

**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.

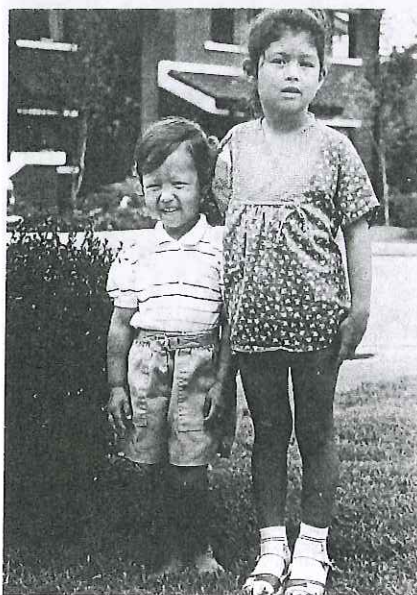
A lot more matters in a true photograph. A photograph is, or should be, an artistic interpretation of an event or person or object. Its purpose is to tell the viewer—any viewer—something about its subject. It should show not just what the subject is, but what it is like. And it should do so with impact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



*Attention to detail is the primary difference between a snapshot and a photograph. In the snapshot (right) the head and feet of the taller girl are poorly cropped and the background is distracting. The girls' expressions are stiff and unnatural and the composition doesn't "do" anything. In the photograph (above) the same two girls have been posed in a more interesting way. Their expressions convey a real mood, the background is less distracting, and the composition is much stronger. Snapshot and photograph by Mike Wiley.*



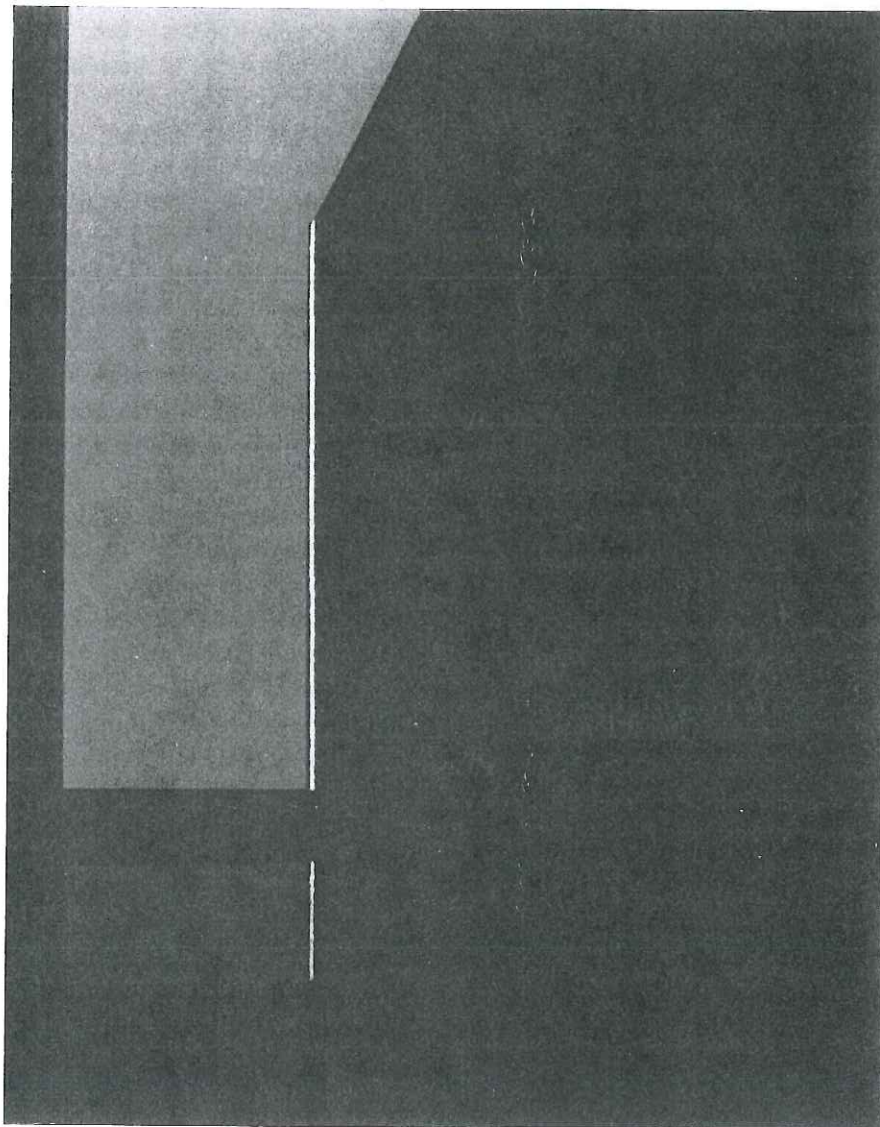
before the shutter is clicked. That's what composition is basically all about: paying attention.

No matter how interesting your subject may be, you have not really photographed it until you have placed it carefully within the frame, gotten rid of anything that distracts attention from it, made sure that all the various elements are working together, and set the camera to the correct aperture and shutter speed for the effect you want. In a broad sense, the subject of a photograph is far less important than its composition. Absolutely anything can be photographed well—or poorly.

This in itself is a valuable lesson. Once you've begun seeing with a photographer's eye, you'll discover that there are wonderful images all around you—far more than you could ever hope to capture on film. Whether you continue to practice photography or not, the way you look at the world around you will probably be changed forever.

Photography is an art of discovery. It is an exploration of the endless variety of line, texture, shape, light, motion and perspective—all the fundamental elements of composition. Not many people have an opportunity to learn to explore the world in this way. You have now become one of the lucky few who do. Enjoy the exploration.

Before focusing in on each separate element, it's important to develop a sense of how they all work together. So, though each element will have its turn, we're beginning with the "big picture": composition. We've already discussed what it is, and provided some clues as to why it is important. Now let's look at how it works.



## STRUCTURE, BALANCE, DYNAMICS

These three things—structure, balance and dynamics—define the composition of a photograph as a whole. They provide a visual framework, a **context**, within which the various elements of the photograph find their proper places. Without structure, balance and dynamics, a photograph would only be a jumble of random objects. It would have little impact and might not make much sense.

### Structure

Structure in photography works in much the same way as it works in architecture. The structural elements in a building are the posts and beams that hold it together. Non-structural elements are the walls, doors and windows that determine how the building looks and what it is for.

