



THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK FOURTEEN.

Using Perspective

One of the more powerful lessons in composition came to me that day I realized I had so much more control of my compositions than I had believed; when I realized that while I most often can't change the scene itself, I possess a tremendous amount of control over how that scene is represented in the photograph. That power comes from the laws of perspective and how the three-dimensional world gets represented in a two-dimensional image. With that power also comes the responsibility to get it right, because once the shutter is tripped and the exposure made, the elements that are so easily moved around in our frames with the camera to the eye become immovable.

This lesson is a simple one. What you do with it and how intentional you become about it is another thing. I'm still finessing my understanding of how I place elements into the frame, both in relationship to the frame itself as well as to the other elements. Here is what you need to know: nothing changes the perspective within a scene other than where you put that camera. Lenses don't do it for you. They might exaggerate the effects, but perspective will only change as your point of view (POV) does. Without turning this into an overly complex lesson on perspective, there are two significant behaviours that I find have the most bearing on photographers. One is foreshortening, where objects closer to us look larger than objects further from us. Again, a lens won't change that, but it will exaggerate it. So get close to a foreground element and it'll be larger than a background object. Put a wide angle lens on and the effect is greater (but the perspective won't change). This is helpful in establishing visual mass (the topic for Week Fifteen).

The second behaviour is that as objects become more and more distant they get closer, eventually converging at a vanishing point. We can't change that. But we can move, and as we do, we change the relationships between the objects, and if we move enough they converge on a different vanishing point. We have so much control! Just by moving our camera to a new position we can change not only how a composition looks or feels, but what it says. We can place elements together or move them apart within the limited two dimensions of the flat image. Add a change in optics to this and the control is incredible.

The lines in the photographs below lead you into the frame in different ways, but this has as much to do with my choice of POV as it does with the actual wood of the dock. In the top image, a shift up or down changed the energy of the lines leading to the kissing couple. In the second image, it was playing with the shift left and right that got me the best lines. Too far to the right and there'd be more dock than I wanted. Too far to the left and there wouldn't be enough.



Most of us have some sense that if we physically move, we control the elements in the scene. Most of us do not fully embrace that, nor do we completely appreciate

what those changed relationships of one element to another can express or imply. How is the reader of your photograph going to understand the story you're telling when you move a little to the right and that shift causes the two people in the scene to get much closer? How will they experience the image when you use foreshortening to imply a much larger size difference between elements? Remember that this works on all levels. Move left or right with the camera and the side-by-side elements can change places if you move far enough. Move up or down and the same is true: you move one element up or down relative to the other. Use that! Don't take the first composition that presents itself. Move around. Explore. Make sketch images. Move forward and back, left and right, up and down. And if you can, move around the subject. You can't move everything, but relative to the frame, you can exert incredible creative control.

The same applies (though it's not really the point of this lesson) to light. We can't often change it, but often just the act of moving can change the light relative to the camera. Boring front light can become stunning side light or moody backlight just by exploring your POV options. Fight the laziness and embrace the curiosity. What happens visually if you move here or there? How do the elements change relative to the frame and to each other, even to the light? Take your camera off that tripod and move your feet around. Lie down. Stand on something. Turn around. You control more than you might be aware. Use that control in your composition and your storytelling.

What role does my choice of POV and my use of perspective play in the images below? How would moving left to right or up and down change the lines and the relationships of the elements in the frame? In the second image, notice how foreshortening (the way the closer object is larger and the distant object of similar size is relatively smaller) draws your eye first to the man in the foreground then into the image, giving it greater depth.



I made the images below in New Mexico, more as an illustration than anything else. It's the same grove of trees, the same light. I changed my lenses, but that doesn't create the largest change in the images; rather, it was my POV. You've got to move if you want to change your lines. Look at the second image.

Clearly, I moved left or right to make the lines horizontal in the frame, but I also got much lower, stacking the lines more on top of each other.



Creative Exercise

Find a scene in which you have two elements. If you have to, put an apple and an orange on a table and use those. Now make a couple dozen images and for each frame move in such a way that the relationships change. Don't move the fruit! Move the camera. Make the apple the primary element and the orange the secondary one. Now do the opposite. Put the orange on the left, then put it on the right. Make it higher in the frame than the apple, then make it lower. Put them in a straight horizontal line relative to each other. Now make them more dynamic and diagonal to each other. Do this when your friends and family aren't looking because they'll think you've lost your mind, but do it. Consider taking the time to do it again with a different lens (perhaps a 24mm if you used a 50mm for the first series), and see how the forward-to-backward relationships change as you get closer or move back. Perspective and its control with POV is powerful: use it!



Study the Masters

To my eye, there are few photographers whose composition is as good as [Josef Hoflehner](#) (1955 -). His stunning black and white images and subtle colour work are about as good as it gets and, strangely, so few photographers I talk to have heard of him. Take the time to [look at his portfolios \(his website is one of the better I've seen for just spending time with his images\)](#) and study his compositions. I love his [Jet Airliner series](#) and the beautiful colour palettes of [his Patience series](#). His work is graphic and dramatic and often incredibly elegant. His book [Retrospective 1975–2015](#) is one of my favourites.

Further Study

Here are a couple resources to follow up on as you have time and inclination.

- [Josef Hoflehner: Retrospective 1975–2015](#)
- If you want to explore the idea of adding depth to your images, I wrote [an eBook called A Deeper Frame](#) a few years ago. It's still relevant (perspective and visual mass haven't changed) and it's still only \$5.

Final Comments

We're now into the second half of this course. I hope you're still working on your personal project. I also hope you're not getting overwhelmed. Some of the emails I've been getting are so encouraging, and by the sound of things, many of you are getting so much out of discovering new techniques and new photographers to study. I'd love to get your thoughts on anything I'm missing or could improve on, and this is your chance to give me some feedback; would you take a moment and [reply to this quick poll](#)? Thanks!

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For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin