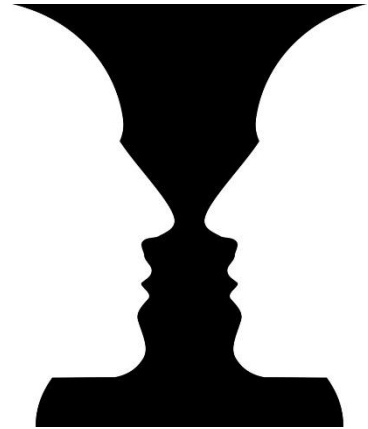


## What's so Positive about Negative Space?

By Chuck Palmer

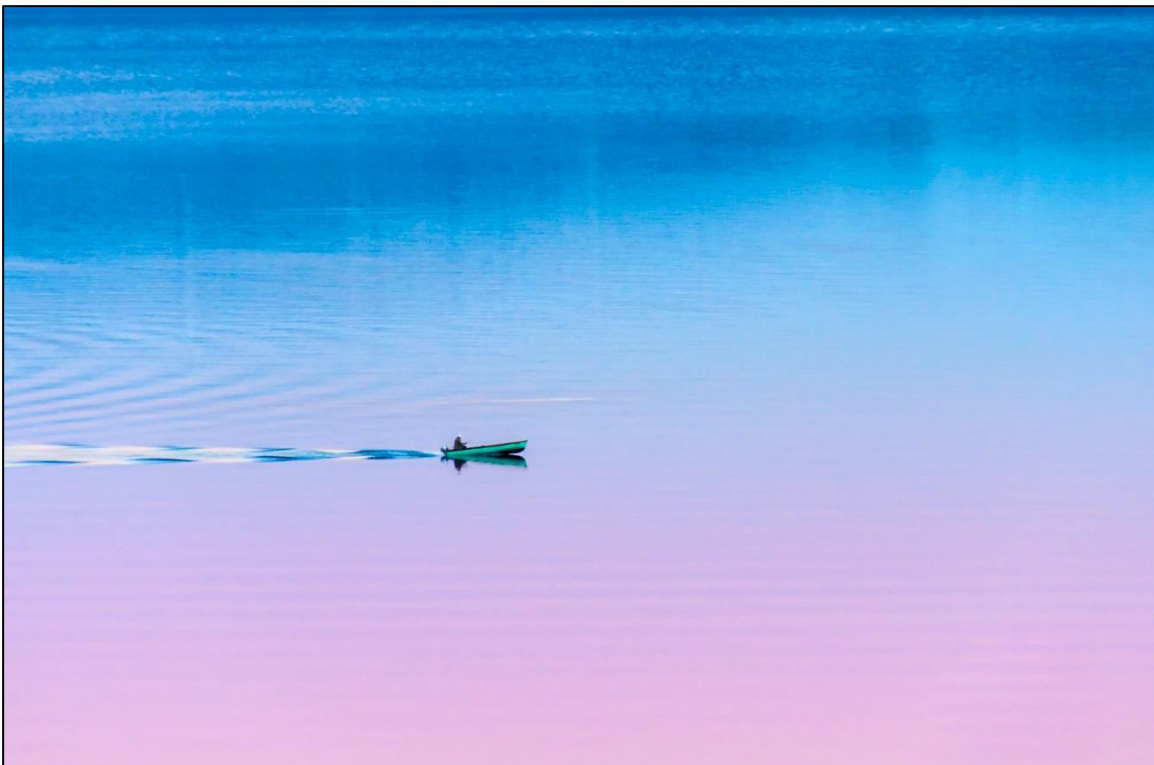
This is the second article in a series on Photography Composition Tools and Concepts. As I suggested in the first article, the most critical ingredient for consistently creating captivating images is seeing creatively. The problem is that it takes practice to develop your creative vision. This series of articles attempts to break down some key components of composition in a way that can be easily applied to your photography. For this article, let's explore What's so positive about Negative Space.