In a photograph, the **basic structural elements** are line, shape and position (the placement of an object within a composition). These three elements hold the photograph together. Non-structural elements—

*As an example of the fact that a photograph can be “about” absolutely anything, here’s one that is pure structure. Notice how the three structural elements—position, line and shape—can make even the simplest image come alive. (Student photograph by Augustine Go.)*

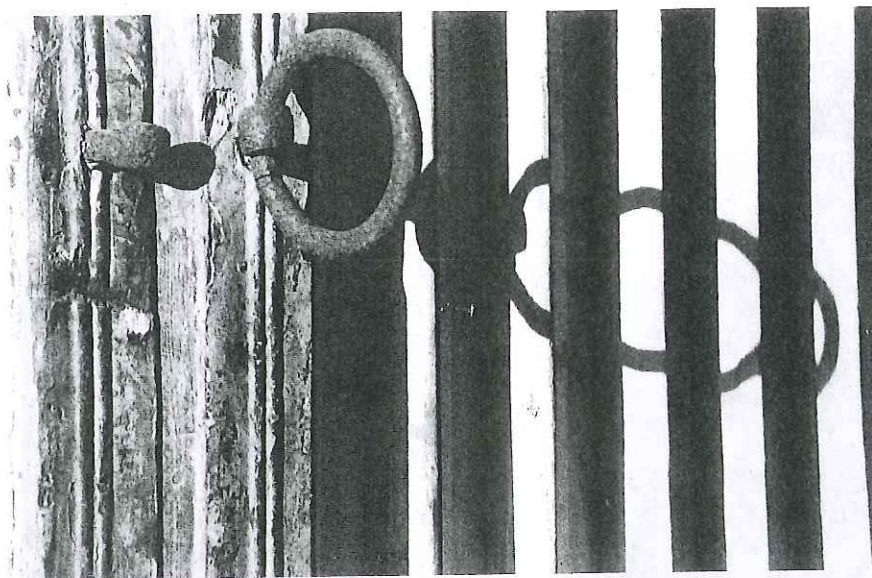
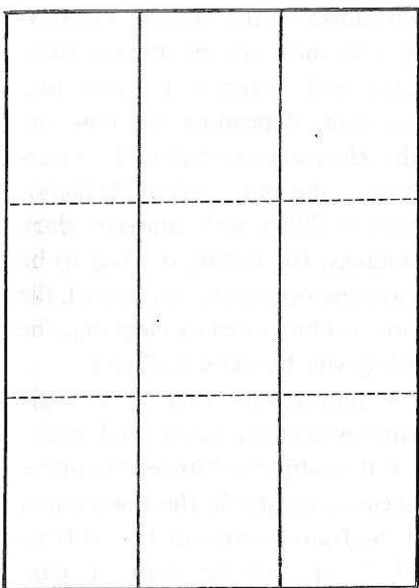
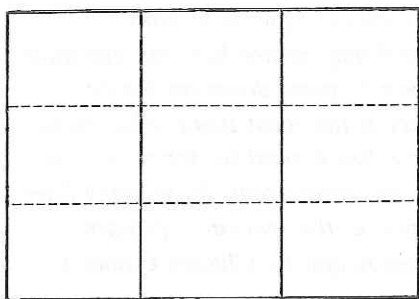
texture, light, motion and perspective—are added to complete the image, altering its appearance and effect.

In a building, the design may require a generally non-structural element, such as an interior wall, to become structural. In this case, some other part of the building, such as the floor above it, depends on that wall for support. If the wall were removed, the building would probably collapse.

It’s the same with photography. Occasionally, texture or light (or any of the other elements that are generally “non-structural”) become so important to the composition that it, too, would collapse if they were removed.

In practical terms, this means that a photograph may, for example, be “about” texture, so much so that line and shape are irrelevant. This is, however, an exception. By and large, composition is determined by line, shape and position.

How do they do this? Primarily by breaking the photograph up into smaller frames within the main one. Each of these smaller frames, which we’ll call **zones**, is in effect a picture within a picture. Ideally, each zone will produce some particular effect on its own, as well as producing with all the others one overall effect.



*Weighting this photograph over to the left side is one element that makes it interesting. What other elements contribute to its impact? (Student photograph by Renee Adsitt.)*

#### • The Nine-Zone Grid

Examine the composition grid diagram. It contains nine zones. These zones are produced by dividing the frame into thirds vertically (the two gray lines) and horizontally (the two dotted lines). By thinking about composition in terms of these zones, you may find it easier to get a sense of how it works.

Each zone need not produce a different effect in order to be doing its job. Most of the zones may be exactly alike, with only one or two doing something different. When that is the case, the zones that are different stand out more clearly in contrast to their surroundings: a lighted area in a photograph that is mostly dark, for example, or a figure standing in the midst of blank space.

Sometimes, on the other hand, there's so much happening in a photograph that it's hard to decide what to look at first. In this case, it helps tremendously to "anchor" the most important objects by placing

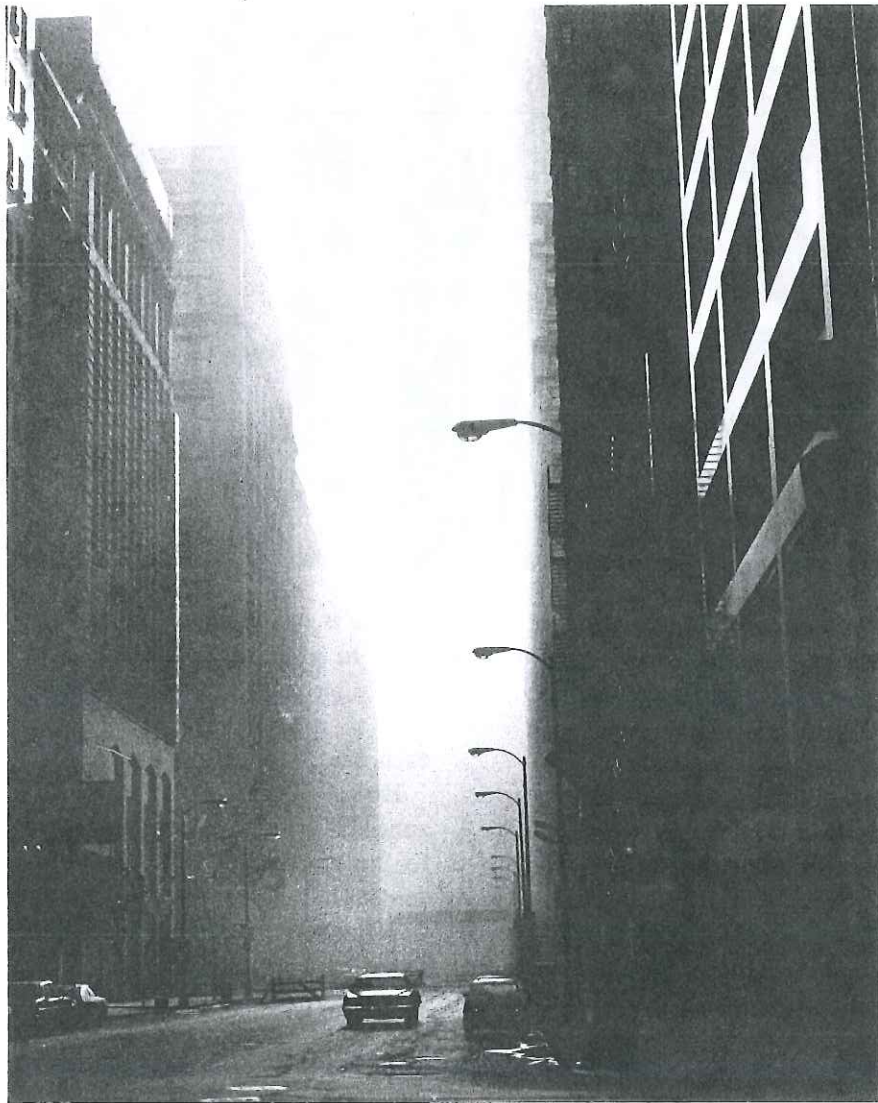
each one in its own zone.

