

Before you begin doing something, it is generally helpful to establish some goals. If you have some idea of where you're headed—or where you *should* be headed—you're likely to arrive more quickly. You'll also be able to measure your progress more accurately.

The best way to start setting your own photographic goals is to critique the work of other photographers. Once you begin producing your own photographs, you'll progress more rapidly if you let others critique your work as well. When a photograph is critiqued, all the various elements of it—good, bad or indifferent—are evaluated. Critiquing is *not* the same as criticizing, which only involves pointing out flaws. In a true critique, positive and negative comments are balanced. This is an essential skill that every photographer must develop.

CRITIQUE SESSIONS

The critique session—or “crit,” as it is popularly called—is one of the most valuable tools for developing skill as a photographer. In simple terms, a crit involves a group of people looking carefully at a selection of photographs, such as those you will be producing for the exercises in this book, and analyzing or judging them.

Though a crit session does usually involve ranking the photographs, its primary purpose is group analysis.

There are three basic questions to ask yourself about each photograph you critique: What is good about it? What is not good? How could it be better? The primary goal is to train your eye—to learn to see clearly as a photographer, when looking at others' photographs and when taking your own.

You'll probably find that it's a bit less threatening to critique someone else's work, rather than your own. You won't be so close to it and, therefore, will be able to spot its strengths and weaknesses more objectively. This is one benefit of a group crit. Another benefit is that you can learn from each other's comments.

EVALUATING A PRINT

Take a look at the photograph to the left which we will use as an “example photograph” for the next few pages. Like most of the photographs in this book, it was taken by a student. Ask yourself the three questions mentioned above: What's good about it? What's not good? What could be better?

As you ask these questions, a fourth one may come to mind: Where do you start?

Most people, when asked to judge

a photograph, will start by saying whether they like it or not. People tend to like a photograph when they like what's in it, and to dislike a photograph when they don't like what's in it. And many will stop there.

Your first goal, as a photographer, is to move beyond your own likes and dislikes; to identify the technical, objective factors that define a photograph and to evaluate them. The essential distinction here is between **style** and **standards**.

Style is largely a personal matter. In time, every photographer develops an individual style, a unique way of seeing things and expressing them—just as a singer or a writer develops an individual “voice.” This does not mean that all of that photographer's work will look the same—far from it—but there will be certain stylistic themes that connect all the images in that photographer's portfolio.

Similarly, each photograph has a style of its own, a mood or an interpretation of the subject. In the best photographs, that style is consistent—everything in the photograph contributes to the overall impact. The result is a single clear image, rather than a collection of random details.

Liking or disliking that style is a matter of opinion—a subjective judgment. It has very little to do with whether the photograph is skillfully

produced. Skill is the key ingredient of standards, and standards can be judged objectively. They are, by and large, matters of fact, not opinion.

The place to start in your critique is to determine the facts about a photo. Once you've done this, you have a good basis for determining your opinions about it.

Four basic factors determine a photograph's standards: **value**, **clarity**, **composition** and **presentation**. Ideally, a photograph will score well on each of these factors, but one or another factor may be so well represented—or the image so striking—that the photograph will be successful as a whole even if one (or more) of the other factors is lacking.

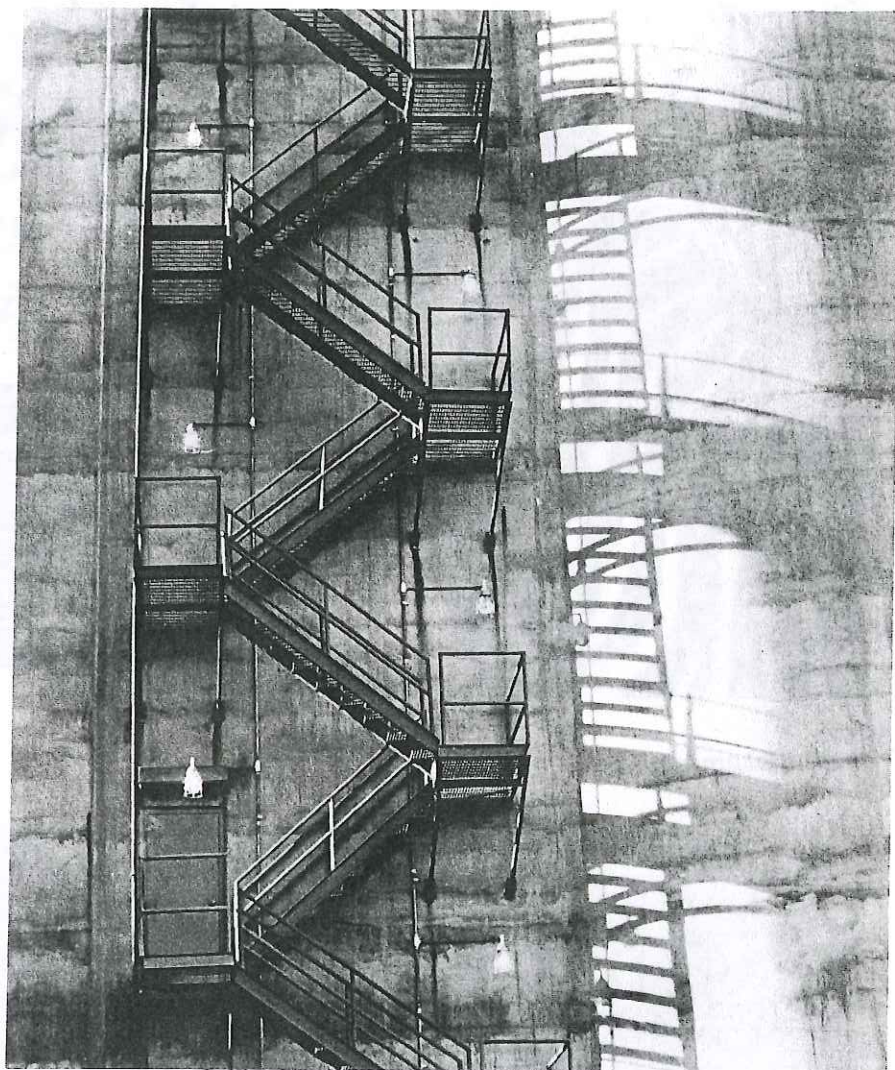
Value

Value, in a photograph, concerns light—not price. Specifically, it refers to the **range** of light in the photograph: from black through shades of gray to white.

