



CRAFT&VISION

# **(micro)STOCK:**

## **FROM PASSION TO PAYCHECK**

Nicole S. Young

# Introduction

When you hear the term “stock photography,” what comes to mind? An image of a woman, smiling, isolated on a white background, wearing a telephone headset? A multi-ethnic group of men and women wearing suits, all happily having a team meeting in a perfectly gorgeous conference room with a stunning view? Or, maybe you think of picturesque beaches and “desktop wallpaper” landscapes?

Whatever images pop into your head, just keep this in mind: stock photography is all of the above and whatever we create it to be. It’s not just a collection of “generic” imagery with simple concepts—I know many successful photographers who push the limits of typical stock and use every ounce of their creative blood to make amazing photographs. These images may not be considered “stocky” but still make their way to stock photography websites every day.

What I believe has made this type of photography so popular is that it’s available to virtually everyone and it offers the potential of having a career with limitless creative freedom and a really great lifestyle. It’s very

appealing, and maybe some of us make it seem easy. But trust me, it’s not ... or at least it wasn’t when we started. There is a lot more to stock photography than going through your collection of photographs, uploading them, and crossing your fingers that they sell. If stock is something that you really want to pursue, then this eBook is for you.

Something that I should probably mention is that while I started out uploading my images to several microstock websites, I ultimately have settled on being exclusive with iStockphoto.com (also referred to as “iStock”). The photographers I interviewed for each of the case studies are also exclusive iStock photographers, chosen because of their talent, niches and uniqueness in the stock industry. But one thing that is certain—it was my goal to make this book helpful for anyone wanting to get involved in microstock. Each stock agency has its own rules, procedures and “DNA”, but creating quality, useful imagery is a commonality and should always be the goal of any stock photographer.







1

What is Commercial  
Stock Photography?



# What is Commercial Stock Photography?

Stock photography has been around for a long time. What it is, in a nutshell, is a collection of photographs that designers, bloggers, writers, etc. can search through to license and use in their projects. These types of photographs are typically used instead of hiring a photographer for specific assignments.

There are two types of stock: rights-managed (RM) and royalty-free (RF). Rights-managed imagery is almost always associated with the traditional stock market since it's very controlled and has limits as to how each image can be used. It also restricts the length of time an image can be licensed for and allows a company to have exclusive rights to the image during this period of time. These licenses are usually very expensive but also serve as a compromise to hiring a photographer for a project, especially if the ad campaign (for example) will only be used for a short period.

Royalty-free images are images that can be used over and over without having to pay additional royalties. They are usually less expensive and also have fewer restrictions as to how or for how long the images can be used. This may result in more than one designer using the same image in their projects, and, in some extreme cases, competing companies using the same images in similar ad campaigns.

The “traditional” stock photography market, consisting of both RM and RF licensing models, has always had somewhat high prices, out of reach to the casual freelance designer. The most recent addition to this market is known as “microstock,” which is stock imagery licensed at very low prices, all sold under an RF license (for the most part).

Before microstock existed, it wasn't easy for photographers to get into the stock business. Established, professional photographers dominated this market, so when microstock came around and allowed other “casual” photographers an open door to the industry, it really started to change things.

It's important to know that when you “sell” a stock photograph, you're not losing any copyright or ownership of your image. When a stock agency gets paid for an image, the customer is actually purchasing a license to use the photograph; they don't own the rights to photo. There are always going to be limits on how the photographs are used, even with an RF license. The specifics of each license are usually dependent on the agency making the transaction, and it's always a good idea to review the terms so you are comfortable with how your photographs can be used by any given customer.





# How Microstock Changed the Industry

Microstock began in the spring of 2000 when entrepreneur Bruce Livingstone started a website, iStockphoto.com, for designers to share photos with each other. At first, images could be downloaded for free. After about a year the company started charging a very small fee (under a “credit” system) in order to license images. iStockphoto became the first business to license images under the microstock model.

Since then, several other microstock websites have sprouted, some successful, others only surviving a year or two. The microstock market has evolved and forced other similar markets to adapt to the changes, and it has definitely provoked some controversy in the industry. The fact that any photographer has a chance at being a stock photographer, making money from their images and possibly taking business away from established, traditional stock photographers is a sore spot for some.

You see, any photographer can upload and license images through microstock. You don’t have to be a “professional”

with an existing stock portfolio of thousands of images—you just need to have a camera, a computer and the Internet ... and a healthy dose of photographic talent, of course. I’m definitely not saying that everyone who uploads images to a microstock website will be successful, or even sell any images, but the entry requirements are much less restricted than with the traditional stock industry.

In my opinion, microstock and traditional stock photography both have their place and are very unique, especially when you compare microstock to rights-managed stock photography. The fact is that before microstock was around people who needed professional-looking imagery for their website, brochure, or church bulletin either used their own photographs or clip-art. The affordability of microstock offers a large and diverse collection of inexpensive photographs easily available to the general public.





## How Do Stock Photos Get Used?

Stock images can be used almost anywhere. There are some obvious prohibited uses, like using a photograph of a person in a way that advertises pornography, sexually transmitted diseases, or in any way that would be considered immoral, infringing or defamatory. There are also other specific restrictions listed in the content license agreement for each stock agency, but aside from these prohibited uses the images can show up anywhere.

Some places I've found my images in use are in news articles on websites (usually the most common and easy to find), photo inserts in picture frames, magazine articles and advertisements, display stands in stores and, my personal favourite, on billboards.

Something you should realize is that you won't always know where your photos will end up. I've sold thousands of images but have only seen a few hundred of those images "in action." Customers aren't required to disclose where they will be using the stock photographs they download, so finding them in use typically happens by chance.







2

My Story



I guess you could say that I sort of “fell” into stock photography. You see, I never went into this thinking I was going to be a photographer or make a full-time income from photographing images for stock. I was just a girl with a passion for photography and a shiny digital SLR camera. All I wanted to do was become a better photographer, and stock seemed like a good place to start.

To backtrack a bit, my journey with photography started when I was seventeen years old. Throughout my childhood I always had a passion for drawing, painting ... basically, if it was art then I was in love. During my junior year of high school I was required to take an art class so I thought I’d give photography a try, thinking it would be fun. That one tiny decision is the catalyst that has changed the course of my life. Literally.

When I think back to the moment that I fell in love with photography, one specific memory comes to mind. I can vividly remember sitting in class, learning about shutter speed and apertures and this light bulb went off—I got it! I understood this stuff! It was this amazing blend of geeky science and math mixed up with the right-brained creative side I’d always found so comforting. That, along with the unforgettable aroma of darkroom chemicals, was what hooked me. I knew at that moment I had found my creative outlet.

A lot of people in my school knew me as “the photographer.” I was on yearbook staff one year, and then the newspaper staff the next. I even got a job at a photo lab and did some digital touch-up work at a nearby portrait studio on the side. I dreamed of becoming a sports photographer for Sports Illustrated (a career path my father was extremely supportive of) yet there was this nagging voice in my head telling me that being a full-time photographer was too competitive, cutthroat and waaaaay out of my reach. I decided I would continue as a hobbyist and put those crazy ideas of a career in photography out of my mind.

So I graduated high school, worked at the photo lab for a year and then joined the Navy. After a few years of intense training and a tour of duty in Japan I moved on to my final duty station in Oahu, Hawaii. It was in Hawaii that I finally decided to jump into the world of digital photography and purchased a 4.1 megapixel digital SLR. Up until this point I had been using a Nikon F4 film camera and had only used a few digital point-and-shoot cameras. I really had no idea what I was getting into.

So I played around with my camera, figured out how to edit RAW files in Adobe Photoshop and then decided I needed more. I wanted to learn, discover and really push myself to become a better photographer.





