

Six Steps to Better Photographs

Original Six Part Article by
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(as published on PhotoArtPeople.com)



Six Steps to Better Photographs Part 1: Blur

I've been teaching photography for several years, and have found that many people have similar issues with their photography when they're first starting out. Did you know that when a professional photographer has a photo session, there are usually many more bad shots than good ones to a roll of film or memory card? That's why they take so many! These hints will help you take more good shots for any occasion.

One problem most people deal with is blurring in their pictures, which can ruin a perfectly good shot. How do you know if you're moving or if the subject was moving? Easy... what's blurred? If the entire shot is blurred, your hands were moving when you hit the shutter button. You may want to steady your hands against something; for instance, a chair or table. A tripod is always a good idea, and you can pick one up very inexpensively in the camera department of most stores. Just remember, the heavier the tripod, the steadier it will be.

If you find that only one object in your picture is blurred, that means it was moving when you shot the picture. If you just can't get your subject to stand still (a common issue with pets and children), you may want to adjust your camera to a faster shutter speed. Keep in mind that you'll also need to adjust your aperture accordingly if you're on the manual setting, although you can set your camera to adjust itself to your shutter speed by going to the Tv setting. You may also want to use a countdown for your subject to let them know when they'll need to hold still. For instance, you can ask a child to wave their arms now, but tell them you're going to count to three. When you say three, they'll need to hold still. In case this makes the child suddenly look stiff and unnatural, engaging him or her in conversation can lead to more natural poses and expressions.

If your view screen shows that something's in motion, using these simple tricks can help you avoid blur in your pictures.

Six Steps to Better Photographs Part 2: Lighting

A mistake that many new photographers make is incorrect lighting. If you've ever taken a picture in a room when there is bright sun outside, you know that adjusting the light to compensate can be difficult. We've all taken a picture of a person against a window, only to have the person show up as a black silhouette against a white, blown-out square. This is called backlighting, and you'll become more accustomed to looking for this issue the longer you shoot.

The reason the person will be a black shadow, especially if you don't use a good flash, is that your camera is automatically compensating for the brighter light it "sees" in the background. You may also see this same effect when you shoot outside if the sun is behind your subject. The easiest way to fix the problem is to move the person or the camera, of course. If this isn't possible, you'll want to use the camera flash. Luckily, digital cameras allow you to immediately see any mistakes you're making, so you'll know right away if there is a backlighting problem. In cases of very bad backlighting, you may want to use a reflector, which is a large silver, gold, or white square that will bounce the sunlight onto the front of your subject. Even a large piece of white paper or a sheet can be used if you don't have an actual photographic reflector. Move the object around until you see that it bounces the light where you need it to go.

In case your flash isn't enough light to avoid the backlighting problem when you're indoors, turn on more lights in the room and take a shot to see how it works. If you're still not happy with the results, you may need to find another location for your picture.

Good luck!

Six Steps to Better Photographs Part 3: Format

Vertical or horizontal? That is the question.

A simple way to take a better photograph is to decide if you want to take a tall photo or a short photo. This is easily answered! Simply take a look at your subject and deciding if it's, well, tall or short! If you're taking a picture that contains a horizontally-oriented subject, such as a building or tree, you'll probably want to take a picture that is horizontal. If you're shooting a single person, you'll probably want to go with a vertical shot unless you want to see the scenery around them.

If you're shooting something in motion, you'll want to shoot in the direction that the motion is happening. For instance, if you're taking pictures at a football game, you'll probably want to shoot a horizontal shot, as most of the action takes place on a flat playing field. If you're watching basketball, you may want to shoot someone shooting a basket in a vertical format because they're actually moving up into the air.

Headroom is extremely important. When shooting a person, you'll want to give them a few inches of space on top of their head. When they're in profile, you'll want to give them at least a few inches in front of their nose. Shooting a gazelle running? Give it some lead room, which is space in front of them for them to "run" into.

Keep in mind that your subject should be the most noticeable thing in the photograph, whether you're shooting horizontally or in a vertical format. The viewer shouldn't have any question about what it is they're supposed to be looking at in the shot.

Using the correct size format for your subject can make your photographs look great while you capture your subject!

