

A close-up photograph of a lion's face, looking directly at the camera. The lion is behind a wire mesh fence, with several strands of the fence visible in the foreground. The lion's fur is a mix of golden-brown and tan, with darker stripes on its face. Its eyes are a deep, warm brown. The lighting is bright, highlighting the texture of the fur and the details of the lion's features.

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PHOTOGRAPHY

10 simple steps to improve
your photography today

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1 - Have a clear subject

Or a point of interest. We naturally look for a point of interest when we look at an image and then step back to view the whole scene.

It's like having a football team with no goal. They can run about the pitch but there's nowhere to go. With a goal, they will be going from where they are now to where the goal is. That route is the route you will take your viewer on.

The top image on the following page is typical of many images I see. It's a nice view but what's the subject? Is it the tree that stands out on the left, or the houses in the distance? What has caught the photographers' eye? What do they want me to see?

In the second image, I've repositioned myself slightly to include the tree in the foreground. I've also lowered my position slightly to bring in more foreground.

Now I have a clear subject and I've created depth in the image. The combination of foreground and background creates a context for my subject. It begins to tell a story!

Which do you think is the more interesting image?



2 - Use the 'Rule of Thirds'

This is an example of a portrait and in the top image, the framing corresponds to what most people will do, that is, place the subject in the centre of the frame. Now, it's ok, but not very inspiring.

What I've done here is to zoom out slightly and apply the 'Rule of Thirds'. I've superimposed four lines over the image, two vertical and two horizontal (you might see this grid on your camera) and these lines split the frame into thirds, vertically and horizontally.

By placing the subject, (in this case the eye closest to the camera) on a junction of two lines, I create a more interesting composition. It's not always necessary to use a point where two of the lines cross. But think about using at least one of these lines as you compose your image.

The tree in the previous example is on one of the vertical 'thirds' lines and creates a more interesting image.

Using these lines creates space. We'll discuss what you can do with this space in some of the other tips. In this case, the space in front of our subject is somewhere she can look into.

And it starts to prompt questions; is she waiting for someone?

Is she lost in thought?

What's about to happen?

There's more connection with the subject.



3 - Use depth of field

Here I've returned to the first example I gave. In the top image, everything in the foreground and background is in focus.

In the second the foreground and background are slightly out of focus. Now the effect is fairly subtle in this example but notice how the tree, our subject, is more prominent.

Using a narrow depth of field (i.e. the area in front of and behind the subject which is in focus) draws the viewers eye back to the subject. It does this because we will automatically look at what we can see clearly rather than what we can't.

A more obvious example is the image on the front cover of this book.

How much of the foreground and background is in focus depends upon two things. The first is the aperture setting you use (if you don't know how to change this I can recommend an online training course!) and the second is your distance from the subject.

In this example, I was a few metres from the subject and in the cover image I was very close (just centimetres away).

The lens you are using will also make a difference. Wide-angle lenses will usually have a larger depth of field than a telephoto. So, get familiar with your equipment by experimenting.



4 - Know your camera!

Before we go any further I'm going to make this recommendation. If you're someone who's never taken their camera out of 'Auto' you're doing your creative self a huge disservice.

Many cameras look very complicated, but the truth is that you don't need to know what every setting on every menu does to take great images.

You do need to know the basics (such as the exposure triangle) and a few basic settings on your camera. Once you understand them you'll be amazed at the difference you will see in your photography.

Many people I meet are worried about the exposure triangle. It's the three-way relationship between shutter speed (how long the shutter is open), aperture (how much light is being allowed into the camera) and ISO (the sensitivity of the camera).

I understand this can seem complicated, however, if you drive you already know a similar relationship; as you press your throttle pedal (accelerator or gas pedal depending upon where you live), your speed increases and your range (the distance to where you run out of petrol (or gas!)) reduces.

If you can understand that three-way relationship, you can understand the exposure triangle.

You'll quickly find that you'll only use a few of the camera controls regularly.



5 - Use 'Leading Lines'

So let's look at how to use the space we've created using the 'Rule of Thirds'.

Each of these images has leading lines. They draw the viewer's eye from the closest part of the image and lead them through the image towards the subject.

So what's their purpose?

They create depth and they create interest. They draw the viewer into the image and make it more interesting. Do you almost feel as though you're there when you look at these images?

Once you start looking for them you'll see them everywhere. The slats on a bench, a line of street lamps, the kerb of a road.

Position yourself so that you're between the lines (assuming more than one) and have the disappearing point (if there is one) close to your subject.