I looked into a few local classes, all of which seemed a bit too basic for what I wanted, and then one day it happened. I was reading a photography magazine with an article on microstock and it really had me intrigued. I thought it was exactly what I needed—a bit of a challenge, a reason to go out and take photos to develop my craft. I signed up and started uploading photos.

My end goal, from the beginning, was not to make money at this. I was hoping to find an outlet for my photography, a purpose to all of the shooting I was doing. I wanted to focus my photographic energy and microstock was a great place to do so. The few dollars I would make on the side were just bonus—a way to pay for my gear. But as the months passed and my income from photography started to grow I realized that this was profitable, something that might actually be a lucrative income down the road. So after eight and a half years in the US Navy I decided to separate from the military and put all of my career efforts towards photography.

So, after almost five years of diving back into this amazing, creative world, here I am. I make a full-time income with stock photography and I love it. I have a lot of other projects I work on and a few side jobs that keep me busy, every

one of them having to do with either photography or Photoshop, but stock photography is my “bread and butter.” I photograph whatever I want, upload the images to my portfolio and cross my fingers that someone out there will find them useful enough to use in their projects.

My journey with microstock wasn’t exactly an easy path to walk and it was up to me to learn everything I needed know about being successful with this business on my own. Bits of what I learned were through reading forum posts or just by getting a photo rejected and learning how to not make the same mistake twice. I fiddled around in Photoshop, found tutorials, photography blogs, and looked at other photos online. I even started blogging about my photography. (Trust me, you’ll see how much I’ve improved if you jump back about five years on my blog!) I knew only one other local photographer at the time, but I was in my own world with stock photography. It was a purely organic process of figuring things out and photographing the “right” stuff and my life as a photographer slowly became what it is today.

*View Nicole’s Portfolio – [istockphoto.com/nicolesy](https://istockphoto.com/nicolesy)*







CASE STUDY

# Renee & Todd Keith





**Renee and Todd Keith**, based out of Salt Lake City, Utah, make an amazing creative team, hands down. They photograph some of the most unique, off-the-wall imagery I've ever seen, and definitely push the limits of microstock. While they work together on many of their projects, they each have a distinct style that shows through in their photographs.

Renee has a bold passion for art. She paints, makes jewelry, creates pottery, sculpts ... the list goes on and on, and much of this shines through in her photography. Renee's journey into stock started when she was asked to license one of her photographs royalty-free. Not knowing what that meant, she did some research online and discovered iStockphoto. She signed up, started uploading images, and is now a full-time stock photographer.

One of Renee's more interesting series of photographs consists of body painting her models and oftentimes creating a similarly painted backdrop. These images are not your typical stock photographs—they're true works of art. Overall, Renee's goal as a stock photographer is to become more and more creative with her work and to "wow" her viewers, and her body painting series is definitely a huge step in that direction.

### **What do you love about photography?**

I love that you can freeze a moment in time with a photograph, and capture it from your own perspective. To me, photography is also a major form of art. I love to be original and creative ... creating images that are interesting to look at.

### **What is the most challenging thing for you with stock photography, or photography in general?**

I always want more—more lighting, lenses, a bigger studio, more money to pay more models and hire wardrobe, hair, makeup, etc. I also want to be better and better. Having this state of mind makes it difficult to be content. I am looking into learning meditation and trying to plan random road trips to get away from the countless hours I spend on my computer. Editing files becomes never-ending.

Aside from being a really nice guy, Todd is a very talented photographer and comes up with some of the craziest photographic concepts I've ever seen. Not only is his photography outstanding, his digital imaging skills are amazing. The creativity and eye-opening imagery behind Todd's work is extremely inspiring.

Todd has been a hobbyist photographer since he was a kid, and it wasn't until five years ago that he dived into the world of commercial photography. His photographs are fun, full of stories, and oftentimes very humorous. He is exceptional at creating photographic composites (combining more than one image into one photograph) and really tries to balance his creative content with strong, marketable imagery. Todd is doing what he loves best and hopes to continue to support his family while working as a full-time photographer.

### **How would you describe your photographic style?**

My style is always in flux because I like to constantly mix things up and try new looks, subjects, and concepts. I strive to create fresh and powerful imagery that will leave an impression.

*View Renee's Portfolio –*  
[istockphoto.com/renphoto](https://istockphoto.com/renphoto)

*View Todd's Portfolio –*  
[istockphoto.com/redhumv](https://istockphoto.com/redhumv)





3

Creating  
Quality  
Content



Creating good stock imagery isn't always as simple as just snapping a few photographs with your camera, uploading them and crossing your fingers that they sell. I'll admit that I do have some images in my portfolio that do quite well which required very little effort to create, some of them being what many people would call "grab shots." But, I'll be honest—those are few and far between. Photographing for stock is more complicated than just digging up old photographs, uploading them and hoping they earn you a small fortune.

There's a much deeper process that takes a bit of getting used to, and as you move forward with stock photography you tend to learn and grow in your own way. What works well for one photographer probably won't work the same way for all photographers. What, where and how you photograph something makes a big difference, and if you take anything out of this section remember this: just be yourself.





One question I get quite frequently when it comes to stock photography is “what should I photograph?” Honestly, I can’t stand this question. Okay, maybe that’s a little harsh, but I guess I just see the answer as being too simple and obvious to warrant a response. So I usually answer it by saying, “photograph what you love!” Photographing something only because you think it will sell might make you money, but you’re likely to get bored with what you’re doing. Plus, it’s not really “your” photograph—it’s an idea of what you think will sell based on other photographers’ success. Finding your own niche is important—it sets you apart from other photographers and helps you focus your energy on what is important to you. Plus, if you’re extremely passionate about something, it will show through in your images.

I think that for some people this takes a bit of figuring out. I discover new “favourites” all the time, but when I started out I knew that I enjoyed photographing people, so that’s what I did. I have a friend with two adorable children (who also turned out to

be great little models) and I almost always had a camera when I was with them and got some really cute, fun photos that still sell quite well. I also photographed friends in exchange for a signed model release, found aspiring models that needed photographs for their portfolio, and used up my weekends creating images. I created a lot of “stocky” photographs because I sincerely enjoyed it. I love working with people and was always excited about my photographs.

I was (and still am) discovering my style and getting a feel for what I love, and I think that it’s an on-going process for all artists. You might not have a clue what you want to photograph, but you have to start somewhere, right? After over five years of a portfolio saturated with people I’ve decided to put most of my energy towards photographing food. It’s not something I ever imagined I would be doing from the beginning, but after going many different directions with my photography I discovered how much I enjoy not only the photography process, but also the cooking and styling, too.

If you’re not quite sure what to do, that’s okay! You are obviously a photographer for a reason, right? What do you see when you close your eyes and envision your next photograph? Go out and create it! There’s no real “style” with stock photography—there are some obvious things to consider that will make images more sellable, but that doesn’t mean you have to change who you are as a photographer or, God forbid, become someone you’re not. We find what we like by experimenting with different subjects, lenses, light sources, locations, etc. We start going down one path and then, when we realize that we want to try something different we take a few steps back and head off in another direction. It’s an ongoing, continually evolving process that you need to embrace in order to grow and, in the end, create beautiful photographs.

Now, stock photography is different in the fact I’m not selling my brand (like you often see with many other photography business models). My photographs have to stand on their own. I need to create

images that I know will sell, but I’m so far along in this process that I can also create images I’m excited about, want to photograph and don’t care if anyone but me ever sees them, and still know that they will be good enough to sell.

Of course, in every business, whether it’s photography, auto sales, or <insert random career choice here>, there will be people who are there either because they love it or because they make money from it. I can see how being a fancy high-end lawyer or cutthroat salesman could be a good “make-lots-of-money” job, and you might see people in those types of industries solely for the money. When it comes to photography, however, I honestly don’t know one person who chose this career because they thought it might bring their dream of fame and fortune closer to reality. Photographers are photographers because they love photography.



