



THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK NINE

Consider the Frame

When we think of our photographs, it's easy to think of the frame itself as merely the holder of the contents, where everything within that frame is so much more important than the edges. Easy as it is to think this way, it's a mistake that prevents us from using one of the most fundamental and powerful visual tools we have. The frame is much more than the bucket into which we pour the content; it's the canvas onto which we paint our image and it's our first (and in some cases, most) important constraint.

The Frame Itself

When we speak of composition, we almost always jump to decisions about how we arrange the elements, but the question is not merely "how do we arrange the elements in relation to each other?" but "how do we arrange the elements in relation to each other *and the frame?*" The same

composition choices we might make for a horizontal orientation do not work for a vertical. The same we might choose for a long 16:9 frame will not work for a square. They tell the reader to read the story differently. They force the eye in different directions. Different frames are experienced in different ways. They *feel* different. And for the photographer, they allow some choices and discourage others. The fact that too often it's not possible to successfully re-frame an image once it has been made means this is one of the more critical choices we can make. And certainly where composition is concerned, the time to choose a frame is before you make the photograph.



I could have framed this vertically, especially with the vertical relationship of the manta, the diver, and the sunburst, but I also wanted to emphasize the horizontality of the manta: the 12-foot wingspan of the primary character in this image was the most important consideration for me.

Orientation

It is too easy to assume that we choose our frame based on the subject. We even call vertical frames “portrait orientation” and horizontal frames “landscape orientation.” I get it, but this has to be the most simplistic and unhelpful way of looking at things I can imagine. What determines the orientation of the frame is not the subject but the photographer and what she wants to say, what she

wants the image to feel like, and the kind of story she wants to tell. And yes, at times, the elements present (subject), combined with the choices I just mentioned, will dictate that one frame is better than another. But that should be only one consideration, and likely not the most important one.

Remember that the orientation of the frame determines how the visual story is read. If it's vertical, we read top to bottom; if it's horizontal, then left to right. What kind of story are you telling? If you want me to look at the face of the bride looking down at her new wedding ring, a vertical frame might emphasize that gesture better than a horizontal. If two people are talking on the street, one looking to the other, it might be that a horizontal frame is a stronger choice to reinforce the visual relationship between the two. How your image is going to be read—and making that experience as strong and unambiguous as possible—is the first consideration, not how tall or wide your subject is; there are plenty of creative ways to accommodate for that, only one of them being the choice of a tall or wide frame.

Having said that, one of the great tools of the graphic designer is the repeated element, which I'll discuss in a future lesson. The repeated element is powerful because it creates a visual echo or reinforcement of an element. So it could be that a vertical frame helps reinforce the verticality of a stand of pine trees. But if that strand of trees is a longer line on the horizon, a horizontal frame might better echo the horizontality of that line. Whichever frame you choose, be sure to do so intentionally, knowing that it's a choice that will work with or against your composition, and therefore will strengthen (or weaken) the experience of the reader.





Two versions of the same image, one of them square and one of them horizontal. The square gives more weight to the relationship between earth and sky while the long horizontal downplays that relationship and concentrates instead upon the long repeating pattern of the trees.

