negative space

Glen Kindness November 8, 2023

What is negative space photography?

Negative space refers to areas of a composition that are empty, bland, or otherwise uninteresting. That's why negative space is also called white space.

Negative space is an essential component of almost every great image. In fact, if you want to create gorgeous photos, master negative space; that way, you can take shots that feature balanced, harmonious, eye-catching arrangements and allow for wonderfully minimalistic compositions.

Negative space is often created by elements that have a quality of "vastness" such as sea, sky, sand, walls, floors, ceilings. A good rule of thumb is that the amount of negative space should take up at least 50% of the photo to achieve the right effect.

Positive space is the complete opposite of negative space. Negative space rejects the eye, while positive space steals the spotlight. Positive space is the area of a photo that includes elements of interest, that includes the main subject, the area where the viewer's eye goes first. Key things people see first include text, people and advancing colors, like red. Elements in the frame on a "third" line, at the end of a Fibonacci spiral or in the center, also draw the eye.
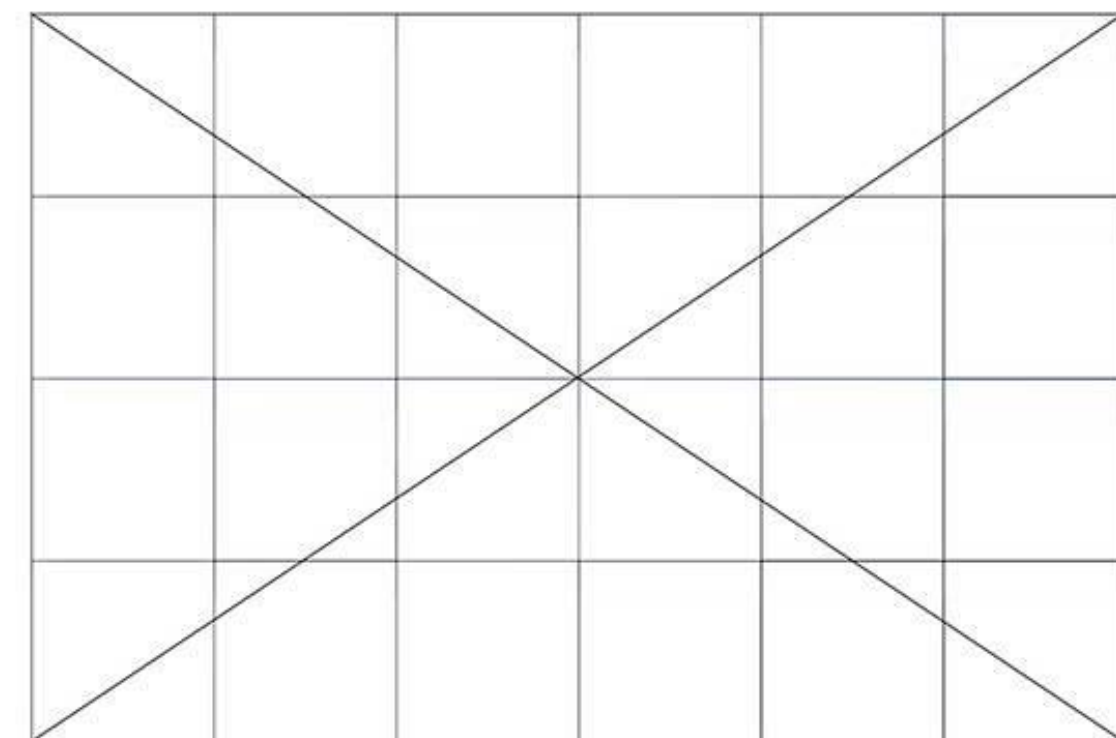
Negative space photographers still use rules of photographic composition, like the rule of thirds, but the style lends itself to a unique approach to these guidelines. Try finding creative ways to use the rules, like having things in the extreme foreground and extreme background.
