21 Ways to Improve Your Photography

FocusEd Camera™

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Introduction

In this e-book we cover 9 bad habits that beginner photographers should break, plus 12 settings your camera wishes you knew about, for a total of 21 actionable tips that will improve your photos!

If you have been wanting to up your photography game and don’t know where to start, these are simple changes that you can use and start seeing improvements immediately!

This is a must-have guide for any beginner or amateur photographer covering a wide variety of suggestions for creating better, more compelling images.

So let's get started!

9 Bad Habits to Break

When you are just starting out in photography, it's easy to pick up bad habits – and not even know they are bad habits. Kicking those habits can help you become a better photographer over time. Like most bad habits, they are easy to fall into and take practice and conscious effort to get out of. Here are the 9 bad habits that you need to break, starting today...

1. Being Stationary.

The best way to bad photography is to root your feet like a tree! You need to move around.

If you have a zoom lens, this habit is especially easy to pick up. The temptation is to "fix" the shot by zooming in or zooming out instead of moving around to get the best shot.

In all cases, taking all of your images for one position or angle is going to limit your creativity and your ability to improve. You will have to move around and change perspectives. Move the camera from landscape to portrait and tilt up and down. Move your feet closer, farther, or around to the side. You will get much more interesting shots this way!

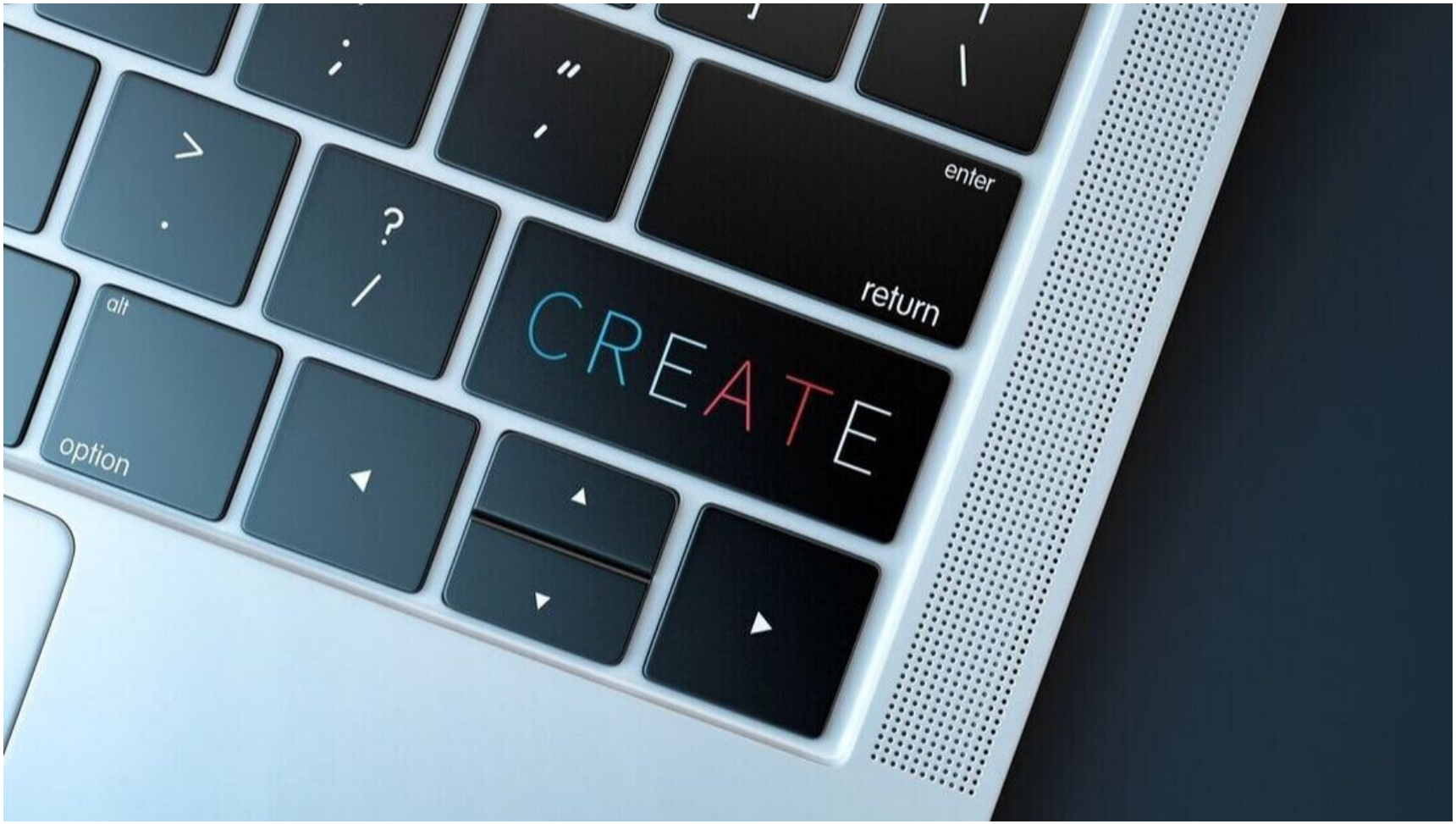
Over time you will start to think about the end goal when composing a shot. You will start to learn which focal lengths, angles, and distances will work the best and plan for those, rather than planting yourself in one spot and relying on the zoom to adjust the image.

2. Relying on Editing to “Fix” It

It is so much easier to get the image right in the camera (but it takes practice). When taking your shots, don’t fall into the habit of thinking all those little things can be fixed in post. Move the subject to get shadows off the face, correct the settings to get the best exposure, and analyze the foreground and background for trash and items you would otherwise have to “erase” later. Taking the time to move your angle so that ugly beam isn’t behind a person’s head, or a piece of trash is out of the frame, or taming the flyaway hairs on your model, will save you later in editing. You can “fix” all of those things in post, but understand that it is a trade-off and what you are giving up is improving your photographic eye.

