60 Photographic Rules for People Images

- *To Use or Abuse*

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Introduction

Rules on People Photography are supposed to guide us to better images. Some Rules work well; others less so. Some Rules are frequently written-up. Some rules are passed word of mouth. Some photographers will live by them; others see their mission as to break them. Many contradict each other – sorry.

Here then is my compendium from many hours listening to regional judges and Assessors; screening of the best online and academic resources; and some mining of photographic media.

I have tried to illustrate each one: sometimes **_using_** the Rule; sometimes **_abusing_** the Rule for variety.

Rules #1 to #10 are the most commonly cited.

The choice is now yours. In your pursuit of the best People images, will you use them or abuse them? There is merit and photographic value to be had in either path.

How many of these Rules do you already know?

All feedback to improve them is most welcome.

#1 Cropping

Use cropping to isolate the person(s) from busy Backdrops to simplify or remove irrelevant elements.

Comments:
The crop here is very tight to minimise the busy crowd. The 2 main heads, the left man's upper body and hands are just kept in frame (too tight for some people!).

#2 Fill The Frame

Use the available space to portray the subject.

Comments:
A wide angle shot from the waist set at F22, no more than 0.5M from the subject filled much of the frame. A more distant use of a telephoto would not of had the same drama.

#3 Rule of Thirds

Locate features such as faces or hands 1/3 of way on width & height.

Comments:
1/3 head position helps lead our eye to the face despite the stadium behind. The more empty content to the left side also makes the head location work well.

#4 Blown Highlights

Expose to prevent loss of detail in facial highlights, light facing body outlines and Backdrops such as sky.

Comments:
The left side's of all 4 faces & sky were close to burn out in places. The RAW file still had sufficient detail to recover realistic facial tones by reducing Highlights.

#5 Blocked Shadows

Expose to prevent lost details in eyes, hair, clothing and Backdrop shadows.

Comments:
This heavily back-lit image suffered from near-blacks in the man's fleece, hood and boat shadows. RAW file Shadows were boosted to recover some detail without it competing with the main focus – face and hands.

#6 Horizons

Ensure building horizontals and sea horizons in Backdrop are level.

Comments: This Pano was stitched from 4 images. Lightroom is good at finding the horizon and aligning each image. Photoshop Liquify can also correct any curvature by eye.

#7 Verticals

Ensure People and building verticals are not converging.

Comments:
Despite the wide angle lens, both subjects and the wooden shed are now vertical. The Lightroom Transformation Module was used to make initial corrections, then Warp in Photoshop.

#8 Stopping Down

Use a shallow depth of field to isolate your subject from busy Backdrops.

Comments:
This Russian train chef's hair was isolated by standing close then using F5.6 to throw the rest of the carriage out of focus. With hindsight F2 may have been better.

#9 Lead-in Lines

Look for strong compositional lines (such as diagonals) to lead the eye to the People.

Comments:
The window lines and their reflection lead the eye on both sides to the woman. However, the position of the head above the window avoids too much confusion with them.

#10 Sharp-ness

Ensure faces and key elements of the body are in focus but not over-sharpened.

Comments:
The face is sharp but natural (no break-up of skin tones. No other signs of over-processing such thick black or white lines around the head and face). The hand is intentionally out of focus.

#11 Right In Camera

Get the set-up (RAW), framing and exposure right in camera to ease processing.

Comments:
With permission from the subjects, I took my time to compose then expose for faces. A full image size then allowed room for cropping after correcting verticals.

#12 One in a Thousand

Shoot X10 more images to overcome the inherent failure of People images from movement, unwanted facial expressions and Backdrop clashes.

Comments:
I wanted to capture the moment coins were being thrown. Only a Drive sequence at 10 FPS allowed the chance to see it. The Buskers eyes are also looking at them.

#13 Golden Ratio

Place your main subject at the ratio 1 to 1.618 to enhance sense of proportions.

Comments:
The woman's head and closest hand are located approx. 40% in from the right and top edges. This is a more central and more dominant position that the 1/3 Rule and fits People well.

#14 Symmetry

Focus on the symmetry of face, body or look-alikes by locating them in the image centre.

Comments:
I have located the centre of the image between these 2 near-identical women. Even the expressions are similar. For a more complete symmetry I would also have removed the graffiti and shopping bag.