However you decide to use each zone, it's good to check all of them to be sure they are all doing something. If a zone is not adding to the effect you want, it should be corrected or cropped out. Usually, correcting a zone involves nothing more than shifting your angle, moving around a bit or waiting patiently for the composition to change on its own. Waiting for—and catching—just the right moment is especially important when you're photographing people. When you're photographing a small object, of course, you can always move it to improve the composition.

#### • Position

If you examine the grid, you'll see that you have three choices for positioning a subject vertically: top, center and bottom. You also have three choices horizontally: right, center and left. This gives you a total of nine choices ( $3 \times 3 = 9$ ).

Most photographs have a domi-



*In this example of bottom-weighting, notice how the buildings seem to press down on the two cars at the focal point. Also notice how line is used to draw your eye to the focal point. How many lines point at the two cars? (Student photograph by Charles Citinas.)*

photograph will generally seem to press down on the subject. The feeling this may convey ranges from heavy and trapped to free and liberating, depending on how the other elements are employed. For example, if the upper part of the photograph is filled with massive, dark buildings, the feeling is likely to be heavy and oppressive. If, instead, the photo is dominated by clear sky, the feeling will be quite different.

A photograph that is strongly center-weighted tends to look static, as if the subject is “frozen” in place. Placing a subject in the exact center of the frame is against the “official rules” of composition. It can, however, be very effective.

Finally, strongly weighting a photograph to either side tends to suggest movement. If a subject faces the same side it is weighted toward, it will seem to be moving out of the frame. This is especially true if it is weighted toward a corner as well. If the subject is facing the opposite side, it will seem to be moving into the frame. In most cases, moving into the frame is preferable.

In most of your photographs, you’ll probably want to place the main subject near where the lines dividing the zones cross each other. In other words, you will usually want your subject to be a little off-center, slightly weighted toward the top, bottom or one side. This produces a more subtle effect. The subject will

nant subject: an object or person that attracts the most attention. Usually, but not always, the dominant subject is the largest object in the frame. Sometimes it is a relatively small object that is carefully placed to command the most attention. It may also be a cluster of several objects or people.

Positioning the dominant subject of a photograph in a zone is called **weighting**. A photograph may be **weighted** toward the top, bottom, center or to either side. It may also be weighted toward any combination

of these directions — for example, the upper right-hand corner.

If the subject of a photograph is strongly weighted toward the top of the frame, it will appear far away and may, as you might expect, appear top-heavy. Though this can be very effective, it produces an unusual and often disturbing effect. It should be used sparingly and only with good reason.

A photograph that is strongly weighted toward the bottom tends to appear very firmly grounded. Whatever is in the upper part of the

still seem to be interestingly distant, grounded, static or mobile, but not too much so. Later on, you will be encouraged to test the extremes. Even though you probably won't use them much, it's good to understand the effects they produce. This will allow you to use them skillfully if and when you want one of those effects.

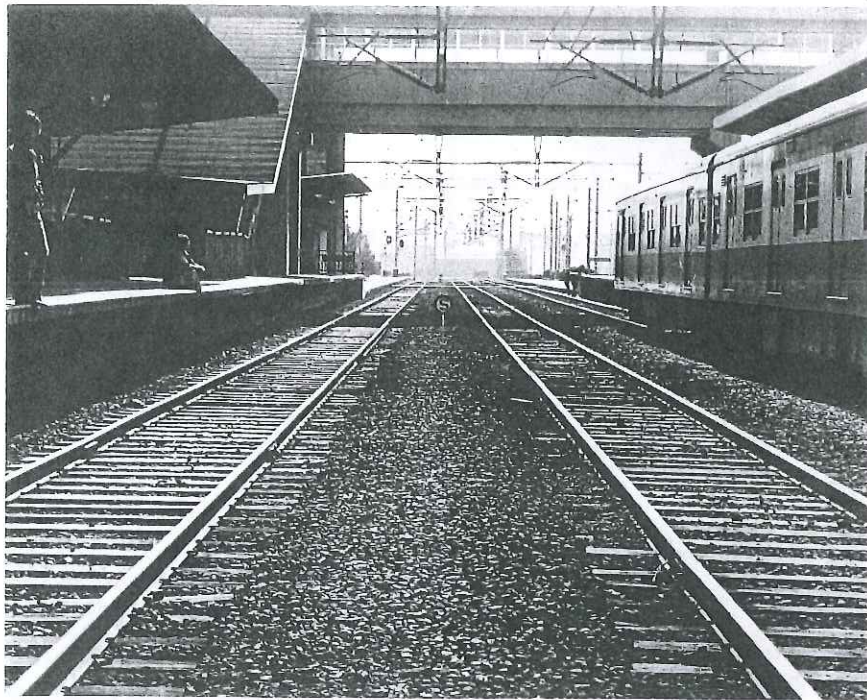
One thing you may have noticed is that the "rules" of composition sound more like suggestions. That is entirely intentional. Some photographers employ these rules very strictly. Most, however, bend and break them as they please. You should feel absolutely free to do the same—once you've understood what the "rules" are, why they exist and how they work. After you've reached that point, they are indeed only suggestions, or guidelines.

