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The Importance of a Focal Point

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A focal point is the part of an image that draws the eye of a viewer to the most important part of the image or the area that you want to highlight. How you do this will make or break the final image. If you don't know how to create this point then you will not achieve much in your photography.



photo by [Dominic Alves](#)

The professionals have all worked this one out and if you are attempting to create similar images then learn this point well. It frustrates the eye of a viewer if there is no focal point, as the eye is not drawn to any one particular part of the photo. The focal point only occupies a small part of the scene but will make or break the whole image. The simplest form of this is an isolated object seen from a distance on a plain background.

So how is this achieved successfully? Let's take a look at a few pointers.

1. Placing the Focal Point

Fundamental to photography this rule needs to be learnt well and executed to perfection. If you know where to place your focal point then you will shoot great images every time. A focal point needs to be off centred and never in the middle of an image. The rule of thirds places it at a point that is very pleasing to the eye as discovered by the ancient Greeks. This golden rule will bring you success every time. Imagine a noughts and crosses or tic-tac-toe grid. Two lines across the image and two lines down the image—vertically and horizontally placed. Equally spaced, they cut the image up into thirds. Where these lines intersect are your focal points. The horizontal lines are where you place your horizons. The human eye loves to view subjects placed at these intersections. Take a magazine or travel book and take a look at how many times this rule is used effectively and see how your eye is drawn to them.

2. Selective Focus

This is an incredibly effective way to focus attention on your subject of focal point. You need to know how aperture and depth of field works in order to use it properly. But, basically it's very simple. Your settings (e.g. $f/2.8$, $f/4$, $f/5.6$ and so on) change the size of your aperture all the way up to $f/32$. You only need to be concerned with the lower apertures for this effect. If your lens goes to $f/1.2$, brilliant, but most lenses won't take you below $f/4$ or $f/2.8$, as they get more expensive the wider the aperture. Depth of field is the area of focus in front of and behind your subject. With the aperture wide open at $f/2.8$ you will have very little in focus which makes it so effective with selective focusing. Everything not on the same focal plane as the subject will be out of focus and thereby excluded from the viewer's attention. The longer your lens, the less depth of field you will have and the more you will be able to selectively focus.



photo by [Dermot O'Halloran](#)

It's a great way of drawing attention when used in conjunction with the rule of thirds.

3. Exposure

By underexposing parts of the image (i.e. making them darker), the areas that are light will stand out. If you are able to use this effectively the light parts will stand out as focal points and whatever you place here will become the point of focus in the photo. This really works well if you have a subject that is lighter than the underexposed, darker areas. Key to the process is knowing what the final image will look like in mind's eye.

4. Light Source

This really pushes your photographic eye to the limits and if you see the opportunity and go for it, will result in a stunning photo. How this works is that when you see a shaft of light or a ray of sunlight entering a window or coming through the clouds, use it to place your subject. A patch of late afternoon sun in dimming light will create an area that is much lighter than the surroundings.

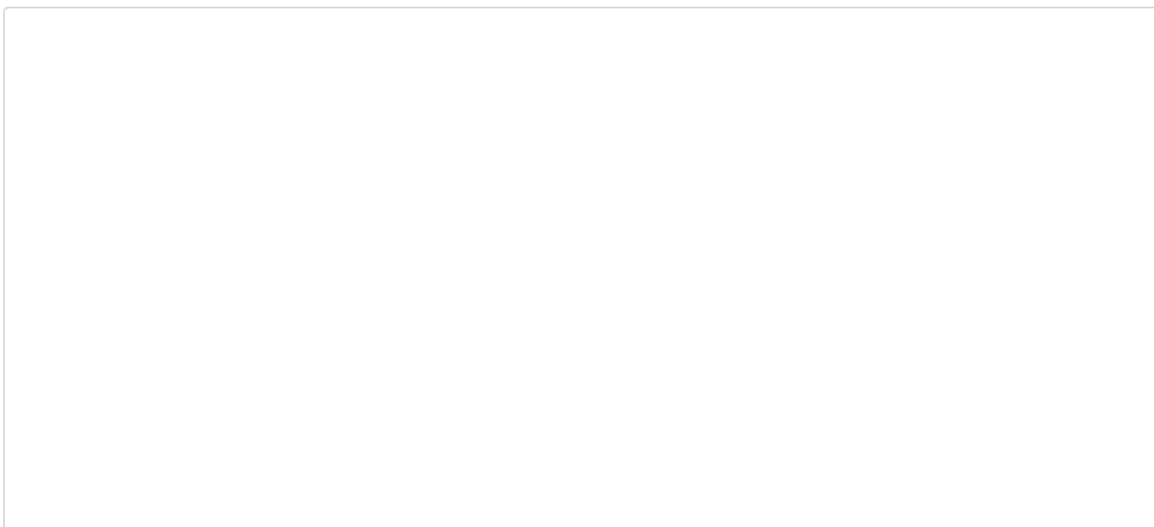


Photo captured by Anton Porsche.