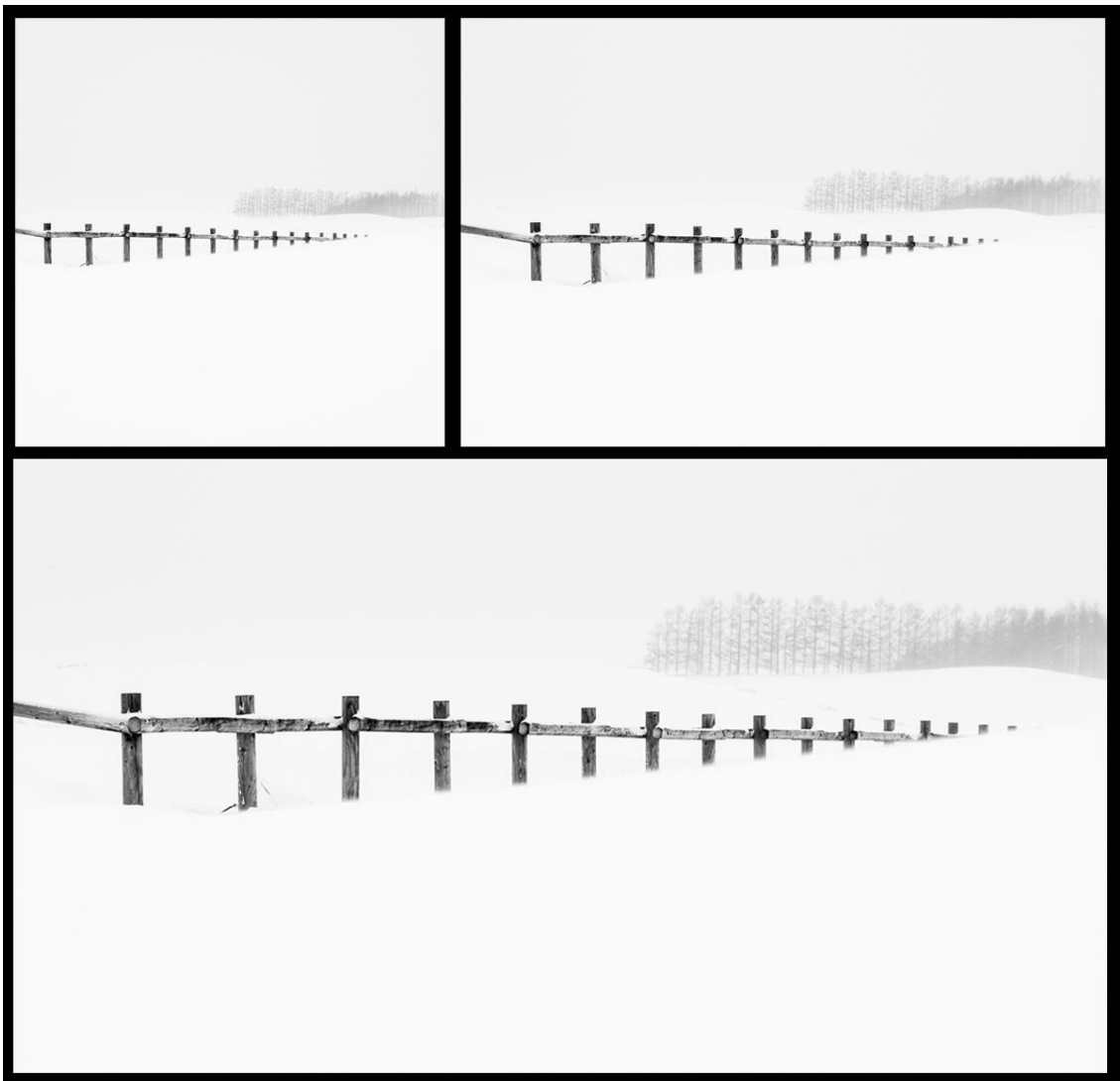
Aspect Ratio

If the choice of frame orientation is about verticality or horizontality, then the choice of ratio is, in part, about *how vertical* or *how horizontal* the image is. It is also about proportion: how vertical in relation to how horizontal. Photographers don't talk much in terms of the visual language, which is a shame because I think it reveals that we're not really aware of it. We don't talk about harmony, balance, or proportion, and those are important ideas when we talk about an aspect ratio. Instead, because of our history and the way images are used, we've often cropped images to fit a page, not designed the page around the photograph. Fair enough, but that casual approach to the frame has carried over to those who aren't forced to compromise for the sake of a *Time* magazine cover.

This course is too short, and these lessons already long enough, that covering the idea of aspect ratios in a fuller way would mean pages of text. What I want to make you aware of is the importance and potential power of this choice. There is a reason we use the ratios we do: 2:3, 5:7, 1:1, 16:9 instead of a bunch of random freestyle crops and it has to do with harmony and balance. It's about proportion and what we seem to find pleasing. That does not mean you can't crop your images with an unconstrained ratio, but do so with an eye towards the whole feel of the image, the whole

balance, and the whole sense of the frame, not merely because pulling the top of the frame down cuts out a distracting detail.

For me, this is about the feeling of an image. You've chosen to photograph that tree vertically, but if the feeling you want is of towering heights, perhaps a tall 9:16 frame would be a better choice than a 4:5, which is rather squat. For other reasons, you might want more negative space—there might be another element that needs inclusion, and another ratio might be a better choice. My hope is that you'll see it as just that; a choice with implications on the way we experience your image.



Three different aspect ratio versions of the same image, 1:1, 2:3, and 16:9, each of them leading the eye more powerfully in different ways. I prefer the 16:9 for this image because it allows plenty of negative space as the others do but also allows me a much more prominent foreground; knowing that the fence was what first drew my eye, it was that I wanted to draw your eye as well. The longer

aspect ratio allows me to do that and maintain a dynamic energy from left to right, which the other frames don't create.

Creative Exercise

Digital cameras are getting very good at giving us choices so we can choose our frames in-camera. My current Fuji allows me to choose 16:9, 3:2, and 1:1. I have Nikons that allow me to choose 4:5, which I miss on the Fuji system. Find out what your options are and play with alternates. If you always shoot in the native 35mm framing, try something else. See how cinematic a 16:9 frame can feel, and experiment with the way that a 1:1 forces changes in your compositions. Next, pull up a few of your favourite images in Lightroom and play with alternate crops. Some will take well to new crops; some not at all. What I'm hoping is that you'll begin to see new possibilities and become more aware of the frame itself—the canvas—as one of the more fundamental and powerful decisions we have. Remember the discussion about constraints? This is a good one. Try shooting for a week on 16:9, or 1:1. Get a sense for how these very different frames feel, what they do well, where they help or hinder.



Study The Masters

Putting this lesson together, no photographer came to mind as much as [Michael Kenna](#), whose often stark but always elegant black and white landscapes have captured me ever since I went to Hokkaido. I knew of him before that first trip but never studied his work. His graceful compositions are often brave for their placement of elements and plays of balance and tension. Take a few minutes to look at these galleries on Kenna's site: [Hokkaido](#), [Kussharo Lake](#), and [Power Stations in the UK](#) which I find mesmerizing. His [full archive index is here](#) and worth the time to study.

If you're like me and prefer your photographs on paper, these three books by Kenna are worth the time: [Forms of Japan](#), [Images of the Seventh Day](#), and [Michael Kenna: A 20 Year Retrospective](#).

Further Study

Here's a rather lengthy but interesting **Fout! De hyperlinkverwijzing is ongeldig.**

Printing is a whole other ball of wax and aspect ratios can be confusing. While we have a range of choices for the frame itself, the paper on which we print is often a different ratio. Here are two articles by John Cornicello that discuss the issue. I have found that printing my own work and owning a good paper cutter gives me the most options with the least headaches.

<https://cornicello.com/itfigures/aspect-ratio>

<https://cornicello.com/itfigures/2013/1/22/aspect-ratio>

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For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin