



Module 10: **Composition**

Module overview

In this module you'll learn about the following:

- The Origins of Composition
- The Rule of Thirds
- Cropping
- Symmetrical Composition
- The Golden Spiral
- Composition Tips



“I like form and shape and strength in pictures.”

Herb Ritts
(1952 – 2002)

Tip: look at the works of famous photographers and see if you can notice where they have used or broken the rules of composition.

Some photographers will say that you shouldn't study the work of others, but that would be like learning to play a musical instrument and never listening to music.

You can always learn from the best.

10.1 Origins of Composition

If light is the most important thing in photography, then composition is a close second. Composition is about the position of your subject or subjects in the frame. Sometimes just moving your camera a few inches up, down, left or right can make a huge difference to your photograph.

Some people have a natural eye for composition, but don't worry if you're not one them; by learning the rules of composition, you will be able to produce more visually pleasing images. As with most rules of photography, one of the most important things about learning them is so that you also know when to break those rules.

The basic rules of composition for photography pre-date the invention of the camera and were originally (and still) used by painters.

One of the early masters of composition was Leonardo Da Vinci. To call him a painter would be ignoring his many talents, but he is arguably best known for his paintings, particularly the *Mona Lisa* (1517). It is one of the most famous paintings in the world, but in terms of composition, one of his finest works is *The Last Supper* (1498).



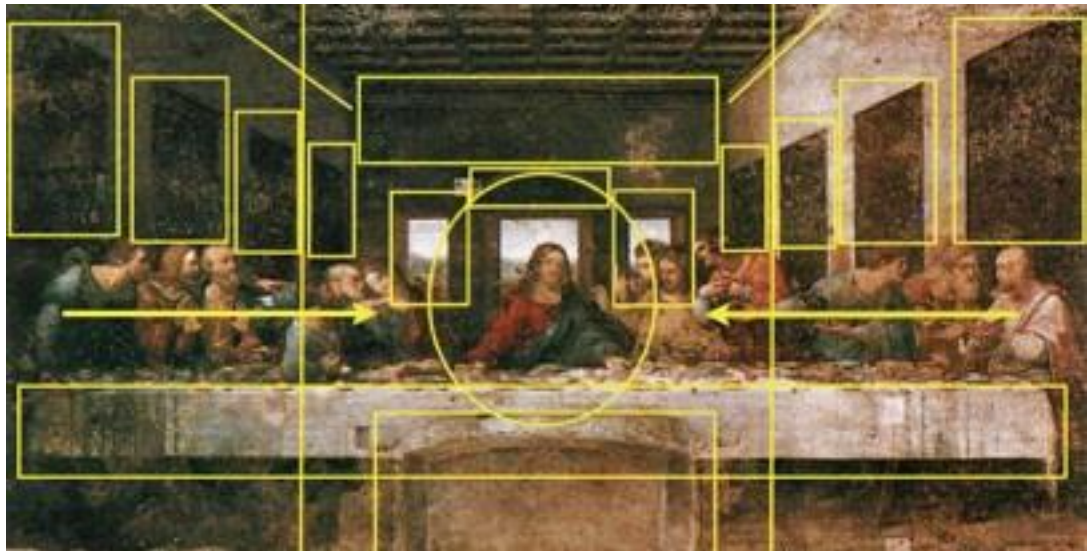
Let's ignore the themes and symbolism in the painting and look at it from a purely compositional point of view.

The position of Jesus and the 12 Apostles is not random: notice how the Apostles are separated into four groups of three. Look at the background and the perspective of the room; all of the lines are positioned to draw your eye toward Jesus, who is the focal point of the painting.

In compositional terms, the focal point has nothing to do with focusing (making sure the image is sharp and not blurred). It is about the predominant object or person in the frame. The focal point does not have to be the largest thing in the frame, but sometimes by making a subject larger can make it the focal point. When the focal point is not the largest thing in the frame, as is the case here, it's important to make the other elements draw your eye to the focal point.

Tip: most cameras will have a Rule of Thirds setting for live view mode.

It basically places a Rule of Thirds grid over the screen, which can then be used as compositional guide lines (in the literal and figurative sense).

