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## Composition and Lighting Fundamentals

Great outdoor photography relies on two key elements: composition (how you frame and arrange elements in your photo) and lighting (the quality and direction of light on your subject). In this section, we cover fundamental tips for composing compelling shots and making the most of natural light.

### 1. Composition Basics:

Composition is about guiding the viewer's eye and creating interest. Here are some core guidelines:

- **Rule of Thirds:** As mentioned, use the grid to apply the rule of thirds. Instead of centering your subject in every shot, try placing key subjects a third of the way into the frame (on one of the gridline intersections). Off-center compositions often look more balanced and professional. For example, when photographing a person, you might position them on the left or right third of the frame rather than dead center – this can produce a more powerful image. Likewise, for a horizon in a landscape, placing it along the top third or bottom third line (rather than splitting the image in half) usually yields a more dynamic result. The gridlines also help ensure your horizons are level.
- **Leading Lines:** Incorporate leading lines to draw viewers into the scene. These are natural lines (like roads, trails, rivers, fences, or a line of trees) that lead from the foreground into the background of your photo. A well-placed leading line can create depth and guide the eye through the image. For instance, a winding path starting at the bottom of the frame and leading toward your main subject (a person or a mountain) makes the viewer feel like they're journeying into the photo. Keep an eye out for such lines in landscapes or even in urban settings (like a railing or shadow) and position yourself to use them in your composition.
- **Foreground and Depth:** Don't just focus on the background scenery – include something interesting in the foreground to create a sense of depth, especially for landscapes. A photo of a distant mountain range can look flat without any foreground object for scale. Adding a nearby element like wildflowers, rocks, or a person in the foreground gives context and three-dimensional depth to the image. The foreground

object leads the viewer's eye into the scene and makes the photo more engaging. For the greatest effect, try getting closer to the ground when including foreground elements – this makes the object appear larger and creates a dramatic, immersive perspective.

- **Simplicity and Framing:** Aim for a clean, uncluttered composition. Too many subjects or a busy background can distract from your main subject. Whenever possible, simplify the scene – change your angle or move closer to eliminate extraneous elements. A simple background helps your subject stand out clearly. You can also use natural frames to highlight your subject: for example, position a person within a doorway, between tree branches, or under an arching bough. These framing elements around the edges of your photo act like a frame and draw attention to the subject in the center. When photographing people outdoors, look for ways to frame them with the environment (such as having them stand among trees or in a sunlit clearing) for a more artful composition.
- **Keep the Horizon Straight:** A tilted horizon is a common rookie mistake that can make an otherwise beautiful photo look amateur. Always check that your horizon line is level. Use the grid or the built-in level (a crosshair appears on-screen if you tilt the phone straight down/up) to help with alignment. Nothing shouts “amateur” more than a slanted horizon in a landscape photo. If you get it right in-camera, you won’t have to fix it later. Take an extra moment to align the shot before tapping the shutter – your photos will instantly look more polished and professional.

## **2. Lighting Basics:**

Lighting can make or break your photo. The good news is that outdoor photography gives you one of the best light sources – the sun – but its quality changes throughout the day. Here’s how to use natural light to your advantage:

- **Shoot During Golden Hours:** The absolute best times to take outdoor photos are during the golden hours – shortly after sunrise and just before sunset. At these times, the sun is low in the sky, producing a soft, warm, golden glow that is incredibly flattering for both landscapes and portraits. Golden hour light adds warmth, long gentle shadows, and a magical quality to photos that midday light can’t match. For example, landscapes shot at sunrise/sunset often have richly colored skies and warm tones, and portraits benefit from the soft light that avoids harsh shadows on your subject’s face. Whenever possible, plan your outdoor shoots for early morning or late afternoon/evening. Tip: Sunrise shoots are great for quiet, serene landscapes with dew or mist, while sunset shoots offer dramatic skies and comfortable shooting conditions.
- **Avoid Harsh Midday Sun:** In contrast, the worst time to shoot outdoors (especially portraits or nature close-ups) is under bright midday sun (around noon). The overhead sun at noon casts harsh, unflattering shadows and creates high contrast that can be difficult to expose properly. Portrait subjects will get dark shadows under the eyes and