So get as much correct in camera as you can! Relying too much on image correction will hold you back as a photographer. Additionally, wouldn’t you rather spend just a few seconds moving a piece of trash and have the time to take more photos instead of spending that time editing?

Personally, we prefer more time to be creative and less time editing!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3. Being Crooked

We don't mean crooked as in thieving and dishonest, we mean crooked as in not level or not straight! In all your images, compose carefully. Don't fall into the habit of rushing to get the shot. If there are vertical or horizontal lines, take the time to straighten up. The grid overlay in your viewfinder can help you with both horizontal lines (the actual horizon, tops of buildings, window ledges) and vertical lines (telephone poles or the edge of a building). Some cameras include a built-in level so even when you can't see the horizon you can still get your shot squared up.

Tripods often feature levels to help you get your image straight on all axis points. If you don't have a tripod try using the flat edge of something to hold your camera level, such as a wall, door frame, or a railing. If all else fails, most "tilts" and curvatures can be corrected in editing software. Here's a quick video tutorial where we teach you how to fix a crooked horizon using Photoshop.

Depending on the lens, most notably wide angles, you may find some subjects with long lines will show curvature. This may be a function of the lens and its optics or the angle of the shot creating an optical effect (non-intentional). In those cases, you may want the curve or tilt for its creative effect or you may have to use editing software to compensate and fix the curvature.

In some cases, you may want curvature or tilt for creative effect as in the example on this page.

The point is that images with a “tilt” because of careless mistakes can and should be avoided by composing the shot and making it level. Even a slight tilt will make an image feel “off” or distracting because our brain automatically expects the world to be level.

4. Lacking Situational Awareness

A terrible, bad habit that can cause you to lose or break a camera, or worse to hurt yourself, is not having situational awareness. It is a bad habit to walk around with the camera up to your face! The lens and viewfinder do not accurately show you the depth of where you are and where an obstacle is so unless you like tripping, or falling, or dropping your camera, always take the camera down from your face to change locations or positions. Even using the LCD can be distracting enough that you could find yourself in a pitfall or stumbling over tree roots if you walk around while looking at it.

While we always strive to get the best shot and the best angle, there are times when we need to be aware that it is not worth the risk to do so. Nothing will cause an end to a promising photography career faster than a fall off a waterfall or into a canyon. It happens multiple times every year. If you want to get better at photography, do so while keeping your common sense. Make improvements to a composition or shot in other ways that avoid dangers and mishaps.

In addition, depending on your shooting location, it is a good idea to assess your surroundings every so often, especially if you are out in the wilderness. Keeping an eye out for snakes, bears, ants creeping up your shoes, and other potentially dangerous creatures is a good idea! When you are on the sidelines of a sporting match, it is equally advisable to keep a lookout for balls or players that might come crashing into your space. There have been many sports photographers injured when the play gets too close to where they were standing, not to mention damaged gear.

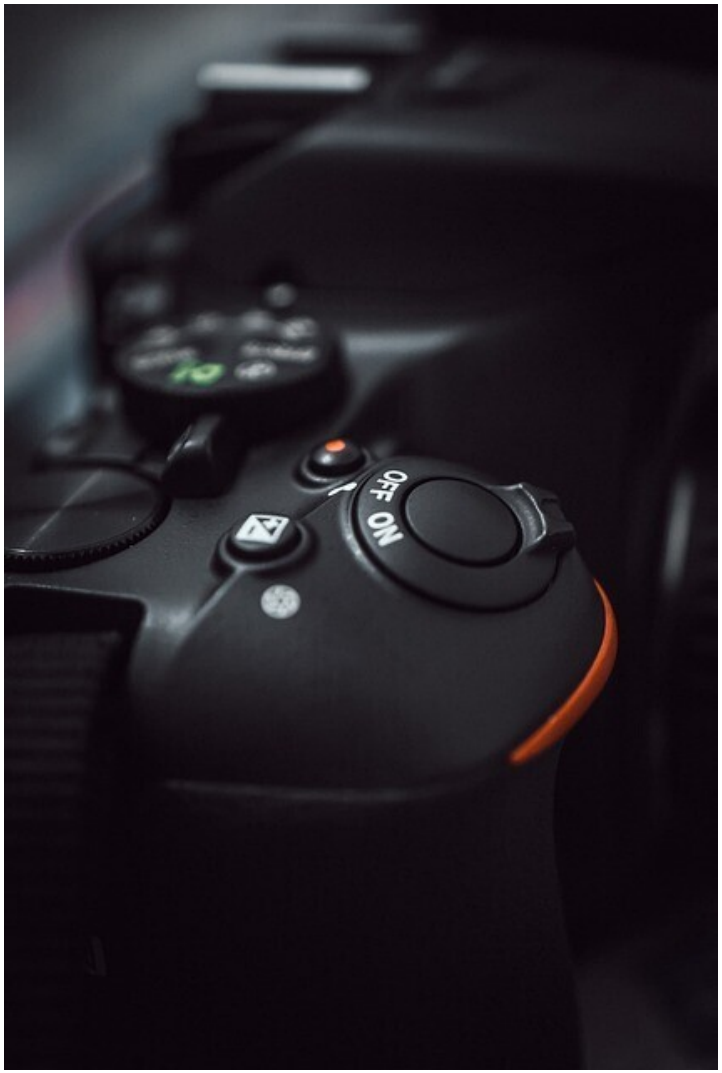
The solutions are simple. Keep your camera away from your face when moving, occasionally check your surroundings, don't take risks, and if you are in a scenario that might be more precarious, bring an additional person with you to act as a “spotter.” I used to assign photographers to sporting events and they were always assigned in pairs – one to hold the gear and keep watch, and the other to do the actual shooting.