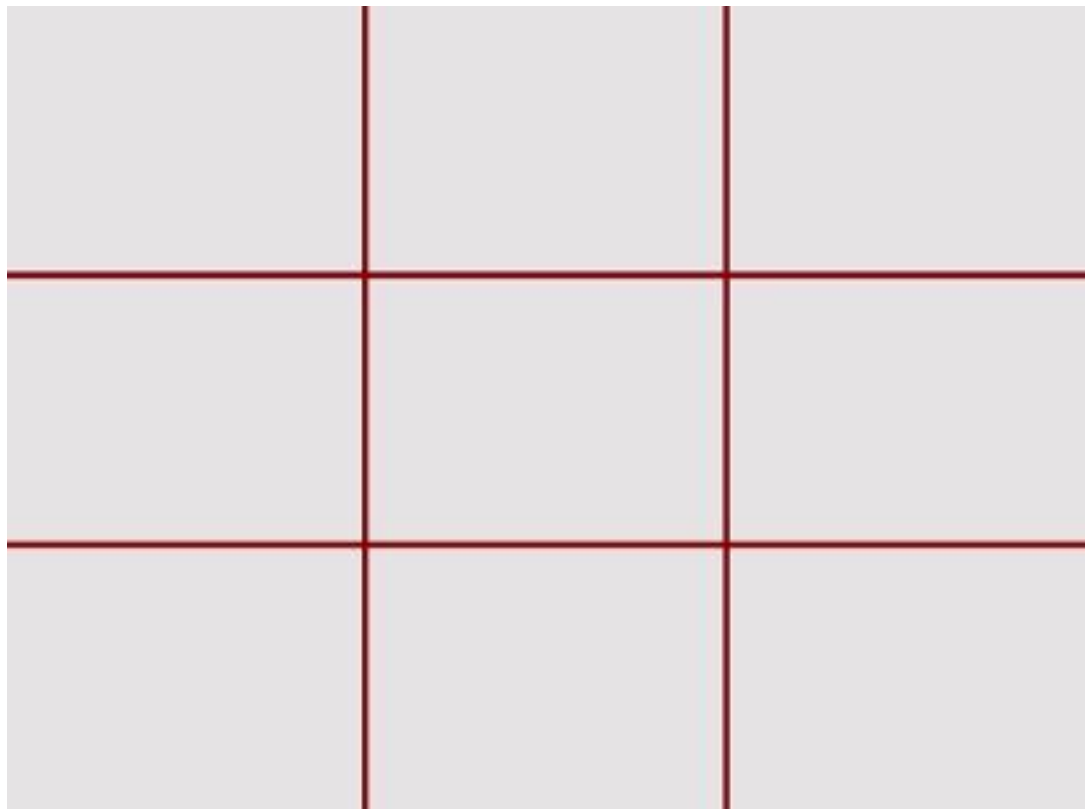


When the composition is broken down into sections, you can see how everything is deliberately positioned to draw your eye to the centre of the painting.

This is a very complex example of composition. Most photos use simpler forms of it; the best known and most used is called the Rule of Thirds.

10.2 The Rule of Thirds

This is so called because the horizontal and vertical planes are both divided into thirds. This creates a grid, which is used as a guide to compose your images.



The Rule of Thirds grid. There are several ways to use this grid as a guide for your compositions. Let's look at some examples.

Tip: when you're starting out, it helps to observe the rules; but don't become a slave to them.

When you start to feel comfortable with your camera, start to experiment more.

That's the beauty of digital photography. In the days of film, you were limited to the amount of film you had, so people were less willing to experiment because they might end up wasting film.

Today that's not a problem. If your experiment is a failure, you can simply delete it but also think about why it failed and learn from it.



You might remember this photograph from Module 4, as an example of when to use motion blur. It also follows the Rule of Thirds.



When the grid is overlaid, it becomes clearer. Notice how the motorbike driver is confined to the left-hand third, the seated figure is in the bottom-right third and the street vendor is in the middle-top third. This is one way to use the grid.

Tip: try being colourblind.

Some photographers use the live view screen with the camera set to black and white, thereby ignoring all of the colour and concentrating merely on the lines and forms that appear in the frame.

It can be an interesting experiment, especially if you set your camera to shoot JPEG and RAW. The JPEG shots will be in black and white, while the RAW images will all be in colour.



