



# Tips for Better Photos

LEARY



# Three Stages of Composition



**Stage One: "Literal" Snapshot - making photographs to describe what you see.**

## Stage One

A snapshot is popularly defined as a photograph that is "shot" spontaneously and quickly, often without artistic or journalistic intent. Snapshots are commonly considered technically "imperfect" or amateurish, out of focus, poorly framed, or composed.

We all start with the literal snapshot and often revisit this photography stage. These literal snapshots are primarily taken for the photographer. These photos are "memory joggers." They help you remember the moment.

Believe it or not, many "professional" photographers never move beyond this point. Since the bride and groom were there with the photographer, the literal snapshots are also like "memory joggers" for them.

Another place I see this is my church. After a team returns from their mission trip, they show their photos, and the group laughs because they get the "inside joke." While not always a joke, it is another memory jogger and not an image that communicates to the audience.

When a photographer realizes that other





## **Stage Two: "Artistic" Snapshot - making aesthetically pleasing pictures that enhance what you saw**

photographers are getting better-looking photos

### **Stage Two**

Only some people can see the difference in their work; they often move to stage two. Their photos reach stage two, but almost everyone can distinguish between a "literal snapshot" and

an "artistic snapshot."

In this stage, the photographer is aware of the visuals  
Subject or blurring the background.

This is where a photographer thinks about being sure the subject is well-composed.



**Stage Three: "Expressive" Images - images made for public rather than private meanings. Like all art, expressive photography offers universal, often symbolic, statements.**

Ansel Adams said it best, "There are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer." Once you realize this and want the audience to feel about the subject as you do, you want to move beyond just the "rules of composition."

***Expressive photography*** interprets, rather than describes, what we see to others.

There are three aspects to **Expressive Photography; see** the diagram. All three must be present for the photo to be more than an "artistic snapshot."

**Abstraction** removes literal, descriptive clutter, hones an image's essence, and encourages unlimited thinking. This might be the difference between listening to music with no words in the tune.



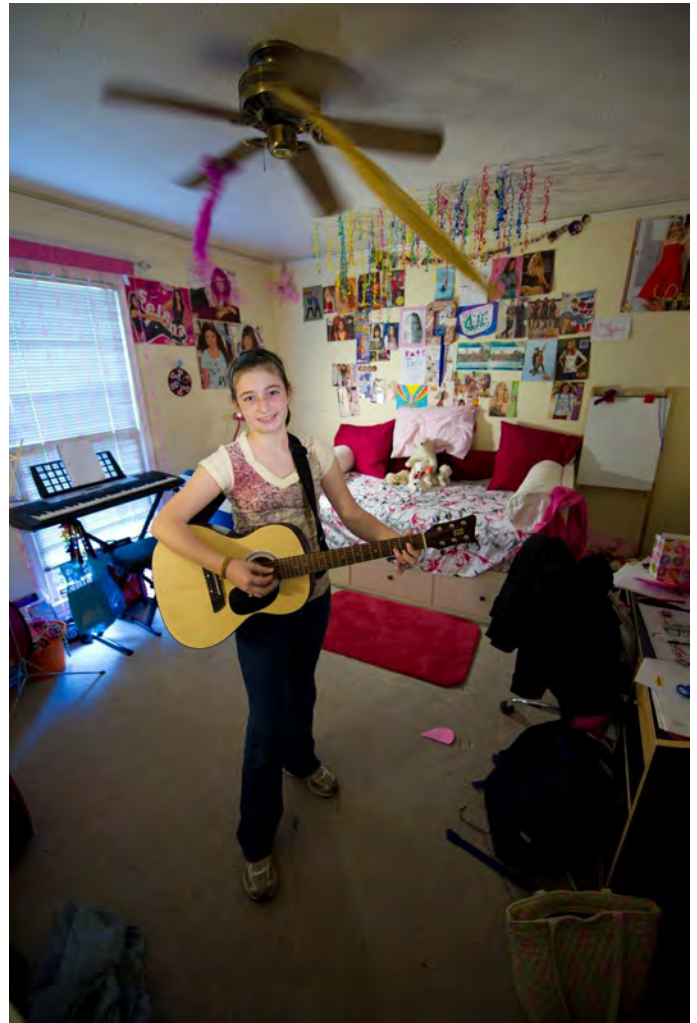
Your mind is free to explore your thoughts. However, if the music has words in the theme, it is less abstract, even if the words are not sung. Hearing Amazing Grace played even without the words will put a more literal thought and therefore is not unlimited as abstract music.

