

Learn the best ways
to compose your
pictures!

Exposure

From Snapshots to Great Shots

Second Edition



Get great detail
in your subjects!

Jeff Revell

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Great Shots

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Peachpit
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Dedication

For Mom and Dad—thanks for everything!

Acknowledgments

Most of the books that I write tend to have a shelf life based on the camera that it is based on. The reality is that cameras don't last forever and there will always be a "next big thing" right around the corner. But that's the beauty of this book. Cameras come and go but the principles of photography have remained unchanged for almost 200 years, which means that this book will continue to be relevant for the foreseeable future. That being said, even the sturdiest of houses needs a fresh coat of paint every now and then, which is why I appreciate the good folks at Peachpit allowing me to give it a little bit of a refresh. A big thank you to Peachpit and my editor Ted for seeing the value of this book and allowing me the opportunity to spruce it up and update it to ensure that it remains a valuable resource for years to come.

Contents

INTRODUCTION	xi
CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS EXPOSURE?	1
Learning the Basics	
Poring Over the Picture	2
Poring Over the Picture	4
The Basic Definition	6
How Is Exposure Calculated?	11
Over- and Underexposure	12
What Is a Proper Exposure?	13
Chapter 1 Assignments	15
CHAPTER 2: EXPOSURE TOOLS	17
How Your Camera Determines Exposure...and More	
Poring Over the Picture	18
Poring Over the Picture	20
Measuring Light	22
Metering Modes	24
The Value of the Histogram	28
Check Your “Blinkies”	30
Setting the Correct White Balance	30
Using the Right Format: RAW vs. JPEG	32
Chapter 2 Assignments	35
CHAPTER 3: SHOOTING MODES	37
Picking the Right Shooting Mode for the Job	
Poring Over the Picture	38
Poring Over the Picture	40
Program Mode	42
Shutter Priority Mode	44
Aperture Priority Mode	46
Manual Mode	48
A Few Words about Automatic Modes	50
Chapter 3 Assignments	57

CHAPTER 4: SEE THE LIGHT **61**

Understanding the Properties of Light and How to Use It

Poring Over the Picture	62
Poring Over the Picture	64
Types of Light	66
Quality of Light	72
Direction of Light	75
Chapter 4 Assignments	78

CHAPTER 5: ON THE MOVE **81**

The Tricks to Shooting Sports and More

Poring Over the Picture	82
Poring Over the Picture	84
Stop Right There!	86
Using Shutter Priority Mode to Stop Motion	89
Using Aperture Priority Mode to Isolate Your Subject	91
Using Auto ISO the Right Way	92
Keep Them in Focus with Continuous Focus and Focus Point Selection	94
Manual Focus for Anticipated Action	96
Keeping Up with the Continuous Shooting Mode	97
A Sense of Motion	98
Tips for Shooting Action	100
Chapter 5 Assignments	104

CHAPTER 6: SAY CHEESE! **107**

Settings and Features to Make Great Portraits

Poring Over the Picture	108
Poring Over the Picture	110
Automatic Portrait Mode	112
Using Aperture Priority Mode	113
Metering Modes for Portraits	115
Using the Exposure Lock Feature	116
Focusing: The Eyes Have It	117
Classic Black and White Portraits	118
The Portrait Preset for Better Skin Tones	119
Use Fill Flash for Reducing Shadows	120
People on the Move	121
Tips for Shooting Better Portraits	122
Chapter 6 Assignments	129

CHAPTER 7: LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY **131**

Tips, Tools, and Techniques to Get the Most Out of
Your Landscape Photography

Poring Over the Picture	132
Poring Over the Picture	134
Sharp and In Focus: Using Tripods	136
Selecting the Proper ISO	137
Selecting a White Balance	139
Using the Landscape Picture Enhancement	141
Taming Bright Skies with Exposure Compensation	142
Shooting Beautiful Black and White Landscapes	143
The Golden Light	146
Where to Focus	147
Easier Focusing	149
Making Water Fluid	150
Directing the Viewer: A Word about Composition	152
Shooting Panoramas	156
Chapter 7 Assignments	160

CHAPTER 8: MOOD LIGHTING **163**

Shooting When the Lights Get Low

Poring Over the Picture	164
Poring Over the Picture	166
Raising the ISO: The Simple Solution	168
Using Very High ISOs	170
Stabilizing the Situation	171
Focusing in Low Light	172
Shooting Long Exposures	174
Using the Built-In Flash	175
Compensating for the Flash Exposure	176
Reducing Red-Eye	177
Rear Curtain Sync	179
Flash and Glass	181
A Few Words about External Flash	182
Chapter 8 Assignments	184

CHAPTER 9: CREATIVE COMPOSITIONS **187**

Improve Your Pictures with Sound Compositional Elements

Poring Over the Picture	188
Poring Over the Picture	190

Depth of Field	192
Angles	194
Point of View	196
Patterns	197
Color	198
Contrast	199
Leading Lines	201
Splitting the Frame	202
Frames within Frames	204
Chapter 9 Assignments	205
CHAPTER 10: ADVANCED TECHNIQUES	207
Impress Your Family and Friends	
Poring Over the Picture	208
Poring Over the Picture	210
Spot Meter for More Exposure Control	212
Shooting High Dynamic Range (HDR) Images	215
Manual Mode	218
Avoiding Lens Flare	220
Using the Sun Creatively	221
Macro Photography	222
Customize Your White Balance	223
Shoot in Bursts for Steadier Images	223
Shooting through Obstructions	224
Zoom During Exposure	226
Chapter 10 Assignments	227
CHAPTER 11: PIMP MY RIDE	229
Upgrades and Accessories to Expand Your Camera's Creative Potential	
Filters	230
Tripods	235
Cable Release	237
Macro Photography Accessories	237
Hot-Shoe Flashes	239
Diffusers	240
Camera Bags	240
Bits and Pieces	241
Conclusion	243
INDEX	244

Introduction

I have written quite a few camera-specific books in the *From Snapshot to Great Shots* series. Unfortunately, I can't write one for every camera out there, but what I can and did do is take all of the great information from those other books and place it into this book. If you already own one of my camera-specific books, you might want to take a pass on this one since it will seem very familiar. If, however, you don't have one of the earlier books, then this one is for you.

I have tried my best to give everyone reading this book a good foundation of photographic knowledge and then build on it in order to create better photographs. If you still aren't sure if this book is for you, read the Q&A on the following pages.

Q: Does the material in this book apply to any camera?

A: You will probably take away some good stuff no matter what camera you have, but to get the most benefit you need something that will let you take control. The automatic modes are okay but most of the material in this book is geared towards taking control over specific camera functions such as shutter speed and ISO. To really get the most out of the book you will need something like a digital SLR or, at the very least, an advanced point-and-shoot.

Q: Is every camera feature going to be covered?

A: Nope, just the ones I felt you need to know about in order to start taking great photos. It would be pretty difficult for me to cover every possible feature in every camera (actually it would be nearly impossible). What I did want to cover was how to harness general camera functions and photographic principles to truly benefit your photography.

