

Photography

Three points for photography learners

August 12, 2018 | Charles T. Low, Photographer

Two idea-tripods (so, really, six points) with comments on what to do with your new (daunting) digital camera

I like tripods: three legs are the minimum required for a self-standing structure. Four legs are more stable, but not self-levelling; hence the ubiquitous, literal tripod used by many photographers.

I extend the tripod concept to ideas: figurative rather than literal tripods.

The idea-tripod concept helps me to distil my thoughts, to use fewer words (and I need that), and that helps me to communicate better. Three things aren't too many to remember. Three things are probably almost manageable to think about in real time if learning a new skill.



-a real, not figurative, tripod - not a mandatory photography accessory, but I absolutely need one for much of the work I do

For photographic learners, I have two sets of three very basic concepts (but helpful perhaps for anyone to review from time to time). They arise from my personal experience of friends approaching me with variations on the story that they got a new digital camera some time ago, and find it so intimidating that it has remained in a drawer ever since.

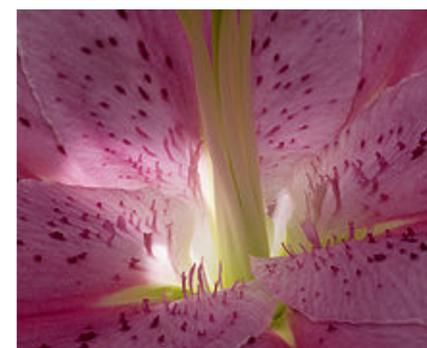
What went wrong?

In the days of film, many people gleefully used to take pictures, of scenery, of memories, of family and friends - and it was wonderful, tremendously enjoyable. Many of them had quite the knack, and produced impressive images. Now, tragically, they have stopped, because they have "progressed" to digital, aware however that somehow they wish to and must restart.

A quick glance through their owners manuals illustrates immediately what may deter some of them: hundreds of pages describing a welter of confusing features and buttons where before, all they had to do was drop in a roll of film, perhaps set an ISO ("ASA" we used to call it), and then start shooting.

My overall advice to those who feel paralyzed by their digital cameras is very simple, and I believe has helped others: **start using the camera.**

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As an owners manual reader myself, I nonetheless say that if it bothers you, *don't read it*. You'll be fine.

For example, I made notes about a friend's digital camera a while back, and here are some of the things that camera could do:

... the wifi capabilities of the camera are simply amazing. It may be that with the right software you could connect to your computer without cables.

It also has a smile mode, a wink mode, and new face mode.

Smile mode: it will take an exposure as soon as it detects a smile. The manual says to remember then to turn it off, or it will keep doing it indefinitely.

Wink mode: it will take an exposure a few seconds after someone in the photo winks. I think it's a way of doing a group selfie.

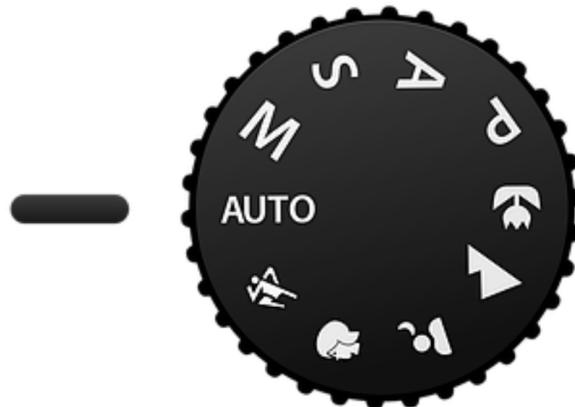
New-face mode: it will wait for a new face to join a group, wait a few seconds, and then take an exposure - another way to do a group selfie. (The old-fashioned way was to use a timer!)

The camera can also identify individual faces, and you can program their names into the menus somewhere, and the camera will recognize them in future photographs and will include the names in the file information.

It goes on and on.

No wonder that some people don't know where to start! The manufacturers don't seem to have figured out that most people bought a quality camera because they want one which can capture high-quality images - end-of-story!

Set the camera on Auto and begin. As you learn, you may wish to move to other modes, but they are not mandatory. If you used to use "A" (for "aperture-priority" (see the [depth-of-field](#) blog) with your film camera, or any other mode, then you can do so with a digital camera too. If you were happy using your film camera on Auto, then that will work with a digital camera too.



You'll be fine ... but note these first three points. You will need:

1. a charged battery (and a spare handy), and we all already know how to charge batteries;
2. a memory card, and I think that most of us can get one of these into our cameras;
3. eventually you will have to figure out how to get the photographs off the card and onto something more permanent. (I prefer a computer to a tablet, and have a whole system of double-back-ups and then annual archiving - not necessary but a good heartache preventer for the inevitable crash. "LOCKSS": lots of copies keeps stuff safe.)

