
MONOCHROMATIC COLOR: ONE COLOR CREATES INTEREST AND MOOD

Quick Guide
Written by Kevin Landwer-Johan



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Colors influence so much of a photographic composition, but what if you take photos when there's only one color in your composition?

Monochromatic color photographs have one color. They can include tints and shades of that color - lighter or darker tones. But essentially, monochromatic compositions hold their strength in using a single color.

Many people think of monochrome as being only black and white. However, monochromatic color is not limited to shades of gray. You can include any color you like. But only one.

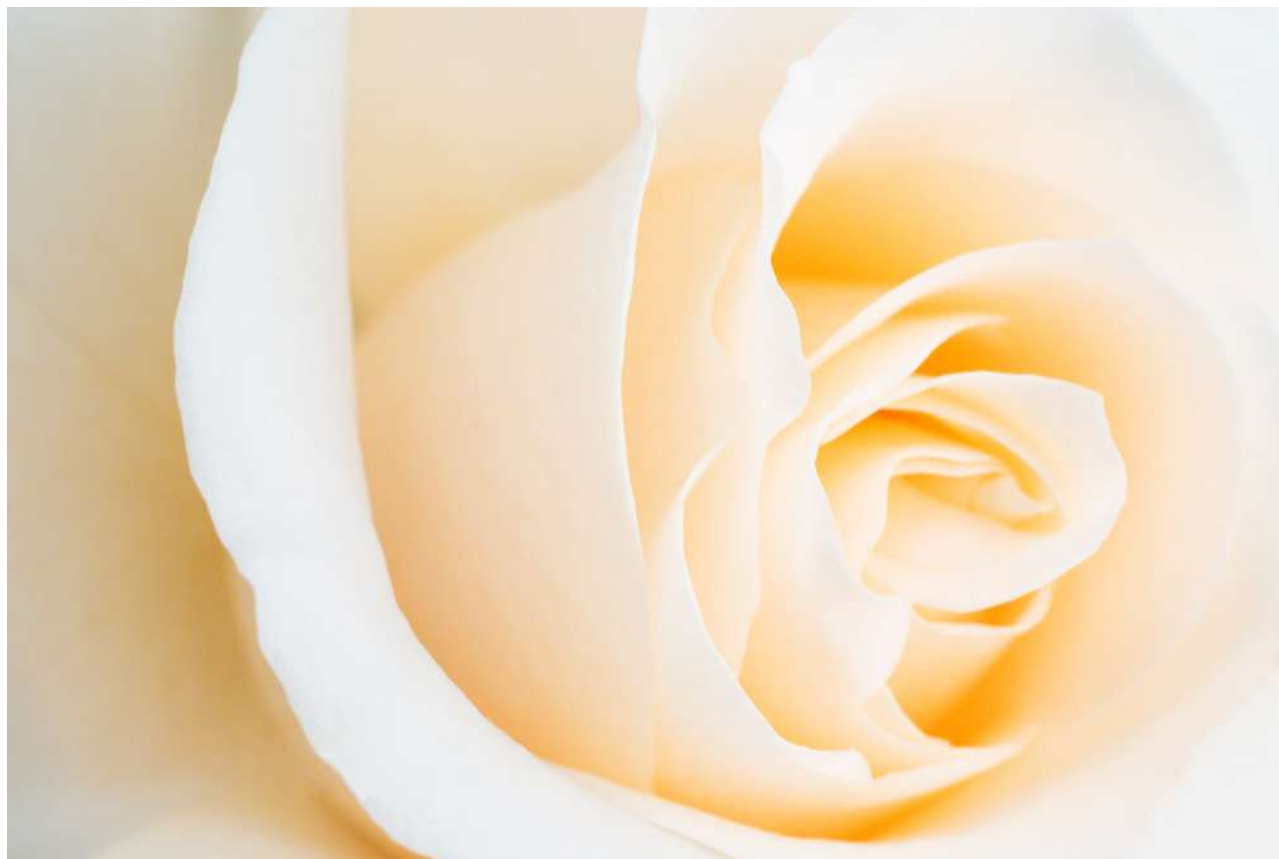
There are many reasons why you might choose to work with a single color. In this guide, we'll take a look at why and how to limit your palette to a lone hue.

 **Recommended Reading:** Want to create memorable, fascinating, and impressive color photographs? Grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: [Rich and Vibrant Color Photography Volume 1.](#)



COMPOSITION AND MONOCHROMATIC COLOR

Composing with one color tends to emphasize a particular mood. Yellows and oranges are warm and summery. Green monochrome compositions invoke refreshing and peaceful feelings. Blue tones tend to be, well, blue. Cool, foreboding, melancholy. Red can be romantic or even angry. Humans are emotionally connected to color so you must choose them carefully.