In case you are not familiar with the term, negative space is the space within the image frame that surrounds the main subject of interest. You will find many graphics in photographic art literature that help demonstrate this principle. The figure on the right is a good one to understand the principle of both negative and positive space. Looking at this image most people will see two faces. The white areas (main subject) make up the positive space while the black area is the negative space. If on the other hand you see a vase, the black area is the positive space (main subject) while the white is the negative space.



Everything in your composition that is not your primary area of focus (main subject) can be considered negative space. The negative space in your image frame can play a tremendous role in focusing your viewer's attention on your main subject (Positive Space).

Many authors suggest negative space should not contain much detail, so it does not compete for attention within your image frame. Negative space lacking much detail naturally draws attention to our main subject. Our brains are programmed to see the differences so naturally we are drawn to a primary (positive) image element surrounded by negative space with little detail.



Overtime and possibly through over-simplification, negative space has become synonymous with blank emptiness in an image. However, Angelo loaides, EV Magazine editor and author, suggests that while negative space has traditionally been thought of as empty, it can just as effectively be bold colors, patterns, textures or other elements. Angelo more accurately defines negative space as “Accentuating Space”, image space that accentuates the primary subject. If we think of using Accentuating Space instead of Negative Space in our photographic art, Angelo suggests that rethinking negative space frees us up to create mood, harmony, context, and tell our story in addition to drawing our viewer’s eye to our main subject. Let’s explore Angelo’s concept of accentuating space.



Like all compositional tools there is no right or wrong way to use accentuating space, only what feels right to us as the photographic artist. The key is to consider the power of accentuating space to convey mood, harmony, context, and visual balance. Let’s look at a few ways we can practically incorporate accentuating space in our images.

**Pay Attention to Surrounding Elements** - Always be mindful of possible points of view and framing opportunities that will best incorporate accentuating space. For instance, you may be photographing wild flowers along your hiking path and you notice you can venture a little farther off the path into the field to capture the accentuating green grass in the background to provide context and harmony while still focusing our viewer on the main subject (see image below).



Find Accentuating Space First – We can seek out interesting accentuating space first that has the potential to create a remarkable image and wait for a subject to enter the scene to serve as the key focal point.



Edge Framing – One way to incorporate accentuating space is to simply position your main subject close to an edge or corner of your frame. This will give your subject more emphasis if your accentuating space does not overwhelm the main subject.



High Contrast – Shadows are Underexposed - Underexposed shadows create empty deep blacks in the background that provide accentuating space. When an image is exposed or post-processed to create deep blacks, this is known as burning.

High Contrast – Highlights are Overexposed – You can create accentuating emptiness in the frame by looking for high contrast scenes where the wide dynamic range causes shadows to expose as deep blacks, and the highlights to “burn out” to white or near white. This is known as dodging, the opposite of burning.



Contrasting Tones – Seeking out and incorporating accentuating areas of contrasting tones can add interest and drama to your photo. This can be quite effective in color or black and white images.



**Contrasting Colors** – One way to add focus to your primary subject is to surround it with an expanse of a contrasting color.



**Contrasting Textures** – Accentuating space is a tool to enhance our primary subject without causing too much distraction for the viewer. A great way to enrich your image is to incorporate a textured surface as your accentuating space.



Step Back – Sometimes when we step back, offering the viewer less subject and more of the subject's surroundings (accentuating space) we can evoke more emotion and interest in the image.



Large Aperture – A simple way to create accentuating space is to use a small numbered aperture (less than  $f/5.6$ ) to give a shallow range of focus (Depth of Field). By focusing on your subject, the background becomes an abstract palette of color.



Panning Blur – Possibly my most favorite way to create accentuating space, and often the most difficult to execute. Panning your camera during the exposure of a moving object will cause the background to blur creating accentuating space. In most situations, it is a good idea to compose your subject, so they are moving into the accentuating space.



Fog/Mist – Another way to turn a distracting background into accentuating space is to photograph subjects in a fog or mist when the mist is just behind your subject. The fog or mist can add drama to your image and is especially effective if your subject is spot lit by direct light.

