



How to Take

Good Pictures



Do you know the difference between a snapshot and a good photograph? A snapshot is the sort of picture that everyone's photo albums are filled with. Pictures that are too dark or out of focus, populated by people that are too small to see, people that are looking the wrong way, and full of unnecessary clutter that detracts from the subject of the pictures.

Good photographs, on the other hand, stand out, even to the untrained eye. There is something about them that makes you want to shout "That's a great photograph!" This page has a collection of ideas that you can practice to help you learn to take great photographs.

Fill the Frame

The number one way to immediately improve your pictures is to *move closer to the subject* before you press the button. This does several things ... it makes the subject of the photo bigger and clearer, while at the same time eliminating unwanted objects in the background.

It will also make your photos seem more dramatic.

A good rule to remember: after you've composed the photo in the viewfinder, *take another step closer*.

Try it ... it works!



Simplify Your Photographs

Try composing the photo you want to take *with as few objects in it as possible*. After you have decided what the subject of your photo is, move around, get closer, zoom in, or change the angle ... do whatever it takes to make the subject stand out, by *eliminating things in the background*.

Some of the most stunning photographs taken by experts in the field are of *very simple subjects*. In most cases, more stuff in your photo is not a good thing.

You can also use 'depth of field' to isolate the background by making it blurry ... more about that later.



Prefocus Your Shots

Your camera probably takes a second or two to focus on the subject you've chosen. This can cause you to miss a lot of good shots, especially when you're trying to take a picture of something or someone that's moving around. Good photographers have a trick that will help you get great in-focus photos of moving subjects. It's called *prefocusing*.

Rather than following the subject with your camera, pick a spot nearby that you think the subject will move into eventually, and *focus on that spot* by holding the shutter-release button down half-way. As long as you keep pressing on the button, the camera will stay focused on that spot, and you will be able to take a picture *instantly* when your subject moves into that spot!

I've used this technique many times to get dramatic basketball shots that would be impossible to get any other way.



Use an External Flash

Most digital cameras come with an automatic flash. However, the effective range of the built-in flash is probably only 4 or 5 metres. This means that if you are trying to get a good photo of a moving object in dim light, from a distance greater than this, you will end up with a photo that's too dark, or an acceptably bright photo with a blurry subject.

One way to solve this problem is to get closer to the subject ... within the 4-5 metre range of the flash. In addition, you may need to change the camera's settings so that it is using a fast shutter speed (to freeze the motion).

A better method is to use an external flash, which attaches to a slot on top of the camera called a 'shoe'. Unfortunately, most inexpensive digital cameras (less than \$500) do not have an external flash shoe. If yours does, get yourself a flash. The best kind is one designed for your camera, so that the flash will work on 'auto'. However, these tend to be rather expensive. Instead, you can purchase any generic flash (for about \$100-150) and use it as a manual flash. Just make sure that the flash you buy has an effective flash distance is at least 50 feet or so, for the largest aperture on your camera, and that the flash output is adjustable.



Using a manual setting means you will have to adjust the flash output as subjects move farther away or closer to the camera. Your view screen may also be too dark to see the subject (the camera doesn't know you're using a flash). However, with a little practice, you will be able to take great indoor action photos from a distance where you never could before!

Action Shots

If the subject of your photo is moving, you can emphasize the movement in a number of ways.

The most common method is to set your camera to a very fast shutter speed and freeze the motion. This method produces striking photographs when your subject is moving quickly, like birds in flight, or athletes in motion. The birds' wings or the basketball player's arms and legs will be frozen in place. To achieve this effect your camera must be able to be set to 'shutter priority' with a shutter speed of 1/1000 second or faster.



Another technique for illustrating motion in a photograph is to do just the opposite ... set the shutter speed to a low value. This will make all the moving parts in the picture leave blurred trails. This method can sometimes produce quite striking results.

A third method is to follow the moving subject with the camera as you press the shutter release. Try it with a slow shutter speed (1/60 sec), and you'll get a picture where the moving subject is in focus, but the background is blurred in the direction of movement. This technique works well with subjects that are moving past you; just be careful to follow the subject with your camera.



