Scotland's
Urban Past
YOUR TOWN YOUR STREET YOUR STORY

# PHOTOGRAPHY

## Composing your photos

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This guide has been created by Scotland's Urban Past (SUP), a five-year community-engagement project from Historic Environment Scotland.

We support communities to record, research and celebrate the history on their doorsteps.

Through our free training and resources, people of all ages can discover and share the fascinating stories of Scotland's towns and cities.

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# Composing your photos

During your Scotland's Urban Past (SUP) project you may choose to photograph the sites and buildings you are exploring.

This guide offers advice on the composition of images to help you create the best photographs you can, whether you are using your phone, a compact camera or a DSLR camera.

## Your site visit

It is essential to identify any potential hazards and to carry out a risk assessment before visiting a site. Please see our Personal Safety and Risk Assessment informaton for further guidance.

When you first arrive on site, do not take any photographs. Take time to look at the buildings and their surroundings until you have a good understanding of the site and have identified the most suitable viewpoints from which to take your photographs. You might like to make a few sketches at this time too. Consider how you will take each photograph and that if you are using a DSLR camera, a sturdy tripod and adequate time setting up each shot will help you produce your best photographs. A remote shutter release used together with a DSLR and tripod can also eliminate the risk of camera shake.

Looking at your site, consider:

- the topography of the land, such as whether is a hilly or flat area
- as well as the building(s) you are interested in, whether there are there any natural or man-made features, such as a river, canal, railway, bridge, viaduct, tunnel, park, cemetery, an open space or empty building plot
- the general layout of the site and surroundings
- the condition of site and surroundings
- how the surroundings have influenced the site

When you **start** taking photographs first take general views of the site and its surroundings to show its location and the relationship of individual buildings to each other. **Then**, concentrate on individual buildings and structures. **Finally**, look more closely at specific features or details.

Remember, you do not need to photograph every structure and detail; aim instead at capturing a sample of the most interesting structures, features, buildings or other techniques, particularly when these can help your understanding of the current or historical use of the building(s). In addition, straight-on views of buildings can be very useful if you are producing elevations drawings; details of doors, windows, stonework and decoration can be added using the photographs as a reference.

Ensure that every photograph counts: each image should illustrate something relevant to your project. Aim to take fewer photos of a high quality, which usually require thought and preparation, rather than taking hundreds of snaps.

## Format

Before you take each photograph, remember to check that the format of your camera or phone corresponds to the subject: for instance, if you are photographing a tall building, a doorway with or without someone standing in it, a column or anything with vertical emphasis, ensure the long sides of your camera or phone are also vertical; when photographing a wide view, a group of people, architectural, structural or decorative details along an elevation or anything with horizontal emphasis, ensure the long sides of your camera or phone are also horizontal.

## Field notes

It is very helpful to make notes about the photographs you take. These are useful for future reference and for creating captions. On a sketch, plan or map of your site, mark the location and direction of each photograph you take. If it is not already recorded, work out the orientation of the site and mark on a north arrow on your sketch, plan or map. Digital cameras and phone cameras give a unique number to each image. If you can, identify where each image was photographed before you leave the site.

## Composition tips

The following tips are intended to help and inspire you when you are setting up shots on your site visits. A wealth of detailed and extensive information on composition can be found in books specific to your camera model and in numerous websites and blogs online. Take some time to explore photography resources online and remember to read your camera or phone manual to gain knowledge and confidence of its settings

### Look and consider

- what catches your eye about a particular building, structure or scene?
- what is the purpose of the image?
- what are you trying to convey about the subject?
- what is the message of the image?
- how will the photo be used?
- how could you capture the ‘personality’ of the building, structure or scene?

### Viewpoint

This is very important. Selecting a viewpoint carefully will allow you to:

- highlight the significant features of your subject
- include or omit surroundings or background as required
- if it is safe to do so, take a photograph from a higher or lower angle to emphasise a feature or aspect of your building

## Frame your shot

Frames focus attention on your subject. You can make use of architectural features such as doors, windows and bridges, street furniture and playground equipment, and of course actual picture frames, cardboard cut-out frames or hands to make a frame shape.