#### • Line

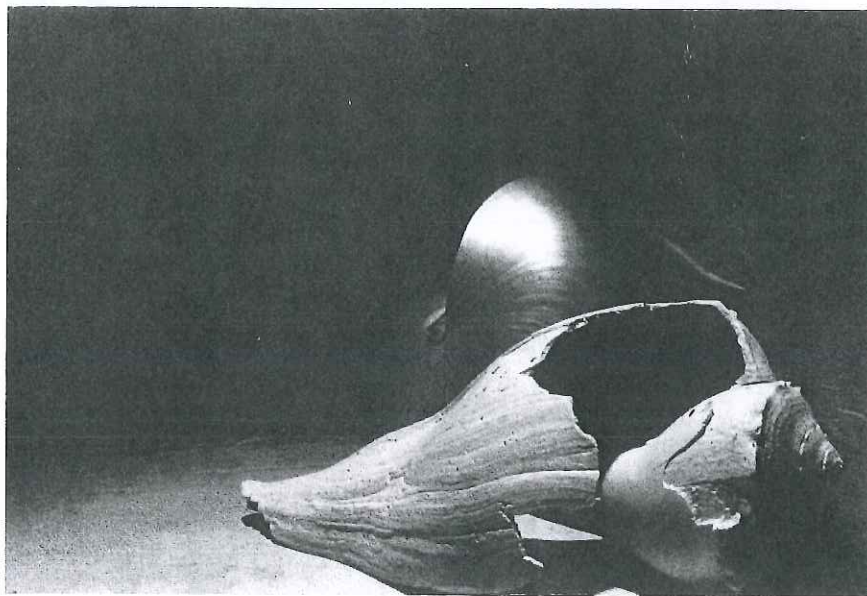
Weighting is generally achieved by positioning. It is often reinforced with line. For example, if you decide to weight a photograph strongly by positioning the dominant subject near the top of the frame, the impression of distance you create will be strengthened if lines starting in the foreground converge (get closer together) as they get nearer to the subject. One example is a photograph of a person walking along a sidewalk. The person will seem more distant if the receding lines of the sidewalk are emphasized. Fortunately, you don't have to do anything to the sidewalk to achieve this effect; the lines will converge naturally as a result of perspective. (Perspective will be examined in greater detail later.) All you need to do is to keep your eyes open for the effect when it may be useful.



*In this photograph, weighted toward the upper left-hand corner, the empty space of the window contributes to the dreamy quality of the image. (Student photograph by Kristin McCauley.)*



*How does line affect this centered, top-weighted photograph? Where do the perspective lines converge? Does that tell you what the photograph is about? What is the photograph about? (Student photograph by Kenneth Griggs.)*



*How does this photograph's composition fit on the 9-zone grid? How is it weighted? How do the shapes in it work together? (Student photograph.)*

## FOCAL POINT: Composition Tips

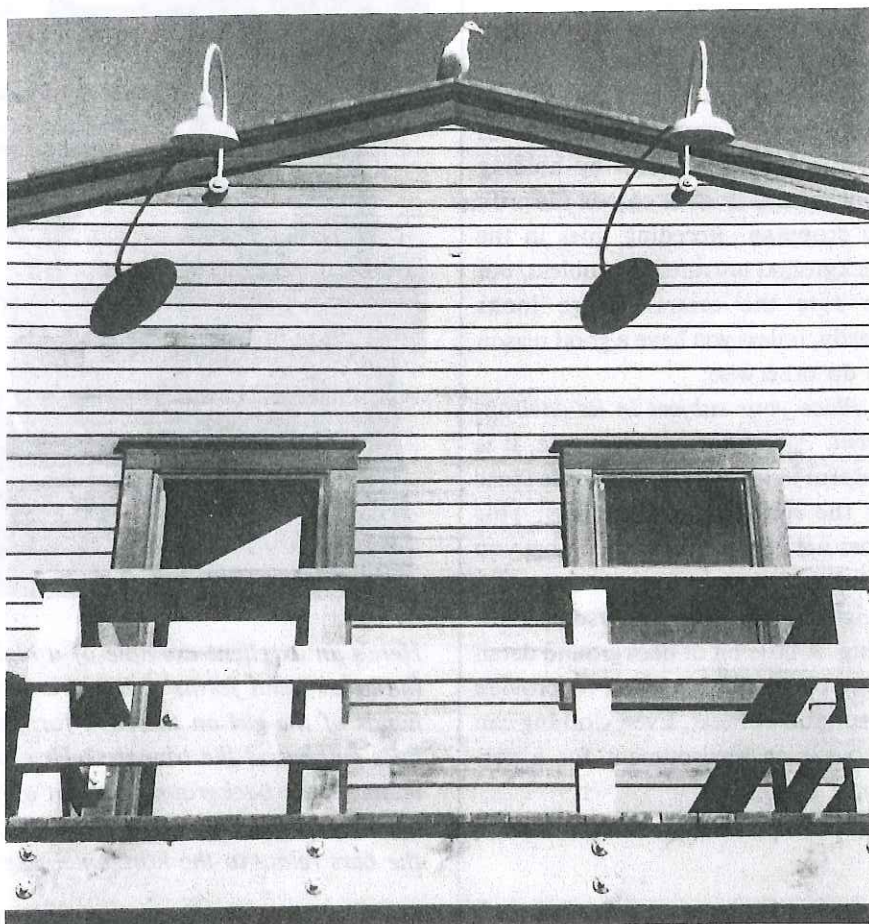
As you continue to practice photography and begin discovering your own style, you'll also begin defining your own approach to composition. The guidelines that follow will, however, help you get off to a good start. If you pay close attention to these guidelines, many of the photographs you produce now will look pretty good even after you become a master photographer.

**Get in close.** The most common mistake made by beginning photographers is staying too far away from the subject. Admittedly, a distant shot can sometimes be very effective. As a general rule, however, the closer you are to your subject, the more interesting your photograph will be.

Why? Well, first of all, the larger the subject is within the frame, the more detail it will have. Detail tends to add interest. Making your primary subject large also helps the viewer understand that it *is* the primary subject. (It's very frustrating to "wander around" in a photograph trying to figure out what the photographer wanted you to look at first.) Finally, getting in close reduces the size of the negative space, making it more interesting.

A good way to practice this tip is to shoot a subject several times, moving in closer with each shot. See how close you can get and still produce an understandable image. You may be surprised.

**Pay attention to negative space.** Keeping negative space relatively small is half the battle, but not all of it. In addition, it's important to experiment with the placement of your subjects until you achieve an effect that is not merely interesting, but



*Student photograph by Janice Pata.*

exciting.

Get into the habit of scanning the edges of the frame—before you click the shutter—to see what the negative space looks like. If it doesn't excite you, change your position or camera angle until it does. This will get easier, even automatic, with practice.

**Edit your image.** You don't score points as a photographer merely by being present for a photograph. You have to work at it. Anything within the frame that doesn't contribute to the whole image doesn't belong in it. Edit it out.

