



HOW TO BECOME A CONFIDENT PHOTOGRAPHER

Quick Guide

Written by Karlo de Leon



INTRODUCTION

Who doesn't want to be a confident photographer? Every photographer wants to be! In a way, having confidence allows you to take better photos because you are focused more on being creative rather than criticizing yourself.

Because each photographer is different, the length of time it takes to develop confidence is also different. For some, it might take a few days; for others, it may take years.

If we went back to the time when I started learning photography, you would notice one thing about my shots – they didn't include people. I remember going on a week-long vacation taking my new camera with me and all I took were landscapes, trees, clouds, artifacts and ornaments, food, and other inanimate objects. It wasn't that I didn't want people subjects, it was simply a case of a lack of confidence. In a way,

I felt confident taking photos of objects and scenes, but I wasn't confident creating shots with people in them. I was not 100% with my skills yet as I was technically new to the craft, especially shots that involved a lot of movement. Also, I didn't know how to relate to people as a photographer.

That was then. These days, I find that most of my shots include some human element in there. I just love seeing people in my photos. I have reached a point where I am confident enough to deal with people as a photographer.

Confidence is important in our journey as photographers. The way I've built confidence in this craft may be different from how others have done it, but I would like to share my own process through this guide. I hope that the pointers here will help you develop your confidence as a photographer.

EVERYONE IS CONFIDENT

Confidence is a mindset and therefore can be developed. Developing confidence will require changes in the way you think.

Ask yourself honestly: are you confident with your photography or not?


Whether your answer is yes or no, I would like to tell you that you are already confident. Let me repeat – YOU are confident.

I don't have to know you personally to know that you are confident. You might be wondering how that's possible. You are already confident because every single person is confident at something. To be able to grasp this, you need to start thinking of confidence in terms of levels instead of something with a finite value that you either have or don't have. When you've decided to learn photography, you've already taken a step of confidence. Buying a camera is another step. Taking a class is another.

In my first year of learning photography, my confidence level with shooting buildings was very high while my confidence level with shooting people was zero.



Photo by Karlo de Leon



Our perception of
ourselves will affect our
confidence level.

Different people will begin at different levels. Some people will begin at a low confidence level while others at a high confidence level. If you answered no earlier when I asked if you are confident, I'm assuming that you're starting at a low confidence level. But low confidence is still confidence.

The reason we begin at different confidence levels has a lot to do with our background and history. A computer technician will probably be more confident in using a camera for the first time compared to a creative writer. A painter would have a high confidence level when it comes to composing shots. Our perception of ourselves will also affect our confidence. If you see yourself as a fast learner, then you would begin with a higher confidence level compared to someone who thinks that everything they do is a failure.

The first step in improving confidence is to be aware of your own confidence level and the factors that affect it.



Photo by Karlo de Leon

This was one of the photos I ended up with when I took my first camera for a test run by traveling to the mountains for a week with a couple of friends. I became more confident pursuing travel photography after the trip.

DEFINING YOUR CONFIDENCE LEVEL

Confidence levels are self-imposed. It's not like there's some tool that you can use to measure confidence. When I started out, I had a high confidence level in learning photography. This was due to three reasons: I saw myself as a fast learner when it comes to tech stuff, I always had a knack for art even if I hadn't learned about composition at that time, and I liked science experiments. Since photography involves a device, is an art form, and felt sort of like a science experiment to me, I was so confident that I could learn the basics of my camera quickly. At that point, however, I was not yet confident holding an exhibit, shooting an event, or taking a friend's portrait. My confidence level was still limited to learning photography.

How about you? What is it about photography that you can say you're confident with?

Name the next step in your photography journey that you're not confident with yet.




Photo by PublicDomainPictures

CONFIDENCE AND COMPETENCE

If you've watched any American Idol auditions or any reality TV talent show, you'll see how some people will seem very confident about their singing skills only to get rejected by the judges because they were out of tune the whole time or had a seriously bizarre performance.

I have met quite a number of people who are confident with their photography but with skills not at par with their confidence level. I have also seen those who display quite an amazing talent but fail to see the potential they carry. I'm sure you have met individuals like that yourself whether in relation to photography or elsewhere.



The more you improve your photography skills, the more confident you become.

This shows us that confidence does not equal competence. And this is good news because it tells us that being confident in our photography has everything to do with how we see ourselves in relation to our craft. Having confidence is a good thing. Use this to propel you to improve your skills. The more you condition your mind that you are able to do something, the more confident you can become.

