

# 20 questions to ask before you take a photograph

## 1. What is my subject?

There's a reason you put your camera to your eye or frame up a shot in the LCD. Ask yourself what you are trying to capture. And, as you operate the camera, do not lose focus on that. Sometimes the vantage point, through the viewfinder or on the screen can distract or distance you from the subject. If the view distracts you, it will be even more distracting for your audience.

## 2. How do I best highlight the subject?

You know what your subject is, but will it be obvious to the viewer? Will it be obvious to you years from now when you look at that photo? There are myriad ways to make your subject stand out: composition, lighting, angles, lines, etc. Start thinking about this and keep reading—some of the upcoming questions will expound on this query.

## 3. Where is the subject in the frame?

Is the subject directly in the centre? Sometimes that works. Divide the frame into thirds vertically and horizontally. Does the composition work better with the subject on one of those lines or at an intersection? How does the picture work if you put the subject in a corner or way off to the side, top, or bottom?

## 4. Am I close enough to my subject to emphasize it?

Being too far from your subject might mean that it gets lost in the background noise. If you have to explain to the viewer where your subject is in the frame, it means you might not have been close enough to that subject or that you failed to emphasize the subject in some other way. In the words of the legendary photojournalist and Magnum co-founder Robert Capa: "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough."

## 5. Am I far enough from my subject to allow the viewer to have a sense of time and place of the photograph?

Contrary to the last question, the subject can take up so much of the frame that the context and location of the photo is lost. If you are seeking to capture a memento of a shared experience by making a photo of your friend or loved one in front of a famous place or picturesque vista, be sure to include some of that place in the frame.

Of course, there are times when you just want the subject to fill the frame.

## 6. Is there something in front of or behind the subject that distracts me?

Sometimes foreground objects can be a distraction, but it is often something behind your subject—the Martian antennas coming out of the back of your subject's head are only acceptable if photographing a Martian—that ruins a good

photo, creates a good laugh, or both. Try to isolate your subject from the background, repositioning the subject, moving yourself and the camera, or using a shallower depth of field.

**7. Is there something else in the frame taking my attention away from the subject?**

Shiny things, like that bright yellow Ferrari in the corner or that super-bright neon light in the background, may easily live within the framing of your photograph and draw your attention away from the true subject. If the subject is the brightest and most beautiful thing in the frame, that makes your job easier. If there is competition for your eye as the photographer, there will be a lot of competition for the viewer's attention, too. If possible, be ready to reposition, zoom, or—borrowing from photography master Henri Cartier Bresson—wait for the “decisive moment” to isolate your subject. Sometimes, in the words of the late architect Ludwig Mies Van de Rohe, “Less is more.”

**8. Is there something outside of the frame that I could incorporate to enhance the image?**

Sometimes it pays to look beyond what you see in the viewfinder, or on the screen. Are there elements just outside your initial composition that would better frame the image or help direct the eye to where you want the viewer's attention to go? Recompose. Move back. Zoom out.

**9. Where is the light coming from?**

If you are outside during the day, you are at the mercy of the tilt and rotation of the earth in relation to the sun. However, the lower the sun is, the more directional the light becomes. Directional light means shadow. Look for light, but also look for shadow. Light can be redirected, reflected, or created. And, sometimes you can reposition yourself in relation to the light to take best advantage of its effects.

**10. How does my eye move through the scene?**

Initially, the eye might perceive a photograph as a whole, but, after a fraction of a second, its focus narrows to initiate a journey through the image, moving from one part of the frame to others, unless something grabs its attention. Compositionally, sometimes you can make this journey easy for the eye or you can force it into a different pattern. How does your own eye move when looking through the viewfinder? Make that part of your consciousness.

**11. Am I standing in the best place to make this photograph?**

If you are lucky, the answer is: “Yes.” But don't always trust that your feet have delivered you to the best point of view. Dramatic changes in perspective may be gained by simply taking a few steps in another direction. Do not be afraid to move, especially if you see something you want to capture, but the composition is

not working for you. Also, what does the view behind you look like? Do a 180 and check it out.