When it comes to creating great stock, if I could narrow it down to one solid piece of advice then remember this: try to create concepts within your images. Whether you photograph people, still life, babies, food, or nature, try to make it fit into a concept, idea, emotion, style, or trend ... basically something that is intangible and can be interpreted in many different ways. “Straightforward” images sell, and will always sell, but when you give a photograph more meaning than what meets the eye, you’ve opened up the possible uses, and therefore you have more potential sales.

Creating photographs that sell means creating images with purpose. If you want to sell your images as stock, then whatever it is that you decide you love to photograph still has to be useful. Stock photographers don’t have the luxury of knowing exactly what the customer wants, they have to make photographs that they hope will be licensed and make money.

When planning your images, something that should always cross your mind is “how can this photograph be used?” If you can come up with at least three or four ways it can be utilized in a design, advertisement, or brochure then you’re probably doing it right. If not, well, it doesn’t hurt

to create the photograph but your chances of it selling aren’t as good. Some of the most successful stock images are those that have several uses—part of me wants to say that they are “generic,” but I really don’t like that word. I know of many unique and creative images that, in a single photograph, manage to convey several concepts. These do very well, and I would never call them “generic.”

One of the things I’ve learned during my time as a stock photographer isn’t so much what will sell, but rather what will not sell. Don’t get me wrong—there are all sorts of buyers out there looking for unique images. Some of them might be bouncing off the walls when they finally find your photo of a Chihuahua wearing a tutu running through an airport terminal, but you might have to be content with that one purchase and then cut your losses. It’s great to add uniqueness to your images—in fact, it’s encouraged! But if your photo has very limited uses for a very small audience then you will probably also be limiting your earnings.

In a nutshell, there’s not just one answer to the question “what type of photo sells?” Stock customers are always looking for different styles, colors, ethnicities, ages, locations, objects ... the

list goes on and on. And, as contributors, we can only guess what we should create to become profitable. It is one of those things that you learn as you grow as a stock photographer, and it can take some time to “get it.” Yet the types of photos I create that I “know” will sell are likely to be different from another photographer’s, mostly because our approaches and styles are very different.

Now, I know that I just went on a long rant about photographing what you love, but chances are you probably still want your stock photographs to make you a few dollars. The key is finding balance. For example, I love food photography, but I also know that there are some types of dishes that are more likely to be used than others, so I tend to photograph those types of dishes more often. Does creating these images rob me of my will to live and chain me to my camera and computer, stuck in a never-ending workflow of uploading photos just to make money? No freaking way! I rarely photograph something for my stock portfolio that I wasn’t ecstatically happy to create. Finding the balance of doing what you love to do and still make money doing it is a dream come true. It still takes a lot of work to get there—trust me on that—but if you can do it you have the best job in the world.





When creating stock photographs, something that always needs to be at the back of your mind is what potential buyers are looking for. Would they want this photo as a horizontal, vertical, or both? Would they need room to add their own text or other images? Should you include (or exclude) certain elements, just in case they might not fit the design? Not knowing the answers to these questions, we either have to guess, or provide as many variations on a subject as possible. So, to help get you on the right track, here are a few things to keep in mind when creating stock images:

**Vary your angles and compositions.**

Photograph your subject vertically, horizontally, and even at an angle if possible.

**Add copy space.**

Oftentimes designers will add text to photographs, so make sure that you back off your subject and try to add some extra space to the image that a designer might find useful.

**Create a series of images.**

Buyers may be looking for more than one photo of the same subject to use

in a design, so do your best to come up with several unique photos of the same setup. It's also a good idea to link these photos together in your image description so the buyer can find them all.

**Do your research.**

There will always be trends regarding colors, patterns, hairstyles, etc. Try to keep your images fresh and up-to-date by paying attention to what's happening in the world, and even in your hometown.

**Plan ahead.**

If you want to create and license stock imagery that is specific to a certain time of the year (like holidays and elections), then you need to make sure that you're photographing these events about six months before they happen. Most of these images need to be available for designers well in advance of the actual event, and while you may get some "last-minute" buyers, you're better off getting the images up early.





A young boy with short blonde hair, seen from behind, stands barefoot on a wet, rocky beach. He is wearing a blue t-shirt, dark pants with rolled-up cuffs, and a blue superhero cape with a white circle and a red lightning bolt on the back. He is looking out at the ocean where waves are breaking. The sky is overcast and grey. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

CASE STUDY

A.J. Rich





**A.J. Rich** is a stock photographer living in Utah County, Utah. His journey with photography started in high school as the photographer for his school newspaper. Photography was his way of pulling himself out of his “introvert shell” to communicate with the outside world.

A.J. found his way into stock photography while working as a designer and art director. He was doing research in a magazine and saw an advertisement for a microstock website and decided to give it a try. Stock photography is now his second full-time job and he pulls a significant income from his photography. He also has a deep respect for the community and the people involved and finds that working with iStock gives his photography much more value.

A.J. is extremely good at conceptual photography, resulting in beautiful and very useful stock imagery. His photography has vintage, nostalgic undertones with what he likes to call “timeless imagery.” His very supportive family consists of his wife, who helps out with a lot of the business aspects of his photography, along with some adorable little kids who oftentimes appear in his images.

Some of A.J.’s most popular and well-recognized images feature people, mostly children, in superhero costumes. When I asked him about this particular series this was his response:

“Children hold special interest for me as they show an immense ability to imagine and believe in things greater than themselves. ... During the shooting of my early superhero series, I was amazed how the children always went right into character and acted super and always quashed evil. These types of pure, innocent moments are what makes photography enjoyable for me...”

A.J.’s words show his passion and love of photography, and that it’s about much more than just creating images that sell. We photograph what moves us—those moments that have special meaning and evoke emotion. A.J.’s attitude towards his work is a beautiful example of why many of us are photographers in the first place.

### What is the most challenging thing for you with stock photography, or photography in general?

The most challenging thing for me at the moment is time. Whether that is with family or the cold winter season—since my studio is outdoors. I can’t find enough time to keep up with my brain. I am waiting for warmer weather to catch up with my brain—which does not have an off-season.

*View A.J.’s Portfolio –*  
[istockphoto.com/richvintage](https://istockphoto.com/richvintage)





4

## Inspections and Image Requirements



One thing that every new stock photographer learns is that this business isn't easy, especially at first. I've talked to many aspiring stock photographers who have told me about their frustrations and hurdles with getting approved as a contributor and having their images inspected. Most microstock websites require all photographs to go through an inspection process where other specially trained photographers review the images and only approve them if they meet all of the guidelines. Most of these guidelines are technical, dealing with the overall quality and "cleanliness" of the photograph, but some are also purely aesthetic-based decisions (such as the ever-so-dreadful "we did not find your photo suitable as stock" rejection).

Quality control with stock photography is very different from normal photography. Photographs need to be tack sharp, free of spots and chromatic aberration, relatively noise-free and, to use a vague term, not "overprocessed". They also need to be well lit, have a pleasing composition and, if there are people in the photograph, need to have model releases attached as well. Microstock websites have

their own set of inspectors who look at the photographs to determine whether or not they are at or above the minimum requirements.

As far as editing goes, I can honestly say that I learned more from uploading my images (and from getting rejections) than I could have learned from any Photoshop or photography class. I have a very deep understanding of how to "cleanly" edit my photographs, making sure I don't overprocess or introduce icky artifacts into the image. It has also helped with my photography, making sure my exposure is accurate in-camera and that my focus is spot-on. Now, just because I know all the "rules" doesn't mean I always follow them, but knowing them means that I know when I'm not following them. I definitely don't consider myself a "pixel peeper", but there is a certain amount of zooming in and checking the entire image for blemishes, chromatic aberration, or just any overall pixel weirdness, that has to take place to ensure the images are approved.