#15 Primary Focus

Compose and use relative light to immediately draw the eye to the key faces/people.

Comments:
This image is telling us about the tension before a race as this spectator checks the time. The watch and face are therefore given more light. The repetition with the second man is a bonus but still made darker.

#16 Left to Right

Position key subject elements from left to right (as the eye tracks) to allow quicker assimilation.

Comments:
The white of the woman's skirt grabs the eye initially, then the sky and bubbles lead us to the TV Cameraman (who crashed my image then became part of it).

#17 Square Aspect

Square can work well with close-ups; landscape works for wider story-telling.

Comments:
This square aspect allows the woman to dominate the frame but provide just enough Backdrop context. A wider image would make the story increasingly more about the location as well.

#18 Negative Space

Use generous featureless Backdrop spaces to portray calmer subjects that do not detract from the subject.

Comments:
Look how the empty beach adds to this story of loneliness. Even the small stumps appear like headstones around him. This Rule is the opposite of '#2, Fill The Frame'.

#19 Foreground Interest

Create a sense of depth or compositional layering by including a related item in front of the subject.

Comments:
The interest here is the ticket which also confirms it is for a ferry and so related to the main story. A manual focus and narrow depth of field were used to give the ticket prominence.

#20 Triangles

Use triangles to strengthen the core composition (eg 3 people, diagonal across corners).

Comments:
This period film set image uses a 3-head triangle as the composition basis.
An empty sky – normally a weakness – makes the triangle clearer.

#21 Visual Continuity

Ensure that the middle of the image (where the eye will naturally look) has some People or Backdrop interest.

Comments: This image abuses the Rule. However, it needs more than the condiments set on the far counter to fill the central void. Perhaps a third person or a different viewing angle to reduce the gap.

#22 Layering

Use multiple compositional layers receding from or moving to the People (an extension of foreground interest).

Comments: This image has 4 layers: the photographer; the party people; the beach huts; the beach and sea. These tend to work only when the viewer is given time to assimilate, not for competitions.

#23 Rhythm

Use similar People or repeating Backdrop patterns to create a compositional rhythm across the image.

Comments: The people in this bus queue are regularly spaced. The man second from left adds amusement to some as to what he is doing.

#24 Framing

Use doorways or trees (for example) to frame the main subject.

Comments: This energetic family were keen to show me their new hut and allowed me in to shoot them framed by the porch and door. This allows much more context to be conveyed.

#25 Overlapping People

Avoid heads/bodies that obscure the main subject (eg by changing view point).

Comments:
All too often with multiple subjects, they will bunch together. In this image, I had to take over 30 images to find one with the least intrusive overlap of the women in the gym class. Still not perfect.

#26 Odd Numbers

Harness the use of odd numbers of People as they tend to be more visually appealing.

Comments:
I was having a funny conversation with these 3 men which shows in their warm faces. I was slow to spot the bottle and that the 'orange juice' was a cocktail. Getting good faces on 3 people is tricky.

#27 Balancing Elements

Incorporate a second element/person to offset the dominance of the Primary Subject.

Comments:
This cycling family were taking a break. The young boy looking to camera is balanced by the scale and posture of his (headless) father.

#28 Vignetting

Help lead the eye to the primary subject by darkening peripheral areas.

Comments:
This woman was lost in thought. The window light could dominate the scene but darkening on all 4 sides helps the eye to lead to her face and hair.

#29 Story-Telling

Tell the Viewer something distinctive about the subject.

Comments:
This man was paying tribute to Falkland soldiers. Many elements help tell the story: his respectful attire, the memorial names, the wooden crosses, the poppies, a fortress wall.
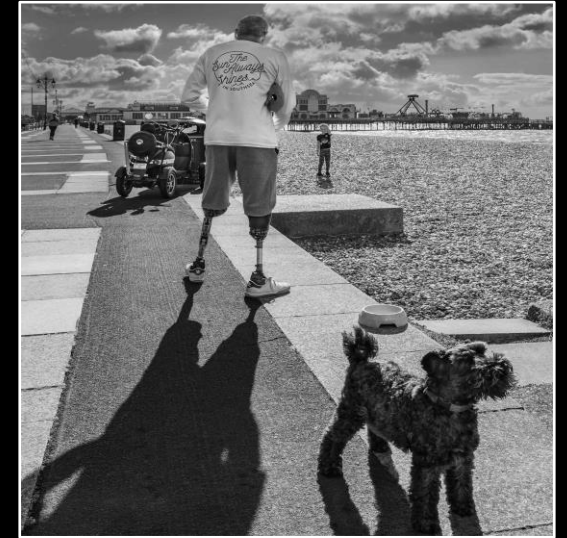

#30 Emotion

Create an emotional connection/reaction (love, hate, fear, anger, laughter, sadness, empathy) between subject and Viewer.