5. Fumbling With the Buttons

This is a very difficult habit to break. I have taught photography and worked with cameras for years, but even I am guilty of this one. When changing your settings, try to learn to do it without having to take your eyes off the scene. This doesn't mean you have to keep your eye up to the camera all the time (see #4 above). This means memorizing where the buttons are and how they work so you can switch them quickly and without losing focus on your subject.

I have my buttons memorized and how they work, but I still want to look at my dials and screen when I make changes! It's a bad habit because every time I do this I take my eyes off the subject or scene which may be rapidly changing – an animal moving through the woods, the sun setting, or children playing. There is the potential of missing something important. It slows you down.

By memorizing the buttons you don't have to take any of your mental capacity away from the subject. You can stay focused mentally on your composition and focused on the subject or scene. Memorizing the buttons takes practice. You will need to sit with your camera and practice changing them over and over. You can carve out some time to practice your settings during commercial breaks while you are watching TV. Don't wait until a big moment is upon you and then realize you are going to miss some incredible shots because you are fumbling with the buttons between each image captured!



6. Incorrect Grip and Lack of Stability

Nothing will ruin a photograph more than blur or lack of focus, and it is the one thing that cannot really be fixed in editing. While software programs have gotten better and better and some functions will sharpen a photo, they are still limited in what they can do.

Blur and lack of focus are often caused by the bad habit of holding the camera incorrectly or not having the camera stable. When you hold the camera incorrectly, the lens can tip downward or wobble up and down while you are taking your shot. The proper camera hold is to grip the camera body with the right hand and support the camera underneath with the left. Tuck your elbows in and stabilize your body by keeping one foot in front of the other. Even better, use a tripod! Tripods stabilize your shots and if you use the camera's timer you can reduce camera shake from the shutter press as well.

Most people don't realize how much their body moves or wobbles while they are taking a photo. In some cases, your body movement from the time the camera focuses until the time the camera takes the photo can move enough to change the focus point, especially with wide-open apertures. If you consistently have a lack of overall focus, it may be from body movements. Using a tripod can solve the problem.

Holding your breath while you take the shot also helps when shooting handheld. Faster shutter speeds can be beneficial. Your shutter speed, as a general rule, should be as fast, or faster, than your focal length. So for example, if you are using a 200mm lens, you should use a shutter speed that is faster than 1/200th of a second. In most cases, you should not shoot handheld at speeds lower than 1/90th of a second.

7. Hiding Behind the Camera

This bad habit is common among portrait photographers. Don't give your models directions while your face is up to the camera (refer back to #4). It is very difficult to build rapport with a person when they can't see your eyes or hear your words. Clear communication and seeing your face will help them feel more comfortable.

If you have this habit, you will need to work consciously at breaking it. Move the camera away and make eye contact while giving instructions for posing. If you need the ability to shoot rapidly and don't want to move the camera away then learn how to shoot with both eyes open. I know it sounds really difficult, but did you know that is one of the reasons why the viewfinder is offset? It is so you can put your right eye to the viewfinder and still see around the camera with your left.

Keeping both eyes open allows you to see the subject and they can still make eye contact (and it gives you more situational awareness too). It is easiest to learn this technique using 35-50mm focal lengths since those are closest to what the human eye sees. At those focal lengths what you see in the viewfinder with the right eye and what you see in the world with your left will be mostly similar. It takes practice but it can be done!

8. “Chimping”

“Chimping” is photographer slang. It means taking a photo and then looking at the LCD after every image (and vocalizing your satisfaction or dissatisfaction with each image). I personally dislike the term because it compares us all to chimpanzees. I also dislike the term since this bad habit is particularly difficult for beginners to break. As you are learning you have to look at your images to see what mistakes you made or what you need to fix (missed focus, incorrect exposure). So don’t be afraid to check your photos on the camera; it is how you will learn, but over time try to rely on that LCD less and less. Check it after every five images, or before you change locations and review several shots at once.

Here’s why checking after every capture is a bad habit once you have had some practice – it causes you to totally disconnect your focus from the subject or scene in order to focus on the LCD. During that time you might miss a great image! Of course, it takes practice and confidence to break the LCD-checking habit, but as your confidence grows you should need to check or review your images less often, kind of like taking the training wheels off your bicycle.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9. Not Learning Your Camera's Other Functions

If you want to improve your photography, you will have to eventually leave Auto Mode behind and start using Aperture Priority, Shutter Priority, and Manual Mode. These require an understanding of ISO, aperture, and shutter speed, which are too complex to cover in this e-book. We do have other e-books and materials that can help you on our website.

Learning how to set ISO, shutter speed, and aperture is only half the battle. There are autofocus types, metering modes, settings for exposure bracketing, and so much more. One of the worst habits for beginners is not reading the camera manual to learn about these settings and staying on auto mode all the time. I know, I know, the camera manual is boring with tiny type and lots of confusing symbols and small diagrams; however, that camera manual is a treasure trove of information!

Spend 10 minutes a day going through a section and trying all the functions, buttons, and settings in that section. Don’t skip any sections, even ones you don’t think you'll ever use. Then go through the manual again, yes again. This time focus on the functions you think you will use the most. Try them all and take some notes. You may not remember them all (and you wouldn’t be expected to), but you will at least be aware of all the capabilities your camera has and in most cases, it is amazing what they can do! The next section of this e-book will cover actionable tips using settings and functions that can take your photography to a whole new level.

To Sum Up This Section

Bad habits are so easy to fall into and it will take dedicated, conscious effort to break them. It will take work and practice to form good photography habits, but once you do they will pay you back tenfold. You will see your technique improve and with it your photos.

If Your Camera Could Talk... 12 Things Your Camera Wishes You Knew!