As a general rule, the more **contrast** a photograph has—or the wider the range between its darkest and lightest elements—the greater its visual impact will be. (As with any rules, there are exceptions; a photograph that is all grays, with no whites or blacks, can be very effective. But, in general, it's good to aim for contrast.)

If, however, everything in a photograph is either black or white, with no grays, it may have a lot of impact, but will generally lack interest. Once the eye has taken in the bold image, there is not much reason to keep looking. So, in addition to a good balance of black and white, it's desirable to have a range of grays to define shapes and provide shading.

When evaluating a photograph's value, it's important to distinguish



A photograph of normal value contains black blacks, white whites and a variety of grays. (Student photograph.)

between good and bad grays. The former are consistent and clear; the latter are best described as “muddy.” Muddy grays may result from under-exposing when shooting, under-developing the film, using an incorrect paper grade, over-exposing the print or removing it from the developer too soon.

Take another look at the “example photograph.” Evaluate its values. You'll probably notice right away that this is an exception to the rule

about contrast. There is not much range between the photograph's lightest and darkest elements, yet the man's face is so expressive that the photograph works. If you look closely, you'll also notice that the one area with good contrast is the eyes—and the eyes are what grab your attention when you look at the photograph. So, while value in the overall image is limited, it is strong at the most critical point—the eyes. In fact, it is largely because the rest of the



Student photograph.

A high contrast photograph contains predominantly blacks and whites, with few grays in between. (Student photograph by Jon Portis.)

image is so subdued that the eyes are so penetrating.

Improving Value

When you have determined that the value of a photograph is weak, the next question is: How could it be better?

Assuming the subject was reasonably contrasty to begin with, there are many possible causes for poor value. The most common is incorrect exposure when taking the photograph. Too little light will result in a dark, "muddy" print. Too much will cause highlights (white areas) to be "washed-out" or "burned out"—so white that no details are visible in them. (The upper corners of the "example photograph" are an example of this—though, again, the image works despite this flaw.)

How the film is processed will also affect its values. The longer the film stays in the developer, the more contrasty it gets. Gray areas continue developing, getting blacker and blacker on the negative and, therefore, lighter and lighter on the print. If the film is removed from the developer too soon, its contrast will be low; the resulting prints will be weak and gray. Special chemicals are available with which you can re-develop film to increase or reduce the contrast.

Additionally, the kind of paper used to make the print has considerable effect on its contrast. Paper grades, which range from low to high contrast (generally numbered 1 through 5) allow considerable oppor-



A low-contrast or "monotone" photograph has a very narrow range of value. And notice how this one is dominated by mid-range grays and contains virtually no white or black. (Student photograph by Charles Stuart Kennedy III.)

Another "rule breaker"—this time without any real whites and few blacks. Notice how the grays are crisp and varied—not muddy. (Student photograph by Michele Dearing.)

tunity to adjust the contrast up or down when making a print.

Other causes include paper that is accidentally exposed to the light, exhausted chemicals and improper developing of the print. Even slight amounts of light leaking into a darkroom can "fog" the paper, resulting in an overall gray tone. Chemicals that have been over-used or left out too long can become exhausted (or weak), resulting in unpredictable results. Too much or too little exposure of the paper under the enlarger and too long or too short a developing time will also distort the values of the final print. In all these cases, careful and consistent darkroom habits are the cure.

Clarity

The second key factor is clarity. The primary key to clarity is focus—not just whether or not the photograph is in focus, but whether it is correctly focused. There is a difference.

In a correctly focused photograph, a subject may be either sharp or soft. With sharp focus, all edges are very clearly defined. With soft focus, the edges blur a bit. When something is out of focus, the edges blur more than they should. Here's another case in which personal style varies considerably. For some photographers, any blurring at all is unacceptable; others deliberately shoot with extremely soft focus to achieve a particular effect.

Often, the best way to treat an image is to choose some elements that



will be sharp, leaving others in softer focus so they are less distracting. This helps direct the viewer's eye to the focal point of the photograph, and it also makes your photograph more closely resemble normal sight. (Test this yourself: look at an object close to you and notice how the background goes out of focus.)

So, the questions to ask are: What's in focus? What should be in focus? Generally it is the center of interest—what the photograph is about—that should be in focus.

Then look at what is not in focus. Why is it not?

Soft focus throughout a photograph may be effective, especially in portraits (to obscure blemishes or enhance the mood) or in landscapes (to achieve a dreamy effect). Special filters are available for this purpose, which work better than shooting out of focus.

