Diver
explores
cenote

"There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographs."
– Ansel Adams

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What is Composition? In its most basic definition, composition is the arrangement of elements and their relationship to one another within an image. It is composition—as well as lighting—that is the primary tool with which photographers put themselves into an image and emphasize the subject(s) in the frame. So, it's important to put your own creative touch on composition. There is no right or wrong to composition—it's definitely an art, not a science.

That being said, there are a few tried and true fundamentals of composition that are almost guaranteed to make your images more visually pleasing to audiences.

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Composition

Composition doesn't just happen
Beginning photographers often see a subject they like and just start shooting. While it is often easier just to be a shutterbug, taking the time to think about how the subject would look best in the frame and within its environment can dramatically increase the impact of the image.

This guide is intended to provide you with some basic composition tips that will help improve your images and serve as a starting point from which you can eventually develop your own creative vision. Many of these tips are not only applicable to underwater photography, but can also prove useful in your topside

photography endeavors as well.

When first approaching how to compose a shot, the first thing you must consider is the best way to generally orientate the shot—horizontally (landscape) or vertically (portrait). Be sure to approach every subject with an open mind. Feel free to shoot both portrait

and landscape images of the same subject; sometimes you might surprise yourself and find the orientation that you wouldn't have originally chosen is better than you thought.

Enough 'fish butts' & dorsal fins
When diving we are in a three dimen-

Cuttlefish (left)
Lizardfish (center)
Blenny (right)

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Don't cut off your subject
Avoid cutting off parts of your subject with the edges of the frame. Sometimes it is okay to not include the entire subject in the photo- this is usually true for creative macro

Just as we show a lot of expression in our eyes, so do our fishy friends. Therefore, it's only natural for us to be drawn to the eye in an image.

If you are shooting with large apertures or with high magnifi-

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sional world; and when swimming over a reef, we are usually looking down on the life below. Resist the urge to just start shooting the top of the fish. You will usually need to get below the fish, or at least at eye level, in order to make a pleasing image. Therefore, always remember this when composing your shots—"get low and shoot up." No more dorsal fin shots!

Another common mistake is scaring the subject and then chasing after it to get the shot. Fish swim faster than you. You will never catch up. You will end up with "fish butt" shots.

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Instead, be patient and take the time to wait until the subject is facing you. As to be discussed later, eyes are the most important part of the subject: a viewer can't relate to a subject without eyes.

shots where the frame is filled with a strategic part of a subject. Cutting off parts of the subject with the frame is best used consciously as a creative tool, like shooting face portraits or eye-shots. However, cutting off part of the subject otherwise meant be included in its entirety will result in an image that subconsciously reads as being incomplete.

Focus on the eyes
Some people say that the most important rule of wildlife photography is making sure the eyes of the subject are in sharp focus. Out of focus eyes means often results in the loss of your audience's focus.

cation macro lenses that have shallow depths of fields, it is very important that you ensure sharp focus on the subject's eye. Luckily, eyes usually offer good contrast and auto-focus can pick them up well. By locking the focus on the eye, and then composing your image, you have the best chance of keeping this important feature sharp.

Give fish room to swim
You should always remember to place any subject, or potential subject for that matter, well way from the frame's edge with room "swim into the frame". In other words, there should be more

Anthia (right)
Diagonal Blenny
(far right)
Turtle and
angelfish
(lower right)

