
IS IT NECESSARY TO ALWAYS STRAIGHTEN THE HORIZON LINE?

Quick Guide
Written by Kevin Landwer-Johan



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“Never have I found the limits of the photographic potential. Every horizon, upon being reached, reveals another beckoning in the distance. Always, I am on the threshold.” ~ W. Eugene Smith

Mr. Smith, in this quote, does not show any interest in how straight the horizon is. When browsing a collection of his photographs, it does not take long to see that the horizons and other horizontal lines in his images are often not level.

I do not think it is necessary to always straighten the horizon line so long as other aspects of the image are strong or an unbalanced horizon line is intentional in a composition.

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Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

KEEPING IT ALL ON THE LEVEL

Human perception appreciates a level horizon. We have an inherent notion that the horizon is how it is. So when we create photographic images that depict it otherwise, it messes with our brains. It can unbalance us.

A skewed horizon line will bother some people more than it bothers others. Much like a picture hanging crooked on a wall, some people will hardly notice. Others, like me, can be mildly irritated, or irked to the extreme.


Keeping your balance is important. You'll fall over if you don't. A strong, straight horizon line provides a visual foundation to an image. In an image with a clear, straight horizon that is not level, everything else in the composition looks slanted. Where the horizon line is clear but not straight, keeping it level is not so vital. For example, you can get away with a crooked horizon when you are photographing mountains because it is not so obvious if it's a little off.



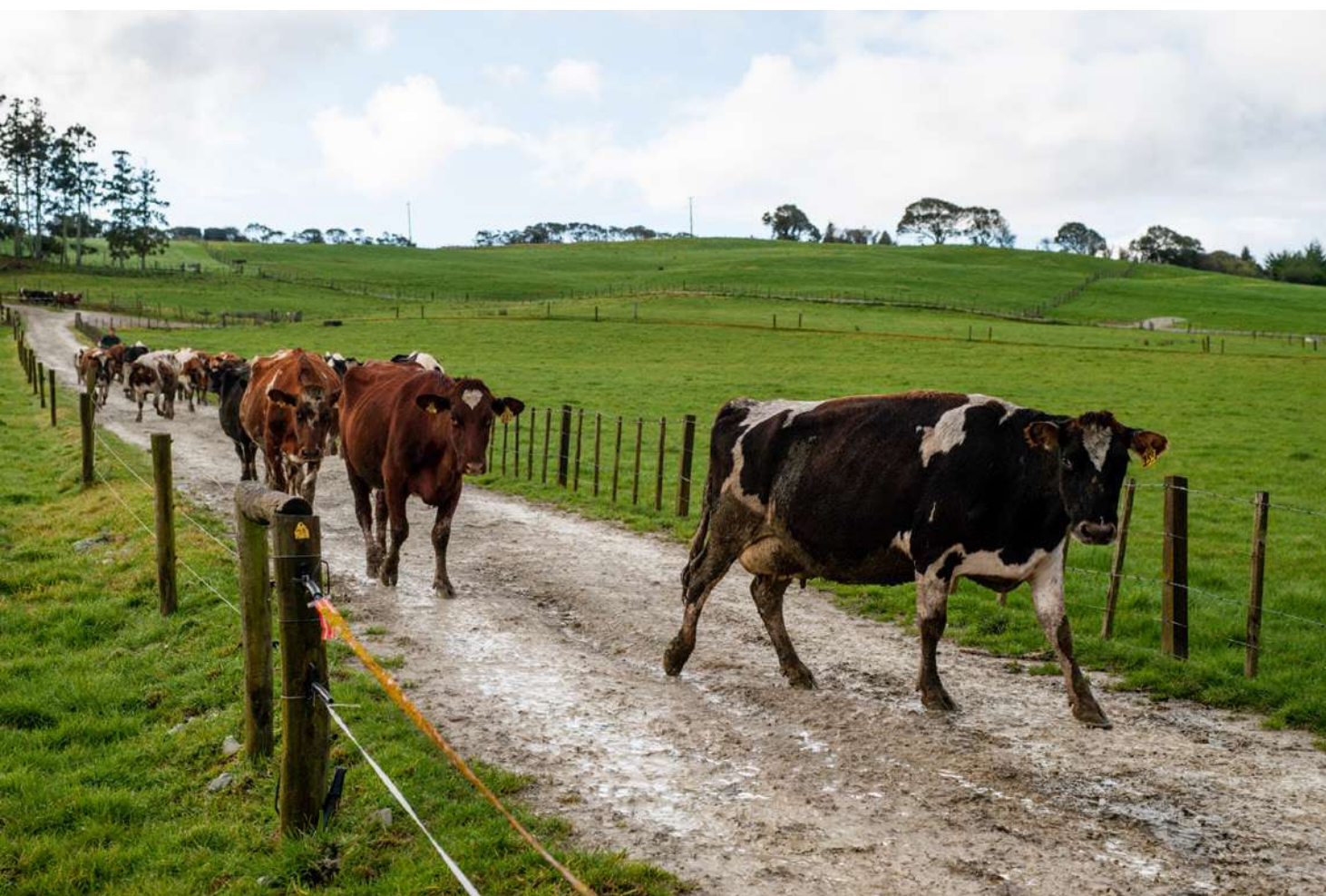
Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