In the same way, although confidence doesn't mean competence, competence leads to confidence. The more you improve your photography skills, the more confident you become. When you feel competent, you will feel confident. It is very hard to feel confident when you don't feel competent. And the best way to feel competent is when you have acquired the skills that tell you that you are competent.

For beginners, competence requires learning the fundamentals of photography – at the very least you should be able to take control of your shots with your camera, having knowledge of settings and how to use them in different lighting conditions. Then continue learning your craft by gaining knowledge about composition and lighting. This will make you feel competent.

Here are some free and premium Photzy resources you can watch and read:

- [Understanding Manual Mode Tutorial Video](#)
- [The Exposure Triangle](#)
- [Understanding Light Book One](#)



Photo by Davide D'Amico

Take a look at the sky in this shot. How confident are you that you recreate this kind of effect without knowing the actual technical details and settings the photographer used?

ASSESSING YOUR COMPETENCE

To succeed in any craft, there should always be a balance of mindset and skill. One requires the other to attain a healthy dose of self-confidence in a photographer. Why is this important? Imagine boasting to a client that you can do a project only to fail miserably because all you had was the confidence but not the skill to execute it. This is an unhealthy kind of confidence that may backfire when real skills are required. Remember the American Idol example? This is why seeing confidence in terms of levels is helpful in gauging where you truly are in your photography.

Gaining confidence also requires the ability to assess yourself fairly so it is important to also assess your competence.

The way you can assess your competence is by way of asking questions about your skills and truthfully answering them. This is about going beyond "Yes, I can do it" to "Yes, this is how I will do it."

Can I create a long exposure shot of the ocean? If yes, how will I do it? Can I produce a long exposure shot at midday? If not, why not? If yes, how?

Trust is the foundation of confidence and people usually trust experience. If you have prior experience, then you can use that to your advantage.



Photo by Karlo de Leon

Because I've made it a habit to review my old photos from time to time, I found out that my photos that I thought had perfect exposure was actually slightly underexposed, those that were bright and colorful, were actually overly saturated (like this photo), and those with balanced composition, were actually cropped too tight.

YOU ARE IMPROVING

Here's some truth that you may not know if you're starting out in photography. Between now and a couple years from today, if you continue learning photography, you will have a different opinion about your own shots that you consider beautiful.

I always look back at what I used to consider as my exhibit-worthy shots only to realize a few years later that I wouldn't even keep them if I created them today.

Is that a bad thing? No. It only shows that my standard of beautiful photos has increased. It is a sign of improvement. The frequency of this happening becomes less as you mature as a photographer.

ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE CONFIDENCE

Because confidence is a mindset, there are a few things you can do to shape it.

Before I explain how, let's talk about mindsets for a bit. Mindsets are preconceived perceptions of ourselves and the things around us. If we think we are hopeless, then we will act as if this is true in our life. If we think life is full of good opportunities, chances are that we will find many opportunities because our mind is conditioned to look for them. What does this have to do with confidence? Simple: if you think you're confident, you will act confident. If you think you're not, you will act as if you're not.

Changing mindsets requires one of two things: emotional impact or repetition.

When you have a perception that you're in a good neighborhood, it only takes one assault encounter for you to suddenly think otherwise. When you're learning photography and someone you trust and look up to suddenly discourages you saying that your art is hopeless, that will surely make you feel disheartened no matter how hard you try. That's emotional impact. Of course, this is a general observation. I've encountered a few who are used to rejecting negative opinion about them even if it's someone they trust.

Emotional impact can also be in a revelatory nature. Your mind simply shifts when you discover something about yourself that is opposite of what you used to think. If you find out that someone you trust is betraying you, or if you find a rumored criminal helping the needy, then this can change your perception about the person.



Photo via Pexels

Repetition also helps change mindsets. If you think that people are not kind, but continuously see acts of kindness every day, then this could change the way you think. Repetition is simply doing things over and over again. To change a mindset, you have to do things against the grain, against what you're used to. If you think you're not confident, you have to do activities that are opposite of what unconfident people do, over and over and over. This takes time, but if it becomes a habit, it can change the way you see yourself.

On the next pages, I've listed eight things that you can do to improve your confidence. It can be by way of emotional impact, repetition, or both.



Photo via Visualhunt

1

OBTAIN KNOWLEDGE

Obtaining knowledge is probably the easiest and the most obvious way to improve confidence. This is done by reading books, watching videos, attending photography classes, learning from a pro, etc. Even without trying out what we have learned, the idea that you know more makes you feel confident.

