



Photography Basics

An introduction to taking great photographs - web edition

For anyone who has little or no photographic experience and wants to take photographs for journalistic, activist or documentary purposes.



The Media
Co-op

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The Basics

You don't need an expensive camera to capture good photos, but you do need a bit of creativity and perseverance. The main thing is to be self-critical and try new things.

Working with a Point-and-Shoot Camera

- Don't use digital zoom. It crops the image in-camera and doesn't actually capture more visual detail.
- Pre-focus. Press the shutter button down half way and the camera will focus. Press the shutter button the rest of the way down to take a photograph.
- Avoid backlight. Many digital cameras don't handle it well.
- Avoid using flash unless you understand it well. Natural light is best and ambient light is better than using a flash.
- Check your manual if you don't know how to use or change certain settings.

The Subject

The subject is the person, place, or thing you are photographing.

- Get as close as possible to the subject; you don't have to photograph them from head-to-toe
- Capturing a lot of background in a photo isn't necessary, unless it helps tell the story of the subject or the written article
- Be engaged with your subject and communicate with them if you can
- Be respectful of your subject and the community and environment you are in
- Make sure what's behind your subject doesn't distract from the story you are trying to tell with your photo.
- Try not to always centre the subject. Capture them on the right or left of the frame too.

Framing the Shot

- Always look in the corners of the viewfinder or LCD screen to see what you've got in the shot
- Consider whether it's a vertical or horizontal shot and rotate the camera accordingly
- Usually photos of people are better than photos of buildings
- Change your angle: squat down and aim up at people. Hold the camera high over a crowd
- Watch for where the sun and shade are
- Take more than one shot in case people are blinking or looking away
- Look on the Media Co-op sites and find photos you like to emulate and understand what works

Tell a Story

A photograph isn't just an image—it's a retelling of an event or the story of a person or place. Try to capture some kind of action or movement in each photograph. Don't just take a few photos and leave the scene—try to capture every element of it so you have many diverse images to choose from.

Don't get anchored to one spot. Be dynamic. Move around to find more interesting places to photograph from. Move to the right and left of your subject. Go behind them. Try moving higher or lower. Are there stairs or a bridge near the action? Try taking a few photographs from there.

Taking more photographs from more angles and positions will increase the likelihood of capturing strong photographs.

If you're documenting a community project or event, photograph the participants while they are engaged in an activity. You can take a few posed photos if you like or if the participants suggest it, but also ask them to continue with what they were doing and take candid photos.

If a potential subject seems aware of the camera to the point of being self-conscious, wait a while, take photos of other people or the scene in general or just hang out, and often people will forget you're there.

Editing

- Take lots of shots to learn what works and what doesn't
- Pick your best dozen, then pick your best five or six from those
- Look for sharp focus, good colour or contrast, unusual content, striking images, emotion
- Watch out for trees and signs coming out of people's heads that you didn't notice when you took the shot
- If there is lots of empty space or something you don't want in the photo crop it out
- Don't pick shots where people are mid-blink or caught looking awkward or silly (unless it's a politician)

Remember

- Don't be afraid to experiment
- Learn from your mistakes
- Caption your photos as soon as you're done shooting

Taking Photographs at Actions

If you are photographing a march or demo, take lots of close-up people shots, but also pull back for a general crowd shot to show the location and how many people there are.

If it's a march try to get ahead of the marchers and walk backwards at the same pace as them. Find a high spot or corner ahead of the march where the entire crowd can be seen.

- Placards and banners are good, so are faces
- Ask people to stop for a photo if they are marching
- Lots of people automatically smile—if it's more appropriate to the action (like a march to release jailed comrades) ask them not to smile.

Permission

Legally anything in public is fair game, but ask permission verbally or with gestures if photographing allies. If they indicate or say “no” then don't take the shot.

Always ask permission first if photographing children. Ask the children too.

Tell people you are taking photographs for the Media Co-op or *The Dominion*. Make eye contact with potential subjects.

Be very careful photographing allies who are doing things that could get them arrested. Your photos could be used to arrest and persecute them. Respect anyone's decision to keep their identity hidden.

Police

You can legally photograph police in public but know that they often try to block you and tell you you are obstructing them. Have someone watching your back if you are photographing police action.

- If they tell you to move identify yourself as a journalist.
- Get as close to the action as you can.
- Private security has no legal right to touch you, push you or assault you in any way, but sometimes do with the support of cops.

Police officers sometimes take cameras and phones and wipe them. Be prepared for that possibility as well as arrest for obstruction. If it looks like you'll get arrested try to pass your camera or phone to someone.

