
CONTROLLING COMPOSITION WITH THE RULE OF THIRDS

Quick Guide
Written by Jenn Mishra



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A photo captures only a small slice of the world we see. What we choose to photograph and how we place elements in the frame is called composition.

Photographers, unlike other visual artists, generally have to work within the confines of reality. But that does not mean you have no control over the composition. Good photographers make a lot of decisions about where various elements lie in the frame.

This guide will explore one way of organizing the elements in your photograph using the Rule of Thirds.

Before we go on, let me clarify the name of this compositional tool.

It is called the Rule of Thirds, but use the word “rule” loosely. It is more of a “Guide of Thirds.” A “rule” implies that you must compose this way. This is not the case. The Rule of Thirds is one of many ways of composing your image. This isn’t the *right* way of composing your image.

The Rule of Thirds isn’t the only way to compose your images, but there is a reason that the Rule of Thirds is often the first compositional tool photographers learn. Using the Rule of Thirds helps train your eye and brings your attention to the way elements are placed in your image. Using the Rule of Thirds will improve your photographs and help you learn to control photographic composition.

What we will cover:

- Defining the Rule of Thirds
- Reasons to use the Rule of Thirds
- Using grid lines
- Cropping with the Rule of Thirds



Recommended Reading: If you’d like to improve your composition skills for better images, grab a copy of Photzy’s best-selling premium guide, [Advanced Composition](#).



Photograph by Jennifer Mishra

*Bushel of peppers at a
farmers' market with
Rule of Thirds grid lines
overlay. My settings
were 1/250th of a second
@ f/6.3, ISO 800.*

WHAT IS THE RULE OF THIRDS?


Composing using the Rule of Thirds means placing your main subject a third of the way into the image.

Imagine lines across your image dividing the frame into three parts. Your photograph can be divided into top, middle, and bottom, or left, middle, and right.

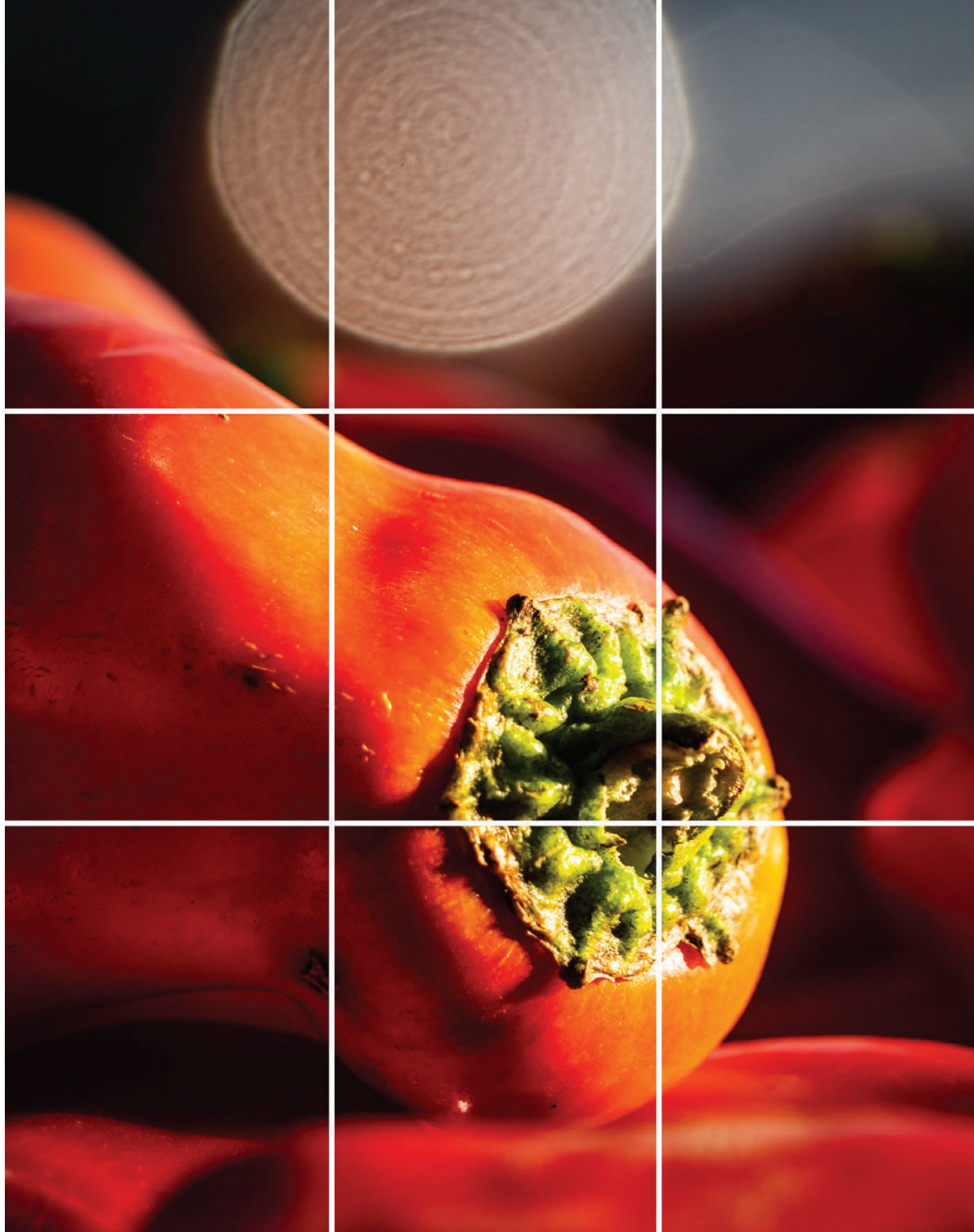
When photographing using the Rule of Thirds, place your main subject on one of the lines. For instance, you can position your subject in the left-hand or right-hand third of the frame. In this image, the dominant pepper takes up the right two-thirds of the image. The stem of the pepper is on the left line.