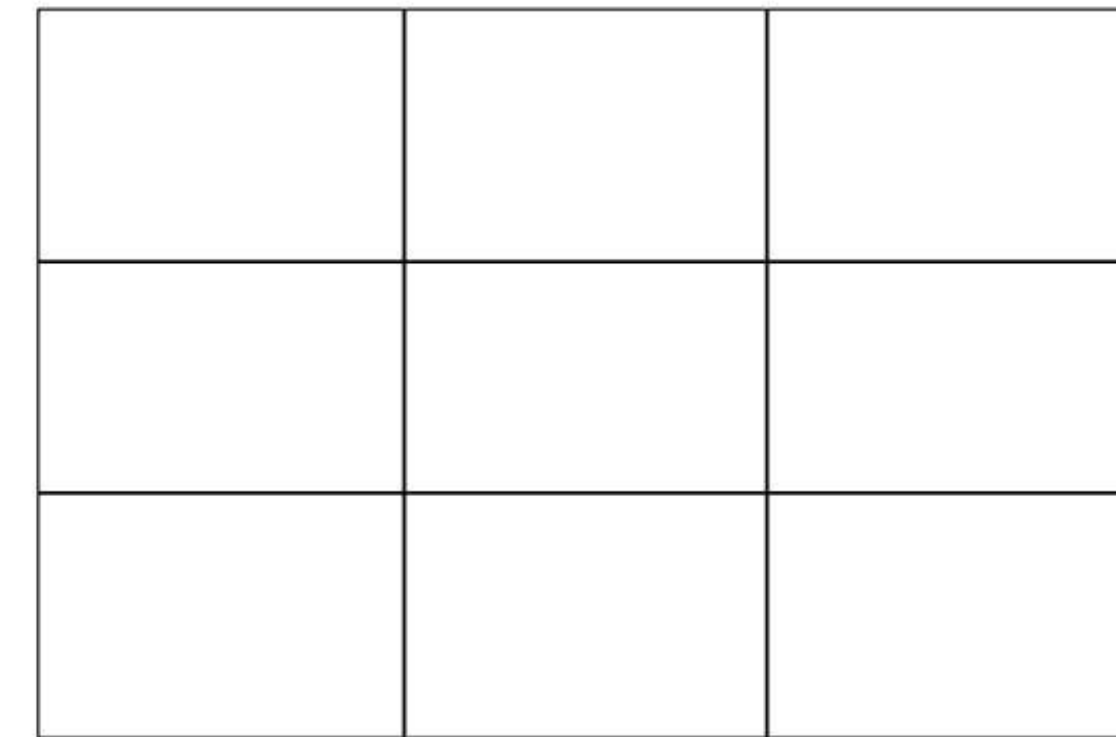
Rule of Thirds grid
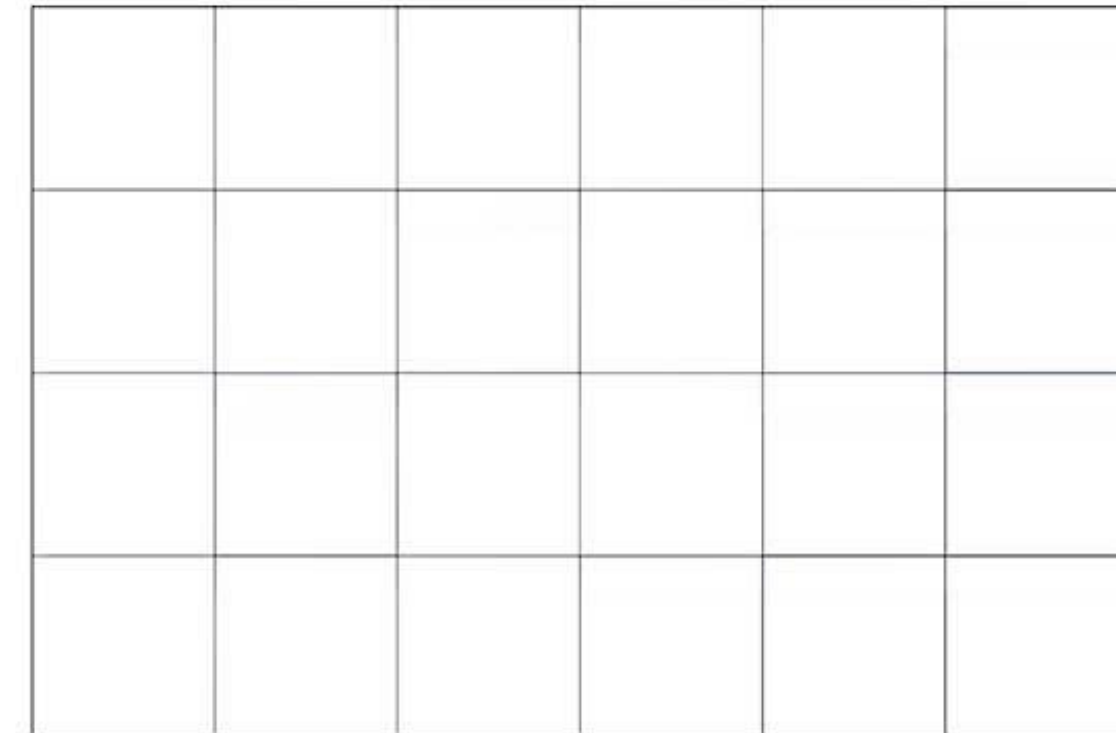
Square grid

Square grid + diagonal

Negative spaces don't have to be uniform. Grass can be a negative space, even though it has quite a bit of texture to it. Likewise, desert sand with notable variation or cloudy sky can also serve as a dramatic, empty space, even though they are not strictly one uniform color. Negative space photography is about relationships and how the subject relates to expensive spaces.

So, which is better? Positive or negative?

Neither! In photography, the goal is to combine both types of space to create a balanced composition. You want negative space, yes, but you also want positive space.

Negativism and Minimalism

Minimalism in photography heavily emphasizes negative space to create a calming effect and clear focal point. Minimalism uses a lot of negative space to give the viewer plenty of room to breathe and focus on the subject.

Where might I use them to their best advantage?

Travel
  - a person standing next to a large body of water
  - a road stretching through the landscape

Street photograph
  - a person passing through a very empty cityscape to give a sense of scale

Negative space can bring peace to an image, focus to the subject and opportunities for exciting and creative compositions. Enjoy!

Thanks for your attention!