There may be times in the book where I mention a camera function that might not have the same name for your specific camera, like the Shutter Priority mode. If you have a Canon, you have the same shooting mode; it's just referred to as Time Value (Tv). The function, however, is the same for all cameras. I tried to be as generic as possible but you may still have to do a little investigating to associate your camera's terminology with that used in the book.

Q: So if I already own a camera manual, why do I need this book?

A: The manual does a pretty good job of telling you how to use a feature or turn it on in the menus, but it doesn't necessarily tell you why and when you should use it. If you really want to improve your photography, you need to know the whys and whens to put all of those great camera features to use at the right time. To that extent, the manual just isn't going to cut it. It is, however, a great resource on the camera's specific features. You should use it like a companion to this book.

Q: What can I expect to learn from this book?

A: Hopefully, you will learn how to take great photographs. My goal, and the reason the book is laid out the way it is, is to help you understand the basics of photography and all the elements that you need to really start creating great images. From there, you can begin to utilize your knowledge of exposure as it relates to different situations and scenarios. By using the features of your camera and this book, you will learn about aperture, shutter speed, ISO, lens selection, depth of field, and many other photographic concepts. You will also find plenty of large full-page photos that include captions, shooting data, and callouts so you can see how all of the photography fundamentals come together to make great images. All the while, you will be learning how your camera works and how to apply its functions and features to your photography.

Q: What are the assignments all about?

A: At the end of most of the chapters, you will find shooting assignments, where I give you some suggestions on how to apply the lessons of the chapter to help reinforce everything you just learned. Let's face it—using the camera is much more fun than reading about it, so the assignments are a way of taking a little break after each chapter and having some fun.

Q: Should I read the book straight through or can I skip around from chapter to chapter?

A: Here's the easy answer: yes and no. No, because the first four chapters give you the basic foundation that you need to know for creating proper exposures. These are the building blocks for making photographs with your camera. After that, yes, you can move around the book as you see fit because the later chapters are written to stand on their own as guides to specific types of photography or shooting situations. So you can bounce from portraits to shooting landscapes and then maybe to a little action photography. It's all about your needs and how you want to address them. Or, you can read it straight through. The choice is up to you.

Q: Is that it?

A: One last thought before you dive into the first chapter. My goal in writing this book has been to give you a resource that you can turn to for creating great photographs with your digital SLR. Take some time to learn the basics and then put them to use. Photography, like most things, takes time to master and requires practice. I have been a photographer for more than 25 years and I'm still learning. Always remember, it's not the camera but the person using it who makes beautiful photographs. Have fun, make mistakes, and then learn from them. In no time, I'm sure you will transition from a person who takes snapshots to a photographer who makes great shots.

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ISO 200 • 1/125 sec. •
f/5.6 • 50mm lens

4

See the Light

Understanding the Properties of Light and How to Use It

Understanding light is one of the most important skills in photography, but it's also one of the most overlooked subjects. After all, light touches on every aspect of exposure, from ISO to lens aperture to shutter speed to white balance. It doesn't matter if you are working with natural or artificial light; in order to get great images, you need to have a basic understanding of not only the characteristics of light, but also how to take advantage of them.

Poring Over the Picture

There's a time that comes twice a day that photographers refer to as "the golden hour." This is the short period of time in the morning and afternoon when the sun is very low in the sky and is casting long, warm shadows across the landscape. Catching the early golden hour usually means rising well before the sunrise to get set up in your shooting location. That's why I prefer the afternoon period, when I can find my shot in good light and then just wait for the golden light to come my way.

A Cloudy white balance was used to warm up the colors.





The bright afternoon sun allowed me to use a low ISO for maximum quality.

I used the large cactus as the anchor point for the foreground.

I achieved depth in the image by composing it such that I have elements in the foreground, middle ground, and background of the scene.

ISO 100 • 1/160 sec. •
f/6.3 • 38mm lens

Poring Over the Picture

Although I don't like shooting in the midday sun, there are times when you don't have much choice. Sometimes it can make for some very harsh lighting that is not flattering to your subject, but I found it to actually be helpful when photographing this statue at the Holocaust Memorial in Miami. The harsh light helps to add some contrast and definition to the hand and figures on the arm.



The clouds and building
add depth to the image.



● The bright sun made it easy to use a very low ISO setting.

● I used a classic rule-of-thirds composition to position the hand in relation to the background elements.

● A Daylight white balance rendered accurate colors.

ISO 50 • 1/320 sec. •
f/8 • 110mm lens

Types of Light

Before we start trying to use the light, we should take a look at the various types of light that you will deal with when making images. Knowing the type of light will help you control your white balance, but it will also give you an indication of the quality of the light.

Daylight

Because the sun passes through the Earth's atmosphere, you will find that daylight can be one of the most varied light sources you ever encounter. It can range in color temperature and intensity based on several factors. First off, there is the time of day that you are taking the photos; the color of light is very different at sunrise than it is at midday. There is also a difference in the intensity of the light. Midday sun can be very harsh, creating hard-edged shadows (**Figure 4.1**). The shadows that occur after sunrise and before sunset are usually longer and add more definition, especially to a landscape (**Figure 4.2**).

Figure 4.1

The midday sun can be some of the harshest and most direct light to shoot in, but sometimes it is your only option.

ISO 400 • 1/800 sec. • f/14 • 24mm lens





Figure 4.2
Sunrise, with the light coming in low from the horizon, provides some beautiful light across the landscape.

ISO 100 • 1/250 sec. •
f/5.3 • 70mm lens

This can also lead to extreme exposure variances between light and dark areas. This is known as *contrast*. Having a lot of contrast means that you will often have to compromise your exposure in some way or another. If you shoot just before sunrise or just after sunset, you can capture beautiful light without all the really dark shadows (Figure 4.3).