Or you can place your subject in the top or bottom third of the image. In this photo, the bushel of peppers takes up the bottom two-thirds of the frame.

 **Key Lesson:** Composing using the Rule of Thirds means seeing the scene in front of you in three parts.

Photograph by Jennifer Mishra
Bushel of peppers at a farmers' market with Rule of Thirds grid lines overlay. My settings were 1/160th of a second @ f/6.3, ISO 200.



Photograph by
 Jennifer Mishra
*Red pepper at a
 farmers' market
 with Rule of
 Thirds grid
 lines overlay.
 My settings
 were 1/250th
 of a second @
 f/6.3, ISO 400.*

When you imagine your scene divided both horizontally and vertically at the same time, you will get something like a tic-tac-toe grid. The frame divides into nine rectangles.

The points at which the horizontal and vertical lines intersect are "crash points." Using the Rule of Thirds, you have four crash points: upper left, upper right, lower left, and lower right.

Placing your main subject on one of these crash points means that your main subject is a third of the way into the frame both horizontally and vertically. The stem of this red pepper (at left) is on the lower right crash point.

REASONS TO USE THE RULE OF THIRDS

Using the Rule of Thirds, or any other compositional tool, helps train your eye to see where elements are positioned in the scene.

But there are a couple of reasons why the Rule of Thirds is a popular way to compose images.

OFF-CENTER FOR INTEREST

Most beginner photographers see something interesting, point their camera at it, and snap a photo.

The most interesting thing (your subject) is often in the middle of the frame. This is human nature.

When we're interested in something, we look at it. We turn our heads and place the subject directly in our line of vision.

Since we all place what we're paying attention to in the middle of our field of vision, this is the most expected placement for a photographic subject.

Fulfilling your viewers' expectations is the quickest way to bore them.


Placing your subject off-center is more unexpected and therefore more interesting than locating it in the center. It's not that you can't take a photo with your subject in the center, but the image tends to be more interesting if at least one element is off-center. It's a different way of seeing the world.

The large sunflower on the next page is in the center of the frame horizontally, but vertically it falls on the upper third grid line. The lower third of the frame is filled with the background field of sunflowers.



Photograph by Jennifer Mishra
*Sunflower field with Rule of Thirds grid overlay. My settings
were 1/80th of a second @ F/16, ISO 100.*

Also, a subject in the middle of the frame reads as static or stable. There is no implied movement left or right, up or down.

 **Key Lesson:** Using the Rule of Thirds emphasizes an asymmetrical space that is more interesting and dynamic.

Let's go back to the process of taking an image and let's add an important step.

1. See something interesting
2. Point your camera at something interesting
3. *Take a breath and think about what your main subject is and move it to a crash point*
4. Snap the photo

Shifting the camera left or right, or up or down, lets you see alternate compositions. Your first, intuitive composition does not have to be your final composition.

Getting into the habit of using the Rule of Thirds does two things:

1. You must quickly identify your main subject.
2. You think more deeply about the placement of your subject rather than allowing the subject to fall into your frame by chance.

When using the Rule of Thirds becomes a habit, you can take composition a step further.

Look for a secondary subject and decide on the relationship between the elements in your frame.

Your main subject might be on one crash point and a secondary element on another. Creating this relationship might mean moving your camera or shifting your position.



Photograph by Jennifer Mishra

The eye of the front horse and the nose of the horse behind fall almost perfectly on crash points (marked in red). My settings were 1/1250th of a second @ f/6.3, ISO 4000.

