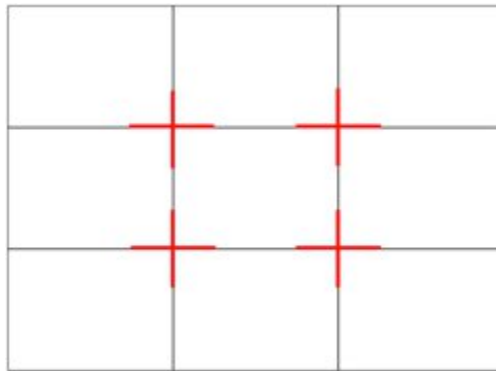


Topic 86

Rule of Thirds

The rule of thirds is a powerful compositional technique for making photos more interesting and dynamic. It's also perhaps one of the most well-known. The basic principle behind the rule of thirds is to imagine breaking an image down into thirds (both horizontally and vertically) so that you have 9 parts. As follows.



The rule of thirds is applied by aligning a subject with the guide lines and their intersection points, placing the horizon on the top or bottom line, or allowing linear features in the image to flow from section to section. The main reason for observing the rule of thirds is to discourage placement of the subject at the center, or prevent a horizon from appearing to divide the picture in half. Michael Ryan and Melissa Lenos, authors of the book *An Introduction to Film Analysis: Technique and Meaning in Narrative Film* state that the use of rule of thirds is "favored by cinematographers in their effort to design balanced and unified images" (page 40).

When filming or photographing people, it is common to line the body up to a vertical line and the person's eyes to a horizontal line. If filming a moving subject, the same pattern is often followed, with the majority of the extra room being in front of the person (the way they are

moving). Likewise, when photographing a still subject who is not directly facing the camera, the majority of the extra room should be in front of the subject with the vertical line running through their perceived center of mass.

The rule of thirds was first written down by John Thomas Smith in 1797. In his book *Remarks on Rural Scenery*, Smith quotes a 1783 work by Sir Joshua Reynolds, in which Reynolds discusses, in un-quantified terms, the balance of dark and light in a painting. Smith then continues with an expansion on the idea, naming it the "Rule of thirds".

Writing in 1845, in his book *Chromatics*, George Field notes (perhaps erroneously) that Sir Joshua Reynolds gives the ratio 2:1 as a rule for the proportion of warm to cold colors in a painting, and attributes to Smith the expansion of that rule to all proportions in painting.

Smith's conception of the rule is meant to apply more generally than the version commonly explained today, as he recommends it not just for dividing the frame, but also for *all* division of straight lines, masses, or groups. On the other hand, he does not discuss the now-common idea that intersections of the third-lines of the frame are particularly strong or interesting for composition.

Using the Rule of Thirds comes naturally to some photographers but for many of us takes a little time and practice for it to become second nature.

In learning how to use the rule of thirds (and then to break it) the most important questions to be asking of yourself are:

- What are the points of interest in this shot?
- Where am I intentionally placing them?

Once again – remember that breaking the rule can result in some striking shots – so once you've learnt it experiment with purposely breaking it to see what you discover.

Lastly – keep the rule of thirds in mind as you edit your photos later on. Post production editing tools today have good tools for cropping and reframing images so that they fit within the rules. Experiment with some of your old shots to see what impact it might have on your photos.