Compare these two images of roses on the left. The main difference in the compositions is the color of the flower. They convey quite different feelings.

Making the most of the connection between color and emotion brings integrity to your compositions. Sticking to a single color, and choosing the right tints and shades, helps you make a more significant impression on viewers. Used well, a single color in a photographic composition brings more life to an image.

Photographs by Kevin Landwer-Johan



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

It's often easier to set up monochromatic photos; for example, this photo of red roses filling the entire frame. I wanted only red roses of the same hue. When I processed the image, I darkened the roses in the background. Having the single rose raised above the others that are out of focus holds your attention.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

Often, monochromatic simplicity can be found in nature. Blue seascapes and green landscapes are two very common examples. Close-ups of not only colorful flowers, like the roses I've used as examples, but also of other naturally occurring scenes are other common examples, as well as browns or greens in forest scenes, or orange and yellow hues in a desert landscape.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

I love the rice growing season where I live, as there's an abundance of opportunities to photograph the color green.



Key Lesson: Hue means color. Tints are created by adding white to a hue. Shades are created by adding black to a hue. Tone is about the vibrancy of a hue. Tones are created by adding gray to a hue.



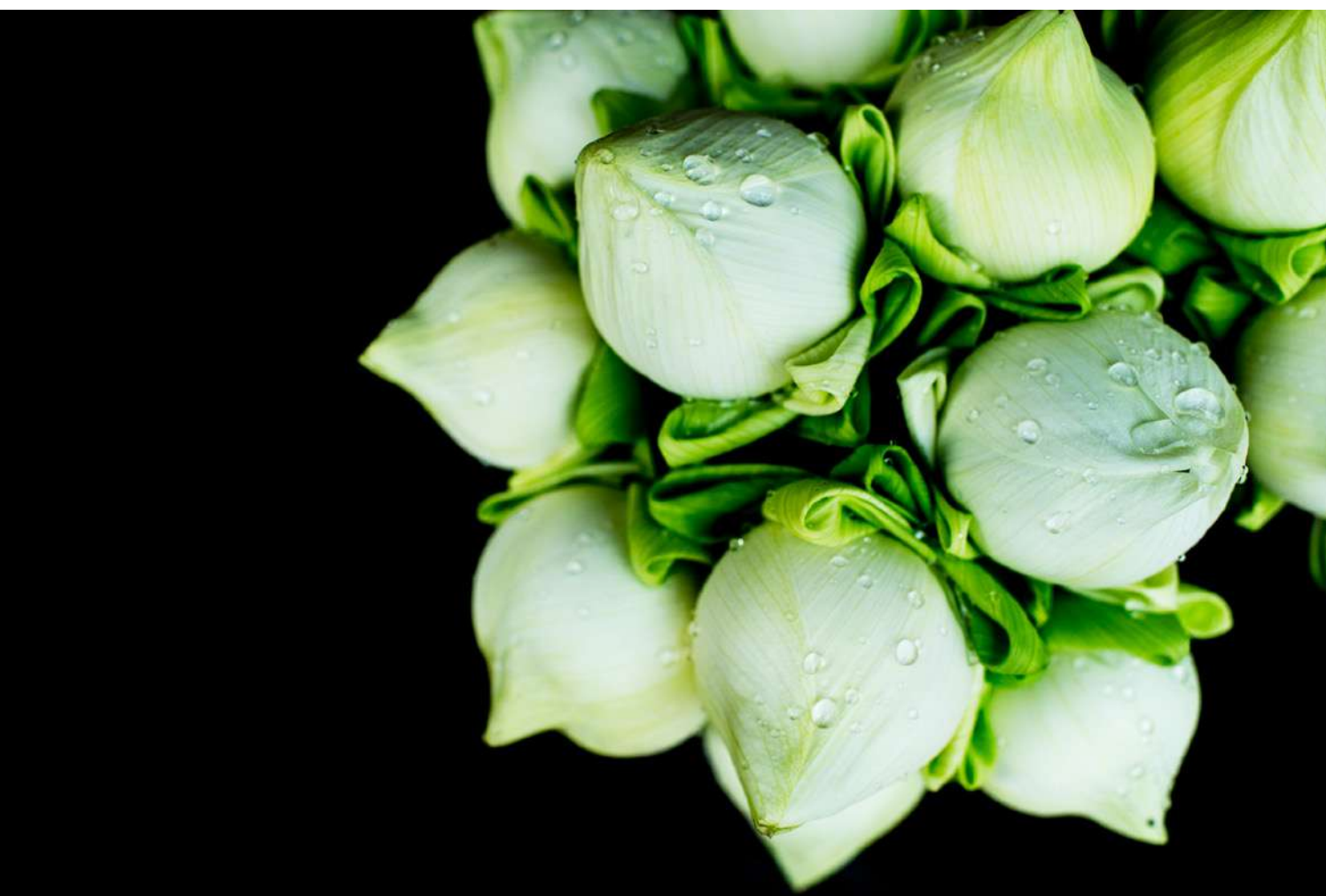
Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