If the photo moves too far into abstraction, the other triangle parts weaken, and the picture becomes just an "artistic snapshot."

**Tension** presents elements that seem at odds with their context and creates contrasts and juxtapositions that stimulate emotions and the imagination. This is where the photographer helps create a mood within the photo. They may use composition, lighting, and exposure, or in combination, to help move the picture beyond just documenting the moment to an interpretation of the moment.

Underexpose a little, and you create darkness or gloom.

Expose, and you may create lightness and lighten the mood.



The subject is close to the camera and her room around her. Light off to the proper lighting to draw more emphasis on her.



After photographing my daughter in different locations, I started writing this newsletter. My wife said, "Stanley, you've got to see Chelle." Of course, I had to add another photo after seeing her playing her guitar in a tree. Some of the best pictures are when you catch the subject doing what they like best.

**Human values** convey the emotions, beliefs, traditions, and knowledge we understand and share. Genuine smiles communicate across all language barriers, just as frowns and anger will. We often say this is one of the most critical factors of the portrait. What is a portrait's three most important things? 1) Expression, 2) Expression, and 3) Expression.

To make expressive photos, you must first ask yourself what you want to express through your image(s). How do you feel about your subject?

I like to boil this down to "Why?" Why should anyone in your audience care about what you want them to see?

Journalists are trained to ask Who, What, Where, When, How, and Why. In my opinion



The hook of the story often rests on the Why.

If you failed to ask yourself why you are making this photograph, rest assured that your audience will not know either.

***I would love for you to comment on which photos you think above are your favorite pictures and why. Do any of them work as "Expressive" images?***

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You must adjust the exposure when shooting on snow or at the beach. Adding +1 stop using the exposure compensation dial gives the best results. Depending on how your meter interprets the scene, you may need more or less.



# ***Shallow Depth-of-Field***



*A shallow depth of field can help draw attention to a subject and diminish things in the background. I used my Nikon D5 and Sigma 35mm f/1.4 DG Art lens with the camera set at ISO 100, f/1.4, and 1/100 for this photo.*



# Camera Settings

This is how my camera is set for many situations. Look on my blog for more custom situations like sports.



**Quality of Image.** Set the camera to the most extensive JPEG file at the highest quality.

**Auto ISO.** Set your camera to Auto ISO and our lowest ISO on the camera default preferences of 50 to 200 ISO. We then set the highest ISO on what the camera is realistically capable of shooting. For most of the cameras, this was between ISO 1600 and 6400. Both Canon and Nikon allow you to set your highest shutter speed. We put this according to the situation.

**Shutter speeds (Using auto ISO):** The camera will raise the ISO to get the optimum shutter speed and drop it once it hits the maximum ISO.

If shooting under fluorescent or sodium vapor lights, we recommend shooting at 1/100 shutter speed,

unless they had to shoot sports.

For shooting sports, we recommended setting a 1/2000 shutter speed.

For general shooting, we recommended a 1/250 shutter speed.

**White Balance.** We recommended getting a custom White Balance as the primary choice.

? your second choice was to use a preset like Fluorescent, Daylight, or tungsten, for example

When changing lighting that affects white balance often, we recommend using Auto White Balance.

**Aperture.** For general shooting, we recommended not shooting wide open but using f/4 or f/5.6 so that your subject is in focus.

When your subject can cooperate more with you, we recommend shooting wide apertures if you choose for artistic reasons. This is when f/1.4 is more appropriate. We have found the trend of too many shooters buying 50mm f/1.4 lenses shooting all the time wide open and having very few in-focus photos due to the shallow depth of field.

**Inside Flash or when dark.** Use a higher ISO to help open up the background. Here is an earlier blog post on how using the higher ISO helps open the background up.

**Flash outside in daylight.** When it is the middle of the day and the sun is straight up, you are most likely to get dark circles.



Around the eyes. I call this the raccoon eye look. If you are less than 10 feet from the subject, you can use your built-in flash or hot shoe flash to fill those shadows. In addition to filling in the shadows, you will get a nice catch light in the eyes. You can also use the flash when you backlight a subject. (I wrote about this in an earlier blog post [here](#)) This helps them from looking directly into the sun and squinting. Since the shadow side of the face is now towards the camera, a flash can help balance the light.



This is tricky lighting, but I could tweak the image before shooting it. I was seeing the results I would be getting, and in theater, the lighting changes so much that it is a blessing to shoot with the mirrorless Fuji X-E2. The electronic viewfinder lets you see what the CMOS chip is seeing and capturing.





