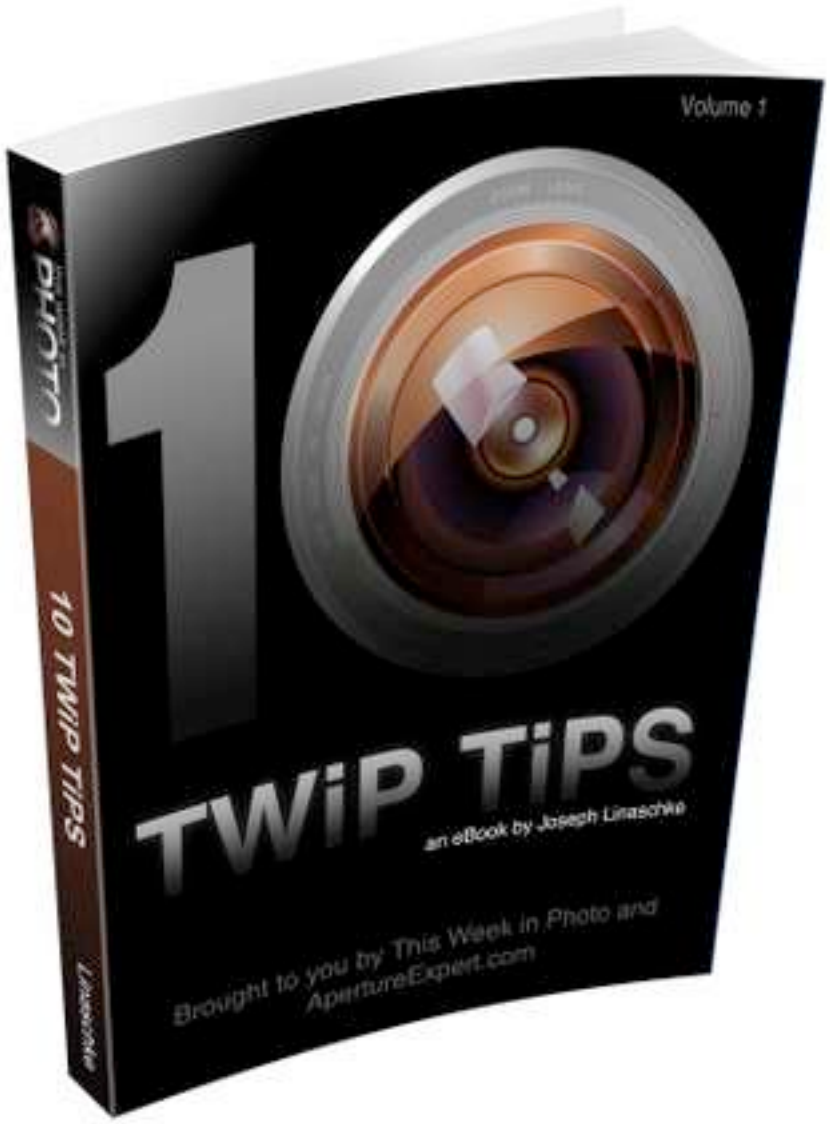

"10 TWiP Tips"

for making better pictures

brought to you by This Week in Photography and ApertureExpert.com

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#1 Carrying the camera (take that lens cap… off!)

How do you carry your camera? Over your neck, over your shoulder, or across your chest? Pointing out, or in? While there aren't many rules in photography that can't be broken, how you carry your camera is, in the minds of many, one of them. Consider the following holds…

Tourist :(

Closer…

Photographer!

The over-the-neck is the "tourist" hold. It's heavy on your neck, and bounces off your belly with every step. There's no way this is comfortable for more than about 30 seconds, especially if you're carrying a heavier camera and lens.

In the middle shot, over-the-shoulder is a much better place for it, but notice how the lens is pointing out? It's on backwards. The lens is likely to knock into something, and the grip is on the wrong side—at your back. That makes it harder to grab the camera when you need it.

In the final photo, it's in the best position. Lens is pointing down, away from passing people, buildings, or anything else you don't want your glass to come into contact with. And the grip is facing forward, so you can quickly and easily grab the camera and swing it up into position.