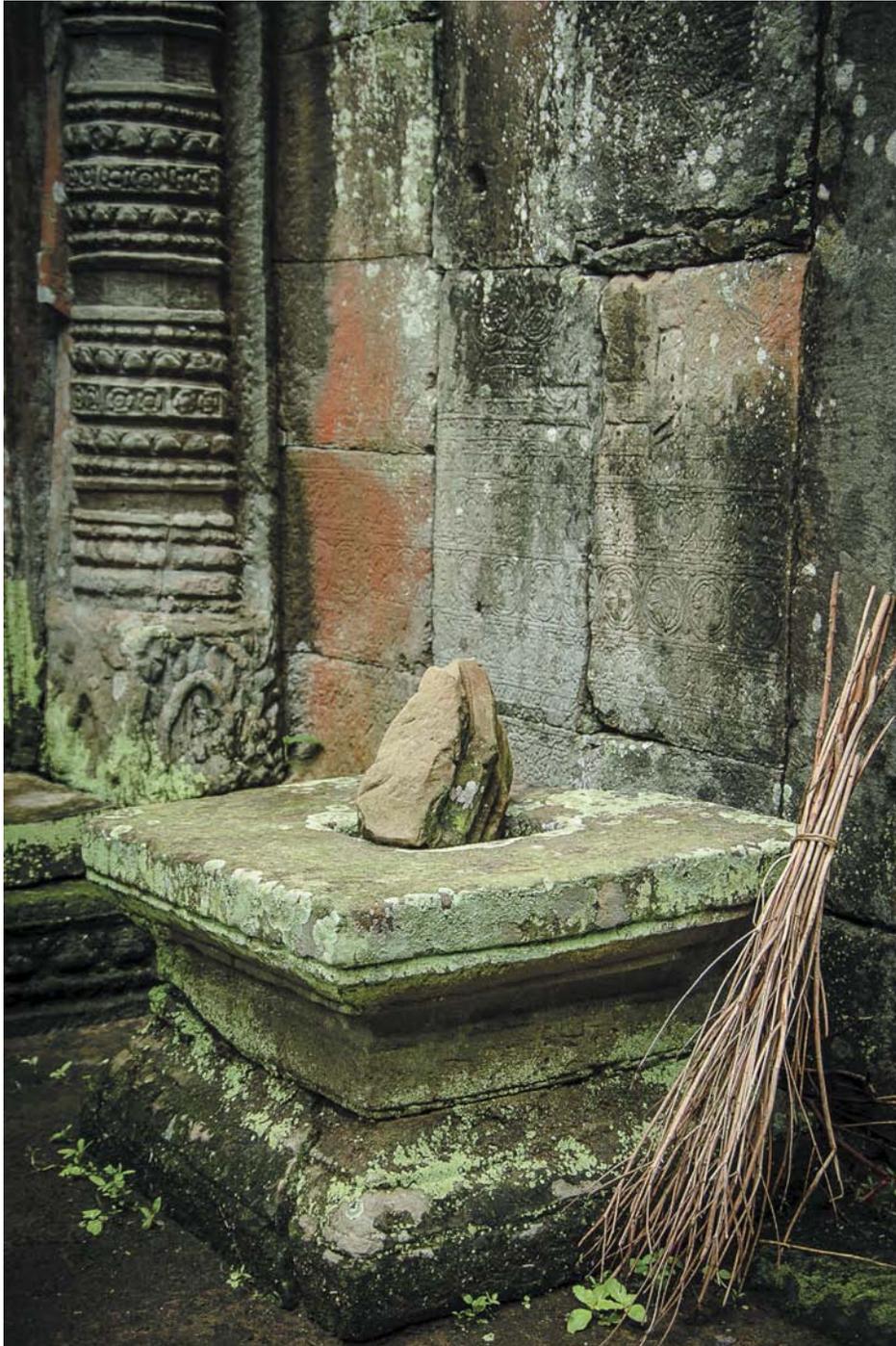
Figure 4.3
The long shadows and warm light of sunset help add depth to the scene.

ISO 400 • 1/160 sec. •
f/8 • 70mm lens

One of my favorite times to shoot outdoors is during overcast conditions. Actually, let me clarify. If I am shooting landscape images that will include the sky, overcast is not my favorite, but if I'm shooting a portrait or anything else during the day, it will most likely look better under a little cloud cover. This is because the cloud layer is acting like a large diffuser, which spreads out the sunlight and produces much softer shadows and less contrast in the image (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4
An overcast sky
will help to soften
shadows.

ISO 200 • 1/200 sec. •
f/5 • 32mm lens



Fluorescent

With more and more people turning from wasteful incandescent light bulbs to the more energy-efficient fluorescent option, it is more likely than not that you will be shooting under this light source. It used to be that fluorescent bulbs would give off a cool, greenish color cast but now you can find fluorescent bulbs that are balanced for daylight for the home or even for use in a photo studio. As a light source in general, fluorescent bulbs are not that bad to shoot with. They offer a nice bright light that is fairly diffuse, which means lower contrast (**Figure 4.5**). The one thing you will want to do when using them is to either use the Fluorescent white balance setting on your camera or create a custom white balance setting. Creating a custom white balance is probably the best approach, because the color temperature of the bulb can vary greatly depending on whether or not it is daylight-balanced.



Figure 4.5

With the proper white balance, you can get some nice, even lighting from a fluorescent light source.

ISO 5000 • 1/400 sec. •
f/5.6 • 85mm lens

Shooting with cool lights

There was a time when you would avoid fluorescent lights when photographing people. They generally had a very greenish hue and tended to make people look pale and kind of sickly. But those days are long gone, thanks to cool fluorescent lights. They are called “cool” because they don’t throw off the huge amounts of heat that traditional tungsten and quartz lights do. These new cool lights usually come in compact bulb configurations, and there is an abundance of available lighting fixtures that let you use multiple lights in a softbox to create beautiful soft light (**Figure 4.6**).

The great thing about shooting portraits with these lights is that they are WYSIWYG, or What You See Is What You Get. Unlike a flash, these lights are constantly on and instantly show you how your lights are interacting with the subject so you don’t have to use a modeling light or take photos and reconfigure, as you do with a hotshoe flash/softbox configuration. The other cool thing about these lights is the color temperature. They are usually cooler in color temperature than traditional fluorescent lights and are usually balanced for a daylight white balance.

Figure 4.6

Using a cool fluorescent softbox lets you put some soft, beautiful light on your subject.

ISO 800 • 1/60 sec. •
f/6.3 • 230mm lens



Incandescent

When shooting under incandescent lighting, you will find that the light has an orange-yellow color cast. It can also be a much harsher light source since most of the light is emanating from a small point (the bulb). Of course, shooting with the correct white balance is the easiest way to overcome the color issues. Just be sure to preview your results (Figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7 There are all sorts of artificial lights on the Vegas strip. This scene was captured with a Tungsten white balance setting.

ISO 1600 • 1/60 sec. • f/5 • 18mm lens

Flash

We will cover flash more extensively in Chapter 8, but I think it's important to mention here. Flash can be a photographer's best friend because it is a reliable, predictable, controllable light source that is very close in color temperature to daylight. This means that it can be used to fill in shadows while shooting in daylight conditions without worrying about mixing different color temperatures. The same can't be said for most of the other artificial light sources (with the exception of daylight-balanced fluorescents).

Flash can also be made to take on different characteristics, which can make the quality of light either very harsh and contrasty, or very soft and flat. This can be done through the use of diffusion materials or other methods to create a larger apparent light source (such as shooting your flash through a diffuser or a softbox). You can also color the light coming from a flash using gels, which allows you to match another light source's color or create a special effect (Figure 4.8).

Quality of Light

When speaking about the quality of any particular light, we usually talk in terms of "hard light"—which usually is coming from a small, single spot or source—and "soft light," which is more diffuse and seems to come from multiple directions.



Figure 4.8 A flash fired through a softbox close to the subject provides the main light for this image. Another flash is used to provide “fill light,” which lightens the shadows on the left side of his face. Finally, a small flash with a blue gel is used to illuminate the background.

ISO 200 • 1/250 sec. • f/4.5 • 85mm lens

Hard Light

Examples of hard light might be the sun, which is a small light source that creates hard light and shadows, or a flash that is pointed directly at your subject without passing through any diffusion material. Hard light is usually very directional and, due to this fact, the shadows that are created by it are very hard-edged. Another characteristic of hard light is that there are very few midtone values separating the highlights from the shadows (Figure 4.9).



