



The Secrets of Photography

#7 Focus

on

You

WELCOME

Welcome to your lesson from the New York Institute of Photography—we've been educating photographers since 1910.

We have trained more
successful photographers
than any other school
in the world.

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photographers
since 1910.

Our Mission

For over 100 years, NYIP has been providing high-quality training in the art, technique, and business of photography. We offer a unique combination of online education and personal coaching. Our online, accredited certificate programs allow you to engage in course work at your own pace. Affordable tuition with flexible, interest-free payment plans and a no-risk refund policy make NYIP the best value in photographic education.

We have trained more successful photographers than any other school in the world. Through NYIP's combination of mentorship, course work, and assignments, you'll develop the skills you need to take your photography to the next level—and beyond. Our comprehensive courses contain hundreds of hours of training covering every facet of photography—from aperture to histograms and lighting to portfolio editing.



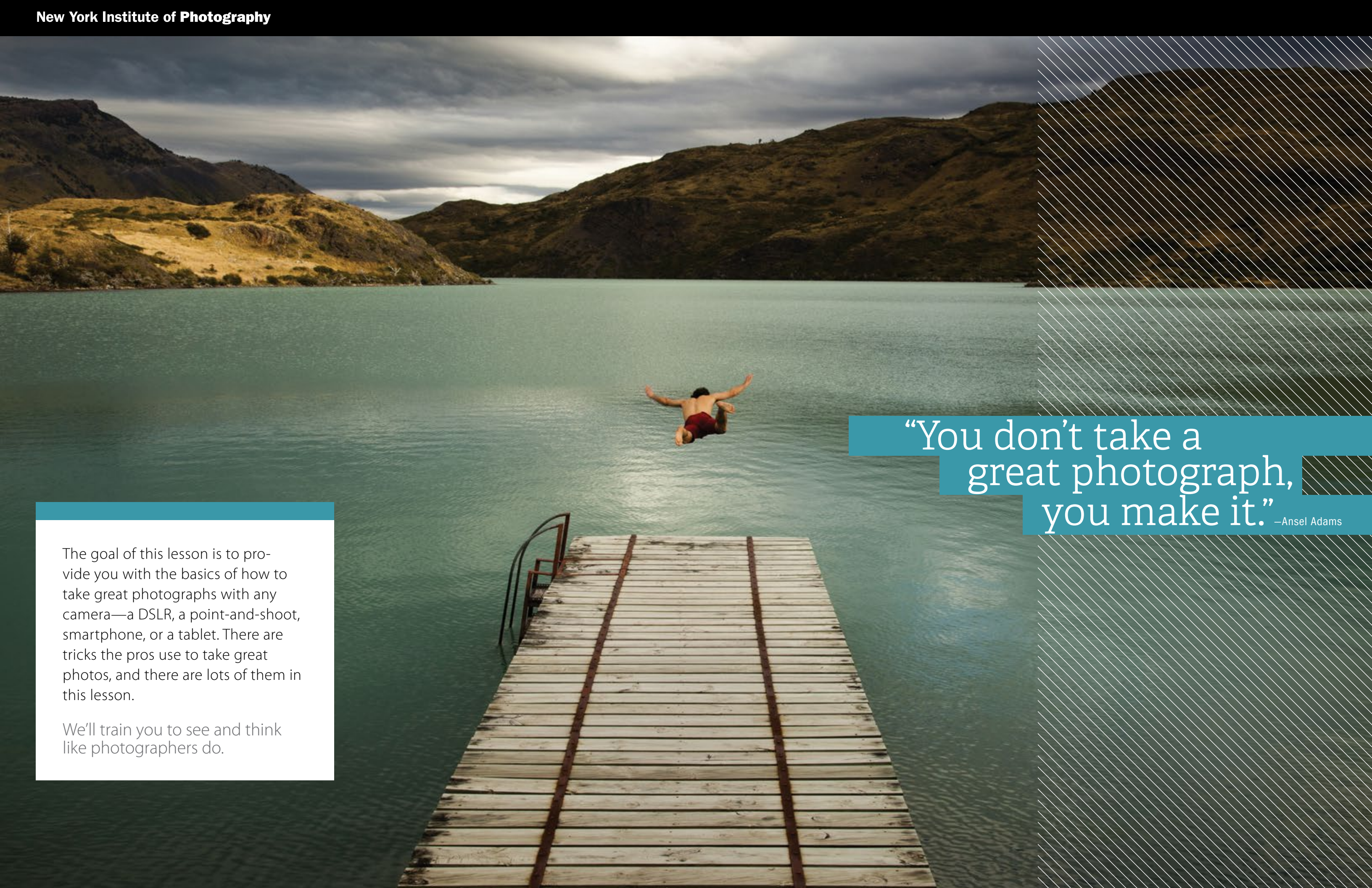
Our Students

There's NYIP graduate Matthew Lewis Jr., a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer who spent twenty-five years at the *Washington Post*. Lewis personifies the storytelling tradition in great news photography. His famous images include Jacqueline Kennedy at President Kennedy's funeral, scenes at the March on Washington in 1963, and policemen beating marchers during the Poor People's Campaign in 1968.

