

Photographing for Pittsburgh Indymedia

Pittsburgh Indymedia Photo Workshop

Composition

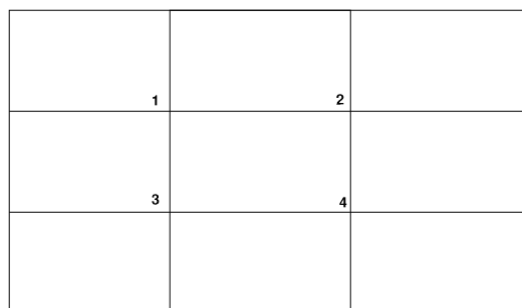
Photographing for Indymedia is different from taking casual snapshots of your friends, photographing as an artwork, and even traditional news photography. But all good photography has one common element -- composition. Digital cameras and even most consumer-level point and shoot traditional film cameras take most of the guesswork out of things like the correct exposure, color balance, and other technical elements of photography. But composition is the one thing that the camera cannot do for you.

What is composition?

Composition simply means the way that the subject of interest is framed within the camera's viewfinder. Often the same, interesting subject can be completely transformed by altering the composition. This is especially important in protest photography, because the subjects will often look very similar from protest to protest. Finding a good composition just means taking time to think about how the people and background are lined up, and taking the time to get the most interesting shot. Don't just point and shoot -- think about what your photograph will look like later!

One useful shortcut for finding an interesting composition that artists have been using for centuries is the **rule of thirds**

Rule of thirds



The rule of thirds simply divides the view through the lens into three vertical and three horizontal sections, as in the illustration above, and can be applied to both portrait and landscape images. You can use the rule of thirds in three ways:

- Place important subjects at one of the four numbered intersections

- Place secondary subjects along one of the four lines that divide the space. It can also make a composition more interesting to diagonally oppose two secondary subjects.

- Place background elements along the four lines as well. For example, a composition that has the horizon at the first horizontal line will be very different than one that puts the

horizon at the second line.

The rule of thirds is like any rule -- you can take it or leave it. It can also be difficult to keep track of in the middle of an active event. But photographers have found that it can be a very helpful start to composing a good photograph., and being aware of it can't hurt your photographs.

Make use of the whole frame

Making sure that your subject fills the frame can really help create a photograph that works. Before you take that photograph, pause and look through the lens. Is there a lot of wasted space? If so, that extra space will only distract your subject. The best way to fill the frame is to move in closer, rather than zoom in. This gives you more flexibility, as well as making it less likely that the picture will be blurry.

Watch out for "stuff"

Look out for distracting "stuff" in your composition and try to frame around it. Maybe it's someone's elbow, or a telephone pole, or the edge of a car. Sometimes you can't get around that stuff: just grin and bear it.



Sometimes you can make use of the surrounding architecture or natural background to frame an interesting composition. In the picture above, the photographer has framed the march between the heads of two observers. What do you like about this composition? What doesn't work? What special challenges might have framing this photograph posed?

Discussion Point

Look at the accompanying images of different events take from the Indymedia newswire.
Which images do you like? Why?

Which images don't you like? Why?

Now look at the second set of images.

Practice cropping the images. How does framing the images differently change them?
Did framing a photograph differently turn a photograph that you didn't like into one that you do?

Now try applying the rule of thirds, both to the images before you cropped them, and images that you have cropped. How closely do the images line up to the rule of thirds?
Do the images that match the rule of thirds most closely match what you consider a "good" photograph?

Basics of Interesting Protest Photography

As a photographer for Indymedia, you will spend a lot of your time photographing rallies and marches. Occasionally, you will get to photograph performance art. Hopefully that won't be all that you photograph, but it is certainly for these events that the most photographs are taken. So you should have plenty of time to perfect your technique. But still, if you look at coverage of any recent event, you probably notice that a lot of the photographs look the same. How can you make your photographs look more interesting?

Tell a story with your photographs



Both of the photographs above are interesting because they tell a story. Note how both photographs make use of depth to allow us to experience the story gradually. Different things are going on in the foreground, mid-ground, and background of each. Also, note how the framing of the photographs is used to emphasize the central subject in each. In both of these photos, the photos were carefully cropped after the original photo was taken. The ability to crop an image later is invaluable when the subject you are photographing is quickly changing and you want to get your photo fast.

Discussion points

What story do these photographs tell? How might you tell the story differently?

How is telling a story different with a photograph than telling a story with words?

Now take a look at the accompanying set of images. What stories do these photographs tell?

Photographing marches

If you're photographing a march, you are probably marching along with the marchers. Think about what will be interesting to people who look at your photographs later. The easy thing is to take a bunch of photographs of the heads of the people in front of you. While this perspective may put the viewer "right in the march," it also gets boring quickly.

Take pictures of faces -- not the back of heads.

This means getting out in front of the marchers. Everyone's moving along here, so don't be embarrassed or feel rude about running ahead of the march and stopping for a second to line up your shot. Make the extra effort to do this, even if the march is tightly packed or moving quickly.

Vary your composition.