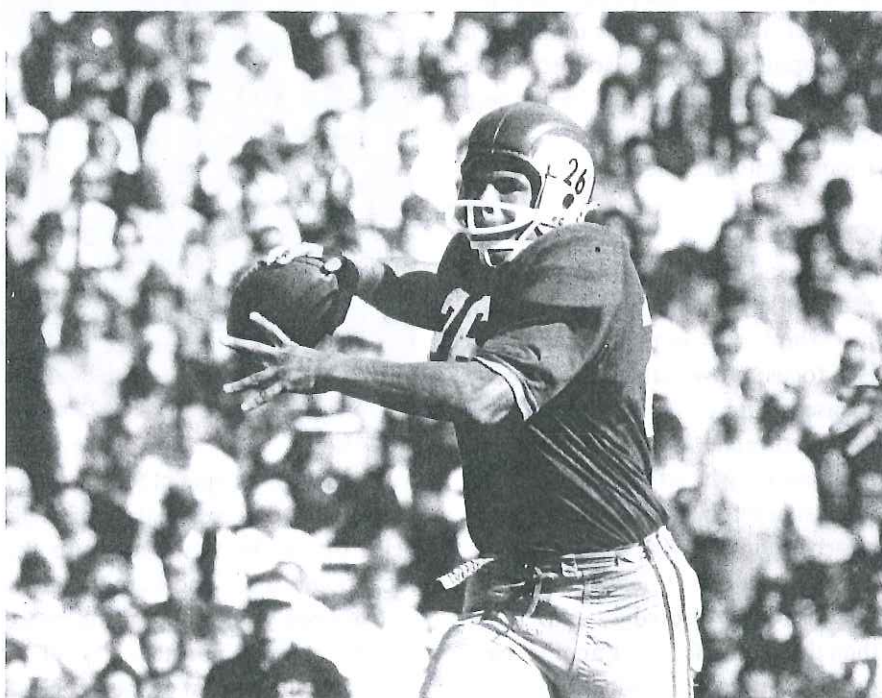
In addition to appropriate focus, clarity depends on an appropriate shutter speed and an appropriate degree of contrast between the sub-

"What to leave in, what to leave out . . ." is the critical decision regarding focus. Notice that the helicopter in the background is just clear enough to be recognizable. This helps to keep our attention focused on the man in the foreground. (Student photograph by Trevor Bredenkamp.)

ject and background. If the shutter speed is too slow, the subject will be blurred—either because it moved or because the photographer did. Blurs can be effective . . . if they are done on purpose. If the shutter speed is too fast, it may reduce the photograph's impact. For example, a race car that should look like it's zipping past may instead look like it's standing still.

The relation between the subject and background in a photograph has something to do with light and value, with line and with composition. Common mistakes include photographing a dark subject against a dark background (causing the subject to vanish mysteriously), composing a photograph so trees are growing out of the subject's head, and placing a complex subject in front of a complex background (causing another vanishing act).

Returning to the "example photograph," the lines on the face, the mouth and, especially, the eyes are quite sharp. This reinforces their impact. The fur hood, zipper and button of the jacket are softer. They are clear enough to provide a **context**, or setting, for the face, but not so sharp as to compete with it for the viewer's attention. The nose is also a little soft, adding depth to the face. The shutter speed was fast enough to prevent any blurring, and the white background (what there is of it) sets the whole figure off nicely.



Selective focus works again in this photo, in which the crowd is reduced to a suggestive blur—keeping our eyes on the quarterback. (Student photograph by Jerry Wisler.)



Placing everything in sharp focus helps to accentuate shapes and patterns, as well as giving the viewer's eye "permission" to wander about the composition. (Student photograph by Lena Aiken.)

Occasionally—very occasionally—a poorly focused photograph can work just fine . . . even better than if it were focused "correctly."

Notice how the soft focus on this woman affects the photograph's mood and meaning. What does the photograph seem to be about? What feelings does it convey to you? (Student photograph by Jonathan Serenius.)





Wide depth of field can provide the viewer's eye with plenty of entertainment after a photograph's initial impact (in this case, the visual joke of the balloon) has worn off. How does this photograph make use of the 9-zone grid? Of weighting? Of value? (Student photograph by David Chmielewski.)

always be in focus . . . but it may not be in the frame of the camera. The trick is to focus more carefully as you use larger apertures. After focusing, do not move forward or backward. When the subject is relatively close and the depth of field is very shallow, this can be crucial. (Depth of field will be covered in Chapter 9.)

A third cause of poor clarity concerns the other half of the shutter-aperture equation: As the shutter speed decreases, the chances of blurring a picture increase. This may be caused by a subject that moves, or by "camera shake," particularly in low-light situations.

You have little control over the movement of a subject (other than asking it to sit still), but you can control camera shake. Try pressing the camera tight against your forehead and cheekbone, holding your breath while you shoot, or bracing yourself against a wall—or all three at once. Another good technique is to prop your elbows on a solid surface or, in a pinch, on your knees.

You will soon learn how slow a shutter speed you can safely use, which (as we'll discuss in Chapter 10) will vary according to the length of the lens you're using. For photographs that require a lower speed, use a tripod (see Appendix 4).

In addition, a print may be fuzzy because the enlarger was incorrectly

Improving Clarity

There are, again, a number of causes for poor clarity. Focus is the most common problem. It is generally caused by a failure to set the correct distance on the focusing ring. A less obvious, and slightly less common, cause is using too large an aperture.

As the available light decreases, a

photographer can make up for this lack of light in two ways (assuming no flash is being used). The shutter speed can be decreased, or the aperture can be increased. As the aperture is increased—as the lens opening gets larger—the **depth of field**, or range of distance that will be in focus at any time, decreases. Something will

focused. Use a focusing aid (see Appendix 1) to correct this. If the problem persists, have your eyes and your lens checked. Your eyesight may be poor or your lens may be either faulty or dirty.

Presentation

The third factor to look for is the care and skill with which the final print has been produced. In addition to the contrast and focus already mentioned, one telltale indication of a print's quality (and, therefore, of the photographer's commitment to standards) is how clean it is. Look for white flecks, variously known as satellites, glitches, scuzz, hickies or glop—stuff on the negative that shouldn't be there. Other categories include fingerprints on the negative or print (keep your fingers out of the chemicals!), scratches, and dark circles caused by poor agitation when developing the film. In general, following instructions carefully, using anti-static brushes and other cleaning tools and keeping the darkroom as dust-free as possible will do the trick. It is possible to produce flawless prints, though at first it may not seem to be.

