

# Positive and Negative Space

Positive space and negative space are terms that are commonly used in art and photography that have to do with composition. Positive space refers to the objects in the frame and negative space is the space between and around the objects in the frame.

At first, it may seem like negative space isn't that important because it's just the space surrounding the focus of the photograph. THIS is a misconception though - too much or too little positive or negative space can *make or break* a photograph. If there is too much negative space, the subject may be lost in the frame. If there is too little negative space, the focus of the photograph might not be what was intended.

However, there are many ways in which to balance the positive and negative space in a photograph in order to achieve an appealing composition.

## Positive and Negative Space Example

The two versions of an image below illustrate how the balance of positive and negative space affects an image. There is quite a bit of negative space to the right of the subject in the first version of the image. This space gives the boy space to run into while remaining in the frame. In the second version of the image, the large area of negative space on the right has been cropped off. In this version, the boy fills the frame more, but it looks as though he is going to run right out of the frame.



# Negative Spaces & Positive Spaces in Digital Photography

Negative space is defined as...“the space around the subject of an image.”

It means the empty space around your main subject. This kind of space seems like unimportant background space but it's this empty space adds an important aspect to the composition.

Positive space is defined as the focal point of a work of art or the primary subject matter in a work of art, as opposed to the background or unoccupied spaces.

So how do we apply the use of balanced Positive and Negative Space practically in our photographs?

To start with, negative space is a huge design element in your composition. Since negative space is the space around your focal point, having too much or too little can completely ruin a potentially strong digital photograph.

So to improve your photographs always look at how much *space* is around your focal subject. Even the slightest bit too much or too little can completely put your composition out of kilter (out of balance). This is especially true when/if your subject has a distinct point of focus such as a person's eyes, defining lines coming to a point, or even an aspect of sharp color.

We're going to examine/compare two photos to show you what I mean.



Photo #1: This photograph has a lot of really interesting negative space around it. For starters the negative space is blue, which is quite different to our main focal subject. The wisps of white, which are the colors, seem to glide nicely into the main subject without distraction or hesitation. The clouds do distract our eyes from the branches momentarily but not in an inconvenient way. The negative space in this picture works very well to support the positive space. It gives the branches “breathing room,” giving this photograph a feeling of depth and openness.

Photo #2: Look at the photograph now without the support of the right amount of negative space.



The focal point changes due to a 3cm crop from the right. Removal of the negative space changes the entire feel and focus of the photo. Now, the end of the tree trunk is the main focal point. Our eyes don't follow the branches outward as much as they did before; giving the photo a somewhat cramped feeling. This change does not make the picture drastically worse, it's actually ok; but you see how this negative space alteration changes a lot about the photograph artistically? (Think about it.)

### **Pay Attention**

If you have been taking photos with your digital camera and everything is right technically but you feel something is missing, then it could very well be your composition. Pay close attention to what you are focusing on and the negative space around your main subject. Changing the slightest thing can improve or reduce the quality of your photos.

### **The Importance and Effect of Negative Space**

Negative space can drastically change the mood and story of a photograph. In many cases, negative space *is* the mood, the emotion. It *is* what creates those things in the first place. It can act as a context, it can create a sense of lightness, airiness, it can strengthen the positive emotions in a photograph, emphasize the feelings of your subject whether they are romantic or simply joyful. It can also add a sense of loneliness, despair.

In short, whatever message you are trying to send out, whichever feelings, emotions you want to convey, whichever story you want to tell, the use of negative space affects it all. It can either emphasize all of these aspects, or, when used incorrectly, totally miss the mark.

So here comes the rub:

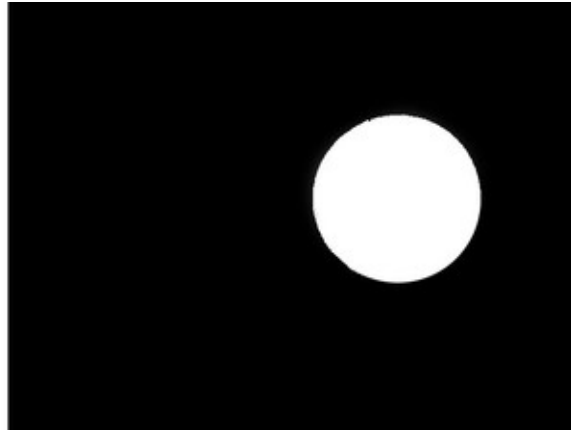
### **Space and Balance:**

Now, because negative space often (but certainly not always) lacks any sort of detail, one might think it's not an active element of composition itself, merely a means to emphasize other elements. **That's not true.** Like everything in a photograph, it, too,

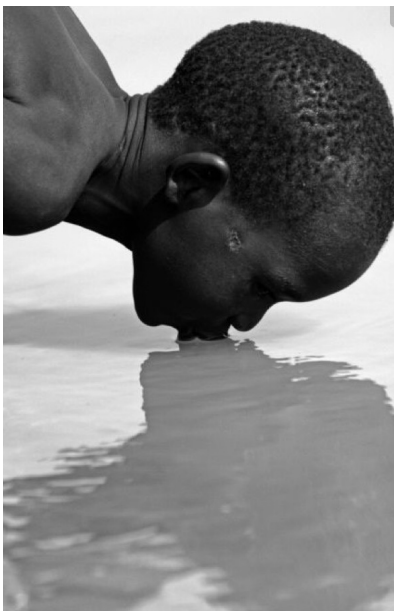
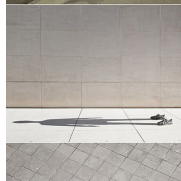
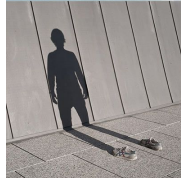


has visual “weight” and you need to be very careful when deciding how much “emptiness” to include and where. More than that, “adding” or “taking” away negative space effects the weight of other elements in the image, as they effectively become smaller or larger within the frame. That also means you can use negative space to balance out your composition.

Examples of Positive and Negative Space Photographs:



Pos/Neg Space with Shadows





Pos/Neg  
Space Object vs.  
Area







Pos/Neg  
Space Foreground,  
Middle Ground, and  
Background