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space in front of the swimming fish then behind it. If the moving object is close the edge, it looks like it may "swim" off the edge, which subconsciously makes the viewer uncomfortable.
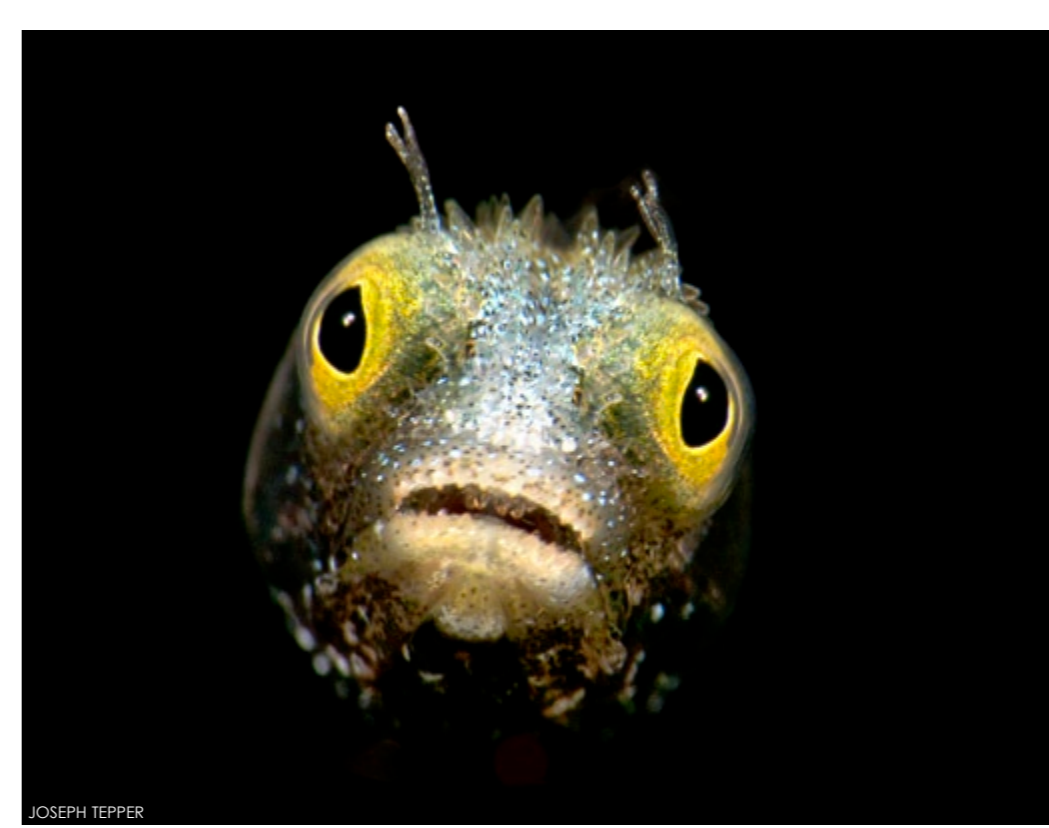
The rule of thirds
—Don't aim for the bulls eye
The rule of thirds might as well be called the golden rule of photographic composition. This rule dictates that an image should be divided up into thirds both horizontally and vertically, and that the important elements of the image should fall on or close to the

intersections. Aligning key compositional elements of the image with these intersection points will make an image more interesting.

You will notice that most great landscape images have key subject matter offset from the center and do not have the horizon smack dab in the middle, but closer to one of these lines. The rule is mainly applied so photographers avoid placing the main point of interest in the middle of the frame, which is referred to as "bulls eyeing" and will often produce a boring image.

