

Choose your vantage point

Be selective in deciding where to stand—it can determine what your photographs say to viewers

Photographers use their vantage point to create a perspective that expresses an idea, tells a story and draws the viewer into an image. The beginner or formula-bound descriptive photographer will always take the most predictable camera position: 8 to 10 feet away from the subject with camera held at eye level. Photographic communicators, on the other hand, will often get down, move up or go entirely around the subject to find the position that creates the most meaning.

Bob Gilka, former director of photography for *National*



Shooting from below the man doing tai chi (above) adds energy to the image. Shooting from above the seemingly calm train station concourse (below) provides contrast with the hectic street scene outside.

Geographic magazine, once said that when he reviewed a photographer's portfolio, he would look first for evidence of a "willingness to bend." Where we stand surely determines what we say.

In my first example (left), I was able to move well below a man doing tai chi on a monument to China's revolution in Shanghai. In doing so, I created an echo effect, linking the interlocked position of his arms to the interlocked hammer and sickle on the wall just below him. By moving to my left, I shifted the man toward the right side of the frame, linking the direction of his tai chi thrust to





Taken at near-pavement level, this shot leads the viewer into the heart of the oncoming herd of cattle.

the flow of the rays coming out of that hammer and sickle emblem. My low vantage point places him directly between the emblem and the Chinese inscription behind him. My perspective not only energizes the image, it also suggests that China's past may be very much alive in this man's mind.

In my second example (left), I moved high over the main concourse of the Shanghai Railroad Station, which enabled me to make an image that greatly reduces the scale of the people far below me, and in the process makes the train station appear even larger than it is. I also chose a 28-mm wide-angle lens that stretches my perspective into near-panoramic effect. By shooting down on the scene, I give the viewer not only a glimpse of the entire concourse but also a look

outside of the building. The image contrasts two worlds: the relatively casual pace and spacing of the people walking below us, and a chaotic Shanghai street jammed with buses just outside the station's window.

In my final example (above), I photographed a cattle drive near Henry, Idaho. Most of my shots were made through the open door of our van as the cattle moved past us, but early on, when we first spotted them coming at us from a distance, I was able to spend a few precious seconds shooting from the middle of the highway. I took the lowest vantage point I could, lowering my camera to almost pavement level and looking down into my flip-out viewfinder at the oncoming herd. I placed the double yellow line at the lower right-hand corner of

my frame so that it would lead the eye into the heart of the herd. They were coming at me up a long slope, and I shot just as they reached the crest. The yellow line rises and then begins to fall as it vanishes into the herd. Cowboys on horseback drive the cattle from the rear, and traffic backs up behind them. My 420-mm telephoto lens collapses the distance between these elements and makes the distant field seem as if it is an earthen wall at the back of the image. This photograph is essentially a product of my own perspective. It is far more expressive than any of the images I made by shooting the cattle from our van as they passed us, because my ground-level perspective puts the viewer vicariously into the path of the oncoming herd. ●

about the author

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