If your camera could actually talk to you and give you advice on how to improve your photography game, there are 12 things it would tell you. These 12 things vary from hidden tools and menu items to common settings that are all essential to know for great photography.

1. Focus Modes are not created equal and they are not scary.

Camera manufacturers may have different names for their autofocus modes, but in general, they all offer 3 main focus modes: Manual, One Shot/Single AF, and Continuous AF.

As a basic rule, full manual focus is best saved for professionals or after you have some experience, one shot is for stationary subjects, and continuous is for when either the camera, photographer, or subject is moving. Let's look at each briefly.

Manual focus allows the photographer to use a focusing ring on the lens to focus the image. The camera has no control over focus at all. It is easy to "miss" your focus in this mode, especially with subjects that are moving.

Single or One-shot AF is useful for many types of photography where the subject is static or motionless. Portrait, product, landscape, and macro are a few examples. It is not a recommended choice for action, wildlife, or sports photography. In one-shot mode, the camera focuses when the shutter release is half-pressed. After focus is locked, it will stay locked as long as the button stays half-pressed. It will not adjust if you, the camera, or the subject moves. If you need to refocus, you must release the button and half-press it again.

This autofocus mode can be used to “recompose” the image. Center your subject, press the shutter release halfway to focus, and then while the button is still half-pressed reposition the camera to get the composition you want. Then fully press the button the rest of the way (do not lift off the button before taking the shot as this will cause the camera to refocus again). You must keep the distance to the subject the same, but this way you can position your subject on the left or right, top or bottom of the frame.

Continuous AF (known as AF-C on Nikon and AI Servo AF on Canon) is the best choice for subjects that move (or if you or the camera moves). The camera continuously checks and adjusts focus as long as the shutter release button is half-pressed. When used with continuous shooting mode (burst mode), you can take a series of images with the focus automatically adjusted in between shots. This is a great mode for kids, pets, sports, and wildlife, or anytime a subject may be moving towards or away from the camera. The camera continuously checks focus and anticipates the direction the subject will move, but it is not foolproof. It is also not a good mode to use if you need to focus and recompose your subject, because as you move the camera it will automatically refocus.

Some cameras have a combination mode. On Canon cameras, this is called AI Focus. AI Focus is considered a multi-purpose mode where the camera switches between single and continuous as needed. If the subject is static, the camera will select one shot. If the subject moves, the camera will select continuous. This seems like a “one-size-fits-all” or “set-it-and-forget-it” mode that would be the solution to all focus needs, but it is not. While it is convenient, you are leaving the decision to the camera and the camera does not always interpret the situation properly. There can be delays as the camera switches modes and this can cause you to miss shots. It also does not work well when you try to recompose your shot. In most situations, you should select one shot or continuous depending on your subject and not rely on the multi-purpose option.

2. Please don't fill me with cheap memory cards

Investing in quality memory cards is important! You spend all the time and effort to pick a good camera, please fill it with good memory cards. You wouldn't buy a Lamborghini and then fill it with cheap gas would you?

Your camera manual is the first place you should look before buying a memory card. It will provide you with the type of card (CF, SD, etc.), and a list of suggested/compatible memory cards and their card classification. Once you check compatibility, there are several other factors to consider.

The next factor to keep in mind is capacity. More capacity isn't always better. If you have a small point-and-shoot with small file sizes, you would probably never need a memory card that holds 8,000 images. You would be paying for capacity you never use (like buying an 8-bedroom home and only using one of them). Consider your shooting style and file sizes to pick a card with the capacity you will use. For example, if you plan a trip to Italy, you might want a different smaller capacity card for each day so you can keep your images and locations organized. However, if you do video or large file sizes you might need one larger capacity card so you don't have to split your work session onto two different cards.

Capacity is also important because you will want to shoot and save your image files using the RAW setting (more on this later). These file types take up more space, but allow better results in editing for improved photos.

Next, consider the writing speed. This affects how quickly the card can store the images as you shoot. And higher read speeds will speed up file transfers and workflow efficiency once you get back to your computer. Look for write speeds of at least 30-60MB/s and for video over 60MB/s is even better.

If you want to take a series of photos in quick succession (like the duck landing sequence shown on this page) you need faster writing speeds or you might miss the shot. This is particularly important if you are interested in any type of action photography with moving subjects like sports or wildlife.

Harald Hoyer from Schwerin, Germany, CC BY-SA 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

Look for a card that can withstand repeated use. Check for the number of duty cycles (10,000 or more). This represents the lifespan of the card in terms of the number of insertions and removals (with reading and writing of files). Try to find a card with ECC (Error Correction Code) which can help detect and fix transfer errors, as well as “wear-level management” which writes data evenly across the card potentially preventing sections of the card from corruption from excessive wear. The last thing you want to have happen is a corrupted memory card after you come back from a photo session!

Lastly, depending on your photography genre, you might also need to look for a card that has increased durability, such as water resistance, can last in extreme temperatures, or survive drops and crushing.

3. Don’t blame me for things that aren’t my fault.

Sharpness in your images has little or nothing to do with the camera or camera sensor so don’t blame the camera. Lack of sharpness is either because of the photographer (camera shake, missing focus) or because of the lens.

Every lens has a “sweet spot” and all lenses are not equally sharp at all focal lengths and distances. Understanding the limitations of your lens can help improve the sharpness of your images.

Proper camera grip and use of a tripod, as well as making sure you have a fast enough shutter speed are the best ways to reduce camera shake. Using the appropriate focus mode as explained above can help you get accurate focus.

