



WHY CAMERA GEAR DOESN'T MATTER

Quick Guide by Stacey Hill



"I need to upgrade my camera, what should I get?"

"I'm thinking about getting a new lens. What do you recommend?"

"Do I need to go full frame?"

"My phone has a camera in it, why isn't that good enough?"

Go into one of the many photography discussion groups online on any day of the week and it will have questions like this in it. There are heaps of responses, discussions, and arguments over which brand is better and which lens is best for whatever reason. People can get quite heated on the subject of gear, but the one thing that ties everyone together is the idea that *YOU CAN'T HAVE TOO MUCH GEAR!!*


It's called GAS (Gear Acquisition Syndrome) and it is this Holy Grail of thought: "If I get new shiny toy X, then my photography will magically be better."

Occasionally you even see posts from people disappointed because their new full-frame camera is now taking WORSE shots than their other one. They haven't properly set it up or learned how to use it, but that is the camera's fault, of course.

Well I am here to tell you a secret...

Your camera gear doesn't matter.

gasps of horror from the audience! and all the voices start with "But what about...?"

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Photograph by Stacey Hill

What was a fairly plain loaf of bread is transformed with some careful props and styling and a fresh sprinkle of flour.

INSTANCES WHERE THE GEAR MATTERS

Yes, there are absolutely situations where a specific piece of equipment is necessary to achieve a certain shot. For example:

- For extreme close-ups, a macro lens or sufficient alternative is required.
- For wildlife and birds where the subjects are at a distance (for yours and their safety), a long lens is necessary.
- Long exposures require filters to modify the light and give you nice, soft waterfalls and water effects.
- Tripods are required to keep the camera steady.
- Sport/action shots usually need a long lens.
- Wedding/portraits need a high-quality fast lens for good light performance in low-light conditions and a body with good low noise performance at a higher ISO.
- Astrophotography has specific lens requirements as well as technical demands with shooting (on a tripod), an intervalometer for long exposures, or exposure stacking etc.

There are many situations where you can only achieve a particular image with a specific piece of hardware. We all know this as photographers; it's one of the reasons why GAS exists. There is always something new, shiny, and usually more expensive than we can afford to tempt us.

Yet what about all the OTHER elements that make up creating an image that gear is only adjunct to (i.e. we use the gear in our process to achieve our images). Gear is **not** the only factor that determines what the final image will look like.



Key Lesson: There will always be situations where a specific technical requirement exists, but outside of that there is still a lot of other factors at play.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

Yes, this shot was taken on a 100mm macro lens, but until I lay down on a snow back – choosing to have the sun backlight these crystals, and spending an hour shooting – I never would have got this shot.

CONVERSATION WITH A NON-PHOTOGRAPHER

A few years ago I was showing some shots to a lady who was admiring one of my few sunrise shots. She commented, "Wow, you must have a really good camera." I do have a pretty good camera, but I get really tired of having my personal contribution to the process totally overlooked. So this was my reply:

"Yes, it's a fantastic camera, I don't have to do anything at all. I can stay in bed and it magically takes itself down to the beach, sets itself up, and takes the shot. All by itself."

I said this with a straight face but with a slight tone of sarcasm, and yet her reply I should have seen coming, but I didn't, was:

"Really? That's amazing, I didn't know they could do that!"

I sighed and explained I was joking and we carried on.

My point – that she had entirely missed – was that without the photographer my camera does NOT function as a separate entity. It doesn't go off and have adventures by itself and come back with great photos. I can't sleep in while it goes off and shoots a sunrise (although I wish it did some mornings!).



Key Lesson: Other people have NO IDEA about what it takes to be a photographer and make an image.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

An image inspired by shots seen on Pinterest, I made the background, laid out the spoons, carefully sprinkled the salt, and only then picked up the camera.

SOME OF THE REASONS WHY YOUR GEAR DOESN'T MATTER


- When you go into a camera shop, all the different models don't jump up and down going "me, me, me!" If you buy your gear, you probably do some level of research or ask someone's advice or recommendation. For most general photography, the brand you buy doesn't matter, and even the most recent cellphones have pretty impressive cameras on them now. But you choose what you end up getting, not the gear.
- The camera doesn't decide what the subject will be. Whether you go out to do a landscape or flowers or birds or architecture, you decide what you are pointing the camera at.
- Unless you shoot on full Auto mode, the camera doesn't choose the settings you use. It doesn't decide what F stop or shutter speed you are going to use.
- Unless you have a fixed lens camera, the choice of lens is not dictated by the camera (unless you only have one, then hey).
- It doesn't put itself on a tripod, or mount a filter on the front.
- You are the person who might go without that extra

coffee every day for a year so you can afford a trip overseas to somewhere exotic to shoot.