Key Lesson: Your image isn't necessarily better because you've used the Rule of Thirds; it is better because you've thought about your composition.

Recommended Reading: If you'd like to improve your composition skills for better images, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide, [Advanced Composition](#).

EDGE DROP-OFF

The Rule of Thirds also helps photographers avoid a common compositional error: placing the subject too close to the edge.

Key Lesson: Placing your subject close to the edge of the frame is usually a compositional error but it may be the correct choice if you want to create a lot of tension.



Photograph by Jennifer Mishra

Bee and purple flowers in a field. My settings were 1/500th of a second @ f/5.6, ISO 800.

Placing your subject too close to the edge creates distracting tension. There is a feeling that the subject might fall out of the frame.

In the image on the left, all but one of the purple flowers is close to an edge. This makes them look like a border rather than an integral part of the photo. Also, the subject of this image, the bee, is directly in the center of the frame.

Placing your subject too close to the edge creates the opposite reaction to placing your subject in the center. One creates tension. The other creates stability. The Rule of Thirds splits the difference. Your main subject is comfortably in the frame, but not uncomfortably close to the edge.

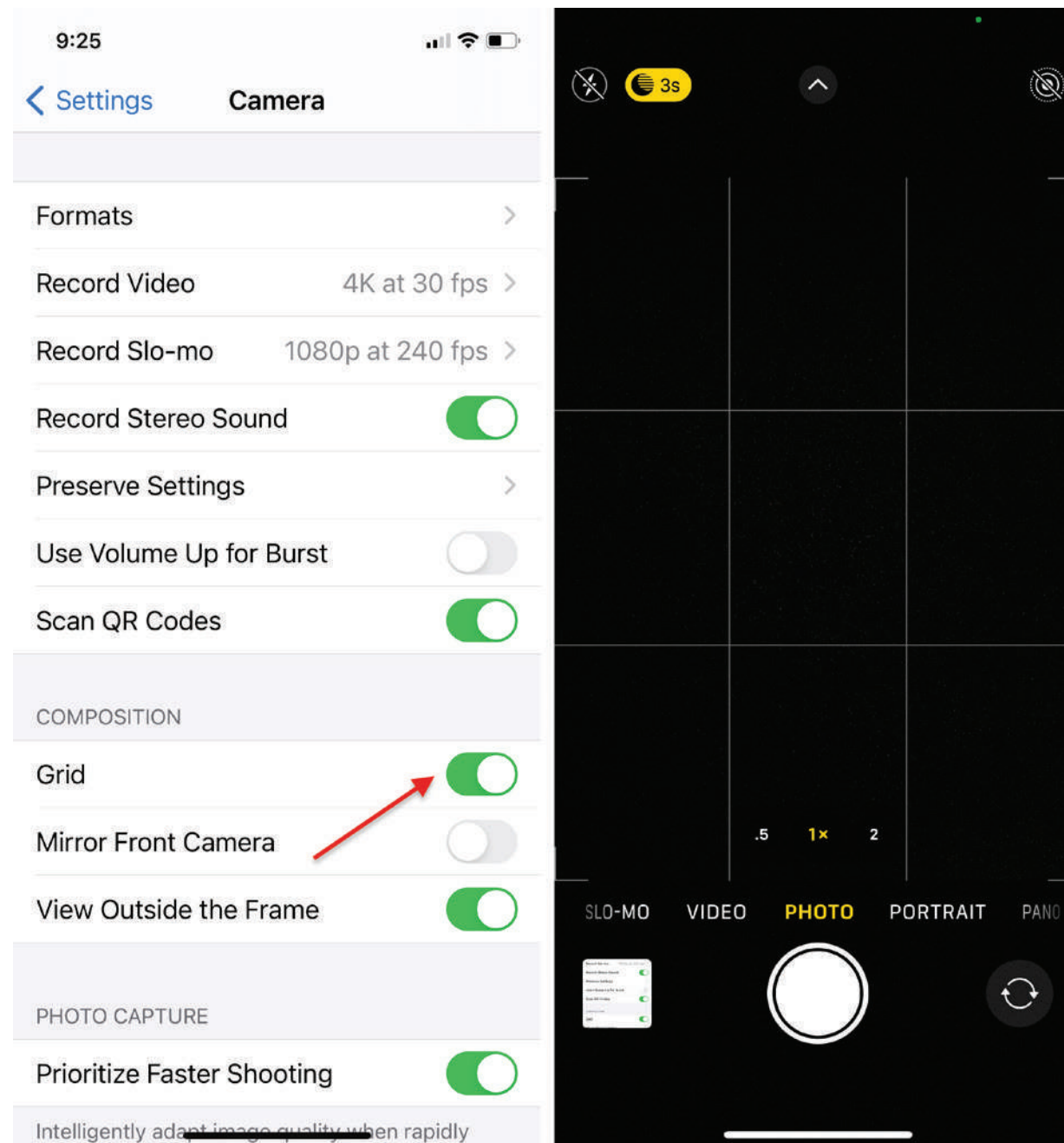
In most cases, it doesn't take much to reframe the image. With a bit of cropping, the photo of the bee and purple flowers becomes more interesting. Now, the image on next page shows the bee in the right third and the supporting flowers in the bottom third.