To take it a step further, make the strap longer and sling it across your chest "bandolier" style. This has the added advantage of making it exceedingly difficult for anyone walking by to liberate you of your camera. You can also wear a jacket over it quite comfortably.

Finally… leave the lens cap OFF. If you have to remove the cap and turn the camera on every time you want to take a picture, you'll miss more shots than you'll get. Keep the lens shade on instead—besides keeping light from crossing the lens, adding unwanted reflections and refractions (which is what it is designed for), it will protect the lens from bumps and bounces.

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#2 Holding the camera

One of the physical requirements to getting good photos is keeping the camera steady. While naturally a certain amount of motion is permitted (if it weren't we'd always have to shoot with a tripod, because NO ONE is a rock), the less we move the camera while shooting, the better. Both how you hold your camera, and how you stand, are critical in keeping the camera steady.

In the first photo, the arms are sticking out like chicken wings. This provides zero stability—try it! Notice as well the way the left hand is on the lens—fingers over the top, thumb below. This actually *encourages* more movement into the camera as the zoom or focus is rotated!

Now look at the image to the right. The elbows are tucked in, arms pressing against the body, adding stability and rigidity. The left hand is reversed, forming a flat surface for the lens or camera body to rest on. You don't need your entire arm to twist the lens zoom and focus controls—just your fingers. Let the weight of the camera sit on the left hand, which is braced against your body already. Your right hand is now looser and can more easily move around the camera, pushing buttons and adjusting dials.

Also, don't jam the shutter button—squeeze it. Gently push down, feeling the resistance as it meets the focus point, then keep squeezing to make the shot. Don't immediately rip your finger off the trigger, either—if you're shooting a slower shutter speed, that can add motion on the way up. Release as gently as you pushed.

Finally, get in a good, solid stance. Legs apart, knees bent slightly. The same lesson you've learned in probably any sport in the world applies here—get your body solid!

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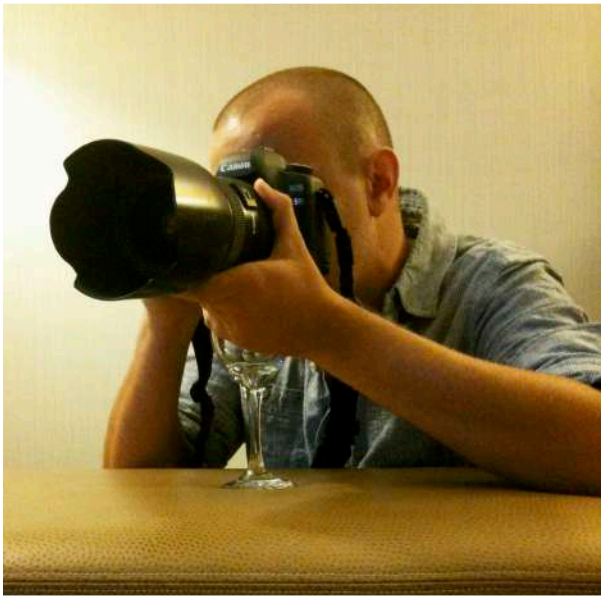
#3 Steadying the camera

How many times have you taken a photo in a low-light situation, such as indoors at a restaurant or party, or outside a night, and gotten a blurry picture because the camera moved? But you don't want to use the flash, because that would wash out the beautiful ambiance that you're trying to capture. At that point you're thinking, "a tripod sure would be handy"… but you don't have one. And let's face it, most people don't want to carry a tripod around everywhere they go!

However, if you get creative about it, you can find places to stabilize your camera everywhere you look. The top of a fence or low wall. The hood of a car. The table you're sitting at. The back of a chair. To stabilize a camera for a slow shutter speed image, you don't always have to have it 100% solid like it's on a tripod—often simply stabilizing it by resting or leaning it on a solid surface, while you're still holding it, is sufficient. Consider the following two scenarios.



On the left, the camera is resting on a wine glass. If you like taking pictures at dinner parties, this is one of the best tricks. You may not even be using a dSLR, but just a little pocket camera. Set the camera on top of a glass, put on the self timer, and take your hands off. Solid! Or just use it as is being done here, to add a little extra stability to the camera.

You can't always find something to rest the camera *on*, but you can usually find something to lean it *against*. In the example on the right, the camera is being pushed into a lamp post. The camera has a reasonably right-angle on it between the body and the lens; nuzzle a lamp post into that corner, and apply pressure on the other side to hold it in place. You'll find it's much more stable than hand holding it, and can often get shots exceeding even one second in duration this way.

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#4 Get high (or low)

A common mistake people make when photographing, well, anything, is that they forget that they can crouch down close to the floor, or stand on a chair, or in any other way change their perspective. This is extremely common in looking at photographs of children or pets. Adults, who usually have the camera in hand, often shoot from their own eye-level—instead of the eye-level of their subject.

But it doesn't just apply to photos of people or animals. Anything that's at a different level than the your eyes can often be photographed better by getting level with it.

In the following two photos, notice the difference of shooting these flowers on the ground. The first is at eye-level, and the second, at flower level. Both are shot at the same aperture (f/2.8). so the difference in depth of field is due to the camera being closer to the main subject.

#5 "P" is not for Perfect!

All digital cameras have a mode called **P**, which stands for **Program**. That's a techie way of saying "fully automatic". And if you're shooting in this mode, you may as well be shooting with a point-and-shoot camera, because the camera won't be taking advantage of one of the greatest assets on a dSLR; the fast lens and larger sensor that allow you to get the holy grail of good photos—shallow depth of field.

When you shoot in **P**, the camera will select a mid-range aperture, probably around f/8, or even f/11, because that's "safe". Even if you don't focus accurately, as long as your subject is nearly in focus, the image will probably still be sharp—because the depth of field (how much appears in focus) is quite large. The problem is that when you photograph a subject against a busy background, and the background is mostly in focus, the subject doesn't "pop". What you want is for the subject to pop out of the background. And the only way to do that is to get a shallow depth of field, throwing the background out of focus. And the way to do *that* is to set the camera to **Aperture Priority** (**A** on Nikon, **Av** on Canon), and to choose the largest aperture possible (which is actually the smallest number… on most lenses that will be around f/2.8, or f/3.5, or f/4). The camera will figure out the rest of the settings (shutter speed, and on some cameras, even ISO) for you. You'll have to be quite careful that what you focus on is actually in focus, but it's well worth it.

Another non-P mode is **Shutter Priority** (**S** on Nikon; **Tv** on Canon) which allows you to choose a slower or faster shutter speed. This can be useful when trying to freeze motion (i.e. 1/1000th), or to show motion (i.e. 1/30th) by allowing the subject to blur as it crosses the frame.

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#6 Filling the frame

It's easy to walk up to a scene, raise the camera and snap a photo from where you happened to be standing the moment you thought "I'd like a picture of that". It takes only slightly more effort to think about the picture you'll be capturing, look through the lens and consider if you might be better off moving a bit closer—which more often than not, will help the picture dramatically.

Consider the two pictures below of the exact same thing. The one on the left is a snapshot. The one on the right; a photograph. On the left, we see the name of the monument, the three statues, and the flag. We also see the clutter of the street and some kind of antenna tower in the background. To make it even worse, the photo was taken from standing height. On the right, we also see the name, three statues and flag—but none of the rest. The camera angle is skewed, adding interest and tension to the image, and the flag, blowing in the wind, is positioned behind the soldier's head in such a way that it provides a backdrop to the statue without hiding the nationality of the flag.

Getting closer to your subject is nearly always a good thing. Do you really need that much space around your subject's head in the photo? Is there a reason for it; are you showing something important in the background? Are you revealing something of interest back there, or is it just cluttering the frame? Ask yourself these questions when looking through the lens, and chances are, you can afford to take a step or two closer.

