Basic Photography Tips 2: Tips and Tricks

There are two qualities (among many others) that many photographers struggle to control in their photographs. These two qualities are among the basic technical phonetic elements in photographic communication:

1. Colour: Control over colour is one of the most basic ways of communicating through a photograph. The degree to which a photograph displays its colours is paramount in keeping with its mood.

2. Sharpness: Control over the sharpness and clarity of a photograph can also greatly alter its mood. A fine hand in controlling sharpness is essential to ensure clear communication of a theme.

Learning to control these qualities is relatively simple. Deciding how to use them to get the appropriate "look and feel" for a photograph is at times very difficult. It can become more difficult with time, as you learn more about photography and what you like in a photograph. Don't be afraid to experiment, and always let your own opinions play a part!

Colour: The Palette of Photography

The colours of a photograph and their intensity alter the mood greatly. Delicate hues can be a subtle voice, while intense, bold colours speak more forcefully. "Warm" colours, like oranges and yellows, can feel inviting, or exciting. "Cool" colours, like blues and greens, can feel calming or invigorating. Certain colour blends can clash, adding energy and tension to the photograph.

However colour is used, it must reflect the wishes of the photographer. Don't always aim for the most intensely colourful photograph! The following tips and tricks can help create the colour you want:

1. Use good film / sensors: Though I have many films that I like, I have two favorites, each with a specific purpose. One I like for its strongly saturated colours, especially reds, greens, and yellows, and its ability to record very overexposed or underexposed colours. The other film I like for its more muted pallet, and for its bright, pure blues and whites. Over time, I have gotten to know both films well, and can predict results from each in many situations. This is important! Films are created very differently, and, by experimenting, you can learn to work within their limitations to make better photographs. Try new films too - a new film personality can help a photographer see the world very differently.

2. Use good lenses: A poor lens will not transmit all light waves evenly, telling the film only part of the story. Colour saturation in the photograph can be reduced or inaccurate. Poor lenses also "flare" more easily, (see below) causing reduced colour saturation in the photograph. Though spectacular photographs can be made with any lens, poor quality lenses can be more limiting, allowing the photographer fewer creative freedoms. Use the best quality lenses you can afford - one good lens is usually better than three mediocre ones.

3. Try a polarizer: A good quality, adjustable polarizing filter filters out "polarized" light - light glaring off any non-metal surface, like the surface of a pond. (This glare is different from reflected light, which lets us see objects.) By reducing the glare it is possible to see what is beneath more clearly - and more colourfully. A polarizer can enhance the colours of most objects - even when you first can't see glare at all! A polarizer can also make skies appear deeper blue. Maximum polarization takes place at a 30-degree angle to the surface and at a 90-degree angle to the sun. (To find the last angle, cock your finger and thumb into the shape of a "gun" and point your thumb at the sun. The arc that the finger can follow is where maximum polarization can occur.) Be careful! Polarizers can produce obvious and distracting effects if used carelessly. They also block 1 or 2 "stops" worth of light, and can sometimes add a slight bluish cast. Only use a polarizer when you want vibrant colour: sometimes reflections and glare can make a photograph great!

4. Be careful with coloured filters: Coloured filters lend an overall coloured cast to a scene. Some photographers use coloured filters to correct for "sub-optimal" lighting conditions. I don't use them. However, carefully employed, they can improve the colour balance of your image, especially when the lighting conditions do not suit the subject. Be careful! Though coloured filters might help saturate certain colours, they can also under saturate others, giving a feeling of obvious filtration to the photograph.

5. Be careful of lens flare, especially with filters: Lens flare happens when a photograph is made with the lens pointed into a bright light source, like the sun. Light from the bright source glares off the surfaces of lens elements, and the stray light reduces the "contrast" of the photograph. (The image trends more towards middle gray, rather than highlights and shadows.) This dulls the colours of the photograph. Flat filters and poor-quality lenses flare most. To reduce lens flare, move the lens slightly, or shade it with either your hand or a lens hood. Don't forget - there might be times when lens flare will improve a photograph!

6. Try underexposing and overexposing: Colours look very different depending on how they are exposed. A dark blue, brooding storm cloud, for instance, (underexposed) lends a much different feel to a photograph than the pale, almost luminescent, baby blue of a flower in open shade. (Overexposed.) Most camera's light meters are set to record colours as 18% gray - where colours will appear most saturated. This is not always how colours will look their best! Only photographers

can decide on the "correct" exposure, based on how they see the colours fitting into the overall feeling of the photograph. Experiment!

7. Think about the lighting conditions: In outdoor photography, the colour balance of your photographs can vary dramatically depending the colour of the surrounding light. The trick is this: Your brain quickly compensates for changes in light colour. As a result, many photographers think that they are always photographing under neutral (white) light! (Did you know that most of your home lights are yellowish orange?) Light in the shade on a clear day is slightly blue, as the shady space is lit only by the blue sky. To the film, blue subjects might appear more vibrant, and yellow subjects less so. Light just after sunrise or just before sunset is often very yellow or orange, giving the opposite effect. Keep in mind how surrounding light is being reflected or filtered, and what colour it might be as a result. Instead of trying to "compensate" for these lighting situations, try using them to your advantage in your photographs!

8. Experiment! The results you want might not come from the usual techniques. Experiment with different exposures, subjects, lighting conditions, films, and equipment. Even camera or subject movement can affect how colours are recorded on film. If you're aiming for a particular effect, keep trying new ideas until you get what you want!

