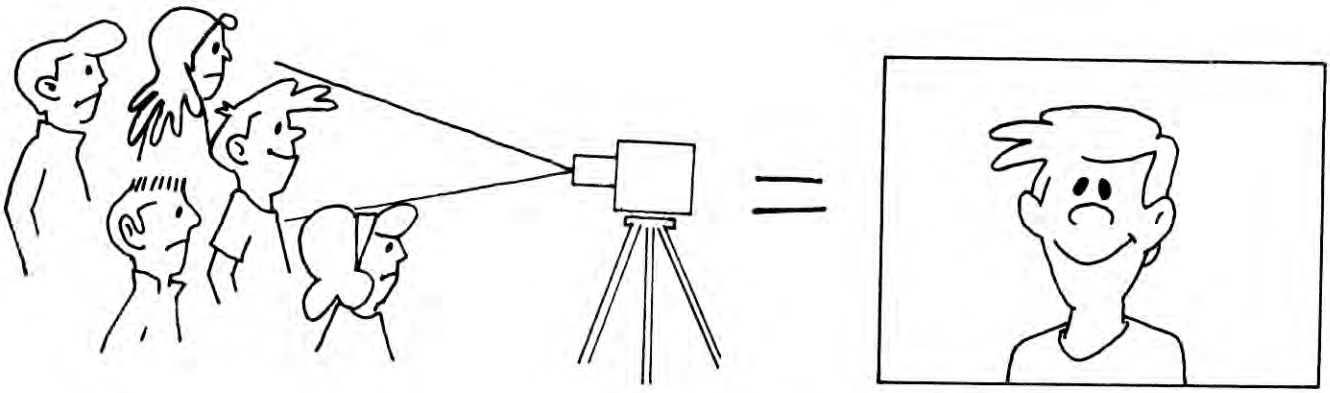
COMPOSITION

Digital Imaging 1A / Hellyer

2. COMPOSITION

THE CAMERA - A TOOL FOR SELECTIVE VISION

The camera is a tool for looking at things in a special way. It's a window on the world which you control. Your viewer--the person who will look at the pictures you take--will see only what you decide to show him. This selectivity is the basis of all camerawork.



THE CAMERA IS SELECTIVE. YOU DECIDE WHAT THE VIEWER WILL SEE

Say you're shooting a program about a high school. The decisions you as a cameraperson make will shape the reality of the school as perceived by your viewer. Leave Student A out of your frame and for your viewer he will never exist. Include B, C, and D in a number of shots and they become important persons. Show E studying by himself and he becomes a loner. By choosing what to shoot and how to shoot it, you create your own selective version of the high school. How close your version comes to reality depends on your camera skills and how you use them.

USE A TRIPOD

To appreciate a good composition, the viewer must first see it without distractions. One of the most common distractions is camera jiggle caused by shaky handholding of the camera.

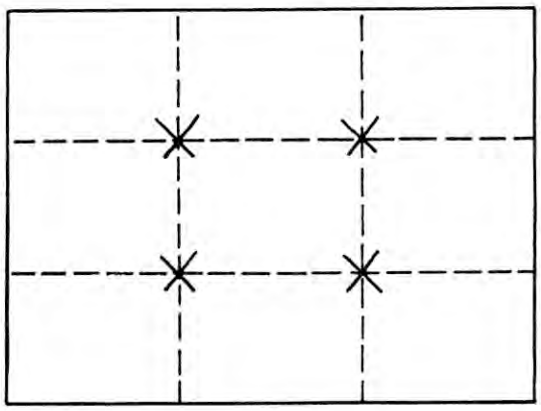
Shaky pictures are okay if you're shooting an earthquake; or if you're in the middle of a prison riot or some other precarious situation. Most of the time, though, shaky pictures are just plain annoying to the viewer. They make it harder for him to see what's happening and they remind him of the camera--they destroy the illusion that he's seeing the real thing.

In editing scenes together, the only thing more distracting than a shaky shot of a building inserted between two nice steady shots, is two different shaky shots one after the other, with one shaking up and down and the other shaking side to side. Where they come together, it looks like the cut was made with a chain saw.

So use a tripod whenever possible. A good tripod, preferably with a fluid head, will give you a steady frame, make your camera moves smoother, and keep your arms and the rest of your body from getting tired so quickly.

It's not that much trouble to use a tripod. With practice, most people can set up and level a tripod in less than 30 seconds. But, if you don't have a tripod, or you're someplace where a tripod would get in the way, or you're just moving too fast to bother with it, you can still try for tripod-like support. Use a monopod or shoulder brace. Lean against a wall, a chair, or your assistant. Try for at least three points of support for the camera. With a well-balanced news camera, these would be your shoulder, your hand on the grip, and the side of your head. If you can brace the elbow of your camera-supporting arm against your side, so much the better.

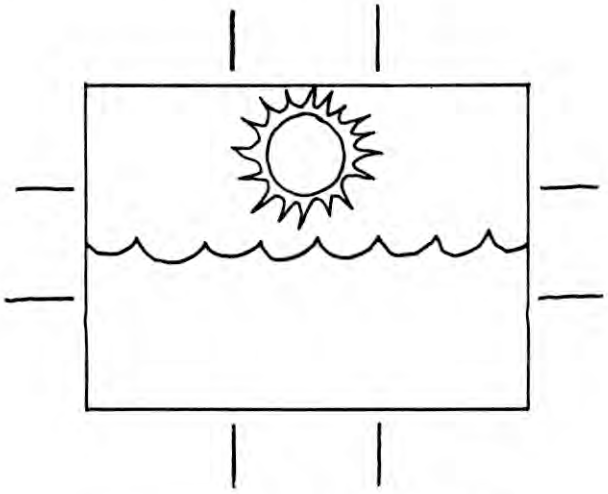
RULE OF THIRDS



The rule of thirds is an old, old theory about composition that still works pretty well. It won't compose the picture for you, but it'll at least give you someplace to start.

The idea is to mentally divide the frame into thirds horizontally and vertically. Then you place your elements along the lines, preferably with the center of interest at one of the four points where the lines cross.

