

TAKING GOOD PHOTOGRAPHS



How do you begin to take good photos? The first thing to remember is this: The photographer, not the camera, takes great photos. Second, remember that you master photography by doing it—experimenting and learning by trial and error.

The following tips should get you started. Some will have more meaning after you've gone out, shot a bunch of pictures, and analyzed the results.

Get your camera ready

Learn about the moving parts

Find and practice operating your camera's shutter, zoom, and LCD monitor/display screen. Learn what each of the mode settings on the dial next to the shutter is best used for. Learn how to review pictures you've taken, and how to erase a picture.

Check the memory capacity

It's terrible to be in the middle of taking pictures and then run out of memory space. Always have enough memory capacity in your digital camera. A 512 MB card is a good bet.

And always upload photos as soon as you've taken them. Then erase the images from the camera so that the memory card has space for new photos.

Set the mode dial to "AUTO"

Let the camera do most of the thinking for you. Put it on "AUTO" so that it will automatically adjust the focus and lighting.

Turn off your camera's "date function"

Photos that appear with the date in the corner are unusable when creating a professional-looking slideshow or exhibit.

Set your camera for high resolution and low compression

A big reason for packing a big memory card is so that you can shoot at your camera's highest resolution and lowest compression, both of which take up memory space. Why? Because these two factors—resolution and compression—determine how your photos will look when printed or blown up on a computer screen. A photo taken at a low resolution—640 x 480 ppi (pixels per inch)—will look fuzzy when enlarged beyond 4 by 6 inches. Compression works the other way. If compression is set too high, image quality goes down.

All digital cameras allow you to set resolution and compression levels. It sounds complicated, but here are suggested settings. If your photos will be published in a book or displayed in an exhibit, you must set the resolution to 2048 X 1536!

Use of Images

Internet, email
4" x 6" print
5" x 7" print
8" x 10" print or larger

Resolution

640 x 480
1632 x 1224
2048 x 1536
2816 x 2112

Compression

Standard, high compression
Standard, high compression
Fine, low compression
Fine, low compression

Learn to control the flash

When you set the mode dial on “AUTO,” the camera’s internal flash automatically goes off when you are taking pictures inside or under low light conditions. Sometimes, the flash is necessary. Often, it is not—this is one area where the camera’s thinking isn’t right on. Pictures taken with a flash tend to have a cool (blue-ish) rather than a warm tone. And sometimes the white light from the flash shows up in the picture, something you don’t want.

When you are taking pictures inside, you need to take the extra step of **turning off the automatic flash every time your camera comes on**. (Unfortunately, whenever your camera shuts off, it will automatically go back to the “flash on” setting, so you’ll need to turn it off again.)

How to turn off the automatic flash: Press the icon that looks like a lightning bolt. Then press it again. On the LCD screen, the lightning bolt icon should show up with a line through it. This tells you the flash is off.

Shooting basics

Hold the camera steady

If the camera moves while you are taking a picture, you will get a blurry image. The only thing that should move when taking a picture is your finger on the shutter. The more you can steady your arms, the sharper your pictures will be. When holding the camera, also be sure that you don’t have a finger in front of the lens or the flash.

Hold the camera level

If you forget to hold the camera level, your pictures will come out sloping to one side or another—cock-eyed. Look for the horizontal lines in the scene you are photographing (like the horizon!) and use them as guides.

Set the focus

If you get the focus right, you will get a sharp image. Rely on your camera’s automatic focus. Press the shutter button halfway down and wait a second for the camera to adjust the focus automatically. Then continue to press the shutter down fully. If you press halfway down, then let the shutter come back up and then press down fully, you will lose the focus you set.

Understand the zoom lens

It is tempting to over-use your camera’s zoom lens. It lets you get close to a subject without feeling like you are putting the camera in the person’s face. It can also help to create a focal point in a large landscape or to take pictures of people naturally going about their routine without their knowing you are photographing them. But there is a trade-off. The more you zoom into a subject, the more the resulting image is affected by “camera shake.” And when the camera shakes, photos come out blurred.

Unfortunately, your digital camera’s “picture preview” mode, with its lack of detail, may not show that the photographs you took were blurred. You may only find out after you copy the pictures to your computer.

Shoot more

With digital cameras, there is no added cost to taking more photographs. Shoot more, not less. When you take multiple shots of the same subject, you increase the likelihood that one of the pictures will be a winner.