Other aspects of presentation to look for include neatly trimmed edges (use a good sharp cutter), squared corners and proper adhesion to the mat board.

Composition

You already know something about composition. Of the four basic factors of "standards," it is the trickiest to define, because it is the closest to "style." There are, however, a number of aspects of composition that you can evaluate objectively. We'll review them quickly to refresh your memory.



Where is the point of interest in this photograph? Is it cropped effectively? Is there wasted space in it? What would happen to the mood and impact of the photograph if it were cropped more tightly? Student photograph.

• Point of Interest

First and foremost, is there a **point of interest**? Does it stand out or is it lost in the surrounding confusion? With rare exceptions (and there are always exceptions), a photograph should have one clear point of interest—a single dominant element. Generally, the point of interest should be near the middle of the frame, though not usually right at the center.

• Cropping

Once you've identified the structure of the photograph, consider its **cropping**, or the way it is framed. Is it "tight"—is the frame filled with important elements, or is there wasted space? Blank areas, or **negative space**, can enhance a photograph's impact, but should interact with the central image in some way or the photograph will instead have less impact.

As a general rule, it is good to keep the "idea" of the photograph "clean"

and simple. The frame should narrow in on what's important, leaving out unnecessary details.

What about the overall **balance** of the composition? Is it top-heavy, lopsided, boring? A composition may be balanced in two ways: **static** or **dynamic**.

Static balance just sits there, but that can be quite effective. The most common way of achieving static balance is to **weight** the composition, or concentrate its point of interest, near the center.

Dynamic balance suggests movement. Generally, this is achieved by weighting the composition away from the center, toward one side or the other, or toward the corners.

• Lines

Lines and curves within a composition often have a tremendous effect on its impact. Sometimes this will be obvious, as in a photograph with a crisscross pattern in the background. Often, however, you'll need to look

more closely to locate the straight and curved lines.

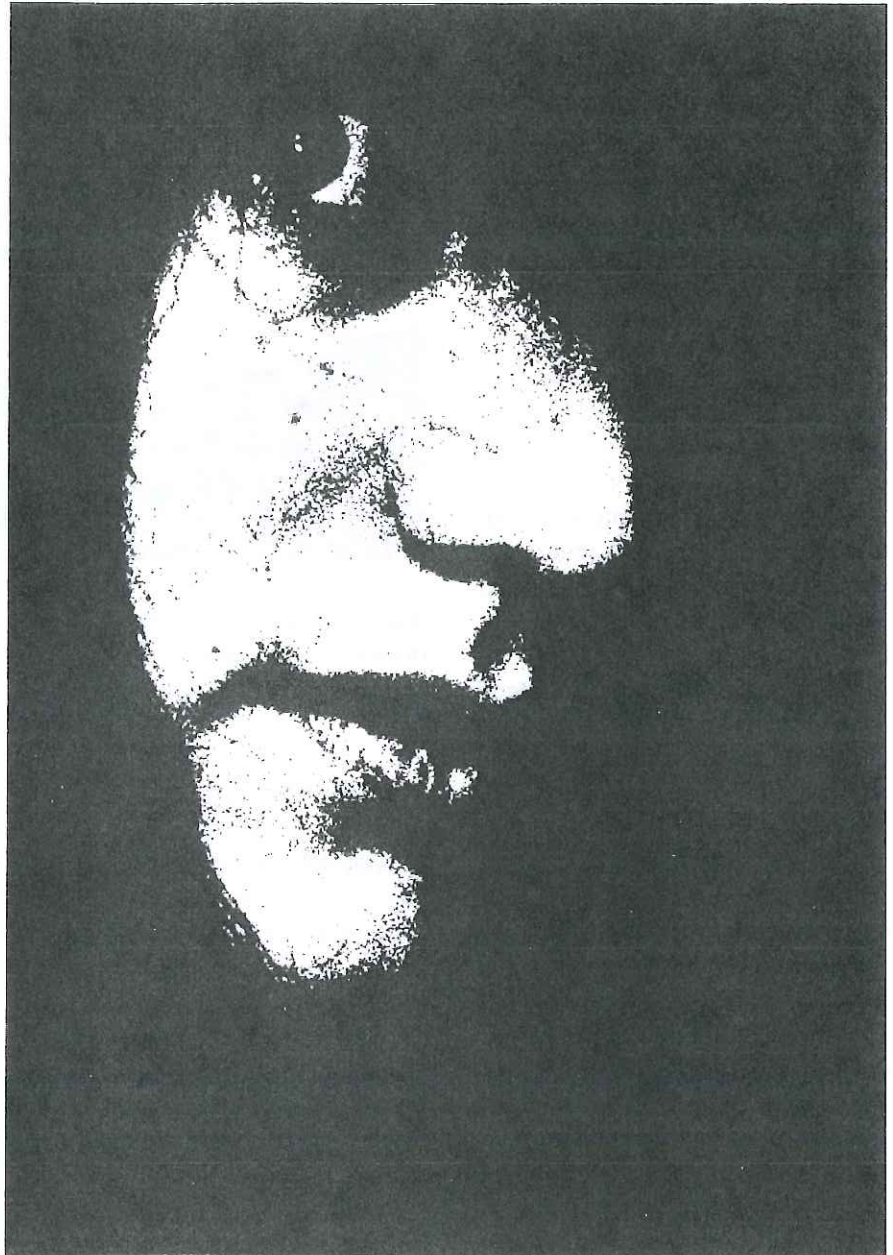
Even a single line can “pull” or “point,” drawing the viewer’s eye toward or away from the point of interest, increasing or reducing the photograph’s drama.