Other notable NYIP graduates include the profound documentarian W. Eugene Smith and famed celebrity photographer Douglas Kirkland.

Paul Gilmore, who studied with NYIP, was the first photographer to shoot moon rocks, while Richard Weede shot several of the most famous photographs of Elvis Presley. Jim Edds is a successful storm chaser and photographer who shoots extreme weather events for TV and magazines. Each studied the same material, but found their own stories to tell through unique images. Other notable NYIP graduates include the profound documentarian W. Eugene Smith and famed celebrity photographer Douglas Kirkland.





The goal of this lesson is to provide you with the basics of how to take great photographs with any camera—a DSLR, a point-and-shoot, smartphone, or a tablet. There are tricks the pros use to take great photos, and there are lots of them in this lesson.

We'll train you to see and think like photographers do.

“You don’t take a great photograph, you make it.” —Ansel Adams



Burn Your Manual

While we don't really advocate that you burn your camera manual, we do suggest that you spend reading it only when you have a specific question about camera function. The reason we suggest avoiding your manual is because your point-and-shoot, like many of today's electronic gadgets, has suffered from *feature creep*. The designers and engineers figure out new things they can add to new cameras to differentiate their product from others on the market. But as far as we know, there is no button or dial which can teach you to see and think like a photographer.

Using any digital camera, you can learn efficiently by doing. That is, taking hundreds of photographs, looking at them, and thinking about how to take better ones. It was one thing, years ago, when we paid to develop every roll of film. With digital cameras, of course, there's no cost to shooting thousands of images.

At NYIP, we believe it's
the eye behind the machine that matters.

We train you to
see and think like a photographer.

What's Next?

First, we'll look at the "one eye" that Cartier-Bresson mentioned, and how you can develop your own.

Next, you'll explore what you want to photograph. That's because figuring out what you want to do is like unlocking a secret. Why do you want to take photographs? What are you planning to do with them? When and where do you want to take them? All questions with critically important answers.

Many emerging photographers think they would like to specialize in a certain area of photography until they spend some time doing it. Someone might think they'd like to be a landscape photographer until they realize they have to sit for hours on location waiting for the right light. Another person might be perfectly suited to shooting still life while another is better with people and lifestyle.

We'll take a look at some of the common subjects, and offer tips that will help you get the best results photographing the things that are most likely to interest you—such as portraits of people (including kids and pets) and travel photos.

Finally, we'll share with you our favorite ten tips for taking great photographs.

We can promise you that you will take better pictures after you read this lesson. How do we know? From experience; we've been teaching photography for over 100 years, and our successful students speak for themselves.



The Photographer's Eye

You've probably looked at stunning photographs in magazines, books, and websites thought: "I wish I could take beautiful pictures like that!" But simply looking at beautiful pictures doesn't help you take better pictures. (Though it can inspire and motivate you!)

You see a photograph that seems beautiful, but you can't exactly explain why it's beautiful. Even if you knew the technical details—the *f*-stop or the type of lens the photographer used—those details don't help you produce better pictures, any more than knowing the names of the paints and brushes used by Michelangelo would help you produce a beautiful painting.

When it comes to taking pictures that are beautiful or powerful, the main ingredient is learning how to see like a photographer.

When it comes to taking pictures that are beautiful or powerful, the main ingredient is learning how to see like a photographer. We're going to give you three simple guidelines that will help. By following these guidelines, you will start to develop a sense of how things you see will look in a photograph—that means developing a sense of how the three-dimensional scene in front of your camera will translate into a two-dimensional photograph. This skill is what we call *the photographer's eye*.