When you are using a frame to create your photograph, aim to fill the frame with the subject of the shot. You may need to get in close to your subject and/or use the zoom function on your camera. However, remember that the more you zoom in, the lower the quality of the image will be.


Primary seven pupils learn about different types of frames.

Using a window frame to focus attention on the subject.

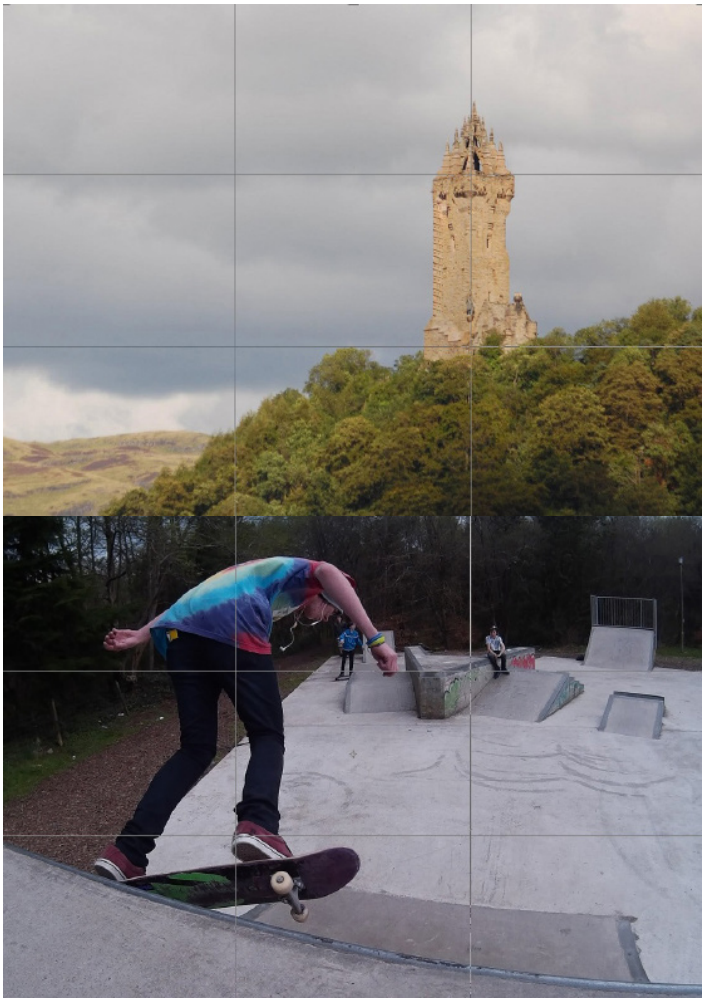
## Rule of thirds

The rule of thirds is a very important basic principle of photography composition. This rule is used to focus on the subject or points of interest in the photograph.

To create the rule of thirds, divide your photograph into nine equal parts - three horizontal rows and three vertical columns - using a grid of two pairs of equally spaced horizontal and vertical lines. Your camera or phone will have a setting to create this grid.

The subject or points of interest of your photograph are then lined up with the grid lines; the intersection of the horizontal and vertical lines are used to focus on the most important points of interest in the photo. The rule of thirds can also be used to show your subject in context or to suggest direction of movement (also known as lead room).

Take a moment to determine your subject or points of interest before your start by looking carefully and considering the purpose of each photograph again.



Horizontal and vertical lines intersect at the battlements of the Wallace Monument to focus the viewers' attention.

Lines intersect on the skateboarder's lead foot. Space on the right (lead room) suggests direction of travel.

## Shapes and lines

Geometric shapes can be used as an alternative to the rule of thirds to create a structured and balanced composition. You can use the corners of the shape to position the points of interest. Shapes, particularly triangles can be used to draw the viewer's eye into the image in a similar way to converging lines.

Lines can be used to lead the viewer's eye to the subject of an image or to guide the eye through an image. Diagonal and curved lines in the form of building facades or roof lines, roads or paths, lines of trees, walls and fences, rivers or canals, railway lines are frequently used in this way. Lines of people can also be used as leading or guiding lines.