This time, instead of containing things inside the rectangles created by the lines, the subject is framed so that lines intersect the focal point.



The points at which the lines intersect (cross each other) are called points of interest. In portraits, the point of interest should always be the subject's face.

By adding a circle around the point of interest, you can see how the face is positioned perfectly in that area.

Tip: look for shapes when composing your shots.

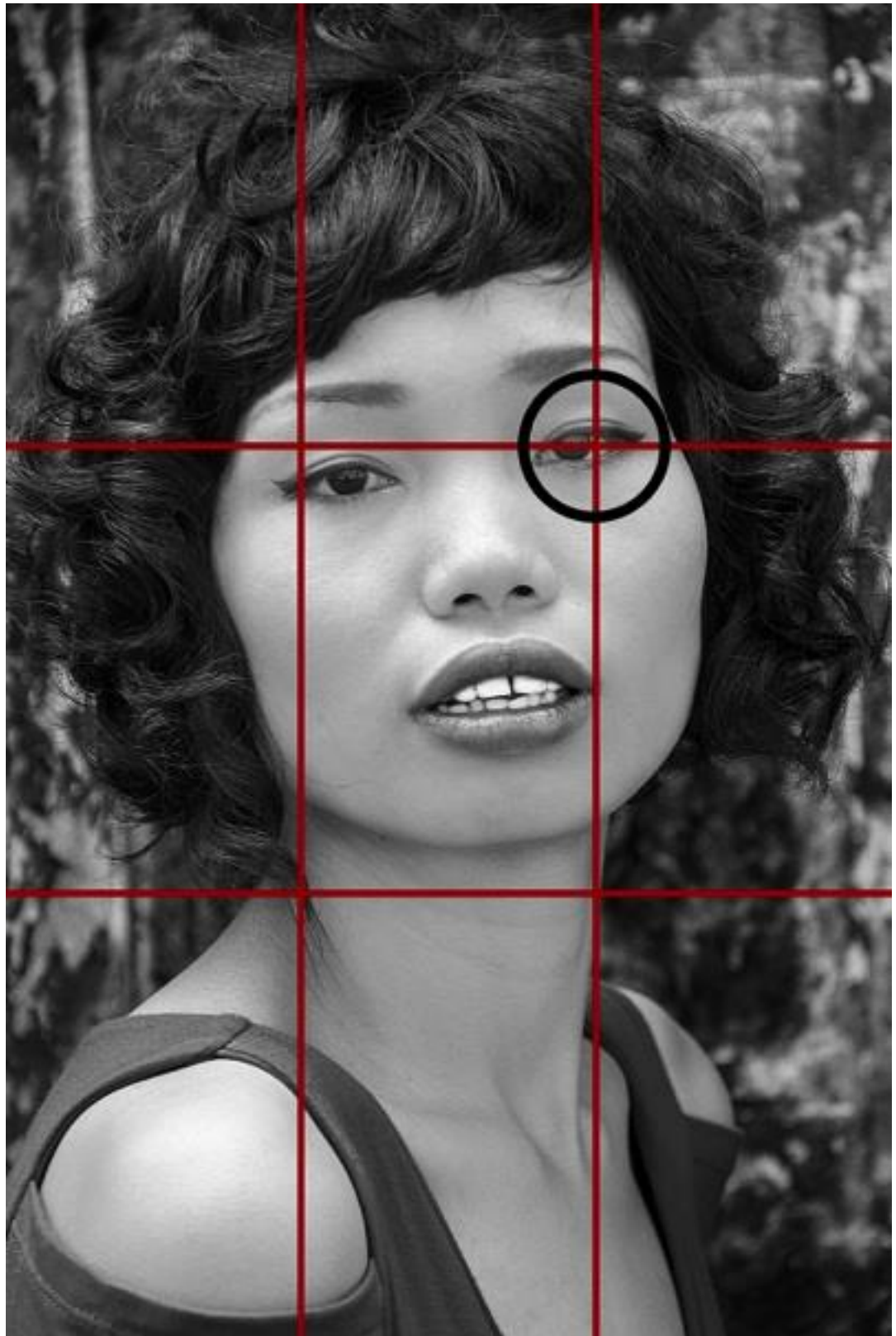
Try to imagine lines connecting the different elements of the shots.