Rejection is never easy, but with stock photography having photographs inspected is a necessary evil. In the grand scheme of things it's a very good thing, since the higher the minimum entry requirements and standards are, the better the overall collection of images will be on the site. It also can create better photographers in the long run, assuming that the photographers learn from their mistakes.

One extremely important thing to realize is that with microstock, you will get rejections. You might even have a difficult time being approved to be a contributor right off the bat. If you want to have a chance in this industry, make sure you learn from each mistake and don't get hung up on them.

I've had several rejections over the years, but each time I got a photograph rejected I made a conscious effort to not make the same mistake twice. It is of course to your advantage to maintain a high acceptance rate since each image that is rejected can't be added to your portfolio, and therefore

won't make you any money. Oftentimes you can re-submit the rejected photographs, but you will still have to spend a few minutes re-editing and re-uploading it.

**“If you want to have a chance in this industry, make sure you learn from each mistake and don't get hung up on them.”**

The best way to avoid rejection, especially when it comes to image editing, is to understand what an inspector is looking for when they inspect your image. You can do that by always viewing every inch of your image at 100% to make sure it's the absolute best quality you can possibly create. There are many different things you should be aware of when photographing and editing your images, and listed below are a few items that image inspectors look for—things you definitely should avoid. This

isn't an all-encompassing list; there are a lot of different reasons a photograph might be rejected. The bottom line with editing photographs is to not push your edits too

far, keep things clean, and learn your limits ... and when you can go beyond them.

One thing I should mention is that if you want to create stock photos then you should seriously consider hardware-calibrating your monitor. When you calibrate your monitor you are setting it up so that you and the inspector are seeing the same thing, along with any other viewer who has the same settings. Now, not everyone will have his or her monitor calibrated, but by doing so

you are levelling it out (zeroing it, so to speak) so that it's not skewed in any one direction or the other. Some monitor settings might be pre-set to be very contrasty and bright, or have over-enhanced vibrant colors, but you want to be able to see what your photo actually looks like. Monitor calibration will not only show you what your photo actually looks like but it will also save you from many edits that might cause rejection (and confusion) down the road.



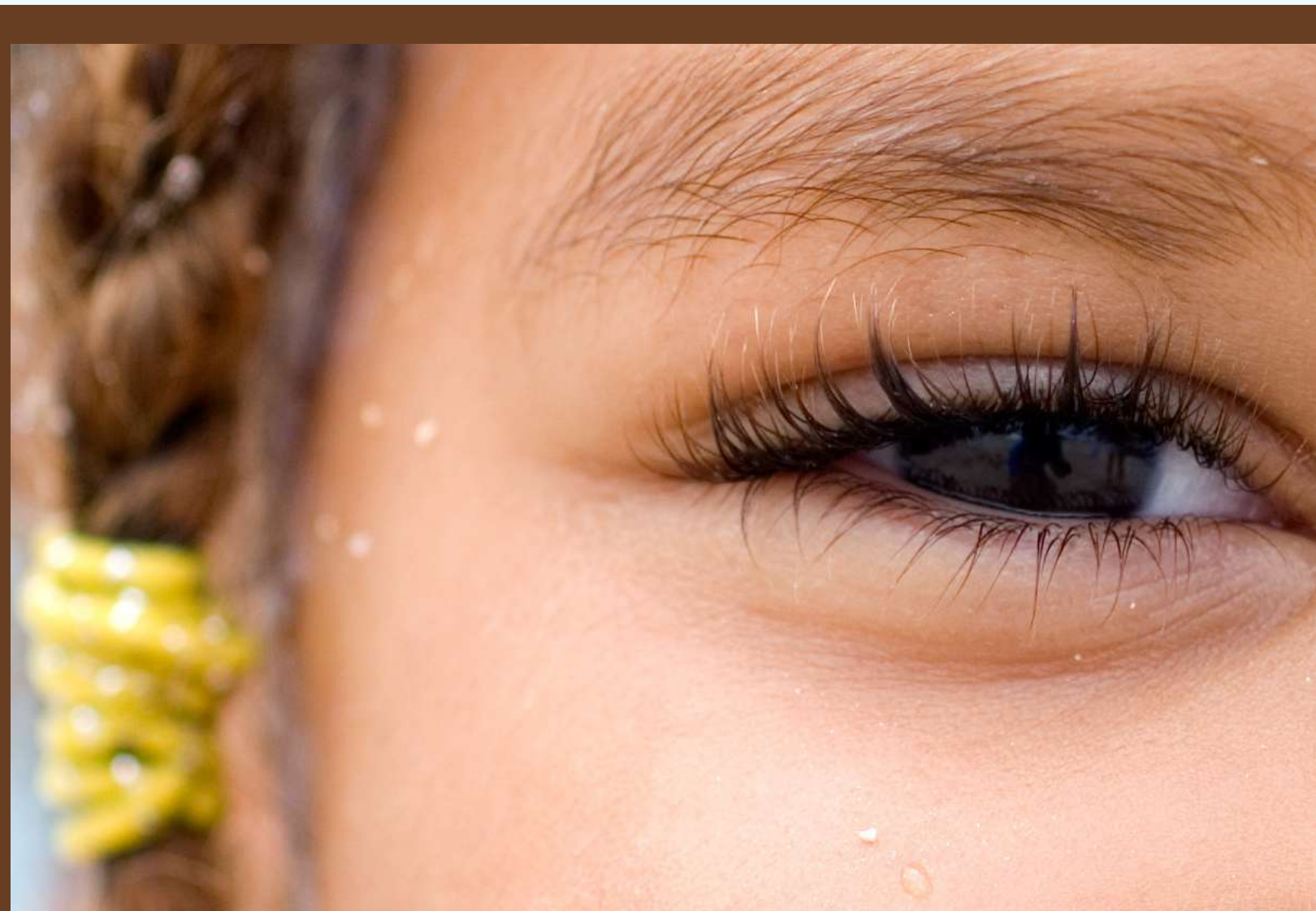
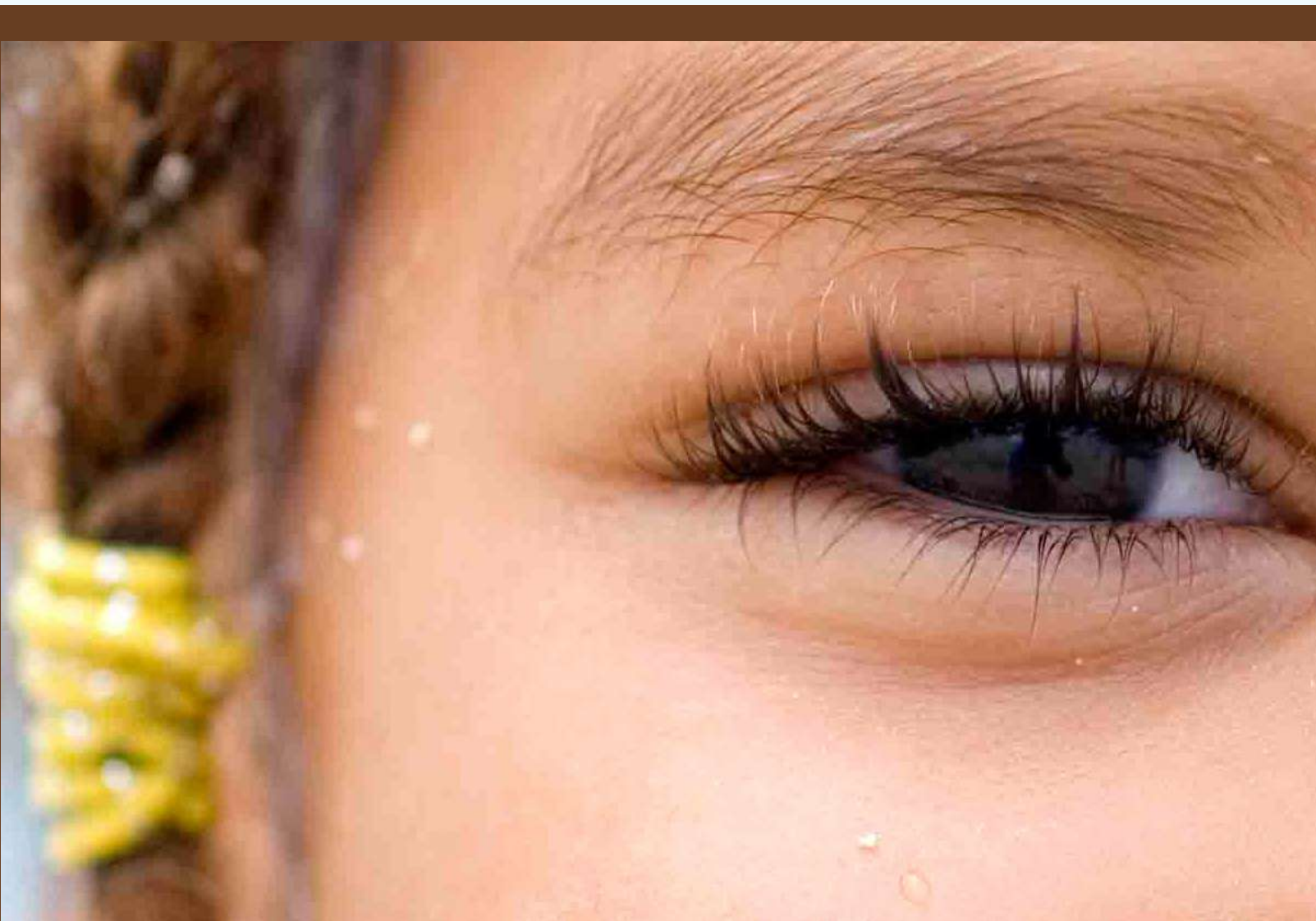
**ARTIFACTING**