EYE OF THE
PHOTOGRAPHER

New York Institute of Photography's Three Guidelines for Great Photographs



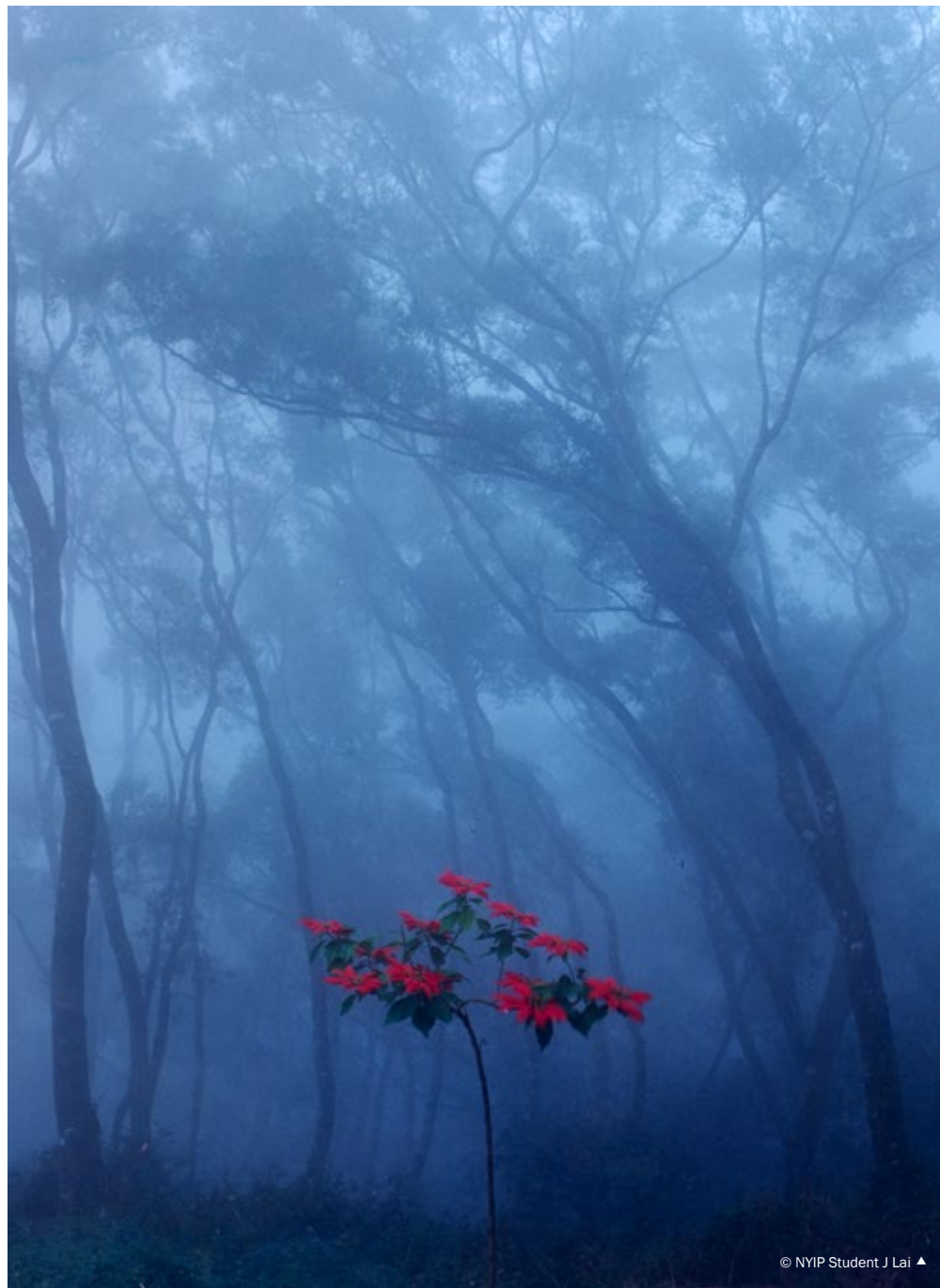
The basic principles of good photography remain unchanged from the early days of photography.