Take photographs of the marchers from different heights. Don't be afraid to crouch down or hold the camera higher or lower than your head to get a more interesting photo. It's amazing how much of a difference this can make.

Scout out good vantage points ahead of time

If you suspect that the march is going to pass a certain area, take a risk and get there a little early to find a good spot to take your photograph from

Vary your perspective

You will want to take some photographs of the march that show it in its entirety, if nothing else to stop the corporate press from playing numbers games. To do this, you will need to get high up. Here is where scouting out ahead of time is useful. These shots also often look the same, so careful attention paid to composition will pay off.

Photographing Rallies and Crowds

Making a photograph of a rally interesting is tough work. But here are some tips to keep in mind.

Photograph faces, not backs.

This is even more important for rallies than it is for marches. Photographs of people standing around are not inherently interesting, and they become less so when you can't see their faces.

Don't be afraid to be a little obnoxious

You know that photographer you always hate, who gets up next to the speakers on the platform and clicks away? Well, she knows where the good photograph is going to be. Try to be less obnoxious than her, but don't be afraid to climb up to weird spots to get an interesting photo. Just be careful not to be too distracting or to block the view of too many people.

Only get a few wide shots

It is useful to get some photos that show the size of the crowd, but to get an interesting photograph, you might need to get closer. Find that one unusual picture -- maybe it's that mask-clad protester next to the older woman with her grandchild, maybe it's a confrontation between protesters and counter-protesters, maybe it's just .

Photograph people, not signs

Sure, that's a clever sign. It's less interesting when you just see the hands of the person holding it though. You don't have to photograph the whole person, but try to incorporate your photographs of signs in a complete composition.

Discussion Point

Look through the accompanying photographs of rallies and marches. Which images do you like best? Why?

For the images that you don't like, how would you have changed where you were standing to make the picture more interesting?

Photography Etiquette

When you are photographing for Indymedia, you may be given trusted access to the protest. For one thing, you might be participating in the protest while you are photographing it. The temptation is to photograph everything and everyone indiscriminately, but remember that with that trusted access comes some responsibility for the people you are photographing.

Asking for consent

In a public setting, we do not have a reasonable expectation of privacy. Therefore, you will not violate any laws by photographing anyone. But you might be breaking rules of common courtesy if you a) *fail to ask for consent when photographing an individual* or b) *continue to photograph someone when they have asked you not to take their photograph*.

A simple rule of thumb is to ask for consent beforehand if you are taking someone's portrait and they are the main subject of the photo. If you are taking a photograph of a crowd, respect the wishes of someone who asks that you not take their photograph if they are part of the crowd.

Remember, people may have many reasons for not wanting to be photographed. Perhaps their photograph will be used against them later by the courts, even if they are not breaking the law, or perhaps they do not want their co-workers or families to know that they participated in a protest. Our interest in covering an event should not discourage protesters from participating.

Be careful in photographing (and captioning) events that may violate the law

We know that the police are at least occasional readers of Indymedia. Prosecutors have attempted to use posts on Indymedia as evidence in court. So think carefully about what and how you photograph someone when they might be breaking the law. When you post pictures of someone you know, think twice before attaching their names to the picture. They might not appreciate it down the road if you make things that much easier for the District Attorney's office.

Sometimes, you might choose to photograph something newsworthy even if you think that the people involved might be breaking the law. One way to respect people's wishes is to modify the pictures before posting by blurring out anything that makes the subject of the photograph identifiable. However, this is not necessarily a legally foolproof strategy. Your film or digital camera's memory card might be confiscated if you yourself are arrested in an illegal mass arrest, or you might be subpoenaed for the original file. So think twice before deciding to go ahead and take those pictures that you will have to alter before posting. It might be better just to never take them.

Getting in the way

While the most interesting photograph might be directly in front of that speaker, take a second to think about whether you are interfering with an event's purpose by blocking someone's view. Try to balance getting the best photograph with being polite. Conversely, don't be timid about being a little in the way, as long as you don't stop other people from participating.

Digital Photography Specific Tips

Always set your camera to use the least compression / highest quality level.

This is important because you can't be sure how you will want to use the photo later.

Even though compressed photos are fine for the web, they are not good for either print or video. How to set this varies from camera to camera: consult your camera's manual if you are unsure.

Use a higher resolution for capturing than you will eventually save it as

For the same reason that you don't want to compress your images, capture them at least one-to-two notches higher in resolution than you plan to save them. This gives you flexibility later on. A good guideline for photos you plan to publish on the web is to capture at a resolution no smaller than 1600x1200, even though you will probably not post an image that large.

Turn off flash for daylight photography; only turn it on at night

Low-end camera flashes usually don't look very good. They also may cause artifacts, if as in many cameras, they sit too close to smaller digital camera lens. So avoid using the flash unless you need it. You probably will need it turned on for dusk or evening photographs though; don't forget to turn it back on at the end of a long day of shooting.

Take extra batteries

Hold still!

You're probably used to the blurriness common to digital camera pictures with their longer exposure times. Don't forget to hold the camera steady in the excitement of capturing that picture. Better to get one good photo than two blurry photos.