Photograph by Jennifer Mishra

Bee and purple flowers in a field reframed based on the Rule of Thirds.

My settings were 1/500th of a second @ f/5.6, ISO 800.



Photograph by Jennifer Mishra

iPhone 11 camera settings panel showing how to turn on Rule of Thirds grid overlay (left) and what the grid lines look like on a blank screen (right).

GRID LINE ASSISTANCE

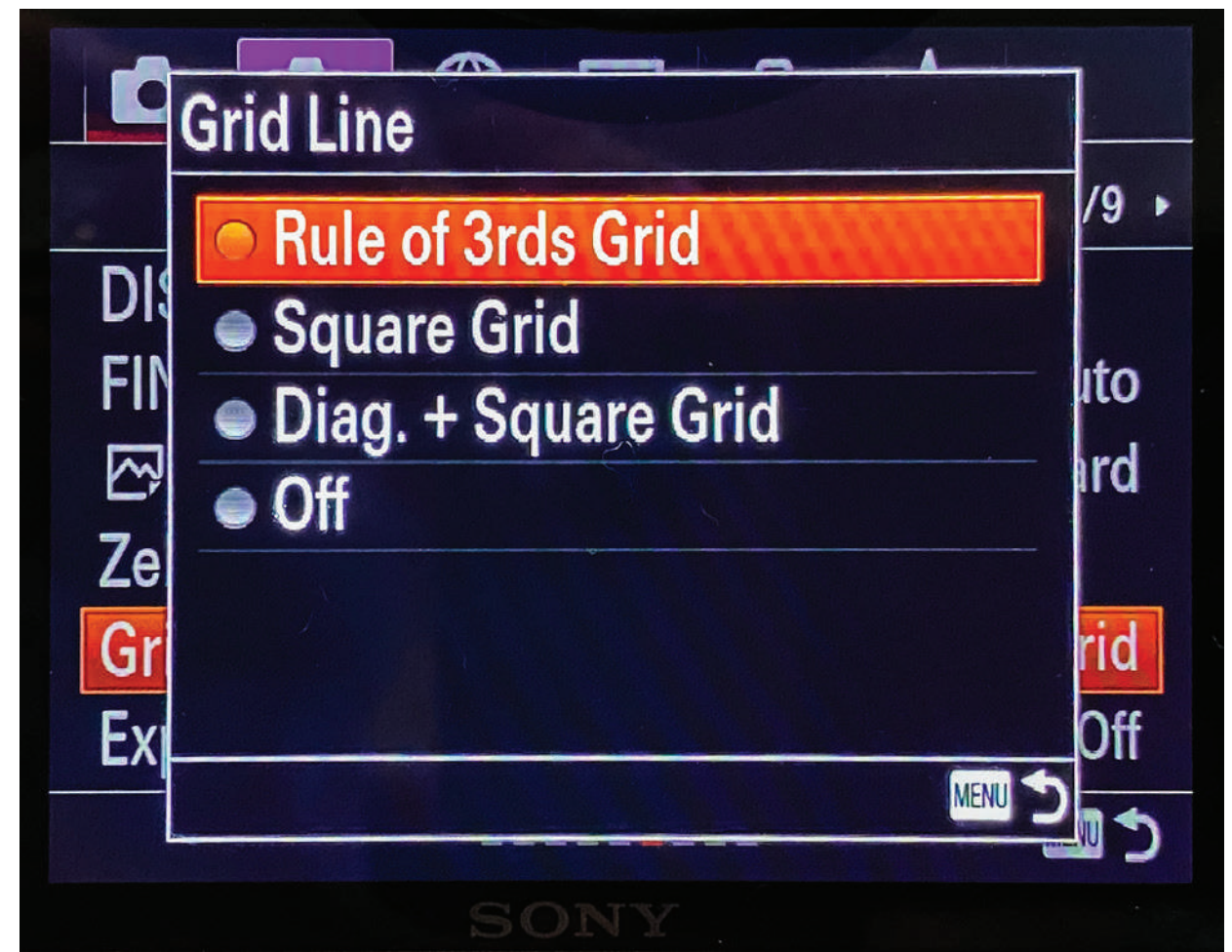
Most cameras have a Rule of Thirds grid overlay that you can turn on. The grid lines are especially helpful when you are first learning to use the Rule of Thirds. The grid lines are faint and won't interfere with seeing the scene, but they remind you to shift the camera around to try different compositions.