Here are some examples of compositions improved by using the rule of thirds:



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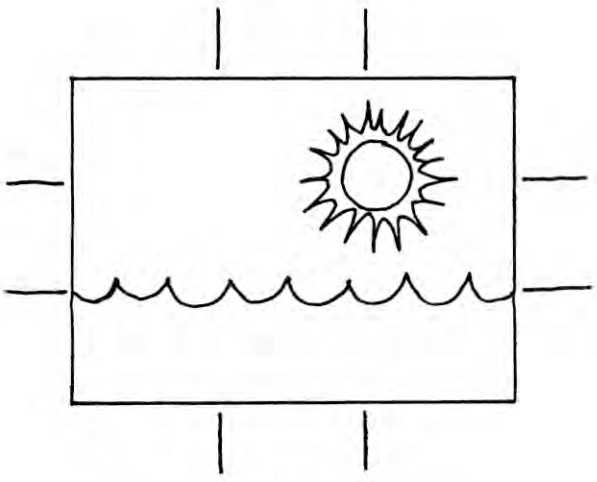

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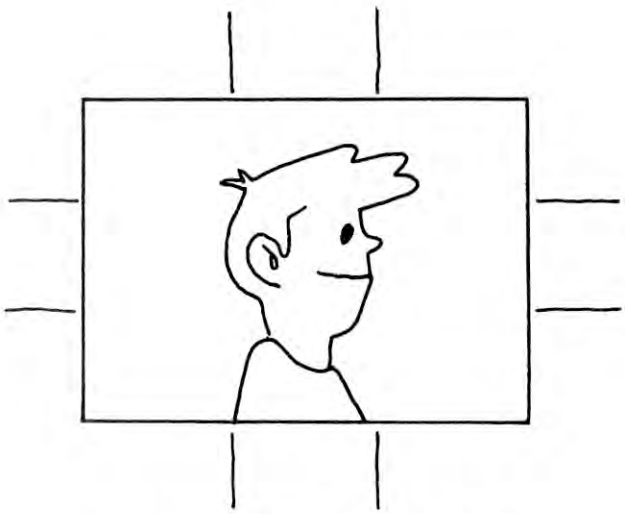

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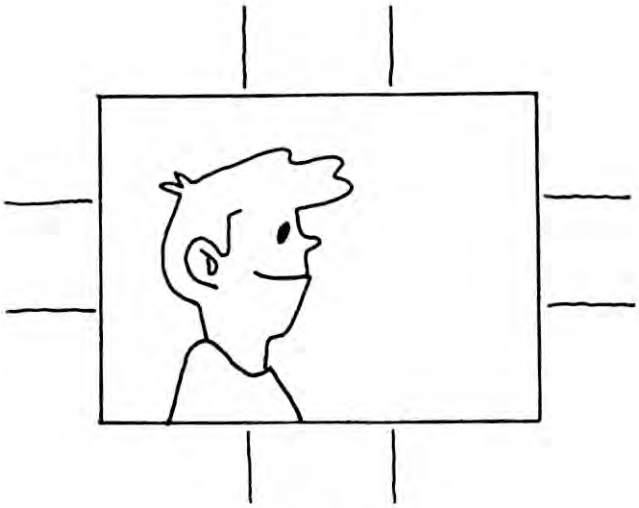

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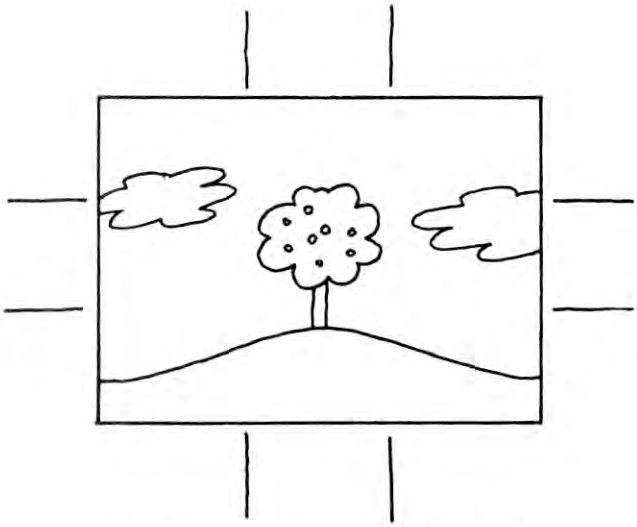

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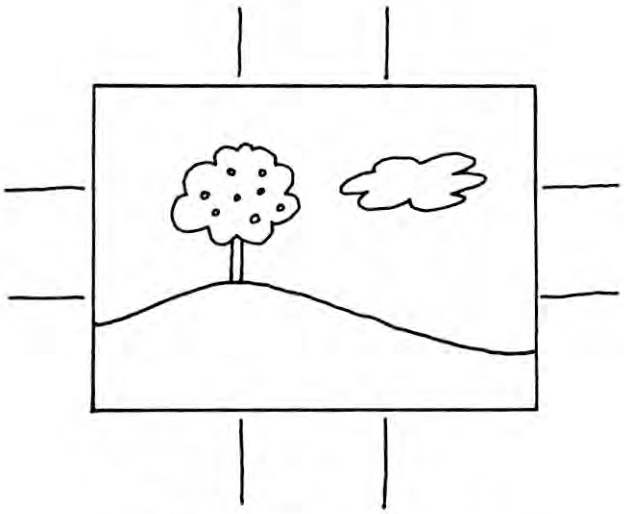

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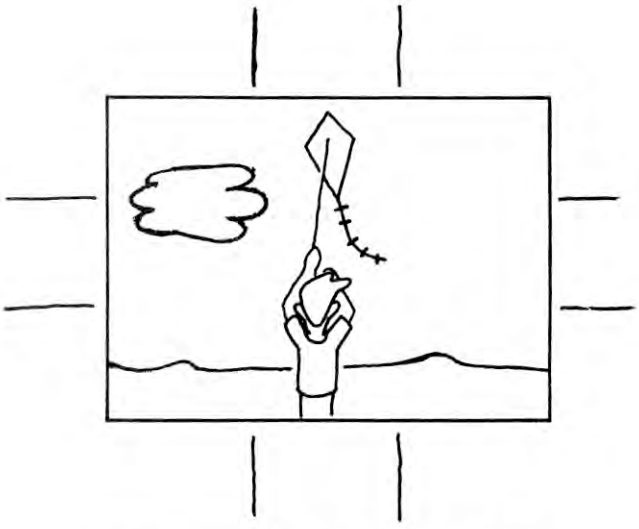

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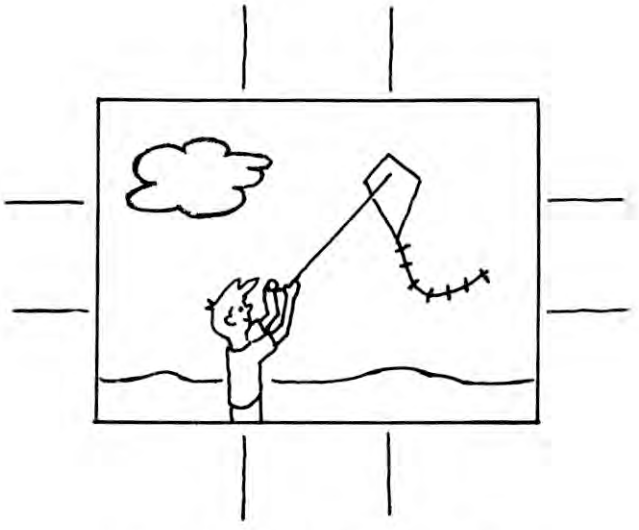