## KISS - Keep It Simple Stupid

Keep your gear as simple as possible to concentrate on the people.

For this headshot setup, I keep it super simple.

This helps kick light under the chin and into the eyes for what I consider a very flattering light.

Now, the leading light is a beauty dish or a white umbrella most of the time. I prefer round light modifiers for the catch light shape.

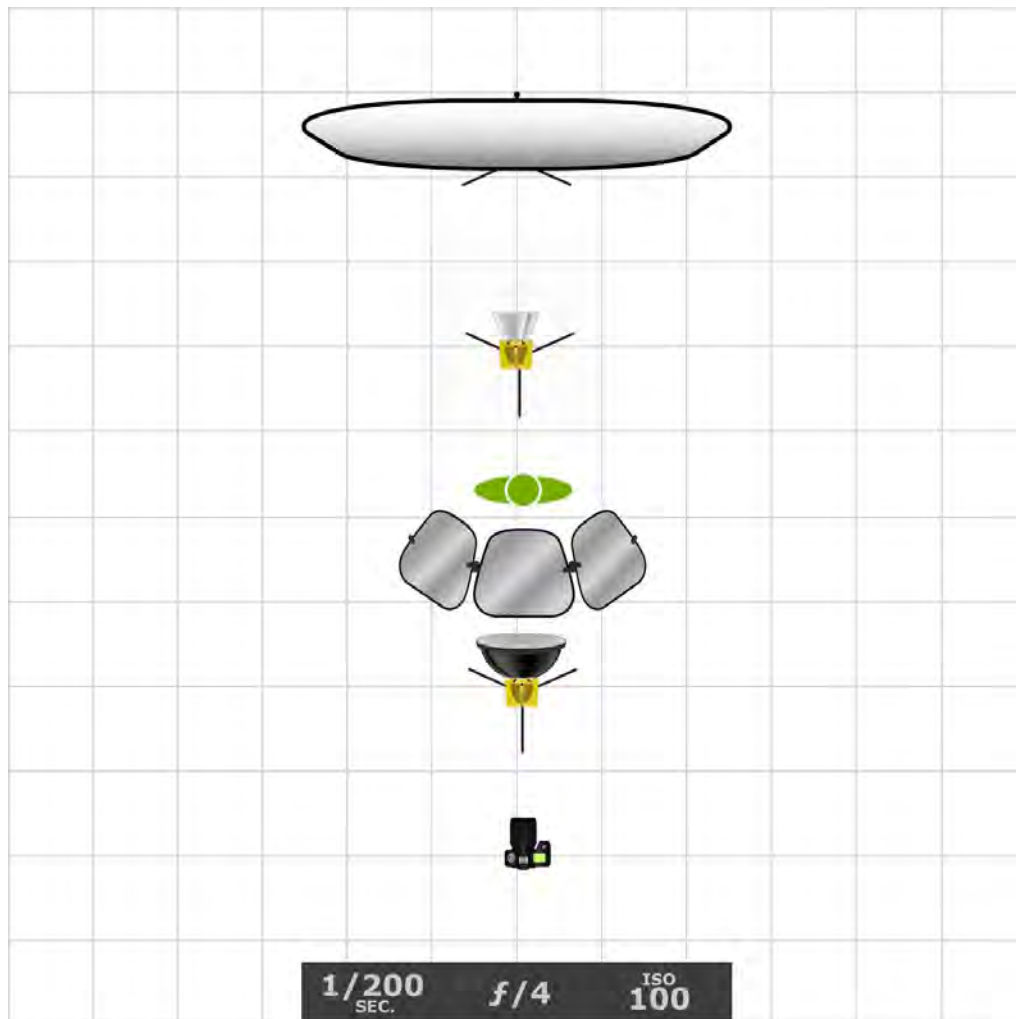
The reflector is always slightly

less than the leading light. To soften it more, use a white rather than the silver. If you want to warm it up, use a gold reflector.

You want the leading light up about 45° above the camera lens and straight above it. This will make the sunlight hitting the face come down across it, help those cheekbones pop, and give some contours to the face. Straight on to the model will kill those cheekbones and flatten out their features.

By the way, I also like to use a tripod to glance above the camera to keep a personal connection with the people.





Here is the Lastolite-Triflector reflector that I am using for the headshots.