Six Steps to Better Photographs Part 4: Depth of Field

Depth of field is an issue that many people experience, but don't know how to fix. When you're shooting a picture, the depth of field is the area in front of your camera that is in focus. For instance, you can set your aperture to make sure every object from ten feet to twenty feet in front of the camera is focused, while everything in front or behind this space is blurred. Photographers use this technique to take the viewer's eye directly to the subject of the picture; your eye tends to ignore blurry spots and go straight to the crisp, clear areas of the photo.

To experiment with your depth of field, it's helpful to have your camera's manual on hand. This will tell you how to adjust the aperture to focus on the area on which you wish to concentrate. The aperture is the actual size of your lens opening that adjusts the amount of light let in to your sensor.

When you're going through your aperture settings, keep in mind that the larger the aperture number, the smaller the opening, and the larger the depth of field. Your shutter speed will need to be adjusted to work correctly with the aperture setting to assure you'll have the correct amount of light hitting your sensor for a good picture. You can adjust both manually by setting your camera's mode to "M," or have your camera automatically set your shutter speed to the correct setting for the lighting conditions by changing your mode to "Av."

Experimenting with the different aperture and shutter speed settings on your camera can help you achieve photos that are more professional in subject and focus!

Six Steps to Better Photographs Part 5: Shutter Speed

Did you ever wonder how photographers can take a picture of a waterfall and the water looks as smooth as glass in one shot, while the next shot shows individual water droplets? It's all about the shutter speed, baby. Playing with the shutter speed on your camera can help you turn a simple shot into a work of art.

To adjust your camera's shutter speed, you'll most likely have a setting on your dial that reads "Tv." When you turn to this mode, you have control over the shutter speed of your camera, which will compensate for the changes you make by adjusting the aperture so your sensor still gets the correct amount of light to take the shot. If you're comfortable adjusting the aperture manually, you can switch your mode to "M" and choose the aperture setting to work with your shutter speed setting. Keep in mind that when you change your aperture setting, you'll also be changing your depth of field, or the distance between the camera and your subject that will be in focus.

The shutter speed is usually going to appear on your viewscreen as 1/60, 1/30, or another set of numbers with a slash. This means the shutter will fire at 1/60th of a second, 1/30th of a second, and so on. To capture fast motion, you'll want to use a faster shutter speed to avoid blurring, unless that is the effect you are looking to achieve. If you turn your camera to anything slower than 1/60th of a second, you'll need to use a tripod or other steadying tool, as your hands may move a little too much and blur your shot in the length of time it takes your shutter to fire.

Adjusting the shutter speed can give you a whole range of artistic freedom when you're taking a photograph, so get in there and do some experimentation!

Six Steps to Better Photographs Part 6: White Balance

One of the most common problems with shooting photos is color shift. Have you ever seen a picture taken under fluorescent lighting that seems too green, or an indoor shot that seems too orange? How about a picture taken outdoors on a sunny morning that looks blue? These shifts in color are caused by the lighting conditions, or even the color of the subject you're shooting. Some photographers take advantage of these conditions to give a picture a certain "feel." For instance, they may shoot in the afternoon to get a warmer light for their photos.

However, if you want to take pictures with true color, you may need to adjust the "white balance" of your camera. Most digital cameras have settings that allow you to compensate for the type of lighting in your area. These settings usually include a preconfigured setting for outdoors, indoors, fluorescent lighting, and more. Use your viewscreen to see what lighting setting works best for your situation.

Your photo can also be affected by the color of your subject. I have an old, treasured photograph of my father, my uncle, and myself sitting together at my grandmother's home. Besides my shocking eighties hair and dark green eye shadow, my bright red shirt is the most noticeable feature. The red color actually shifted the entire photograph towards a blue tone! If you're shooting a subject with a bright, dominant color, you may want to check for a color shift before you take too many shots.

Correcting the white balance of a picture can be done in Photoshop or other photo manipulation program, but it's easier to take care of the problem before it even happens. Learning how to adjust the color setting on your digital camera can help you get better shots more often.

Photography is considered an art by many. By following these six basic tips, your photos will become beautiful keepsakes that aren't just snapshots. They'll be truly worth of the word "photograph!"