If uploading the photos feels like an obstacle, then ask a friend. We all know the odd geek, not meaning that all geeks are odd (or at least, I hope not!). Obstacle removed!

My second restart-with-digital-photography idea-tripod is not actually particularly specific to digital, although digital photography does have many advantages (see the [digital/film](#) blog) over film.

Here are the second three points:

1. learn EV adjustment;
2. get back further from people;
3. have a mentor.

1/ Exposure Value

"EV" means "exposure value". Despite some variation, depending upon the sophistication of your camera's computerized light-metre, we can think of it as "dumb" - all it "knows" is how much light reaches the sensor. The light-meter will set or recommend the exposure satisfactorily about 90% of the time, but it can get confused. Then some human intervention helps.

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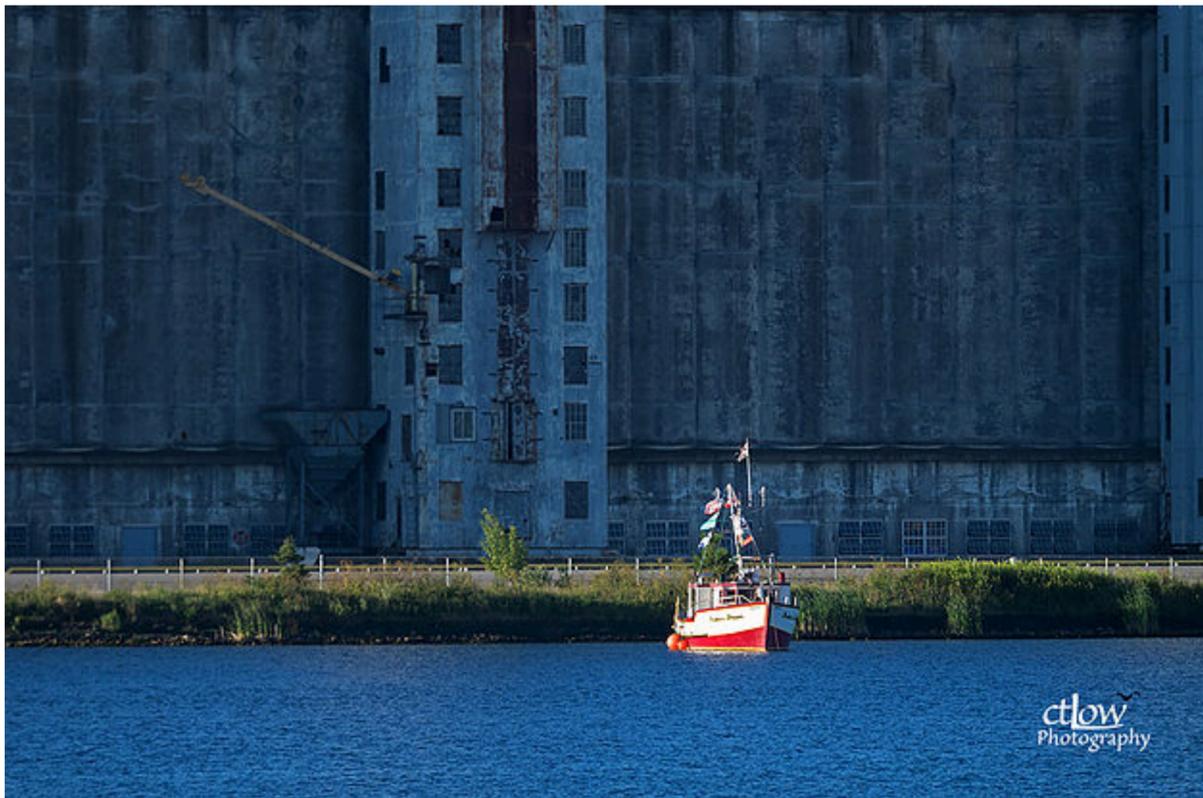
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This yacht at anchor is badly over-exposed, because the dark background confused the camera's light-metre by measuring a dark scene. A correct exposure overall is too bright for the boat.



This was taken with the EV set at "-1", i.e. darker. The boat is better. (Whether you like the rest of it a bit dark or not is up to your individual judgement, but clearly I decided to leave it that way.)



This is what happens more often: a bright background produces an exposure too dark for darker foreground subjects. This is already at an EV of "+1"!



Better - EV of "+3", which is quite unusual!. The background has washed out, but it's only for context, and this is what we chose. (And: congratulations Capt. Norm on attaining your four bars, and thanks so much Christine for entrusting me with the [shoot](#).)

So, you may wish to read your owners manual on this one point. If not, then it's another question for your geek friend who will gladly (perhaps a trifle too smugly) do it for you. Usually, you'll find a little button which looks like this:



-a typical exposure-value button

And then turn a dial or move some arrow-buttons to make the photo brighter or darker, and a little scale will usually display to show you the EV number (e.g. "+1" for a little brighter or "-2" for quite a lot darker). You can leave your camera in some kind of automatic mode and yet adjust the exposure. And you might not have had to leaf through the instructions. Fantastic!