- The camera doesn't make the call to haul itself out of bed and drive in the dark to a special sunrise spot.

There are many more reasons and examples of other things that impact the image and have nothing to do with the gear at all.

Why do we put so much attention on what the gear is capable of and completely overlook the important elements that the person holding the gear also contributes to the final image?

 **Key Lesson:** There are lots of other elements that go into making your final image. Some are creative, some are choices, and some are decisions. Many happen long before the camera is even turned on.

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Photograph by Stacey Hill

ICM (Intentional Camera Movement). I didn't need to buy any new gear and have a whole new creative world open to me.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

I rarely shoot backlit, but the delicate beauty of this poppy and the angle of the sun aligned nicely.

HOW THE PHOTOGRAPHER REALLY MATTERS

- You are the one planning the exciting vacation, deciding where to go and at what time of year, which places to visit, and which things you might want to see and photograph. You are the one saving all your extra cash to afford it, often going without luxuries to do so.
- It's you that decides the image composition (portrait/landscape, close in or pulled back), what the subject is, and what aperture or shutter speed to use for the desired creative outcome.
- You choose the subject, decide the composition, choose where you will shoot from, decide from what height/angle, and choose which settings are used.
- You make the creative choices. Will it be macro or shot with a very wide open aperture for a blurred background? Will you use a long telephoto lens for extra compression or isolation? Will you try a different look with an ultrawide or fisheye lens, or even an old vintage lens with interesting bokeh? The gear you use and the combination of it (i.e. body/lens/accessories) is entirely up to you.
- It's you that makes the sacrifice to the early alarm clock to get the sunrise shots.
- You load up the gear, don hiking boots, load up a drink bottle and head off for an adventure. As well as the great shots, you also earn your blisters and sore feet.
- A food photographer might spend hours baking in the kitchen to create tasty treats which then need to be styled and propped before the shoot. All the work goes into making the scene from scratch; the camera only captures the end result.
- A portrait photographer might have to dabble in hair or makeup, and you absolutely need to have full control of your gear to modify and shape the light.
- Maternity/newborn photographers will have to understand personal styling and hair/makeup/clothing. Set design, staging, and lighting for newborn shots is an art form all of itself, and the camera only comes out at the end of the process.
- A wedding photographer probably has to have a bag full of tricks and emergency supplies to cope with any last-minute drama or wardrobe failure, plus you have to wrangle all of the people on what is often a stressful day. The ability to keep calm and still get the outcomes the client wants have nothing to do with what brand of camera is in your bag!



Photograph by Stacey Hill

Three hours' drive from home, up before sunrise, dress in cold winter gear for a -6°C hoar frost, and yes I took my camera too.

These are, of course, just a few of the ways that the photographer makes decisions and choices that affect the way the image will look.

There are so many creative choices that the photographer will make: high key or low key, black and white, cool or warm tones, abstract, low to the ground or eye level, or morning/daytime/evening light. But none of these reference your gear at all. These are all things you may even decide before you even pick up the camera.

So much of creating an image is visualizing the image in our heads. Once we have a concept or idea in place, then we need to put in place the required circumstances or situations to make that image happen.

It might mean a lot of saving to afford the trip to Patagonia or Alaska, or getting up early every

morning for months in winter to get the perfect sunrise or get lucky with a hoar frost.

Astro means a lot of late nights with limited sleep in often cold conditions. If you are a birder, then traveling around the world to get your list can be very expensive and time consuming. Getting properly fit before a trip to Everest Base Camp or hiking up a mountain takes a lot of time, especially if you need altitude training.

I was shooting in a public garden one day and a young child was chasing some ducks around, being cute, and his mum was clicking away with a camera, from a standing-up position. I wandered over and mentioned that if she got down at eye level with the child the shots would be different – more intimate and with the child's point of view. Hopefully she got some good images from trying that.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

This was inspired by my camera oddly exposing a shot when my Lensbaby was loaded on the front. I was able to replicate it in Lightroom for pleasing effect.

It can be something as simple as changing where you are in relation to your subject that makes the difference.

Do any of these things take into account what brand your gear is? Does it matter if you have a full-frame/crop/point and shoot/cellphone camera or how much you spent on your gear? Does it matter how shiny it is, what lens you shoot with, or what your settings are?

In general, no. If you are going hiking a lot, you might choose to opt for the lighter 4/3 brand of camera to save weight, but if you never take it out and use it, what is the point?