They don't have to lead precisely to the subject but they need to take the viewer some of the distance.

Leading lines don't have to be straight either. The curve of a road, path or river works just as well.

And you can consider suggestion number 6 to add further interest...



6 - Change your point of view

We usually see everything from eye level. Most people treat their photography that way too and, while there's nothing wrong with it, it's not particularly inspiring either!

So, this tip is to get down low and create a more interesting image. It might be something commonplace but taken from an angle from which people wouldn't usually see it.

Something I will do on photowalks when I'm not feeling particularly inspired is to put my camera on the ground and press the shutter button. I always get inspired by the results.

So, here's something you can try for yourself. Take an image of something near you. Pick your subject, it might be something familiar; your home, your car, your dog!

Now drop down low and shoot the same image from ground level. What's different?

If you have a baby get on the floor and shoot images from 'baby level'.

And, of course, you can flip this one and shoot from a high vantage point and look at the impact this has.

Changing viewpoint is an easy way of making ordinary subjects more interesting or at least worth a second look.



7 - Use reflections

Reflections add another level of interest to an image and they can be easier to find than you might think.

Water is an obvious source; e.g. a river or a lake. Still water can create some amazing images.

If you're in a more urban environment, look for large windows, polished surfaces (e.g. cars) or even painted objects; they can reflect light and bring an image alive.

This is certainly one occasion where rain is your friend. There are certain places close to the Sydney Harbour bridge that will always form puddles when it rains and I would always go to these to get a good reflection. Do you have similar places that you can get to easily?

Sometimes you'll see something which would look great reflected but there's no water in sight. A simple trick, which you can see in the final image, is to make sure you have a water bottle with you and simply make your own puddle. Even fairly porous surfaces can be used if you have enough water and you work quickly.

Reflections are a great way to use space and you might use them to split your image vertically or horizontally.



8 - Be aware of your background

We've all seen pictures of people with a tree or a lamppost growing out of their head. While they can be funny to look at, they can be a source of immense frustration for the photographer, especially if it's an important event or a situation that can't be easily repeated.

The good news is that the more you begin to consciously compose your images, the more likely you are to pick up on things that will ruin a great shot.

A bright background might allow you to create a backlight if you position yourself in the right place. Before taking the lower image I noticed how the dandelions were being backlit by the setting sun. I dropped down low and focused on the dandelion. As you've no doubt noticed, I also chose to use a narrow depth of field to put everything else out of focus.

There's another aspect to consider too. Do you plan to post-process your image?

Most photographers do to some extent (I certainly do with my images but rarely spend more than two minutes working on them). You can make some simple changes to the contrast of the image and that can have a big effect on the background and the impact it has.

For example, you might make the background darker than you were able to shoot it and this, in turn, can make the subject stand out even more.



9 - Try using black and white

Changing an image from colour to black and white changes how it feels. Black and white emphasises textures and shapes and can greatly add to the 'mood' of an image.

Mood is important because any connection we make will be emotional.

This example is a merry-go-round but try it with portraits. Colours can become distracting and you might find you have a greater connection with the subject of a black and white portrait.

I like this quote from Canadian photojournalist Ted Grant:

"When you photograph people in color, you photograph their clothes. But when you photograph people in Black and White, you photograph their souls!"

If you're using a DSLR or Mirrorless camera you may well find that you have a black and white preset mode you can use.

Smartphones allow you to take black and white images and usually give you the option of different contrasts too. Have a look under filters and see which options are available on your smartphone.

A soft look might be ethereal or dreamy, while a harsh contrast might create a feeling of threat or danger.

Try it out.



10 - Break the rules!

Not all the time, but once you know the rules it's good to break them from time to time.

Shoot into the sun to get a strong contrast. If you're shooting towards water, what effect can you get from light reflecting off it?