One of the wonderful things about digital cameras is that you can see how it looks before you make the exposure, and then you can see how the exposure came out immediately. Adjust and retake if desired! Nothing to it.

We were able to adjust exposure like that with film cameras too. We just didn't know how well it was working until we got the film developed.



-seeing the exposure adjustment in real time

And by the way that helped me get this:



St. Lawrence River, from [Brockville](#); pre-dawn (no exposure-adjustment at all, as it turned out)

Thinking about exposure adjustments could be a way to get us all thinking a little bit more about the larger topic of light, but that again is nice but completely optional, and not our topic for just now.

The next two points have nothing to do with digital cameras. Photography is still photography, and we need to know when to focus on the technology and when on the art.

2/ Further back

This hearkens back to a previous blog about how we collect light-data with our eyes, but see with our brains. We see people quite close-up all the time, and our brain makes the necessary perspective adjustments, but when the camera records them from a near distance, the face distorts, the nose looks too big and the ears look too far way.



[Peter Bryenton](#) suggested to me today that perhaps the selfie is getting us used to this, but it has long been thought that such a close portrait (of myself) shows the nose too large and the ears too small. My cycling companion (whom I failed to shove out of the shot), looks more normal (in this picture I mean!).

Portraitists have long known to get further back. A photographer's portrait lens used to be said to be a telephoto with a magnification of 1.8 (90 mm on a 35 mm film camera), but that's a tool, not a rule. Using a telephoto lens just makes you put more distance between yourself and the subject, and produces a face which looks more as our brain sees it.



This young woman's photograph was made using roughly 1.5x telephoto magnification, and the facial proportions look about right. Check out by the way the marvellous work she does at [Creek Shore Farms](#), and if you're in the St. Catharines area then you'll want to investigate their organic produce (and friendly service).

Mentor

Almost universally, all great artists have had mentors early on in their careers. I see no reason why this shouldn't apply to photographers as well, whether an occasional snap-shooter or to someone world-famous. I mentioned above the very concrete example of finding a geek, but also by all means find a fellow photographer to compare notes with.

It doesn't have to be a *better* photographer, although by all means find the best you can. By all means get in touch with me, for example, by which I mean "fellow photographer", not "better". I enjoy discussing composition and light, as well as the technical arcana of the craft.

If it were to become very involved or time-consuming, then that's one of the services I offer, but for casual discussions then I simply enjoy doing it, and always learn something myself.

A very pleasant way to bump your skills up quite quickly is on one of my world-renowned [Photo-Walks](#), where a very small group of people allocates a period of time - often just half a day, but everything is negotiable - to head out into the woods or the city with me, and see what's happening with their photography. Participants have enthusiastically found it beneficial in ways which cannot be accomplished as efficiently without that personal, real-time interaction.



Me, being a mentor. (Isn't it obvious?) [Diana](#) of Diana Earle Clay Sculptures could not resist her inner artist, and made this unconventional - but surprisingly appealing - portrait of me. And we had a good day, and made progress.

On a more casual basis, find someone else who enjoys making photographs - we all know such people - and ask them about some of your favourite images - or, more helpfully, about some of your *disappointments*.

By all means: mentor someone else, if you feel able (and if you're asked!).

Now ... having a art-mentor differs from having a geek-mentor, in that it does require enough self-confidence to approach the exercise with humility. (I know that sounds internally-contradictory - it's not.) If all you want is to hear how wonderful you are, then you aren't going to learn anything. (But you are wonderful.)

So, I have presented the things which come up when friends ask me for help with their new digital cameras. Some of the things have nothing to do with digital cameras specifically - it's just that they come up.

To recap:

List #1:

1. put in a battery;
2. put in a memory card;
3. upload the photographs before you lose them!

List #2:

1. learn how to adjust the EV;
2. get farther away from faces;
3. talk with a mentor (one who won't just say "nice work!")

That doesn't sound like too much. Please let me know what you think.

And by all means: make some photographs.

While you're here:

Remember that I make photographs and that I sell photographs.

Almost everything which you see on this web site is for sale. Prices at the time of writing, for example, for an 11x14" fine-art print with a generous white border would start at about \$50, and you can go up or down from there. Check the [rates](#) page. More importantly, check out my [gallery](#).

Book a portrait-sitting - the right frequency with which to commission formal [portraits](#) is a bit more often.

Remember also to leave a comment, or to [contact](#) me. Note that on the main [blog](#) page you can sign up for new-blog notifications. I am very careful and respectful with your privacy.

Thank you so much for reading.

Charles T. Low
Photographer



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David R. Low 2018



Timothy Low 2010

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