While lack of sharpness may be related to camera shake or the lens, even more likely, it is the fault of the photographer or not understanding the difference between sharpness and depth of field (focus). Knowing how aperture and depth of fieldwork are critical to getting good focus and crisp images. If your depth of field is too shallow it is easy to “miss focus” on the subject. Depth of field is directly affected by the aperture setting of a lens. It is a good idea to keep apertures at f/4, f/5.6, or f/8 if you want to make sure you are getting more of a subject in focus. In auto mode, the camera will usually select a mid-range aperture like f/5.6 for you.

4. We like to feel secure (just like you).

Your camera likes to be adequately secured. Nothing will “end” a camera’s life faster than a 5 or 6-foot drop out of your hands or off of an unstable tripod.

When using a tripod, make sure you purchase a sturdy tripod that is built to hold the weight of your camera and lens. After you invest all that money into the camera and glass, don’t skimp out on investing in the tripod, get one that will last and is constructed out of strong materials. There is such a thing as “catastrophic tripod collapse” and it is just as bad as it sounds.

If you are a tall person, be sure to buy a tripod that will get to your height using the legs only, without the need for the center column. Using the center column extended is usually a bad idea. It makes the tripod more unstable and more prone to tipping over. An unstable tripod will wobble when you press the shutter or in a slight breeze. This can make your images less sharp.

Learn the proper hand grip for hand-holding a camera. A two-handed grip is always more secure! One hand on the camera body and one hand supporting the camera/lens from underneath. If you have a mirrorless camera, there are “grips” sold as accessories for some models to make them easier to hold. Proper grip will also give you sharper images. Hold the camera up to your eyes and tuck your elbows in. Using the LCD is always less steady and can create blur in your images.

Get a neck strap, wrist strap, or sling strap. These clip to your camera so that even if you lose your hand grip the strap can save the camera from dropping.

Lastly, as already discussed, never walk around with the camera up to your face/eyes. This is a sure way to trip and drop your equipment.

All of these "stabilizing" factors will all improve your photography. A steady shot is always a better photo! Using a tripod forces one to slow down and compose the shot more carefully. This typically results in a better photo as well because time and care went into creating it.

5. You don't need to ditch me for a new model

Camera manufacturers make lots of money every time they get you to buy a whole new camera. The honest truth is you don't need to buy a new model, get an upgraded model, switch to mirrorless, or even have a DSLR camera to get great images. Any camera type (even crop sensor and low megapixels) or model (even a phone!) is capable of quality results when in the right hands. Think about it this way, if you gave Ansel Adams a point-and-shoot camera or your phone, he'd probably still create fantastic images. Give a beginner the most expensive camera on the market and their images won't be that good. You are better off working on upgrading your knowledge base and investing in better lenses. In fact, today's cheapest camera is much more advanced technology than what Ansel Adams worked with. I think he said it best when he said, "Knowing what I know now, any photographer worth his salt could make some beautiful things with pinhole cameras."

So he is saying the camera is not what makes a good photo!

Some often overlooked aspects of photography that will improve your photography game (better and faster than a new camera) are composition, lighting, and exposure training (not just the exposure triangle). Take time to analyze images you like and learn all you can about how they were created. Join photography learning and sharing groups where you can get constructive criticism and ask questions. Get some old-fashioned books on these subjects. The underlying concepts behind good lighting and proper exposure don't change, so these books can be used editions that you can pick up inexpensively from resellers.

If you'd like to read up on some Composition Basics, we have an e-book on our website. Composition is the "art" behind a photo and there are some basic elements of good design that can help your images immensely. They are guidelines, not rules, but they will help you make better, more compelling photos.

The other way to improve your photography is to buy better glass. “Faster glass” with wide maximum apertures, crisp prime lenses, and fixed aperture zoom lenses for full frame cameras are good places to start. However, it is easy to fall into “GAS”—known as Gear Acquisition Syndrome. Afflicted photographers find themselves unable to resist the temptation of buying more and more photography gear (ex. lenses).

Save up and buy one good lens for each prime focal length or zoom range that serves well for your photography style and that is it. Once you have a great lens that covers the 24-70mm range, a 35mm prime, and a 50mm prime, you really don’t need a 35-70mm zoom because you already have it all covered with what you already own.

I recommend using the lens(es) you already have until you have a really good understanding of it and the type of photography you like. This may take some time. Then you will have a better idea of what you need so you don't waste money on a lens you hardly ever use. If you want to read up on lenses, be sure to check out our Lens Guide on our website.

This image of a building in New Zealand was taken with a very old, low-megapixel point-n-shoot camera in full auto mode by a 10-year-old back in 2010 (shared with permission). This photo demonstrates that a decent photograph does not require an expensive camera or lens. It is more about the composition, framing, lighting, and angles, as well as a good subject than it is about the gear.

6. Know my size. Am I a full-frame or crop?

Camera sensors come in different sizes. Larger sensors are usually in larger camera bodies and smaller sensors are usually in smaller, more lightweight, and compact camera bodies. But that is not the only difference. The sensor size and camera type can affect what lenses you can use and they will definitely affect how that lens performs.

Some full-frame cameras are not compatible with crop sensor lenses which are constructed for optimal performance on smaller crop sensor camera bodies. Trying to use them on a full-frame could cause damage to your camera. See your manufacturer's camera manual to see which types of lenses you can use.

On the other hand, you can use full-frame lenses on crop sensor camera bodies, but the image will be cropped to the smaller size of that sensor. The "crop sensor effect" refers to how the resulting image appears as if it was taken using a longer focal length lens.

For example, a 50mm full-frame lens on a full-frame camera will give you a greater angle of view than using that same lens on a crop sensor camera. On the crop sensor camera, the angle of view is more similar to an 80mm lens. If your full-frame camera does have a setting that allows you to use the crop sensor lenses safely, then it will still have this cropped view since the lens was designed to cover a smaller sensor size.

