

Photographic Compositing

A good composite should begin with an idea...a story if you will. It will sometimes help to try to draw this idea on paper because it will give you something to refer to during the process. In essence it will keep you on track.

It is always best to begin with the background image. By starting this way, you know from which direction the light is coming and then when you do go to photograph your subject you will know how to set up the lighting. Lighting from different directions will make a composite look unreal and confuse the viewer. Choosing the background first will be much easier than trying to find a background that you like, is appropriate and whose lighting matches the subject.

If you are shooting background images that you think you might use in the future, ie. you don't have an idea in mind, make sure you leave room in the picture to place your model or subject. In my opinion, foreground space helps to add depth and hence a more interesting image.

You will want to think about the type of light that is in the background and how to match that when shooting the subject. Is it hard or soft light and what is the temperature of the light. For example is it warm as in the evening or cold like mid day or at night. Matching the highlights in your subject and background will definitely help in creating that sense of realism.

All composite images require that at least one element, usually the subject is cut out from another image. A well done extraction is very important in any good composite and one of the key points is to always feather the edges by a few pixels, (amount will vary with resolution), to aid in preventing jagged edges and helping to blend the selection into the background.

You also need to consider that all the elements in composite images need to have the same perspective. That is to say, the focal length, camera angle and tilt need to be the same as that of the background. A major point to be aware of is that all the images, models and other subjects that are added have the same horizon line as the background image. Depending on the background, this may not be blatantly noticeable but the viewer will have a feeling that **something** is not right.

Another feature that is necessary when creating a composite image is the shadows. Simply, where the subject touches the ground will always be the darkest and sharpest shadow. This is often referred to as the contact shadow.

As the distance from the subject increases so does the blur and density of the shadow. Using the shadows already present in the background image as a guide will help in matching those you create for your subject.

A final item that is often overlooked is the need to colour correct the subject to match the background. Unless the subject and background were shot under exactly the same lighting conditions, colour and luminance will need to be adjusted. This is often a subtle addition but it can make a big difference in the blending of the components to one cohesive image.

There are many methods in Photoshop to address these situations. Some are complex and more appropriate for certain images while others are quite simple and will work just fine on the majority of your photographs. Probably the most important thing to remember is that the previously mentioned factors are necessary and each of them needs to be considered when creating a good realistic composite.

Composite References:

Adrian Sommeling- <http://tutorials.adriansommeling.com/>

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