Do not be intimidated!

Tricks for Better Photographs

Rule of Thirds

According to Wikipedia, the rule of thirds is a guideline that “proposes that an image can be divided into nine equal parts by two equally-spaced horizontal lines and two equally-spaced vertical lines, and that important compositional elements should be placed along these lines or their intersections.”

“Proponents of the technique claim that aligning a subject with these points creates more tension, energy and interest in the composition than simply centering the subject would.”



photo by Moondigger found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule_of_thirds

“The photograph above demonstrates the application of the rule of thirds. The horizon sits at the horizontal line dividing the lower third of the photo from the upper two-thirds. The tree sits at the intersection of two lines, sometimes called a power point or a crash point. **Points of interest in the photo don't have to actually touch one of these lines to take advantage of the rule of thirds.** For example, the brightest part of the sky near the horizon where the sun recently set does not fall directly on one of the lines, but does fall near the intersection of two of the lines, close enough to take advantage of the rule.”



photo by Zinta Avens Auszins

Depth of Field

As described by Wikipedia: “depth of field (DOF) is the distance between the nearest and farthest objects in a scene that appear acceptably sharp in an image. Although a lens can precisely focus at only one distance at a time, the decrease in sharpness is gradual on each side of the focused distance.”

One way to take interesting photographs is to have a shallow depth of field, meaning that a small portion of the image (usually the subject or a part of it) is in focus and the rest is out of focus.

The photograph on the left demonstrates depth of field. The roots in the foreground are clear, the hand a little less so while the leaves are quite unfocused.

Capturing Depth of Field with a Point-and-Shoot Camera

(Adapted and copied from www.scrappersworkshop.com) As long as your camera has an Aperture Priority setting, you can get images with shallow depth of field. On your camera, it's represented by A or AV. It might be on a dial on your camera, or it might be in a menu. Check the camera's manual if you're not sure.

1. Set your aperture as wide as you can (to the lowest number you can get). f/1.4 is the lowest possible in general, but depending on the light and other settings, it might not go that low. It will most likely be around f/2.8 or f/3. The higher the number, the deeper the DOF will be, and the bigger the area in focus will be.
2. Zoom in all the way, while avoiding digital zoom. Step back from your subject.
3. Pre-focus. Press the shutter button down half way and the camera will focus. You will be able to see what is in focus and what is not. If your camera has a little 'focus box' or bullseye, be sure that's placed over the portion of the image you want to be in focus. You can move the camera a little before you take the picture if you want that portion of the scene off to one side. By holding the shutter button down halfway you will 'lock' the focus at that distance, so if you move the camera it will still focus in the same area.
4. Take a lot of photos from different angles and perspectives.

Lots of light helps. If you don't have enough light your camera will kick up the ISO and you'll have grainy photos.

Set the camera on a surface to stabilize it. If you have a tripod, use it. That way if the camera chooses a slow shutter speed, you'll still have a clear shot.

Technical Information

Resolution

Resolution is a measurement of how many pixels or dots there are per inch in an image. It is represented as **ppi (pixels per inch)** or **dpi (dots per inch)**. A high-resolution photograph will have large dimensions, such as 3648 x 2736 pixels. A low resolution photo could have dimensions like 50 x 100 or 200 x 500 pixels. Small photos such as these can be fine on the internet, but don't look good printed out on paper.

Display resolution on the internet is 72ppi. In print, it is typically 300dpi, which means that a 5"x4" photo that looks clear on the web will look pixelated and unclear if it's printed on paper at the same size. **You should always shoot in a high-resolution, large mode and keep your original high-resolution photo files on hand**, even if you've already published the photos on the web. What if someone loves one of your photos and wants it to accompany an article or get it printed, but it will only look good as a thumbnail?

- Use the maximum resolution and photo size you can. Photo size settings are often represented as L, M, S (large, medium, small), but can also be represented as dimensions, in pixels. Check your manual for instructions if you need to.
- A 2GB memory card will probably be sufficient for one session of shooting, but if you can afford a 4GB or 8GB card, you won't have to worry as much about missing photo opportunities due to lack of space on your camera.

More to Learn

If you want more in-depth information or want to explore photography further, here are a few things you can look up and learn about:

- RAW format vs. jpeg
- Taking photographs in dim light
- Aperture
- Shutter Speed
- ISO

Sources

The sections "Framing the Shot," "Editing" and "Taking Photographs at Actions" were contributed by murray bush of flux photo.

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