Examine the lines of the “example photograph.” Look for curves: the hood, the lines on the man’s face, the circles under his eyes, the button, the slope of the right shoulder. All these add to the visual impact of the composition, creating a complex pattern which, in turn, creates an appealing “visual tension” in contrast to the eyes. In addition, the curves of the zipper help to anchor the composition, giving it a base and opening up into the face.

Aesthetics

Finally, we come to “style”—that elusive something that makes the difference between a skillful photograph and genuine art. Often, a photograph will have all the right elements but still not work. Sometimes, however, a photograph will lack many critically important elements, yet work very well. And, of course, all the right elements may combine to achieve an effect that is greater than the sum of its parts. Something special happens, a certain spark ignites, and the result is . . . magic.

It’s difficult to pinpoint what makes this difference, but it is precisely what all photographers strive to achieve. As you progress, you’ll become increasingly aware of which photographs have that something, and which don’t, and why. And you’ll begin to make it happen in your own photographs. A very good way to start, probably the only way, is to master the techniques of producing consistently good photo-



How does the presentation of this photograph (using lith film to produce a high-contrast print) affect its impact? Do you think it probably improves the photograph? Is the presentation appropriate? Student photograph by Christopher Moiles.

graphs, and to train your eye to recognize the great ones when they come along. Eventually, they will.

EXERCISE

Sample Crit



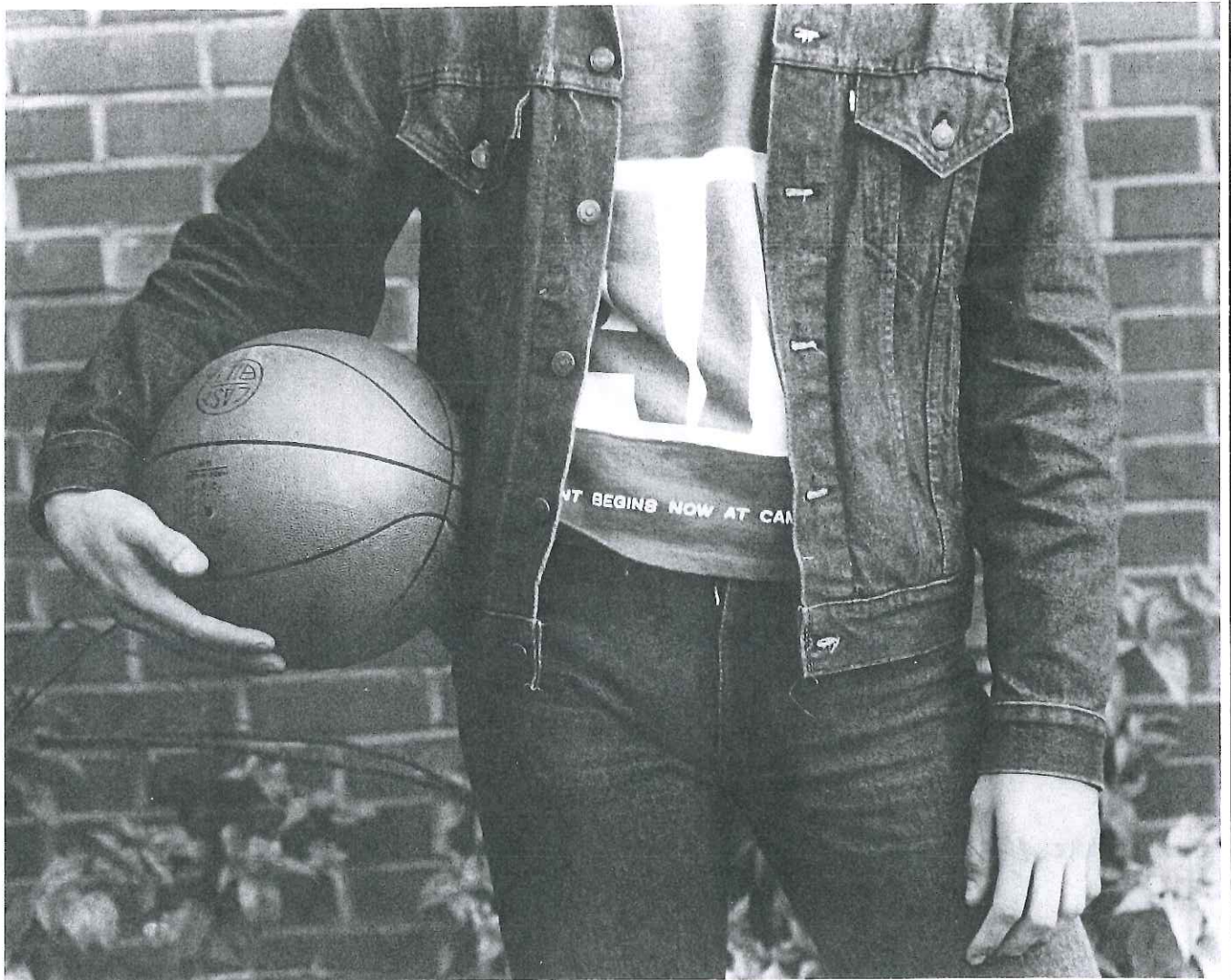
Describe the dynamics of this photograph. What elements contribute to them? Assess the value of the photograph. The composition (9-zone grid anyone?). How does it make you feel? What sort of person do you suppose the subject is? What sort of person do you suppose the photographer is? (Student photograph by Alison Sheehy.)

Now it's your turn. Evaluate each of the photographs on the following pages, applying the criteria we've discussed in this chapter: value, clarity and composition. (Presentation is a bit hard to apply to photographs in a book.) Notice the use of negative space in each photograph. Can the cropping be improved? Is the primary subject well placed on the nine-zone grid? Is the photograph well balanced? How about its dynamics? Does it work?