On your iPhone, go into Settings and select Camera. Turn on the switch next to Grid. This will add a Rule of Thirds overlay to your screen.

On DSLRs and mirrorless cameras, there is usually a setting in the menu system to turn on the grid lines. For instance, my Sony A7R3 includes a Grid Line menu with one of the options being "Rule of 3rds Grid."



Photograph by Jennifer Mishra
Grid Line menu screen on a Sony A7R3 camera.



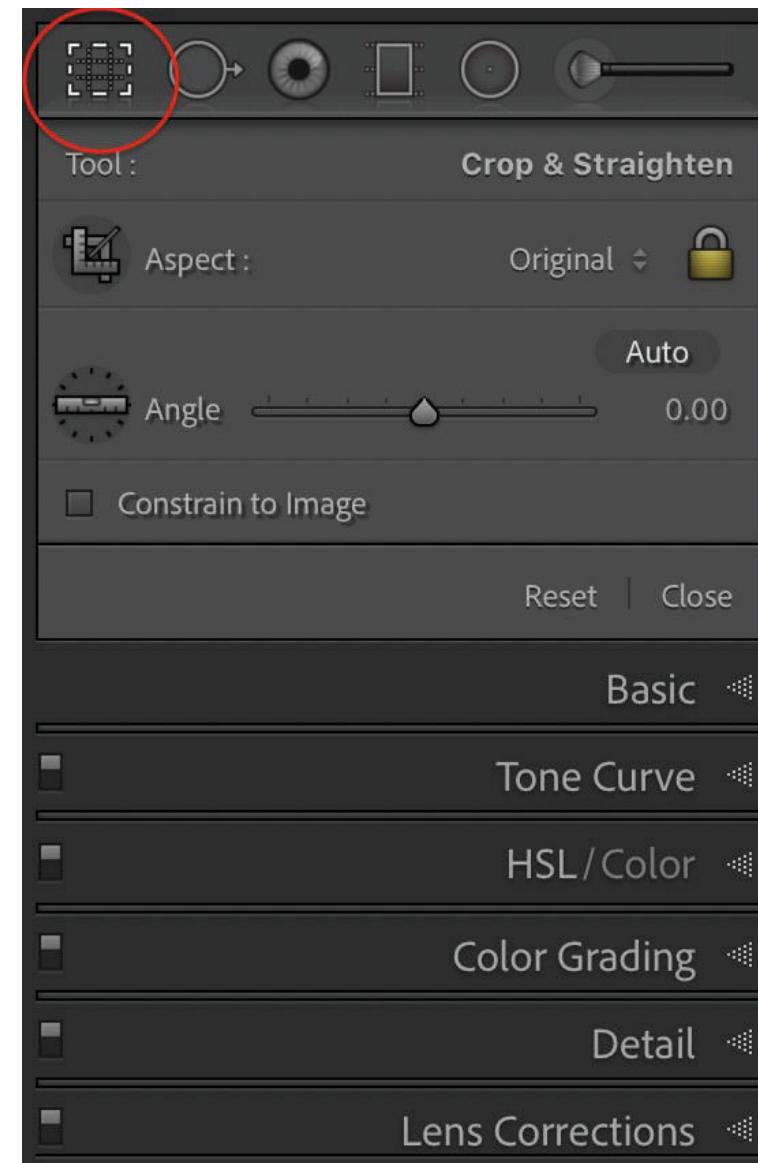
Photograph by Jennifer Mishra
Rule of 3rds Grid option in the Grid Line menu screen on a Sony A7R3 camera.

You may have to check the user manual for your specific camera brand to find the grid line feature.

CROPPING DECISIONS USING THE RULE OF THIRDS

Composing happens in the camera, but it also happens in post-processing when you're deciding on how to crop your image. Cropping often removes extra elements in the frame or parts that aren't contributing to the overall image. The Rule of Thirds helps you make cropping decisions.

Grid line overlays are available in most post-processing programs. If you're using Lightroom, select the Crop tool in the Develop Module. The tool is located just above the Basic Panel. It looks like a rectangle with dashed lines (or use the hotkey R).