Comments:
This Vet playing with his grandson and dog is helped by the strong shadows highlighting his injuries. For me, it has both happy and sad emotional elements.

#31 Juxta-position

Include one or more element in the scene that contrasts/opposes with the Primary Focus.

Comments:
Here the speed and agility of the daughter is juxtaposed by the slow and less agile grandmother and mother (primary focus).

#32 Eye Contact

Invite the subject to look to camera for strong engagement.

Comments:
I like the proud posture of this otherwise quiet man. He was reluctant to look to camera but gradually I gained a little trust for this environmental portrait.

#33 Authent-icity

Avoid overly contrived/posed postures and Backdrops (including HDR to boost shadows).

Comments:
This slot machine addict was up £15 by 11:00. He was consumed by the machine allowing me close for this candid shot. This is no portrait or posed image. It is a study of someone losing his wallet in one sitting.

#34 Record Shots

Avoid People images that show limited personal photographic vision or value add.

Comments:
I hope this image meets the Rule: there is humour in the faces and dogs; there is drama in the hand gestures; there is sense of place in the scrappy beach; there is intensity in the man's conviction.

#35 Artistic Borrowing

Avoid using Backdrops to a subject where the merit of the image relies heavily on someone else's art.

Comments:
This breaks the Rule. While the mirrored shadows are strong, this picture relies too much (for me) on the humour of the 2 billboards. The man cycling into frame is not adding value to the subject.

#36 Decisive Moments

Select subject images (such as People interactions) taken in the blink of the eye that tells a fleeting story.

Comments:
While focussing on a conversation with the swimmer, two men momentarily walked into frame. There is no combined story here just an interesting piece of momentary chaos.

#37 Coherence

Select People and elements that are consistent in supporting the narrative.

Comments:
This man did not hold back in sharing his politics. The body language conveys his strength of feeling. The newspaper headline however nails the discussion topic - a gift.

#38 Sense Of Place

Select subjects that tell us something about the people, the place, the culture and convey a sense of 'being there'.

Comments:
These late afternoon fishermen were tidying their net. Their modest boat tells us about their prosperity. Their attire tells us about the climate. The dog tells us that food might be scarce.

#39 Selective Chaos

Over-supply the People and supporting elements to force the eye to wonder around the frame to make sense of it.

Comments:
Most of the Rules guide simplification. This is the opposite – a device sometimes used by 'street' photographers. The eye has to scan all of the faces before settling on the twins.

#40 Ambig-uity

Select People's behaviours or actions that leave the Viewer wondering what was actually happening.

Comments:
The behaviour of the parents at right, watched in surprise by the family at left makes us wonder what is going on. Turning my back on the action found this image.

#41 Minam-alism

Make the People element modest to communicate something about the relationship between subject and Backdrop.

Comments:
The sense of isolation of the boy is given by the almost empty seafront. While the subject is 1% of the space, our minds speculate about who he is. The space provides a calming Backdrop.

#42 Faceless

Hide faces (eg back of heads) in order to challenge the Viewer to speculate about the identity of the subject.

Comments:
This Rule contradicts earlier ones. The subject was OK to be photographed - but not his face. The image suggests a sense of shame at not affording a washing machine. No face forces us to speculate about the subject.

#43 Sky Mood

Ensure the mood in sky Backdrops reflects the mood to be conveyed from the subject.

Comments:
This was part of a project on loneliness. He was lost in thought and seemed troubled during a long wait for the bus. A sunny sky would not support the mood.

#44 Text

Avoid the inclusion of large volumes/irrelevant text as the Viewer will wish to read all of it before exploring the Primary Focus.

Comments:
This image breaks the Rule. Including such large text conveys the importance of the dish in our seaside culture. The text is big and brash. Cropping it off would make a weaker story.

#45 Diminish

Avoid images that appear demeaning to the subject even when well intentioned.