One of the most common rejections photographers see is from artifacting, and it's usually the most difficult to recognize. One easy way to add artifacting to a photograph (not that you'd want to) is to open a JPEG over and over in

Photoshop, editing and saving it each time. Each time the JPEG is saved and closed it's compressed, and each time it's compressed it makes the pixels blotchy and chunky and you lose the "smoothness" of your image when viewed at 100%.

A few ways to avoid artifacting are to set your camera to photograph in the RAW setting, and also to do very little processing to the image. It's also not a bad idea to edit the file as a PSD (Photoshop Document) or TIFF and then save a copy of the final ver-

sion as a JPEG. But the biggest thing is just being able to recognize artifacting in your image so you can avoid it down the road, or possibly even diagnose why you're introducing it into your images in the first place.



▲ The image on the left has significant compression artifacts compared to the image on the right.



## NOISE

One of the downsides to using digital cameras is that at high ISO levels you tend to get what's called "noise." Noise levels are pretty low at ISO 100 or 200, but the more you crank up that number the more noise you'll get in your photographs. With film photography this is called grain, and in some images it can actually add character to a photograph, but in most cases, it's something you should avoid.

With that said, don't assume that all noise is always bad. If I'm photographing food, then I'll want my image to be relatively noise-free (no need to crank up the ISO if I'm in a controlled lighting environment). But if I'm photographing a gritty, "artsy" scene then maybe a little bit of noise won't hurt, and I've even been known to add noise to my images in Photoshop. Many newer digital cameras are creating noise that is more on par with the grain we see with film, and they're also getting better at reducing the noise at higher ISO levels. As a general rule, if it's not color noise (noise with a lot of rainbow-speckled dots), the noise quality is good, and it's appropriate to the photograph, then you're probably going to be okay.

This is an image with an acceptable amount of noise, and is actually grain, which was added in post-processing. ►





**FLAT/DULL LIGHTING OR COLORS**

Having flat or dull lighting and/or colors in a photograph is a rejection notice you would get if your image doesn't have any "pop" in its overall look. If the light looks too flat and dull it could be the way it was lit when photographed, or the way it was (or wasn't) edited on the computer. Sometimes the simplest way to fix this is just to add a bit of light and contrast in Photoshop using levels or curves, and oftentimes adding this contrast can make the colors in the image appear more vibrant, too.

Something to keep in mind when editing your stock photographs is to always look at the thumbnail. You still need the image to look good at a large size, of course, but when customers are searching for images they see a page full of photos that are all very, very small. You want your photo to stand out among all of the other search results, and if you make it pop with the right amount of contrast and color then the thumbnail is more likely to catch a customer's eye.

**OVERPROCESSING**

Something that stock photographers need to take into consideration while editing their photographs is that they are oftentimes creating a "blank slate" for the customers to use in their projects. There are exceptions to this, since there are a lot of stock images out there that many would consider to be "fine art," but any "stocky" photograph will be expected to have very little editing done to it ... or at least appear that way.

Let me be clear on this: this does NOT mean that stock photographs should not be edited. When I edit my photographs in Photoshop I usually end up with a file that has several layers of editing, but ironically my goal is to edit the image so that it looks like it wasn't edited. I want it to be crisp, clean, and bright. You just have to be careful that anything you do to an image is not overdone.

While the image on the left might seem washed-out next to its oversaturated counterpart, the image on the right is overprocessed and is likely to get rejected. ►



If you want to add saturation or color pop to your image, don't be heavy-handed with the saturation slider. Add just a tiny bit, and then stop. Don't push the numbers too high or you'll start to see clipped, and possibly even unnatural colors.