For close-up portraits, one of the facial features will become the point of interest.

Imagine a Rule of Thirds grid placed over this photograph: can you spot the point of interest?

Tip: when photographing people, keep an eye on the background. Make sure there are no signposts or any vertical objects behind your subject's head. Otherwise, it can look like the object is growing out their head.



When using points of interest in the Rule of Thirds for portraits, one or both eyes are usually the best point of interest. The mouth can also work well as the focal point, but people are mostly drawn to the eyes.

If your photograph doesn't quite follow the Rule of Thirds, it's possible to adjust it to conform to the rules by cropping it. Cropping is basically selecting an area of the photograph and removing it. This makes a big difference to composition.

Tip: if you're using a telephoto lens, try slowly zooming in and out while composing your shot.

Making the scene wider or tighter can make a huge difference to the composition.

10.3 Cropping



Sometimes your composition might be a little bit off, but by cropping the image it can be improved. Some photographers actually shoot wider than necessary, so it gives them more freedom to crop the image later.

In the days of film, this was done by projecting the image on to photographic paper that was slightly larger than the original. With digital, it's a simpler matter of using the crop tool on your editing software.

Tip: it's ok to shoot too much. Try to get the shot right first time, but it doesn't hurt to retake the same shot several times while making minor adjustments each time.



The crop tool also gives you the option of using a Rule of Thirds grid, which helps to select the point of interest.



Uncropped



Cropped

Sometimes your composition can have what's known as dead space. This is an area where there's nothing of interest. It's not always a bad thing, as it can be used to isolate your subject deliberately. If you see dead space in your photos, try cropping it out and see if the composition is improved.

Tip: the Rule of Thirds is useful for shooting landscapes; use one of the two horizontal lines to line up with the actual horizon.



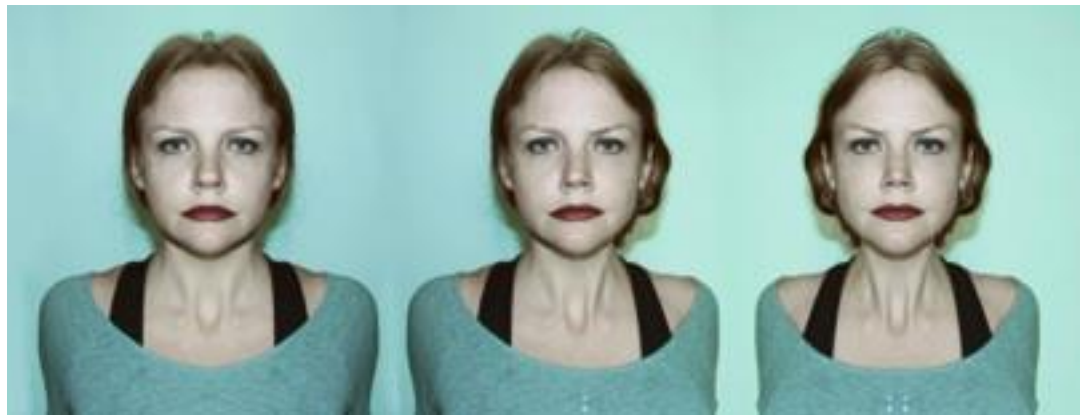
By cropping the dead space in the left and bottom parts of the image, the composition conforms to the Rule of Thirds and creates the point of interest.

This isn't always necessary, though, and sometimes the Rule of Thirds should be broken.

Tip: if in doubt, keep it simple. Try not to make the frame look cluttered, as it can distract attention away from the focal point of your composition.

10.4 Symmetrical Composition

There are different types of symmetry. But, in basic terms, imagine a line that runs through an image: everything on opposite sides of the line is a mirror image of the other side. That's more a definition of perfect symmetry but it still applies.



Left Side Mirrored

Right Side Mirrored

Draw a vertical line directly down the centre of a person's face and duplicate each half; then create mirror images of each one, put them together and you'll see the differences.

So let's forget about perfect symmetry; in most cases, it's only really possible with Photoshop trickery. Symmetrical composition in photography is more about balance – each side doesn't have to be a mirror image of the other side but they should at the very least look similar.