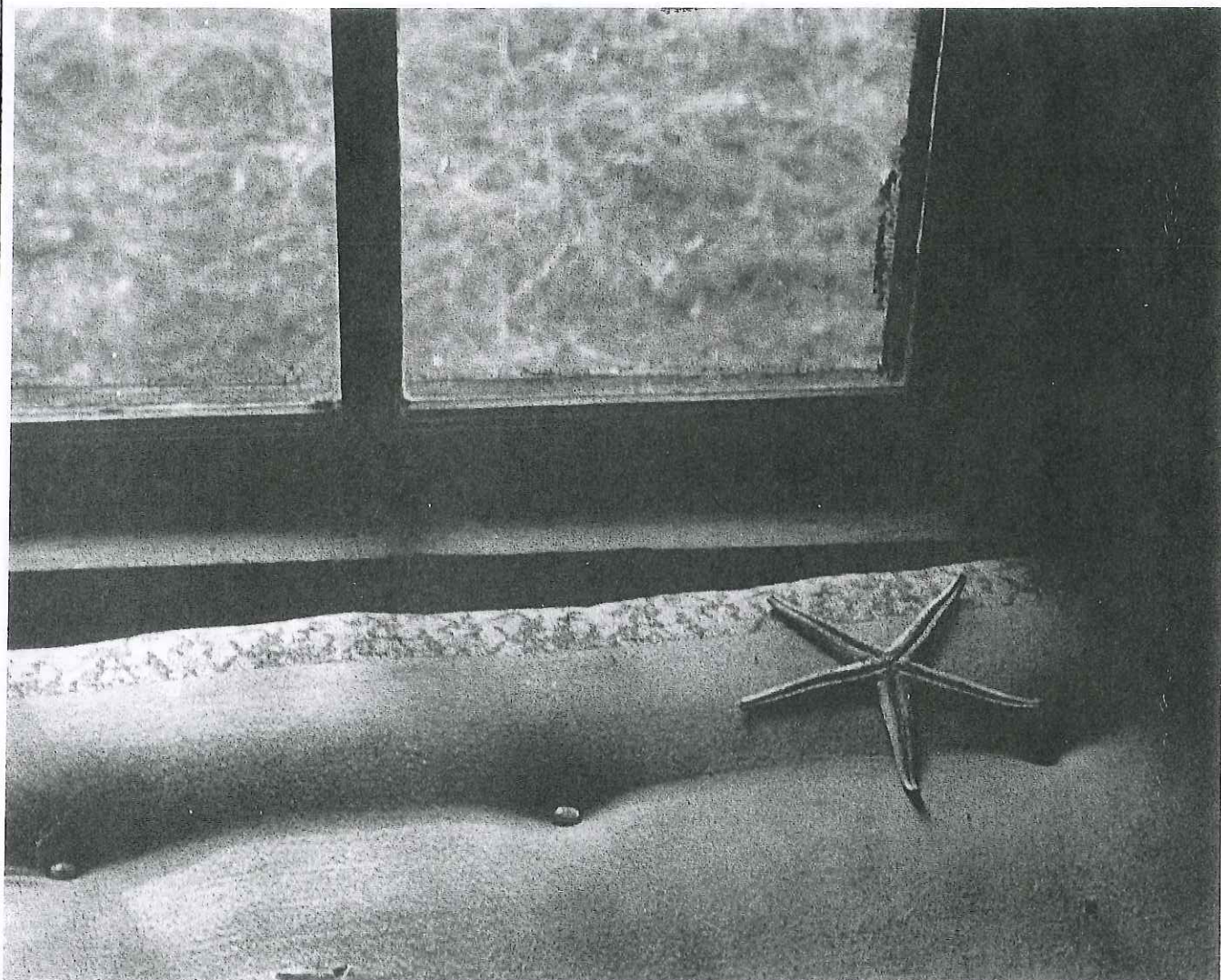
As you explore these and other

questions, try to determine why each element of the photograph does or doesn't work. Ask yourself how you might improve each element. Would the photograph be equally or more effective if it were shot from a different angle? What changes in lighting might increase the photograph's impact? In some cases you're likely to see a number of possible alternatives or improvements. In others you may decide that the photograph is close to an ideal treatment of its subject.

Take some notes as you evaluate each photograph. Jot down what you like about each photograph and what you think could be improved: "Good value range and mood; negative space could be enhanced by cropping in closer to face"; etc. Discuss your observations to see how others respond to the same photographs. Keep your notes on file and check them again in a few months to see if your perceptions change.