Use the Horizon

You can control the effect your photograph will have on its viewers by using the horizon line. Moving it up or down can affect the mood of your photo.



If you put the horizon very low in your picture, with lots of sky showing, the effect will be to make whatever is on the horizon seem isolated. The landscape will seem 'empty'. A feeling of loneliness or isolation will be evoked by the picture. This technique is very effective when shooting sunsets. (Photograph by Emily W.)



Putting the horizon high in your picture makes the photograph all about what's in the foreground. This is a good way to draw attention to the subject of your photo. You will need to adjust the depth of focus (more on this later) to make sure everything is in focus, by setting a small aperture. If your camera won't do this, use the 'Landscape' setting. (Photograph by Jenna K.)

You shouldn't put the horizon line in the centre of your photo unless there is some vertical symmetry in the picture, like a reflection of trees in a lake, for example. Wherever you put the horizon line, make sure that it's level.

Rule of Thirds

The 'Rule of Thirds' has been used by artists for hundreds of years; it's also used by photographers. It says that you should almost never center anything in your picture, either vertically or horizontally. Instead, place the subject of your photo in the left or right third of the frame, and/or in the top or bottom third. Most people will find this off-centre alignment more pleasing to the eye.

There are exceptions when you *will* want to centre the subject ... portraits, team photos, or images with symmetry.



Here the subject is in the right third of the picture. (Photo by Josh Wasylciw)



Here the subjects are in both the left third and bottom third of the picture. Notice also the high horizon line. (Photo by Ty G.)



Vertically symmetric images should be centred, to emphasize the symmetry. (Photo by Rick Carleton)

Depth of Field



Depth of field is one of the most effective ways of making the subject of your photo stand out. The effect is simple ... what is in the foreground is sharply in focus, while the *background is out of focus*.

What can be 'in focus' in the image can be anything from a few centimetres from the lens to anything on the horizon, and anything in between. Cameras set on 'auto' will usually try to make as much of this range as possible 'in focus'. This means that if you want a subject at a certain distance to be the *only thing* in focus, you'll have to use a manual setting and adjust the aperture.

Generally, the *smaller* the aperture setting, the more things (moving outwards from the camera)

will be in focus. A very *large* aperture will make only the objects at or near the subject (what you've focused on) sharp; everything else closer and farther away will be blurry. You can see this large aperture effect in the photo at the left; the result is an out-of-focus background, which makes the subject stand out.

With digital cameras, not only will you need the largest possible aperture setting, but you will have to *zoom in* as far as possible too. This means you'll need to be well back from the subject, depending on how powerful your optical zoom is.

Unusual Angle

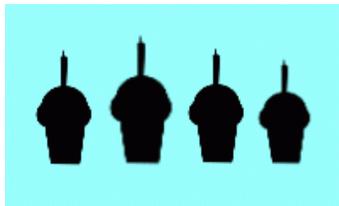
Great photographs are often taken by photographers who go to far-flung destinations to take images of things that you've never seen before. But how can the average photographer like you and I take great photographs in our back yard, where nothing is unusual? One answer is to take your pictures from *unusual angles*, creating views of every-day objects that no-one has seen before. The standard rule for getting a good photograph is to '*take an image of an unusual subject, or take an image of a common subject from an unusual viewpoint*'.



(Photos above by Michelle J. and Chelsie A.)

Balance

Balance in a photograph can be **formal**, as in a posed group shot or team picture, or **informal**, where the subject on one side is balanced by something else on the other side.



Formal Balance



Informal Balance

If you've used the 'rule of thirds' to locate the subject of your photo off to one side, including something else on the other side to create an informal balance in the picture makes it more interesting to look at. In the examples below, people on one side are balanced by other people on the right. You can balance your subject with *anything*; for example, a person on the left could be balanced by a tree and a dog on the right.



Triangles

Try to place a triangle in your picture, using objects in the frame. The triangle can be composed of anything, as long as a triangular shape is evident. In the examples below, heads are used to form triangles in each of the three pictures.

