

Photography

# Adequate (Exposure) Compensation

January 10, 2019 | Charles T. Low, Photographer

## Mistrust your camera's light meter

I'm going to try to keep this one short and sweet. (Wish me luck!) I am going to over-simplify, glossing over varieties of light-metering such as "average", "centre-weighted" or "spot", and if anyone wishes more detail on those, then you know where to find me.

Camera meters have also long had various "smart" metering features, with which they can give great exposures in atypical situations, without the photographer having to grapple with settings.

Nonetheless, *I see a lot of bad exposures.*

Can I just say that so plainly, in this age of political-correctness?

**I see a lot of bad exposures.** (Many of them are my own, except you will never see them. But it happens to all of us.)

I use the completely-invented figure of 10%. Leave your settings alone, using one of several automatic exposure modes, and 90% of the time, you'll be happy. But I find a 10% failure-rate excessive. (Don't you?)



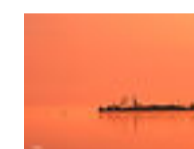
Apologies to the cherished person who made this recent cell-phone photo, but it does illustrate a limitation of even the most modern technology, if it does not allow you control. We had strong back-lighting, and we all ended up a bit too dark. We like having a nice memento of the occasion, and it does provide that.

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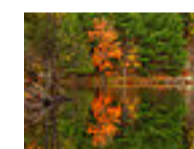
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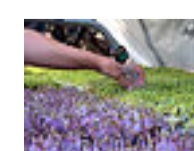
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Me, over-exposed. Again a cell-phone camera (but other cameras do this too), confused I presume by all of the dark in the image.

Happily, we can tame undesirable exposures, with "real" cameras (and sometimes with phone-cameras - different topic), fairly readily. Let me explain.

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## Exposure compensation

*Compensate your exposure.* Pretty all digital cameras have that ability these days, so if you use some sort of automatic setting, but an individual photo comes out too dark or too bright, then adjust it.

Pardon me for repeating myself. I have touched on this previously, [here](#) and [here](#).

With digital cameras, you can tell if you like the camera's chosen exposure on the camera's own view-screen, either before or after you made the exposure. (If you only figure it out *after*, then you have to take another shot.)

You might have to dig out your owner's manual, just for this one little thing. You might not: the button almost always looks like this:

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You may or may not have to hold the button down while turning some dial or pressing some other button. A little scale will pop up somewhere, and you can make your exposure brighter (e.g. +1) or darker (e.g. -1). Often, the setting remains on the screen until you reset it to zero, and remember to do that when you have finished.

(Another way around poor exposures requires the use of full-manual mode, controlling ISO, aperture and shutter speed explicitly yourself. I will leave that for another day.)

Note:

**this is the best piece of advice that I have to give!!!**

I use exposure-compensation constantly when making photographs. It's simple, and makes a huge difference. (Impress your friends!)

There! **We're done.** *You can use exposure-compensation.*

**Great!**

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## But may I show you some examples?

### Even light



-exposure compensation "0". The camera got it right. (I chose the aperture and ISO, and it chose the shutter speed.) There are dark areas in the photograph (more than at first meet the eye), but the light is generally even from corner to corner - minimal shadow, for example.



Most of this scene looks a little dark - appropriately, or at least, *intentionally* - except for one lighter-toned door; but the camera got it right without any input from me. Check out [Balleycanoe](#).

### Spot-light

Think of a spot-lit performer on a dark stage. The camera won't usually cope very well with that exposure, if left to its own devices. I don't have any photographs of my own quite like that, but these will serve to illustrate the point.



-minus 1 stop, i.e. decreasing the exposure. Otherwise the foreground would get too bright (because the camera's light meter aims for neutral), and the sunrise - a spot of light - would flare too much. That's the spot-light dilemma and its solution: close down the exposure.



-minus 1.5 stops, i.e. decreasing the exposure. Otherwise the light-meter will set an exposure to make the blacks look grey; not a typical "spot-light" image, but the idea remains that the scene is mostly very dark, with a few small areas of bright light. (Check out [Upper Canada Village](#).)