Lines, shapes and colors
Diagonal lines
Adding a diagonal flow to the placement of your subject(s) and/or background, can be one of the major ways to make your images more dynamic and create more interest for the viewer.
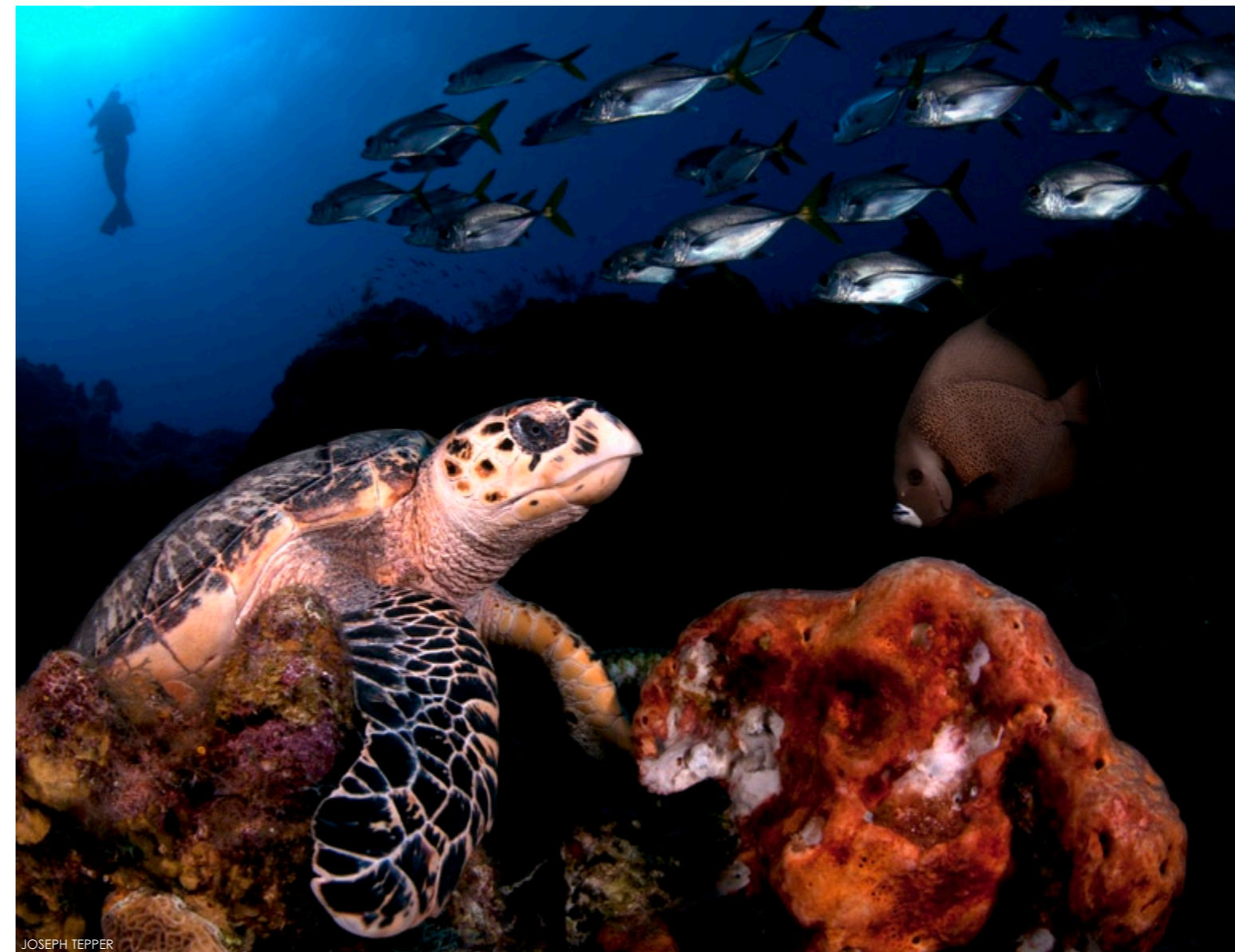
Non-diagonal lines
Lines are everywhere in the underwater world; you just have to pay attention. Using these lines effectively can help improve an image's composition.

Different types of lines have different qualities that can change the impact of the image. For example, vertical lines imply strength and power—if you wanted to emphasize the size of something, say, large barrel sponges or massive stalactites, shooting them vertically can help.

Horizontal lines are said to indicate rest or leisure. Shooting a goby resting on coral horizontally may imply that the goby is not moving and perched on the coral.
Leading lines

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Moray eel (left); Ornate ghost pipefish (far left); S-curve shark (bottom)

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sponges and soft corals in the background of the image distracting the eye from the subject. As a diver and underwater photographer, if you cannot find a subject on your display screen, it is highly unlikely an untrained eye will be able to.

The human eye can easily distinguish between different elements in nature; however, once photographed, subjects have a tendency to melt into the scene, merging the background with the foreground. Thus, the aforementioned nudibranch stands out to your eye, but not in your image.

Often, subjects are not situated against a good background. The challenge is to figure out a way to create proper contrast between your subject and your background. The most obvious way to eliminate distractions is to change your position or angle. Sometimes we are so excited to

Lines are often essential in creating "eye flow", or in other words, the path the viewer takes when looking at an image. In a well-composed image, the photographer will have dictated where the viewer starts looking at the image and the path their eyes travel across the image using careful composition. The audience's entering and exiting points when viewing the image should not be arbitrary.

