

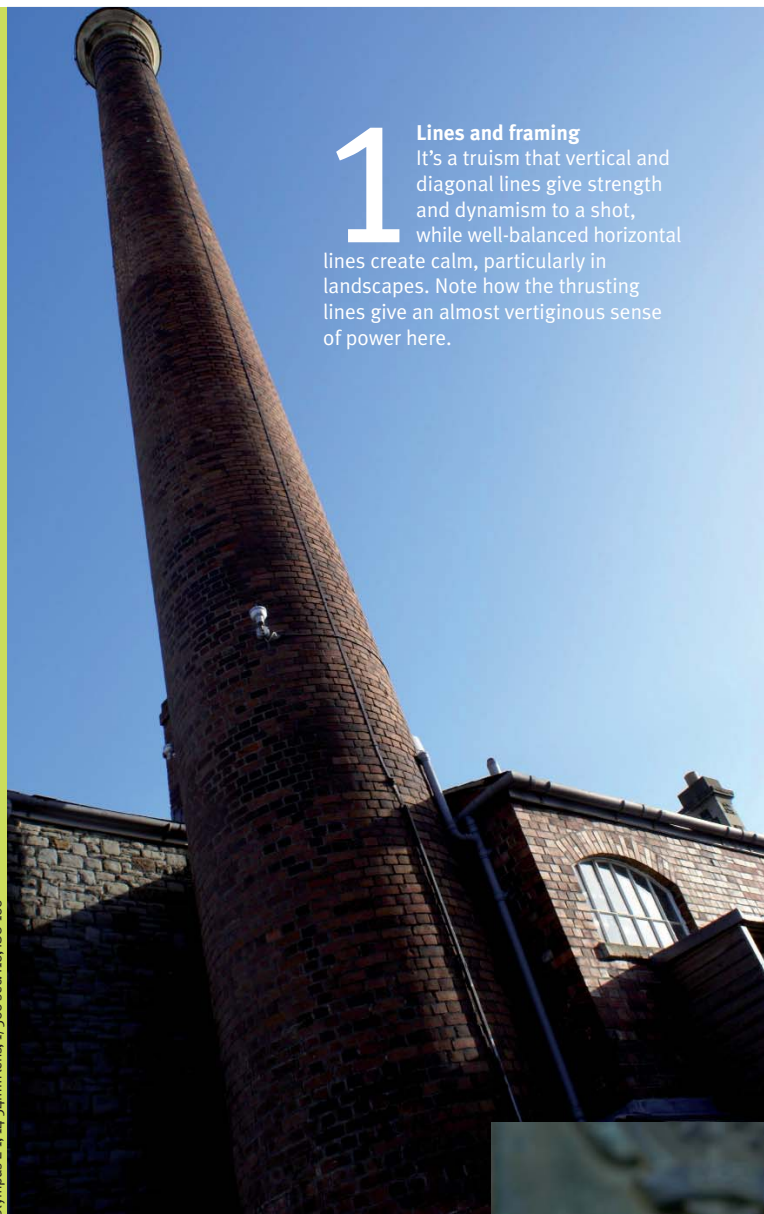
Smarter composition

GOT EXPOSURE AND SHUTTER SPEED RIGHT BUT FIND YOUR PICTURES LACK IMPACT? THE PROBLEM COULD BE WITH YOUR COMPOSITION, AS HELEN HARRIS EXPLAINS

GOOD COMPOSITION IS crucial to good photography. Most readers will know that it's not always a good idea to place your subject bang in the centre and that you should avoid cropping off people's heads and feet at all cost. In the winter 2005 issue of *Olympus User*, we examined how the rule of thirds – basically, placing your subject off centre – can energise your photography. Now we're going to look at some other compositional techniques. You don't need professional cameras or fancy equipment, so try them out today!



