

Making Great Pictures – Fundamentals of Remarkable Photography

By Chuck Palmer

A friend asked me recently, “what are the key things a photographer has to do to make a great picture?” I had to stop and think a minute. After all the workshops, many hours of study, and thousands of practice photos, how do I answer this question? I told my friend. . . “that is an excellent question, let’s meet again after I gather my thoughts.”

My mind wandered though many ideas as I drove home pondering the question. I’m not sure there is a specific answer, or possibly the answer is never ending. . . but I thought I could share a few things I have learned that certainly helped me make better pictures. So here are several fundamentals of remarkable pictures that I shared with my friend. Give these fundamentals a try the next time you pick up your camera.

Fundamentals of Remarkable Photography

With today’s digital imaging technology, Remarkable Photography is almost exclusively about seeing well. Even before we peer through the viewfinder, a remarkable photograph starts with seeing your story, the presentation of your story, and the light before you make the picture. Remarkable photos are not the result of our camera, but seeing well before we capture the image. Of course, what you see depends mainly on what you look for. Let’s review three steps to seeing well before we make a great picture.”



Step 1 - See your Story – One of the key things you must do to make a great picture is to see the clearly defined story you are trying to convey to your viewers. Does the photo you are about to take convey a cohesive concept for your viewers. Ask these questions: Who or what is the main subject, or focal point in the image? Have you included supporting elements that help convey your story? Have you included in the frame only the important stuff to tell your story, or are there many distractions that pull your viewer out of the story you are trying to tell? Even if you are just documenting your trip to the bowling alley, or a successful fishing trip, or even a great meal you are about to eat. . . What story are you trying to tell your viewer? Ask yourself the critical questions.



Step 2 - See your Story Presentation – One could probably spend a lifetime studying composition and art design principles of the masters to become a professional artist. But where might an amateur photographer start to present their story in a compelling way? Here are just a few things to keep in mind to present your story well:

Clean Background - Keep an eye on your background. What is behind your main subject? Often a clean background may be just one step away. Many professional photographers advise to find your background first, then put your subject in it! A perfectly clean background is not always possible so make use of a shallow depth of field (range of focus), or light value differences to minimize a distracting background.

Fill the Frame – One of the most powerful things you can do to make a great picture is to get closer to your subject. Whatever you include in your image. . . if it doesn't support your story, it will pull your viewer out of your story. Simplify your image by getting closer to your subject. In photography. . . the size of your main subject matters. Fill the frame with your story, and eliminate any elements that do not support your story.

Uncenter your subjects – There are many great pictures with the main character smack dab in the middle of the frame. However, often uncentering your subject makes a more interesting image. The Rule-of-Thirds is a good composition guide that helps you divide the image frame, uncenters your subject, gives your image more energy, and makes your picture more interesting. Don't always follow the rules, but the Rule of Thirds is one you should research, understand, and use to help you compose your story.

Point of View – Point of view in photography simply means the position from which the camera sees the scene. Are you looking down on the subject? Are you looking up at the subject? How close are you to the subject? Is there anything between you and the subject? Every decision you make about point of view will change how your viewer sees the photo which can make a tremendous difference in your picture. An interesting point of view makes an interesting photo. When capturing your image ... think about bending your knees as well as your mind. Tilt your camera, shoot from above, or below. Too often we capture our scene by raising our camera to our eye at standing height. An all too common point of view your viewers will likely find boring.

Perspective – A photographic image is two-dimensional. To give our viewers a sense of being there in the scene, we need to add the third dimension. We can use various strategies to enhance perspective and the sense of depth in our images. One of the most common types of perspective is linear perspective. It is characterized by parallel lines that converge to a vanishing point (think railroad tracks that converge on the horizon). A wide-angle lens can enhance linear perspective by showing more of the diagonal lines in the foreground. Adding a sense of depth in your image will give your viewer a sense of being there in the story, making your picture much more interesting.



Step 3 – See the Light – Some of the best light can be found near sunrise or sunset, in covered shade, on overcast days, or next to a window indoors. Look for great light and put your subjects in the great light when you can. But often we are presented with light that is not ideal or the light value is far different on our subject and background. One basic way we can deal with difficult light and optimize camera exposure is the use of Exposure Compensation. Exposure Compensation enables you to turn up and down the brightness of your image. Many people may be familiar with this feature on their cell phones. On your camera, use this camera setting in Aperture Priority, Shutter Priority, and Program camera exposure modes to optimize the lighting on your subject. Look it up in your camera manual! Understanding and using Exposure Compensation is probably the most critical camera setting to making great well-lit photographs.

Of course, there are many more tools and techniques we can use to make great pictures. However, these three steps in seeing our great picture before we shoot will go a long way to making your images remarkable ones. Good Shooting, and may the remarkable photos always be yours.

Chuck