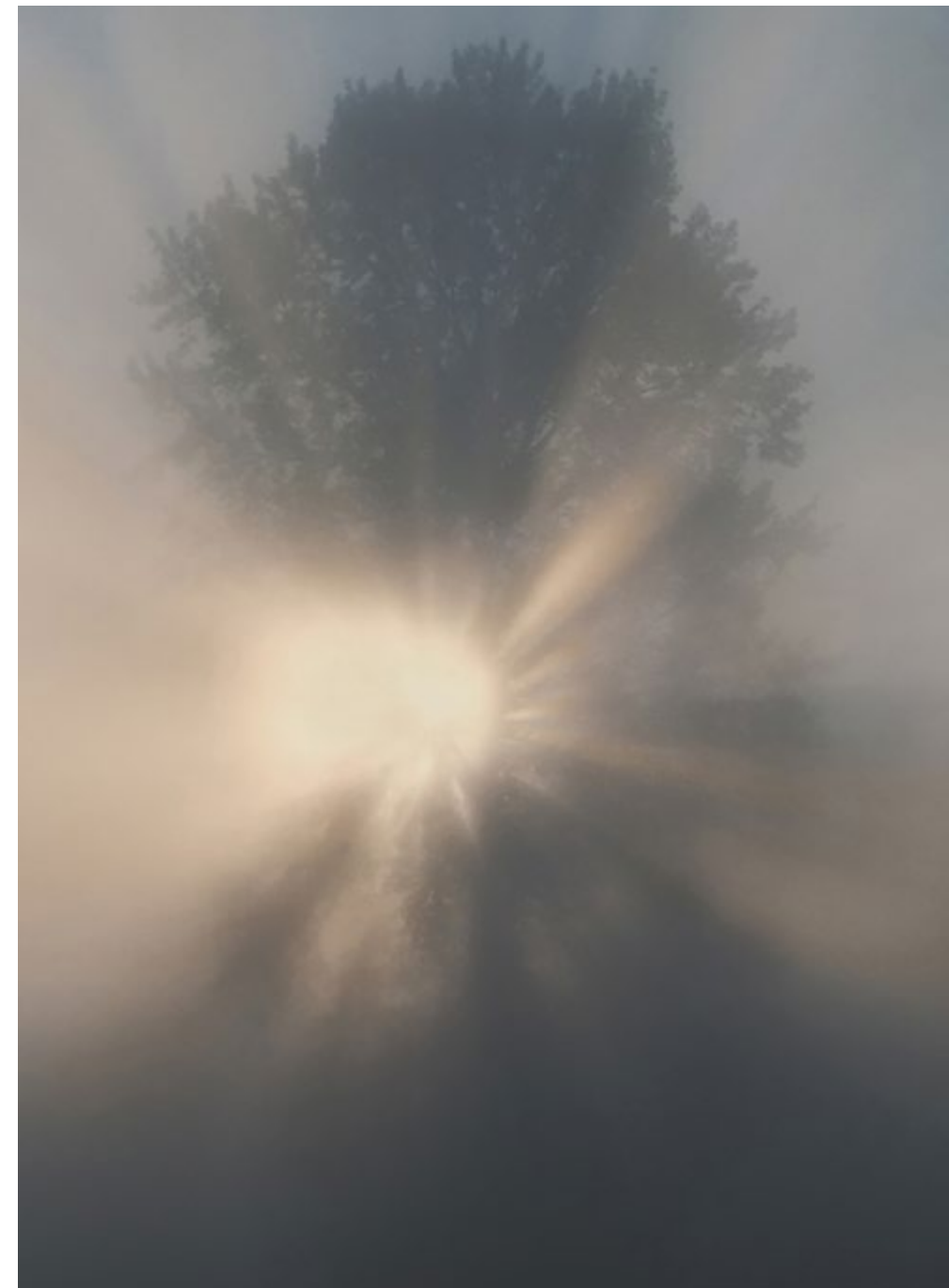
1 A Good Photograph Has a Clear Subject or Theme

Every good picture is about someone or something. It may tell a story about a subject. The subject is clear and unambiguous. Whoever looks at the photograph should immediately see what the photographer intended to be the subject of the picture.



2 A Good Photograph Focuses Attention on the Subject

The viewer's eye is immediately drawn to the subject. The viewer doesn't have to hunt for the subject or guess what it is. We call this emphasis. In this lesson, you'll learn a number of ways you can give emphasis to your subjects.



3 A Good Photograph Simplifies

There should be no distractions in your photograph. The picture includes only those elements that draw the viewer's eye to the subject, and it excludes or diminishes those elements that might draw the viewer's attention from the intended subject. Anything that distracts from the photo's subject is eliminated, hidden, or minimized.

As you absorb the three guidelines you'll find yourself looking at photographs in a new way. More importantly, you will find yourself seeing the world around you with a fresh perspective. Eventually, you will find yourself making vastly improved photographs.

You will start to see the world with the eye of the photographer.

These Three Guidelines are the foundation on which your progress as a photographer will rest.

So let's explore each one in detail.





1 A Good Photograph Has a Clear Subject or Theme.

« The Golden Gate Bridge.

The Golden Gate Bridge is an icon of the San Francisco Bay area. While the subject is clearly the bridge, the moody sky and strong sidelighting combine. The bridge shares the scene with the sky and the city skyline to the left of the bridge—all these elements combine to give us a real sense of the bridge within its environment, San Francisco. There's nothing we would remove from this picture, no information to distract us or interrupt the beautiful setting the photographer has presented.



◀◀ **Here's a very different type of photo.**
The subject

The subject of this picture is clearly the young girl enjoying a summer day. The photographer has used a technique called *panning*—that uses a relatively slow shutter speed to blur the background just a bit while keeping the subject sharp. It's great for eliminating distracting backgrounds.