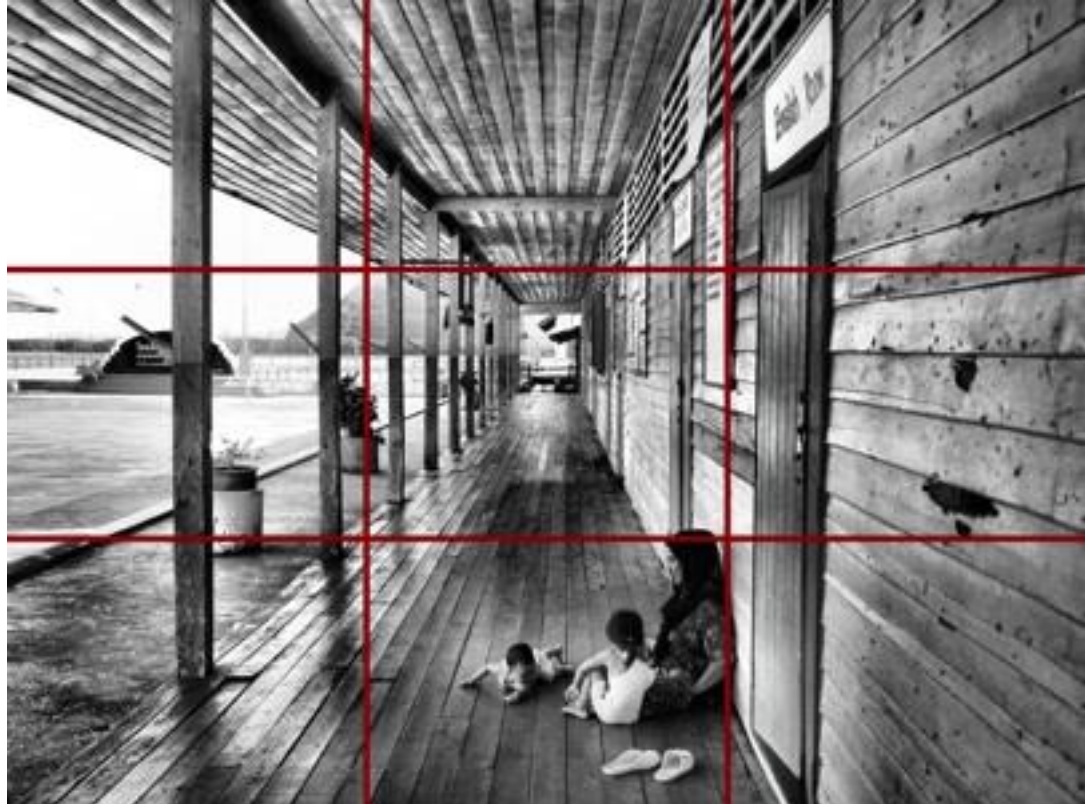
Here we see an image that is not perfectly symmetrical but which displays two types of symmetry – horizontal symmetry and vertical symmetry.

Tip: most live view modes will have different grid overlay options. These can be useful for symmetrical composition.

Newer DSLR cameras will also have a level indicator to make sure your camera is not at a slight angle.



The red line shows the vertical axis; if we compare both sides, we can see they are more or less symmetrical. The blue line shows the horizontal axis and the reflective floor creates a symmetrical look, albeit in a distorted form.



This is an example of broken symmetry and use of perspective.

