

Booklet #17: The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs

## **BREAKING THE RULES**

by

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## PREFACE

The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs (NVACC) is an informal organization started in 1997 by Joseph Miller with the assistance of Dave Carter\* and Ed Funk. Our purpose is to promote communication and cooperation among camera clubs. We accomplish this by (a) publishing a monthly calendar of the member clubs' activities; (b) conducting training seminars for photographic judges; (c) maintaining a registry of trained judges who serve the clubs' monthly competitions and critiques; and (d) maintaining a directory of speakers who have been recommended by the various clubs. You can learn more about NVACC by going to our web site at [www.NVACC.org](http://www.NVACC.org).

This booklet is one of a series that was developed by NVACC during the period 1998-2008 to capture the considerable expertise of the many accomplished photographers in Northern Virginia and share it with others. Over recent years, we have seen significant change in the photographic art form and very rapid technical advance in both the media of photography (film and digital) and the tools (cameras, lenses, computers, and software). For that reason, the detail of some of these booklets may seem "dated", although the ideas and techniques presented transcend "progress" and the digital-film divide. Watch the NVACC web for new booklets as well as revisions that incorporate new technology and ideas into the existing ones.

Originally, our booklets were made available through member clubs for a small fee that covered the cost of reproduction. Now, however, the booklets are available on [www.NVACC.com](http://www.NVACC.com) where individuals may download one machine-readable copy and one print copy per page for personal, noncommercial use only. Written permission from NVACC is required for any other use.

If you would like to know more about NVACC or have questions or suggestions concerning our booklets or services, please feel free to contact us at [JoeMiller@NVACC.org](mailto:JoeMiller@NVACC.org).

\* Dave Carter, the creator of this booklet and a founding father of NVACC has passed but his photographic skill and artistic vision live on in the technique of all photographers who were fortunate enough to work with him.



## Breaking the Rules

We are often told, "Rules are meant to be broken." Yet photographers slavishly go right on following so-called "rules." These rules include, in most instances, principles of composition. Many of these rules are useful within limits and the photographer should be aware of them. The reader may wish to refer to "Some Important Principles of Composition," by Dave Carter, Booklet No. 3 in this series.

We believe that there are times rules can and should be broken. The purpose of this booklet is to discuss rules in terms of when they can be broken to your advantage. As Freeman Patterson is fond of saying, "The only rule to follow in photography is never process color film in chicken noodle soup."

The list of rules which we have chosen to discuss is not exhaustive. As you find other rules in photography, question them. You may want to give yourself an assignment to take pictures which intentionally violate the rules. Try to make these images as creative and as successful as you can.

*The Rule of Thirds.* This rule requires that you place the subject at a "power point." If we divide the frame into thirds vertically and horizontally, the four points of intersection, where the imaginary lines cross, are called power points.

Most judges feel that the subject should be placed at these power points. This sometimes works, but it is not a given. Moving the subject to a power point frequently leaves your image unbalanced. That may be all right if you want to convey a feeling of tension.

More often than not, however, we may wish to convey a pleasant feeling or to show stability. In these instances we want a balanced picture and it will require something else in the frame. For example, consider an abandoned house beside barren trees. The trees provide balance. That is to say, there is as much visual interest on one side as on the other.

Be sure you don't place the center of interest at a power point without providing something else in the frame which provides balance. If you consistently place the center of interest at power points, your photography is in danger of become stale, boring and unimaginative.

Whether located at a power point or not, we don't feel that every picture requires a center of interest, but more about that later.

There are times when we photograph subjects and give them the same amount of space of either side. *Center placement is a way of insuring a balanced picture.*

There is a corollary to the rule of thirds; always show in your pictures either one third sky and two thirds land or *vice versa*. Sometimes this works, but be careful that your

pictures have variety.

There is nothing sacred about the one-third, two-thirds ratio. Use it when it works, but be flexible, imaginative and creative. You sometimes want to divide the picture in the center. Consider a picture of a long row of buses lined up side by side. They are photographed at an oblique angle so that the more distant buses are much smaller than buses in the foreground. The buses are parked on wet pavement, and in the pavement we see a clear reflection of the buses above. The picture is divided into two parts, equally shared by the buses and their reflections. Deliberately dividing the picture in two stresses the symmetry of the image. Neither half of the picture is more important than the other half.