## Shooting the Publicity Photo for Shakespeare's Twelfth Night

The lighting light is an Alienbees B1600 with a 20° grid to keep the light tight on them. I put just enough sunlight on the background to light it and then used a CTO gel over an Alienbees positioned behind the background with a 30° grid.

I enjoyed shooting this for my daughter and her classmates. I hope we get more people to attend the show because the photos helped generate more attention.









## Turn on your flash outside

These are a couple of photos that I made for publicity photos for promoting the musical "Oklahoma!" at Roswell High School this spring.

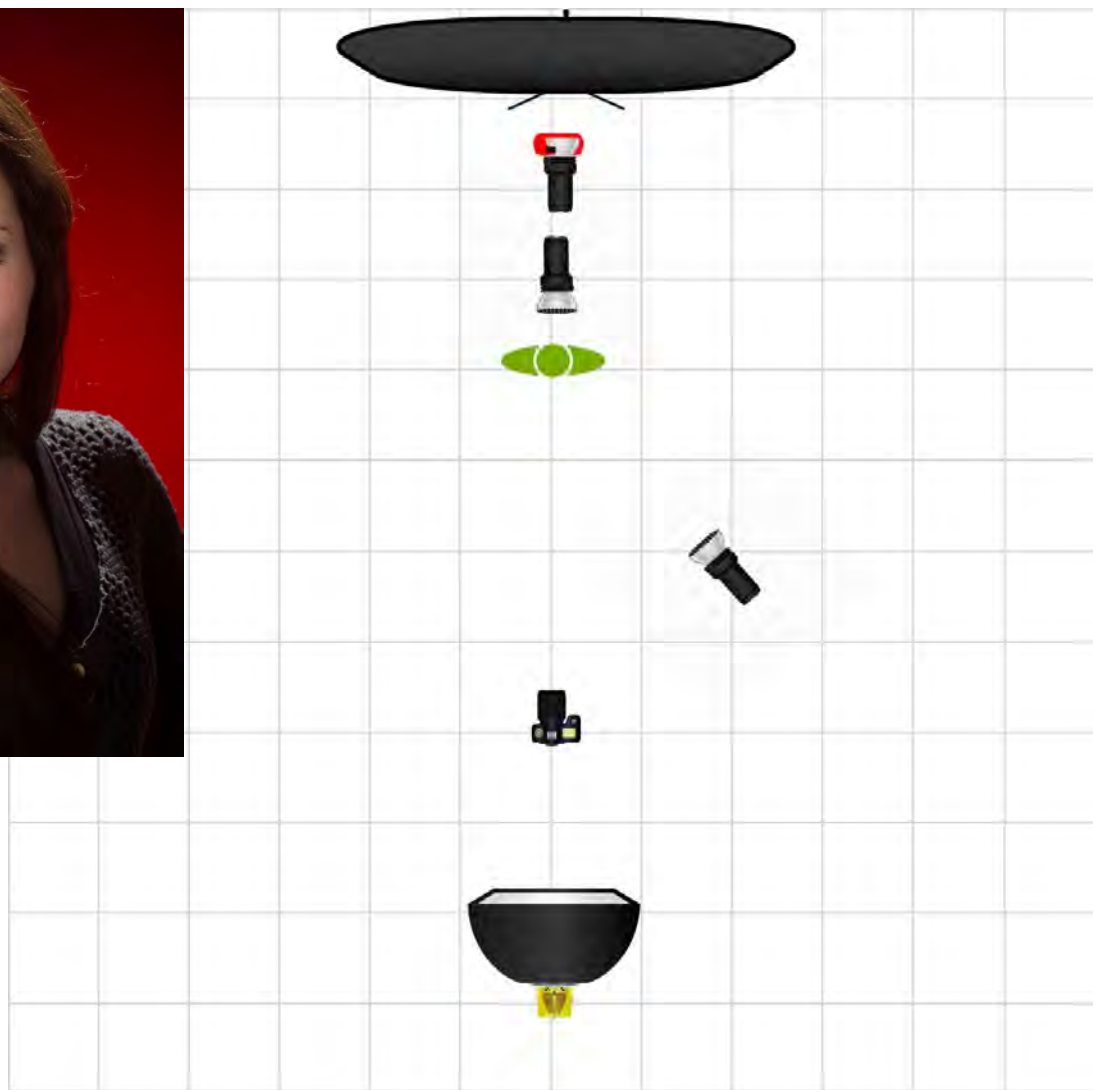
The sun is behind everyone so they are not having to squint with the sun in their eyes.