The subject is large in the foreground. Nothing interrupts our experience of the girl. The photo is timeless and goes beyond an identifiable subject to touch on the themes of carefree youth and a world where nature hasn't lost its importance.

The Number One Question that you must ask yourself whenever you are about to capture an image:

What do I want to be
the subject of this photograph?

or

What is the subject (or theme)
that I want this picture to express?

Remember, the subject of your photo is going to look a lot different in a two-dimensional format than it does as you look at it in front of your camera. If you're making a portrait, you see the vitality of the person in front of your camera. You see varied expressions. Chances are good that you know your subject. The challenge is to capture that vitality in a photograph.

The beautiful landscape in your viewfinder may include warm sun on your face, a gentle scent of lilac, and even some sounds of nature. You won't have those features in your photograph so you're going to have to work hard to capture an image that stimulates your viewer visually without those other sensory supports, as this picture does beautifully.





2 A Good Photograph Focuses Attention on the Subject.

Usually there is one principal subject of interest in a photograph. It may be a person, a thing, or a group of people or things.

In many situations you'll do best by placing your subject large and upfront in the frame. This photographer uses selective focus to ensure the viewers attention is on the subject.

- » Focus attention on the subjects in your pictures
- » Position your subject within the frame to focus attention on it
- » Frame your subject using other elements in the scene
- » Use color to make your subject prominent

These are all techniques—tricks of the trade—used by professional photographers to draw the viewer's attention on the subject. You're learning to employ these techniques in your pictures, too.



3 A Good Photograph Simplifies.

« Close-up

This photo employs the most common method of making sure your subject is clear to your viewer—make your subject large and put it upfront in the frame. The famous war photographer Robert Capa is credited with having said, “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough!” Fortunately, for most of us this isn’t as dangerous a piece of advice as it is for combat photographers. (Capa, by the way, died on the battlefield in pursuit of pictures that work.)

This picture uses a technique called *shallow depth of field* that requires a large aperture opening in your camera. The large aperture produces a shallow depth of field that keeps the subject clearly defined against a background that might be distracting. Here, a large lens aperture throws the background out of focus. (This may not be a technique you can accomplish with a smartphone or a tablet. Where various lens choices are not readily available.)



◀ Here's an example of a photo that needs to show the wide environment.

Sometimes, you want your viewer to see the subject very clearly in its setting, as with this picture of a photographer at work. This kind of picture is often called an "environmental" portrait. It might have been possible to get closer to the photographer, but in this image the photographer has cleverly used the reflecting water in the foreground and the mountains at the top to frame and help tell the story.

For many beginning photographers, it's easy to miss the extraneous elements in the background and elsewhere in the photo that will distract the viewer from the image after the photo has been made.

But bear in mind that simplification means eliminating elements that distract from the subject. It does not necessarily mean eliminating all background of all sorts. Where the surroundings contribute to our understanding of the subject, they are essential; they should not be eliminated.

As you're taking the photograph, it's natural that you concentrate on your subject, where it is in the frame, and if it's moving, what it's doing. However, to become a good photographer it is essential that you train yourself to consider the rest of the photograph that surrounds your subject.

So as you peer through the viewfinder, there are three key questions to ask yourself.

- 1 What is my subject?**
- 2 Have I focused attention on my main subject?**
- 3 Have I eliminated anything distracting and everything that is unnecessary?**

By consciously asking yourself these three simple questions, we guarantee you will see a noticeable improvement in your work right away. From now on, make these three questions your basic guidelines for every picture you take and for every picture you study.

Where the surroundings contribute to our understanding of the subject, they are essential and should not be eliminated.

FOCUS ON YOU

What Do You Want to Photograph?

Now it's time for you to ask yourself some questions. What kind of photographs do you want to take and why?

- » **Do you want to record moments with your family and friends?**
- » **Do you want to photograph your first born child (or grandchild) growing up?**
- » **Do you want to take photographs that could win a prize in a contest or get published?**
- » **Do you like to take pictures when you travel?**
- » **Do you take your camera to the baseball game, when you go hiking, in nature, or on other types of adventures?**

Your answers are important because depending on what you want to photograph, there are different skills you'll want to learn. If you're interested in photographing people, for instance, then you need to know a bit about portraiture, including the basics of posing and lighting the human face and body.

The Clock

How much time are you willing to spend taking pictures? If you're traveling, can you get away from your family or friends for a while to explore the surroundings by yourself? Are you willing to get up early and spend some time with your camera while the rest of the family is still sleeping?