*The subject must fill the frame.* We disagree. Imagine a picture of a still life where 50 marbles of the same size fill the frame. All the marbles are blue except one which is yellow. Although yellow occupies only a small percent of the picture space, the yellow marble stands out. In general, that which is different often is most obvious to the viewer.

*There must be a center of interest.* While judges often make this statement, we disagree. Pattern shots and most abstracts do not have a center of interest, and yet they can make wonderful images. Consider a picture of ripples in sand where side lighting brings out a sense of texture. If there were a center of interest, let's say an animal, an entirely different story would be told.

*The foreground is more important than the background.* It is essential to realize that all of the picture space is important. Indeed, it is good advice to "compose for the background." Consider a picture of a flower where the background is intentionally thrown out of focus. If there is a hot spot in the background, the eye will be drawn away from the flower toward the lighter area. If we cannot avoid hot spots in the background, make sure they are uniformly spread throughout the picture space.

Sometimes an element in the background is the subject. Imagine a landscape of stacked rectangles consisting of fields of brown having various tones. At the very top of the picture is a lone tree with a round, green top. Because of the different shape and color, the tree is the center of interest even though it is very small and far away in the background. Once again, the odd element stands out.

Imagine a picture of a young man on a skate board skating as fast as he can towards some cement steps. He is about to skate off into the air and land at the foot of the steps. In the distance are three of his friends, somewhat out of focus. The expressions on their faces and their body language show tension as they worry about their friend who is attempting a dangerous stunt. The boys in the background are not the subject, but they are important because they emphasize the dangers of skate boarding.

*The image must have immediate impact.* Photographers often try to take pictures with immediate impact, especially if they are shooting for competition. It is true that immediate impact is useful in competition, primarily because judges have little time to

look at each image. However, we may wish to make images that lack immediate impact. Said another way, we may want our images to be subtle.

Consider a picture of a vast field with a rock in the foreground at the left and a mountain in the background at the right. There is a tendency for the eye to move back and forth between those two elements, especially if they are placed at power points. Away from the perceived line which runs between these two elements is a small group of deer in the middle of a vast field of dying brown grasses. We do not notice the deer at first, but all of a sudden we spot the deer in the image. This is a subtlety which mimics our real visual experience. It is often the case that we fail to see deer at first in a scene which we have looked at for several seconds or even minutes. In this picture, the deer are our subject, and the viewer discovers them in much the same way as we might in a real situation.

Photojournalists, in particular, are concerned about images with immediate impact because they know readers will spend only a few scant moments before turning the page. But we should be more concerned about the lasting power of our images. How would the image fare on our walls if we had to look at it every day? As Oscar Wilde said, "It's not love at the beginning, but love at the end of the season which is so important."

*The image must be properly exposed.* The question is, what is "properly exposed?" It may not be the exposure indicated by your meter. Darker images often communicate an ominous feeling and we may deliberately underexpose the picture to produce this feeling. Overexposed pictures, on the other hand, may convey a light hearted or airy feeling. We can, and often do, manipulate mood through exposure.

As you know, film is unable to handle properly a wide range of tonal values. For slide film, which we primarily use, we expose for the highlights, knowing that the shadows may be underexposed. Because of the limitations of film, we generally avoid photographing scenes where the tonal range is beyond the limits film can handle.

*The image must be sharp.* Quite the contrary. We often use selective focus where only the subject is sharp. This requires opening up as wide as possible in order to blur out the background. This is a way of quickly directing the viewer's attention to the subject.

Sometimes, we want to have the entire picture out of focus. This is often the case when we make abstracts or wish to simulate impressionism. Multiple exposure photography often gives an image the appearance of being unsharp.

In creative photography there are several techniques that intentionally make the image appear unsharp. These consist of using soft focus filters, placing a woman's stocking over the front of the lens, and putting hair spray on a cheap filter.

*The photographer must fill the frame.* We often hear this from judges. But the question is, fill the frame with what? We certainly do not always want to fill the frame with the

subject, assuming there is a subject. We may want to leave some "breathing room." We sometimes want our subject to exist within a context, and that context may require a rather large portion of the picture space. Consider an image of a man in a forest. The man is the subject and the forest is the context. Making the forest occupy a large portion of the picture space enhances the feeling of the smallness of the man and the overwhelming size of the forest.

A word should be said about negative space. Negative space is often necessary. By negative space we mean there is an absence of specific information, yet that space supports the rest of the picture. Imagine an image of a man gazing into the night sky. A large black area separates the man from a single star at the top of the image. The black area is negative space, but it is necessary to convey the feeling of the vastness of the sky.