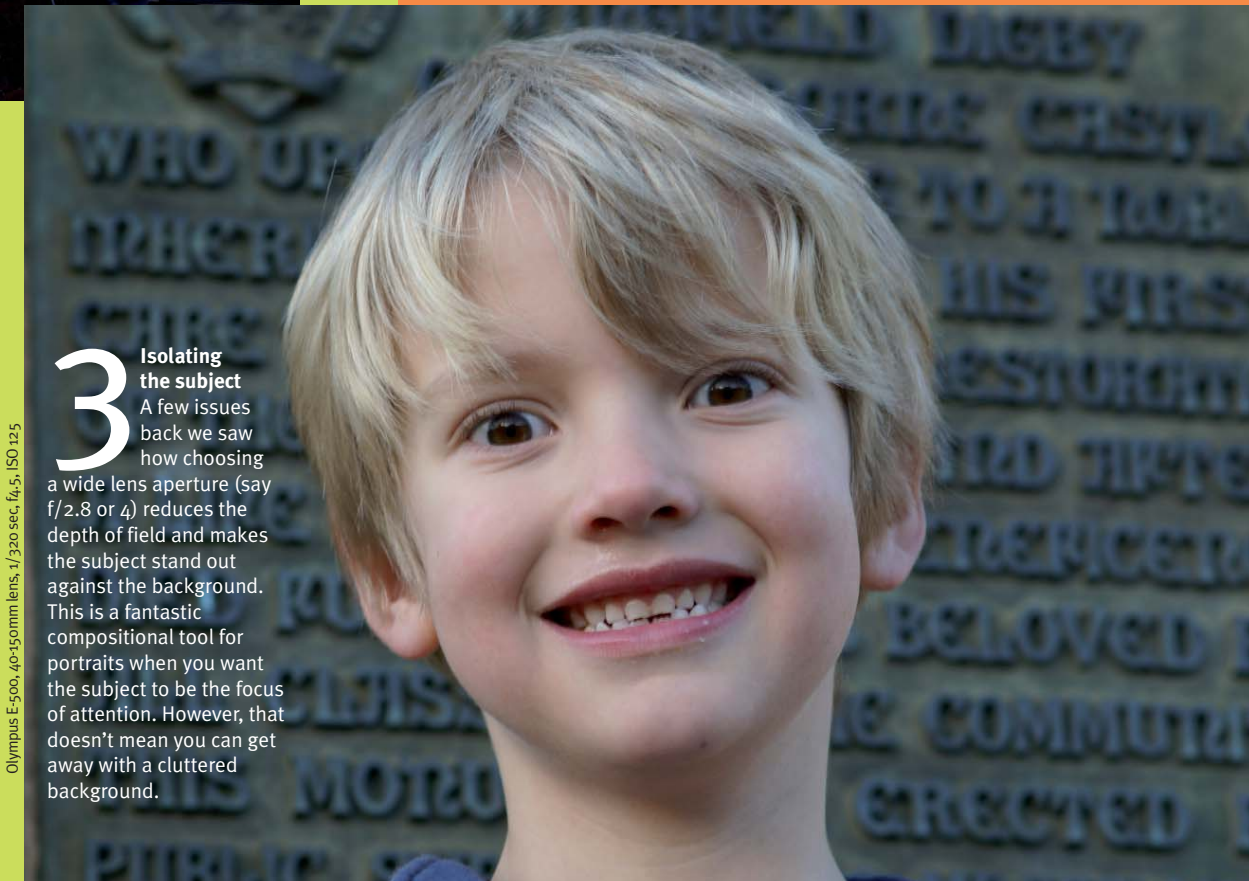
Olympus E-500, 40-150mm lens, 1/2000 sec, f5, ISO 100



Olympus E-1, 14-54mm lens, 1/500 sec, f10, ISO 100

1 Lines and framing
It's a truism that vertical and diagonal lines give strength and dynamism to a shot, while well-balanced horizontal lines create calm, particularly in landscapes. Note how the thrusting lines give an almost vertiginous sense of power here.

2 Central placement (left)
Sometimes you need to break the rule of thirds. Powerful shapes are great for balancing a shot, and this image wouldn't work quite so well if the subject was off centre. Filling the frame gives real impact, ideal when shooting animals or sports (though don't forget the background and give the subject space to breathe).



Olympus E-500, 40-150mm lens, 1/320 sec, f4.5, ISO 125

3 Isolating the subject
A few issues back we saw how choosing a wide lens aperture (say f/2.8 or 4) reduces the depth of field and makes the subject stand out against the background. This is a fantastic compositional tool for portraits when you want the subject to be the focus of attention. However, that doesn't mean you can get away with a cluttered background.

4 Odd numbers and angles (right)
Another good way to isolate your subject and cut the background clutter is to change your shooting angle. Moving left or right to the subject(s) or above and below them allows them to dominate the shot in a pleasing way, saving you from having to crop out distracting background elements with software. Arranging people in odd numbers, particularly in threes rather than pairs or fours, can help too.



Olympus E-500, 40-150mm lens, 1/2000 sec, f5, ISO 100



Olympus E-1, 14-54mm lens, 1/800 sec, f8, ISO 1000

5 Change your perspective (left)
Try kneeling and lying down – it's all about seeing things from a different perspective. This can also help you to exaggerate particularly prominent features, which is handy when shooting a subject or person that's been seen a million times before. Note how here the lower view creates a more atmospheric shot of the meadow.



Olympus SP-500 UltraZoom, 1/320 sec, f5.6, ISO 100

6 Think abstract
Related to the last point, abstract photography is a good way to get a fresh visual take on familiar sights. Abstract photography is a subject in itself, but it's all about being sensitive to shape, pattern and texture, and ruthlessly cutting out distracting elements. Just about anything can yield an attractive shot if you approach it in a new way, even stuff you find in the road!



7 Think patterns
Even on the most miserable, un-photogenic days you can usually take interesting photos if you're sensitive to the patterns and textures present in nature. Don't just go for texture and pattern for the sake of it – aim for a pleasing balance and try to fill all four edges of the frame.

Olympus E-500, 40-150mm lens, 1/320 sec, f/4.5, ISO 125

8 Experiment with lenses (below)
Getting creative with wide-angle and telephoto lenses can help with composition too, and you don't need to lug around a sack of SLR lenses. Wide-angle lenses have short minimum focusing distances so you can get up close and personal with your subject. They help you get in lots of foreground interest, leading the eye in. Meanwhile, telephoto or extreme zoom lenses can cause objects to compress or appear closer than they actually are, as with these windows shot from afar.



Olympus SP-500, 1/80, f/10, ISO 100



Olympus E-500, 40-150mm lens, 1/200 sec, f/5, ISO 100

9 Smarter cropping (above)
All these tips, while useful, will come to nothing if you go on to spoil your carefully composed shots with poor cropping. This is a common problem with people having easy access to photo-editing software. One of the most common mistakes is to crop in too tightly. Of course, having large objects dominating the frame can add impact, but not if the object feels 'squashed' into the frame. Cropping a shot of a racing motorbike or horse jumper, for instance, kills any sense of movement. You need to leave a bit of space for the object to move into. Other cropping no-nos include leaving in distracting background elements, or cutting off hands, feet and heads. When cropping a shot, always save the new image under a different name to that of the original, so you can start again if you mess things up.