

# Composition 101 - Practical Steps

## What to Focus On:

The most common mistake is to focus on the subject choice and the painting steps. Unfortunately if the composition is out then no amount of painting that subject is going to cure the problem.

## The really important things to do is to first:

1. Choose the painting format (landscape, portrait, square and size)
2. Set out the composition framework (composition skeleton)
3. Establish the major shapes and value relationships

We have spent time on number three since it is so important.

Now let us have a look at numbers one and two.

## 1. Painting Format

Always ask yourself whether the subject you are looking at will be better in landscape, portrait or square format.

Then consider the size.

Surprisingly no every landscape should be painted in a landscape format. Very often the vertical portrait format works better. It is more interesting or it accentuates an element of the scene that transforms the subject. Then the square format is also inherently interesting with a unique kind of harmony. Each variation should be considered in the planning stage.

**For example here is the original reference photo?**

**Now begin asking questions about format:**

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## Landscape

Combined with this approach is also the important idea that the photo does not have to be slavishly followed. Think about cropping down to the action.

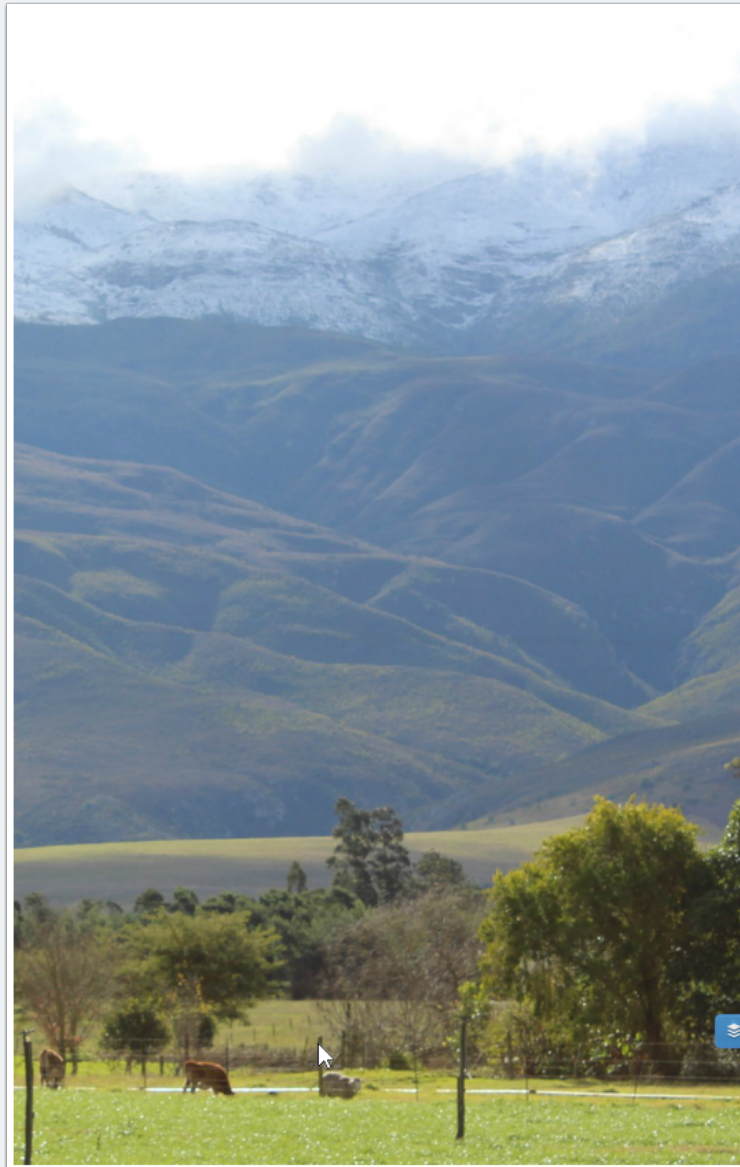
Here is a possible landscape format that will focus more on the house. The scene has also been cropped for this purpose.



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## Portrait Format

What about the vertical format? Here we are focussing on the majesty of the mountain.





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## Square Format

Using the square format offers other options once again.



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## 2. Underlying Composition Elements

The skeleton or armature that hold and connects the various parts of the subject.

Popular elements include the use of:

1. Natural features like tree lines, overlapping bushes/trees
2. Lines such as diagonals, s-shaped lines and other lines such as roads or pathways
3. Geometric shapes such as the triangle, L-shaped or circle
4. Connecting lines such as poles linking foreground to middle ground (any vertical element)
5. Intersecting lines
6. Creating depth with diminishing sized shapes and overlapping shapes
7. The rule of thirds

In the photo below there are a number of important lines:

The diagonals in the trees and hill

The vertical and horizontal intersection between telephone pole and foreground

The overlapping shapes leading the eye into the distance

The fence posts can also be rearranged to take the eye into the middle of the painting.

Then there is the pleasing harmony of light and dark shapes. The dark tree line dominates the scene - it is important that something dominates and a dark shape is usually best for this.

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## Key Idea

Attract the viewer's eye into the painting and keep it there. This composition by Edgar Payne is very **simple but effective**:

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Diagonal line intersected by the rider.