Once again, this is done by mov-

ing closer or to one side, or by shifting your camera angle until everything that should be in is in and everything that should be out is out. Never let yourself mutter, "That thing just got in the way." It's up to you to get it out of the way.

**Watch your edges.** While you're shooting, printing or critiquing a photograph, look carefully at the borders, especially the corners. Lines that cut through the corners, random flecks of light or shadow and little bits of confusing detail along the edges will draw the viewer's eye away from the point of interest.

*Keep verticals vertical and horizontals horizontal.* Buildings that appear to lean or horizon lines that tilt are likely to make your viewers nervous or queasy. Avoid them by holding your camera level, or correct the print by cropping. Receding lines in the background are rarely a problem, but be sure the central image looks steady, unless you have a good reason to do otherwise.

*Place your subject in its environment.* As another general rule, it is helpful to give the viewer some sense of the subject's surroundings. This does not mean, for example, that you need to pull away to show the entire neighborhood where a person is standing. A little bit of background detail may be all that's needed to provide a suitable context. Even clothing can provide an environment for a person's face.



*Here's an excellent example of a highly structured photograph. Notice how the lower hand forms a downward triangle with the two girls' heads. The hands of the girl on the right form a second triangle (pointing up). What lines emphasize the triangles? How does the sweater of the girl on the left relate to the background pattern of the jungle-gym bars? How does the position of the girls relate to the vertical lines of the 9-zone grid? How do the bars relate to the horizontal lines? (Student photograph by Jun Hwang.)*

Line can also contribute to the structure of a photograph without being directly involved in the position of its subject. The most common way it does this is by literally dividing the frame up in some kind of grid pattern. The grid produced by lines in a photo may or may not be the same as the compositional grid we have just been looking at. The lines may make a different grid of their own. In this case, the grid produced by the lines is added to the basic compositional grid. The rules concerning the compositional grid, however, remain the same.

In fact, as you experiment with line, you will probably discover that the compositional grid corresponds

quite accurately to the best placement of the most important lines in the frame. For example, horizon lines are generally most pleasing, and seem most natural, when they are placed very near one of the two horizontal lines in the compositional grid. Similarly, a key vertical line, such as the edge of a wall, will generally work best when it is placed near either of the two vertical lines of the grid. This observation leads to another: in most photographs that employ lines, the lines have merely weighted the photograph in one or another direction, depending on how they have been placed within the compositional grid. In other words, lines work within the grid just as any other objects do.



*An unusual kind of balance is produced by composing a photograph so that it “pulls” in opposite directions. This photograph is weighted toward both the upper-right-hand and lower-left-hand corners. What effect does that have on its impact and mood? (Student photograph by Brian MacMillan.)*

#### • Shape

Shape affects structure in two ways: by where it is . . . and by where it isn't. Though the idea may be hard to grasp until we explore it further (in the chapter on Shape), every object in a photograph actually has two shapes. The first shape is the obvious one: the space an object takes up within the frame, known as **positive space**. The second is less obvious: the space that surrounds an object. This second shape is called **negative space**. Because careful composition is required to make negative space interesting, it is one of the main differences between photographs and snapshots.

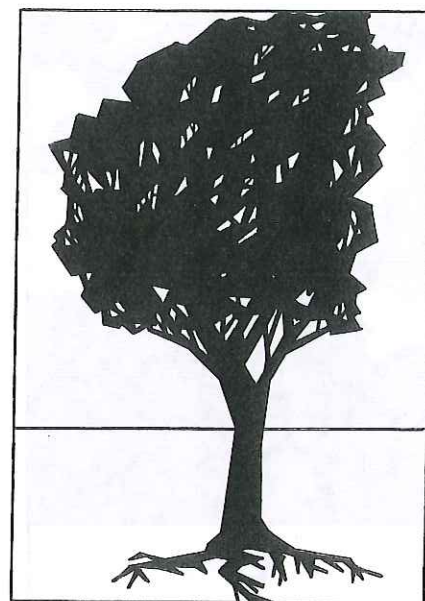
Negative space is defined by borders—the borders of an object and the borders of the photograph's frame. The closer those borders are to each other, the more effective the negative space will be. If the subject

of a photograph is surrounded by too much negative space, the overall effect may be weakened. In this case, the borders of the frame may be too far away from the object to interact with it in an interesting way.

So, when you position a shape within the frame of a photograph, you need to pay attention to two things:

First, is the shape itself interesting? If not, you can usually improve upon it by either altering the shape (asking a model to change position, for example) or by changing the angle from which you are photographing it. It is not enough simply to find an interesting subject; anyone who takes a snapshot does that. The photographer's job is to make an interesting photograph of an interesting subject, which is quite a different thing.

The second point you need to think about when you position a shape is

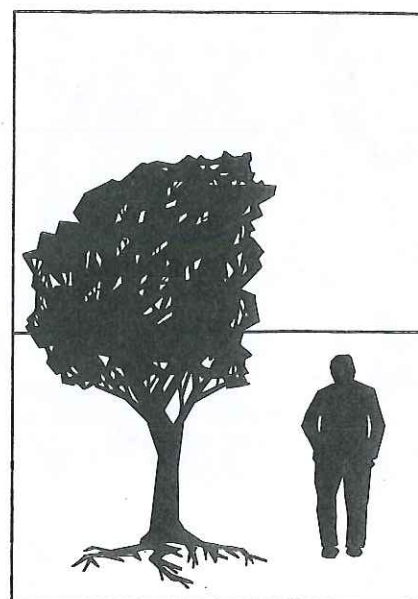
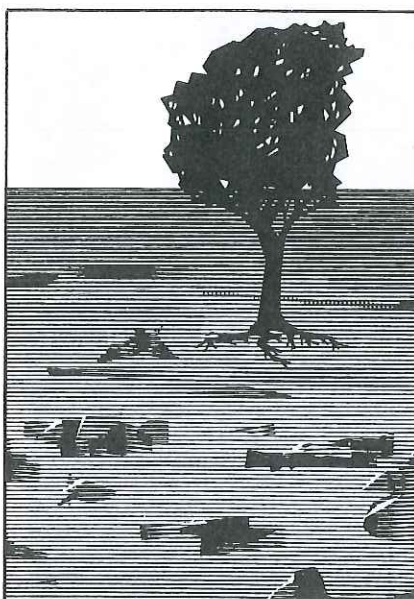
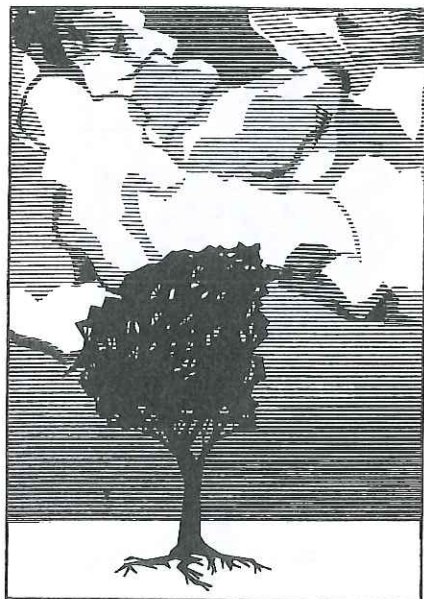


how it fits within the frame. Does it do something interesting in relation to the other objects and the frame? If not, you probably need to move the object or move your camera.