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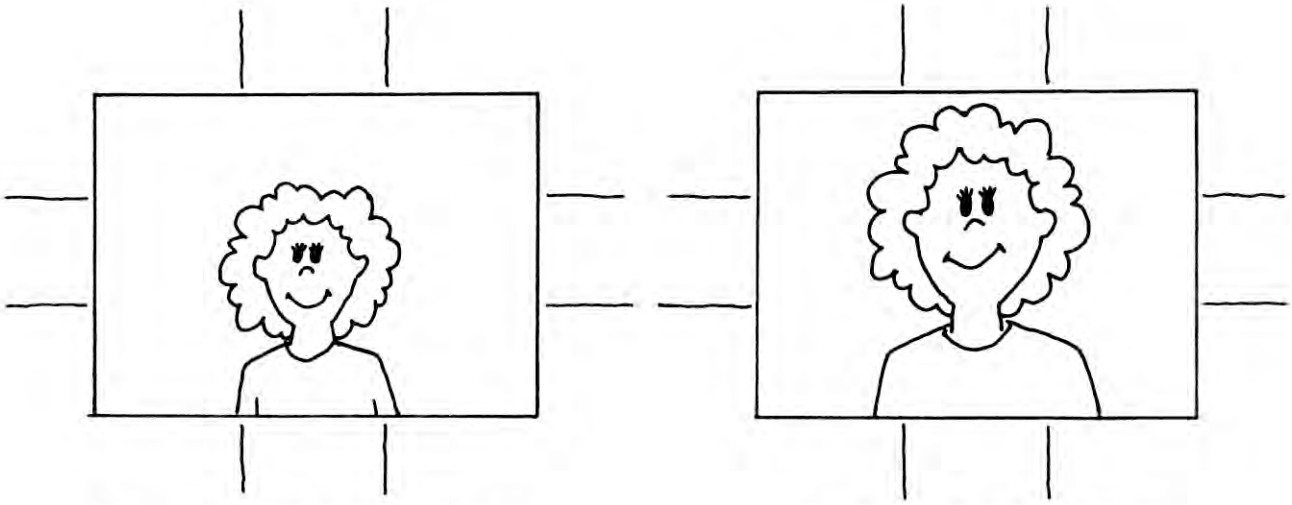


WITHOUT RULE OF THIRDS

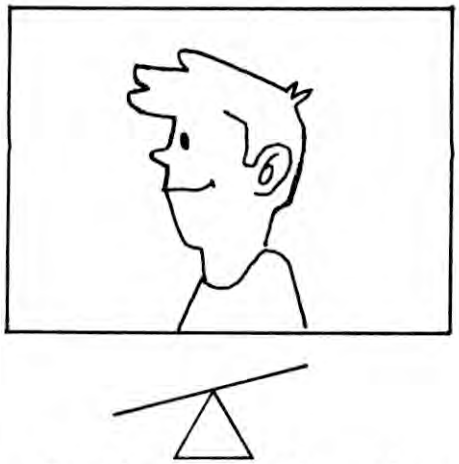
WITH RULE OF THIRDS
(Eyes on top 1/3 line)

In paintings, still photos and feature films, you'll see many interesting and good compositions that don't comply with the rule of thirds. But remember, such compositions, being more complicated, require more time from the viewer to comprehend. His eye will roam around more before he sees what you want him to see. If you can afford to leave an unusual composition on the screen 15 or 20 seconds or more, it can work--often quite nicely. But be sure you know what you're doing and why. For most documentary film and TV work, the rule of thirds is a good safe bet.

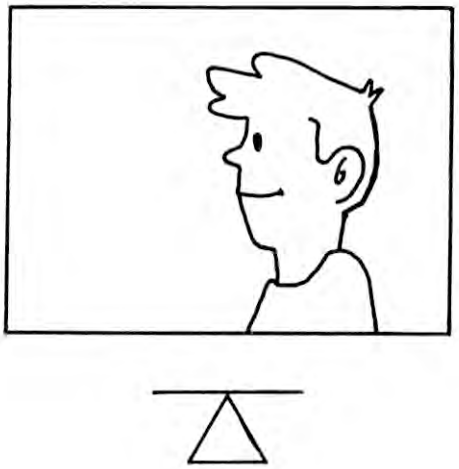
BALANCE - LEADING LOOKS

One of the most common errors among camerapersons everywhere is the failure to leave enough space in front of people's faces when they're looking to one side or the other.

A shot like this,



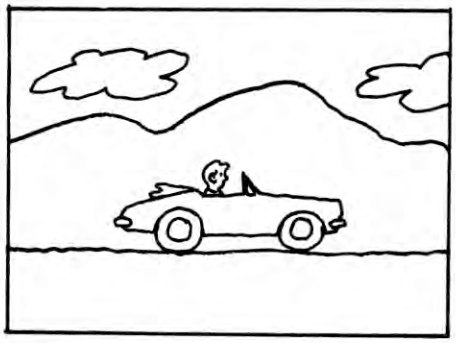
is annoying to look at. Psychologically, the viewer perceives the man as boxed in, with no place to go. By moving the frame just a little, like this,

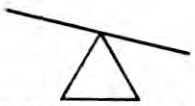


you get a more comfortable composition. You've allowed for the *compositional weight of the look*.

People aren't the only things that have looks. Almost everything has a look. Some examples follow on the next page.

LEADING LOOKS - CONTINUED





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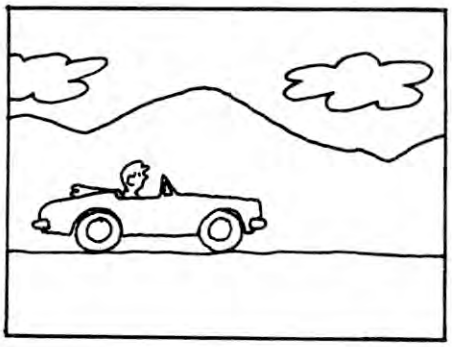

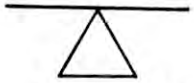

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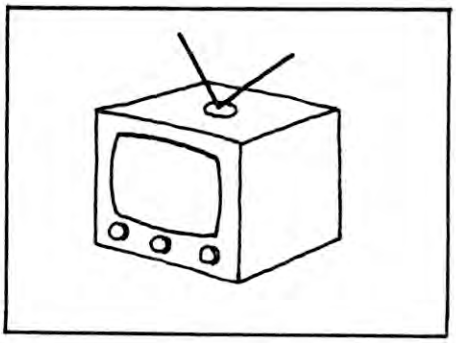

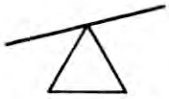

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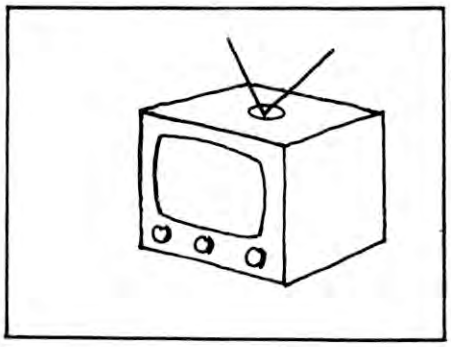