Leading lines are lines that lure the viewer, either through the image or to important features. Often diagonal lines act as leading lines by starting in one corner and leading the viewer's eye to the

opposite corner. Try aligning your leading lines with your rule of thirds intersections.

The S-curve
S-curves are an interesting type of leading line. An S-curve need not be strictly an 'S' shape, but rather some sort of curved or zigzagged line. The point of the curve is to allow viewers to really get into the image as they follow the line through the frame. S-curves in topside images are often used in peaceful scenes, such as winding streams in the countryside, footpaths in forests, or fences on farms. The organic shape of the line naturally lends itself to creating "eyeflow".

Underwater, an s-curve can be almost anything. When shooting macro, you can incorporate s-curves by shooting long subjects such as pipefish or gobies in a curved position, or subjects that naturally curve in multiple directions like seahorses or sea snakes.

When shooting wide angle, you

can use the s-curve similarly to topside shooters, finding lines within coral formations or among larger animals that pull the viewer in and through the image. Additionally, large schools of fish often form s-curves, and when captured in an image will give the school a sense of order.

Beware of the background
Creating contrast between the foreground and the background is sometimes difficult, but always essential. Failing to do so can lead to the viewer being distracted from the main subject by the unsightly background.

A common situation: you have spotted a rare nudibranch (or other subject of interest) and overcome with excitement you adjust your strobes, focus and fire. You take a quick a look at your LCD screen to review the shot, and notice it's well exposed but you can't find the subject. Well, the little guy is hard to find because there are a few different colored
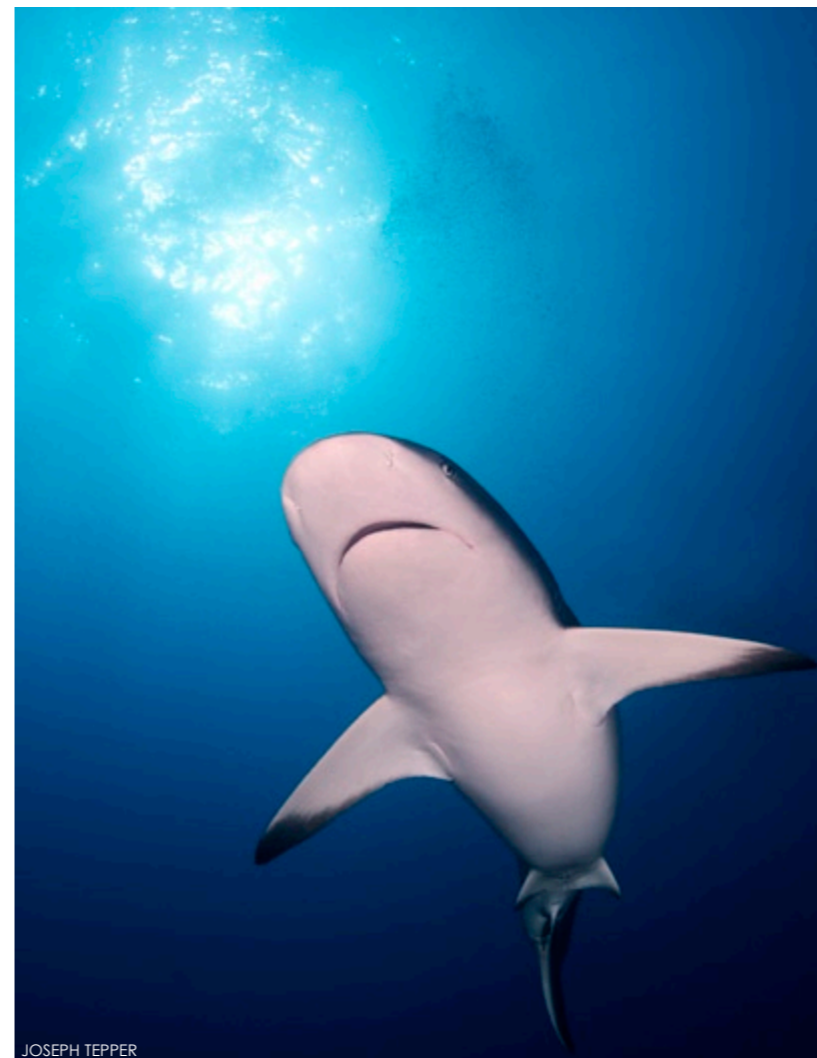
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Bokeh lizardfish (left)

Juvenile spotted drum (bottom)

decreasing the amount of light that hits the sensor. If you use extreme side or top lighting, you can light up the foreground subject, while minimizing the light in the background, thereby reducing its effect on the image.

