



TWOPEASINABUCKET.COM PHOTOGRAPHY COURSE: 12 WEEKS TO BETTER PHOTOS

By Mark & Joanna Bolick

LESSON TWELVE: Camera Accessories

So we've made it through twelve weeks together and it's finally Graduation Day! Congratulations to you! We hope you'll consider this final lesson a graduation present of sorts, as our focus this week is on the lenses, filters, and accessories you can use to broaden your newfound photography skills.

Tracy Wilder asked:

Explain lenses to me. What different kinds are there and what effects are they used for?

Lenses

One of the main questions we heard over & over again these past weeks was regarding lenses. *Which lens should I buy, which lens is the best and which lens do I use for what situation?* While there are no definite answers to those questions, here are some good generalities to consider before making your choices:

1. Consider the type of lens. A kit lens is defined as the lens that usually comes standard with your camera. Telephoto lenses [a medium telephoto ranges from 85mm -135mm, and a long telephoto is >135mm] allow you to zoom in on a subject, and get close-up photos of that subject even though you're farther away. A wideangle lens [<50mm] stretches your perspective -- it allows you a wider scope for your photo. A fisheye lens [around 7-16mm] is an extremely wide lens that takes in a spacious, hemispherical (180 degree) image.

2. Consider f/stop. A lot of this decision is going to depend on where you shoot most often. If you're primarily shooting outdoors, for example, then the minimum aperture of the lens is not going to be the "end all be all" of your lens purchasing decision. However, if you're doing a lot of indoor, low-light photography, then you should definitely consider the f/stop range of your lens. As we've discovered in our challenges, it's helpful to have a lens that goes lower than f/4 (f/2.8, f/1.8) if you're planning on doing a lot of photography indoors.

3. Consider focal length. You can choose between a prime lens (a lens with a single focal length) or a lens that has a range such as the 18-55mm or 70-200mm. While you can get a nice 70-300mm telephoto to cover a range of situations with a single lens, a prime lens limits your focal length to a single distance. However, prime lenses are helpful if you prefer to take portraits, so you may want to consider a common prime lens, such as a 50mm, 85mm or a 100mm.

If you only have a the kit lens that came with your camera, we strongly recommend that you take a look at a prime lens and then add a nice telephoto for longer-range work.

Kimosmom asked:

If you could have one lens as your "standard" (on the camera all the time lens) what would it be?

This definitely varies from person to person. Joanna, for example, prefers to keep a 50mm on her camera most of the time because she takes a lot of photos indoors. Mark, however, prefers the flexibility of a telephoto and is usually seen with a 70-200 on his camera.

Scrapnmom2 said:

I would also like to learn more about "image stabilization," how that works, and when/where it would be needed.

Image Stabilization (IS) basically takes a gyroscopic motor that operates on either the lens elements or on the camera sensor and compensates for the natural "camera shake" we all have. It can be especially helpful on telephoto lenses where the length and weight of the lens makes it harder to hold the camera steady. It's wonderful, helpful technology and we'll see it utilized more and more as it becomes more refined and less costly.

IS can be particularly helpful in low-light situations because it enables you to capture images at slower shutter speeds than you would normally be able to achieve when hand-holding a camera. Be aware that when shooting with IS that you may need to give the system an extra second or two to stabilize before shooting. If you're using a tripod, turn the IS system off on your lens, as the vibration from the IS motors will actually blur your shots on a tripod.

scrapperdipper said:

Please explain filters -- what they do, the different kinds, when to use which.

Filters

What filters should you use on your lens? Well, we've already covered one of the most important filters that you should purchase and that is a Skylight or UV filter. These should be purchased for every lens you own and left on the lens at all times to protect the precious front element of your lens from scratches and damage. It's much cheaper to replace a UV filter than to replace an expensive lens. (When you're shooting in low light and shooting lights such as Christmas tree lights, be sure to remove your Skylight or UV filter from your lens as they can create distracting "ghost lights" on your images.)

Another handy filter we've also discussed is the circular polarizing filter. These filters do an amazing job of reducing glare and refining colors in your outdoor photography.

A graduated filter is also a nice tool to have in your camera bag for shooting landscapes. One half of a graduated filter is darker than the other half, which, in most cases, is completely clear. Essentially, a graduated filter reduces the brightness difference between the sky and the ground, and will help to enhance the appearance of the sky in your photo while keeping the terrain fresh and bright at the same time.

Back in the days of film, colored filters were oftentimes used to warm or cool a photo, or add extra depth and contrast to black & white photography. While you can still use these filters with digital cameras, most people find it easier to control these types of effects in their post-processing programs. These filters are still available and quite fun to use, so don't let the digital age deter you from trying some good old-school photography methods.

