FOUNDATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY SKILLS LESSON 1

Composition

Grade Levels: 9–12
Duration: One 45-minute to one-hour classroom period
MESSAGE TO EDUCATORS

Everyone has the ability to create and interpret images. This lesson-plan series guides students through the foundational elements of photography, outlines the artistic process, and aims to strengthen their visual literacy skills. The lessons build upon one another and are developed to familiarize students with photography and become comfortable operating the camera as a tool for creative self-expression. Once your students develop an understanding of fundamental photography techniques, their photographic explorations can lead them on journeys that capture the world from their point of view.

You do not need to be practiced in the skills of photography and facilitating discussions about art to effectively lead this lesson, but we would encourage you to try some of the photography assignments included in order to share your experience with students. The Getty Museum is committed to supporting meaningful dialogue through art, and therefore this lesson plan was created with educators to carefully walk you through the steps needed to effectively facilitate and guide your students.

We encourage you and your students to use this lesson to spark ideas and conversations about the world around them.

Student Learning Objectives/Outcome

- Students will examine and analyze examples of photography that use the rule of thirds and the elements of visual art in photography.
- Students will compose and make four photographs that implement the techniques discussed in class.

ASSOCIATED STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards Speaking and Listening: Grades 9–10

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9–10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11–12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

National Core Arts Standards

Anchor Standard #1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard #2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and analyze artistic work.

CA VAPA Standards

Prof.VA:Cr1.1: Use multiple approaches to begin creative endeavors.

Prof.VA:Re7.2: Analyze how one’s understanding of the world is affected by experiencing visual imagery.

Acc.VA:Re7.2: Evaluate the effectiveness of an image or images to influence ideas, feelings, and behaviors of specific audiences.
**MATERIALS**

- Projector/screen sharing on your monitor
- Photographs from Getty Museum collection (provided)
- Photographs from Getty Unshuttered community (provided)
- Getty Unshuttered Composition challenge videos (See Resources below)
- A digital camera or smartphone

**VOCABULARY**

**Composition** How the elements of a photo are arranged.

**Rule of Thirds** A basic compositional structure of a photograph. You can take any image and split it into 9 sections by using 2 vertical and 2 horizontal lines.

**Framing** The technique of drawing attention to the main focus in the photo by blocking or surrounding other parts of the image with something in the scene.

**Positive Space** Any section of the photograph that stands out. This could be the main focal point, along with other noteworthy areas of detail in a photograph.

**Negative Space** Parts of an image that don’t attract as much attention, surrounding the positive space and giving it a buffer.

**Brainstorm** Technique for the initial production of ideas or ways of solving a problem by an individual or group in which ideas are spontaneously contributed without critical comment or judgement.

**Digital Format** Anything in electronic form including photos, images, video, audio files, or artwork created or presented through electronic means; a gallery of artwork viewed electronically through any device.

**Image** Visual representation of a person, animal, thing, idea or concept.

(Vocabulary available as Unshuttered Composition Reference sheet in Resources below. For more definitions, see Elements of Visual Art reference sheet.)

**Before Class Preparation & Accommodations**

- Select which of the provided Unshuttered photograph(s) and Getty collection photograph(s) you would like to discuss with your class. Depending on your class size and class period length you may want to discuss two or more of each.

- Consider how students will share the images they take. Using Google classrooms, Dropbox or similar platforms can allow students to upload and share their photographs with their classmates.

- If working with students who may require visual accommodations, the website Teaching the Visually Impaired, provides useful resources for educators.
INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN

Lesson Description

What makes a photograph visually compelling? How does one take a photograph with an interesting composition? What is composition? This lesson guides students through the basic elements of composition in photography focusing on the rule of thirds and the elements of visual art while focusing on four major photography examples. Students are then instructed to create four photographs: one portrait (or self-portrait), a landscape photograph, a still life photograph, and one photograph that depicts street photography, often called "candid" photography.

(You may want to write the words or phrases that students mention during your discussion. If teaching remotely, you may want to use a jamboard, type the words in the chat, or use a shared online document for everyone to contribute to, this list can be available for everyone to see.)

For an easy reference sheet to use while actively teaching, use the Instructional Plan reference sheet in Resources below.

Tell Students There are many different ways to make a photograph interesting to look at. Photographers use various techniques to draw your attention to certain aspects of an image. One of those techniques is called the Rule of Thirds. The rule of thirds describes a basic compositional structure of a photograph. You can take any image and split it into 9 sections by using 2 vertical and 2 horizontal lines.

The rule of thirds helps you consider the composition of a photograph and is used by photographers at any level to assist in creating an interesting composition for their image.