Our Lens Guide e-book goes into this concept in a bit more detail to help you understand the concept visually. But for our purposes right now, crop factor is like cropping a photo in editing with a crop tool. If you want to plan out a good composition you will need to plan for the proper lens for the camera and for that shot.

7. My Self-Timer isn't just for "selfies."

The self-timer camera function allows you to set the shutter to release after you have stepped away from the camera. Depending on the manufacturer and model, this is most commonly a two-second timer or a 10-second timer, but there could be other options. Most often, the timer is used so that you can get a picture with you in it. You set the 10-second timer then jump into the frame before the shutter releases.

However, there are other great uses for this timer, the main one is that it can be used to reduce camera shake. With your camera set up on a tripod, set the timer for the 2-second delay. This way your actual finger pressing up and down on the shutter is not vibrating the camera as the image is taken because the image is taken a few seconds after the shaking is done. This is especially helpful for longer exposures and will ensure your images are as crisp as possible.

The timer paired with long exposure settings can be used for a variety of creative photo effects such as light and star trails or long exposure landscapes. A longer timer allows you to get into position for long exposure light painting like the low-key light painting effect seen in the image on the next page. Or again, using the timer to allow the camera to settle after pressing the shutter button before a long exposure of a waterfall or light trails.

These are specialty types of photography that are too complicated to describe here, but they can be lots of fun and create some interesting images with a bit of practice. We offer some e-books on specialty topics like these, and if you sign up for our mailing list on our website you will get a low-key light painting instructional sheet automatically.

'D'ischord in Darkness

8. Know the different File Formats I offer

Most cameras allow you to choose whether your images are saved in RAW (NEF, CR2, etc.) or JPEG, as well as the size of the JPEG files – small, medium, or large. These choices affect your final images, how you can edit them, and the size of enlargements you can create while still maintaining a quality image.

RAW files should never be left RAW. They need to be edited in a program like Photoshop or Lightroom, otherwise they may look a bit dull. Then they can be saved in a format like PNG, or JPEG, to be shared on social media.

Shooting in RAW has many advantages in post-processing. A RAW file contains all of the data from the camera which allows you to recover shadow and highlight details, choose white balance, apply LUTs and profiles, choose your own level of sharpening and noise reduction, and more. RAW files are like negatives and allow you to make edits that are non-destructive, meaning you can revert back to the original at any time. They are “lossless” files and don’t have compression issues.

JPEGs are simple, ready-to-go files. You have less editing ability and you should never edit a JPEG, save it, then reopen it to edit more and save it again. Each time a JPEG goes through this process it loses detail to compression which leaves artifacts in your image (simply opening and closing without making changes or saving does not create loss). Shooting in RAW+JPEG gives you the best of both worlds (but it does use more memory so consider that when buying memory cards). You end up with a "ready to go" JPEG file that you can post and saves time, but you also get the "digital negative" of the RAW file that you can edit when you do have time later on.

Some people will tell you that editing is cheating. Basic editing like correcting white balance, improving the color (by bringing down highlights or changing vibrance), sharpening, or applying noise reduction is not cheating. JPEGs are files where the camera has made all of those post-processing decisions and applied them for you. RAW files allow you to make those decisions and apply those changes yourself. Post processing can be time consuming, so if the image looks great in JPEG then save time and just go with it! Otherwise a bit of editing from a RAW file can really improve the look of your imagery.

9. Use my AE/AF Lock feature!

AE/AF lock is a commonly overlooked button. Auto Exposure (AE) lock will freeze the exposure and Auto Focus (AF) lock will lock the focus. These can both be helpful for recomposing a shot for difficult lighting or when a focus point does not exist where you want the focus to be.

Have you ever tried to take a photo where the camera can't decide whether to choose the lighting of the sky or the lighting of the person or landscape for the exposure? Half-press your shutter while focusing on the area you want to base your exposure on. Hold the AE lock button and keep holding the half-pressed shutter. Reposition the camera and fully press the shutter. The exposure will stay locked where you set it.

AF lock works similarly, except for focus. Have a shot where you want something in the foreground in focus and the camera keeps switching to the background or it won't focus because there is no focus point on that spot? AF lock is the solution. Lock your focus, then recompose your shot. The photo on the next page is an example of this type of situation where the subject is off-center.

Not all cameras have an AF lock button. If you are using one-shot/single focus the half-press of the shutter button functions as an AF lock. A separate AF lock button is only helpful if you are using a continuous/servo, or combination/hybrid mode. (See #1 – Focus Modes above).

Your camera may also have an AF-ON button. This can be used for “back button” focus which allows you to set the camera focus button in this position instead of on the shutter release. The shutter release will no longer control focus. Focus will only activate using the AF-ON button. You won't know whether you will love or hate back button focus until you test it out, but many pro photographers use this feature.

These buttons are located in different places on different models and brands and may have slightly different names or in some cases use a symbol like an * asterisk. In some cases, you may have to assign which function you want the button to use. Consult your camera manual for guidance and see the photos below for some examples of these buttons.

10. I can save you so much time in editing, if you just spend a little time getting to know me.

Metering Modes, Histograms, White Balance, and Exposure Compensation all sound complicated (or terrifying), but a few times using these with your camera manual in hand and your images will be so much better in the camera that when it is time to edit there is much less to do!

The catch is that most of these functions cannot be used in Auto Mode. You will need to use Program, Aperture Priority, Shutter Priority, or Manual Mode. These are not as complicated as they sound either!

Metering modes are how your camera chooses proper exposure. Your camera's built-in light meter then uses this mode/setting to indicate whether you are under or over-exposed.

Common modes for metering are Zone, Partial, Averaging (or Matrix), Center, or Spot. Spot metering does exactly as it sounds. It takes a light reading from one small spot of the frame. The mode is most useful when there is one important area you want to make sure is properly exposed, like the face of a person. Matrix/Averaging tries to balance exposure by averaging the brightest/lightest and darkest parts in the frame. Landscapes are one example of where this metering mode can be very useful.