MASTERING MONOCHROMATIC COLOR TECHNIQUES IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Working with a single color can be challenging. If you're adamant about having a single hue in your composition, you'll need to be more patient and particular. What you include and what you exclude from your frame becomes more critical when taking photos.

Of course, you can always make adjustments to an image during the post-production process, but this is somewhat different than only including a single color in your composition as you're taking the photograph.

Creating an interesting, visually appealing photo in monochrome requires practice and experimentation. It's also helpful to have some understanding of color theory. When looking to create this type of photo, you must have a keen eye and be able to see subtle differences between colors. Even the inclusion of a little bit of color that's significantly different than the main color will alter the feeling of your composition.




Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

To add depth and dimension to your monochrome compositions, pay attention to different tints and shades. How you place them in relation to each other affects the overall design of a composition. Depending on your main subject and elements in your composition, darker or lighter hues convey depth. In some cases, darker colors may appear more distant. In other compositions, darker tones might seem closer to the camera than lighter ones. Think of mountains with a hazy sky. The peaks furthest away are lighter in tone.

Careful use of contrast becomes more important. You can use contrast between shades and tints of a single color to add emphasis to elements in your photos. Subjects with hard lines, large blocks of shape, and high contrast leave a different impression than images with smooth gradations between tints and shades.

Texture and repetitive pattern can also be used for greater impact when working with a single hue. They can break up an area of color and bring more visual interest. Texture is often enhanced using high contrast caused by a low angle light source.

 **Key Lesson:** Experiment with your camera's exposure controls and/or flash settings. This brings more options for how your monochromatic images turn out. A slightly underexposed monochrome image has a different feel than one that's been a little overexposed.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

MONOCHROMATIC COLOR IN DIFFERENT GENRES OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Some genres are more challenging to create monochromatic images than others, but there's always a way when you really want to. The more control you have over your subject, the background, and the lighting, the easier it is to make images with a single color.

Still-life photography is one of the most controlled genres. The photographer gets to choose, manipulate, and light the whole composition. You can do anything you want when you have the eye for it and the skills.

When setting up a still-life photo or doing a product photography session, you must think of the mood. What do you want to convey, and how does the color you work with affect this? Bring together a collection of objects to photograph and choose a background of the same hue. This is crucial to the atmosphere you'll create. With product photography, choosing the wrong color will not help your marketing efforts at all. Think of what you want to achieve and pick the best color, tints, and shades that will do the job well for you.

Landscape and seascape photography can lend themselves well to being captured in monochrome, but you must choose the right locations and lighting. Sunrise and sunset photos are often monochromatic. The warm light of the sun as it's low to the horizon evokes pleasant feelings. It bathes a landscape in a yellow or orange hue. Seascapes, when the sun is below the horizon, are an enhanced blue. With a calm sea, they are restful, but a wild storm combined with the bluish light emphasizes angst or sadness.

Truly monochromatic portraits are a little more challenging. This is because people have colored eyes, varying skin tones, and pink lips. Use makeup, and carefully use clothing that has the same hue. Pick a background that matches. By doing these things, you can make a monochromatic portrait possible. Sometimes, as with the image on the previous page, they can happen naturally.

Street photography in monochrome is a more challenging genre to capture monochromatic images. Inherently this genre allows for no manipulation of your subject. It also commonly includes all manner of elements, people, and unpredictable situations. These make it more difficult to limit your color palette to a single hue. However, this challenge is

a good one to take on to help improve your street photography skills.

Looking to include only one color in your street photos trains you to look more carefully before pressing the shutter button. It can also teach you to become more patient. Once you set your mind to taking only monochromatic street photos, it can become compulsive. The challenge is real, and the opportunities are there.



Key Lesson: Look beyond the easy option: gray. Aspects of cities can be very monochromatic and are usually gray. Sure, take some grayscale images, but push yourself to find others that include real color. The biggest challenge is to see how many different elements you can include in a single frame of a single color.



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Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

CONCLUSION

Monochrome is more than just black and white or grayscale photographs. Thinking in terms of mood or atmosphere, using a single color can have the most impact. Designers and art directors know this and often make compelling use of the technique.