### Back-light



-plus 1/2 stop, i.e. increasing the exposure only a little, to deal with the twin problems of back-lighting and a bright subject. Note that the light comes from the left and leaves the side of the ship in shadow, against a bright sky and bright water, so the camera's meter will try to make the scene darker; note also all of the white, a neutral exposure tending to make whites come out looking too grey; in this case, it only took +0.5 stops of extra exposure, but the photograph looks better that way than with no adjustment. (Check out [Chi-Cheemaun](#).)

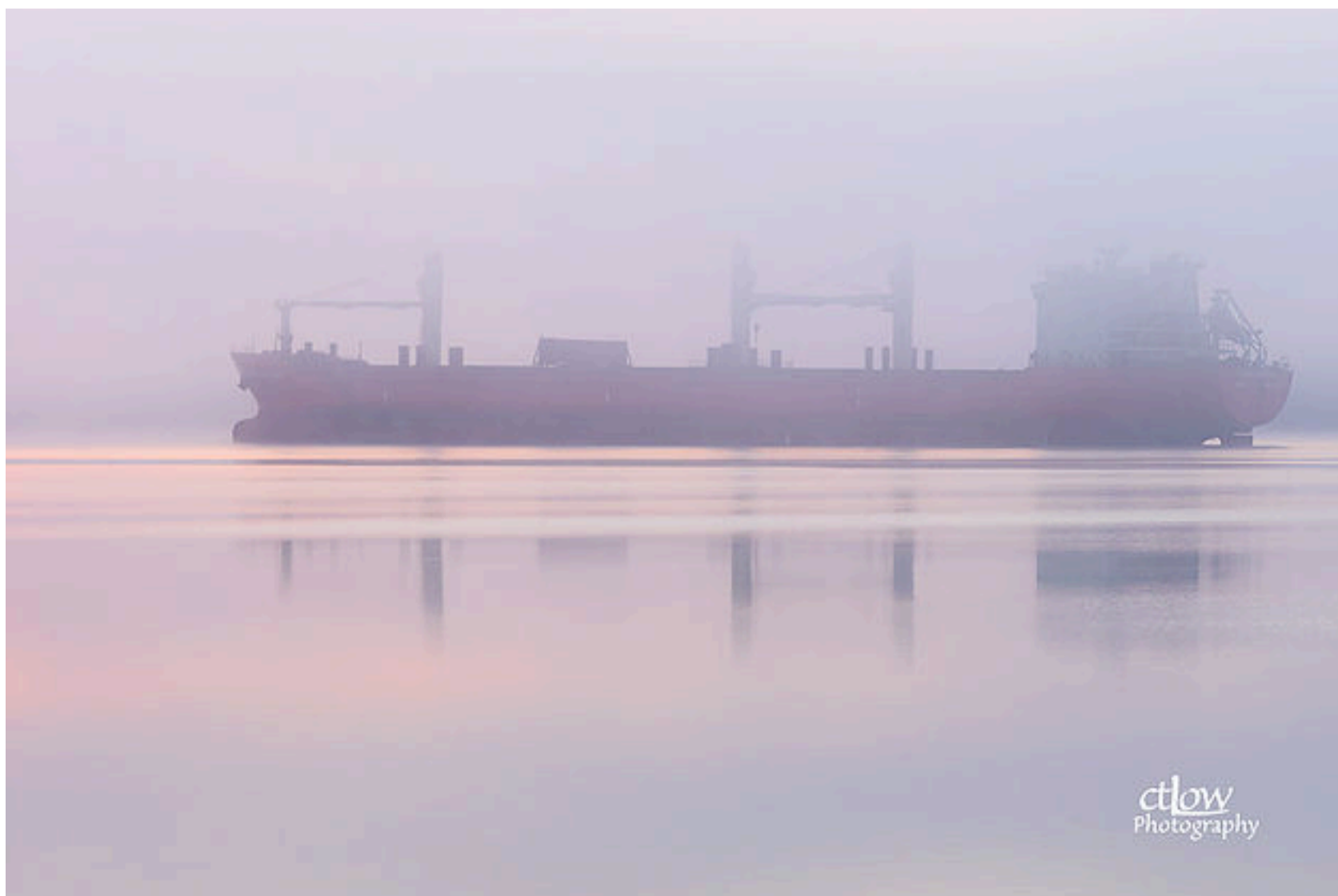
### Bright scenes



-plus 1 stop, i.e. increasing the exposure, quite similar to the above, not identical in that the ship is dark. The bright sky and water will have the camera, designed to produce a neutral exposure, make them seem unnaturally dark, because: they're bright, not neutral! Neutral would not look right. But in this case that would bring the double-whammy of making the dark ship's hull even darker, losing detail. So, this highlights both the problem and the approach to bright scenes ... and back-lit scenes: open up the exposure.



