

Digital Photography I: The Old Rules Still Apply By Christine Pepler

For the majority of us, taking photographs is a rather "informal" event. We spend minimal time posing our subjects, setting up the shot, adjusting the lighting, and so forth. However, understanding some of the basics of digital photography and taking just a bit of time prior to pressing the button can greatly improve the quality of the pictures we create. Digital cameras introduced two great features into our world. One is the ability to delete pictures and try again. Beginning photographers need to experiment and practice. Digital cameras allow us to do this inexpensively. The second great feature is the ability to edit after the fact. However, the editing function is not unlimited and should not be used as a crutch; getting the shot right in the first place is still much more effective in creating quality images.

Most of the traditional rules for creating pictures still apply with digital photography. What makes a good photograph is the same. Good photography is a topic of considerable study but for now a brief discussion about just a handful of tips that will make the most immediate improvement for the true novice is sufficient.

Avoid blurry pictures by keeping a steady camera. Tripods are of course excellent for this purpose but aren't always handy or available. Without a tripod, you can grasp the camera in a manner that is comfortable for you; using two hands offers the best stability. Steady the camera by holding your arms next to your body with your elbows in close to your chest or stomach. You can brace yourself by keeping your feet apart or leaning against a wall, tree, or other object when possible.

Don't be afraid to set up the shot. When working with people as subjects, it is easy to direct them for a better picture. When looking at the LCD you can see basically how the shot is set up. Would the shot be better if the subjects in a group stepped in closer together, if they removed their sunglasses, if they turned slightly, or looked over your shoulder versus straight into the camera? You are the director and can make alterations at that point.

Another element of setting up the shot is to use an uncluttered background. If a person is the subject of your picture you want to eliminate all the other "distractions" in the surrounding area. A lot of background activity and other objects can take away from your intended subject. Sometimes just repositioning a bit and stepping in closer can help achieve a better background as well.

Another general rule is to take pictures at the eye level of the subject. In other words, your view angle should not be from above or below. This allows much more detail, the ability to see expression, emotion, personality, and so forth. This doesn't necessarily mean that the subject

must look directly into the camera however.

When shooting people, animals, and wildlife it is usually best to move in close. Closer shots can dramatically improve your results. In some instances stepping in closer is not an option but in these instances you can use zoom to come in closer to the subject. Too close is 3 feet or less, this kind of proximity can result in blurry pictures. Special lenses are used for ultra up close photography.

Lighting is probably the most critical factor in image quality and it will be discussed in greater detail in a later article. For now it will suffice to say that mid-day often does not produce the best pictures. The lighting is harsh, it creates shadows, and it can alter the colors you are trying to capture. In general, you want the sun behind you but you need to be sure your shadow is not in the picture! When shooting people you also need to be sure that the sun is not forcing them to squint.

These are just a few of the most basic tips for creating the kind of images you want. To master these concepts practice is critical but the happy news is that they don't really require a great deal of time or require any additional equipment and expense.