In seascapes and flat landscapes especially, you need to keep the horizon level or make sure it's very intentionally crooked. I'll get to this more later in this guide. In any photo that has a flat horizon, it's far more noticeable when that line is errant. We've all seen photos of yachts appearing as though they are sailing downhill. Not only is the horizon off-kilter, but the boat's mast is not vertical.

When the horizon is a clear and important aspect of your composition, it pays to give attention to it before pressing the shutter button. Seeing that your horizon is not straight when you're editing photos can be most frustrating.

 **Key Lesson:** Use the gridlines feature on your camera to help keep your horizons level. This feature is often turned off by default. You'll need to locate it in your menu and activate it. Gridlines will then appear on your camera's monitor and maybe in your viewfinder, depending on what camera you use.

Some cameras also have a level indicator. This graphic can be displayed when you're using live view or if your camera has an electronic viewfinder. When the camera is level, the display indicates this, usually by changing the color of the horizontal line.




Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

HOW A LEVEL HORIZON AFFECTS OTHER ELEMENTS OF YOUR COMPOSITION

Even when you compose a photograph with no clear horizon, making sure your camera is level helps make a stronger image. When you have bold vertical lines that people expect to be vertical, it's important to make sure that they are. Think of buildings, power poles, tall straight trees, and other vertical elements. We intuitively expect them to appear straight up and down, and so they are often best presented like this in your photos.

Wide-angle lenses can complicate vertical lines. When tilting a camera up or down when photographing strong vertical lines with a wide-angle lens, the lines appear to converge. No matter how straight and level you keep the horizon, the verticals will not look straight up and down.

Composing photos with a clear, flat horizon and strong vertical lines has more of an impact when using a wide-angle lens. When the horizon is not level and your camera is tilted up or down, the vertical lines will look most unbalanced.

 **Key Lesson:** Make sure to hold your camera level both horizontally and vertically, especially when photographing clear horizon lines with a wide-angle lens.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

WHEN IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOUR LINES ARE STRAIGHT OR NOT

I opened with a quote from master photojournalist W. Eugene Smith. A quick search of his images that include a horizon line shows that he was not so concerned about keeping it on the level. His focus was on portraying his subject to help the narrative of the story he was telling.

A strong composition of an interesting subject captivates attention. Viewers may not even notice when a horizon line is running downhill. Whether or not a photographer pays much attention to the horizon when they compose such images is not so relevant. What makes an impact are other elements in the composition. When there are no other strong straight lines included, the impact of a crooked horizon is minimal.

