

Pre-Shot Essential Questions

Jim Altengarten of exposure36 Photography. Article complements of Apogee Photo Magazine

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As soon as he arrives on location, many a photographer jumps out of his car, sets up his tripod, and starts shooting. He probably has a pre-conceived idea of what to shoot based on photos of the area he's seen on postcards or in guidebooks.

When a participant in one of my workshops behaves this way, I immediately stop the group and gather the members together. I ask them three simple questions: Do you know what you're trying to communicate? Do you know how to meter the scene? Which camera controls are you going to use to interpret the scene?

Click photo below for a larger example.



These questions make each photographer stop to think about what's in front of him rather than wildly taking photos that he might throw away later. There are several aspects of a scene to consider before you place your eye at the viewfinder. Here is a list of starting points that may serve advanced photographers who have been frustrated with their results as well as beginners:

1. Do you know the theme, main subject, and compositional elements of the photo?

The theme of the photo is what you want to communicate to the viewer. One consideration is whether you're using a portrait or landscape orientation for your photo. Since each orientation emphasizes a different view of the subject (for example, a portrait orientation emphasizes the vertical nature of the scene), this should be one of your first decisions.

I selected a vertical format for the image on the left, because that format draws more attention to the dripping water in the scene. A horizontal format would have reduced the distance the dripping water flows and increased the amount of river water visible. A horizontal format would result in more emphasis on the river.

I often recommend that my students carry an empty slide frame in the field. You can hold the frame in either a vertical or a horizontal position to see the difference between them. After a while, you'll train your eye to see in both formats, and you won't need the slide frame any longer. However, a slide frame can help you with your lens selection as well as with your format. If you hold the slide frame an inch from your eye, you'll see the scene as you would if you used a 25mm lens. Four inches from your eye is the equivalent of a 100mm lens.

Another consideration is whether you'll show your subject in its environment with a wide-angle view, isolate the subject from its environment, or select a position somewhere in-between. Showing the subject in its environment could mean placing an elk in a meadow or a person at her work desk. But you have to be careful with wide-angle lenses. They can reveal so much of the environment that the main subject becomes too small to be significant in the scene. It's difficult to communicate how wonderful seeing an elk in a meadow can be when the elk takes up only one percent of the scene.

Every photo has a main subject. The subject can be one element of the scene, or it can be a relationship between various elements of the scene. Whatever scene you select, the main subject must be clearly differentiated from the secondary elements. If the viewer can't recognize the main subject immediately, he/she will become bored and want to move on to another photo. You must, in your own mind, be able to articulate what the important components of the scene are. Everything else in the scene needs to be eliminated or de-emphasized as much as possible. If you find there are more than three dominant elements of the scene that are important to your photo, then you should make more than one photo of that scene. If you emphasize more than three dominant elements in a scene, the viewer is likely to become confused as to what's important.

Compositional considerations include such things as perspective (depth-of-field), placement of the subject (don't always use the Rule of Thirds, or your photos will become predictable), use of frames, a scale indicator, shape/form, color management, lens selection, and texture.

If you don't know the theme, main subject, or compositional elements you will use, don't take the picture. If you don't know what you're shooting, how can your viewer appreciate your results?

When you can identify those components, move on to the next step...

Stayed tuned for part 2 coming up soon in your ACD Photography Tips Newsletters.

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