#### Balance

Balance is an equal relationship between two or more things. If you place two objects on a balancing scale, they are balanced when both sides of the scale are of the same weight. It's no different in photography. A photograph is balanced when the various elements “weigh” the same. This does not mean that they must take up the same amount of room. What it does mean is a good deal more complex.

Let's say you are taking a photograph of a tree. You can balance the photograph in several ways, depending on the tree's surroundings and on the effect you want. If the tree stands alone against a blank sky, you'll probably want it to nearly fill the frame—in which case the negative space will interact well with the frame. In this case, the photograph has a single subject: the



tree.

If the sky is interesting, you may choose to weight the tree toward the bottom of the frame. In this case, there are actually two subjects in the photograph: the tree and the sky. If the ground under the tree is interesting, you might weight the tree toward the top of the frame. Again, you have two main subjects: the tree and the ground.

If there is a person standing off to the right side of the tree and if the sky behind is interesting, you might weight the tree to the lower left of the frame. You now have three subjects: the tree, the sky and the person.

In all these examples, you achieve balance by making sure that the subject or subjects are placed in an interesting relationship to each other and to the frame of the photograph. Each should take up exactly the right amount of room it needs to achieve this relationship.

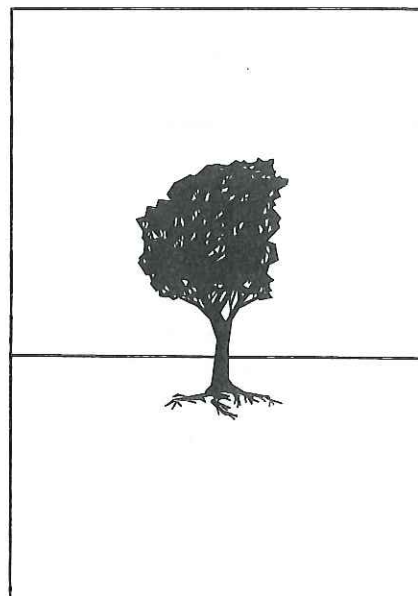
To make things clearer, let's see what happens when a photograph is unbalanced. Go back to the photograph of the tree isolated against a blank sky. If you photograph it so the

tree is small and weighted toward the bottom, what happens? First, the tree itself loses interest simply because it is small. Second, the sky loses interest because it is too big to create much negative space. There's so much negative space that the eye gets lost in it. This effect, which is almost always undesirable, is called **dead space**. Space that doesn't do anything is dead.

The photograph we've just described is uninteresting because its subject is not balanced with the negative space. Make the tree larger and move it further up into the frame, and the photo begins to generate interest.

### Dynamics

Dynamics are about movement, specifically the movement of a viewer's eye as it explores a photograph. When you look at a photograph, your eye naturally moves from one object within the frame to another. Ideally, that movement begins with the most important object, the **primary subject**, and then proceeds to less important ones,



Two kinds of dynamics are at work in this photograph. First, the viewer's eye naturally follows the eyes of the subject, to see what he's looking at (which, in this case, is beyond the frame). Second, the curved lines of the subject's jacket collar and hair create a sort of "funnel" that reinforces the dynamic flow. (Student photograph by Jeff Frye.)

**secondary subjects.** Finally, it comes full circle back to the primary subject again.

In a poorly composed photograph, on the other hand, one of several things can happen to the dynamics. The viewer's eye may get stuck on one of the secondary subjects, which weakens the impact of the primary one. It may get distracted by something that wasn't supposed to be a subject at all (such as an annoying white space near one corner), in which case it may not really "see" the photo at all. Or it may find so many secondary subjects competing for attention that it just bounces around the frame until it gets tired and looks away.

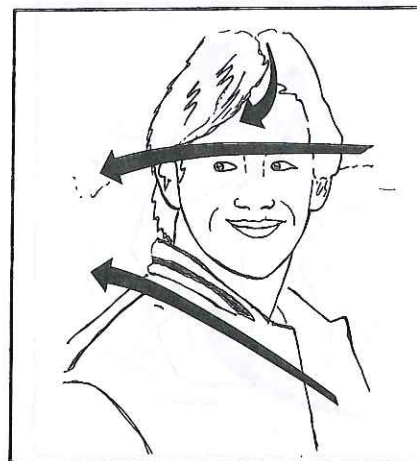
Part of your job as a photographer is to arrange the objects in a photograph so the eye naturally moves around it in a way that strengthens the photograph's impact. Generally, this means that the objects are arranged so the eye first notices the primary subject, then begins to explore how it relates to the secondary subjects, and finally comes back to the primary subject before going around one more time. The more interesting these relationships are, the more often the viewer's eye will repeat its path around the photograph. This is what dynamics are all about—generating and holding in-



terest by directing the eye around the photograph.

Dynamics can be enhanced through the use of lines. Actual lines, as in the sidewalk mentioned above, may connect two or more subjects. This creates a sort of road map of the photograph. The eye finds its way around by following the lines.

**Implied lines** can achieve the same effect. If, for example, a person in a photograph is looking at another subject in it, the viewer's eye will nat-





*At its best, the dynamics of a photograph bind all of the various elements together. Notice how the tuft of grass beneath the subject rises to the scarf, which then runs straight up to the face. The line continues, through the subject's hair, around the face and (back to the scarf again) spills over the subject's left shoulder. The similarity between the tuft of grass and the subject's bangs is a nice added touch. (Student photograph by Indira Suganda.)*

Take a few moments to test the theory of dynamics we've just outlined. Look at any photograph in this book and pay careful attention to how your eye moves about within the frame. Try this with several photographs. Which ones are most dynamic? Which hold your interest longest? Which contain distracting elements that interfere with the dynamics?

While they may work alone, balance and dynamics often work together. A photograph conveys **static balance** when its subjects are of equal weight and appear immobile, "frozen." Static balance is essentially balance without strong dynamics. In a statically balanced photograph, the viewer's eye tends to take in everything all at once, without moving around the frame. This can be effective if the subject and composition so interesting that they hold the viewer's interest on their own. Portraits of people with especially interesting faces or expressions often employ static balance.

