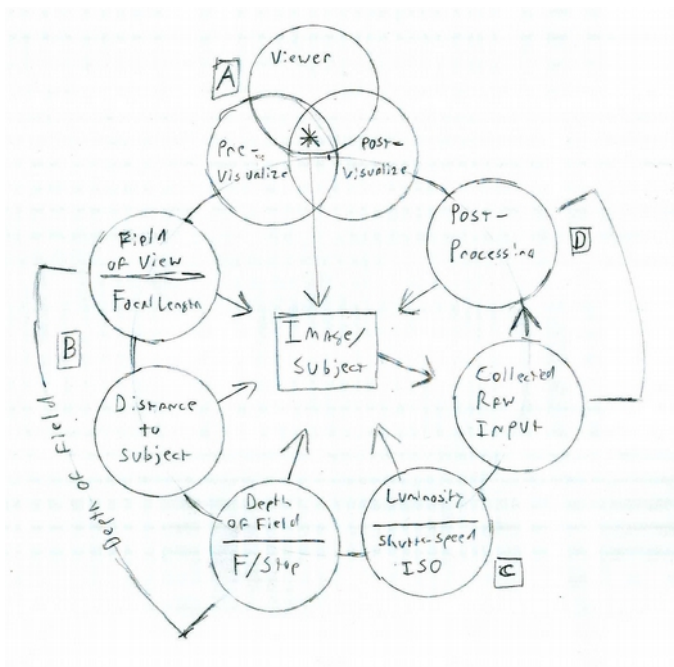# Composition First
by Malcolm McElvaney

Some ideas seem to just occur after so many ideas mix and match over time but when given the right time makes sense. The idea of before any of the technical details begin to take over my focus of taking the picture I should really compose the image and decide how to apply that technical knowledge to achieve that image more completely is at the heart of this idea in particular. This shift in point of view is new to me as I find the technical side is what I like to explore but in working up material to teach photography, in theory, many assumptions had to be broken down. One of the key questions I might ask would relate to what that new photographer would want to do after taking that picture or even if they want to invest the time and skills to achieve their version of that image. In either case I would show the importance of composition when the image is created.

It is this emphasis on at least learning about composition at a minimum regardless of the camera's ability to allow user control that I believe I can learn from as well. It is taken for granted by me and its context as it relates to the technical I'm so comfortable with is what I am working out in the article. Some of the aspects I want to cover is the dual nature of the exposure controls I use in manual mode, as well as adding the idea of pre-viewing the image in your head along with pre-visualization and post-visualization of it while taking the image. The camera you use may not give you that ability so desired but if it does give you the control needed to achieve an image fully under your vision as the artist hopefully this will help you see it from another possible way to do so.

Maybe the best place to start is to realize if the image has a subject or focal point then it isn't how to make it if fit into a type of photography or known comfort zone but work out from the subject and make technical decisions to spot light the subject. This could cause an overall image with some blown out or lost details if one thinks in terms of a localized ideal exposure being set versus a global one of everything in full range. Landscape photography and the aim of a full dynamic range as an the end goal fits because the landscape is the subject but reduce the subject matter down to an area within the whole and perhaps the idea of a localized "full" range has a role. At first glance the viewer may think your photography skills need some work but that correct exposure surrounded by area they saw initially spot lights the subject. This isn't done in post-processing but a decision infield that sets the final image on a path to tell a story in its own visual style.

[A] The viewer of your image is going to see it entirely different than you potentially but the subject will be a common element that you have control in directing the eye within that image. I say pre-visualization and post-visualization but I really have no idea how I do it either but that is the goal I aim for and is the advice I have seen.

[B] Depth of field as a whole is based on the field of view (focal length), distance to your subject, and F/Stop used; however, each of these do alter the image as we see in relation to the subject.

[C] Somehow I like to see exposure as the overall luminosity but depending on the F/Stop your using the shutter speed and ISO will have constraints in place. Every decision made before does effect another later on.

[D] The raw input is taken and may be in RAW, JPG, or sets needed to continue on in the post-processing. The end goal of this processing is unique to the photographer working on matching the vision they have.