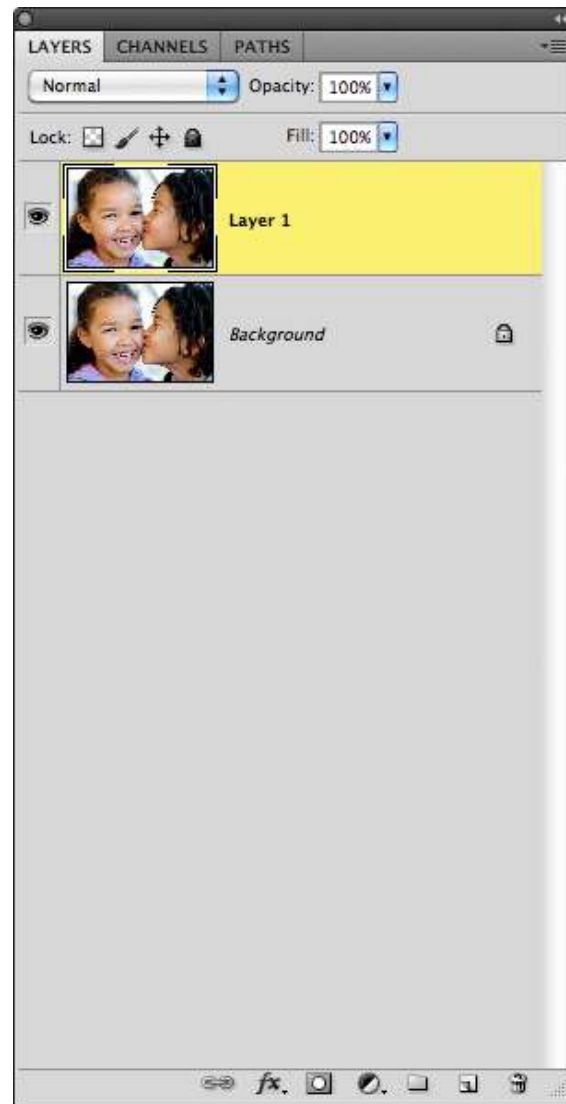


## CHROMATIC ABERRATION

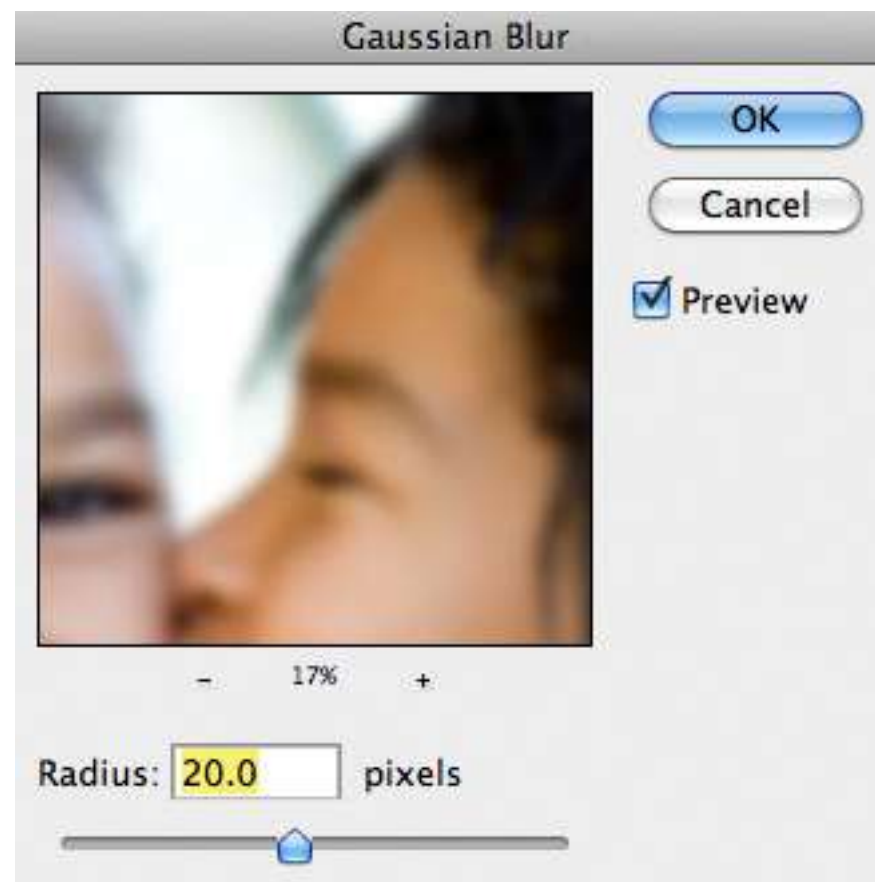
Chromatic aberration, also referred to as CA or “purple fringing,” is the discoloration in a photograph typically appearing where there are areas of high contrast. Oftentimes you’ll see this along the edges that are white against a darker color (like brown or black), or in the hair if photographing a person. This unsightly digital effect occurs within the lens and you’re more likely to see it in lower-quality glass, but this doesn’t mean that it won’t show up in top-of-the-line lenses.

While you can’t always prevent chromatic aberration in-camera, it’s relatively easy to fix in editing software with just a few simple steps. Software, like Adobe Lightroom or Apple Aperture, usually have a slider you can play around with to remove the CA from your photograph. If that doesn’t work (or you’re like me and prefer to do most of your in-depth editing in Photoshop) then here’s a step-by-step process to removing CA from your photographs using Adobe Photoshop:

1. In Photoshop, duplicate the background layer.



2. Next, go to Filter > Blur > Gaussian Blur. Add a substantial blur to spread out the colors of the image, especially at the edges where you see the CA. On a full-resolution file, this would likely be a radius of 15–30 pixels.

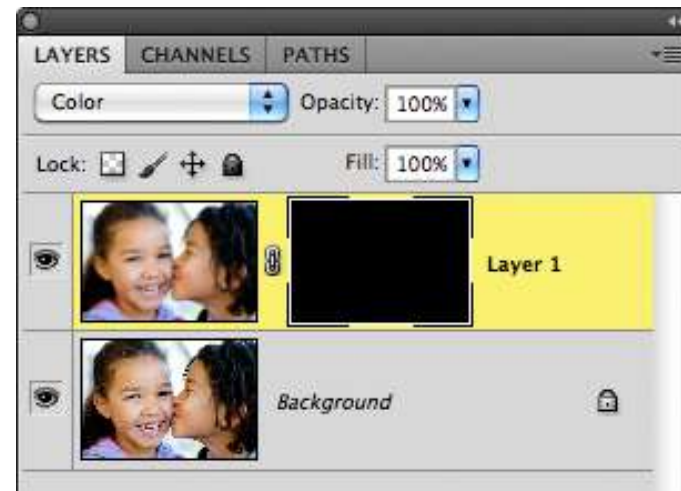




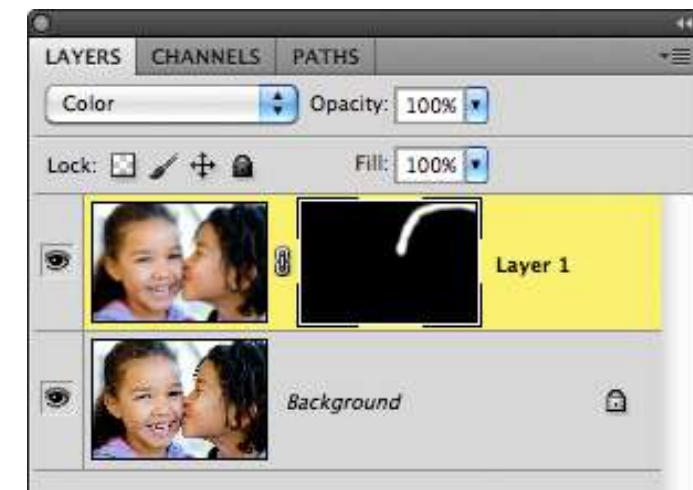
**CHROMATIC ABERRATION – CONTINUED**

3. Change the blend mode of this layer to Color.

4. Next, add a layer mask to the image. Click on the mask and go to Image > Adjustments > Invert.



5. Now, using the brush tool at a very small size with zero hardness, paint with white over the areas of CA. The discoloration along the edges should start to disappear.



The image on the left has significant chromatic aberration in the hair (the greenish tinge). The discoloration was removed successfully, as you can see on the image to the right.





**KEYWORDING**

It may not seem like a big deal at first, but if you're uploading photographs to a microstock site then you are responsible for the keywords in your image. The keywords you choose are the same keywords

customers will use to search for images, so it's important that your images not only have appropriate keywords but that they also don't have inappropriate keywords. You want to provide as much informa-

tion as possible about what you can see in the photograph, along with any specific concepts. Anything that might be "implied" in your image is not necessarily a good keyword. (For example, a girl doing

homework in her bedroom should not have the keyword "school building" in it.)

Here are a few examples of appropriate keywords for a stock photograph.



**Appropriate keywords:** cookie, food, hands, decorate, icing, pink, baked, dessert, chef, cooling rack, heart shape



**Appropriate keywords:** seafood, prepared fish, halibut, tomato, garlic, capers, white, nobody, cooked, meal, food



**Appropriate keywords:** woman, one person, people, young adult, Hispanic, library, books, book shelf, looking at camera, smiling, happiness



As I mentioned earlier you will get rejections—it's just part of the process. Many of the best photographers out there see rejections from time to time, and even I am not immune to the wrath of the inspector. Bottom line: we all make mistakes, but it doesn't mean that your images aren't good or that you'll never "make it" in the stock photography industry. The technical quality standards for stock photography are extremely high, so it might take a little while to understand and grasp the ways to avoid rejection.

Even with all that said, getting rejections still sucks, especially when you put a lot of time into an image and it's very near and dear to your heart. The best thing you can do, especially if you want to progress with stock, is to learn from each rejection. Use critique forums, ask other photographers, or just re-edit and upload the image to see if it makes it through the second time around. The approval and rejection process was a huge learning tool for me, mostly because I not only I took the time to use the feedback I received, but more importantly ... I didn't give up.