Putting a portrait client at ease and helping them to relax so you can get natural interaction has no relation to the logo on your gear.

Will a dog sit still and smile for the treats patiently just because you have a Brand X camera? Does a fretful toddler care you are shooting in manual mode? Nope!



Key Lesson: If you are creating with your whole being, and bringing all of yourself into your image, then the equipment you use is merely a tool in the hands of a skilled artist.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

The time taken to lay out a flatlay shot can never be underestimated.

EDITING IS THE FORGOTTEN SKILL

For those of us shooting in RAW, it means your image needs to be 'developed' digitally within the computer.' You can make a great image, but the editing can still let it down or not bring it to its full potential.

After you have taken the shot, downloaded it onto your computer, and got it into your software weapon of choice, there is nothing your camera gear does to affect how the image will look. Yes, there might be some technical limitations or issues, such as perspective adjustments for architecture etc.

But beyond that, anything done to the digital file is a fully creative process input only by the person editing the shot. And this can have a radical difference to how the final image will look. You can completely change the color tone, style, mood, and feel of an image via editing.

Many photographers see it as a necessary evil; some don't edit at all. Some spend hours perfecting every pixel on the image, and many of us do the best we can with the skills and time we have to get the best outcome we can.


A lot can be changed in an edit and the frame that the camera shot can end up being vastly different from the final edited creation.


For some images you might actually plan the type of edit as part of your creative process so you shoot specifically for that. I do that in my black and white images wherever possible.

Maybe you have a certain style or aesthetic, so your images will always encompass that as part of your shooting process, and that's also reflected in your editing.

Some of us just wing it by the seat of our pants and see what we end up with!

Either way, whether an image looks better in black and white or color is not affected by the logo on your camera strap.

 **Key Lesson:** Editing can have a significant impact on the final image and totally change the mood/tone/feel. Yet this all happens AFTER you press the shutter button!

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Photograph by Stacey Hill

Another ICM shot. All this takes is the time to go out and play with your camera.

CONCLUSION

For some people, it is almost blasphemous to state that their precious camera gear is not the most important thing in creating an image. For those people, I ask you to put your camera gear on the floor in the middle of your lounge, unzip the bag, sit down on the sofa and say, "Okay camera, go shoot." Sit there for a while and see what happens!

Surprise! Nothing extraordinary happened. Because until you, the photographer, picks up your camera, imagines a concept or idea, undertakes the steps needed to create it, sets up the necessary elements for the shot, takes the shot and edits it, there is no image.

And in that long list of things you need to do, the one click of the shutter is really only a small part of the whole image creation process.

I've seen people create wonderful imagery with a phone, and I have seen people with thousands of dollars of top-end gear create technically perfect, entirely soulless unengaging images.

If you have a will, an intent, a drive to create, to see the world and work to replicate it through your own personal lens, then the tools you use to do that are just one piece of the equation.

I encourage you to be brave, take some risk with your creative ideas, and try something you haven't done before. Try panning, long exposures, intentional camera movement, and zoom bursts. Try shooting food or still life. Tag along at a wedding shoot. Volunteer at an event. Go out after dark with a torch and have fun lightpainting. Sit quietly in a garden and see the flowers and insects from a different perspective.

There are plenty of opportunities to try new things that don't need to cost any extra money. Many of them you can do quite likely with a lot of the gear you already have (especially if you have collected a bit of stuff by now).

The thing that is MOST likely to improve your photography? Do the work. Put the hours in shooting. Experiment, take risks, and try new things. Invest time in your own education; there is so much free content just on YouTube alone.

Consider not buying the next body upgrade. Maybe take a vacation instead!

[?] Quick Q&A:

Q: Does my cellphone camera count?

A: Yes, absolutely. It may have some technical limitations, but cellphone camera technology is well advanced and there are many accessories you can get to extend the capability.

Q: But it's all about the numbers and the technical stuff, isn't it?

A: For some people, yes that is their approach to photography. Others are at a more creative end of the spectrum, and most fall in the middle. There is room for everyone in photography.

Q: But I really WANT to upgrade my camera!

A: Ok, well if you can afford it, good. If it will genuinely give you new features and functions that will benefit your photography, excellent.

Q: If I don't have the new thing, I can't do this cool thing I want to!

A: Really? How do you know? Would it just be easier if you had the new thing or just make you feel better that you have it?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Stacey Hill invested in her first DSLR back in 2007. While having many adventures out and about in the South Island of New Zealand, Stacey took to blogging about her experiences learning photography. Eventually she discovered the fun and creative possibilities to be had with Photoshop. Stacey can be found having an opinion all over the place:



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