

Creating Impact and Depth with Focal Length

Changing the focal length of your lens has a very different effect on your photograph than changing your perspective. As you move your body closer or further from your subject, you change all of the relationships within the image. With the prevalence of zoom lenses, many photographers forget that changing perspective on a subject is not the same as zooming in or out. Good photographers will use all of their equipment - - their legs AND their lenses!

Try this exercise to learn about your lenses and the effect of changing perspective:

1. Select a subject to photograph. Be sure that you have space to walk 10 feet forward and 10 feet backward from your chosen spot. (i.e. don't do this at the edge of a cliff or on the curb of a busy street!)
2. Carefully compose your scene with a normal focal length lens. Be sure to include foreground, middleground & background elements. Make notes as to what is at the edges of your frame. Make your exposure.
3. Make exposures with each of your lenses at a variety of focal lengths (i.e. if you have a 35-75 mm and a 75-210 mm lens, take shots at 35mm, 50mm, 75mm, 100mm, 135mm and 210mm. If you have a 35, 50 and 135mm, make one shot with each.)
4. Next, move closer to your subject in order to get as close to the same composition as you can with your wide-angle lens as you had in your old position with your normal lens. Notice the edges. Make this exposure now.
5. Notice how it feels to be closer to your subject. Jot down some notes.
6. Now, more back beyond your first positions and re-compose in the same manner with your telephoto lens. Be sure to check the edges of your frame. Make this exposure.
7. Notice how it feels to be further from your subject. Jot down more notes.
8. Lastly, at your favorite focal lengths for this scene, try photographing the subject from lower and higher perspectives. Get down on your belly! Up on your toes!! How different does your subject feel when you are looking up at it or down at it?
9. Process the images. Compare your notes with your images when they are processed.

Work to use both focal length changes and perspective changes to create interesting photographs. Also remember that you are recreating a three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional image. Ask yourself where your foreground, middleground, and background elements lie. Remember to MOVE to make photographs!