

How To Take Better Digital Pictures

Compiled by the Editors

So you're ready to take a photo. Camera, lights...everything is set. Your subject is smiling and ready to go, and you could snap the shot at any moment. But, wait. Are you sure there's nothing more you can do to improve this photo? Here are some basic tips to consider before you hit "Click." They are easy to learn, and every photo you take will benefit from your newfound expertise. Even a beginner can take professional-looking portraits that are suitable for framing.



Prepare for your shoot

Schedule a quiet 30 minutes to take your pictures. Make sure you and your subject have eaten a light meal and are well-rested. Gather props and clothing, and prepare a background that is free from clutter.

Focus on having fun

Loosen up and find humor. Often the best pictures occur when something silly happens behind the scenes. Then your subject laughs or gives a funny expression, which results in a masterpiece you can cherish for years to come.

Get closer

Try to get within 2-4 feet of your subject. You want to have 90 percent person and 10 percent background in your picture. Get close even when it's uncomfortable. This is where you get the best photographs.

Cut the clutter

Nothing ruins a photo like stray objects that detract from your composition. If there's a phone wire, an aluminum can, or anything else that isn't part of your picture's focus, then eliminate it.

Try a new angle

Consider using a different angle. Get a little creative. Get down on the ground and look at your subject from a different perspective. Nobody is using a stopwatch, so take your time to find the best viewpoint.

Consider composition

For an image to be successful and meaningful, it needs to be composed correctly. Do whatever you can to guide the gaze of the viewer toward your subject. And don't be afraid to experiment! If your subject isn't in the best position, have them move around until you achieve the best



composition.

Find the right lighting

Turn off your flash. Using a flash destroys your pictures and gives faces a harsh and unnatural look, like deer caught in the headlights. To get a more flattering tone and higher quality, use natural light. Have your subject sit sideways next to a window or door reflecting the bright midday sun...indirect light makes soft and beautiful pictures. It also makes one side of your subject's face light and the other shadowed, which creates strong emotion and mood.



Take more pictures

Most of us are frugal when it comes to taking pictures. But with a digital camera, you can simply delete the pictures you don't like, so snap away! Fill the entire picture card with one subject. You are sure to find a few pictures that will thrill you. Using these insightful tips will help you create quality portraits of your family and friends. Most amateur photographers have taken more than a few really good pictures in their lives. And if they're lucky, they will have taken a few that are truly great. So what is it about those great images that sets them apart? With a few helpful hints that you can learn in an afternoon, you can improve your pictures tremendously. Understanding the following five basic tips will also have a profound impact on your photographs.

1. Hold your camera steady

Camera movement is the most common cause of blurry pictures. Plant your feet firmly on the ground. Steady your upper body by tucking your elbows in close to your sides. And hold your camera firmly against your face. Now you're ready for the big moment. Take a deep breath and gently squeeze down the shutter release in one motion. Gently now...if you press down too hard on the button, you could jerk the camera downward. Even breathing too hard can cause the camera to move. If you feel shaky, you may want to use a tripod. Or try stabilizing yourself by leaning against a wall or a tree.

2. Know when to use a flash

Most digital cameras have an auto flash that fires whenever the exposure system determines there's too little light. Since many cameras use this as the default setting, you may be using the flash without knowing it. Photos lit by auto flash have a flat quality that minimizes shadows. The light from the flash is so fast that you don't have to worry about your subject moving and blurring the picture during the exposure, even when you're holding the camera with your hands. This is great for some types of photos, such as portraits. But you may not want the flash to bounce right off your subject. Instead, try bouncing the light off a wall or ceiling and onto your subject. Just make sure your subject isn't too close to the wall, or the result will be a distracting shadow. Auto flash photos often have "red-eye." Eliminating red-eye is as



simple as choosing a red-eye-reduction setting on your camera (look in the manual for instructions). You can also remove red-eye after the fact with the software that came with your camera, but it's easier to avoid it in the first place.

3. Use natural light

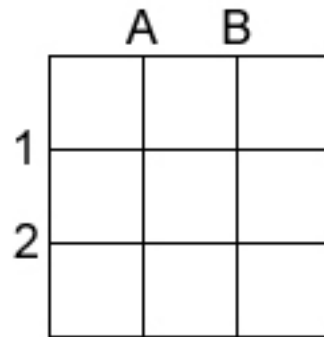
There are times when you should forget about using your automatic flash and instead use available or "natural" light, even in low-light situations. Sunbeams drifting through a window provide a terrific photo opportunity: a subtle interplay of light and gorgeous colors. But this kind of light will wash out the foreground subject and you'll lose intriguing surface textures. In this instance, you need to turn the flash off and physically support the camera for a long exposure (or your photo will blur from camera movement). It's easy to turn off auto flash. Check your user's manual for instructions.

4. Don't say cheese

Sometimes you want a perfectly posed picture, such as the kids with their grandparents. But you don't need to pose your subjects every time. Part of the beauty of digital photography is that it is much easier to capture life's candid moments. So, forget the cheese and say something to make them laugh! Your subjects will look relaxed and natural, allowing more personality to shine through.

5. Avoid the bull's-eye effect

There's nothing wrong with placing your subject in the exact center of the frame, but there's nothing particularly interesting about it either. Compositionally speaking, it's actually more pleasing to place your subject off center than in the middle of the picture. We're referring to the Rule of Thirds, a tried-and-true compositional technique. Here's how it works: In your mind's eye, divide up the picture area into vertical and horizontal thirds (like a tic-tac-toe grid).



Rather than placing your subject smack dab in the center of the grid, try placing it on one of the four lines to create a more interesting picture. You might line up a human subject on line A or on line B, for example. Or in a landscape photo, you could experiment by aligning the mountains or horizon on line 1 or line 2. Use the Rule of Thirds to create a picture with a more dramatic sense of scale or proportion.