Taking time to look for photographs, and sometimes taking the time to set up a picture, is one of the main things that distinguishes the professional photographer from the snap-shot maker. A tourist with a camera might spend an afternoon at, let's say, the Spanish Steps in Rome. A professional might spend the entire day, or perhaps a number of days, looking and waiting for the right opportunity.

But whatever your level of commitment is to making your photographs, we're going to help you move your work forward. Take the three points we've outlined so far, and add on what's to come.





See the World Around You

For most of us, it's easier to take exciting pictures when we visit faraway lands than it is in our own backyard. That's because travel awakens us to new things. But there are beautiful and striking images in the familiar world that surrounds each of us, whether that's a big city, small town, suburb, or farm.

Consider this: If you have always lived in the United States and then were to visit Kyoto, Japan, your camera would rarely leave your eye. You would find a thousand fascinating images every moment. But remember, the Japanese tourist who visits your neighborhood will find thousands of fascinating images, too.

The reason you "see" exciting things in Kyoto and the Japanese tourist "sees" things here is that it's easier to notice things in a world other than your own. It's easier to note things when you see them with a different eye. The trick is to learn to apply this new way of seeing to your own surroundings.

What you need to do is start to see your own world with the same sense of newness and strangeness that the visitor from Kyoto would have on his or her first visit to the United States.

After you do this, you'll discover that some of the most beautiful photographs imaginable are within a one-mile radius of where you're sitting right now.

As one recent NYIP graduate wrote us: "The biggest thing I learned is how to look at something I may see every day, but now I can look at it with a photographer's eye and see the beauty or story in it. The daily ride to work is now an adventure to see all the things I have been missing."



DEVELOP YOUR EYE

Composition

Seeing Creatively

Now let's return to NYIP's Three Guidelines for Great Photographs. In particular, it's time to delve more deeply into the implications of Guideline Two: How Can I Add Emphasis to My Subject?

The tricks that photographers use to add emphasis to photographs are often presented as techniques for composition. Once again, the trick is to see the possibilities before you and understand how to draw the viewer's attention to your subject once it has been reduced to two dimensions.

"Seeing" means more to photographers than just perceiving things with their eyes. This type of looking at things might better be called *creative seeing*. It's recognizing things that have the potential for being the subject of a good photograph.

Snapshooters just click away without really becoming aware of the possibilities for making outstanding pictures out of the subject matter before them. But to make an effective picture, you must be aware—to "see" the possibilities for that picture.

So how do you develop this creative eye? Start right where you are as you read this. Relax your mind—don't think about what you're having for dinner tonight or the tasks ahead of you at the office. Look in front of you. Observe the texture of objects. Notice—really notice—their shapes, their lines, their colors. Next, concentrate on just a small area in front of you. Then zero-in on just one or two objects. Don't be in a hurry. Now turn your chair in another direction and repeat the exercise, slowly looking at various elements.

Take a leisurely walk outdoors and try to carefully observe parts of the scene. As you look at a scene, observe the light. Really look at it. Notice its direction and color, and look at the shadows it casts. Notice its color and direction. You'll find that light is one of the most important aspects in creating an effective photograph.

You'll start to discover that there's a photographic subject to be found in even a torn window screen flapping in the

breeze, the breakfast coffee cup soaking in a mountain of sudsy water, or the colorful trash can on the sidewalk. Simple things can make beautiful pictures if your mind is alert to the possibilities.

Your visual sensitivity can be developed. And as this skill matures, people who look at your pictures may comment, "You have a good eye." With your increased awareness, not only will your pictures improve but you'll also increase your appreciation and enjoyment of the world around you.

Camera Position

It's often been noted that probably 90–95% of all photographs are taken with the camera about five feet off the ground. That's because most pictures are taken by people who are standing and holding the camera to their eye. Professionals will kneel, even lie on their stomachs and rest the camera on the ground, if necessary, to find a camera angle that will show a subject in an interesting way. The more you move around with your camera, the more interesting angles you'll find.

Light is one of
the most important aspects
in creating an effective photograph.





So once you have found a potential subject, move yourself right, left, up, down, back, and forth until the elements are framed in an attractive and meaningful arrangement. You want the elements to guide the viewer's eye and support the idea you had in mind when you decided to take the photograph.

To make a great picture depends on your recognizing the opportunities for powerful pictures, and then to compose those pictures most effectively before you click the shutter.

Earlier, we introduced you to NYIP's Three Guidelines for making a good photograph.

