an unbalanced shot. The castle is cool and interesting, but there's not a lot going on in the photo otherwise. A few moments later, a boat passed up the river. Now we're onto something. The small moving boat is enough to balance the gigantic, ancient castle. You can also balance a single object that has large visual weight with lots of objects that have very little visual weight. Here, the stars in the sky balance the large Joshua trees. The smaller trees also balance the big tree. Perhaps the best example of asymmetrical balance comes not from photography, but art. Michelangelo's The Creation of Adam is wonderfully balanced. Adam and the earth have the same visual weight as God and the choir of angels. Unbalanced or Dynamic Images Remember, balance is just one tool in your compositional toolbox. There's also other stuff like leading lines, limited color palettes, and much more. This means that not all your images need to be balanced. Unbalanced images tend to have tension, dynamism, and a sense of activity. Just look at this photo. Will is jumping into a black abyss. This gives a sense of speed and drama to what he's doing. Or, take this shot of the Santa Monica Pier. Do the sky and sea balance the pier? Maybe, but I'd say probably not. Instead, we get this dynamic sunset shot of the pier thrusting out into the ocean. What it comes down to, for me, is what you're trying to convey. If you want solidity and stability, go with a formally-balanced image. If you're looking for something more dramatic that still has that balanced look, try some asymmetrically-balanced compositions. Or, if you want something tense and dynamic, go with an unbalanced image. Play around: whatever composition you go with might not work out, but you might end up with something wonderful! And at the very least, you'll learn something along the way. There are very few rights or wrongs here.

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