Light grass against dark shape of the rider

Vertical line of rider breaking horizontal of horizon line

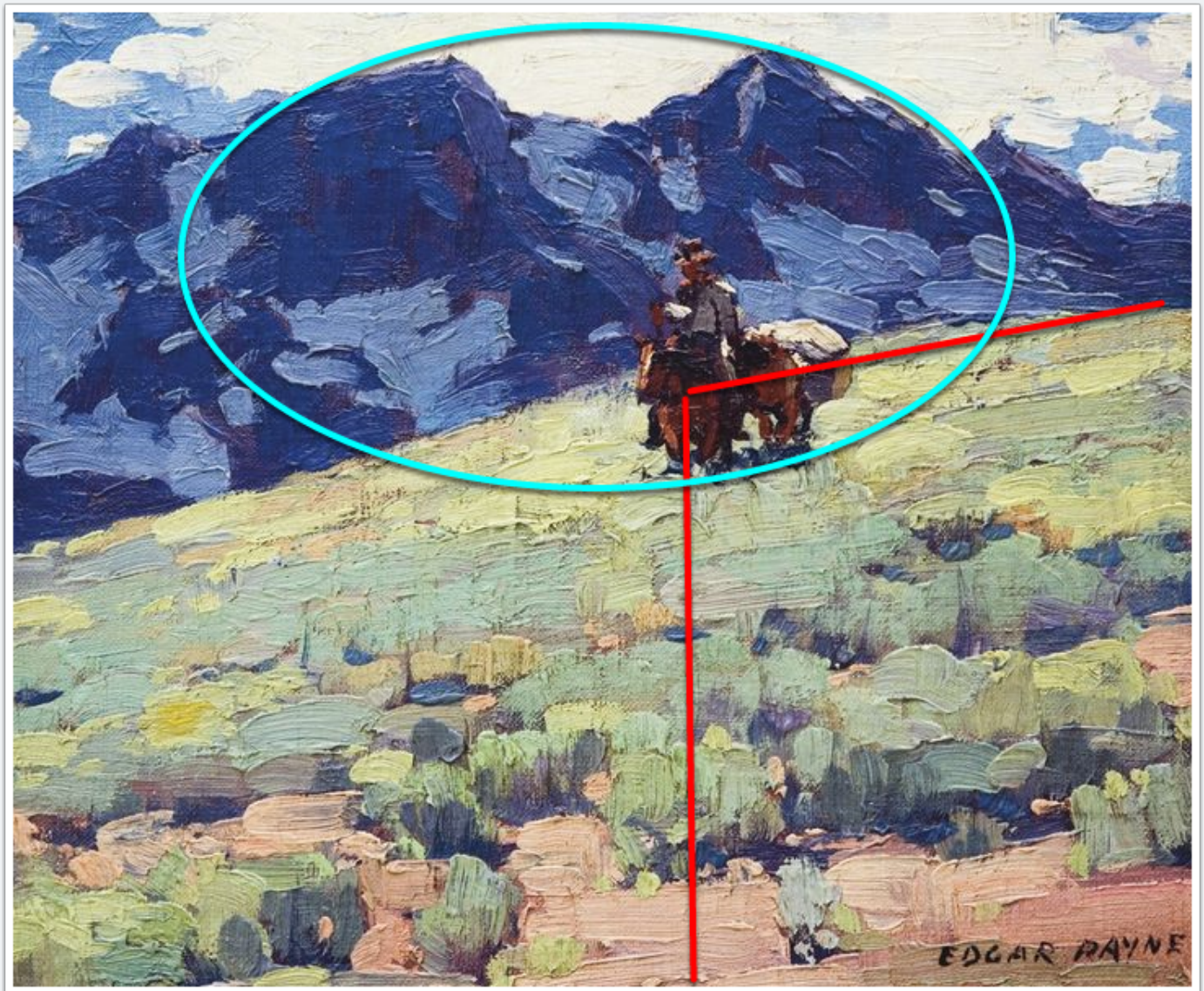
Then eye moves around the mountain and comes back to the rider.

Your eye keeps coming back to the focal point of the rider.

Always ask yourself whether you are helping the viewer to the focal point and then to linger within the picture plane. Simple beats complicated everytime!



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## Avoid leading eye to corners and edges.

This could be due to placement of objects, direction lines or unduly bright/high value colors or shapes that attract the eye to these danger points.

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## Strong Shapes and Values are Also Key

Abstract mass shapes and value are also part of the composition. Make sure you follow the notan steps to find dominant mass shapes. The abstract structure is part of the skeleton that gives strength to the composition.

Think of moving light and dark shapes around your picture plane like a jigsaw. What arrangement looks best? Now look at the scene to find that layout. Use the viewfinder (L-shaped card) or your computer cropping tool.

Plus keep an eye on hard lines and soft edges. Know what creates them - look for them in your painting. Should they be there? Adjust if they distract your eye.





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## Perspective

Both in the landscape and in the sky - clouds follow the rules too.

Use perspective to your advantage to lead the eye.

## Color Shapes

Color attracts the eye. Make sure your color shapes are helping the eye to go where you want it. No high key color spots at the edge of the painting, for example.

## Conclusion

Assess the painting from a distance.

Leave it overnight and look again the the next day.

Look at the reverse image using a mirror. All these approaches can help you spot something that is out of kilter. Always appreciate that painting is mentally taxing. Give yourself a rest and look again the next day. You will almost certainly spot a correction if you keep the main objectives in mind. Forget about whether you have drawing the subject well enough. Consider the movement of the eye and you will find compositional error that can be fixed.