It's a good habit though to try out and practice what we have recently learned. New information allows us to do something differently and this helps us to learn more and gain more knowledge. Essentially we become more competent when we are able to apply the knowledge we have obtained.

Let me just say it again – competence leads to confidence.

Note: Photzy has comprehensive resources in its [Marketplace page](#) like the [Complete Landscape Photography Guide](#) and [The Art of Portrait Photography](#) to help you master landscapes and portraiture, respectively. There are also premium guides on Post Processing, Lighting, and Composition available. Reading books like these and applying the principles helps in building confidence.



Photo by Karlo de Leon

2

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH PEOPLE WHO MOTIVATE YOU

One of the best ways to use repetition in terms of confidence is to be with people who can motivate you. When you hear good things, in a way, it increases your confidence level a little bit. Hang out with positive people who are natural encouragers. Keep your photos away from negative people. I do not suggest shunning any form of critique – critique is healthy when done constructively. Find people who can give constructive critique rather than simple criticism.

A lot of times, people focus on the negative aspect of photographs when they give critique. This is ok. But if someone critiques in a way that focuses on your incapability or degrades you as an artist, stay away from them. A constructive critique can be something like, 'This photo is a little underexposed, and the lighting is also a bit flat. It might work better if you process it a bit,' as opposed to, 'That's an ugly photo. It's trash! You should never have decided to take up photography.'

Normally you would want to go to people who can encourage you regardless if they know photography or not. If you can find photography mentors with positive attitudes, then that's better. Being surrounded by people you trust and who can motivate you is a mix of repetition and emotional impact.



Photo by Kyle Pearson

3

DISCOVER YOUR LEARNING STYLE GENIUS

My wife had always thought she was a slow learner. She had this mindset because she didn't think she had the ability to memorize or easily grasp technical concepts. But because she had a husband who knew about learning methodologies (ahem, that's me), she no longer thinks that. She has gained confidence in herself because she saw that she was actually good at learning a certain way.

How did I do it?

I asked her to tell me why she thinks she was a slow learner, and she enumerated the reasons to me. Back when she was still studying, when a teacher explained something, most of the time she wouldn't understand it. When she needed to memorize a portion of a text book, she couldn't. When she's reading a philosophical quote, she finds it hard to grasp.

Although I am not a psychologist, my experience with coaching and adult learning tells me that her strength doesn't lie in that kind of learning. I would like to think it's because she naturally gets bored with those things. She doesn't learn best that way.

Then I asked her, "When you need to learn a dance move, do you quickly get it," because I have observed that she dances well. She said "Yes." She could easily follow along when someone was dancing.

We went on vacation a few weeks ago where she had a fun time learning how to swim. I was surprised that it didn't take her an hour to do the breaststroke perfectly. I didn't even have to teach her much. She learned most of it on her own by watching me how I did it.

The truth is that she's a very fast learner when it comes to practical and experiential learning. I bought a ukulele for her to learn and in the first 15 minutes, she was already playing a song. It's the first instrument she's learned to play.

How is that possible? It's because her learning style genius is in her artistic motor skills. For her to learn, it has to be something that is demonstrated to her

and she can physically try on her own. You don't have to hold her hand while doing it. She can figure it out on her own just by watching. She can also memorize things if it involves music, dance, or anything physical. She learns fast when it's something that taps into her right brain – the side of the brain that's responsible for creativity, intuition, and imagination. She's also been doing some phone photography on her own without my help and I can see that she has a natural intuitive skill in composition.

After telling her all this, she had an 'aha' moment and her face lit up. Something in her shifted.


I asked her a couple days after that if she still feels she's a slow learner, and she smiled and said, 'No, I learn fast.' She now feels more confident about herself. It only took one moment to change the way she thought about herself. It's a mindset shift by emotional impact.

Nowadays, when she's having difficulty learning something, she finds a way to learn it using her own learning-style genius.

When you focus on a learning style that is not your own, you will feel incompetent.



Photo by skeeze

 **Quick Activity:** There are different types of learning methodologies, and it will take time for us to discuss it here, but here's an activity that may help. Just answer these questions:

Think of a time in your life when you've learned something and had fun doing it. Which of your five senses were involved?

When you want to learn something new, which of these styles do you learn best with: observing demos, researching, reading and memorizing, practicing, imitating others, listening over and over, using your imagination, role playing, experimenting, challenging yourself, etc.?

One of these may be where your learning-style genius lies.