-plus 1 stop, i.e. increasing the exposure. Snow gets often touted as the quintessential example of a bright scene, along with bright, sandy beaches (not usually together!). Remember that the camera meter aims for a *neutral* brightness (i.e. grey, not white), but a scene made up of snow has a *bright* brightness! So, whatever the camera sets as the exposure, the exact numbers are less relevant here than the concept that we need to over-ride that, and let more light into the scene.



-plus 1 stop, i.e. increasing the exposure. Fog confuses photographers by it's brightness. We don't think of it as bright, but what we think has no effect on its actual brightness. On a simple optical level, if you let the camera meter have its way, it will often come out too dark.

## Dark scenes



-minus 1 stop, i.e. decreasing the exposure. These odd and unpredictable things happen: at a neutral exposure, this looked too bright. The black in the boot, and perhaps in the rock, isn't surprising, but the green, if brighter, loses its richness, its saturation. That leads into another topic, not for discussion here today, about when you might veer towards dark or light ... perhaps the subject of a future blog.

## Unexpectedly neutral exposures



-no exposure compensation. I would have thought this an overall bright scene, with the snow and ice, the sky, only a thin line of dark trees crossing the image - but this worked well without any further input from me. To me, it looks brighter than the photograph of autumn leaves, above - but apparently is not! Often, you just have to experiment!



-no exposure compensation. Again, this looks bright, to me. But the camera metered it at neutral, and that turned out well.



-no exposure compensation. This dark street metered well as neutral. It must be all of the lights and reflections. But it looks dark to me! Doesn't it look dark to you? I tried several exposures, and could work most easily with the unadjusted one.





-no exposure compensation. The sun is actually in this photo (albeit behind the sail), which normally would cause the camera to perceive lots of light, and to decrease the exposure, making everything else very dark. But, I had the camera light-meter set to "smart", so it helped me. Also, much of the sky and water are quite dark. in the photo, although not jarringly so, I don't think - it's still quite apparent (at least to my eye) that this is under full, mid-day sun. I would have predicted having to increase the exposure.

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### Other thoughts

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#### Bracket

Bracketing means to take several exposures, for later versatility in the digital darkroom.

I often have my camera on a tripod, with a cable-release, so it does not move. I can set it to take multiple shots in quick succession, "auto-bracketing" to get, for example, a neutral exposure, and a +1 and a -1 exposure. Then at my leisure, back at the studio, I can choose which I prefer (or blend them).

#### Compensation extremes

I note that most of my exposure compensations are in the 1-stop range, over or under. I less often get to "2", and vanishingly rarely beyond that. But do what you have to do.

#### Phone cameras

Not my area, although I do use them, but on my cell-phone, if the exposure doesn't look right, I just touch the spot on the screen which I want adjusted. It doesn't solve all my problems, but it both i) focusses on and ii) exposes (at least a bit better) for the spot I touched. Nothing could be simpler - well worth trying.

#### Post-processing

"Editing" is the simpler term. With all of the marvels of modern technology, editing can shield us from

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even fairly egregious exposure errors. It's still better to get it right, in the camera, plus not all of us do any editing anyway. All of the above photos underwent editing, which can muddy the waters of understanding and illustration, but the principles stand.

## Finally

In conclusion, I just find it jarring when I see unintentionally very dark photographs (or, less often, unintentionally bright). There's a button for that on the camera. Push the button, turn a dial. It really is that easy.

Often that might mean letting *areas* of the image go very dark or very bright. Every photograph differs, but my own opinion is that it's usually better to get some of it properly exposed rather than none of it.

**That's my request. When you have time, be prepared to compensate the camera's automatic exposures.**

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## 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](#). I would love to provide you with a work of fine-art photography, or to discuss a commission.

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Thank you so much for reading.



**Charles T. Low  
Photographer**



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