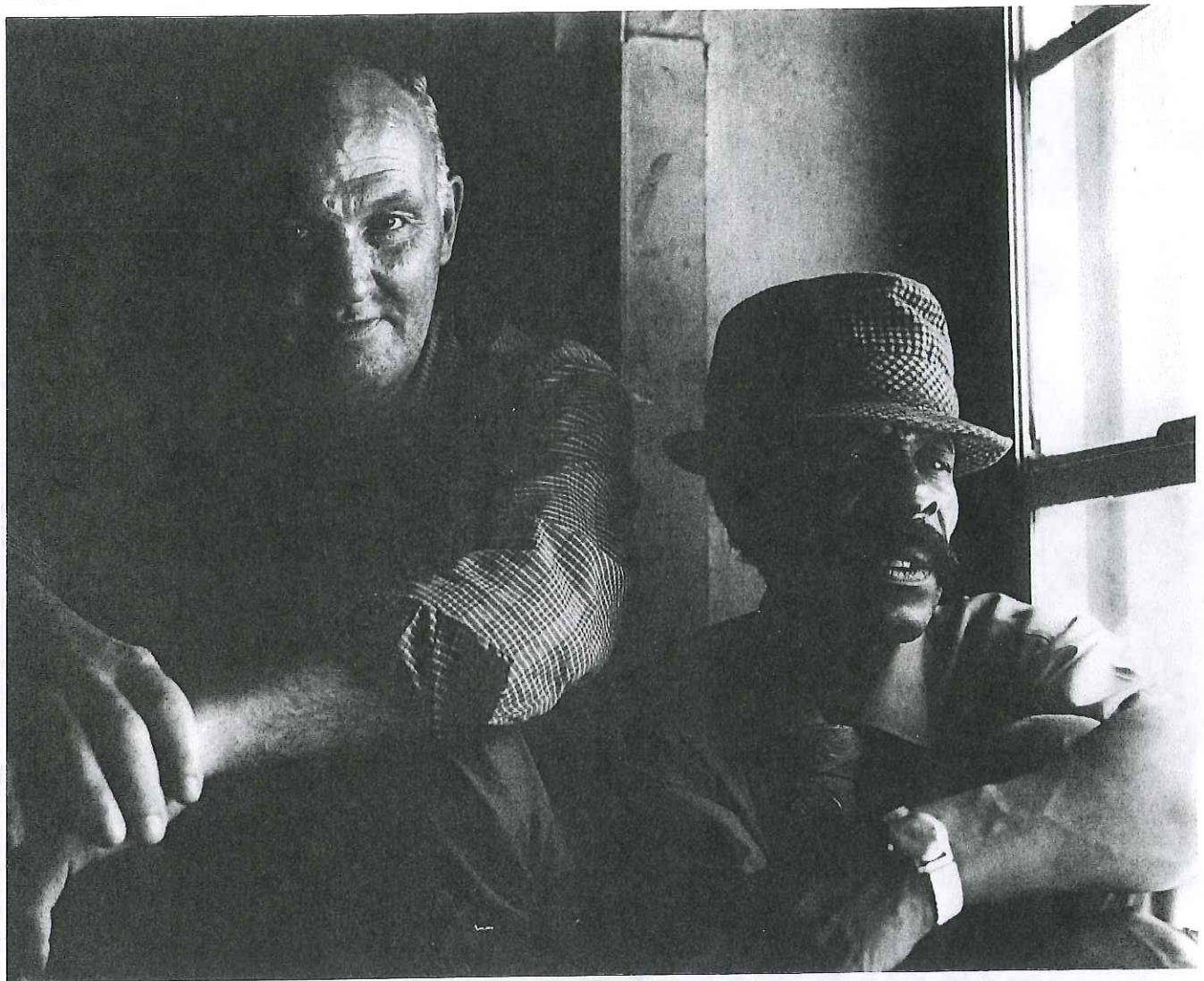
How does this photograph fit on the 9-zone grid? How would you rate its value? What about the cropping (i.e. the missing head)? Is it annoying? What, if anything, does the photograph say to you? What sort of person do you suppose the subject is? (Student photograph by Jeff Frye.)



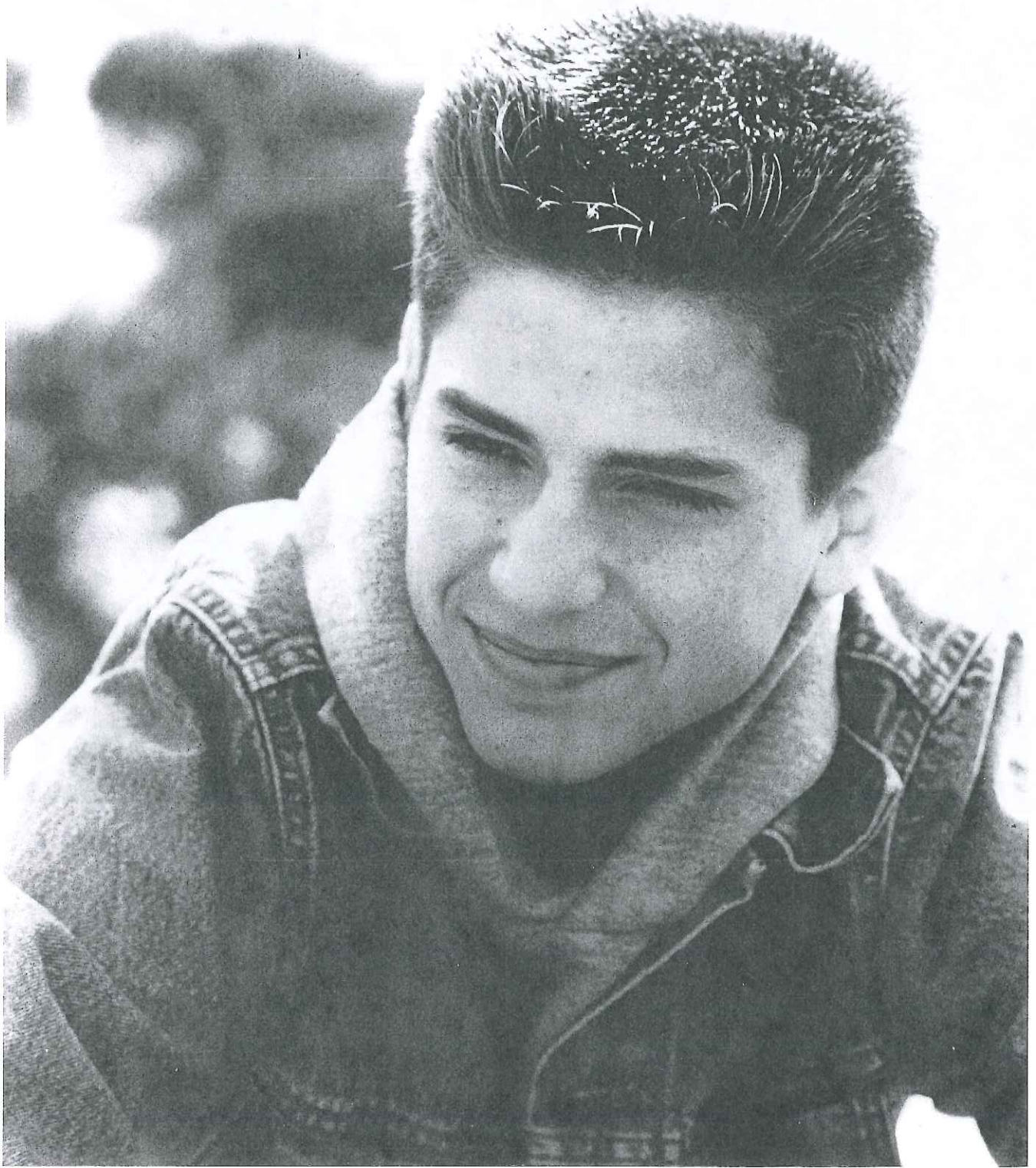
The value of this photograph is restricted to black and a very narrow range of grays. Is it appropriate and effective? How is the composition structured? Do you suppose the starfish was found where it is or placed there by the photographer? Does it matter to you? What elements do you consider most important in it? How does the photograph make you feel? What thoughts or memories does it provoke? (Student photograph by Amy Christine Zorovich.)