Which of the styles listed in in the previous question are you having trouble learning with?

Now, can you apply it in your photography? If you learn best by watching, then watch. If you learn best by imitation, then imitate. If you learn best by experimentation, then experiment.

4 LEARN IT BEFORE THE SHOOT

My first ever paid food photography gig was quite memorable. It was for a known coffee restaurant in one of the Pacific Islands. They had to fly me in to do the job since I lived in another country. I'd only been doing professional travel photography for three years at that time, shooting for travel magazines, so most of my portfolio consisted of lifestyle and travel shots. I'd never done food photography except for naturally-lit food photos.

I met with the client and she told me her requirements. She showed me photographs of what they had and what they wanted to achieve. Then she asked me if I could do something like that. Although they were pleased with my portfolio, I had to be honest with her that it may not translate to the same thing because the type of photography she was looking for required a different skill.

I asked her if she could give me a week to submit sample shots to her. Now, she could have looked for a different photographer, but she didn't.

I didn't own strobe lights at this time so I borrowed spare ones from another photographer friend. I tried to learn food photography in one week and by the end of that week, I submitted my sample shots. Long story short, she awarded me the job.

Not only did I get the project, but it also gave me confidence to close more deals on food photography after that. Of course there were other factors involved as to why I got the job, but the point of the story is that practicing for what you want to shoot pays off.

Here at Photzy, we've had new photographers tell us that they've been asked by their friends to help them with marketing materials for their business, cover their event, or take their portraits. Here's a tip that can help boost your confidence:

Your success lies in your ability to prepare. For me, preparation looks like replicating the shots through practice shoots so that I will feel confident enough in the actual paid gig. I will do this until I know I can do it perfectly. Serious landscape photographers oftentimes survey their location hours or even days before they actually intend to shoot.



One of my food shots before I learned to do food photography. The photo critique gods will probably have a feast with this one for bad composition, lighting, and design.

Photo by Karlo de Leon

Yours can look different, but here are some things you can do.

1. Assist in another similar photoshoot.
2. Become an apprentice of a professional photographer specializing in that genre. If you need to shoot food, then apprentice for a professional food photographer.
3. For weddings and events, attend similar events. If you can, offer to assist or shoot as a second or third photographer. There won't be a lot of pressure compared to being the primary photographer.
4. Survey the location, assess the lighting situation, and look for backdrops prior to the event date.
5. Study tutorials and practice what you learn. If a friend asks you to take her daughter's portrait, look for a comprehensive guide on portraiture like [The Art of Portrait Photography](#) book.
6. Prepare for the worst. Consider the possibility of things going wrong – a broken camera, rain during the event, corrupted media cards, etc.

5 SET SHORT-TERM SKILL GOALS

I'm a big fan of setting goals. Goals can help propel you into the next level. It gives you a target to follow and a tool to gauge what you have accomplished. It's a good way to motivate and boost confidence both by repetition and emotional impact.

Most people are wired to set goals. Just ask anyone what they want to accomplish and almost everyone can think of something to achieve or acquire.

Since this is not a guide on goal-setting, we will not cover the details on how to set a goal.

But I urge you to think of goals or objectives that focus on improving your photography skills. Make them realistic and achievable in the next one to three months. Short-term goals work best when learning crafts and doing projects.

Let's say you're a photographer who wants to become a professional in the portrait genre. Depending on your skill level, your three-month goal can include being able to get off the auto settings and use manual settings, accomplishing at least three portrait sessions with friends or family, learning about several lighting setups, or being able to retouch portraits using Lightroom.



One of the first few personal photo projects I've ever had was to create a calendar portfolio of heritage structures which included buildings and interiors from the olden days. This is one of my photos that I included in the project. It took me around eight weeks to finish it.

Photo by Karlo de Leon

After three months, whether or not you've completed your goal, look back and compare before and after photos of what you have achieved. I'm pretty sure you will have accomplished a lot. This will give you a boost in your confidence.



Photo via VisualHunt

6

LEARN THE BODY LANGUAGE OF ACTING CONFIDENT

It's hard to be friendly with people and feel negative about life. In the same way, being confident requires acting confident. It's not a "fake it till you make it" concept. Remember, try to match your confidence with your skill. You don't have to pretend you have the skill when you don't, but don't put yourself down either.

Conduct yourself in a manner in which it looks like you have some respect for yourself. Relax your shoulders and lift your chin up. Look forward when you're conversing with people; look them in the eye like you would a friend. You may not be used to it now, but you'll get the hang of it over time.

