



Working the Subject

Even just changing the placement of a key part of a composition, in this case the sun, will change the photo significantly. This is a quick and easy way of experimenting with a composition.

Sunsets are a classic subject for photographers everywhere. Who can resist a beautiful sunset, especially one with clouds over the Pacific Ocean.

I strongly believe that when you work your subject to find multiple compositions, you will end up with better photographs. With bold subjects like this, it is easy to be distracted by the color and light show so that you forget that you are trying to find an interesting photograph in the scene.

One shot is just that, one shot. You then have no choices, no options except one when you edit your photos, or when you work your images in Photoshop.

So once you have one good shot, look for another. It helps to remind

yourself that you won't be satisfied with one shot. One image might be, the stand-out best, but you will never see any other possibilities unless you try. Go beyond that first impression of the subject and find new compositions of it.

You can see from these photos of the sunset that these were all taken very quickly. Once the sun gets close to the horizon, it will drop very fast. But I knew I wanted to get the most from this scene.

So I looked for compositional variations that might be interesting. The photo above emphasizes the cloud and cold/warm colors. The photo at the upper left is a simple composition of color and texture. The bottom two are variations that include the waves, but place the sun

differently.

All photos were shot with a telephoto zoom to allow quick variation in focal length. My personal preference is the one above for its range of color.

Clouds add a lot to a sunset, especially when the scene is as simple as ocean, sky, sun and clouds. While it is certainly possible to get great sunsets on clear days, clouds will always enrich the colors and create added compositional interest to the image.



Tips to try:

1 PHOTOSHOP TIP: To bring out the water in the bottom parts of the two wave photos, I added an adjustment layer without making any adjustments, then turned the layer mode to Screen. Screen is a good way of opening up dark areas (though it will reveal noise in those areas, too). After adding the layer with Screen, I filled its layer mask with black, then used white to paint in the effect only in the breaking waves.

2 SHOOTING TIP: Be careful when shooting a sunset with a telephoto lens. Staring through the viewfinder at the sun can damage your eye. I try to line up the basic composition without the sun, then move the camera into position when I am ready to shoot. With the camera on a tripod, I can then look at the sunset without looking through the lens.

3 PHOTOSHOP TIP: As much as I try to remember to carefully line up my horizons, I often forget when I shooting quickly with such a great subject. So I get crooked horizons.

The down and dirty way to deal with this is to use the crop tool. I outline a long, skinny crop box close to the horizon. I then move the bottom or top line of the crop box so that it is near the horizon. This gives me a quick reference to line up with the horizon.

Next, I move my cursor outside of the box so it turns into a little curved cursor. This lets you rotate the crop, so I rotate the box until the bounding line is parallel to the horizon. Then I grab and move all sides of the crop box until I have covered as much of the photo as I can without going outside of the picture area. Then I complete the crop. You can use the measure tool in the toolbox for rotating horizons, too, but I like this crop technique because it makes it easy to do the rotation and the crop at the same time. I find it helps me do a better job of both.