Alternatively, you can use a large aperture to blur the background. Sometimes this lets too much light into the background, but an out of focus distracting background can be better than an in focus one. Sometimes if there is a distracting coral in the background, using a larger aperture can blur it out so it's actually an interesting background. This technique is called *bokeh* and is a more advanced technique.

Contrasting colors

Setting your primary subject against a contrasting color is a surefire way to create images that pop off the screen or page! Choosing the color of a background to complement the subject, be it blue or green water, a blacked out background or the colors of another object can make or break an image.

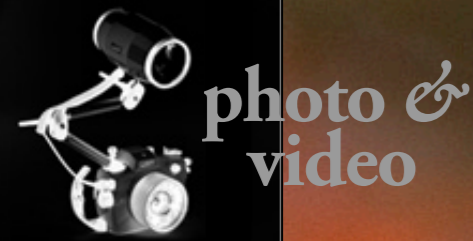For example, an image of a beautiful red soft coral is more visually striking when taken against a blue background

find a subject that we try and shoot it in whatever way we first approach it. Step back and think —what is in the background and is there a better background from a different position or angle?

Shooting at an upward angle in order get more open water in the frame is a common way photographers remove distracting backgrounds. By minimiz-

ing the amount of "stuff" that is in the frame you add emphasis on the subject. Having more than a few primary points of interest in an image is very distracting.

Tip: If you can't frame the foreground so that it is separated from the background, adjusting your settings may help. Try closing your aperture and increasing your shutter speed, thus

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of open water rather than against a busy background of the various life forms on a wall. While you may know that the subject was the red coral, it may be hard for your uniformed viewer to tell what the subject is.

Macro photographers often isolate subjects on monochromatic background like plain black or flat blue. A lot of times a colorful macro subject looks good when contrasted with a pure black background.

Negative space
Using the negative space—the part of the frame that has no shapes or objects–can become a major element of your composition. In underwater photography we ordinarily refer to the blue (or green) water or black backgrounds as the negative space.

Of course, good use of negative space implies that the subject is an area in which negative space can be utilized properly. Given that underwater photographers are shooting wild animals that have not been posed in anyway, this is not always possible. In these cases, you just do the best you can. Just because you spot a subject doesn't necessarily mean it is in proper location to be shot—this can be the most frustrating of all!

Framing your subject
Framing subjects with other objects or with negative space is more challenging, but can yield very pleasing results. A cuttlefish with a black background can be nice, but if you can also light up two nice red sea fans that it's swimming between, the image becomes more interesting. See the whole frame. Think about if it can be improved. Then shoot.

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Flounder eye (above); Clownfish (top left); Underwater photographer and sea turtle (lower left)

Creating a sense of scale
Wide-angle photographers often utilize objects in the background to increase the appeal of the image. Often a model (another diver) is placed in one of the upper corners of the background, following the rule of thirds, to create depth and show perspective. With just open water in the background, it's impossible to get a sense of the depth. Placing a relatable subject in the background will create perspective. The key here is that we can relate to the size of another human, and use it to get a sense of size and depth in an image.

If you don't have a model off-hand, including another object, like the silhouette of your dive boat, in the background can also achieve similar effects. With patience, an interesting animal like a shark or turtle may swim in the frame in a way that can provide a similar sense of perspective.

Fill the frame
Lastly, if shooting macro you can get in closer to try and fill the frame as much as possible with the subject. Sometimes a close-up portrait is better than a full body shot with a distracting background.

Rules are meant to be broken
These rules are just guidelines. As with every rule, there are always exceptions. Really great composition comes from a photographer's imagination, and truly fantastic images are products of creativity—not a list of rules. Think outside the box, but keep these guidelines in the back of your head when first starting out. Remember, rules were meant to be broken!

For more information about underwater photography, check out the comprehensive Techniques Guide on DivePhotoGuide.com ■