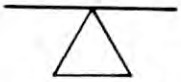

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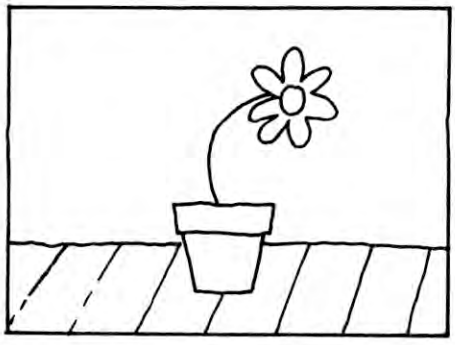

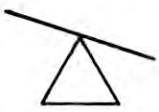

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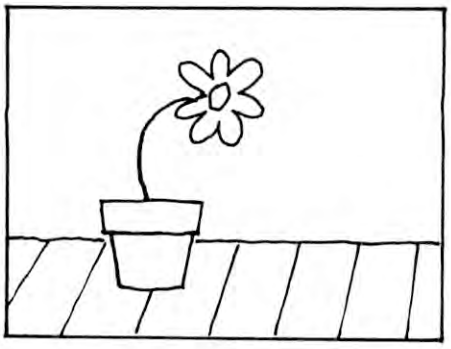
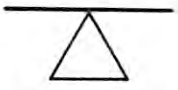
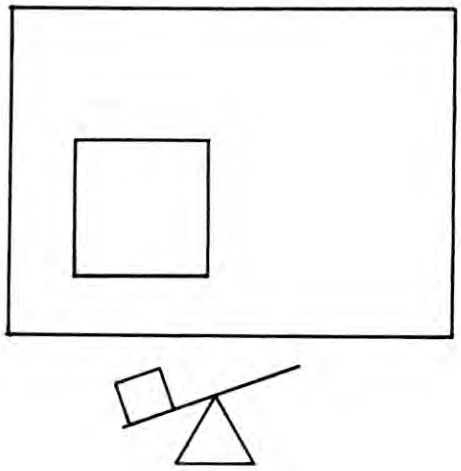




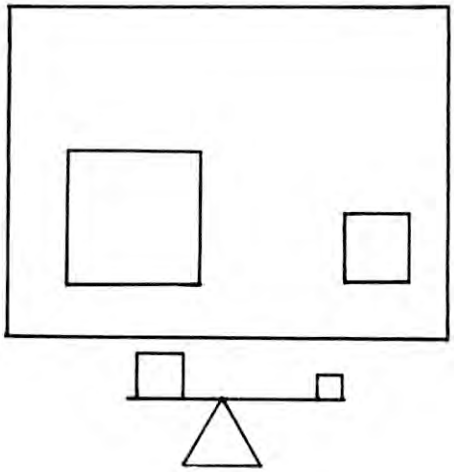
BALANCED

BALANCE - MASSES

Sometimes you see a scene with a large object on one side and nothing significant on the other side. Even though it doesn't look all that bad, you still feel a little uneasy about it. That's because it's off balance in terms of mass. This is most pleasantly corrected by placing a smaller object at some distance away within the frame. Visual leverage then balances the two nicely, like this:

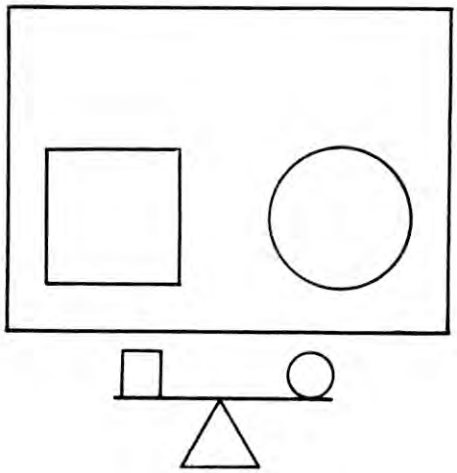


UNBALANCED



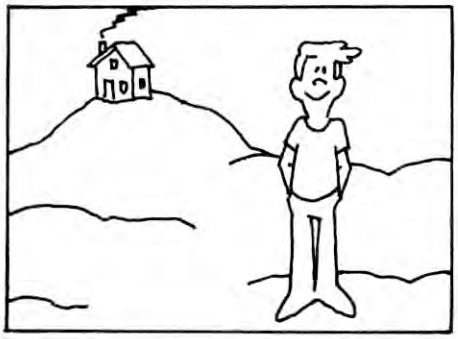
BALANCED

Of course you <u>can</u> balance out with another object the same size in the frame, but it usually ends up kind of static and unexciting:

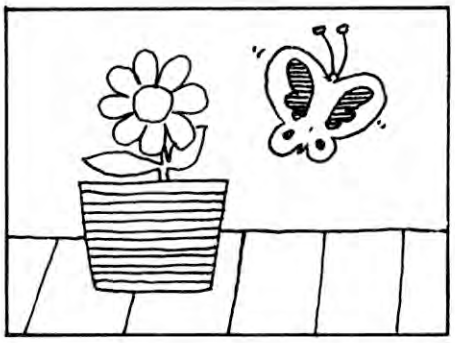


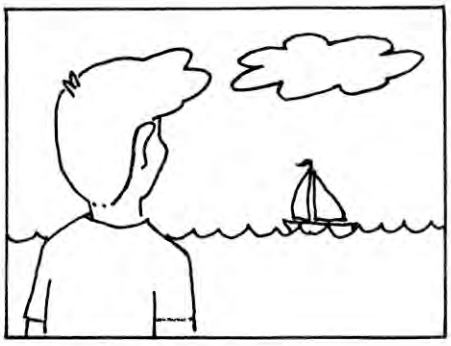
BALANCED

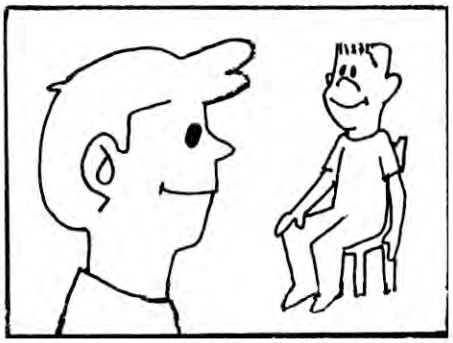
Remember, when we're balancing masses we're not concerned with the true size of things. All that matters is how big they look through the camera. Objects closer to the camera will always appear larger; those farther away will appear smaller. Depending on the camera angle, a house in the distance can balance out a man in the foreground:



Some other examples:







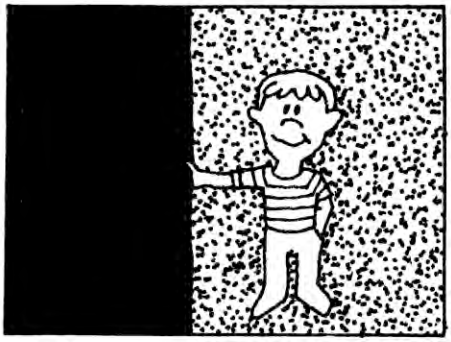
BALANCE - COLORS

The most important thing to know about colors is that bright ones attract the viewer's eye. How often have you seen a TV interview on location somewhere and found yourself watching, not the interview, but some guy in a red shirt in the background? Your eye just naturally goes to white or brightly colored areas in the frame. Once you know this fact, you can use it to help your pictures.

