

## What Constitutes Wow Factor In an Image & How Do I get It?

I have been a photographer since high school, some 50 years ago now. I've also been a member of KPAC for about 14 years or so and have learned much through that membership. Recently, I was asked to be a judge in a photography contest for novices. Judging is a huge responsibility and I found that it's easy to discard or otherwise condemn one or other image as being no good. Yet I also learned a lot about my own photography through the process of judging the competition. Rather than dissing an image as being inferior, I asked myself what was missing from the image to make me disfavour one image in favour of another. And here's what I came up with...

While lighting is vitally important in the success of any image (you may recall hearing that that "photography" is painting with light), when it comes to image wow factor, *composition* is the ultimate king. While composition may be learned, it's a difficult concept to get one's head around. Furthermore, it's a hard fact that successful composition more often than not comes about through practice. Lots and lots of practice - Henri Cartier-Bresson once said that "Your first 10,000 photographs are your worst." While I personally do not believe this to be an accurate statement, it gives us pause to realize how many pictures we need to take in order to consider ourselves an accomplished photographer. Think of a star athlete or your favourite musician – they didn't rocket to success overnight but paid their dues through many hours of dedicated training and practice. I believe this is what Cartier-Bresson is trying to tell us: There's no shortcut to proficiency.

So what about the technical facets of photography? Exposure, shutter speed, depth of field, and sharpness? While we're at it, what about post processing? To be sure, these are all important aspects of making a successful image. However, all of these skills can be learned relatively easily, either by subscribing to online courses or mentoring through workshops and one-on-one tutoring.

To be sure, the road to being a good photographer can be extremely overwhelming to a novice photographer. But don't lose heart as nobody that I know of has yet been born with a camera in their hands. We all started somewhere and increased our knowledge and improved our technique gradually over time. Like many things in life, photography is a journey, not a destination. Cast your mind back to when you first learned to drive a car. With so many things to think about, you were terrified of hitting something with the car as you rounded a corner for the first time. Or perhaps you almost put your dad or mum through the windshield the first time you nervously stomped on the brakes. But now, as an experienced driver, you unconsciously turn on the signal indicator as you approach a turn and you don't give much thought to modulating the brake pedal properly as you pull up to a stop light. In fact, you don't think much about driving at all as you make your way to or from work or to the grocery store and back. Driving for you has become almost an automatic task that you execute without having to consider the myriad things you have to do in order to perform this very complicated task. Over a period of time, the same will become true of the technical aspects of photography. Eventually, you will make changes to the exposure, depth of field or focus without consciously thinking of it. And this will free you up to *concentrate and actually think about* the composition of the photograph that you are attempting to make. Because right now, as a novice, you have too much on your mind in driving the camera correctly to concentrate much (if at all) on the actual composition of the photograph.

In an effort to give aspiring photographers a good head start on the road to good composition skills, we are taught the “Rules of Composition”. You are probably already familiar with the rule of thirds, leading lines, triangular juxtapositions, s-curves, don't put horizon lines in the middle, never put the main object dead centre and several more. These “rules” might be better referred to as “concepts” rather than rules. The idea behind this renaming is that rules are usually followed. Keeping the car analogy going, think of the rules of the road which are designed to keep cars from smashing into each other. In a similar way, rules/concepts of composition are designed to give your images foolproof eye appeal. But in the same manner that the rules of the road sometimes allow car accidents to occur, the rules of composition sometimes similarly don't work. If one slavishly adheres to the rules of composition, images can take on a similarity or sameness, be uninspired or even boring. Merely following concepts and expecting exceptional results does not demonstrate ingenuity, inspiration, or creativity. This is not art. Nor is it artistic. By now you may be thinking “So much for composition and wow factor!”. The important takeaway here is that knowing the concepts of composition allows a thinking person to follow them, bend them or even break away from them entirely. Use these concepts as a springboard to great photography rather than a formulaic and pedestrian route to merely average images.

In reality, composition requires considerable awareness and thought about how you will put what you see in front of your nose into a successful image. But how does one add wow-factor to an image without being a slave to the rules of composition? Before taking an image, your thought processes should include:

1. Point of view – high or low (hint: we all see too many images from standing height or eye level)
2. Foreground interest – there should be something in the foreground that anchors the image and that starts our journey through the photograph. This can even be negative space.
3. Colour or B&W – you should know at the outset how you want the image to be presented to the viewer, even though it is initially captured in colour. My personal take on this is that B&W images tend to be more graphic in nature and that colour images quite often need help in post-processing to become effective. However, one will be better than the other in terms of wow factor. It's important to note that changing a colour image to B&W will not necessarily improve it. A so-so image is just that: a so-so image.
4. Placement of the image components – as a novice think about the concepts of composition (rule of thirds is a good place to start, but don't be a slave to it). While certainly some images look better with the main subject dead centre, most do not (think of aunt Harriet's family snapshots). Vary the placement of the subject to find the composition that best shows what you see in front of you.
5. Positive and negative space – go out and try to create images with this primary thought in mind. If you don't know about this concept, do some research online.
6. Less is very often more – more impact, more wow factor. While we are all in awe of the “big picture” it's often very difficult to capture it effectively and the result can be overwhelming for the viewer (their eye has nowhere to linger as they dart through the image). Look for the pictures within a picture (hint: this is where your telephoto lens can be more effective than your wide-angle lens).

7. Go out and break all the rules of composition that you possibly can. As an example, go ahead and put the main subject on the centre of the image and then recompose the scene and take it again following the rule of thirds. See if you prefer one over the other and if so, give some thought as to why you think that way. Do this with other concepts of composition. You need to understand the rules before you break them. Take a photographer friend out with you for a day and compare notes as you both run through this exercise of following then breaking the rules of composition. It's a fun activity that will prove invaluable to you as a photographer in that it will have an immediate impact on all of your images from this point forward. This exercise makes you work at consciously thinking about your composition by giving you a jumping off point to actually start thinking about it.
8. Long shadows often make landscapes more visually appealing – get up early (before dawn) and stay out late (after sunset) and take images during these times. As incentive, be aware that the blue hours often contain built-in wow factor lighting.
9. Here's a big one – if it ain't there, it ain't there (and you can't force it to be so). Nobody can make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. The subject may not be worth your effort, or it's the wrong time of day (wrong light), or whatever. Learn to walk away without clicking the shutter. If nothing else, you'll spare yourself hours of computer time trying in vain to create something out of nothing.
10. Most importantly, know that each and every one of us takes crappy photographs from time to time. **Do not show these images to anyone, not even your spouse.** Only show others your very best work. You'll quickly gain the reputation as a good photographer who has “a good eye”.

Finally, have fun learning how to add wow factor into your images. If it stops being fun or if you become overcome with frustration, it just isn't worth it. Experimentation = creativity. Never be afraid to try something new or different – that's the way to have fun while you learn. And it doesn't cost you anything extra.

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