

Tips to Better Digital Photographs

Now that use of digital cameras has outpaced use of standard film cameras, many people are looking for ideas on how to improve their digital photography. This handout describes some easy tips that will help digital photographers get the most out of their cameras.

Tip #1: Know your zoom. Digital cameras have two kinds of zoom functions. The optical zoom is a mechanical system where the lens mechanism is actually moved and adjusted. This is the best and clearest zoom. The other type of zoom is called digital, or sometimes electronic, zoom. This is a software type of method where the picture is enlarged. But digital zoom doesn't add any more data to the image, and as a result the picture looks blurry and faded. Different cameras will have different combinations of zooms. One camera may have something like 3x optical zoom and 7x digital. Another camera may have 5x optical and 12x digital. Check to make sure you have the appropriate zoom setting for your photo before you take the picture.

Tip #2: Reduce shutter lag. Shutter lag is the time between when you push the button and when the shutter is activated. Some cameras have very long shutter lags which may cause you to miss a shot. In modern cameras this shutter lag is caused by the camera focusing. Most cameras have a "prefocus" function. Check your owner's manual. Typically, if you press the shutter button part way down the camera will focus on a target. Then when the subject enters the frame, press the button the rest of the way and the shutter will fire instantly. A little practice will allow you to become a wizard at taking photos of fast moving subjects, such as ball players, runners, and wildlife.

Tip #3: Know how you will use your photos in the end. Your camera should have settings where you can select low, medium, or high quality photos. Some cameras will have even more choices. For prints, select the higher quality. For Web use, choose lower quality. Again, check the owner's manual to help you decide which is best for your application. If you plan to make enlargements you will want to use the highest quality setting possible. But for pictures on a Web site the lower settings will do.

Tip #4: Keep a spare battery handy. Using the zoom a lot and using the flash will eat up battery power quickly. The view screen also use a lot of power, so if you don't need the screen, turn it off. It is a good idea to keep a fully charged spare battery with you when you go out picture taking.

Tip #5: Avoid moisture. Cameras, even the digital ones, are fairly delicate. Moisture from rain or high humidity can affect the motors for the zoom mechanisms and the electronic circuitry. Moving from a moist cold environment to a warm one can cause condensation to form in and on the camera. Be prepared to let the camera warm up naturally (don't use a blow drier on it) and air out.

Tip #6: Lenses are delicate. The lens on your camera is a precision item. Do not touch it with your fingers because the oil may damage the coating on the lens. Inexpensive cameras use plastic lenses that scratch. Expensive cameras have glass lenses that have their own problems. Follow the manufacturer's instructions. This may mean keeping a packet of lens cloths with you. Lens cloths are available at a camera store. As a general rule, avoid wiping a lens with facial tissues, rags or clothing, or paper towels. Paper scratches and clothing may have dirt particles embedded in the fabric. Never use household glass cleaner on a camera lens.

Tip #6: Get a spare memory card. Memory cards are relatively inexpensive, and because they are reusable, cards are a better bargain than film. Having a spare memory card available means that you will be able to keep taking photos if the first one gets filled up.

Tip #7: Be stable and don't wiggle. The biggest cause of blurry photos is photographer wiggle. Your camera may have an autostabilize feature. You may consider turning it on. But remember, it isn't perfect and is likely to use more battery power. Traditional tools are usually best, so get a decent tripod. Some photographers will carry a small beanbag that they can plop onto a table or countertop. The camera rests on the beanbag which acts as a squishy stabilizing platform. You may be able to use a remote cable release, if your camera has the right fitting, or use the camera's built-in timer. The timer will take the picture without vibrating the camera.

Tip #8: Reduce reddyeye. Reddeye is caused when light is reflected back out toward the camera from the inside of the subject's eye. It occurs most often when a flash is used to take the picture. One way to reduce reddyeye is to use a remote flash where the flash unit is far enough away from the camera that the reflected angle keeps the light from going into the lens. Some cameras have a popup flash that improves the angle. But most modern cameras have a reddyeye reducer that is like a miniflash. The reducer blinks a couple of times and this causes the subject's iris to close. When the flash fires the reddyeye effect is reduced or eliminated.

Tip #9: Don't flash the pets. Using flash on the pets may harm the animals. It might also make them angry or frightened.

Tip #10: Use the wrist strip. It may seem hard to believe, but dropping is an extremely common way that cameras get damaged. The wrist strap will help reduce the chance of damage to the camera if it slips from your hand. If you have a neck strap, use that, too. It is extra insurance in case the effects of gravity become irresistible.

Tip #11: Always read your owners manual. The owners manual is the best way to learn how to care for your camera. It also describes the many features your camera has. Reviewing the manual periodically may remind you of some seldom-used features that you forgot about.