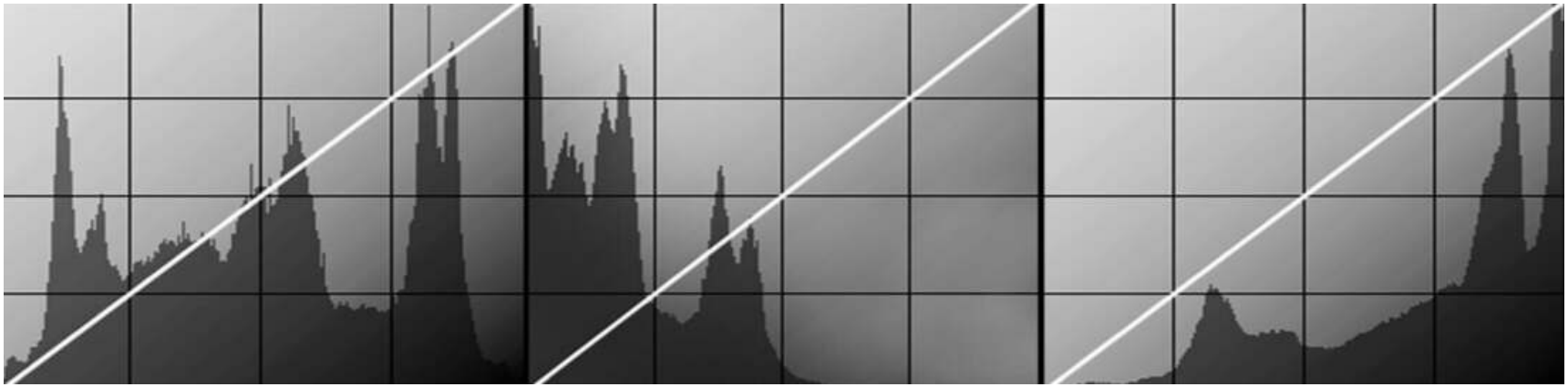
Once you understand basic metering, know that sometimes the camera exposure is not what you want – you want darker or lighter. This is where exposure compensation comes in. You can adjust more positive (lighter) or negative (darker) exposure. Not all cameras have this function. Those that do, most often allow you to make adjustments of 3 stops of light (positive or negative). How the camera creates this compensation will depend on what mode you are in.

For example, if you are in Aperture Priority, the camera will adjust the ISO or shutter speed, but not the aperture. In Shutter Priority mode, it will adjust the ISO or aperture, but not the shutter speed.

A few practice sessions with your camera manual and you will have this function in your arsenal of tools to use in complicated lighting situations. The exposure compensation button is usually a square symbol with a plus and negative inside. You will need to consult your camera manual for the location of this feature and how to operate it.

Now that you have exposed your image, it's time to review it. Learn how to read the histogram. The histogram is that scary-looking graph that sometimes pops up after you take a photo (you may have to go into settings to be able to view this on your LCD after each shot). This graph represents all of the pixels in your image based on each shade of gray (the camera basically looks at all colors as grays – that's why there is that 18% grey card in white balance card sets – but this is a whole topic all its own). The camera plots the number of pixels for each range of gray colors in the photo on the graph. The graph will be taller when there are more pixels of a certain shade.

A good exposure still has details in the darkest and lightest areas and on a graph this might look like a bell-shaped curve, or even multiple spikes along the graph center, but not at the extreme left and right. If you see a graph where a lot of pixels are all the way over on the left (black) or all the way over on the right (whites), then "clipping" has occurred. This means the details of the image in the dark and light areas will be lost and most likely cannot be recovered in editing either. A "blown out" white sky is a common example of this. A few basic histograms are shown below. On the left is proper exposure. In the center is underexposed (too dark) and on the right is overexposed (too light/blown out).



11. I need you to pick Focus Points/Autofocus Area Modes or I will have to pick for you (and I am not really very good at this).

One final, overlooked area in your settings is Focus Points and the Autofocus Area Modes. Again, these sound scary, but they aren't and once you know how to use them they will help you achieve crisp focus! These are not the same as setting Autofocus (Servo/Continuous, One-shot) or Manual focus from our first section above, and this is not the same thing as selecting a Metering Mode. Metering modes as discussed above are related to light and exposure.

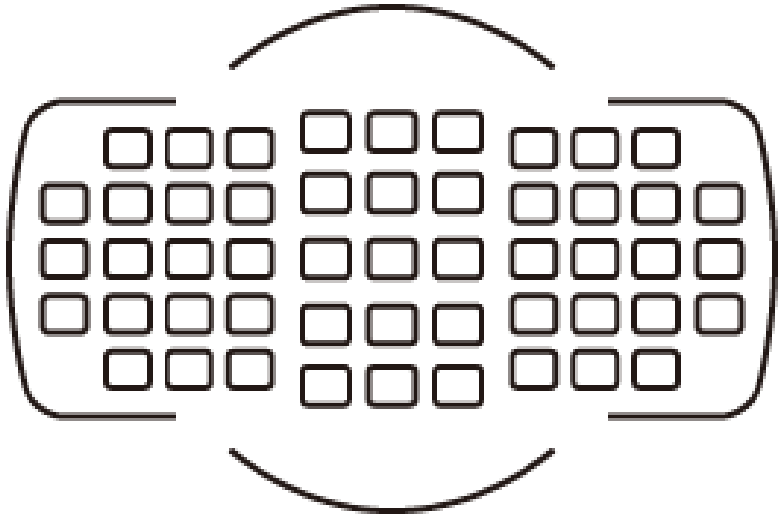
Your camera allows you to specifically pick which parts of the image you want to have in focus by using Focus Points. Focus points are the spots that cover your frame of view and blink or light up when you half-press the shutter button. (If you have never seen this "blink" you may have it turned off in your camera settings). Unless you make a selection, all of these points are active by default. Having all of these points active or "on" might seem like a great idea, but it does not mean the camera is focused in all of those places.