The presence of a nice straight horizon along with other prominent lines in a composition affects our perception of the horizon. In images like that, when the horizon is not level, it tilts our impression of the scene. Everything looks like it's leaning.

Photographs in which the horizon is not so relevant to the overall composition have a lesser effect on our perception. So, for a photojournalist or a landscape photographer, the focus of whether a horizon line is kept level has dissimilar significance.

I took this photo of one of our dogs in the rice fields. Because the horizon line is not straight, I made sure the line at the edge of the field was. The lines of the path leading to it make it vital that the line is level.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

In this photo taken during the same walk, the line is not level. To me, this does not matter at all. I was concentrating on capturing a very close photo of my dog. She doesn't pose well for me, so I needed to be quick before she ran off to play. I was more concerned about having both her ears in the frame without being cropped. Because my depth of field is shallow and the line of the rice is quite blurred, it means the tilt has less of an impact on a viewer's perception of it.

💎 Key Lesson: When you're photographing some action where you can see a horizon and want to keep it level, give your composition some room. Zoom out a little or move back from your subject. Then if your horizon is not level, you can crop it more easily when you're editing. If you crop tight when you take the photo, it may not be possible to level the horizon line when you edit without cropping some of your subject as well.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

WHEN YOU MEAN TO LEAN

Filmmakers use a technique called the Dutch Angle, or Dutch Tilt, to convey a sense of unease in a scene. This is where the camera is deliberately tilted off-axis as a scene is recorded. It was first made popular by German directors way back in the days of silent movies.

Photographers have also adopted this technique for making still images that evoke a sense of discomfort or distress. It works to stir up this type of feeling because it plays with our subconscious. Our brains want the horizon to be level. When we see that it's not level in a photo or movie, whether we recognize it or not, we can feel ill at ease.

Making good use of the Dutch Tilt technique must be deliberate. You want to evoke an uncomfortable feeling in viewers. This is best achieved when you carefully compose and control the angle of your camera to your advantage.

This technique is made use of whether or not a clear horizon is included in the frame. Because the camera angle generally needs to be exaggerated, the lack of horizon can still mean we feel troubled by it. Including a flat horizon in Dutch Tilt images tends to amplify the effect.



Key Lesson: Throwing a horizon off-kilter works best when it's intentional and exaggerated. If the tilt is minimal, it will most likely appear as though the photographer made a mistake when taking the photo. Use this technique when you want to create a sense of unease.



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CONCLUSION

It's best to use any composition rule intentionally so it adds to the story your photograph is telling. Thinking about how you want viewers to perceive your image helps you know when to break the rules or to keep them.

Keeping the horizon line level is a little different than most composition rules. This is because a crooked horizon messes with our subconscious perception. When this is purposefully exploited, the results can have a pronounced impact on how viewers might feel when looking at a photo.

Always keep a clear horizon straight unless your intention is to potentially unsettle anyone who views your photo. Make good use of the tools that your camera provides to help you do this. Turn on the gridlines in your viewfinder and on your monitor. If your camera has a level indicator, turn it on and check to see if your horizon line is on the level.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) Is it necessary to always straighten the horizon line?
- 2) Does human perception appreciate a level horizon line?
- 3) What are two types of photos where you usually need to keep the horizon level?
- 4) Which features on your camera can help you keep the horizon level?
- 5) What kind of lenses can complicate the inclusion of vertical lines in photos?
- 6) How can you better compose an image when you are photographing some action that also includes a horizon line?
- 7) What is the name of the technique where the photographer purposefully does not keep the horizon level?
- 8) When is this technique best used?