Comments:
This environmental portrait of a patient (a keen photographer) who had lost his leg. I hope this appears a sympathetic and respectful image. It would take little to exploit the opportunity and render a more dramatic shot.

#46 Motion

Use slower shutter speeds to create sense of motion of the subject.

Comments:
1/200s was enough to animate the jumping man but maintain sufficient face and body detail. I was fortunate to catch him as his feet left the ground.

#47 ICM

Do not use Intentional Camera Movement (ICM) for People images as the blur is distracting.

Comments:
This contemporary style image breaks the Rule.
You may well share the anger at the man on the TV. ICM (rotation) was used to capture the anger then layered on to a faster shutter speed image to freeze Putin.

#48 Golden Hour

Use the Landscaper Rule of shooting in the early and late light of the day for gentle side lighting.

Comments: These 07:00 Winter Swimmers were emerging as daylight was breaking on the far buildings. For me, the light is weak for people at this time risking blur. An hour or two later would still have had the side-light but with more strength.

#49 Proximity

If your pictures are not good enough, you're not (physically or emotionally) close enough (Robert Capa).

Comments:
Proximity also risks being intrusive so here is a candid compromise that was taken within 0.5M of the subject. However, too much proximity will squeeze Backdrop context out.

#50 Side-Lighting

Use light 90 degrees to camera to delineate characterful faces, lines and attire textures.

Comments:
The sun was appearing from the top righthand corner to give this gardener stronger facial and jacket lines. It would have been better without sunglasses but the joy conveyed is still clear.

#51 Eye Positioning

Centre the dominant eye horizontally across the image (and the line of eyes at or above the vertical centre line).

Comments:
The man is looking to camera with his face at 45 degrees making his right eye dominant. I therefore cropped as close as possible to position the right eye at centre.

#52 Low Viewpoint

Use a lower viewpoint for a more dramatic perspective of the subject and to isolate them from a busy Backdrop.

Comments:
I needed to achieve 2 things: isolate the man from a hectic crowd; capture an arriving storm as Backdrop. The RAW file had to be pushed to balance the light in favour of the man over the sky . A low viewpoint did work though.

#53 High Viewpoint

Use the high viewpoint for greater Backdrop context, abstraction or larger groups.

Comments:
This image was about the couple and their hats. I raised my camera above my head and guessed the angle. Cropping allowed a good composition and enough Backdrop context.

#54 Facial Tones

Avoid excessive processing which creates an un-natural face/skin tones.

Comments:
This commuter's face was side-lit by a sun just above the horizon. Initial post-processing gave ghastly tones so I returned to an early version and left well alone.

#55 Limb Cropping

Ensure figures are either full or cropped to a joint (not dis-membered).

Comments:
This (like many of my images) breaks the Rule. I had the full boot detail but it left the Viewer too far from the stressed expressions of the jockeys. I have left enough of the glossy boots but cropped mid-calf.

#56 Rule Of Space

Allow space in the direction of travel for the subject(s) to move into.

Comments:
It would have been easy to crop this image just to the left of the front boy. This Rule suggests that the boy should have plenty of space to walk into below him. It also affords us a full set of steps and beach hut line.

#57 Head Positioning

Select viewing points to avoid body distractions/intersections from Backdrop by positioning heads/bodies in clear gaps.

Comments:
The shelter and small windows could easily conflict with the man's head. I moved my viewing position to frame him within one of the small windows and avoid the main external shelter post on the left.

#58 Smiles

Avoid excessive smiles as they render the subject 'nice' rather than interesting.

Comments:
A smile, while so natural, can dilute the drama. They can work for humour. In this image, my story is one of austerity: "let them eat cake". Any hint of a smile would have blown the narrative.

#59 Tonality

Yield the full range of tonality (Highs, Midtones and Shadow) in faces and bodies.

Comments:
Strong light will create high contrast images loosing facial midtones. This image shows how softer lighter can be more friendly to faces allowing a fuller tonal range.

#60 Halation or Fringing

Avoid over-sharpening or strong vignetting that creates a halo effect around the subject.

Comments:
Black subjects against white Backdrops can create either a halo or a strong fringe of a few pixels between subject and Backdrop. In this image, I had both. I used gentle sky cloning to remove the halo and localised darkening to remove the fringing.