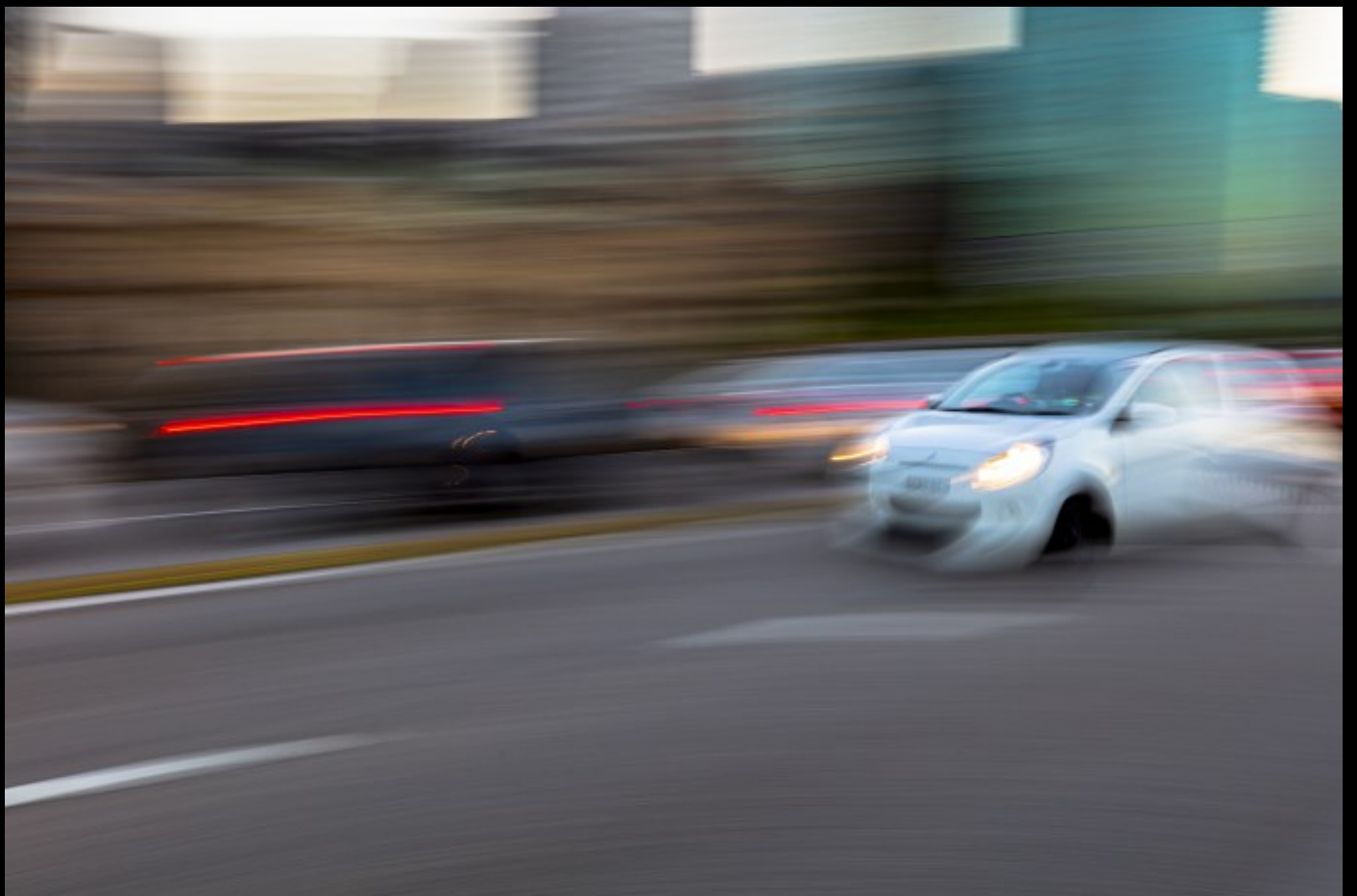
If you're photographing people, how does the mood of the image change when you can no longer see them clearly?

Try moving your camera while you shoot. What difference does blur make (try this when taking a picture of someone and make sure they have good eye contact with the camera)?

There are many different things you can try.

One of the best things you can do to improve your photography is to experiment. Many things you try won't give you the result you were hoping for, but occasionally something unexpected will show up.

Great photographers didn't start that way. They practised and developed their style through experimentation.



And Where to find inspiration

Here are five simple ways to stay inspired:

- 1.** Look at the details. Look at ironwork, the details in buildings that are above eye level, the way the light catches an object at particular times of the day.
- 2.** Get on social media (Instagram is a great place to start) and search for a hashtag of interest to you (e.g. #wildlife). Find three people whose work you like and follow them.
- 3.** Join a photography community. It might be a club where you physically meet or an online community. Ideally, you'll be able to share and get feedback on your work.
- 4.** Do a project. Maybe post an image a day for a month, or shoot the same subject from the same place once a month and put together a compilation of images at the end of the year.
- 5.** Photograph places you pass through regularly. Look for things you've never seen before.

The most important thing you can do is to keep yourself inspired. Photography is not a spectator sport! The only way to improve your photography (and your confidence) is to practice. And feeling good about one aspect of your life tends to impact other areas too!

*Whatever you choose, remember to
practice, practice, practice!*



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Let's stop boring images!

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