Develop an Objective Eye  We are not suggesting that you eliminate everything except the center of interest, just whatever does not in some way support or, at the least, does not detract from the central idea being presented. A scene may, in fact, be cluttered with objects and people, such as an establishing shot of a person working in a busy television newsroom. But each of the things should fit in and belong; nothing should “upstage” the intended center of interest. A master (wide) shot of an authentic interior of an 18th-century farmhouse may include dozens of objects. But each of the objects should add to the overall statement: “18th-century farmhouse.” An interview with a scientist may take place in an office full of scientific apparatus. But the apparatus belong there and represents the “natural habitat” of the scientist. Assuming that you are focusing on the scientist, just make sure you can put these supporting elements in a visually secondary position.

Remember that the viewer has a limited time—generally only a few seconds—to understand the content and meaning of a shot. If some basic meaning doesn’t come though before the shot is changed, the viewer will miss the point of the scene.

Use Selective Focus  If you were to videotape an interview with the woman in her office, described earlier, the coat rack might appear to be growing out of her head. Assuming for some reason that the coat rack can’t be moved or the camera angle can’t be shifted to exclude it, you might be able to throw it out of focus by using selective focus (refer to Figure 4.15). From Chapter 4 recall that shooting from a distance and using a zoom lens at an extended focal length (zoomed in) while shooting at a wide f-stop decreases depth of field and increases the selective focus effect. In order not to be distracting, competing objects need to be thrown far enough out of focus so that our eye will not be drawn to them.

A Basic Component of “The Film Look”  As we’ve previously noted, part of “the film look” that many people like centers on selective focus. Early films were not highly sensitive to light and lenses had to be used at relatively wide apertures (f-stops) to attain sufficient exposure. This was fortunate, in a way, because by focusing on the key element in each shot (and throwing those in front and behind that area out of focus) audiences were immediately led to the scene’s center of interest and not distracted by anything else. Even with today’s high-speed film emulsions, directors of photography in film strive to retain the selective focus effect by shooting under comparatively low light levels.

The same principles that have worked so well in film can also be used in video. By throwing foreground and background objects out of focus, the videographer can reduce visual confusion, while directing attention to the center of interest (refer to Figure 4.15). This level of image control takes extra planning when you use today’s highly sensitive CCD cameras. The auto-iris circuit generally adjusts the f-stop to an aperture that brings both the foreground and background into focus. To make use of the creative control inherent in selective focus, high shutter speeds, neutral density filters or controlled lighting must be used. The control of lighting is also important in another way.

Use Lighting to Focus Attention  The eye is drawn to the brighter areas of a scene. This means that the prudent use of lighting can be a composition tool, in this case to emphasize important scenic elements and to de-emphasize others. As discussed in the upcoming chapter on lighting, barn doors are commonly used with lights to downgrade the importance of elements in a scene by making them slightly darker.
Shift Attention with Sound  In stereo and surround-sound we can shift attention from the center of interest to another area through sound placement. This is typically accompanied by movement, as, for example, when something that originally held a secondary role at one side of the frame suddenly “comes to life” and becomes the center of interest. There are many good examples of this technique in horror films.

Guideline 4: Observe Proper Subject Placement

In “gun sight fashion,” most weekend snapshotters, armed with their disposable, point-and-shoot cameras, feel they have to place the center of interest—be it Uncle Henry, or the Eiffel Tower—squarely in the center of the frame. Quite often this weakens composition.

Rule of Thirds  Except, possibly, for close-ups of people, it is often best to place the center of interest near one of the points indicated by the rule of thirds. In the rule of thirds the total image area is divided vertically and horizontally into three equal sections (Figure 6.5). Although it is often best to place the center of interest somewhere along the two horizontal and two vertical lines, generally, composition is even stronger if the center of interest falls near one of the four cross-points.

Handle Horizontal and Vertical Lines  Weekend snapshotters also typically go to some effort to make sure that horizon lines are perfectly centered in the middle of
the frame. This severely weakens composition by splitting the frame into two equal halves. According to the rule of thirds, horizon lines should be either in the upper third or the lower third of the frame. In the same way, vertical lines shouldn’t divide the frame into two equal parts. From the rule of thirds, we can see that it’s generally best to place a dominant vertical line either one-third or two-thirds of the way across the frame.

It is also a good idea to break up or intersect dominant, unbroken lines with some scenic element. Otherwise, the scene may seem divided. A horizon can be broken by an object in the foreground. Often this can be done by simply moving the camera slightly. A vertical line can be interrupted by something as simple as a tree branch. (Videographers have been known to have someone hold a tree branch so that it projects into the side of a shot in order to break up a line or make composition more interesting.)

Guideline 5: Observe Tonal Balance

The tone (brightness and darkness) of objects in a scene suggests weight. Against light backgrounds dark objects seem heavier than light objects. Once you realize that brightness influences mass, you can begin to “feel” the visual “weight” of objects within a scene—and strive for balance.

Guideline 6: Balance Mass

Just as a room would seem out of balance if all of the furniture were piled up on one side, the mass of a scene must be balanced to be aesthetically pleasing. Regardless of their actual physical weight, large objects in a scene seem heavier than small ones. By objectively viewing the elements in a scene, you will learn to see their “psychological weight” in composition. To do this it helps to imagine a fulcrum or balance point at the bottom center of each of your shots.

Several things can be done to try to balance a shot: the camera can be panned to the left or right, a new camera angle can be selected, or the lens can be zoomed in or out to include and exclude objects. Seldom will things actually have to be moved around.

Guideline 7: Create a Pattern of Meaning

Use a combination of scenic elements to create meaning. Most people are familiar with the ink blot tests used by psychiatrists. By presenting someone with a meaningless collection of shapes and forms an individual draws from his or her own background and thoughts and projects their own meaning into the abstract images. (“That looks like a mother scolding her son”; or “that looks like a school being crushed by a bulldozer.”)

In the same way, if a variety of objects appear in a still photo or video scene, we try to make sense (possibly even unconsciously) out of why they are there and what they represent. We assume that things don’t just come together by accident.

Good directors take advantage of this tendency and pay careful attention to the specific elements included in a scene. The most obvious example of this is the atmosphere introduction, where a director will open on a scene full of clues about the central characters, long before we see them. Early morning shots of a room littered with beer cans, overflowing ash trays, overturned chairs and shoes would not only suggest what happened the night before, but would tell us a lot about the kind of people who were there.