Using the rule of thirds helps you create a point of interest in your image. This is typically where the two lines intersect (one horizontal and one vertical). The point where the lines intersect is often referred to as the "point of interest."

![Diagram of rule of thirds with circles indicating points of interest](https://unshuttered.org/resources/rule_of_thirds_diagram.png)
Unshuttered Composition Sheet  As a large group review the Unshuttered Composition Reference Sheet. Encourage your students to keep the worksheet handy either printed or saved on their computer or mobile device. (Duration: 10 minutes)

Essential Question: What makes a photograph visually interesting?

Set the Stage  Project one of the two student photographs shown below. Ask students to pause for 30 seconds, to simply observe the image then begin by asking students what they notice about the photograph.

• 30–45 seconds examining the artwork.
• 2–4 minutes discussing the artwork.
• Transition to next artwork.

Image 1
Untitled, Fabiola Lopez, 2019

Image 2
Untitled, Linsey A. Montgomery, 2018

About the Artist  Fabiola Lopez is a Latina photographer born and raised in Los Angeles. Her passion for photography began at a young age and has continued to grow and expand over the years. Lopez enjoys documenting people within her community while creating visual representations of social issues that are significant to society at large. Her work has been recognized with the Las Fotos Project: Editorial Photo Award and Gucci Changemakers Scholarship Award. Lopez plans to continue her career within the fashion photography industry, hoping to bring a fresh perspective through her own voice and by providing platforms for other women of color who hope to work in the same field. Currently, Lopez is working as a freelance photographer and completing her bachelor’s degree in Business Management at Azusa Pacific University.

About the Artwork  This photograph is part of a small series that focuses on three different girls who all have very different religious backgrounds. The goal of this photo was to demonstrate unity between these three individuals despite their differences. Lopez attempted to represent this unity “...by tightly framing them in the image, ensuring the composition guided the eyes of the audience to each girl without having to move their eyes sporadically throughout the frame. The audience would find that their eyes travel from the center to the left and the right and back to the center. The position the girls sit in helps add to the composition and storytelling aspect of the image as they sit calmly and closely, expressing a bond between each of them.”
Suggested Questions for Discussion

What do you notice first about this image?

What stands out to you the most about the way the artist composed this photograph?

How is the photo framed?

Image 1: The three models are at the forefront of the image. Both persons on the right and left of the frame have their head resting on each shoulder of the model in the middle of the frame, this composition creates an invisible triangle.

Image 2: There are three people sitting in a grass field. The image is framed in such a way where the three people are positioned diagonally in the right of the frame.

What is going on in the foreground and background?

Image 1: The three models of the photo are in the foreground, nearest the viewer and we see sky in the background behind them

Image 2: The three people are seated on grass. All are a distance from the viewer, though the expanse of green space acts as a background to the people

Describe the visual cohesion in the photograph. What patterns do you notice?

You may want to discuss the repetition of color. For example, the models are wearing all white in image 1 or the subtle repetition of the color red in image 2.

Explore Further!

From the Getty Collection Getty Collection Artwork(s): Project the Getty collection photograph shown to the right. Ask students to pause for about 30 seconds, to simply observe the image then begin by asking students what they notice about the photograph.

• 30–45 seconds examining the artwork.
• 2–4 minutes discussing the artwork.
• Share the artist’s description with your students.
• Transition to the next portion of the lesson.

About the Artist Carrie Mae Weems’s works explore issues of race, class, and gender identity. Weems primarily works in photography and video. Weems’s work specifically, looks at history as a way of better understanding our present. Weems once said “Photography can be used as a powerful weapon toward instituting political and cultural change.”

About the Artwork This photograph is from a nine-part series titled May Days Long Forgotten mounted in frames made by the artist.

The images in this series feature young Black girls in flowered dresses dancing around a maypole or resting on shady lawns. The aesthetic that Weems uses in this series brings attention to 19th-century photographic
portraiture, which often used oval or circular frames. By depicting the girls in this antiquated format, Weems presents a harsh irony: in the 19th century, young African American women were much more likely to work as servants in upper-class houses than to appear in formal portraits.

**Suggested Questions for Discussion**

- What do you notice about this image?
  Students point out elements they notice in the photograph. This may include: details about the three children such as appearance and pose, the shape of the photo, the composition and the colors.

- What artistic choices did the photographer make?
  For example:
  - The photograph is black and white in a black circular frame.
  - Only one of the girls (the one in the middle of the image) is looking directly at the viewer.
  - Perhaps because of their attire, the photograph looks like it may have been taken a long time ago, certainly prior to 2003 which is the date of the work of art noted in the caption.