First off, try to arrange your frame so that the brightest area is also the area you want the viewer to look at first. Consider the following example, where we want the viewer to look at the man:

NO GOOD

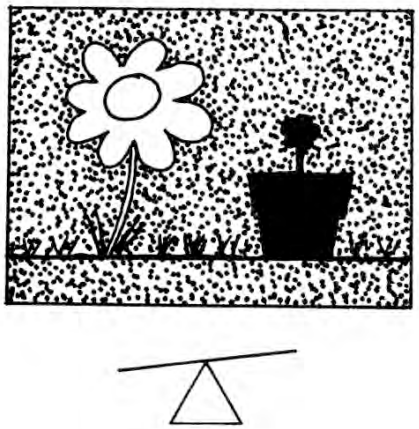
EYE GOES TO THE WALL INSTEAD OF THE MAN



BETTER

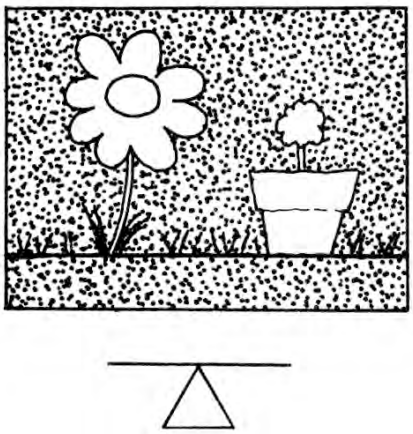
EYE GOES TO THE MAN

When you do include a bright object or area in your frame, remember that its brightness gives it extra weight in the composition--weight you have to balance out, either with another bright area, or with a larger mass.



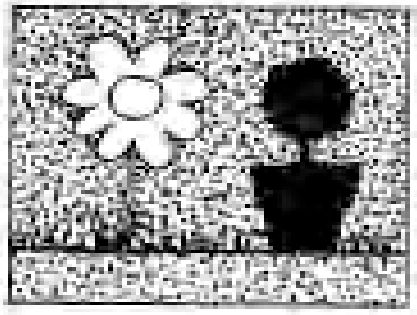
OFF-BALANCE

Although the masses of the flower and the pot balance out, the brightness of the flower pulls the composition to the left.



BALANCED

The brightness of the pot now balances out the brightness of the flower.

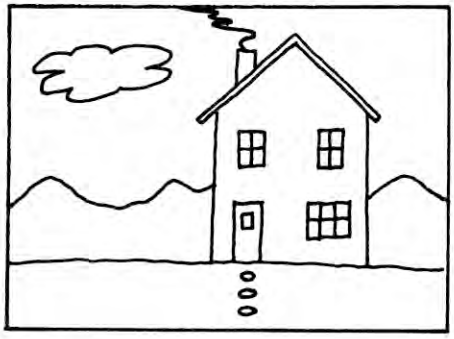


MASSES

How the brightness of the flower is balanced out by placing [illegible] on the other side of the frame.

ANGLES

Reality has three physical dimensions: height, width, and depth. In pictures we have only two dimensions: height and width. To give the illusion of depth, we show things at an angle, so we can at least see two sides.



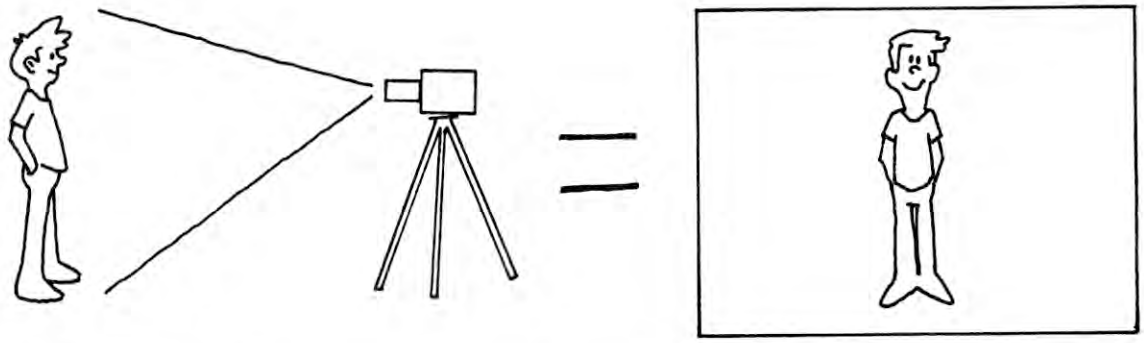
FLAT

ANGLED

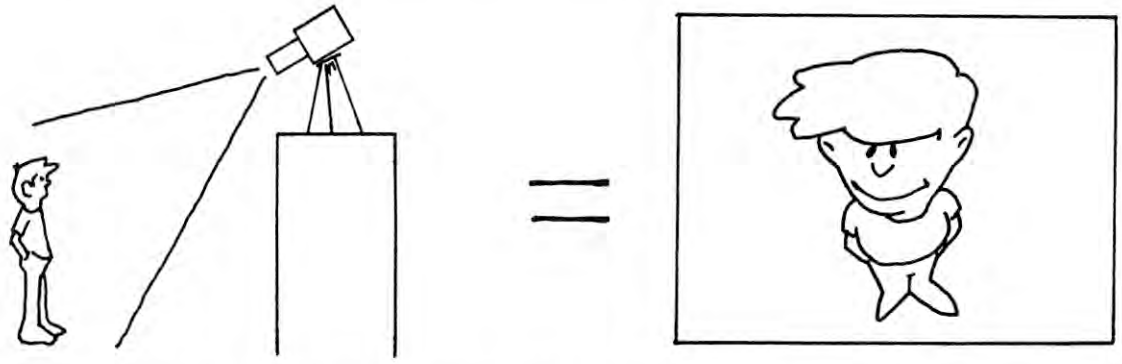
FLAT

ANGLED

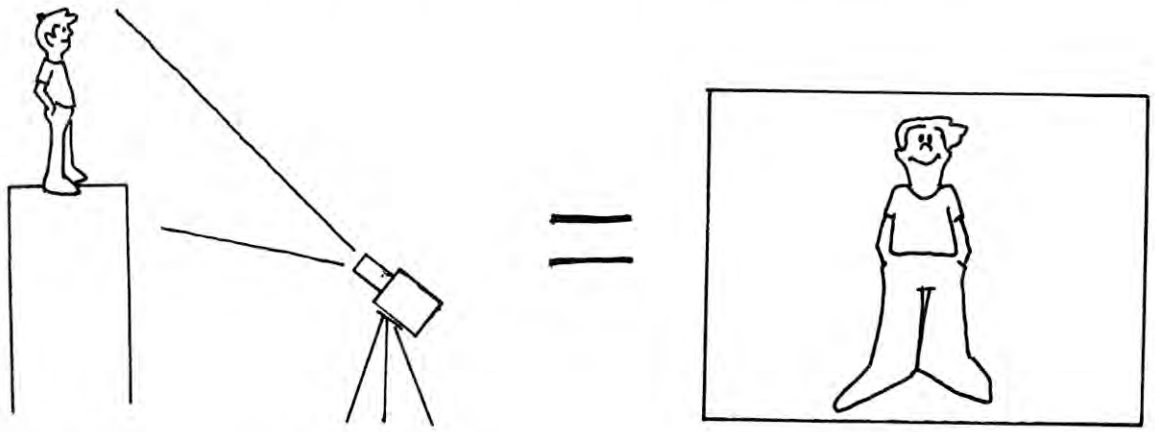
The angle created by the difference in height between the camera and the subject makes a definite impression on the viewer:



When the camera and the subject are at the same height, it gives the feeling that the viewer and the subject are of equal value.