*Color pictures must have bright colors.* We disagree. Often we have taken images that have only subtle colors, and many times they are more satisfying. Take, for example, a field of hay with soft, muted browns. Another example might show a man walking from his farmhouse to the barn in the middle of a snowstorm. There is very little color, but the picture does an excellent job of conveying the bleakness of winter. In fact, many pictures contain no bright colors and yet they work perfectly well. Be aware that the introduction of a bright color, even if it is small in the picture space, can completely change the mood of a picture.

Frequently we find monochrome pictures to be very effective, particularly when there are shadings of the same color within the picture space — in other words, when the tonal range is wide. If it were truly monochrome, and had no variations of tone, the picture basically would be a blank, boring image. We see what we see because of a contrast of color and/or a contrast of tone.

*Edges and corners are less important than the center.* In fact, edges and corners are very important. When objects appear at the edges or in corners, they take on special importance and are readily noticed. Consider a stray bit of tree branch that intrudes at the edge of your picture and ruins the composition. We once critiqued a picture of a young lady that showed someone's nose intruding on the right hand side. That nose was the first thing we noticed in the picture.

All of us are familiar with landscape pictures where the omnipotent beer can finds its way into the image at the edge of the frame. The beer can is noticed even more because it is at the edge of the frame. Most cameras do not have viewfinders which show 100 percent of the image that will appear on film. It is critical you make certain that no unwanted elements intrude into the picture space. Get to *know your viewfinder*.

Because of the importance of edges, the photographer must be careful to keep buildings and other objects parallel to the edge of the picture frame. Things tilt when we point our camera upward and downward. We have seen some images where extreme

tilt works well, but it was clear that that was the intent of the photographer.

*Odd numbers work best.* Often this is true, but there are exceptions. Consider a picture of two flowers. This may not

work because there is no interaction between the two flowers. Indeed, they may serve as two subjects producing a divided center of interest. But consider a picture of two people talking to each other. This may work well because the two people serve as a single subject. Thus, there is no divided center of interest. In general, pictures where there are only two objects need a feeling of interaction. As the numbers increase, it is less important whether the numbers are odd or even.

*A subject must look or move into the picture space.* This is not necessarily true. Josef Karsh once took a famous picture of Pablo Casals playing the cello with his back to the camera. In most cases you probably will want to have the subject looking into the picture, but always consider the alternatives. For example, a race car placed at the edge of the picture space, seemingly going out of the picture, may suggest extreme speed.

In 1961 President Kennedy invited former President Eisenhower to Camp David to discuss the Bay of Pigs fiasco. A famous picture resulted showing the two presidents walking away, their backs to the camera. A journalist wrote: "Only three months in office, Kennedy has a world crisis on his hands... he needs help. He turns to the old man... Ike has been here many times. They pose for a few shots with the press, and then Ike turns to the young man and says, 'Come on up here. I know a place where we can talk.' The photographers turn away, all except one. Paul Vathis, AP photographer, watches them as they walk away. There were just the two of them, all by themselves, their heads bowed, walking up the path. They looked so lonely..." The picture with their backs to the camera indicates that they cannot share the conversation they are having, and there are no facial expressions to give a clue as to their thoughts.

*Portraits must have a catch light in the eye.* Catch lights, because of their lighter tones, draw attention to the eyes. But sometimes we don't want to emphasize the eyes. An example might be where we wish to stress the gnarled hands of an older person. A person of dull intellect or personality might be best shown without a catch light. Likewise, leaving out the catch light may add an aura of mystery or intrigue to the person depicted. Think carefully about the portraits you make. What do you want to say about the person?

*Bigger prints are better than smaller prints.* Often when we judge competitions we see prints that are too large for the subject matter. Bigger is not necessarily better. Where there is a feeling of intimacy, a smaller print may be more effective. Certainly a poor picture is not made better by making it larger.

*A final word.* We hope this booklet will help you be more creative. We often have to break the rules to produce unique images. That is one of the things you may need to do

in order to become a creative photographer. In general, others will expect you to follow the so-called "rules." Don't be afraid to break the rules, but break them only when it will make the picture better. You always should be able to articulate the reasons you make an image the way you do.

### **Recommended Reference**

Carter, Dave. Some Important Principles of Composition. Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs. 1998.