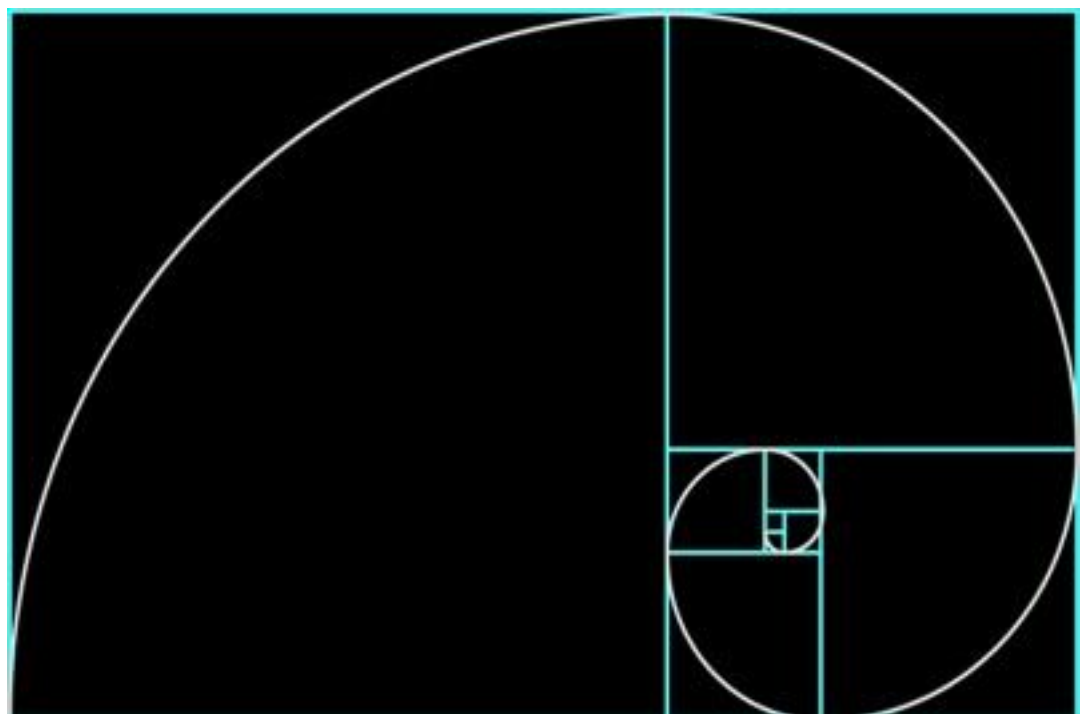
Tip: balance is important, but you can also go the opposite direction. Try placing your subject to the extreme left or extreme right of your frame.



All of the lines draw your eye to the vanishing point. Horizontal lines give a static, calm feel, while vertical lines suggest stability. Raising or lowering your camera can create more diagonal lines, which can add impact or drama to your image.

10.5 The Golden Spiral

This goes by many other names, such as the Golden Mean, the Golden Ratio and the Fibonacci Spiral. Let's not get bogged down in the geometrical and mathematical elements of the spiral but look at from a purely visual point of view.



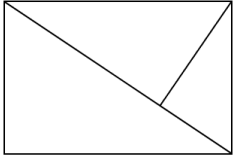
Tip: when you're composing your shot, try rotating your camera 90 degrees.

Not everything has to be in landscape format.

When using a compositional tool, the idea is that it leads the eyes towards the focal point of the image.