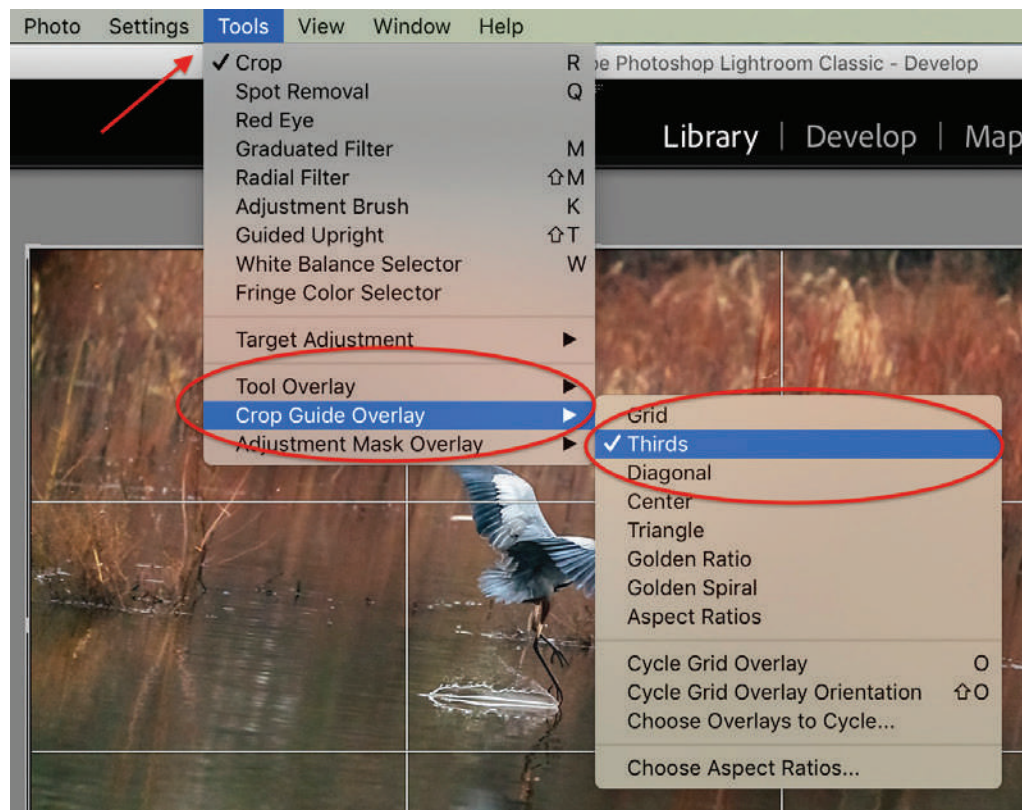


Photograph by Jennifer Mishra

Screenshot showing the location of the Crop tool in Lightroom's Develop Module.

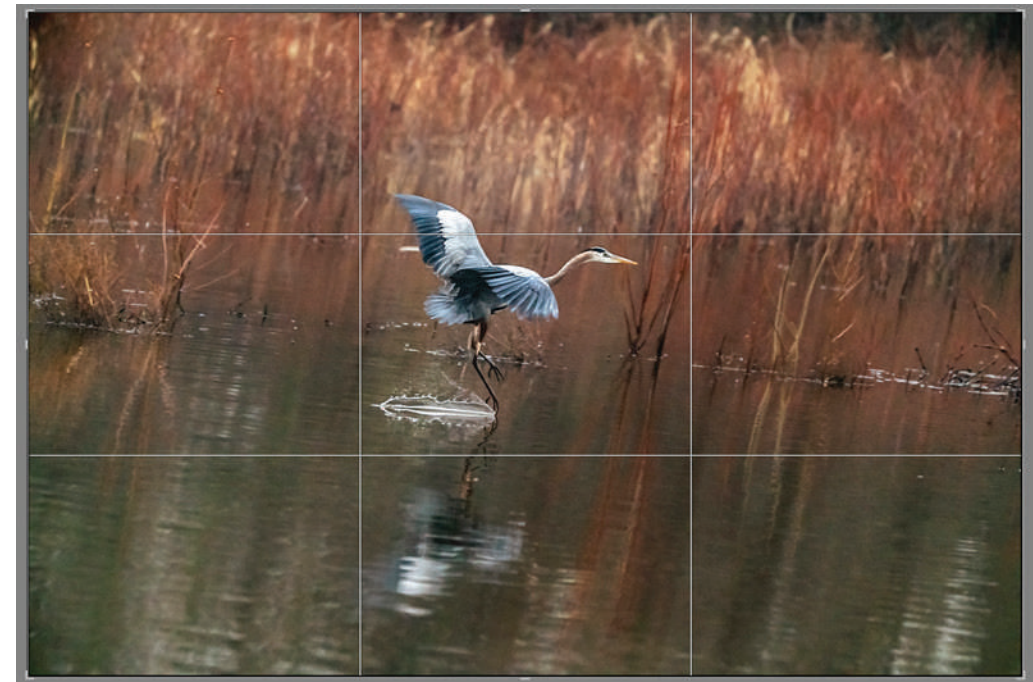
Then select the **Tools dropdown menu > Crop Guide Overlay > Thirds**. If the selections are grayed out, make sure you have the Crop tool selected. Notice that there are options other than Thirds.