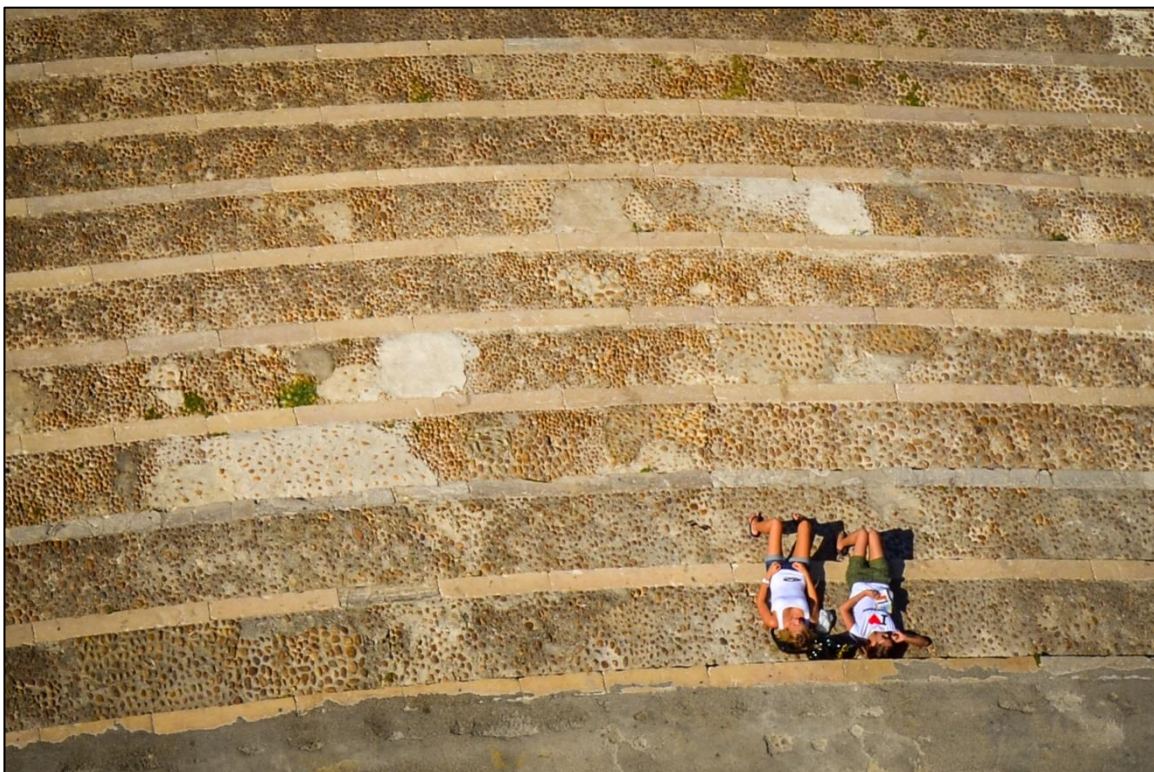




Look Up – One of the easiest accentuating space to photograph is the sky. Shooting a subject in the sky like a plane, bird, or kite can be even more interesting if you incorporate the abstract shapes of tall buildings, trees, or even the shapes of umbrellas in your accentuating space. The added shapes can create an even more remarkable image while still adding focus to your primary subject.



Get High and Shoot Down – Conversely, a vantage point where you can shoot downwards will likely present an expansive view of the ground. This provides you with a large accentuating space, an unusual point of view, and presents a greater emphasis on your primary subject.



Repeating Patterns – Patterns always provide such interesting accentuating space for many images. If you come across a scene that presents a repeating pattern, find a good vantage point and wait for something or someone to enter the scene.