Figure 4.9
Midday sun is a perfect example of hard, directional light that creates dark shadows and lots of contrast.

ISO 50 • 1/320 sec. •
f/8 • 110mm lens

Soft Light

An overcast day is a perfect example of soft light, where the sun has to penetrate through a cloud layer. The cloud is spreading the light, making it come from multiple angles instead of a small, single point. This is also called diffusion; the light spreads out and creates much softer shadows. (It may actually appear to eliminate shadows altogether.) It also helps to create much more defined midtones because there is a smoother transition from the bright to dark areas (Figure 4.10).

Figure 4.10

An overcast sky creates a soft, multi-directional light that creates a lot of smooth tones and no hard-edged shadows.

ISO 100 • 1 sec. •
f/25 • 35mm lens



When it comes to light, size does matter

The smaller a light source is in comparison to the subject, the harder the light will be. That means that a small flash head or even the sun will create dark shadows and lots of contrast. If you want to soften things up a bit, try making the light source larger. You can accomplish this by diffusing the light by passing it through a translucent material, or perhaps by using an umbrella. If you are using a flash on your camera, try bouncing it off a wall or ceiling. Before the light reaches your subject, it will hit that surface and spread out, making it bigger and therefore softer.

For outside solutions, try working in open shade or even overcast conditions. Shade and clouds disperse direct sunlight, making the light fall on your subject from all over, not just from one direction. This is the same as having a larger light source.

Direction of Light

Light not only has the characteristics of being harder or softer, diffuse or sharp, but it also has a directional quality that you can use to enhance or your subject and, therefore, your images. There are typically three directions that we look at when discussing the direction of light.

Front Lighting

Front lighting typically comes from a source that is behind the photographer and shining directly onto the subject. One of the characteristics of this type of lighting is that it tends to flatten out your subject. It's kind of like putting your subject on a copy machine where everything is evenly illuminated. It does, however, offer a very well lit and defined subject (Figure 4.11).



Figure 4.11
When the light is coming from directly in front of the subject, there is less shadow and a flattening of details.
ISO 100 • 1/1250 sec. • f/4 • 200mm lens

Side Lighting

If you really want to define the three-dimensional characteristics of your subject, the best possible light to use as a main light is side lighting. Side lighting will enhance any contour detail by creating shadows and highlights, giving a three-dimensional quality to the scene. This is why a lot of portrait lighting or landscape lighting is done with the light coming from a side direction (**Figure 4.12**).

Figure 4.12
The late afternoon sun was crossing in from the left of the frame, creating shadows and highlights that define the contours of the landscape and the cactus.

ISO 100 • 1/160 sec. •
f/6.3 • 38mm lens



Back Lighting

The best light to use for separating your subject from a background is, of course, back light. Unfortunately, back lighting provides little illumination on the front of your subject—which is what your camera is pointing at—but it does an excellent job of separating the subject from the background and giving a three-dimensional feeling to the shot.

Usually, a back lighting technique is used to enhance a silhouette or to provide a little separation in combination with other light sources. Typically, I'll use this kind of light if I'm shooting a person in bright daylight. I might actually put the sun behind them, then use a flash to fill in the shadows on the subject's face. That way, I have my separation using the back light from the sun, and I have an excellent light coming from my camera angle to define the face. Best of all, I don't have bright sunlight shining into my subject's eyes and making him squint. I get the best of all the characteristics of direction and quality of light (Figure 4.13).



Figure 4.13 By positioning myself so that the bright sun is behind my subjects, I can get a good rim of light to separate them from the background while using a flash to add a little light back into their faces.

ISO 200 • 1/250 sec. • f/8 • 48mm lens

Chapter 4 Assignments

Now that you know what light looks like in photographic terms, it's time to start looking for those different qualities of light and discovering how they apply to your photography.

The color of light

Set your camera's white balance to Daylight and try shooting in as many different light sources as possible. Compare the results so that you get a good idea of the qualities of each type of light source.

Hard vs. soft

Find a willing volunteer, have them stand out in the direct sun, and take their picture. Then look for a shady spot and take another. Compare the quality of the light from both photos.

Directional light

As long as you have a volunteer hanging around, have them stand facing the sun and take a shot. Next, have them turn so that the light is coming from the side and take another shot. Finally, have them turn so the sun is at their back. Of course, you will need to rotate your position as well to take advantage of the different directional light.

Share your results with the book's Flickr group!

Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/exposure_fromsnapshottogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/exposure_fromsnapshottogreatshots)

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Index

- 1st curtain (front curtain sync), flash synchronization modes, 179
- 2nd curtain (rear curtain sync), flash synchronization modes, 179

A

Accessories

- cable release, 237
- camera bags, 240–241
- close-up filters, 238–239
- diffusers, 240
- dust cleaners, 241–242
- extension tubes, 237–238
- filters, 230
- Hoodman HoodLoupe, 243
- hot-shoe flashes, 239–240
- neutral density filters, 232–234
- overview of, 229
- polarizing filters, 230–232
- skylight filters, 230
- tripods, 235–236

Action shots

- continuous or burst shooting modes for, 97
- conveying sense of motion, 98–99
- direction of travel in, 86–87
- examples, 82–85
- exercises, 104
- focus options, 94–96
- freezing a moment in time, 86
- overview of, 81
- portraits of subjects in motion, 121
- subject speed in, 87
- subject-to-camera distance in, 88
- tips for shooting, 100–103
- using Aperture Priority mode to isolate subject, 91–92
- using Shutter Priority mode to stop motion, 89–90
- when to use Auto ISO, 92–93

Adams, Ansel, 143

Advanced techniques

- avoiding lens flare, 220–221
- Bulb option for shutter speed, 218–220
- creating starburst effect, 221
- customizing white balance, 223
- examples, 208–211
- exercises, 227
- Exposure Lock feature, 214

- macro or close-up shots, 222
- Manual (M) mode and, 218
- metering for sunrise and sunset, 213–214
- shooting high dynamic range (HDR) images, 215–217
- shooting in continuous burst mode for steadier images, 223
- shooting through obstructions, 224–225
- spot metering for exposure control, 212–213
- zooming during exposures, 226

AF Assist (Auto focus assist), in low light conditions, 172

Air blowers, for dust removal, 242

American Standards Association (ASA), 7

Angles, use in composition, 194–195

Aperture Priority mode

- depth of field selection, 192–193
- exposure compensation, 143
- for high dynamic range (HDR) images, 216
- for long exposures, 175
- in macro photography, 222
- for multiple-image panorama, 159
- overview of, 46–47
- for portraits in environmental settings, 113–114
- for shooting through obstructions, 224–225
- for silky waterfall shots, 151
- for subject isolation, 91–92
- when to use, 47–48