Sharpness: The Clarity of a Photograph

A photograph's sharpness and clarity, like its colour, can greatly affect its mood. Most good photographs have at least one element in sharp focus. (Not all, however - a lot can be communicated with dull shapes and washes of colour or tone!) Some photographs are sharp and clear front to back, while some focus on a single subject and produce the rest as a blur. A photograph's mood and theme will change depending on the decisions the photographer makes regarding sharpness.

However sharpness controls are used, they must reflect the wishes of the photographer. Don't always aim to make your photograph sharp front to back! The following tips and tricks can help you create the sharpness you want:

1. Use good film / sensors: Good film will make it easier to create the sharpness you want in your photographs. If you want to create sharp, clear, photographs that you will eventually make into large prints, consider using a very fine "grain" film. (The film grain is the network of dots that makes up an image.) In general, slower ISO films have finer grain. For example, ISO 50 films have finer grain than ISO 200. I use ISO 50 or 100 films for most of my fine art photography. Slow, fine grain films allow you to create photographs that have higher definition and smoother "edges." Photographs appear sharper, and even out-of-focus areas seem

more lifelike. However, try faster, coarser film as well. It can give more flexibility in low light, and can produce an artistic look that many enjoy!

2. Use good lenses: The most obvious sign of a poor lens is inconsistent sharpness. A poor lens can produce photographs that are sharp in the centre but blurry near the edges and corners. Also, the sharpness of a poor lens can vary with aperture, producing much better results at some settings than others. Most lenses have sharper apertures, usually mid-range, but poor lenses can show a dramatic difference. Most lenses are least sharp at their widest aperture. If you can get excellent corner-to-corner sharpness at maximum aperture, (look closely!) you've got a sharp lens! Though spectacular photographs can be made with any lens, poor quality lenses can be more limiting, allowing the photographer fewer creative freedoms. Use the best quality lenses you can afford - one good lens is usually better than three mediocre ones.

3. Try using a tripod: A tripod can be the easiest way to improve the sharpness of your photographs. When handholding the camera in dim light, the photographer often has to sacrifice fine grain film, smaller apertures, or the use of filters for a shutter speed that won't show camera shake. (See below.) This can mean giving up some sharpness in the photograph. With a tripod, I regularly shoot ISO 50 film with a small aperture in low light! As long as neither the camera nor the subject are moving, the shutter speed can be as long as I need - seconds, minutes, or even hours. This can give me the flexibility to control the rest of my settings and get the sharpness I want.

4. Think about your lens length and shutter speed: If you are handholding the camera, the shutter speed that is fast enough to counteract camera shake and keep the photograph sharp changes with the length (magnification) of the lens. Since longer lenses "shake" more, this shutter speed is generally 1 / lens focal length. For example, if you are using a 100mm lens, this shutter speed would be 1/100s. (Or the closest your camera has, maybe 1/125s.) Of course, a faster shutter speed is fine - I usually double this formula to get sharper photographs. (I would shoot the 100mm lens at 1/250s or faster.) Handheld shutter speeds for maintaining sharpness can change a lot - from about 1/20s (20mm lens) to about 1/400s (400mm lens)! Keep your subject's movement in mind as well, even when using a tripod. It takes experience to find the appropriate shutter speed to "freeze" a moving subject. Experiment!

5. Focus carefully: Though focusing is not complex, it must be done well and to the photographer's taste. Especially with longer lenses and wider apertures, focusing can be very finicky and precise. Take time if you have it, and make sure you've got it right. A slightly out of focus photograph almost always looks like a mistake! If you're not sure where to focus, try several different spots and decide which you like later.

6. Control "depth of field" with the aperture: The depth of a photograph's focus is called the "depth of field." Adjusting the aperture will control this depth, with certain limitations. The first is lens length. Longer (higher magnification) lenses produce a smaller depth of field than shorter (lower magnification) lenses. A 135mm lens will then have a smaller depth of field than a 50mm lens set at the same aperture. The differences are very pronounced - a 20mm lens at f8 will display most of the photograph in focus, while a 300mm lens at f8 will only focus about 3 or 4cm. Both will add a different look to the photograph! The second limitation is distance. The closer you get to your subject, the smaller the depth of field becomes. This means that you can show less of the photograph in focus when you are photographing close up. Be careful - a slightly out of focus subject almost always looks like a mistake! If you're not sure which aperture to use, try several different settings and decide which you like later.

7. Try using "mirror lock": Mirror lock is a feature on some SLR cameras that can slightly reduce vibration caused by the camera when it normally makes an exposure. The camera's reflex mirror reflects light coming through the lens into the viewfinder. This mirror flips up at the moment of exposure, (vibrating the camera slightly) and flips down immediately afterwards. Mirror lock enables you to flip the mirror up prior to exposing and hold it there until you're done, reducing exposure vibration. Mirror lock can be difficult without a tripod or with moving subjects, as the viewfinder is black when the mirror is locked. Locking the mirror is especially useful when using longer (higher magnification) lenses, slower shutter speeds, or anytime when critical sharpness is needed.

8. Experiment! The results you want might not come from the usual techniques. Experiment with different shutter speeds and apertures, subjects, lighting conditions, films, and equipment. Even the colour of your subject can affect its sharpness. If you're aiming for a particular effect, keep trying new ideas until you get what you want!