When the camera is higher than the subject, it gives the feeling that the subject is inferior, smaller, less important.

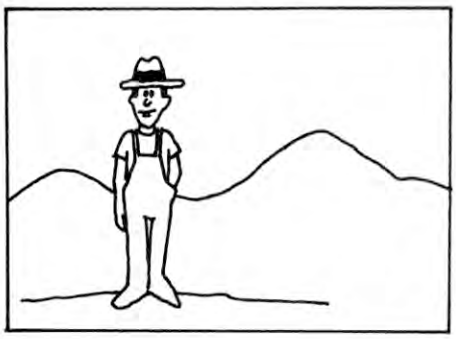


When the camera is lower than the subject, it gives the feeling that the subject is superior, larger, more important.

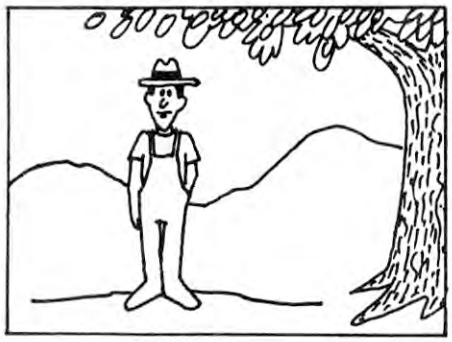
By raising or lowering your camera, you can subtly influence how your viewer will perceive your subject. This is used to great effect in horror films and political TV commercials.

FRAMES WITHIN THE FRAME

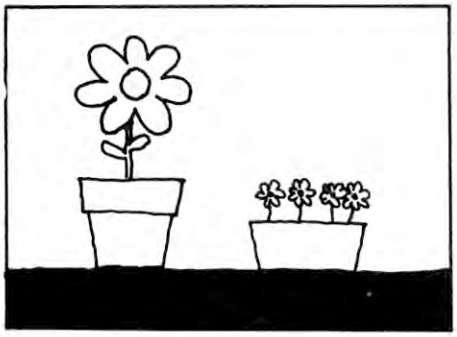
Often you can make a picture more interesting by using elements of your location to create full or partial frames within the camera frame.



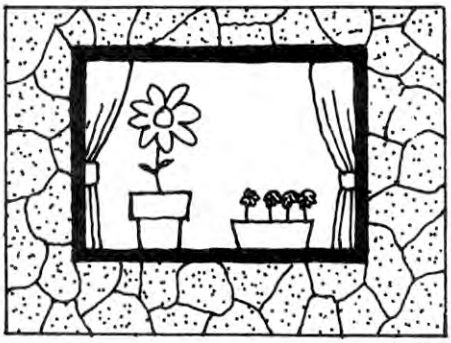
OKAY



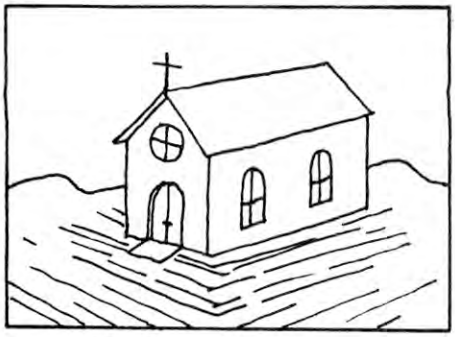
BETTER



OKAY



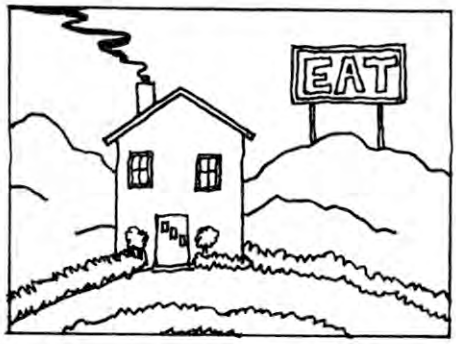
BETTER



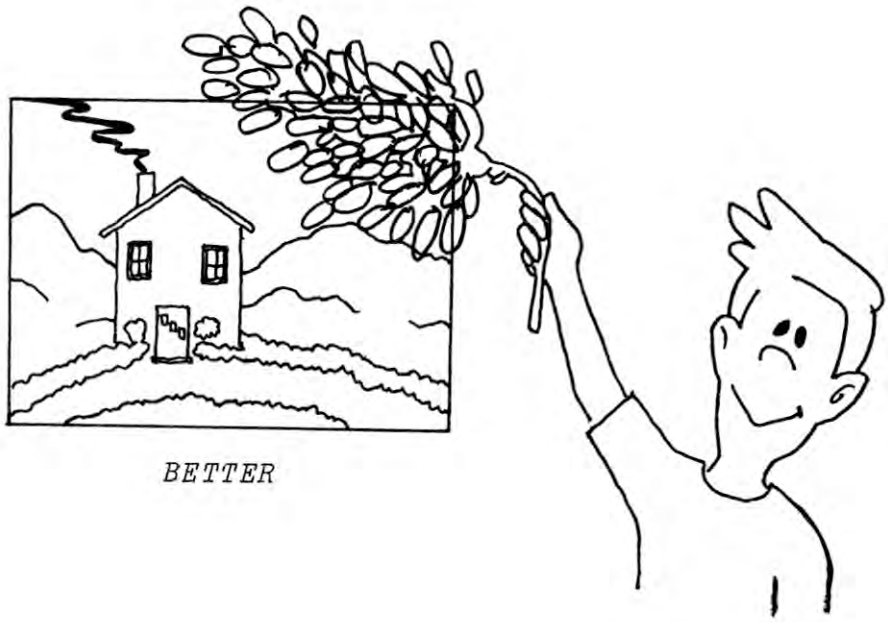
OKAY

BETTER

This type of framing can also be used to hide or obstruct unwanted elements. For example, a cut tree branch held near the camera can cover up an ugly sky or a billboard in the background.