Even if you are able edit your photographs perfectly and avoid them from being rejected, there are still other basic requirements you'll need to keep in mind for certain types of images.

### LOGOS AND TRADEMARKS

When creating commercial stock photographs, you need to avoid visible trademarks and logos in your images. These are identifiers of someone else's product or brand. When customers license stock photographs for commercial purposes, they have a license to use the image in any way that is in line with the licensing agreement, which oftentimes will be in advertising their own product or brand. So, to avoid crossing any messy legal boundaries, if you upload a photograph as commercial stock then it absolutely cannot have any trademarks or logos in the image.

As far as logos are concerned, if you can, it's best to keep them out of your images altogether. If that's not possible (or you know that it won't be too difficult) then the next best thing is to clone them out of the image using editing software (such as with the Clone Stamp Tool in Adobe Photoshop). When I

photograph people I will oftentimes request that they wear only solid-coloured shirts, and that they bring a few changes of clothes just in case they wear something that won't work in a stock photo. When photographing children I will oftentimes buy clothes for them to wear when being photographed, since children's clothing is often filled with cartoon characters and logos. When it comes to logos on objects, you might be able to discreetly cover them up (gaffer tape tends to work really well). If the logo is "embedded" into the object in such a way that would be time-consuming to edit out, consider removing it from the scene altogether.

There are certain products and items that you can't show in a commercial stock photograph because of their design. Some of these items include (but are not limited to) smartphones, cars, motorcycles, stuffed animals and (some) toys, and playing cards. (If you're not sure about something you want to photograph for stock then it's best to check with your stock agency.) Of course, the actual limitations to these items will depend on how they are displayed. The basic rule is that if you can't tell what the item

is (like if it's extremely blurred in the background) then it's usually going to be okay to include in a commercial stock photograph.

### MODEL AND PROPERTY RELEASES

If you want to photograph people for your commercial stock portfolio, you must have them fill out a model release. The basic guideline is that if a person can recognize himself or herself in a photograph then it needs a release. The rule of thumb I follow, however, is that if a person's head or face is in a photograph, no matter how blurred they are or if it's the back of their head, then I get a signed release. It's always in your best interest to make sure that any identifiable people in your photographs have proper model releases, since the last thing you want is someone going after you for illegally using their likeness in a photograph you created. Even though you are licensing your images through another agency you are usually still personally responsible for making sure your images are properly released for commercial usage.

One question I get frequently is how I get people to sign model releases. A lot of the people I photograph are friends, or friends of

friends, and they typically already know what I do. Either that, or I discuss in detail what stock photography is, how the photos might be used and then let them know that they will get free copies of their photos (called "trade for CD" a.k.a. "TFCD") in exchange for signing a model release. I also (and often) will hire and pay models when I'm creating a very specific setup and I need a certain "look." The bottom line is that I'm always honest about what I do, how the photos might be used, how much money I will make if they sell, and what they should expect overall.

Another thing that you may need for your photos is a property release. It's always a good idea to get one signed if you have permission to use a location (such as a coffee shop or any indoor facility) or you have an item in your photograph that is owned or was created by someone else. Some examples include works of art, sculptures, architecture, and structures. I commonly use property releases for locations, like a house as the setting of a photograph, and for makeup work and costumes used in an image.





CASE STUDY

M. Eric Honeycutt



**M. Eric Honeycutt** lives in Raleigh, North Carolina and has been a professional photographer for more than ten years. He's been using a camera for a very long time but fell in love with photography in the early 1990s while studying history in Greenville, North Carolina. While walking through a graveyard and photographing a gorgeous sky, he was fascinated by the colors of the clouds, and when his photos turned out nothing like he expected them to, his intrigue of the nature of light was ignited. It was this moment that his passion and life began.

Before becoming a full-time stock photographer, Eric owned his own web design business—catering to homebuilders—where he used his skills in photography to photograph home interiors, many of which are in his stock portfolio. He started using microstock in 2005, mostly as a customer, but it wasn't long before he also began uploading his own imagery. He hopes to keep making a decent living for years to come to support his wife and their three children who love to model ... and even show up in his photos from time to time.

When I look at Eric's photography, I am always overcome with a sense of eerie, surreal darkness. His portrait work is filled with images of children posed as if in an

old Victorian death photograph, women in white gowns floating in the water, and long exposure photography to mimic the effect of ghostly figures. In one simple word his photography is just stunning.

### **What types of photos do you enjoy creating? Why?**

Many of my photo shoots are based on my dreams. I have found this very fulfilling and it allows me to go in directions that I am not so sure I would have otherwise. So this translates into very surreal and bizarre imagery.

### **What do you love about photography?**

What I love about photography is this: it is an instantaneous memory captured that the photographer experienced in less than a second of history; a memory that can physically outlast multiple lifetimes. It is also the irrefutable historical proof that something and/or someone truly existed and it defines and redefines the very world we live in. A photograph can evoke every possible emotion known to the human existence and it is the ultimate form of artistic expression, in my humble opinion.

*View Eric's Portfolio –*  
[istockphoto.com/ericvega](https://istockphoto.com/ericvega)





5

Microstock:  
The Reality



Microstock photography is definitely not a “get-rich-quick” type of job. It takes a lot of time to build this business to a point where it’s actually working for you. Another way to say this is that you basically “work for free” before you can make a profit.

With stock photography you don’t have clients paying you with a big cheque after a long day of photographing. Instead you have to create all of your photographs on your own budget, on your own time, find your own models, edit all of your images, upload them and then hope that someone likes your images enough to license them. But you need more than one happy customer if you want to pay for your work, since you’ll probably make an average of only a few dollars per photograph, especially if you’re just starting in this business.

It’s really a numbers game ... upload a large quantity of high quality photographs and you’ll probably see them sell. Then do it again, and again. It’s a lot of work, but if it pays off then it’s totally worth it.





If you're considering becoming a microstock photographer, there are a few different routes you can follow to select an agency. First of all, before you jump in headfirst, do your research. You'll soon discover that there are a lot of microstock agencies and websites available to license your images and it can be somewhat overwhelming. When I first started uploading images I started out by contributing to five different agencies, but as the months passed and I learned more about them, I decided to stick with one and join their exclusivity program, which basically means that I only license royalty-free photographs through their website.

There are several reasons why I decided to go exclusive with one agency. One is that I was making money on their site. It wasn't a considerable amount since I was still very new to the industry, but it was enough to make a difference and sway my decision. Going exclusive also meant a higher royalty rate, better overall sales, and other agency-specific benefits, such as being able to add my images to the site's higher-end collec-

tions, and having a certain amount of legal protection for my images.

However, many microstock photographers prefer to license their photos through more than one agency—it's a personal decision that we all have made on our own after weighing our options. Some websites will be profitable, others will sell very few of your images. Many photographers don't want to put "all their eggs in one basket" by being exclusive with one agency. One thing I do know is that if you prefer to use more than one website, then you definitely have your work cut out for you. Along with the benefits to being exclusive, one really big reason that I chose to only use one agency is that uploading photos (which includes keywords, model releases, categories, etc.) is extremely time consuming. Since I do all of my own photography, editing and uploading, working with only one agency means I free up my time to create more photographs or even work on other projects.





## Can Stock Photographers Really be Successful?

One question that is usually on people's minds when they find out about stock—microstock in particular—is whether it's lucrative. Can photographers really make money—significant money—doing this job? There are obviously a lot of photographers out there doing it every day, so is it still possible for photographers just getting their feet wet in this industry to eventually quit their jobs and become full-time microstock photographers?

My honest opinion is that yes, it's very possible, but like many things in life it's definitely not easy. It takes work and a full-time commitment, usually while also working a full-time job. It takes a lot of self-drive, motivation, determination, and creativity, and you have to be okay with being your own boss, and possibly even creating your own structured business (like an LLC or corporation).

