

A photograph is a rectangular frame with something in it. That, in essence, is all it is. Yet, within that simple definition, there are countless possibilities. Before you can begin to achieve some of those possibilities, you will need to learn how to make certain decisions with precision and creativity.

First of all, you'll need to decide what to place within that rectangular frame. Then you'll need to decide *how* to place it. Should it fill the whole frame or just a part of it? Should it be placed toward the top or bottom of the frame, to one side, or in the center? Should the frame contain a single object or several? These questions, and others like them, are questions of **composition**.

Composition is the arrangement of visual **elements** within the frame of a photograph. In photography as in chemistry, elements are basic units of composition which cannot be broken down into smaller parts. They are composition's raw materials.

The most important elements in photography are line, texture, shape, light, motion and perspective. In virtually all photographs, several of these elements combine to achieve a specific effect. A photograph achieves greatness when every single element in it contributes to one overall effect, and none is wasted.

You'll need a considerable amount of trial-and-error experience before you can expect to reach this goal, but it's a good idea to keep it in mind from the very beginning.

A good photographer is like a master chef who mixes a certain number of ingredients (or elements) together in just the right proportions to create a memorable dish (or composition). In both cases, following recipes is a useful way to get started, but soon you'll want to be more creative and try new things. A true master breaks the rules a bit and creates something unique. Before the rules can be broken creatively, however, they must be understood.

Understanding is very different from memorizing. You've memorized something when you can repeat it. You've understood it when you can apply it.

You already know that composition is the arrangement of elements within the frame of a photograph. Now let's poke at the idea of composition to see if we can achieve a genuine understanding of it.

SNAPSHOTS vs. PHOTOGRAPHS

Perhaps the best way to do this is to consider the difference between a "snapshot" and a "photograph." You

know what a snapshot is and what it generally looks like: Aunt Molly sitting by the pool, grinning at the camera. A snapshot is a casual record of some event or person or object.

When you look at a snapshot, the main thing you're looking at is a memory: "Oh, so that's what Aunt Molly used to look like." It doesn't matter if part of her head got cut off or if she's slightly out of focus. All that matters is that the picture is clear enough to preserve some memories.

A lot more matters in a true photograph. A photograph is, or should be, an artistic interpretation of an event or person or object. Its purpose is to tell the viewer—any viewer—something about its subject: It should show not just what the subject is, but what it is like. And it should do so with impact and style.

To accomplish this, a photograph must be **composed**. All its elements must be selected and arranged to work together toward some unified effect.

The main difference between a snapshot and a photograph is the care with which each is produced. Taking a snapshot involves little more than pointing the camera in the right direction and clicking the shutter. Taking a photograph requires paying attention to every detail within the frame, and getting all of them just right,