Due to perspective, horizontal and vertical lines appear to converge over longer distances, for example, in images of views down streets or of tall buildings. However, you can use converging lines intentionally to create depth and draw the viewer into the image. Paths, roads, piers, railways and tunnels are often photographed in this way.

Converging lines and curves lead the viewers' eye into and through the images.

## Lighting

To make the best of a photography visit, it is important to consider lighting. How the exterior of a building or a structure is lit - either naturally or artificially - can make an enormous difference to the quality of a photograph. First, consider season and time of day, weather conditions and the direction(s) you will face when taking photographs. Wherever possible visit your site or building on more than one occasion to record it in better or different weather and lighting conditions.

Normally subjects look better in bright sunshine; however, north-facing elevations (facades) are better photographed in overcast conditions in order to avoid the problem of light flare because you are facing towards the sun. A lens hood on a DSLR camera can reduce or eliminate this effect. East elevations catch morning sunlight, south elevations will be lit for most of the day, while west elevation are best photographed after about 1pm.

Between April and September in Scotland, the sun is higher in the sky offering more time each day and a better quality of light for photographing buildings. These are significantly reduced during the rest of the year, particularly during December and January.

To get the best results when photographing the interior of a building you will need additional lighting, such as static lights or an electronic flashgun. Seeking the advice and assistance from an experienced or professional photographer is recommended here.

Additional lighting is also required when photographing exterior and interior details or objects such as furniture. Numerous effects can be achieved using artificial light and different aspects of the form or technique of a detail or object can be highlighted. Again, seeking the advice and assistance of an experienced or professional photographer is recommended here.

A dark interior in an historic building lit by a beam of sunlight presents a challenge to the photographer.

## Technical Tips

The following tips will help you get the best out of your camera's technical settings and so help you take an even better photograph.

### Aperture

The aperture determines **how much light is allowed through the lens**.

The **smaller** the **'F' number** (F4, F2.8, F2, F1.4)**,** the **more light** gets to the sensor. inside the camera; a **higher 'F' number lets less light** into the sensor.

Aperture also controls **Depth of Field.** That is the amount of the image that is in focus.

### Shutter speed

The shutter speed determines **how long the sensor inside the camera is exposed to light**.

**Aperture and shutter speed are connected. The amount of light allowed through the lens dictates how long the lens needs to be open.**

An aperture of F22 will need a slower shutter speed, such as 1/30th (of a second), than an aperture of F2.8 which would need a shutter speed, such as 1/250th.

Shutter speed is **important** when photographing a **moving object**.

### ISO

ISO determines **how the sensor responds to different lighting scenarios**.
For average lighting conditions ISO 400 is a good starting point.

A **higher ISO** will be needed when photographing **a subject in low light**.
A **higher ISO** will allow you to use **faster shutter speeds**. This can be **useful** if you are **not using a tripod**.
A **higher ISO** will generate **more 'noise'** (grainy or pixelated appearance of image).

Take a look at the **diagram on the next page** for examples of aperture, shutter speed and ISO.

## Some practical examples

**Outdoors**
When you are photographing a **building exterior in bright sunshine**, a good starting point would be a shutter speed (exposure) of 1/125th with the aperture set at F16.

To ensure that the whole building is in focus, you will need a small aperture (see diagram). In bright sunshine you should be able to use a fast shutter speed.

**Indoors**
When you are taking photographs **inside a building** the **light levels can be quite low** so you will need to use a longer exposure (slower shutter speed).

Settings needed in this situation would be a shutter speed (exposure) of ½ or 1 second at an aperture setting of F16. To avoid camera shake use a tripod if you can.

**Movement**
If you are photographing **an event or a scene that involves movement**, choose a shutter speed of 1/250th or higher to minimise any blur. You may need to increase the ISO to allow you to use fast shutter speeds.

A good starting point might be: ISO 800 with a shutter speed (exposure) of 1/250th with the aperture set at F11.

**Details**
If you want to **highlight a detail** in a photograph you are taking, you can use Depth of Field to blur the background of the image. This draws attention to the object you want to focus on.

Start with a small aperture setting of F2.8 or F4 to blur the background.

## Notes

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