Photo Composition

Move in close

It's always good to move in closer to your subject. Most scenes will benefit from your taking several steps forward. The goal is to fill the picture area with the subject you are photographing. That way, you reveal details, like the expression on a face. As tempting as it is to use your camera's zoom to get close, the image quality is much better when you use the "sneaker" technique—walking up to your subject. As noted earlier, "zooming" can result in blurry images, especially when the light conditions are low or the subject is moving. The best choice may be a compromise: Get as physically close to your subject as you can, then use the zoom lens a bit (but not all the way) to inch in closer.

Anticipate the moment

With digital cameras, there's a delay of several seconds from when you press the shutter button and when it takes the picture. If you are shooting anything active, make sure you press the shutter button down before your subject is at the position you're trying to capture. You may need to take many pictures to make up for the delay factor.

Look your subject in the eye

When taking a picture of someone, hold the camera at the person's eye level to unleash the power of a gaze or smile. Your subject need not always stare at the camera. All by itself, the eye-level angle will create a personal feeling that pulls you into the picture.

Take some vertical pictures

Most people take horizontal pictures. But there are times when what you are photographing will come out better if you rotate the camera and take a vertical shot. This way you can capture the length of what you are shooting. You will probably have to take a few steps back when shooting vertically, so that you don't cut off the top or bottom of what you are photographing.

Trust your instincts

In the end, trust your own instincts when it comes to composing your photos. As you frame the shot, move the camera and explore the scene. When you find an angle or composition that feels good to you, take the picture immediately. Then get several more shots.

Analyze your work

Look at the pictures you have taken and ask some questions. Did the image turn out as you planned? Do you like the composition? Could you have closed in more on the subject? Would the picture have come out better if you had turned the camera vertically?

Lighting

Always consider your lighting

Next to the subject, the most important part of every picture is the lighting. It affects the appearance of everything you photograph. On an older face, for example, bright sunlight from the side will emphasize the wrinkles, while the soft light of a cloudy day will soften them. Don't like the light on your subject? Then move yourself, or your subject.

Rely on available light as much as possible

Learn how to turn off your camera's automatic flash—and turn it off. Use the flash only when the lighting is poor and you have no choice but to rely on your on-camera flash. If you are not sure

whether the picture requires the flash, experiment. Take a shot without the flash and look at it on the LCD monitor. Then take one with the flash. See which looks better.

Avoid red-eye

Do your subjects have red eyes? This is common when taking pictures with the flash on. If you notice this problem, make the feature “flash—remove red eye” is on.

Know the range of your flash

If you do use the flash, make sure you aren't taking the picture beyond the flash's range. Pictures taken beyond the maximum flash range will be too dark. For many cameras, the maximum flash range is less than fifteen feet—about five steps away.

Turn around to avoid the sun

When taking outdoor photos, position subjects so that the sun is behind you. If the sun is directly in your field of view, your subjects may look overexposed and washed-out. With the sun behind you, enough light reaches the subject to show a wide variety of color without washing out features like skin tones.

Don't shoot subjects or objects in front of a window.

If you are taking a picture indoors and the subject is close to a window, the person or object may turn out too dark. The camera's automatic light meter will lock onto the light coming in from the window, leaving your subject underexposed and mostly black—the opposite of the washed-out white look of overexposed pictures.

More tips on taking photos of people

Portrait photography is an art of its own. Getting close up, natural-looking photos of people challenges the best photographers. Often, the lighting isn't good, the person's expression is wrong, or they look too posed.

This helps:

- Snap as many pictures as you can of the person.
- Be sure to get some close ups, taken from different angles (not all head on, like mug shots).
- Ask your subject to move around and pose in front of different backgrounds. When picking a background, pay attention to what it contains. Be sure it doesn't include distracting objects, like wires and soda bottles.
- Try to get some pictures of your subject in a setting that “fits” them—for example, at work, if they have a job, or doing something they love (or hate) to do. Remember, though, that you will still need to be pretty close up to the person—you want him/her to be in the foreground, not the background.
- Don't take pictures of your subject directly in front of or near a window. The light coming in from the window will throw off the camera's automatic exposure, and the person will come out too dark in the photo.
- Ask the person to go about their business. Try to make yourself inconspicuous, then snap away.