Aperture settings

- balancing with shutter speed, 4
- creating starburst effect, 211
- defined, 6
- depth of field and, 20, 112
- exposure and, 9–10
- Flash Off mode and, 55
- getting proper exposures, 90
- Macro or Close-up mode and, 53
- Manual (M) mode and, 48
- maximizing depth of field for chosen aperture, 147
- neutral density filters and, 232
- for portraits, 113–114
- shooting modes and, 37
- for shooting through obstructions, 224–225
- for soft background, 108–109, 135
- Sports mode and, 54
- for stop action, 83
- for subject isolation, 188–189, 192–193

when to use Auto ISO, 92–93

when to use Program mode, 42–43

ASA (American Standards Association), 7

Auto focus assist (AF Assist), in low light conditions, 172

Auto ISO settings, 92–93

Auto white balance settings, 31

Automatic shooting modes

- benefits of not using, 56
- Flash Off mode, 55
- Full Auto mode, 50
- Landscape mode, 52
- Macro or Close-up mode, 53
- Portrait mode, 50–51, 112
- Sports mode, 54

Auto-point focus, for action/sports shots, 94–95

B

Back lighting

- exposure compensation and, 109
- impact of direction of lighting, 75

Benro tripods, 235–236

Black and white photos

- landscape photos, 143–144
- portraits, 118–119
- post-processing for, 145

Black values, in luminance histogram, 28

“Blinkies.” *see* Highlight Alert (“blinkies”)

Blue Hour photographs, 140

Blues, cool colors, 146, 188

Blur

- depth of field and, 85, 91–92
- motion blur. *see* Motion blur

Bright scenes, aperture size and, 48

Brightness

- luminance histogram, 28
- principles of composition and, 152

Bulb option

- cable release and, 237
- for nighttime exposures, 218–220

Bull’s eye composition, 153–154

Burst shooting modes. *see* Continuous or burst shooting modes

C

Cable release

- activating camera with, 237
- use with tripods, 190

Camera accessories. *see* Accessories

Camera bags, 240–241

Camera shake

- cable release minimizing, 237
- slow shutter speeds and, 136

Canon

- built-in HDR, 217

- close-up filters, 238
- continuous focus mode, 94
- extension tubes, 238
- external flash options, 182
- hot-shoe flashes, 239
- skylight filters, 230
- Catchlight, reflection of light in eyes, 120
- Center-weighted metering
 - overview of, 25
 - for portraits, 115–116
- Close-up filters, for macro photography, 238–239
- Close-ups, shooting portraits, 127. *see also* Macro or close-up photos
- Clouds, enhancing morning or evening shots, 146
- Cloudy white balance setting, 31, 139
- Color correction, using gray card for, 26–27
- Color space, reasons for not using automatic shooting modes, 56
- Colors
 - benefits of RAW images, 33
 - Cloudy white balance for warming up, 62
 - in composition, 152, 198–199
 - Daylight white balance for accuracy of, 65
 - filters for improving color saturation, 123
 - Landscape mode enhancing, 52
 - polarizing filter and, 231
 - using contrasting, 199–201
 - warm and cool color temperatures, 146
 - white balance correction, 30–31
- Composition
 - angle use, 194–195
 - colors, 198–199
 - contrast, 199–201
 - creating sense of depth, 63, 155
 - depth of field, 192–193
 - examples, 38, 188–191
 - exercises, 205
 - frames within frames, 201
 - framing subjects off-center, 111
 - of landscape photos, 152
 - leading lines, 201–202
 - maximizing image sharpness, 147–148
 - overview of, 187
 - patterns, 197
 - point of view, 196
 - Rule of Thirds, 19, 65, 153–154
 - splitting the frame, 202–203
 - subject placement, 50, 165

- tips for shooting action shots, 100–101
- tips for shooting portraits, 122–124
- for visual interest, 21
- Composition: From Snapshots to Great Shots* (Excell), 204
- Compression
 - lossless compression (JPEG images), 32
 - lossy compression (RAW images), 33
- Continuous focus mode
 - for action/sports shots, 94–95
 - for portraits of subjects in motion, 121
- Continuous or burst shooting modes
 - examples of use of, 83–84
 - keeping up with action, 97
 - panning, 98–99
 - for steadier images, 223
- Contrast
 - in composition, 199–201
 - daylight and, 67
 - example of soft light with low contrast, 134
 - fluorescent lighting and, 69
 - Landscape style presets, 141
 - polarizing filter and, 231
 - Portrait presets, 119
 - shooting black and white landscapes, 143
 - shooting black and white portraits, 119
- Cool colors, 146, 188
- Cropping
 - for panoramic feel, 157
 - tips for shooting portraits, 123–124
- Custom white balance settings, 31

D

- Dark values, measuring light, 22
- Daylight
 - avoiding lens flare, 220–221
 - capturing silky waterfall shot in bright daylight, 151
 - example of hard light, 73
 - fill flash for reducing shadows, 120
 - overview of, 66–68
 - tips for shooting portraits, 125
- Daylight setting, white balance
 - example, 39
 - exposure tools, 31
 - selecting for landscape photos, 139
- Depth (or dimension)
 - adding to images, 63–64, 133
 - in landscape photos, 155
 - shadows adding, 141
 - side lighting adding, 76

- Depth of field
 - aperture settings and, 112
 - benefits of Aperture Priority mode, 47–48
 - in composition, 192–193
 - example of use, 2
 - for isolating subject, 188–189, 192–193
 - in landscape photos, 147–149
 - large aperture narrowing, 91–92
 - lens length and, 51
 - macro photography and, 222
 - maximizing for chosen aperture, 147
 - for portraits, 113
 - for shooting through obstructions, 224–225
 - small aperture increasing, 20, 52
- Diffuse lighting
 - fluorescent lighting and, 69
 - overcast lighting and, 68
 - soft light and, 73
- Diffusers
 - macro photography and, 222
 - shooting flash through, 72
 - types of accessories, 240
- Digital noise
 - image quality and, 7
 - ISO settings and, 53, 137–139, 167
 - minimizing, 20
 - Sports mode and, 54
- Dimension. *see* Depth (or dimension)
- DIN (German Institute for Standardization), 7
- Direction of travel, in action/sports shots, 85–87
- Dutch Tilt, 197
- Dynamic range, of RAW images, 33

E

- Environmental settings, shooting portraits in, 114. *see also* Landscape photos
- Evaluative metering. *see* Matrix (evaluative) metering
- Excell, Laurie, 204
- Exposure
 - adjusting by changing power of flash, 208
 - adjusting ISO setting for low light, 90
 - aperture and, 9–10
 - bracketing exposures in HDR, 217
 - Bulb option for nighttime exposure, 218–220
 - calculating, 11–12
 - compensating for flash exposure, 176–177