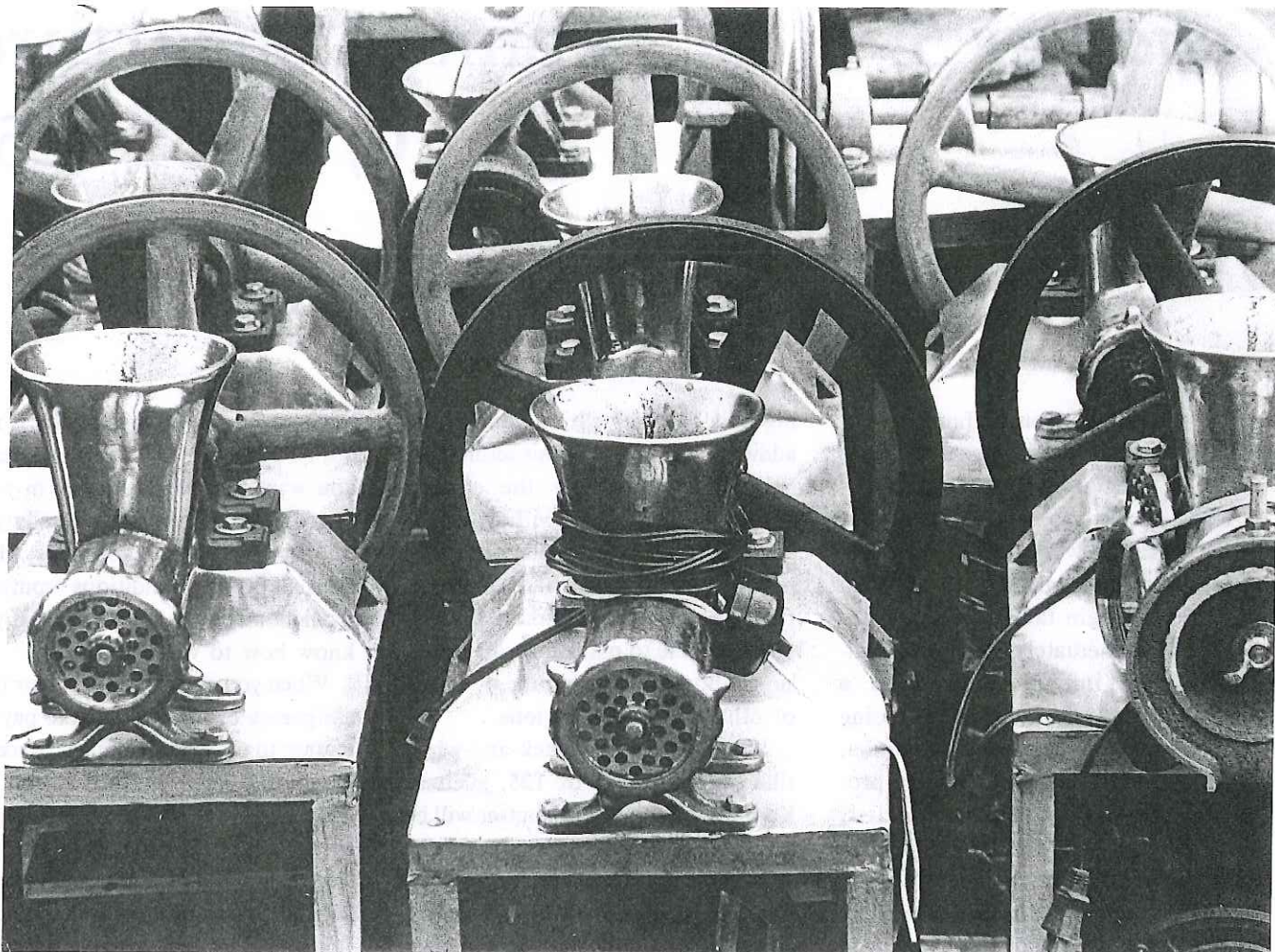
Does this photograph have any composition? (Look carefully and remember the grid.) What do you think of it? How about its values? Its focus? What, if anything, is it about? (Student photograph by Jon Portis.)



How would you evaluate this photograph? (Student photograph.)



How would you evaluate this one? (Student photograph by Chong Street.)



Used correctly, the "point of departure" setting will produce consistently good results in bright sunlight. (Student photograph.)