NO GOOD

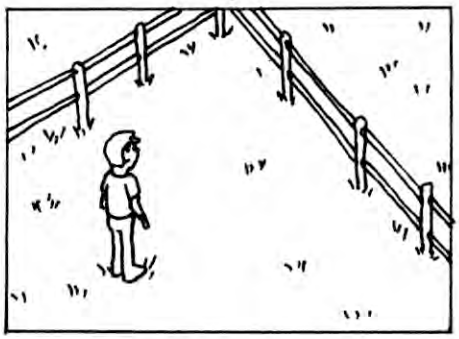


BETTER

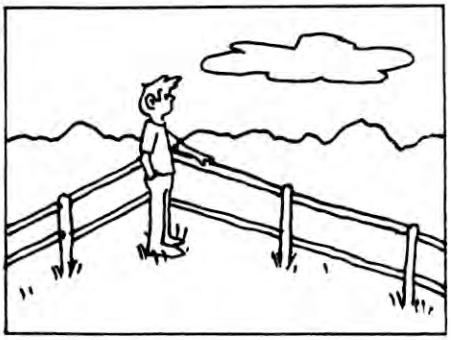
LEADING LINES

A nice way to direct the viewer's eye to your subject is through the use of leading lines. Here are some examples:

Viewer's eye is drawn here



NOT VERY GOOD



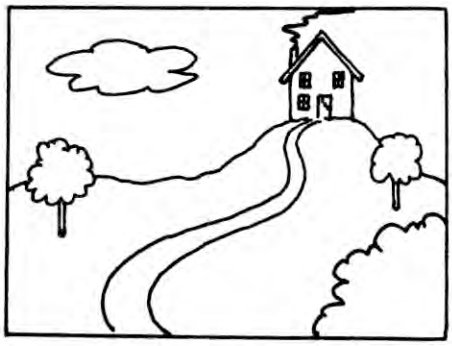
BETTER

Lines of fence now lead to man.

Viewer's eye is drawn here

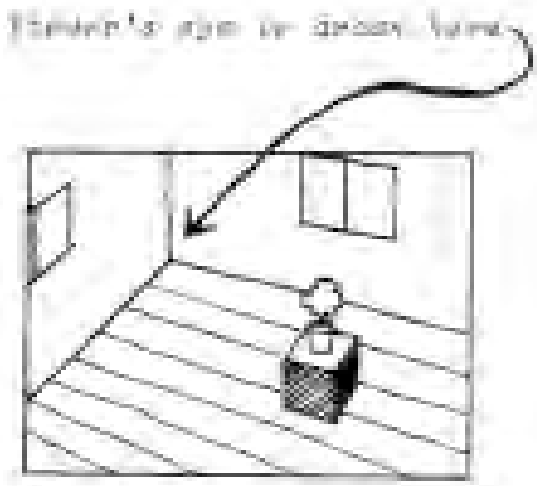
NOT VERY GOOD

From this angle, the path leads away from the house.



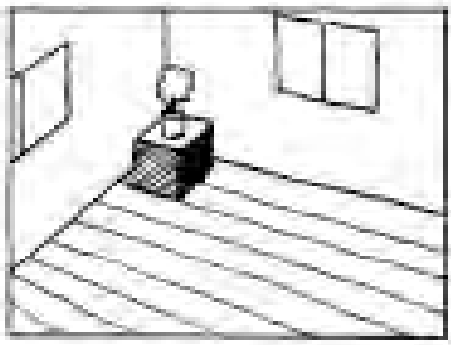
BETTER

From this angle, the path leads toward the house.



NOT VERY GOOD

The lines lead away from the flower on the table.

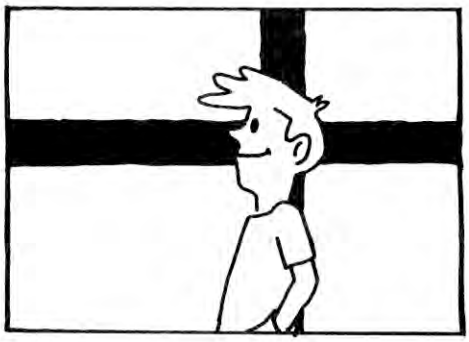


BETTER

All lines now lead to the flower on the table.

BACKGROUNDS

The best background is the one that stays where it belongs--in the background. Unfortunately, some types of backgrounds push forward and call attention away from your foreground subjects. Let's look at some of the more common distracting backgrounds and ways to avoid them:



PROBLEM: Door frames, window frames, trees, poles, etc., that grow out of people's heads.

SOLUTION: Move the camera, the subject, or both.

PROBLEM: Backgrounds that are too visually busy, so full of details and colors similar to those of the subject that the subject becomes buried in the background.

SOLUTION #1: Move the camera, the subject, or both.

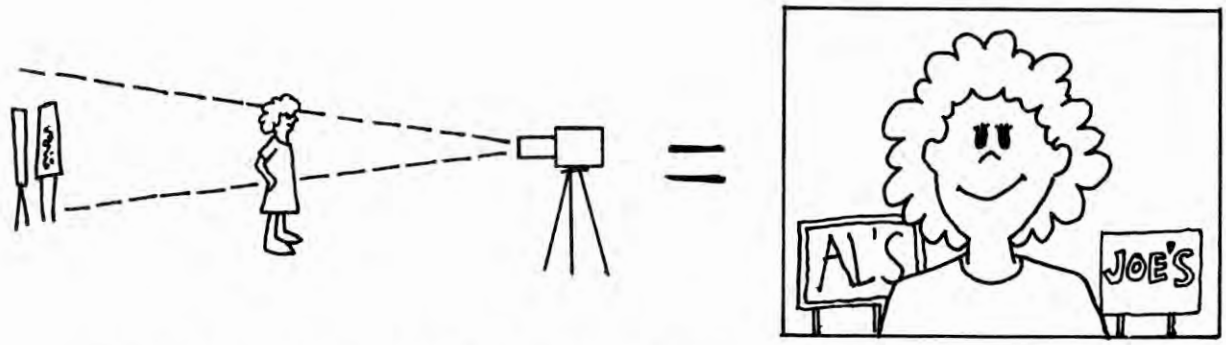
SOLUTION #2: Move the camera far enough back from the subject

so you can use a telephoto focal length. This will give you a more shallow depth of field, throwing the background out of focus while leaving the subject sharp.

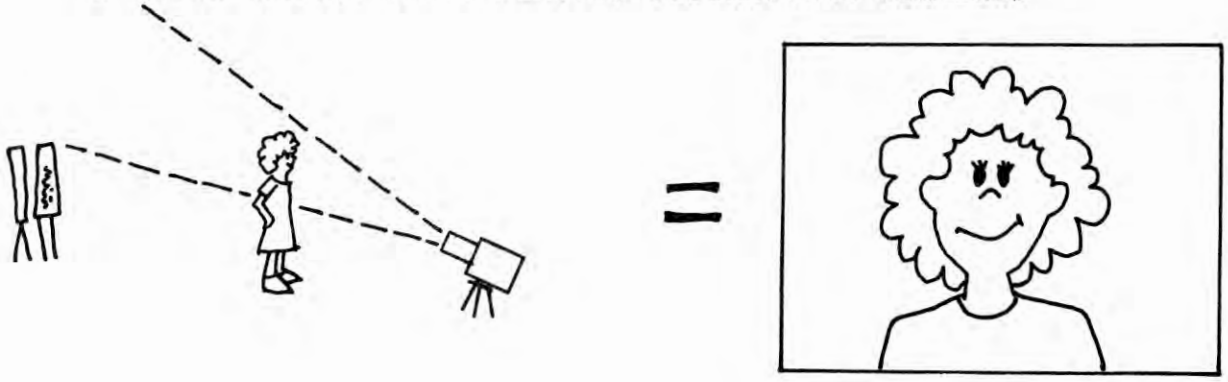
PROBLEM: Unusual or persistent movements in the background.