They are active, but when you go to take a photo the camera will select one of them, usually whatever it locks focus on first, whether that is your intended subject or not. Often it is the wrong point or wrong part of the subject and that is where choosing your point or Autofocus Area becomes important.

There are three common modes for selecting an Autofocus Area among most camera models and brands.

Single Point AF Area means you are selecting one single focus point. If you want a "set it and forget it" setting, then you'd be best off choosing this one and selecting the center point. The center point is most accurate and as long as you always put your subject smack in the middle then it should work 90% of the time (as long as you ½ press and make sure your camera locks focus before you take the shot). With Single Point AF the camera will focus on the subject under the selected focus point only. You can select which point this will be. This mode is best for stationary subjects like portraits, landscapes, macro, studio work like product photography, and architecture.

Dynamic or Expansion AF Area expands your point selection. The camera will focus based on information from surrounding points if the subject wobbles or moves slightly from the selected focus point. Many newer cameras allow you to choose how large of an “expansion area” you want. A smaller area (9 points) would be useful for predictable movements, like runners on a track. A larger area (21 or 51 points) is more useful for erratic and unpredictable or very quick movements, such as soccer players or birds in flight. Therefore, the Dynamic Mode is great for wildlife and sports photography. Of course, you will still need to pan or “track” your subject by moving the camera along with your subject to keep it inside the selected focus area. The diagrams below show the areas covered by 9 and 51 autofocus points.



Automatic AF Area is just like it sounds. This mode lets the camera make the decision about which point to use and what area to focus on. Unfortunately, the camera can focus on the wrong area. It decides what area is most important and it may give priority to a bicycle rider behind your child on the swing. This mode is best for beginners or when you need quick focus on something that is easy and close to you.

Your camera may also have a Group AF Area or even Eye AF, and new modes are being developed and added all the time. It is highly recommended that you learn about the focus points and areas your camera supports and under which circumstances they can be used. In most cases, the changes you can make to Auto Focus settings are limited when you are in Auto Mode.

12. Shoot more than you need, because unlike film, digital is basically free.

Digital photography gives you a freedom that traditional film photographers never had. They didn't know for certain how their images would turn out until they were in their darkroom waiting for their composition to appear. Nowadays, you can review your images, but even then, those little LCDs will lie like politicians, and when you get home you come to realize that you missed your mark. So consider all the previous tips in this e-book and use some of those settings to lower the risk of this happening to you.

Shooting more than you need doesn't mean 18 straight shots of the same thing without making any changes. It means taking lots of photos with some adjustments in between each one. Shoot in burst/continuous mode or change the exposure with exposure compensation. Try a different metering mode, adjust your angle, or use a different auto-focusing mode, AF point, or focus area mode.

If you are ever unsure about your results, shoot more than you need. It costs very little and whatever that cost is will be worth it when you only have one opportunity to catch the moment.

Lastly, if you shoot in RAW, you have more post-processing/ editing options and many things can be fixed in editing if you do mess up (although not everything and it can be time-consuming to do so). The images on the right are all the same photo, just with different effects applied. Editing from RAW allows you to change hue and saturation, highlights, shadows, contrast, brightness, and much more.

To Sum It All Up...

Now that you have reached the end of this e-book, you are armed with the valuable insights and actionable tips it provides. Implementing these simple tips should put you well on your way to becoming a skilled and confident photographer. By breaking the common bad habits and mastering the often overlooked camera settings, you will gain a solid foundation for improving the quality of your photos.

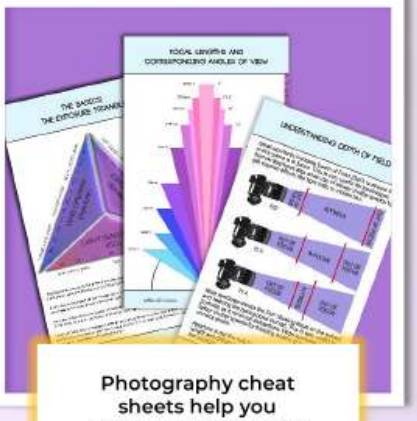
A few simple adjustments can open up a world of possibilities, allowing you to capture more captivating and compelling images. Remember, photography is an ongoing journey of learning and experimentation. Use this guide as your go-to resource, refer back to it whenever you need a refresher. Continue exploring and honing your skills, and before you know it, you will witness remarkable progress in your photography.

Congratulations on taking the first steps towards elevating your photography game. Embrace the joy of capturing moments and unleashing your creativity through the lens. The world is waiting to see your unique perspective. Happy shooting!

Mega Pixel our Superhero Mascot!

You finished this guide! You're awesome!

You know what else is awesome? These additional photography resources to help you along your photography journey!



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About the Author

Cheryl Ritzel, founder of FocusEd Camera, is an esteemed instructional coach. Her exceptional talents have garnered recognition and accolades throughout her career. Cheryl's company and her remarkable work have been featured in prestigious publications such as ICM Magazine, Business Insider, Dogster, Spectrum News, and Yahoo News, and on the social media channels of Lensbaby, Canon, and Adaptalux.

21 Ways to Improve Your Photography!

In this e-book we cover 9 bad habits that beginner photographers should break, plus 12 settings your camera wishes you knew about, for a total of 21 actionable tips that will improve your photos! If you have been wanting to up your photography game and don't know where to start, these are simple changes that you can use and start seeing improvements immediately! This is a must-have guide for any beginner or amateur photographer covering a wide variety of suggestions for creating better, more compelling images.

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