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#7 Framing the Shot

A fun technique in photography is find a way to position the camera such that your subject is naturally framed by something else in the environment. It could be a tree branch, a lamp post, the side of a building, a fence… nearly anything. It doesn't have to be in focus—and often serves better as a framing element if it's not. Consider the photos below. On the left, a fine image of Parliament, albeit a bit boring. Not withstanding the horribly washed out sky, it's pretty much a snapshot. However on the right, we still see interesting elements of the building, and the statue is much more prominent, however the image is far more intriguing because it's being framed by the very fence that's keeping us from getting any closer (yes Canadians, I know I could have walked around the fence… but it makes a better story this way :).

If the photo you're about to take seems like it could use a little more interest, stop and look around for something to shoot through. Quite often that little extra step can make all the difference towards capturing – and keeping – your viewers attention. A frame can quite literally draw the viewers eye into the scene and hold it there, directing their attention at the subject matter itself.

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#8 Making the foreground and background work together

Quite often the subject you want to shoot can't be moved, and when that's the case, there's more often than not something behind it that's just "in the way". One technique to hide the offending matter is to shoot with a very shallow depth of field, like in the "P is not for Perfect!" chapter above. However sometimes that background object can be quite interesting itself, and with some careful camera placement, you can find a way to make it work with your foreground subject.

There are certainly no hard rules here in how to position something in the background. You may want elements to cross each-other because it makes for an interesting play of shapes, or you may want to avoid crossing so you can see everything clearly. Take the two photos below for example. The image on the left shows the giant spider sculpture "Maman" and the church behind it. This is, again, an eye-level made photo, and at such a wide angle that there's loads of other uninteresting things cluttering up the picture. While there may well be an angle to capture the spider without the church or any other building in the background, the long legs of the spider are such a unique element that they beg to be placed against something else—but in an interesting, uncluttered way.

Look at the photo to the right. The steeples on the church are carefully positioned under the arches of the legs, and the flag is rising out of the corner of the frame. Both church and flag are slightly out of focus; not so much that you can't tell what they are, but enough to separate them from the spider.

It's a fun and playful way to combine background and foreground elements. Again there are no rules here, so if you find yourself with a background that's "in the way", find an angle that turns it into your advantage!

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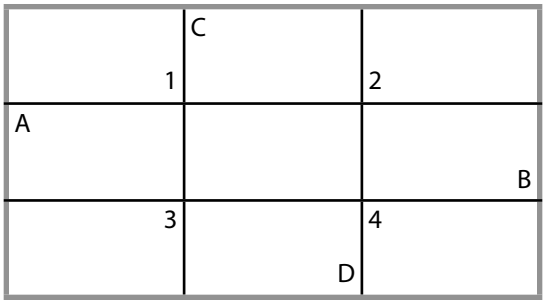
#9 "Rule" of thirds

The "Rule of thirds" was designed as a general guideline of where to place (and not to place) objects in your scene. Like all good rules, this one is meant to be broken—but with care.

The idea is simple. Draw lines through your scene, vertically and horizontally, dividing it into thirds. A top, middle and bottom third, as well as a left, center, and right third—like this.



Horizon lines in your scene should fall roughly around the upper or lower horizontal lines (A&B), and any major vertical lines (a big tree, a building, etc.) should fall along either two vertical lines (C&D). If you have a subject such as a person or animal in the scene, they should fall roughly on one of the four intersecting points (1, 2, 3 or 4).

If something is just smack in the middle of the scene, the image will probably be be pretty boring. Consider these nearly identical photos—the one on the right has much more impact.