**12. Should I be standing straight up and shooting this photograph from eye level, or is there a better perspective?**

Once you've moved a few feet to your left, you might find an even better perspective by kneeling down, standing on a chair, holding the camera above you, or holding it below your waist. A vast majority of images are taken from the eye level. Simply changing your altitude might make your photos different from the rest.

**13. Is it the best time of day to make this photograph?**

The light is constantly changing as the earth rotates and artificial lights cycle on and off. What might be an unexciting vista at one moment might have a completely different personality a few hours before sunset, or at night. Distracting shadows may be nearly non-existent during the sun's meridian transit. If you have the luxury of time, use it to your advantage to make the photograph better. In the fading light of day, a bit of patience can go a long way to getting a magical shot while others have packed up their gear and departed.

**14. Is this the best moment to make this photograph?**

Aside from the time of day or night, ask yourself if there is an advantage to delaying your photograph. If subjects are in motion, try to predict their movements in the frame and wait until they get, hopefully, where you want them to go. Is the stoplight about to change colours? Will that car be gone in 30 seconds? Will that pedestrian stop to read the sign in that doorway? Hopefully, the right moment wasn't 10 seconds before you decided to take the photo! In the age of digital where images are virtually free, it might be safe to take the immediate shot, and then wait to see what develops. Sometimes you may find the initial composition is the strongest and nothing further develops. If the first shot worked best, smile and go about your day.

**15. Is this the best weather to make this photograph at this particular place?**

Again, it is nice to assume the luxury of time. Were you hoping for sun or puffy clouds? Why is it overcast? Take a deep breath, fire off a snapshot, and then check the local weather forecast. In 30 minutes or a few days, it could all change. Depending on your subject matter, you might have all the time in the world to wait for the perfect moment.

**16. Are my lines straight or intentionally angled?**

The ocean is always level unless you are in a trough looking up at the crest of a wave. But, even then, level is level. Leaning towers in Pisa and exploratory architecture aside, most structures are built straight up and down. Compositionally, you may decide to make the horizon askew. Not a problem as

long as you did that with some purpose in mind. A slightly skewed horizon usually highlights inattention to detail rather than creative perspective. No one intentionally tilts his or her horizon by 1 or 2 degrees. If your lines are not straight, it's best to have a reason for them being skewed.

**17. Is the camera lens distorting lines or perspective in a way I don't want them to distort?**

Speaking of lines, the lens distorts those straight vertical lines of buildings when it is tilted off of the horizon. This is a rule of physics. **Specialized perspective control (PC) lenses** may remove this distortion, and this can also be removed digitally. Minus that trickery, be conscious of effects such as key-stoning and other geometric distortions. Embrace them, avoid them, or accept them. Sometimes you'll find that keeping the camera level removes some distortion and provides an acceptable composition. Other times, you'll have to bite the distortion bullet when the camera is moved off the perpendicular.

**18. Are my camera's settings correct for this image?**

You might think that this should have been first or second on the list, but there is no real hierarchy to these questions. These questions are, depending on the photograph, of equal importance. Camera settings can make or break a photo. The good news is that, unlike the trash bag on the sidewalk or that car that you wish hadn't parked there, camera settings can be firmly under your own control. If the image you seek to capture is a fleeting moment passing before your camera, by all means take the shot as soon as you can. If you have a moment, however, check and double-check your **aperture, shutter speed, ISO, white balance, metering, autofocus mode, shooting mode**, and more.

**19. Is the camera capable of capturing the dynamic range of the scene?**

Digital sensors and film can only see so far into **darkness and light**. The human eye is much better at this. With experience in photography comes the ability to know the limitations of your camera or film when it comes to capturing the spread of light and darkness across a scene. Some photographers try to defeat this digitally with high dynamic range (HDR) manipulation, and others embrace the limitations. Regardless, before you release the shutter, it is important to sense how that particular scene is going to look to the camera.

**20. Should my camera be stabilized?**

Not all of us carry tripods in our back pockets, but when light is low or apertures are closed down, adding stability to the camera might help make the photograph sharp by avoiding camera shake. If you need a tripod and you have one, great! If you need a tripod and do not have one, use **proper technique**, look to see where you can rest the camera, or look for something to lean against in an attempt to steady yourself and your hands.