- What compositional and photographic elements do you notice, and why?
  For example:
  - The girl in the middle of the frame could be the primary focus of the image or is indirectly the primary focus because she is staring right at the viewer.
  - There is very little negative space, the three girls take up a majority of the frame.
  - Color, the photograph is intentionally black and white.
  - There is rhythm in the photograph, the girls appear in an organized arrangement. For example, the young girl at the very top and bottom of the frame are facing the viewer’s right, while the young girl in the middle is facing the viewer’s left.
  - Framing: The photograph is in a circle, typically we see photographs are square or rectangular in shape.

- How is the photo framed?
  For example:
  - The frame is circular in shape and painted black, the three girls fill a majority of the frame.

**Classroom discussion**

**Ask Students** After examining the photographs from the Unshuttered and Getty Collection, in your opinion, what makes a photograph interesting? What kinds of photographs are you personally drawn to?

**Unshuttered Composition Sheet** As a large group review the Unshuttered Composition Sheet. Encourage your students to keep the worksheet handy either printed or saved on their computer or mobile device.
**Transition to the practice portion of the lesson** Depending on how much time you have or if you are teaching in a hybrid model, you may want to provide students with additional time to take photographs at home.

**PRACTICE**

Suggested Time: 35–40 minutes + At Home Practice

**Student Learning Objectives**

Students will be able to apply their knowledge of the rule of thirds and elements of art to create four photographs with intentional compositional elements.

**Have students create**

- One portrait photograph
- One landscape photograph
- One still life photograph
- One photograph that documents street photography, often called "candid", photography

**Let’s begin!**

1. **Tell Students** It is important to remember that photography is all about the process. Today you’ll begin experimenting with four photography examples.

   You’ll create:
   - One portrait photograph (either a portrait of someone else or a self-portrait)
   - One landscape photograph
   - One still life photograph
   - One photograph that documents street photography, often called “candid” photography

2. **Tell Students** Let’s look at a few videos that experiment with composition in different ways.

3. **Show** your students the following videos: [Unshuttered Rule of Thirds video](#), [Framing your Composition video](#), [Foreground Composition](#), and [Background Composition](#).

   Depending on your class time frame, you may want to provide your students with the links to the videos, so they can watch them prior to the lesson.

4. **Write (Optional)** Artists often sketch or write down their ideas in a sketchbook or journal. This helps you keep track of your ideas and becomes helpful in the future when developing new ideas. Encourage your students to write down the following: who will you take a portrait of? Will it be a self-portrait or a portrait of a friend or loved one? What kind of landscape will you be creating? Is it a place you frequent? Will it be more spontaneous? What items will you photograph for your still life? How will you place those items? If you choose to take an image that is “candid” or street photography, how will you be mindful of photographing people you do not know? Consider these questions, as well as the composition and rule of thirds, as you depict your worlds.

5. **Begin Creating** Grab your cameras, photography with intent, and have fun!
6. **Reflection** Suggested Time: 5 minutes

   We encourage you to take the last five minutes of class to check-in with students to learn about what techniques worked, did not as well, and what can be improved for the next class. Reflection can take place in the group setting or individually, it can be verbal or written. Encourage your students to continue taking photographs and experimenting with various composition angles. Students should come prepared to discuss one of their photographs.

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**THANK YOU...**

...for your commitment to inspiring young people to create art and tell their stories.

Please adapt and improve upon this lesson plan to meet the needs and age range of your group.

**OTHER RESOURCES**

**Related photography video skills**
- Framing your Composition
- Rule of Thirds
- Foreground Composition
- Background Composition

**Supplemental Sheets**
- Unshuttered Composition Reference Sheet
- Elements of Visual Art: Photography
- Condensed Instructional Plan
FOUNDATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY SKILLS LESSON 1

COMPOSITION REFERENCE SHEET

**Composition** How the elements of a photo are arranged.

**Rule of Thirds** A basic compositional structure of a photograph. You can take any image and split it into 9 sections by using 2 vertical and 2 horizontal lines.

**Framing** The technique of drawing attention to the main focus in the photo by blocking or surrounding other parts of the image with something in the scene.

**Positive Space** Any section of the photograph that stands out. This could be the main focal point, along with other noteworthy areas of detail in a photograph.

**Negative Space** Parts of an image that don’t attract as much attention, surrounding the positive space and accentuating the main subject.

**Brainstorm** Technique for the initial production of ideas or ways of solving a problem by an individual or group in which ideas are spontaneously contributed without critical comment or judgement.