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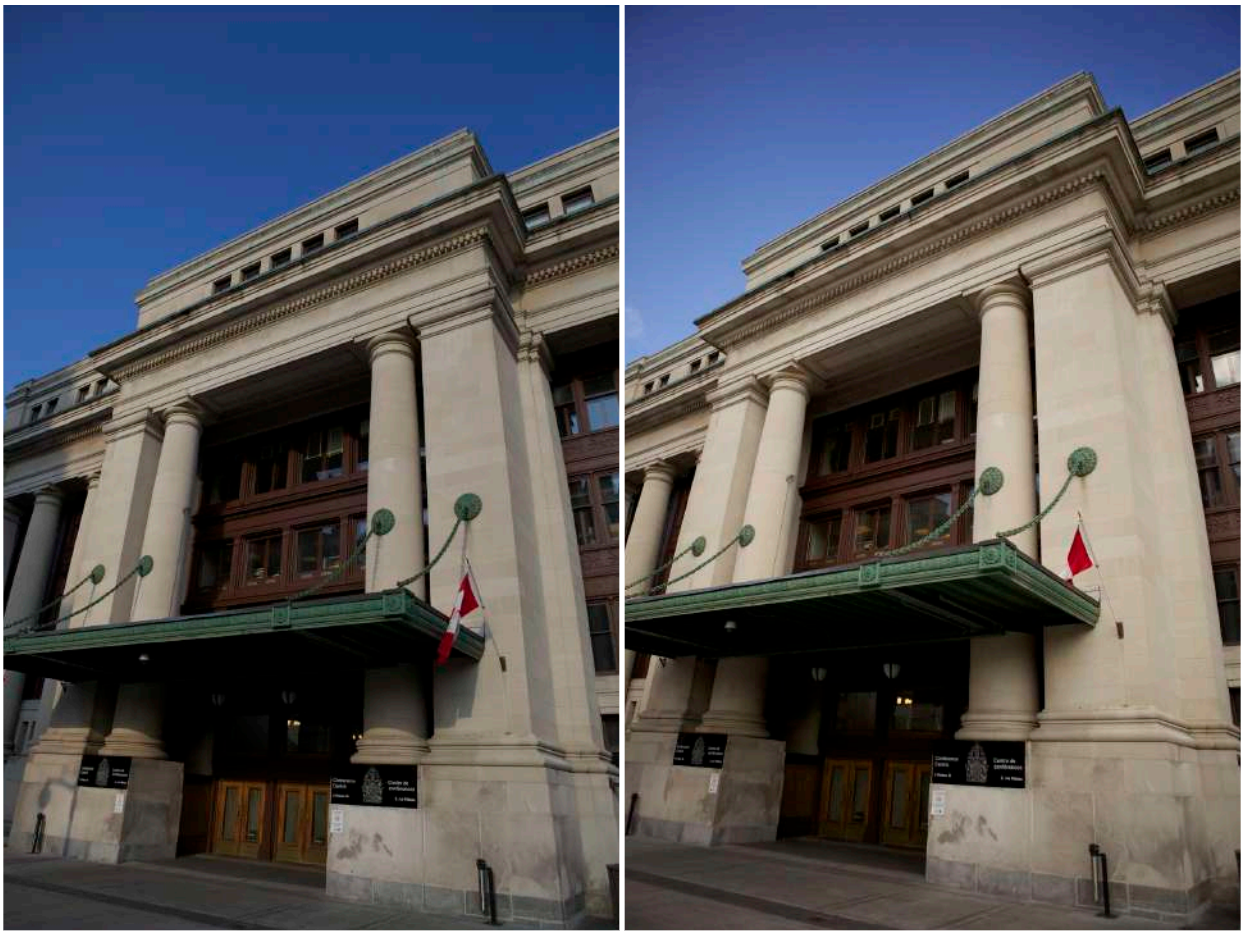
#10 High Noon is not your friend

There are two times of day that are fantastic for taking pictures—about an hour after sunrise, and an hour before sunset. Other than that, the sun is usually too high, and too harsh. The shadows cast are hard-edged and very dark, and the sun makes extremely bright highlights and reflections on anything polished or shiny (metal, glass, marble), making it very difficult to capture any details.

Photographers employ all kinds of tricks to counteract the harsh light of the midday sun. For example, they use diffusors to soften light, reflectors to bounce light back into shadows, and flashes or strobes to bring their own light to the table. But nothing competes with the soft glowing beauty of the sun near the horizon.

Of course we can't always limit our shooting to those times of day. A cloudy day can help tremendously, and if you have the time, waiting for a cloud to pass in front of the sun can make all the difference in the world. Consider the two photos below. On the left, hard shadows under the green awning and roof. On the right, the same sun with a cloud in front—softening up the shadows, letting us see details where before there were none.



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