Through The Lens

A guide to digital photography for computer enthusiasts.
After the click of your camera, you're only half done!

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Cropping your photos
by Lynda Buske

One of the easiest tasks in photo editing is cropping your image. In the days before digital photography, the average person shot film and with no access to a dark room relied instead on the local photo shop or department store to print their images. Since you had no ability to crop the image after (except with scissors), it was important to get close to your subject and to ensure it had a good compositional placement. Life is much easier now and we can shoot with lots of space around our images and decide how best to crop them later. There is of course a limit. For example, if you crop tightly on a small bird, you may run out of resolution and have a very pixelated image. For wildlife photography, usually the old rule of getting in close is the wisest.

So why crop? Probably the most common reason to crop is in order to make a print of your photo. Cameras do not, by default, shoot in the aspect ratio of 4x6 or 8x10. Your camera's sensor may not be the same aspect ratio as the print size you want such as 4x6, 5x7 or 8x10. You may be able to set your camera to that dimension but you are sacrificing pixels on your sensor to do so and hence reducing your resolution. Best to shoot the image and crop to the desired dimension after.

Another strong reason to crop is to emphasize what you were trying to capture or say with your photo. If it is people, it's often the faces that are most important (unless it's someone in their bridal gown). Don't be afraid to even crop the top of a head. See figures 1&2.

Figure 1

Figure 2

For landscape images, you may wish to eliminate extra sky and water. If you are not printing, there is no restriction on the aspect ratio and sometimes a long narrow look is effective for scenic vistas. See figure 3.

Figure 3 – extra sky and water

If there is an object of interest in your scene (such as a boat), crop to get the best compositional layout. For instance, moving objects look better with more space in the direction they are heading than behind. Many people use the rule of thirds which automatically overlays onto your image whenever you select the crop function in either your phone or photo editing program. The grid for the rule of thirds allows you to view and adjust your image so the horizon isn't exactly halfway up and any object of interest is near one of the 4 intersection points rather than centred. See figure 4.

Figure 4 – ship is too centred