

Notes from talk by Anne Mahany
“What makes a good picture?”

- What makes a good picture?
 - If you like it, then it is good!
 - Assessing preferences is subjective and people’s tastes differ.
 - One club judge will like an image whilst another will not.
- Focus of attention
 - Decide the important part of the picture and make it stand out.
 - This will be the focal point for attracting the eye.
- White and black
 - If you see a white and black square of the same size next to each other the eye thinks the white square is larger.
 - Light shapes are much better at drawing the eye than dark shapes.
 - In Anne’s example images a white hat and a very bright sky distracted from the focal point.
 - White or light-coloured areas around the edge of an image not only distract but also take the eye out of the picture. Sometimes darken or remove them.
- Red
 - The eye is instinctively drawn to red in an image and this can be a distraction too.
- Differential focus
 - It can be distracting if everything in an image is in sharp focus.
 - It is usually better if the focal point of the image is in sharp focus and objects in the background are slightly out of focus.
 - Anne showed examples with a strong foreground (hillside covered in heather), interesting middle ground (fields and trees) and a good background (blue sky with attractive clouds).
- ‘Rule of thirds’
 - Important details in images often look better if placed on the lines, vertical or horizontal, that divide the image into three. This includes horizons.
- Leading into a picture
 - A strong foreground fixes the viewer’s interest.
 - Lines can then help lead the eye through the picture to appreciate the whole.
- Triangles and diagonals
 - Triangles and diagonal lines make strong composition statements and can be found in many sorts of pictures.
 - Some images such as flower stems can look more interesting if tilted so that the stem is diagonal.
- Lines
 - Lines can be used to good effect to give the appearance of going on for ever, or at least much further than in the actual picture.
 - Examples are lines at the coast, waves in the sea, or tall buildings.
 - These can give a feeling of space.
- Reflections
 - Reflections are often very attractive.
 - Take care that the real image and its reflection are not the same size, or else it could look as if it is two pictures.
 - Reflections are usually darker than the scene being reflected.
 - The reflection on its own can make an attractive abstract image.
- Framing
 - There are many ways to frame a picture.
 - Tree branches are often used, as are windows and doorways.

- A gateway that opens into a churchyard is another example.
- Be careful not to make the frame too dark as it could be heavy and spoil the atmosphere of the picture.
- If taking photos of stained-glass windows or something through a gateway, sometimes it helps to use fill flash to give some detail and lightness in the 'frame'.
- A 'tie'
 - A tie is something in an image that helps to connect different parts of an image, e.g. a lamp in a scene of Venice to connect the jetty and gondolas in the foreground with the island and church in the background, or a tall tree in a mountain scene.
- Is it straight?
 - It can look wrong to the viewer if a horizon is not horizontal or buildings are not vertical.
 - Sloping water looks especially wrong. Even if the image is taken at an angle, water must appear level.
 - Remember that using a wide angle lens can cause distortion, causing converging verticals. You may wish to use this dramatic style, but take care it is appropriate.
- Keep the image simple
 - You should usually avoid overlapping objects; separating them makes it easier to see.
- Portraiture
 - Where there are several people in a picture it is important to show a relationship between them – physically or by the direction they are looking – as well as ensuring that they are all visible.
 - Posing for portraits is a subject in itself, but just remember that body parts nearer to the camera will look bigger and could therefore seem out of proportion.
 - If facing in one direction, leave space in front of them.
- Moving objects
 - When photographing moving objects, again leave space in front of them.
- Balance
 - 'Balance' here means where different elements are balanced in different parts of the image. It is important for pleasant pictures.
 - Example 1: a man sitting in the foreground balance by a boy looking out of a window behind him.
 - Example 2: an image of a soldier's rifle and his hand holding a 'Union Jack' mug of tea on the left, with an out of focus billboard of Saddam on the right. The image illustrated a powerful message, very simply. The image of Saddam indicated the location; the soldier's tea mug indicated his nationality.
- Breaking the 'rules'
 - Guidelines on composition help to create harmony but breaking them can have a distinct effect on the mood of an image.
 - This change may be just the shock you may want to create.
 - You must understand the effects produced to be able to exploit them.
 - Example 1: Image of woman and 2 children in a refugee camp, composed as two pictures with all the people looking out of the frame in different directions – emphasising desolation and hopelessness.
 - Example 2: Soldiers running out of a picture, giving drama and urgency.
 - Central figures can be very dominant, which can look arrogant or threatening.
- Remember:
 - There are no hard and fast rules, so if a composition works for you and conveys the story or message you want, then it is a good picture.
 - Everyone has a different experience and so takes a different view.
 - The main point is to have fun, play with your images and experiment!