

Composition checklist

12 checks before you shoot. Keep it on your phone.

Subject

☐ **Can you name the subject in three words?**

If you can't, the viewer won't either. Decide what you're shooting first, then how.

☐ **Is the subject the brightest or most contrasted element?**

The eye goes to light and contrast first. If the background wins, change your viewpoint or wait for the light.

☐ **Is it big enough in the frame?**

Get closer or zoom in. A tiny subject in empty space is the most common wide-angle mistake.

Edges and background

☐ **Walk around the four edges.**

Cut branches, half people, signs: anything touching the edge pulls the eye out of the photo.

☐ **Is the background clean behind the subject?**

A pole "growing" out of someone's head is fixed with half a step sideways.

☐ **What can you remove?**

Every element has to earn its place. If it doesn't add, it subtracts.

Structure

☐ **Where does the eye enter?**

A trail, a shoreline, a line at the bottom gives an entry point and a direction.

☐ **Is the subject centered for a reason?**

The center works for symmetry and power. Otherwise try a strong point of the rule-of-thirds grid.

☐ **Is the horizon level and in the right place?**

Interesting sky: horizon low. Empty sky: horizon high. In the middle only for symmetry.

Before you leave

☐ **Did you try a different viewpoint?**

Crouch, climb, walk around. The first viewpoint is almost always everyone's.

☐ **Did you shoot both vertical and horizontal?**

It takes two seconds and doubles your options (and vertical works for social).

☐ **Does it hold up as a thumbnail?**

Look at the shot small on the screen: if the composition reads even then, it's solid.

Exercise: on your next outing, take 10 shots of the same subject changing only the composition. At home, pick the best one and write down why.