**Digital Format** Anything in electronic form including photos, images, video, audio files, or artwork created or presented through electronic means; a gallery of artwork viewed electronically through any device.

**Image** Visual representation of a person, animal, thing, idea or concept.

**Elements of Visual Art** (see separate reference sheet)
FOUNDATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY SKILLS LESSON 1

ELEMENTS OF VISUAL ART: PHOTOGRAPHY

**Line** Leading lines can move your viewer’s eyes throughout a photograph. Lines do not always have to be so obvious, like an actual telephone wire! They can be emphasized by the way a model is posed or by the objects photographed.

**Shape** Shape in a photograph doesn’t have any appearance of depth, it just appears flat and 2-D. When an object appears to have depth in a photograph it is because of lighting or perspective, and it is not a shape, but considered a form.

**Form** Objects in photographs that appear to have depth, despite being part of a two-dimensional image.

**Texture** Textures can add another element to your photographs that attract the eye. Try photographing things that you believe have interesting textures and include them in your photographs. Some examples include clothing or fabrics, kitchen tools, a shiny car door.

**Pattern** When lines, shapes or forms repeat they create a pattern. Patterns can create a sense of calm, or, when broken, a sense of unease.

**Color** Color in photography (or the lack of it in black-and-white photography) is intentional; color draws the eyes to create a specific mood.

**Space** What else is around your subject? Space. A subject surrounded by a lot of open space makes the subject appear small or insignificant. If you eliminate space by zooming into a close up, the subject might appear huge and important. Including open space in an image in front of a moving subject can suggest motion and direction and to lead the viewer’s eye. For example, if photographing a runner in action, within the image you would see some part of their path ahead of them. Space doesn’t have to be “empty,” it can be the background, or just areas of the image that aren’t the focal points.

Adapted from expertphotography.com and photographyhero.com
FOUNDATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY SKILLS LESSON 1

CONDENSED INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN

Student Learning Objectives

• Students will examine and analyze examples of photography that effectively use the rule of thirds and the elements of visual art in photography.

• Students will compose and photograph four photographs that implement composition techniques discussed in class.

Instructions for Educators: Suggested Duration: 10–15 minutes

Essential Question: What are the components of a visually balanced and thoughtfully composed photograph?

Set the Stage

Background Information for Educator During this lesson, students will explore composition in photography. You and your class will look at various types of compositional techniques used in photography. After discussing the artworks, students will create photographs that experiment with various composition techniques.

Classroom discussion

• Ask Students After examining the photographs from the Unshuttered and Getty Collection, in your opinion, what makes a photograph interesting? What kinds of photographs are you personally drawn to?

  (You may want to write words or phrases that students mention during your discussion. If teaching remotely, you may want to use a jamboard, type the words in the chat, or use a shared online document for everyone to contribute to—this list can be available for everyone to see.)

• Tell Students There are many different ways to make a photograph interesting to look at. Photographers use various techniques to draw your attention to certain aspects of an image. One of those techniques is called the Rule of Thirds, which describes a basic compositional structure of a photograph. You can take any image and split it into 9 sections by using 2 vertical and 2 horizontal lines.

  Try to place the subject at one of these four circles.
This helps you consider the composition of a photograph used by photographers at any level to assist in creating an interesting composition for their image.

It also helps you create a point of interest in your image. This is typically where the two lines intersect (one horizontal and one vertical). The point where the lines intersect is often referred to as the "point of interest."

- **Unshuttered Composition Sheet** As a large group review the Unshuttered Composition Worksheet. Encourage your students to keep the worksheet handy either printed or saved on their computer or mobile device.

- **Transition** to the conversation and examination of Unshuttered artwork(s) and the Getty collection artwork.

- **Tell Students** Let’s take a look at a few artwork examples that use perspective to manipulate an image.

- **Examining the Artworks**

  Unshuttered artwork(s): Project one of the two student photographs shown to the right. Ask students to pause for about 30 seconds, to simply observe the image then begin by asking students what they notice about the photograph.
  - 30–45 seconds examining the artwork.
  - 2–4 minutes discussing the artwork.
  - Transition to next artwork.
  - Repeat as necessary.

  Getty collection artwork(s): Project the Getty collection photograph shown to the right. Ask students to pause for about 30 seconds, to simply observe the image then begin by asking students what they notice about the photograph.
  - 30–45 seconds examining the artwork.
  - 2–4 minutes discussing the artwork.
  - Share the artist description with your students.

- Transition to the practice portion of the lesson. Depending on how much time you have or if you are teaching in a hybrid model, you may want to provide students with additional time to take photographs at home.