nose, and they'll likely squint from the bright light . Landscapes in midday can look flat and "washed out" with white skies and glaring highlights. In fact, bright direct sunlight at noon comes with a host of issues like lens flare, blown-out highlights (overexposed whites), and very strong shadows . Your location might be gorgeous, but bad lighting will result in lifeless photos . So try to avoid shooting at noon whenever you can . If you must shoot during midday, look for open shade (for portraits, move your subject under a tree or beside a building to diffuse the light) or wait for a passing cloud to soften the sun. An overcast day is actually great for outdoor portraits and detail shots – clouds act like a giant diffuser, providing soft, even light with no harsh shadows . The soft, diffused light under an overcast sky flatters people and products alike, and you can shoot at any time of day without worrying about squinting or deep shadows .

- **Use the Sun's Direction Creatively:** Pay attention to where the light is coming from. Front light (sun shining from behind you onto the subject) will evenly illuminate the subject, which is good for landscapes and for clear detail. However, front light can be a bit flat for portraits. Side lighting (sun coming from the side) can add texture and depth – for example, side light on a mountain range emphasizes shadows in the crags, and on a person's face it can create a sense of depth (just be mindful of one side of the face being brighter). Backlighting (sun behind your subject) can create beautiful effects too: a rim of light around your subject's hair or leaves, and warm glow, especially at golden hour. Backlighting is perfect for silhouettes as well – if you expose for the sky, your subject will appear as a dark shape against a vibrant sky at sunrise/sunset. Experiment with these lighting directions. If backlighting a portrait, you may need to tap on the person's face to brighten them (which will blow out some of the bright background), or use the HDR function (which iPhones do automatically) to balance a bright background and shadowy face. Also beware of lens flare when shooting toward the sun – sometimes it's an artistic choice, but it can wash out contrast. You can block the sun with an object or your hand (just outside the frame) to reduce unwanted flare.
- **Mind the Shadows and Highlights:** The dynamic range (difference between bright and dark areas) in outdoor scenes can be high – e.g., bright sky and dark foreground. Your iPhone camera has Smart HDR that merges exposures to handle some of this, but it's still wise to watch your exposure. After tapping to focus, look at the brightest parts of the image (like clouds) – if they appear pure white with no detail, you might want to lower the exposure a touch to preserve them. Conversely, if your subject's face is in shadow and too dark, increase exposure a bit (or use fill flash, described next). You generally want to avoid extremes – blown-out highlights or totally black shadows – for a more balanced photo.
- **Use Fill Flash or Reflector if Needed:** While we won't dive into advanced gear, one basic tool you can use even with an iPhone is the built-in flash as a fill light in daylight. If your subject's face is dark compared to a bright background, turning on the flash can illuminate them slightly (within a close range of a few feet) to "fill" in shadows. This can help in portraits when the sun is behind the subject (backlit) or in open shade when the

face is a bit dim. The iPhone's flash isn't very powerful, so it's only effective at short distances, but for close portraits it might give a nice catchlight in the eyes and soften shadows. Another simple trick: use a reflective surface to bounce light – even a white poster board or a sunny wall can reflect light onto your subject. For instance, having your subject face a light-colored building or using a piece of white foam board below them (for product shots or portraits) can fill in some light. These are cheap, basic aids that don't count as complex accessories. Small business owners taking product photos might use a white sheet or board to reflect window light and reduce shadows on the product. While not required, being aware of these light management tricks can elevate your photos.

In summary, plan for good light and compose with purpose. A well-composed photo with thoughtful framing and taken in beautiful light will stand out as professional. Now that you understand these fundamentals, let's apply them to specific scenarios: landscapes, people, and nature photography.