- exercises, 15
- gray card for correcting, 26–27
- histogram of correctly exposed image, 29
- holding (locking) during recomposition, 116–117
- ISO settings and, 7–9
- light meters for, 13–14
- long exposures, 167, 174–175
- managing bright skies, 142–143
- neutral density filters and, 232
- overexposure and underexposure, 12–13
- overview of, 6–7
- in portraits, 115–116
- reasons for not using automatic shooting modes, 56
- shutter speed and, 10
- spot metering for controlling, 212–213
- tripods for long, 123
- what is proper exposure, 13–14
- zooming during, 226
- Exposure Compensation feature
 - adjusting for over or under-exposure, 115
 - applying to waterfall shot, 151
 - managing bright skies, 142–143
 - shooting high dynamic range (HDR) images, 216
- Exposure Lock feature, 116–117, 213–214
- Exposure tools
 - center-weighted metering, 25
 - exercises, 35
 - format options, 32–34
 - highlight warnings (“blinkies”), 40
 - histograms, 28–29
 - matrix (evaluative) metering, 25
 - measuring light, 22–24
 - metering modes, 24
 - spot metering, 26–27
 - white balance settings, 30–31
- Extension tubes, for macro photography, 237–238
- Eyes
 - catchlight reflection in, 120
 - focusing on when shooting portraits, 117–118
 - principles of composition and, 152
- F**
 - Fast lenses, 48
 - Fill light
 - fill flash for reducing shadows in portraits, 120
 - using white card for, 209
- Filters
 - capturing silky waterfall shot in bright daylight, 132–133, 151
 - close-up filters, 222
 - for improving color saturation, 123
 - neutral density filters, 232–234
 - overview of, 230
 - polarizing filters, 230–232
 - shooting black and white landscapes, 143–144
 - shooting black and white portraits, 119
 - skylight filters, 230
- Flash
 - adjusting exposure by changing power of flash, 208
 - benefits/uses of, 72
 - combining with backlighting, 77
 - compensating for flash exposure, 176–177
 - dealing with reflections off glass, 181
 - example of use of, 165
 - fill flash for reducing shadows, 120
 - flash synchronization mode, 179–180
 - hot-shoe flashes, 239–240
 - limitations, 168
 - Macro or Close-up mode and, 53
 - range of, 175
 - red-eye reduction, 177–179
 - using built-in flash, 175–176
 - using external flash, 182–183
 - zooming during exposures and, 226
- Flash Exposure Compensation feature, 176–177
- Flash Off mode, 55
- Flash setting, white balance, 31, 209
- Flash Sync
 - front and rear curtain modes, 179–180
 - overview of, 174
 - shutter speed and, 176
- Fluorescent lighting, benefits/uses of, 69–70
- Fluorescent setting, white balance, 31, 69, 139
- F-number (f-stop)
 - aperture settings, 9–10
 - in calculation of exposure, 11–12
 - light conditions and, 48
 - Manual (M) mode and, 48
- Focus
 - in action/sports shots, 94–96
 - continuous focus in Sports mode, 54
 - example of use of continuous focus, 84
- example of use of manual focus, 82
- in high dynamic range (HDR) images, 216
- for isolating subject, 91–92, 188–189
- in landscape photos, 147–149
- in low light conditions, 172–173
- in portraits, 113, 117–118
- reasons for not using automatic shooting modes, 56
- while using a tripod, 150
- Formats, JPEG vs. RAW, 32–34
- Framing images
 - avoiding center frame, 122
 - don't be afraid to get close, 127
 - example, 188
 - frames within frames, 201
 - getting down to level of child subjects, 125–126
 - leading the viewer's eye, 191
 - shooting portraits vertically (portrait mode), 123–124
 - splitting the frame in composition, 202–203
 - subject and element placement, 125
 - using long lens for candid shots, 128
- Freezing action. *see* Stop (freeze) action
- Front curtain sync (1st curtain), 179
- Front lighting, impact of direction of lighting, 75
- Full Auto mode, 50–51
- G**
 - German Angle, adding dramatic effect to composition, 197
 - German Institute for Standardization (DIN), 7
 - Giotto's
 - Rocket-Air Blower, 242
 - tripods, 235–236
 - Glass, dealing with reflections off, 181
 - Golden Hour
 - Blue Hour contrasted with, 140
 - landscape photos during, 146
 - light quality and, 62
 - Gray card, for exposure and color correction, 26–27
 - Gray shades, in measuring light, 22
 - Gyro sensors, in stabilized lens, 171
- H**
 - Handheld cameras, stabilized lens for, 171
 - Hard light
 - quality of light, 73–74
 - size of light source and, 74
 - Haze filters, 230

HFD (Hyper focal distance)
 capturing images for multiple-image panorama, 159
 selecting focus and, 147–149

High dynamic range (HDR) images
 bracketing exposures, 217
 built-in HDR, 217
 shooting, 215–216

High key images, 143

Highlight Alert (“blinkies”)
 Exposure Compensation feature and, 151
 managing bright skies, 142
 viewing in LCD display, 30

Highlights
 high key and low key images, 143
 managing bright skies, 142
 shooting high dynamic range (HDR) images, 215

Histograms
 as exposure tool, 28–29
 highlight warnings (“blinkies”) in, 30

Hoodman HoodLoupe, 243

Horizon, splitting the frame in composition, 202

Hot-shoe flashes, 239–240

Hue, Portrait presets, 119

Hyper focal distance (HFD)
 capturing images for multiple-image panorama, 159
 selecting focus and, 147–149

I

Image quality, ISO settings and, 7–8

Image Stabilization (IS)
 handheld photos, 171
 ISO settings and, 139
 turning off when using tripods, 137

Image-processing software
 for black and white images, 145
 combining multiple images into panorama shot, 158–159
 creating “fake” panorama, 156–157
 red-eye reduction, 178
 shooting high dynamic range (HDR) images, 216

Incandescent lighting, benefits/uses of, 71

International Standards Organization (ISO), 7

IS. *see* Image Stabilization (IS)

ISO (International Standards Organization), 7

ISO settings
 adjusting for low or high lighting, 90
 in calculation of exposure, 11–12
 capturing silky waterfall shots, 151

defined, 6

Flash Off mode and, 55
 for high dynamic range (HDR) images, 216

history of, 7

image quality and, 7–8

Landscape mode and, 52
 for landscape photos, 137–139
 for low light conditions, 168–170

Macro or Close-up mode and, 53
 maximizing shot quality and, 63
 minimizing digital noise, 20, 167
 neutral density filters and, 232
 reasons for not using automatic shooting modes, 56

Sports mode and, 54

starting points for, 43

for stop action, 83, 91–92, 108
 turning off auto settings, 9
 very high settings for low light conditions, 170

when to use Auto ISO, 92–93
 when to use Program mode, 42–43

J

Joint Photographic Experts Group. *see* JPEG images

JPEG images
 continuous shooting mode and, 97
 creating HDR images, 217
 vs. RAW, 32–34
 shooting black and white portraits, 118
 understanding, 32

K

Kata camera bags, 241

L

Landscape mode
 adding saturation with, 5, 39
 overview of, 52

Landscape photos
 Aperture Priority mode and, 47
 black and white shots, 143–145
 capturing silky waterfall shots, 150–151
 composition of, 152
 creating sense of depth, 155
 examples, 132–135
 exercises, 160–161
 focus and depth of field in, 147–149
 focusing while using a tripod, 150
 Golden Hour periods and, 146
 ISO settings, 137–139
 Landscape style presets, 141

managing bright skies, 142–143
 overview of, 131
 panorama shots, 156–159
 Rule of Thirds, 153–154
 tripod use for sharp, in focus photos, 136–137
 white balance settings, 139–140