These grid lines show you that there are other ways of organizing your composition. Return to the Tools dropdown menu and select **Tool Overlay > Always Show**. Now when you select the Crop tool, a Rule of Thirds grid overlay appears on your image.



Photograph by Jennifer Mishra
Screenshot showing the location of the Rule of Thirds grid lines in Lightroom.

If you use Photoshop, go to **View > Show > Grid** (or Control).



Photograph by Jennifer Mishra
Uncropped image of a blue heron landing on a pond with Rule of Thirds overlay in Lightroom.

In the image of a blue heron, I'm happy with the action that I've captured. But I was tracking this bird from a distance. It is in the center and small in the frame.

The Rule of Thirds grid helps me decide on a crop for this image.

When cropping, try positioning your subject on the upper right crash point, then the upper left. Try placing your subject in both the upper and lower third of the frame.




Photograph by Jennifer Mishra

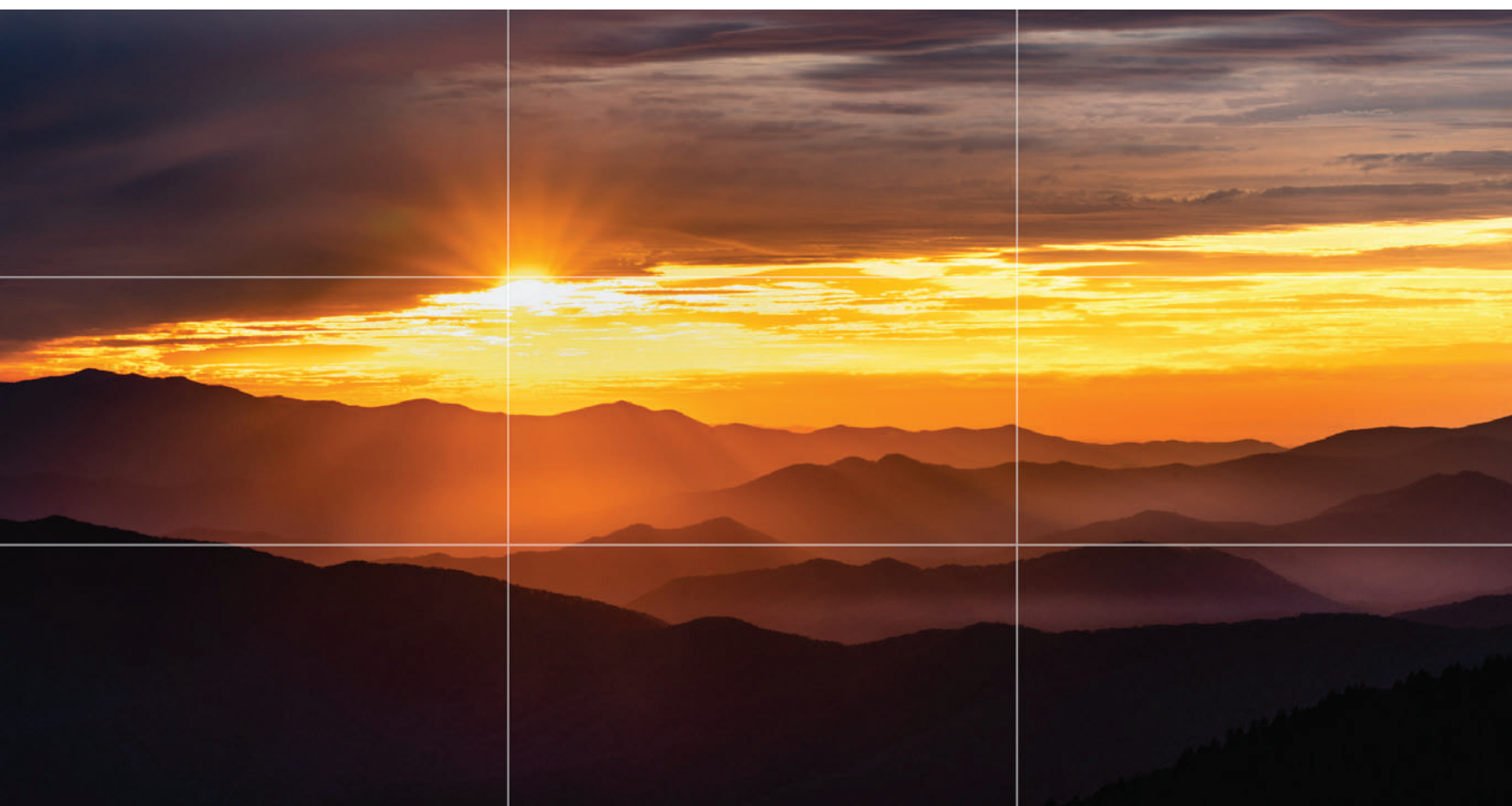
*A cropped image of a blue heron landing on a pond. My settings were
1/500th of a second @f8.0 ISO 6400 at 560mm.*

Look at each position and gauge your reaction. Which seems right to you? Do you have to cut out another interesting element if you make one of these choices?