People will oftentimes want to know how much money a microstock photographer can make, yet this is (by far) the toughest question to answer. Mostly because the

answer is: I don't know. Yeah, I could tell you how much I make, but that would only serve to satisfy your curiosity. The thing is, there are way too many factors and variables involved to give an estimate of how much a new stock photographer can expect to make each month. Some of these include how long someone has been involved with microstock, the type of photos they create, their skill level and talent as a photographer, and even their editing skills. And, the amount can also change from month to month depending on how "seasonal" a portfolio is, changes in search algorithms, etc.

If you're considering getting into this industry then the very first thing you should have is another job, or another source of income that will pay your bills, photography equipment, model fees, computer software ... the list goes on and on. You see, when you start out in this industry you make money very slowly. It took me a full year before the light bulb went off in my head that I could actually make this business work as a full-time job. I was still in the military when

I started, and even when I separated from the Navy and all I had was photography, I was married and had a husband who was paying most of the bills for just over a year before I was fully on my own. So from start to finish it was a solid 2.5–3 years of growing my microstock business before I was on my own, single, and paying my way through life with photography. These stories and timeframes are different for everyone, but hopefully you get the point.

Another thing that you absolutely need to have is photographic knowledge, skill, and talent. This, of course, can be learned and improved upon. However, not only do you need great images that will sell, you must be able to compete with the existing photographers in the industry who are already several steps ahead of you. If you're brand new to photography and just starting out in microstock, you have a long way to go if you want to do this job full time. I'm not saying it's impossible, you just have a much bigger learning curve than some of your fellow stock photographers do.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to discourage anyone from becoming a contributor and diving into stock photography. I just don't believe that it should be "glamorized" or made out to seem like you can drop everything and become a full-time stock photographer in a few months. Why not give it a try? Even if you don't ever do it full time, if you just upload a few images a month here and there, it's a great learning tool and you might make enough money to pay for a lens or two down the road.

The reality is that with stock photography, the more you put into it, the more you get out of it (which is one of those "duh" statements that can be applied to most things, if not everything, in life). Yet with photography the more unique, creative, and useful your photos are, the greater the chances of customers finding and licensing your images. Bottom line.



This is one of those questions that gets asked frequently, and my answer (coming from a photographer/contributor's perspective) is that I don't know. With new photographers joining daily and the industry getting more and more competitive, it's possible that, as a whole, microstock is sustainable, but it's definitely getting more difficult for new, individual contributors to make a living.

Overall, it's very difficult to tell if this industry will last. I think that a lot of the questioning behind whether or not it's sustainable is coming from people who may not want it to succeed, and I don't blame them. I'm not expecting this career of mine to disappear in the near future, but that doesn't mean I don't keep my eyes on the possibility that it may not last forever.



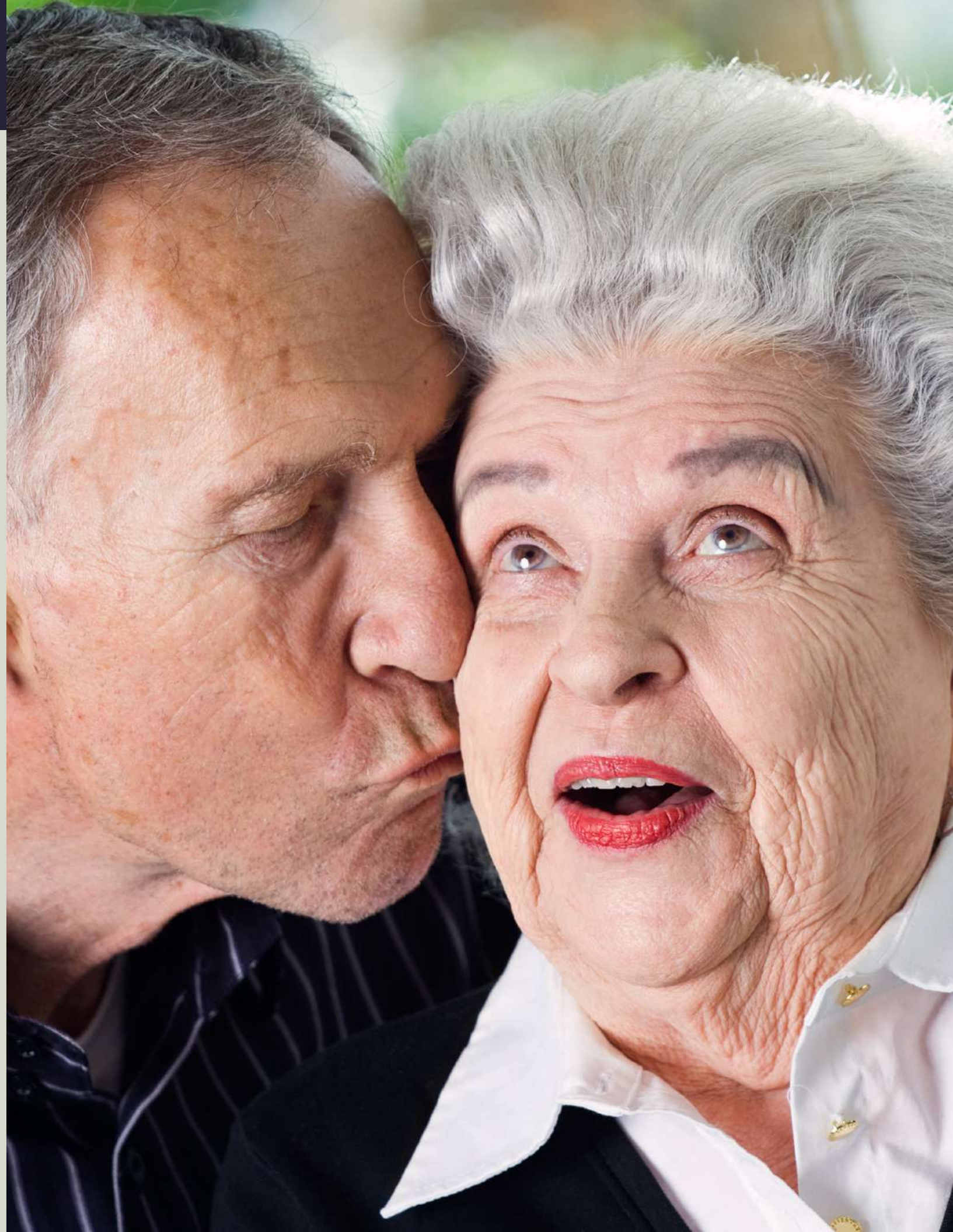


Many of the stock photographers I know seem to have come upon this business by accident—a serendipitous discovery that led to an amazing career. In fact I can't even think of one full-time stock photographer that started out with the intention of making it their full-time job. Microstock may have been the one thing that helped me find my way back to having a job as a “creative” ... it's been the catalyst that has brought me to many other things in my life that I never dreamed possible.

To sum this up I thought I would give some final thoughts, tips, and advice on photographers wanting to dive into microstock. First, there is no checklist in this industry. What works extremely well for one photographer may not be the right moves for another. You have to find your own voice, style, and approach. You also need to be flexible, do your research, continuously create (and upload) new content, and learn how to play by the

rules, which do tend to change from year to year. Being a full-time stock photographer is a great lifestyle but it's also one that is achieved through diligence, hard work, and the ability to adapt to industry changes.

Overall, if you want to get into the world of stock photography, then by all means do it! If you're going to take the photos anyway, why not upload? If you really apply yourself, at the very least you'll get a great learning experience, and you will probably even improve as a photographer. If all else fails and you need some motivation, just remember this well-known saying in the microstock industry: “Shoot, edit, upload ... repeat.”





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## (micro)STOCK: FROM PASSION TO PAYCHECK

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