It's important to choose the color that invokes a particular feeling best. For example, don't use blue for happy images. Stay away from red when you want a feeling of calmness. Bring life to a party feel with yellow or orange. Matching your color choice and subject creates a stronger emotive connection for viewers.

Take time as you work on your composition to look at tints, shades, and tones. How do these affect your photograph? Does your image look too flat? Use lighter and darker areas to help create depth and add dimension to your pictures.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

Monochromatic color creates interest and mood in photographs. How you set your exposure adds to the feeling. A lighter or darker exposure can have an even greater effect because there's only one color in the frame.

Next time you pick up your camera, no matter what genre of images you're creating, challenge yourself to make at least some that have only a single hue.

Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) What is a monochromatic photo?
- 2) What can monochromatic photos help emphasize?
- 3) What are two types of 'found' monochromatic photos?
- 4) What is a hue?
- 5) What are tints and shades?
- 6) Why can it be more challenging to capture monochromatic street photos?



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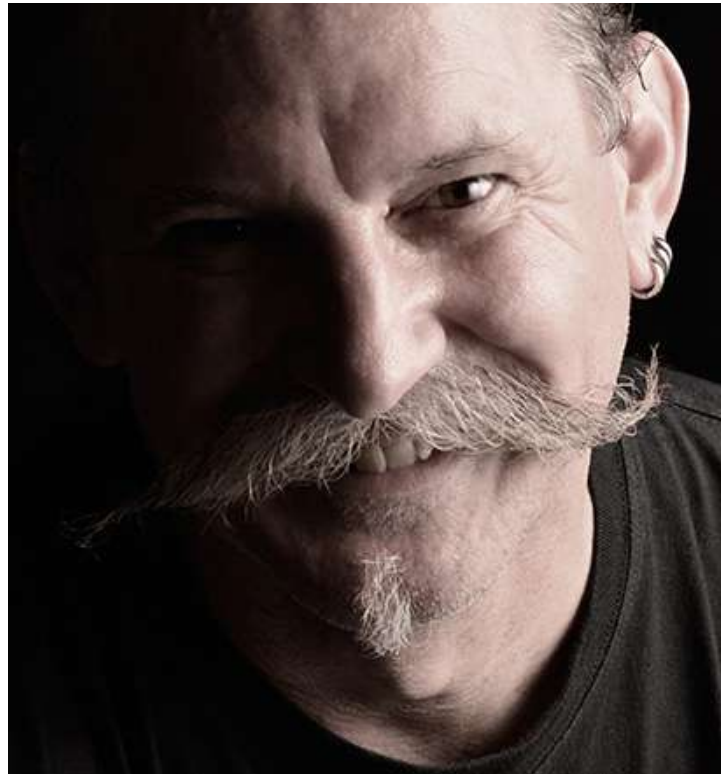
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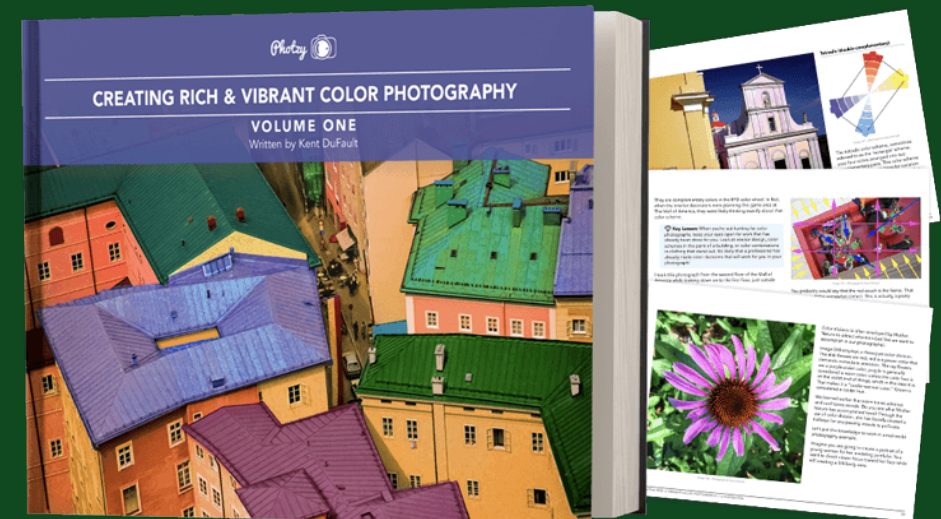
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kevin is a New Zealand professional photographer living in the north of Thailand since 2002. During his career he has worked in editorial, documentary, and commercial photography. He now also teaches photography workshops and writes books and articles. You can read his blog [here](#). He runs [photography workshops based at his home](#) in rural northern Thailand.

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