» **A good photograph should have a clear, unambiguous subject—one that is immediately noticed by the viewer.**

» **A good photograph should focus attention on the main subject of interest.**

» **A good photograph should simplify—it should include only what is necessary, and it should eliminate or minimize what is distracting.**

These Guidelines are the most important facets of composition, and the following ideas build on them, concentrating on techniques that will enable you to compose your pictures most powerfully, and help you develop your eye.



Rules of Composition

You may have heard that there are rules of composition, but there really are no strict rules. We prefer to regard these so-called “rules” as additional guidelines. Following the guidelines can help you achieve the magnificent images you want.

Focus Attention on the Main Subject

There are many techniques you can use to draw the viewer’s attention to the main subject and emphasize it. You can do it by the way you place that subject within the four borders of the picture frame, by the way you relate other objects in the picture to it, by the way you focus on it, by the way light falls upon it, and other simple techniques.





Emphasis Through Placement

It has been said that the major difference between the real world and a photograph of the real world is the four borders that limit the photograph. Where the real world is continuous and the viewer can shift attention to any part of the panorama, the photograph captures a segment of that world within sharply defined borders, top and bottom, left and right. How the photographer places the objects within those borders determines the success or failure of the picture. That's what

composition is all about—the way you arrange elements within the borders of the picture.

The first and most important decision you must make is where to place the main subject. Snapshooters almost always place it dead center in the picture. This “bull’s-eye” placement certainly does emphasize the subject, and it does make focusing easier, but it tends to produce a static, boring picture. Placing the subject off center usually makes a more powerful and pleasing image.



Rule of Thirds

An almost never-fail guideline to placement of the subject is known as the Rule of Thirds. (We'd like to call it the Guideline of Thirds, but it's been called a "rule" for too long to change it.) To follow the rule of thirds, you mentally divide your viewfinder into a grid with two evenly-spaced horizontal and vertical lines—the way you would draw a tick-tack-toe grid. Then compose your image so the main part of the subject is at or very close to one of the points of intersection of these lines. Or if you have a horizontal subject, place it on or close to one of the horizontal lines, or place a vertical subject on a vertical line.

When you have any doubts about subject placement, think Rule of Thirds. It really works.

If dead-center, head-on placement is dull, static, and uninteresting, does this mean that you should never place the subject in the center? Never say "never." There are several types of subjects that work well when they're centered. If the subject is symmetrical and you want to emphasize that symmetry, centered placement will do it. Centering the subject also works if the subject is surrounded by radial lines. And centered placement is effective when the subject is in the middle of two diagonals that make an X or a V. If it's a single subject that fills the frame, centered placement works just fine. But unless you have a good reason to place the subject otherwise, you are best off to follow the time-honored rule and place it off center. You'll find that this Rule of Thirds placement will work for the majority of the photographs you make.





Balance

Balance is something you must be concerned with when placing a subject off center. If all the elements that attract the eye are on one side, the picture may seem ready to tip over, and this can be visually disturbing. The picture may need something of less importance on the other side to balance it.

There are two types of balance: symmetrical (also called formal balance) and asymmetrical (informal balance). Symmetrical balance places the subject in the center with all other elements arranged evenly around it. The right side is like a mirror image of the left side.

Asymmetrical balance distributes the elements in a less rigid manner. Rule of Thirds composition is based on asymmetrical balance.

Balance implies equal weight among the elements in the frame, but here we're talking about *visual weight*. Large objects seem to weigh more than small objects, and dark objects more than light colored ones. The position of the elements is critical. A heavy weight on one side can be balanced by a lighter weight on the other side if the lighter object is at a greater distance from the center of the picture.



Emphasis Through Relative Size

The most obvious way to emphasize your subject is by being sure it appears larger than the objects around it. It should dominate the image. Many photographers stand so far away that the subject appears very small—sometimes it's so small that it is not recognizable as being the subject of the picture. Get in close or use a longer focal length to make your subject compellingly large.



Emphasis Through Framing

When the subject does not dominate because of its relative size, one way to focus attention on it is by framing it with another object. Doorways, arches, fence posts, branches of trees—you can find creative framing elements everywhere. To be effective, a frame should surround the subject on two or more sides. A few leaves poking down from the top of a picture does not work as a frame, but leaves surrounding the subject on three sides really emphasize it. Generally, the frame should be sharply focused, but an out-of-focus blur sometimes works very well, especially when it completely surrounds the subject.





Emphasis Through Lighting and Contrast

No matter what else is in the scene, the viewer's eye is irresistibly drawn to the lightest, brightest area. By making sure the important part of the picture is brighter than the rest, you can draw attention to what you want the viewer to look at. It's like the spotlight that illuminates the star on a stage. The light commands the viewer's attention.