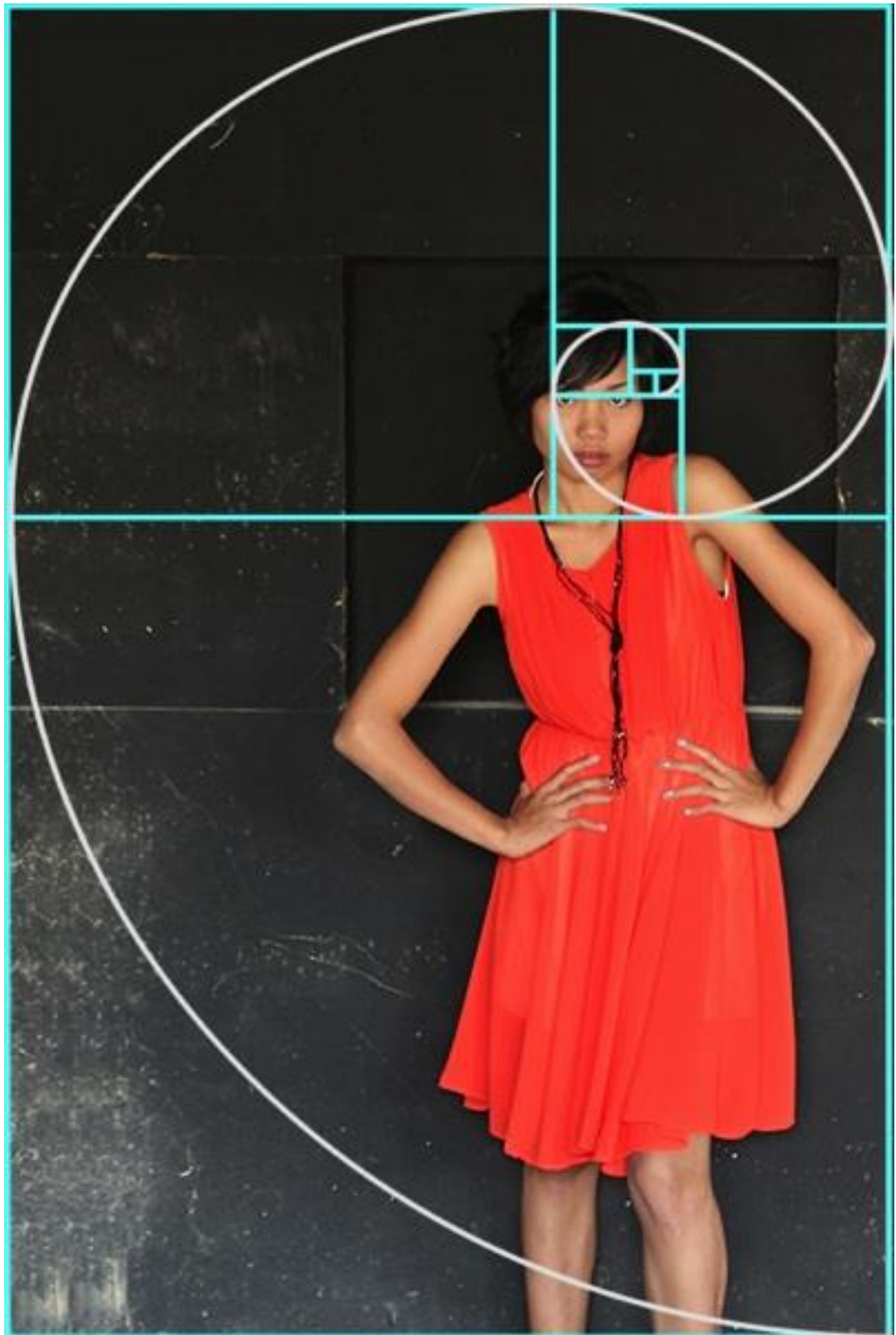


Tip: another compositional guide is called the Golden Triangle.



Imagine your frame is composed of three triangles.

This is recommended for shooting landscapes, cityscapes and architecture.



Employing this compositional guideline can be difficult if you're just using guesswork. It helps either to have a Golden Spiral overlay in live view mode or to shoot your images wider than necessary and then use the Golden Spiral guide with your crop tool.

Tip: look for complementary colours.

The three primary colours; red, yellow and blue all have their opposites (or complements); using a primary colour with its complement can create contrast.

Complementary colour combinations:
red/green
blue/orange
yellow/purple.



10.6 Summary

- The Rule of Thirds is a good place to start.
- When using the Rule of Thirds, look for points of interest.
- Cropping photographs can improve their composition.
- If you see symmetry, use it.
- Look for shapes, lines and colours in your compositions.
- Diagonal lines are more interesting than horizontal or vertical lines.
- Remember the Golden Spiral.

Assessment 10

- 1) True or False? When using the Rule of Thirds, you should always position the most important part of your composition in the centre.
- 2) What are the points of interest?
- 3) Name two types of symmetry?
- 4) What is the definition of asymmetry?
- 5) Does symmetrical composition have to also conform to the Rule of Thirds?
- 6) Why would you crop an image?
- 7) True or False? Symmetrical composition must vertical and horizontal symmetry.
- 8) What is another name for the Golden Spiral?
- 9) What is the purpose of the Golden Spiral?
- 10) Apart from the Rule of Thirds and the Golden Spiral, name another compositional guide.

10.8 Assignment

Part One:

Take a series of photographs using the Rule of Thirds; but for every shot you compose, look to see if there is a way to break the rule and still create a visually interesting image.

Part Two:

Next use the Golden Spiral to compose your images. If you don't have a Golden Spiral overlay guide on your live view system, then you'll have to use your best guess. If necessary, shoot wide and crop later.