When you shoot an image and take the metering off this area, the surrounding environment will appear darker. The image now has a focal point that draws the eye in to the image. This will also work at night where a solitary window is lit and the surrounding area is dark. Experiment with this technique and you will soon be creating dramatically lit photos.

5. Eyes

By placing a person's eyes on a two thirds intersection a viewers eyes are immediately drawn to that area. When the subject is looking down on something else like a child or an object your eye will be naturally drawn to the point where the subjects eyes are focused. Whenever you shoot a person eyes they will automatically become the focal point so if they are the focal point then you have a problem and they will compete for attention.



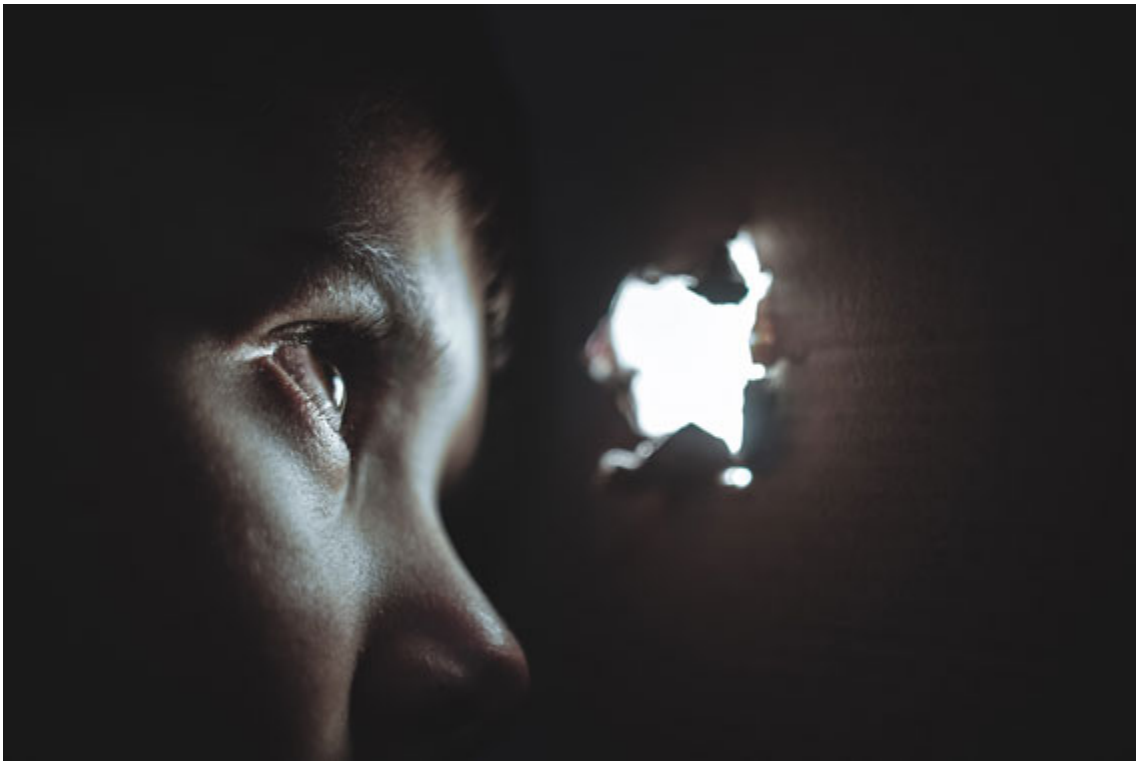


Photo captured by Dmitry Ratushny; ISO 100, 1/80s.

6. Two Focal Points

Sometimes you will have two focal points and there will be competition, but, you can offset this by using size. One of the focal points must be considerably larger which will draw the eye but immediately your focus will move to the smaller focal point. If they are the same size the viewer's eyes will dart between them. So be very careful when using a double focal point.

A focal point is essential to any great image and you need to be able to create this in every image. An image lacking this will appear flat and without impact. As you learn digital photography it will become easier and easier to place it in the right position. Happy shooting!

About the Author:

Wayne Turner has been teaching photography for 25 years and has written three books on photography. He has produced *21 Steps to Perfect Photos*; a program of learner-based training using outcomes based education.

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