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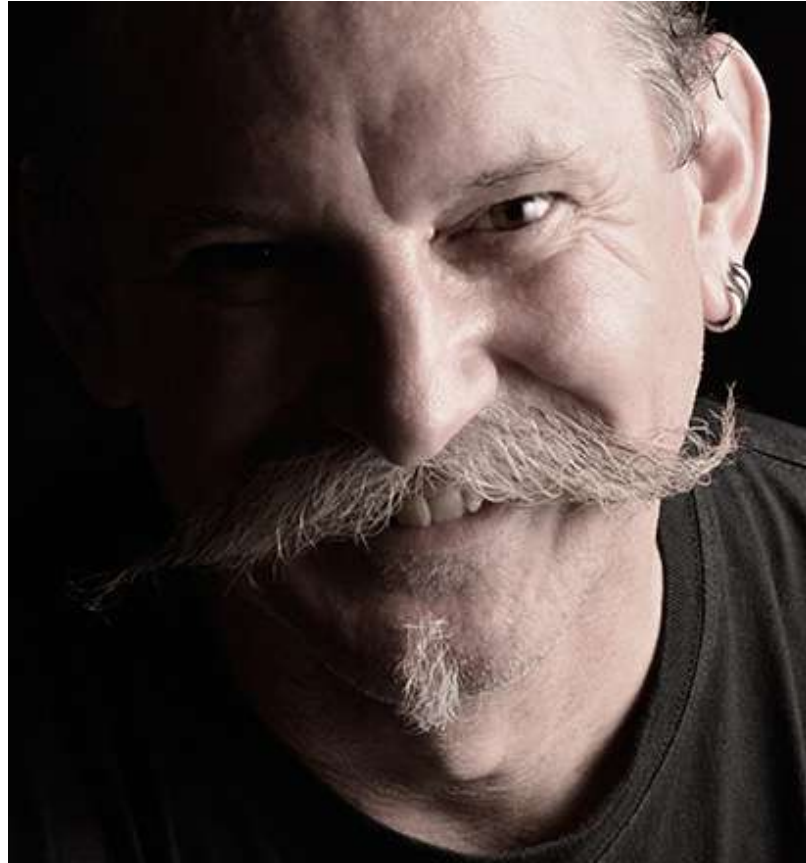
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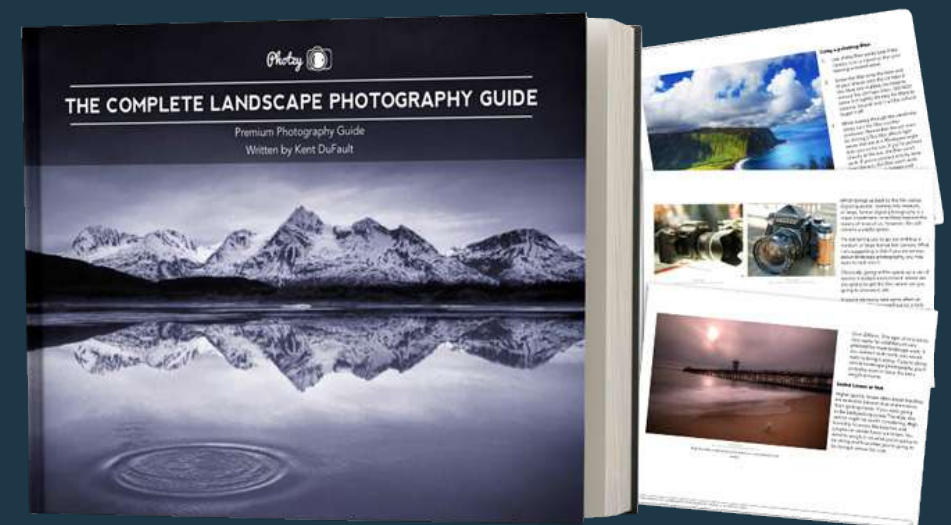
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kevin is a New Zealand professional photographer living in the north of Thailand since 2002. During his career he has worked in editorial, documentary, and commercial photography. He now also teaches photography workshops and writes books and articles. You can read his blog [here](#). He runs [photography workshops based at his home](#) in rural northern Thailand.

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