Landscape style presets, 135, 141

LCD display
 adjusting white balance, 140
 highlight warnings (“blinkies”), 30
 histogram view, 28
 Hoodman HoodLoupe for better viewing, 243
 previewing image sharpness, 147
 previewing silky waterfall shot, 151
 zooming in for sharp images, 90

Leading lines, in composition, 201–202

Lens cloth, 242

Lens flare, 220–221

Lens shades, 220

Lenses
 aperture. *see* Aperture settings
 avoiding lens flare, 220
 benefits of long focal length for sports spots, 82
 burst shooting for steadier images when shooting with long focal length lens, 223
 choosing for portraits, 51
 cleaning, 241–242
 extension tubes, 237–238
 for macro photography, 222
 selecting for portraits, 123
 telephoto. *see* Telephoto lenses
 wide angle. *see* Wide angle lens
 zoom lenses, 53, 102–103

LensPen, 242

Light

aperture settings and, 9–10
 daylight, 66–68
 direction of, 75–77
 exercises, 78
 flash, 72
 Flash Off mode, 55
 fluorescent, 69–70
 Golden Hour, 62, 146
 hard and soft light, 73–74, 111
 incandescent light, 71
 ISO settings, 7–8, 90
 mood lighting. *see* Mood lighting
 overexposure and underexposure, 12–13
 overview of, 61
 quality of, 72
 shutter speed and, 10
 studio lighting, 219

- types of, 66
- Light meters
 - in calculation of exposure, 11
 - center-weighted metering, 25
 - determining proper exposure, 13–14
 - matrix (evaluative) metering, 25
 - measuring light, 22–24
 - metering modes, 24, 115
 - spot metering, 26–27
- Light values, 22
- Lightning, shooting, 218
- Live View, previewing white balance, 140
- Lossless compression, 33
- Lossy compression, 32
- Low key images, 143
- Lowpro camera bags, 241
- Luminance, 28

M

- Macro or Close-up mode, 53
- Macro or close-up photos
 - advanced techniques, 222
 - close-up filters for, 238–239
 - extension tubes for, 237–238
 - when to use Aperture Priority mode, 47
- Maisel, Jay, 187
- Manfrotto tripods, 235–236
- Manual (M) mode
 - adjusting exposure by changing power of flash, 208
 - Bulb option for shutter speed, 218–220
 - capturing images for multiple-image panorama, 159
 - mastering, 218
 - overview of, 48
 - tips for shooting action shots, 101–102
 - when to use, 49
 - working with lights and, 40, 219
- Manual focus, 96–97
- Matrix (evaluative) metering
 - example, 27
 - limitations of, 212
 - overview of, 25
 - for portraits, 115
- Memory requirements, continuous shooting mode and, 97
- Metering modes
 - center-weighted metering, 25
 - flash synchronization and, 176
 - light meters, 24
 - matrix (evaluative) metering, 25
 - overview of, 115
 - for portraits, 115–116

- spot metering, 26–27, 212–213
 - for sunrise and sunset, 213–214
- Midtones, in high dynamic range (HDR) images, 215
- MiniBee-120 camera bag, 241
- Monochrome preset
 - black and white landscapes, 143–144
 - black and white portraits, 118–119
- Mood lighting
 - built-in flash, 175–176
 - compensating for flash exposure, 176–177
 - dealing with reflections off glass, 181
 - examples, 164–167
 - exercises, 184–185
 - external flash, 182–183
 - flash synchronization mode, 179–180
 - focusing in low light conditions, 172–173
 - ISO settings, 168–170
 - long exposures, 174–175
 - overview of, 163
 - red-eye reduction, 177–179
 - stabilized lens for handheld photos, 171

- Motion
 - conveying sense of, 98–99
 - portraits of subjects in motion. *see* Action shots
- Motion blur
 - conveying sense of motion, 98–99
 - Flash Off mode and, 55
 - when to use Shutter Priority mode, 44

N

- Neutral density (ND) filters
 - capturing silky waterfall shot in bright daylight, 132–133, 151
 - graduated ND, 233–234
 - overview of, 232–233
- Nikon
 - built-in HDR, 217
 - continuous focus mode, 94
 - exposure database, 25
 - extension tubes, 238
 - external flash options, 182
 - hot-shoe flashes, 239
 - monochrome preset with color filter variations, 143
- Noise Reduction feature
 - high ISO settings vs., 170
 - long exposures and, 139, 174
 - turning on, 169

O

- Overcast lighting
 - benefits of, 68
 - Cloudy white balance setting compensating for, 83
 - soft lighting from, 73–74, 134
- Overexposure. *see also* Exposure compensating for bright sun, 210 managing bright skies, 142–143 measuring light and, 23 not losing detail by avoiding, 18 overview of, 12–13

P

- Panning, conveying sense of motion, 98–99
- Panorama shots
 - combining multiple images, 158–159
 - creating “fake” panorama, 156–157
 - overview of, 155
- Patterns, in composition, 197
- Photographic accessories. *see* Accessories
- Point of view, in composition, 196
- Polarizing filters
 - capturing silky waterfall shot in bright daylight, 151
 - improving color saturation, 123
 - overview of, 230–232
- Portrait mode, 50–51, 112
- Portrait preset, for better skin tones, 119
- Portraits
 - action shots, 121
 - with Aperture Priority mode, 113
 - black and white, 118–119
 - in environmental settings, 114
 - examples, 108–111
 - exercises, 129
 - Exposure Lock feature and, 116–117
 - fill flash for reducing shadows, 120
 - focusing on eyes, 117–118
 - metering modes for, 115–116
 - overview of, 107
 - Portrait mode, 50–51, 112
 - skin tone presets, 119
 - tips for shooting, 122–128
- Post-processing software. *see* Image-processing software
- Preset Manual option, for customizing white balance, 223
- Pro Mag 2 AW camera bag, 241
- Program mode
 - accommodating for bright sun, 38
 - exposure compensation and, 143
 - when to use, 42–43

Q

Quality of light

- Blue Hour, 140
- Golden Hour, 62, 146
- hard light, 73–74
- soft light, 72

R

RAM requirements, continuous

- shooting mode and, 97

RAW images

- adjusting white balance in post-processing software, 140
- benefits of, 33–34
- continuous shooting mode and, 97
- vs. JPEG format, 32
- shooting black and white portraits, 118
- shooting high dynamic range (HDR) images, 216

Rear curtain sync (2nd curtain), flash synchronization modes, 179

Red colors, warm colors, 146

Red-eye reduction, 177–179

Reflections, tip for photographing, 194

Remote switch, use in long exposures, 175

Rocket-Air Blower, from Giottos, 242

Rule of Thirds

- in composing photos, 153–154
- example, 19, 65
- splitting the frame in composition, 202–203

S

Saturation

- example, 3, 5
- filters for improving, 123
- Portrait presets, 119

Self-timer

- activating camera with, 237
- for long exposures, 175
- reducing camera shake, 171

Semi-automatic shooting modes, 46.