The flash is used to open up the shadows so they are not silhouette.









The background I am using is reversible. One side is White, and the other is Black. When I want to add color to the background, I often use the Black rather than the white side.

If you use the white side, the light hitting exposes the subject. The subject almost always spills onto the background a little. This would wash out the color gel you use to change the background. However, if you use a black background, you must put two times more light on the background to change that color, and the light on the model while it may land on the background has less effect.

I am using a red gel. Just remember to get the gel to look the same color as you see it; it must be 2-stops brighter on the white background and 4-stops more colorful on the black background than the light on the subject, assuming you.

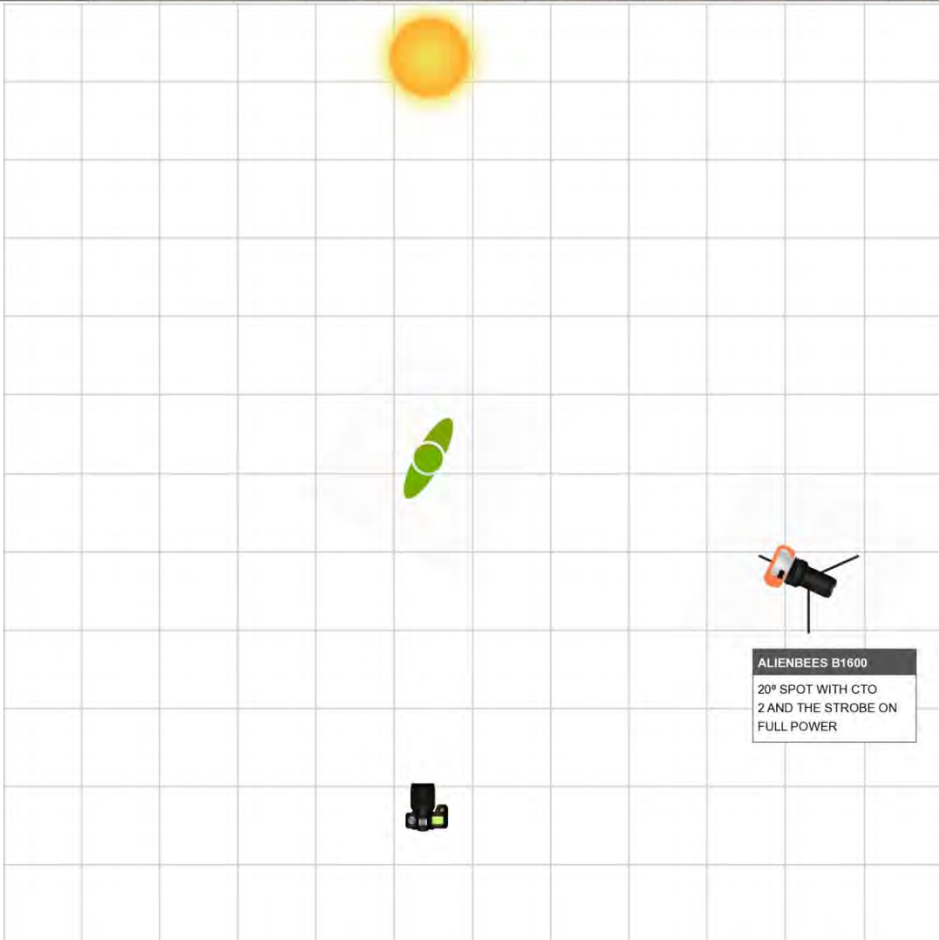
It is much easier to buy a bunch of different colored gels than to buy multiple backgrounds. This way, you can create many other effects using lighting.

# *Use a Tripod*

*By using a tripod on a skyline you can use low ISO and keep the camera absolutely still for these long exposures. For this exposure I set the camera to ISO 100, f/8, 4 sec.*







## Find Interesting Subjects

If you want exciting photos, put interesting subjects before your camera.

Here, I worked with the Island Breeze Fire Dancer in Kana, Hawaii. I am just using a flash with a CTO [Color Temperature Orange] Gel to add a little more light to the front of the dancer. The fire spinning may light up the dancer, but the added flash lets me use a higher speed sync and freeze the dancer's action a little more.



## Previsualize

As I did here, scout a location and plan your shot long before you have the subjects show up.

The gloves were red, but I changed them to Yellow since this is Calvin Johnson, and the photo was for the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets to promote their ticket sales for football one year