A photograph achieves **dynamic balance** when its subjects are positioned to encourage the eye to move around within the frame.



usually look to see what that other subject is. There is an implied line between the person's eye and the subject it is looking at. Similarly, many objects can, in effect, point at others. A fence, for example can point at a tree, even if the fence doesn't actually touch the tree. The viewer's eye will naturally tend to follow the line of the fence. When the fence ends, the eye will keep on going until it reaches the tree. This is another implied line, and another example of dynamics.

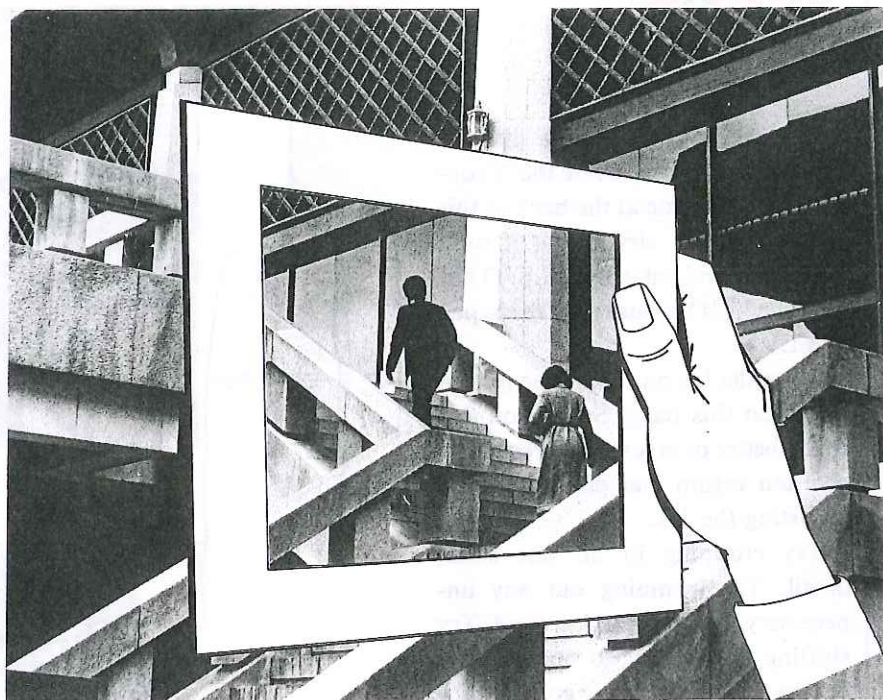
## EXERCISE

### Mat Frame

Turn to the back of the book and locate the “Mat Template.” Trace the template onto sturdy paper and dry-mount it onto a piece of dark mat board. (See Appendix for instructions on mounting.) Then carefully cut through both the mat and the template along the dotted lines. For best results, use a sharp knife (such as an X-acto) and a metal straight-edge.

You have now constructed a mat frame with roughly the same proportions as your camera’s viewfinder. Hold the frame an arm’s length away, with the dark side toward you, and look through it. Wherever you happen to look, you’ll have some kind of composition within the frame. Evaluate it. Is the composition interesting? Is it well-balanced? What kind of dynamics does it have?

Next, shift the frame to either side, up or down, and observe how that changes the composition. Move it closer to you to fit more into it, or further away to crop more out of it. Rotate the frame so it goes from horizontal to vertical and back again. Try as many adjustments as you can think of until you’ve made the best composition you can. Then turn around and try the same process in another direction. Select an object near you and experiment with it. How many interesting compositions can you produce with a single object? Can you make an interesting composition out of absolutely anything, or do only certain kinds of things work well?



*Student photograph by Han June Bae.*

This exercise is, in a sense, a photographer’s “warm-up” exercise. Its purpose is to loosen up your photographic “muscles” before you actually go out to shoot photographs. By exercising with just a frame, you may find that you notice things that you might miss with all the complications of a real camera. This is likely to be true whether you’ve already used a camera for years, or are just getting started. It’s a good exercise to come back to at regular intervals, just to “freshen up” your eye—so keep the template handy and use it often.

## EXERCISE

### *Cropping*

This exercise begins much like the previous one. First, locate the "Cropping L's" template at the back of this book. Trace it, dry-mount it onto mat board and cut out the L's. (They are called L's because they're shaped like L's.)

Place the L's on top of the photograph on this page. See if you can find a better or at least different composition within that photograph by adjusting the L's.