For the image of a blue heron, I decided to place the body of the bird on the upper left crash point. This preserved the bird's reflection in the lower third of the frame. The bird is moving left-to-right across my frame.

By placing the bird in the left third, there is space on the right side for the bird to move into. When I placed the bird on the right side, it looked like the bird was flying out of my photo. Also, its head was too close to the edge of the frame.

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to improve your composition skills for better images, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide, [Advanced Composition](#).



Photograph by Jennifer Mishra

CONCLUSION

There are many ways to see the world. Two photographers standing next to each other and looking at the same scene may make very different images. We have choices. One choice is what elements you choose to include in the frame. Another is how these elements are positioned.

The Rule of Thirds is a compositional tool that places your subject off-center within the frame. Dividing your frame into thirds both horizontally and vertically creates crash points. These are places of visual interest. Placing your subject on one of these crash points makes your image more interesting and dynamic.

But more importantly, using the Rule of Thirds is about making compositional decisions part of your image-making process. You get to decide what you put in the frame and how you place the main subject. What you put in your photo, and more importantly, what you leave out, will make or break your image. There are few “right” choices. It’s up to you.

Self-Check Quiz

1. What is the definition of composition?
2. Why might the word “rule” in the “Rule of Thirds” be misunderstood?
3. Define the Rule of Thirds.
4. What are crash points?
5. How many crash points are there?
6. Why is the center of the frame not the most interesting place for your subject?
7. What compositional error does the Rule of Thirds help you avoid?
8. What does the grid line feature in most cameras and post-processing programs do?
9. The Rule of Thirds grid is often not the only option found in cameras and post-processing programs. What are other options on your camera?
10. How does the Rule of Thirds help make cropping decisions in post-processing?

Assignment

- Choose a scene or a subject and explore different compositions using the Rule of Thirds.
- Start by identifying the main subject.
- Systematically place your subject in different positions within the frame using the Rule of Thirds. Place the subject on each of the crash points. Be thoughtful about your composition.
- Select a secondary subject in the scene.
- Position yourself to place both the main subject and secondary subjects on crash points. What decisions do you have to make for this to happen?



Hey there!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jenn Mishra is a fine art travel and landscape photographer based in the St. Louis metro area. Jenn is an active photographic educator and has been invited to speak at conferences such as Out of Chicago. Her photos have been featured in a number of solo exhibitions. Her studio is Wits End Photography.

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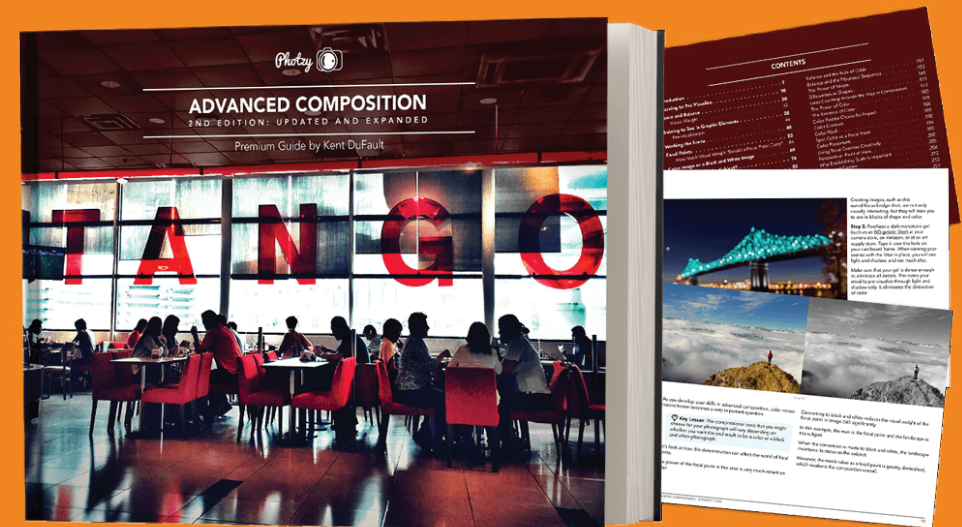
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