Accessories

bcgal100 asked:

Is it worthwhile to have an external flash? When to use it?

If you are unsatisfied with the performance of your in-camera flash, you may first want to consider a flash diffuser. The decision to use an external flash is really personal preference, based primarily on how often you find yourself in a situation needing a controlled flash. For instance, we use external flashes with diffusers because we take a large portion of photos indoors in the evenings for our photography business. If you do decide to purchase one, the key is really to *learn how to use your flash* so that you can rely on it when you need it.

3lilcupcakes asked:
Do you need an external meter?

Do you *need* one? Generally, no.

But they can be a lifesaver in certain lighting situations such as wedding or portrait photography where the light sources and reflection points can easily confuse the built-in meter in a camera. A light meter is most helpful in "staged" settings where you have the time to set up both your subject and your lighting and can use the light meter to correctly gauge the exact exposure.

So what else would come in handy in my camera bag?

-- A gray card or neutral balance card -- these cards are used to accurately capture color in your digital images. You can use a neutral balance or white card to shoot and set your custom white balance in-camera so that your camera handles your white balance. Or you can use a gray card by first shooting the card in the lighting situation that you're in, and then using the photo of the gray card in your post-processing program to set the white balance of your photos.

- A lens cleaning cloth (or lens cleaning kit) doesn't take up much room but is definitely a lifesaver! It's much easier to simply clean off your lenses & filters rather than taking the time to eliminate spots on hundreds of your photos after the fact in a photo-editing program.

-- A good quality tripod cannot be understated either. There are literally hundreds of tripods on the market today and we heartily recommend heading to your local camera shop to give them a try. There are so many variations in style and price that it's almost essential to have some "hands on" experience before making a purchasing decision. If at all possible, try out as many as you can before making your decision.

-- A monopod is a specialized tripod with only one leg and can be extremely useful if you find you have a hard time keeping the camera steady when shooting your photos or are using a heavy telephoto for a long period of time. Give your arm a break!

-- A lens hood is especially helpful in outdoor photography to help prevent or minimize lens flare. A lens hood is typically used with wideangle or telephoto lenses and fits over the outer edge of the lens.

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Camera bag contents, continued...

-- If you're shooting digital, do some research on the memory cards. There are many brands out there (some better than others) and the last thing you want is for your "once in a lifetime" photos to end up as corrupted data on a cheap memory card. You may find it beneficial to spend the money on a high-quality card with a fast read/write speed. It will help your camera perform better, cut down on the time it takes to transfer your photos to your computer, and substantially reduce the occurrence of corrupted image data.

-- A stash of backup batteries & memory cards, just in case! Joanna typically attaches one of the small, zippered cases that our memory cards come in directly to the strap of her camera. This way she has a backup within reach at all times. (Sometimes she uses two cases -- one for memory cards and one for an extra battery.)

-- Regarding batteries, you may find a battery grip useful if you're going to be using your camera for a long period of time and are worried about the life of the single battery. A battery grip attaches to your camera and holds additional batteries which keep your camera powered up at all times.

-- Finally, speaking of bags, a camera bag to protect your camera and hold your gear is definitely a worthwhile investment. There are many kinds of bags or backpacks on the market today. When choosing one, keep in mind how much stuff you want to store in it. Also consider the initial weight of the bag, as the more you put into your bag or backpack, the heavier it'll become. You might also consider having a small bag to safeguard your camera on day trips and a larger backpack, case, or bag for longer travels or vacations.



In Closing

Beyond that, what can we say but how very very proud we are of everyone who has taken this course? Your images, your patience, and your willingness to learn and try new things have been a source of overwhelming joy to us. It has really been a fantastic twelve weeks and we want to thank all of you for making it as wonderful as it has been. You're all terrific photographers and we've been blessed to be able to share our small amount of knowledge with you. Keep your finger on the shutter and keep taking great photos! Thanks!

Mark and Joanna Bolick

WEEKLY CHALLENGE: Your last week to catch up!



This is it - your last week to ask questions, share photos, and catch up on any challenges you may have missed.

Let's review:

- Week 1. Aperture
- Week 2. Experiment with shutter speed
- Week 3. White Balance
- Week 4. Experiment with fill flash
- Week 5. Creative composition
- Week 6. Take advantage of natural light indoors
- Week 7. Experiment with macro mode
- Week 8. Take a great action shot
- Week 9. Show us your portraits
- Week 10. Let's see your landscapes
- Week 11. Playing favorites - post your favorite photos



Thanks so much for your participation these past 12 weeks!