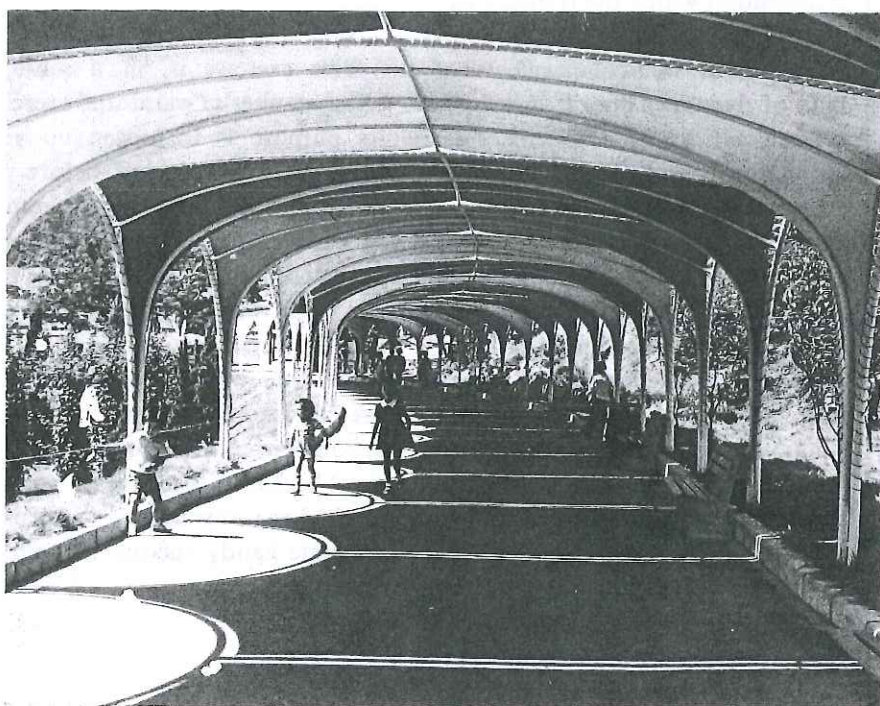
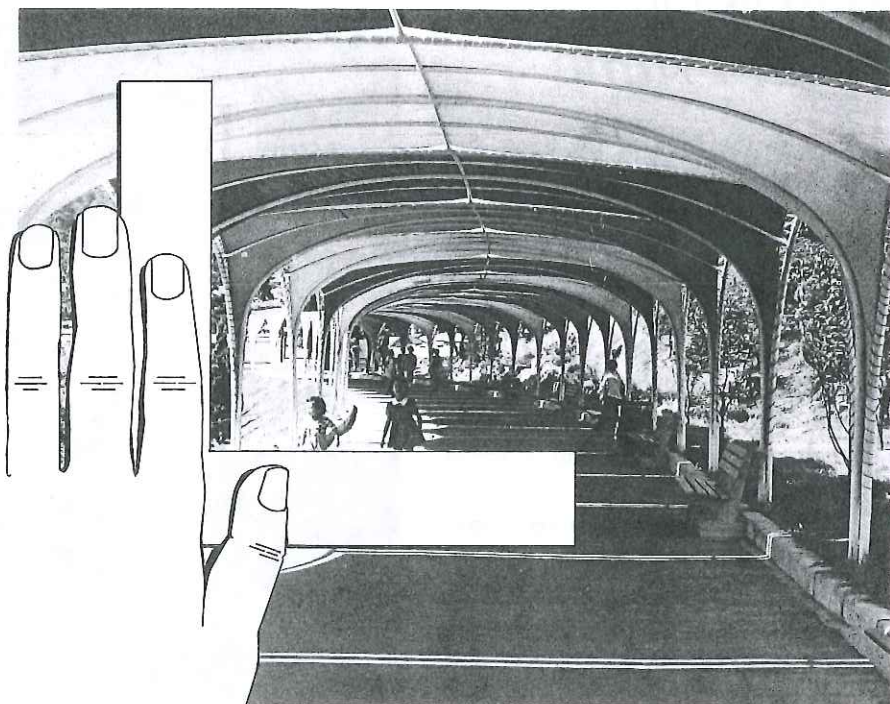
Try cropping in on one small detail. Try trimming out any unnecessary details or background. Try shifting the balance to one side, up or down. See how many good photographs you can find in this one.

Then turn to any other photograph in the book (the larger the better) and try the same thing. Continue experimenting with a variety of photographs.

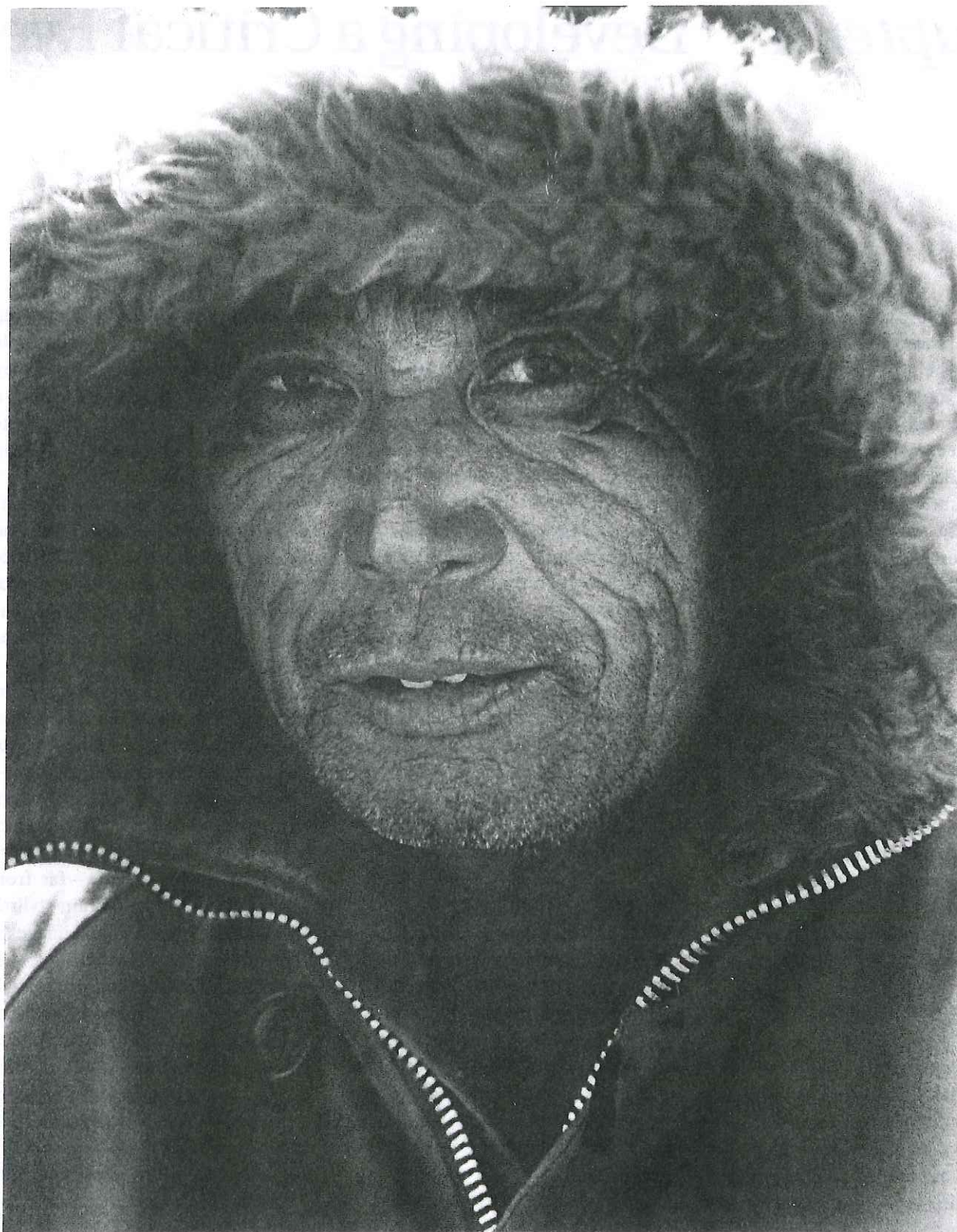
Try working with a partner, taking turns cropping the same photograph.

Is there only one good composition within each photograph? Is there one best composition in each? Does everyone tend to agree on which is best?

Keep your cropping L's handy, and use them often to evaluate compositions. Try using them during critique sessions (see the next section) to show the class how you would crop a photograph differently. Locate or obtain some magazines with a lot of large photographs (Life, National Geographic, Smithsonian, fashion magazines, etc.) and see how many of the photographs you can improve by cropping.



*Student photograph by Frank Hall.*



*Student photograph by Jay Le Claire.*