- see also* Automatic shooting modes

Shade setting, white balance, 31, 135, 139

Shadows

- adding depth to images, 20, 141
- fill flash for reducing, 120
- hard light and, 73
- high dynamic range (HDR) images and, 215
- high key and low key images, 143
- overcast conditions softening, 68

- soft lighting for reducing, 111
- tips for shooting portraits, 125
- when to shoot using daylight, 66–67

Sharpness

- benefits of RAW images, 33
- maximizing image sharpness, 147–148
- Portrait presets, 119
- principles of composition and, 152
- shooting black and white portraits, 119
- Tack sharp, 147
- using self-timer to reduce camera shake, 171

Shooting modes

- Aperture Priority mode, 46–48
- benefits of not using automatic modes, 56
- exercises in working with, 57–58
- Flash Off mode, 55
- Full Auto mode, 50
- Landscape mode, 52
- Macro or Close-up mode, 53
- Manual (M) mode, 48–49
- overview of, 37
- Portrait mode, 50–51
- Program mode, 42–43
- Shutter Priority mode, 44–46
- Sports mode, 54

Shutter Priority mode

- capturing silky waterfall shots, 151
- examples, 85
- exposure compensation and, 143
- limitations, 46
- overview of, 44
- portraits of subjects in motion, 121
- stopping motion, 89–90
- when to use, 44–46

Shutter speed

- action/sports shots and, 86
- balancing with aperture, 4, 48
- Bulb option for, 218–220
- burst shooting for longer exposures, 223
- in calculation of exposure, 11–12
- camera shake with slow speeds, 136
- capturing silky waterfall shots, 150–151
- defined, 6
- direction of travel of subject impacting, 86–87
- exposure and, 10
- fast and slow speeds, 44
- flash synchronization and, 176
- long exposures and, 174
- low light and, 164
- Manual (M) mode and, 48

- neutral density filters and, 232
- panning and motion blur and, 99
- portraits of subjects in motion, 121
- shooting modes and, 37
- speed of subject impacting, 87
- Sports mode and, 54
- for stop action, 102, 108
- subject-to-camera distance impacting, 88–89
- tripod use and, 147
- water motion effect, 190
- when to use Auto ISO, 92–93
- when to use Program mode, 42–43

Side lighting, impact of direction of lighting, 75

Signal-to-noise ratio, 7. *see also* Digital noise

Silhouetted subjects (backlit)

- separating subject from background, 77
- when to use Manual mode, 49

Singh-Ray filters, 232

Single focus point

- for action/sports shots, 94–95
- focusing on eyes when shooting portraits, 117–118

Single frame mode, vs. continuous shooting mode, 97

Skin tones

- metering for achieving proper exposure in portraits, 116
- presets for shooting portraits, 119

Sky

- blue sky as background, 199
- Exposure Compensation feature for managing bright skies, 142–143
- soft lighting from overcast skies, 134

Skylight filters, 230

Soft light

- macro photography and, 222
- overcast skies and, 134
- quality of light, 72
- tips for shooting portraits, 125

Softbox

- benefits of fluorescent softbox, 70
- examples of use, 40–41
- shooting flash through, 72, 165, 183

Software

- for image-processing. *see* Image-processing software
- for working with RAW images, 33–34

Sony HDR, 217

Sports mode, 54

Sports shots. *see* Action shots

- Spot metering
 - for exposure control, 212–213
 - overview of, 26–27
 - for portraits, 115
 - Stabilized lens. *see* Image Stabilization (IS); Vibration Reduction (VR)
 - Starburst effect
 - creative use of sun, 221
 - example, 210–211
 - Still life photos, 47
 - Stop (freeze) action
 - example, 83
 - freezing a moment in time, 86
 - ISO settings and shutter speed, 108
 - portraits of subjects in motion, 121
 - when to use Shutter Priority mode, 44–45, 89–90
 - Studio lights, 49
 - Subject speed, factors in action/sports shots, 87
 - Subject-to-camera distance, factors in action/sports shots, 88–89
 - Sun
 - avoiding lens flare, 220–221
 - benefits of shooting at sunrise or sunset, 67
 - creative use to create starburst effect, 221
 - metering for sunrise and sunset, 213–214
 - sunlight. *see* Daylight
 - Sunny 16 Rule, exposure settings, 11
- T**
- Tack sharp, 147
 - Telephoto lenses
 - for candid shots, 128
 - capturing distance shots without intruding, 109, 111
 - narrow depth of field in shooting portraits, 112
 - narrowing depth of field for isolating subject, 192–193
 - Three-dimensional feel. *see* Depth (or dimension)
 - Through The Lens (TTL). *see* TTL (Through The Lens)
 - Tilting camera, to add angular interest to composition, 195
 - Time exposures, with Shutter Priority mode, 44
 - Tonal range, in high dynamic range (HDR) images, 215–217
 - Tonemapping process, 215
- Tripods**
- factors in selecting, 235–236
 - focusing while using, 149–150
 - for high dynamic range (HDR) images, 215–216
 - for landscapes, 147
 - limitations in low light situations, 168
 - for long exposures, 123, 167, 174
 - for macro photography, 222
 - for multiple-image panorama, 158–159
 - for sharp images, 136–137, 190
 - for silky waterfall shots, 150–151
 - stability of, 137
- TTL (Through The Lens)**
- built-in flash, 176–177
 - external flash, 182
- Tungsten setting, white balance, 31, 71**
- U**
- Underexposure. *see also* Exposure for darkening images, 3, 5
 - histogram of, 29
 - managing bright skies, 142–143
 - measuring light and, 23–24
 - overview of, 12–13
 - UV filters, 230
- V**
- Vanishing perspective lines, using leading lines in composition, 201–202
 - Vibration Reduction (VR)
 - for handheld photos, 171
 - ISO settings, 139
 - turning off when using tripods, 137
- W**
- Warm colors, 146
 - Waterfall shots
 - creating sense of depth in landscape photos, 155
 - maximizing image sharpness, 148
 - silky flowing water effect, 133, 150–151
 - Westcott diffusion panel, 240
 - White balance
 - auto settings, 166
 - Cloudy setting compensating for overcast, 83
 - Cloudy setting examples, 2, 19, 62
 - correcting, 30–31
 - customizing, 40, 223
 - Daylight setting, 39
 - Daylight setting for accurate colors, 65
 - Flash setting, 209
 - Fluorescent setting, 31, 69
 - for landscape photos, 139–140
 - reasons for not using automatic shooting modes, 56
 - Shade setting, 135
 - Tungsten setting, 31, 71
 - warming up colors with, 4
 - when to use Program mode, 42–43
 - White values, in luminance histogram, 28
 - Wide angle lens
 - capturing images for multiple-image panorama, 159
 - capturing unique viewpoint with, 196
 - capturing whole scene, 19
 - creating “fake” panorama, 156
 - distorting features in portraits, 123
 - example of use, 2, 210
 - maximum depth of field, 193
 - shooting portraits in environmental settings, 113
- Y**
- Yellows, warm colors, 146
- Z**
- Zoom lenses
 - getting close to the action, 102–103
 - for macro photography, 222
 - zooming during exposure, 226