The bright area of a photograph is also noticed because of its contrast with its surroundings. But a very dark subject amidst lighter surroundings will also call attention to itself because of its contrast. Contrast, therefore, is another way you can emphasize your subject.

Be very sure that there are no unwanted areas of high contrast in the picture as they will compete with the subject and distract the viewer's eye.

Emphasis by Leading Lines

Lines in a photograph can direct the viewer's attention and lead the eye to the center of interest. Such lines are referred to as leading lines. A road, a fence, a bed of flowers, a row of chairs, or even a shadow can all act as leading lines.

Intersecting lines are even more powerful in emphasizing the subject. So are converging lines that point like an arrow, leading the viewer's eye to a subject, even if it is relatively small.



Emphasis Through Focus

The viewer's eye is always drawn to the area of sharpest focus. That's why we've stressed that you should always focus carefully on your subject. If you focus on the subject and use a large aperture, you may be able to throw everything around it out of focus. You need to be fairly close to the subject for this to work. If you are very close, the background can turn into a soft blur of color. At other distances, the background objects will be blurred, but distinguishable. Either way, selective focus is a powerful compositional tool if you're able to accomplish it with your camera.



Emphasis Through Color

Some colors seem to fairly leap out of the picture, while others remain quietly in the background. You can use this to your advantage when composing your photograph. The “warm” colors—red, orange, and yellow—are the colors to look for if you want to emphasize your subject. Have your friend wear a red jacket and he will immediately be noticed as the subject of your photograph. Or use a background of cool blue, green, or violet to recede behind your subject. Yellow flower against a blue sky—*pow!* You get the idea.





Your Subject

To emphasize the main subject in a picture, as you look through the viewfinder ask yourself:

Shall I emphasize the subject by...

- » Placing it off center?
- » Making it larger?
- » Framing it?
- » Using contrast?
- » Using colors?
- » Using selective lighting?
- » Using selective focus?
- » Using leading lines or converging lines?

Don't think you have to use just one of these techniques in a picture—use as many as necessary to make the viewer say, "Wow!"

Common Compositional Faults and How to Avoid Them

Let's go on to discuss some common problems that frequently occur when you try to compose pictures in the viewfinder. These are things that call attention to themselves and give unwanted and unintended emphasis to the wrong things in your photographs. If you are aware of these pitfalls, it's easy to avoid them.

Picture Cropped Too Close or Too Loose

A major decision you have to make as a creative photographer is what to include in your photograph and what to leave out. All the elements in the picture should have a reason for being there. If they don't add meaning to the composition, they are distracting and detract from the photo. So move your position or change your focal length so you can crop them out.

But don't crop so closely that you crowd the subject. When the subject is touching or almost touching the borders of the picture, it's visually uncomfortable for the viewer. Leave space for the viewer's eye to move around, unless your subject matter is such that the discomfort of a tight crop will add emphasis and the right mood to the photo.

Be sure not to crop off just the tips of things—the tip of a finger, a flower petal, a squirrel's tail. If you're going to crop, do it significantly so it doesn't look like a mistake.

Watch the Background

We pointed out that very bright areas attract the viewer's eye. Because of this, always be alert to distracting bright areas of light that are not part of your subject. Things like spots of sunlight bursting through the leaves, or pieces of white paper on the ground, will make the viewer's attention jump from the subject to the distracting blobs.

Don't include fragments of things at the sides of the frame, such as the arm of a person or a small twig.

Have you ever seen a picture where a tree or telephone pole seems to be growing out of a person's head? This false attachment may be all right for Salvador Dali, but not here, please. This error happens when you don't observe what's going on in the background. To avoid a "tree-growing-out-of-the-head" picture, take the camera away from your eye and study what's behind your subject.

Moral: When shooting, always carefully observe the background behind your subject before you release that shutter.



Look Ahead

Before we leave this introductory lesson, there's one more point we want to cover. That's the future, and the speed with which it's coming at us, and the dazzling innovations we're seeing on a regular basis.

New products and applications for digital photography have popped up all over the place. What new consumer innovation will be announced next month? Next year? What digital photography gear will be old hat a decade from now? We can't tell you what new innovations will surface at the next Consumer Electronics Show, but we guarantee that there will be all kinds of inventive gadgets, new markets for photography, and digital imaging possibilities beyond our ability to envision at this time.

When things are changing this fast, it's an exciting time to be a photographer. While we can't predict the future, we can make you two promises. Whether in print or on the Web, good content is still king, and good pictures are always going to be at the heart of our craft. Photography technique is as important now as it was back at the dawn of photography.

Here's a second promise. The power of photography will continue to grow! Please visit us at nyip.edu and request a copy of our course offerings today.



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good content is still king,
and good pictures are always going to be
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