

Photobasics

by Joel Brain

Active or Passive?

Taking a picture is a bold thing to do. When you pick up a camera, point it and push the shutter button you are making a personal statement. At the very minimum you are saying, "this is important." It's a common mistake to think that a photographer just records what is happening. The decisions you make about what to shoot, when to shoot and how to shoot it reflect whom you are. When you take a picture you are saying "this is what I see" (think/know/feel/believe/understand) and you attempt to capture your perspective. Of course you usually want to share it and hope that your photograph causes others to see (think/know/feel/believe/understand) things like you.

Learning some basic photography techniques will help you do just that. Once you're familiar with these techniques you'll find yourself actively using them when you pick up a camera. And the decisions you make as you actively pursue a photo will cause your images to better touch others.

Fill the frame



When we look through a camera's viewfinder it's easy to get so focused on the subject that we neglect to see all the "wasted" space around the edges and we tend not to notice 'slight' distractions. We can end up with photos where the subject appears tiny or an object grows out of a person's head. It's important to make sure the subject fills the frame. The best way to do this is to move closer. A teacher friend of mine tells his photography students to think "head and shoulders" when composing pictures of people. That's a great way to remember to fill the frame. And before pressing the shutter button it's a good idea to look around the edge of the frame and behind the subject.

Perspective is what causes us to see two-dimensional objects (like photos) as if they were three-dimensional. We can take pictures in such a way as to help the brain do this. One way to do this is to zoom out with your lens. Make it wide angle. This exaggerates the relative size of the objects in the photo. Things that are close appear much larger than things that are farther away.

Another way to create perspective is to use objects and lines effectively. Objects that are partially covered by other objects. A road that wanders toward the horizon. Any line that suggests a direction of action. All of these can give a sense of depth and create perspective. On the other hand, a totally different perspective can be achieved by "stacking" objects. Using a telephoto lens (zooming in) to photograph a barn with a mountain in the background can create the illusion that the mountain is right behind the barn even though they may be miles apart. You've seen this technique used in photos where the subject has a huge full moon as the backdrop.

Rule of Thirds

This is a popular “rule” with photographers and artists. Here’s how it works: Draw imaginary lines that divide the image into thirds both horizontally and vertically. Then place important elements of your composition where these lines intersect. Most of the time placing the subject in the middle of the picture is a lousy idea. For landscapes it’s often nice to use one of the horizontal lines to place the horizon. Using the rule of thirds can produce nicely balanced images that are attractive to the eye.

Angle of View

Besides filling the frame, considering perspective, and the rule of thirds, a good technique for finding the right composition is to look at the subject from different angles. Getting down low, raising the camera up high (even standing on a chair or table) are good ways to explore finding a better angle. Pictures taken from eye level can certainly be very effective but they can also be boring. Besides dramatically altering a composition, taking a picture from a different angle can produce a totally new feeling, mood or effect.

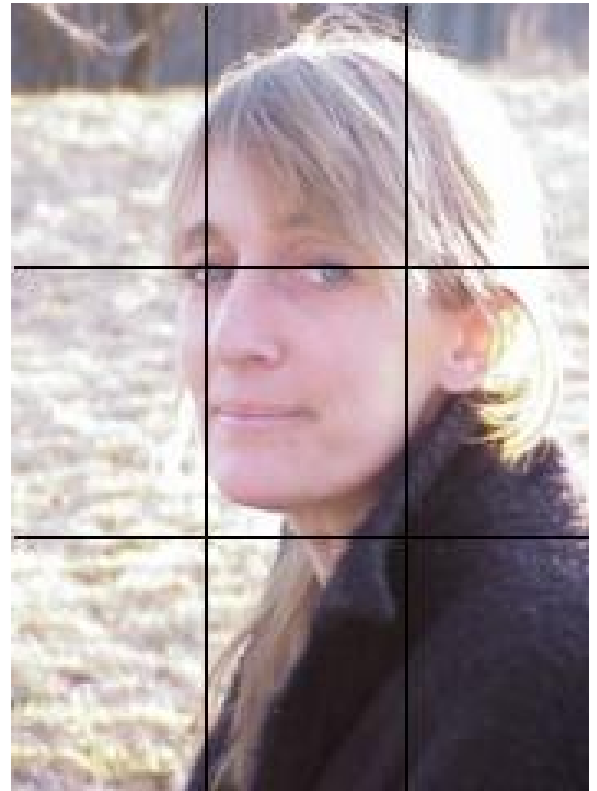
Natural Light

Once you’ve mastered the basics of composition you’ll find that learning how to photograph in a variety of lighting conditions can be the greatest challenge. It’s also the most rewarding. Natural light is wonderful, and it’s usually the most common light we work with, but it can cause some real problems. A direct, bright overhead sun for instance can cause pleasant-looking folks to squint and look well... kind of ugly. Moving the subject so the sunlight comes in from the side can produce high contrast between areas of sunlight and shade. Putting a bright sun behind the subject can often result in photos where the subject is too dark or maybe even silhouetted. How to solve these problems? Move the subject to the shade? If you can, that’s often a good idea. Photograph at another time? Sure, if that’s an option. Waiting until the sun is lower in the sky and coming in at a better angle can result in much more attractive pictures.

Placing the sun behind the subject (backlighting) is a great technique if you remember to adjust the camera so it exposes correctly. Many cameras have a “backlight” button to automatically adjust for this very situation. Not all natural light is bright of course. Often times it’s indirect like when sunlight comes in through a window or bounces off of a light-colored surface. This light is usually very nice to work with. It’s good to have a piece of white foam board around to create your own bounced light. Sometimes the sun is behind clouds. This creates a diffused light that is very soft and often makes for the best photographs. The camera rarely gets fooled on exposure in this light, and the relatively low-contrast images usually print very well.

Artificial Light

Think indoors. The bulbs that produce the artificial light we’ve become so accustomed to create light that is “colored.” Standard tungsten light bulbs (the kind in your reading lamp) have a yellow tint while fluorescents (the ones in your office) have a blue or green cast and halogens (shop lights) are closer to a natural white light. We’re often unaware of this (our brains seem to adjust) until we see our printed photographs. Professionals deal with this in a variety of ways—the most common being that they bring in their own color-balanced lights and turn everything else off. Not a solution for most of us. The easiest way for the rest of us to work with artificial light is to have the camera adjust for it. Many digital cameras have a “preset” for different lighting conditions. A “sun” symbol means natural light, a “light bulb” would be for indoors (probably tungsten lights), and there are often others. Check the manual that came with your camera or just look around in the menu.



Some cameras give you the ability to “white balance.” This is usually a matter of pointing your camera at a white surface (like that piece of foam board you carry around for bouncing light) that’s under the same artificial light you’re working in and pushing a button. When you push the camera’s “white balance” button you’re telling the camera “this is white” and the camera adjusts accordingly. Pictures you take after white balancing will have a more natural look.

Flash

Another type of artificial light is the flash built into your camera. While it has a nice white light, it often “blows out” or overexposes a subject, especially when you’re close. If you think there might be enough light without the flash, try turning it off. Or move away from the subject and use the zoom for a tight composition. The flash will be further away and won’t be so bright. The flash in some cameras can be adjusted. Check out your manual again for specifics. Another thing about flash: it’s good to use it outside when a subject has a lot of shadows that make it hard to see. When used in this way it’s considered “fill-flash.” You won’t need a lot—just enough to bring detail out in a shaded area. This is a good thing to do when there’s too much contrast in a natural light situation.