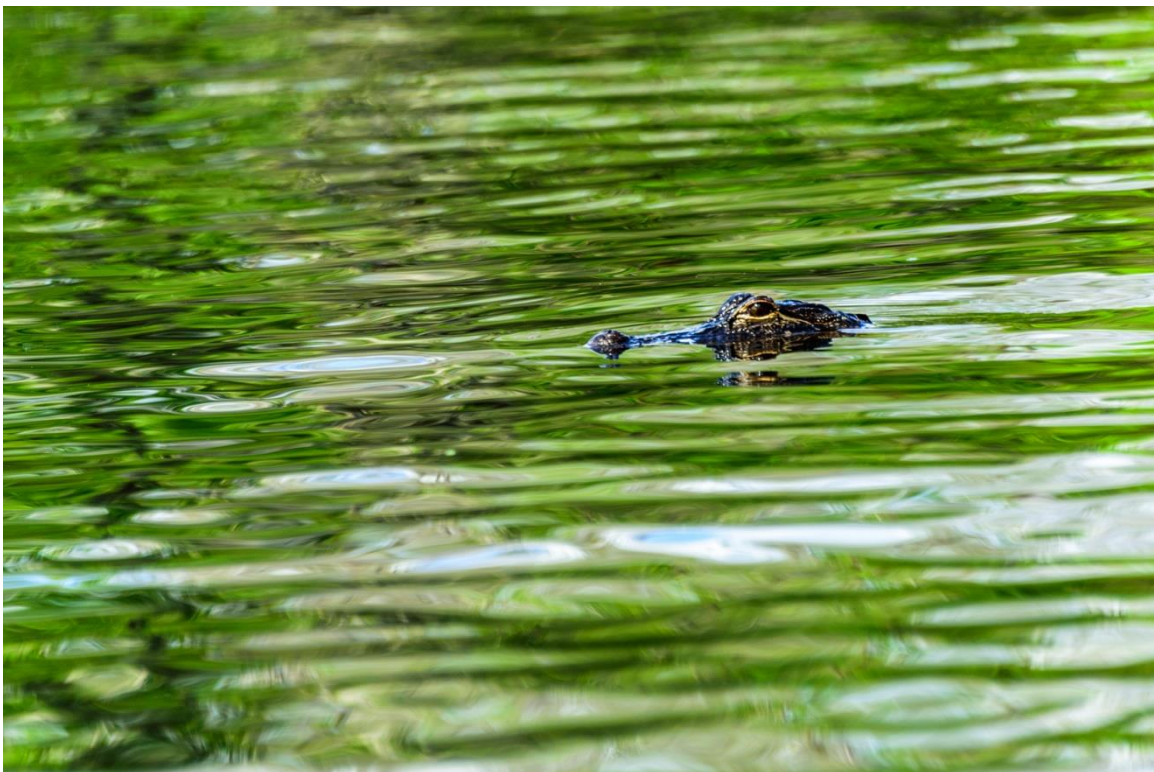
Frames – Many times physical architectural frames within an image are associated with walls which can offer a wide accentuating space, dramatically drawing your viewer's focus to your subject.



Silhouettes – Another pretty simple way to create accentuating space is to create a silhouette of your primary subject. By backlighting your subject, you will eliminate distracting details and textures that surrounds your subject, creating beautiful accentuating space.



Optical Effects – Capturing a pleasing abstract pattern of reflections or optical effects that surrounds your subject can elevate your image. These effects are often created when direct or reflected light shines on water, wet pavement, or shiny elements. These optical effects often create additional impact and emotion in your image.



Accentuating space is a highly effective compositional tool and can be created in many ways. As the photographic artist, we can decide when to incorporate one or more of these accentuating space techniques to create mood, harmony, context, and better tell our story. In addition, by including accentuating space in our images, we draw our viewer's eye to our primary subject.

Have fun with accentuating space. Practice and experiment with the many opportunities to use this powerful compositional tool.

As always, keep shooting and may only the remarkable images be yours.

Chuck

*Authors Note: This article is the second in a series on composition tools and principles. References for these articles include Composition Design Considerations, a series of articles in EV magazine by Angelo; Ioanides"; "Design Principles" by Robin Griggs Wood; The Photographer's Eye by Michael Freeman; Extraordinary Photography by Brenda Tharp and Jed Manwaring*