That is how I see the work flow visually where the optical nature of the lens and the sensor via ISO contribute to the unique look of the image produced by the photographer making decisions at every step along the way. The terms f/stop, shutter speed, and ISO are part of the classic exposure triangle as easily seen in your head if it is mentioned but the tool is linked to the mechanical controls and are part of the work flow shown. The dual nature of these three controls may not be something we consider as depth of field and f/stop are often used interchangeably; while the aperture is important in controlling the flow of light to the sensor it is just a universal ratio and number. The more critical aspect is knowing how that number is linked to shallow depth of field or how to dial in a greater amount of detail.
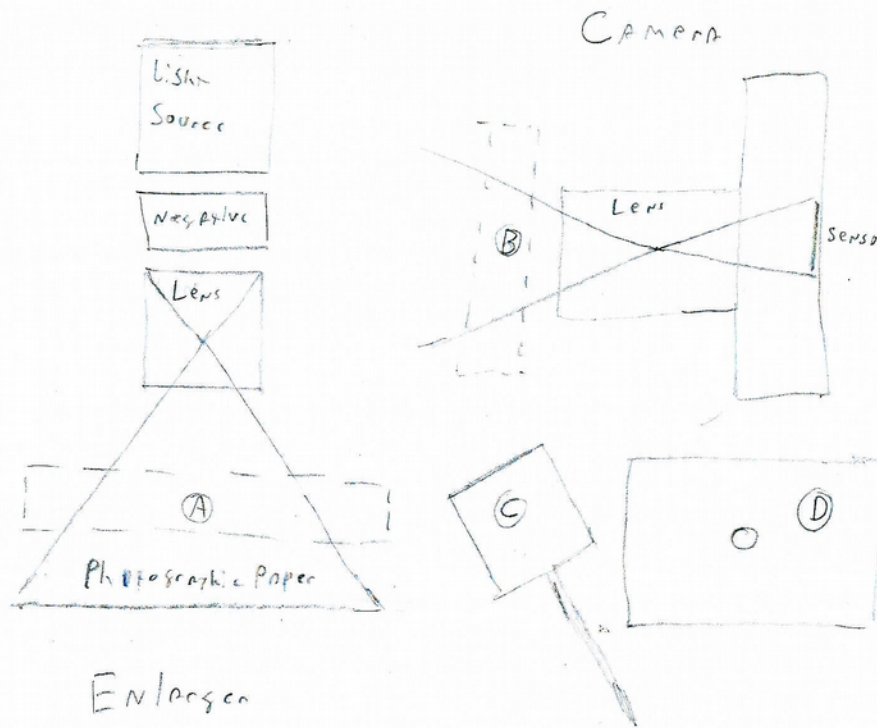
F/Stop	Shutter Speed	ISO
$\triangle = "1"$	$\bigcirc = "1"$	$\square = "1"$

yet...

$\triangle \neq$	$\bigcirc \neq$	$\square \neq$
Depth of Field	Motion Captured	Gain / Dynamic Range

Reduction of a known concept that we can make assumptions about to a more abstract may help me explain the dual nature a little better. It was as part of a game exploring how the exposure triangle worked where I tokenized these factors to show how they relate to each other, started but not finished, the idea has merit as a game. It is in terms of stops of light let in or restricted that the symbol (triangle) formerly known as f/stop can be seen as equal to the other factors because it is the luminosity that they have in common as seen on the histogram we mix and match them on.

What matters more than the overall luminosity captured is the qualities the image has in terms of depth of field, motion captured, and the balance of gain (noise) and dynamic range recorded; therefore, a priority of order will dictate how each factor is used. Each unique attribute negates the possibility of equality but all three factors play a role the photographer must consider when picking that order. Typically during the day the best ISO of ISO-100 works as the abundance of light lets me pick the f/stop and shutter speed more easily, at night the ISO is more critical and restricts my choices but that is what I do as the photographer. The histogram is your best tool in seeing how these combinations work and knowing when the image is blown out or has lost details which is ironic as it shows you the more universal luminosity as priorities are being set.

You may be asking yourself how does this relate to an article on "composition first" but an idea comes from inspirations that are unrelated so it does belong here. The example images used a card with a .25" or .5" opening in it very similar to (D) to help me set an exposure for a select area. While darkroom equipment like an enlarger and the digital camera I use seem an odd comparison they have a lot in common optically; however, it is (A) and (B) I am comparing more specifically. The area (A) is where the photographer working in the darkroom making the print can dodge or burn an image being printed on photographic paper. The dodging tool (C) blocks light from hitting the paper and keeps them lighter in tone but the burning tool (D) only lets light through one point to create a darker toned area. Look up the darkroom process on the internet as this is where I learned what I know about it.

Consider area (B) in front of the lens of the camera which is where filters and a lens hood get used, so the modifier being applied to the light path is in the only place where it can be used. A masking element like a card with an opening isn't that radical then but given a purpose and process makes it a tool I need. That purpose is to let me visually only see that tiny section on the LCD in an overall blanked out screen and use the histogram to fine tune the exposure to a localized part. I may photograph that as is for some reference material in post-processing but that is the role it plays. In truth I created the card to see what it would do with nothing else in mind and found it had an interesting possible use, so here is the experimental process that I chose to illustrate the concept being discussed.

That masking element is a half inch opening centered on a 3 x 5 index card as shown. The image on the left side is the scene exposed globally at 1/80, F/4, ISO-400. The composition works and is exposed properly but where is focal point the eye is drawn too. This is why I exposed locally on the books and let the scene get blown out on purpose. I left the next image as it came out of the camera but I could have worked it over some; however, it looks good as is and the books stand out better within the area around them.

I used the half inch opening again but this card is actually black so it helps more overall but in one of my field test I zoomed in and this opening actually filled more of the screen. Because the field of view narrows the area filled increased but my card with a quarter inch opening could have helped there. The global exposure on the left was taken at 1/100, F/9, ISO-100 and the localized exposure on the right was taken at 1/30, F/9, ISO-100. The processing I applied helped create an image that worked for blown out result.

These are two samples out of many I need to take to really see what this approach can yield but from an unlikely and obscure inspiration applied with some trial and error both in the images captured and the processing I apply you see what is possible. Whether it was the books or the impromptu sculpture the subject and composition was helped not hindered in the experiment. It is in what we know yet don't put into words or recognize as a process that can drive us to do the correct things but in this case a reminder about composition being placed before the technical was a good lesson to have.