SOLUTION: Move the camera, the subject, or both.

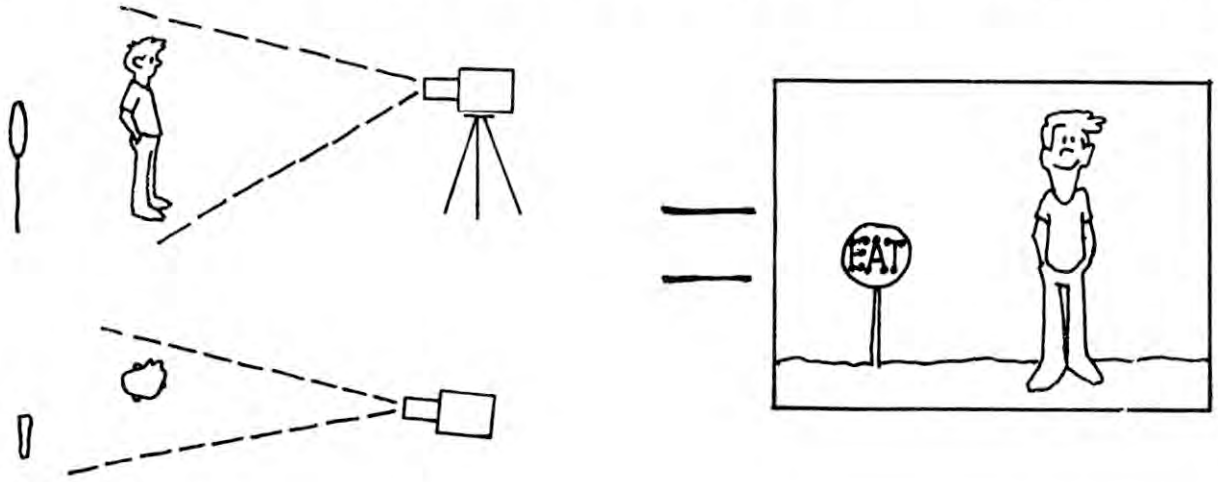
One quick way to remove a distracting background element from your frame is to move closer to your subject, drop the camera to a lower level, and shoot up:



A LOWER CAMERA ANGLE REMOVES DISTRACTING ELEMENTS

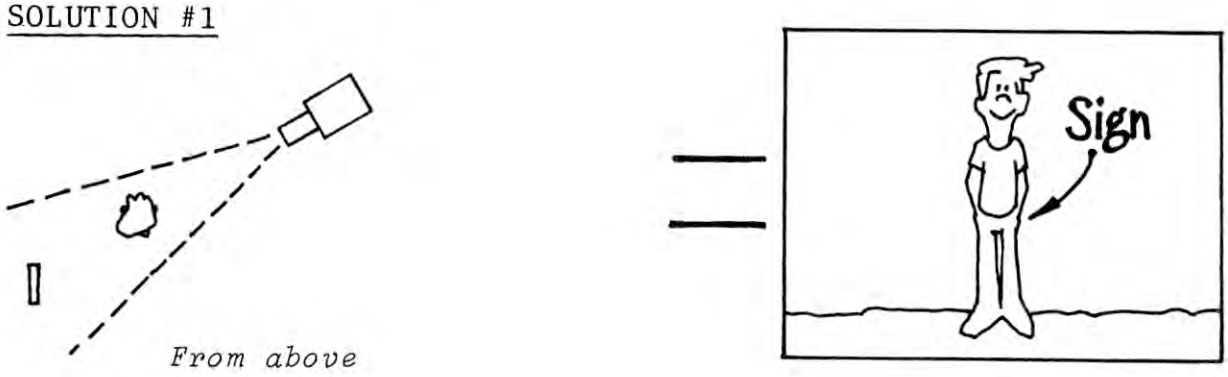


Another way to eliminate a distracting element in the background is to place either the subject or another object in the foreground to block the camera's view of the distracting element.



From above

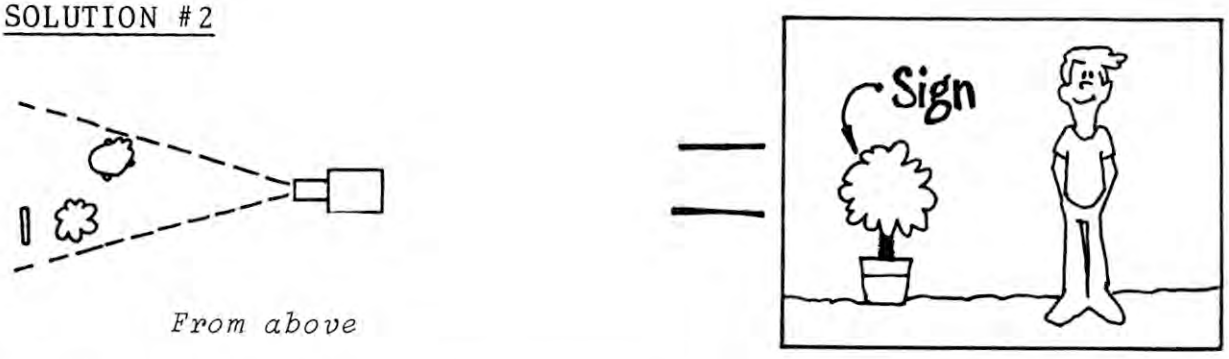
SOLUTION #1



From above

The camera is moved around so that the man's body hides the sign in the background.

SOLUTION #2



From above

A plant placed between the camera and the sign hides the sign.

IN SEARCH OF A GOOD COMPOSITION

A common mistake made by camerapersons everywhere is to arrive at a location, set up the camera in the first clear space that looks pretty good, and go from there. If you do this, you're short-changing yourself.

Sure, go ahead and set the camera down. But then take a quick walk around. As you walk, go up on your toes, squat down, lean from side to side. Find your best angle for framing, background, color, and balance. The whole operation could take less than a minute, and it's well worth your time. If you have trouble visualizing shots, carry the camera around with you and look through it to find your angle.

Remember, you don't have to accept the location exactly as you see it. If you've got a couple minutes, you can rearrange furniture, remove distracting elements, add interesting ones--do all kinds of things to improve your composition.

Look, then look again, as critically as you can. The human eye has a tendency to cancel out unimportant details, but the camera sees and records everything equally. Think back to that "perfect" shot of a wilderness sunset you took on vacation, only to discover when you picked up the prints that you had telephone wires running across the frame. When you learn to see the wires <u>before</u> you take the picture, <u>then</u> you can call yourself a cameraperson.

These pages are copied from the totally excellent book titled
"The Bare Bones Camera Course for Film and Video" by Tom Schroeppel