Have you ever observed how confident people act? Take some time to watch people at a library, coffee shop, or just at the park. Try to guess which ones are confident based on their body language. Observe quiet ones and see which of them are shy and which are confident. Take note of your observations.



Photo via VisualHunt

7

COMMIT TO TEACHING SOMEONE WITH A LESSER SKILL LEVEL

Ask any teacher and they will confirm that the best way to learn is to teach others. First, teaching forces you to repeat things that you already know. It also forces you to improve your own methods. When you're teaching someone, you are sure to encounter questions from your student. When you encounter a question that you don't know, it forces you to search for the answer to the question.

Find yourself a student, preferably someone in your neighborhood so you can spend time shooting together. It can be your grandchild, your friend, your mom, your neighbor – anyone who wants to learn photography. Visit your [Photzy Digital Locker](#), study one guide at a time, and teach it to someone else. You can also join a local camera club and actively support those who are new. Believe me, they will appreciate you for it.

8

BEGIN WITH WHAT DOES NOT INTIMIDATE YOU

I've had my share of bad experiences in photography. One of my clients, a commercial airline company, asked if I could take portraits of their executive team. During this time, I was pretty confident with my travel photography and this is why they hired me in the first place. Although I had done a couple of studio portrait sessions in the past, my skills on portraiture were really limited within the context of travel. The worst part of all this was that I was intimidated by Big Corp executives.

But my client insisted and I eventually agreed. It was another case of "because you're good at that genre, you must be good at this genre too." It was a really bad idea.

The shoot day came and they only gave me a few minutes to prepare. I trembled at the idea of having old men executives who wore serious faces as subjects. The thought made me fumble with camera settings as if I had some sort of mental block. I felt like a beginner trying to figure out manual mode for the first time. It was as if my camera wouldn't cooperate with me.

My shots were so bad I almost gave up fixing it in Photoshop. Asking for a reshoot was also embarrassing and I didn't want another encounter with them again. Good thing they didn't need high-resolution images; although I'm not even sure if they ever used the photos.

I'm not at all suggesting that you should avoid stepping out of your comfort zone – I encourage you to. But do it in such a way that you transition into it. When learning the technical side of photography, it is always best to feel comfortable. You don't need an extra thought in there that attacks your thoughts negatively. Imagine you're trying to figure out how metering modes work and there's this other thought that tells you "your shots are not good enough," or "your friend will be furious when she sees that photo you took of her." It's difficult to concentrate when that happens.

Start practicing with what does not intimidate you until you have mastered the essentials. Once it becomes second nature to you, step out of your comfort zone and start practicing with subjects that make your heart beat faster. Continue doing it until what used to be intimidating isn't too uncomfortable anymore.

Although I'm already quite comfortable taking photos of strangers, I still find it less intimidating to have acquaintances, who I meet when I travel, to pose for me in times when I want to have a human element in the frame –just like in this photo.



Photo by Karlo de Leon

Here's an idea. If you're interested in people photography and you're intimidated by people, develop your camera settings, composition, and lighting skills on inanimate objects first. Once you get this done, find people you trust and use them as your models. Work on photography skills with people you're not intimidated by until you're ready to take on more challenging subjects. Continue developing your skills in this genre by reading up on people photography. We have several free guides in the Photzy Digital Locker on the subjects of street photography and portraits that might interest you, or you can also grab our best-selling premium guide on portraits titled [The Art of Portrait Photography](#).

Do this until you feel competent. Remember, competence leads to confidence.

CONCLUSION

I always love seeing new photographers get excited about this craft. There's just this passion and enthusiasm that feels as if it's something tangible. And if there's something that increases confidence like no other, it is that drive and willingness to do anything so that you can get to where you want to be and take photos you've never taken before. Hope sparks confidence.

At the beginning of the guide, I asked you if you were confident. What was your answer?

How about now? Do you feel a bit more confident now than you did earlier? I hope you do, because that is hope at work. It means you've learned a few things today that you can do so that you can get better. In the process you become more competent, which in turn makes you more confident, which again motivates you to become more competent. It's a never-ending cycle.

So what are you waiting for? Pick up your camera and start shooting with your new confident self.

You can do it! I believe in you.

About the Author



Karlo de Leon is a travel & lifestyle photographer and small business consultant. He has extensive experience in technical training and coaching and has given talks, workshops, and classes on photography to companies, organizations, and the academe.

He also has special interests in lifestyle design and pursuing a positive prolific life.

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