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# USING SELECTIVE FOCUS FOR BETTER IMAGES

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Short Guide

Written by Jason D. Little



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Ansel Adams and his work remain central to photography discussions; he's been a source of inspiration and emulation for generations of photography enthusiasts and professionals, even now in the digital age. There are a number of elements that we closely associate with Adams' style, including the way he used depth-of-field. His approach was to have everything from here to the moon in focus, regularly using extreme f-stops like f/64 and f/90. Just have a look at Adams' famed "Moonrise" photo for evidence of this.

Of course, it is common practice for landscape photographers to use deep depth-of-field in their work; it's a genre in which it is important to have both the foreground and the background in clear focus, though we hardly hear of anyone using an f-stop as high as f/64.

Not everyone is a landscape photographer, obviously. Not everyone needs or wants to shoot in a style that puts everything in focus. This is where something called selective focus photography comes into the picture.





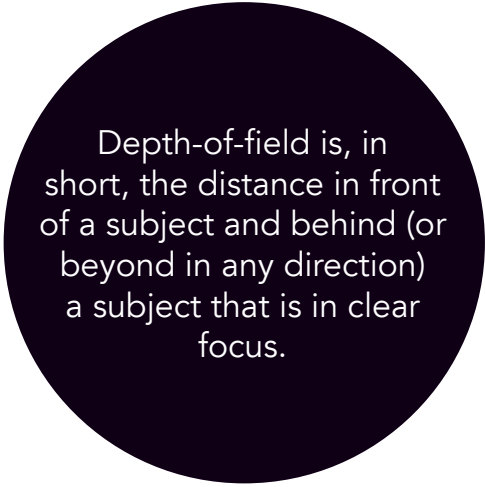
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## WHAT IS SELECTIVE FOCUS?

Selective focus is a rather self-explanatory term: you focus on the specific part of a subject you want to highlight or emphasize, and you “ignore” the rest, letting it fall into the blur of the background (or the foreground — you can be as creative as you like with selective focus). Selective focus is often used for subject studies, to draw attention to a subject or part of a subject and evoke a contemplative mood when viewing the subject in context of its blurred but recognizable surroundings.

As you might have surmised, selective focus is achieved by using shallow depth-of-field. Shallow depth-of-field has a magical way of adding some serious “pop” to an image, from portraits to macros. Read on to learn more.

## SELECTIVE FOCUS AND DEPTH-OF-FIELD



Depth-of-field is, in short, the distance in front of a subject and behind (or beyond in any direction) a subject that is in clear focus.

In order to successfully pull off this photographic feat of selective focus, there is one vital technical consideration to account for.

Selective focus requires shallow depth-of-field. Depth-of-field is, in short, the distance in front of a subject and behind (or beyond in any direction) a subject that is in clear focus. There are three main factors that impact depth-of-field.

1. **F-stop** - As we talked about above in regard to Ansel Adams' work, high f-stops (small apertures) create greater depth-of-field. In cases where focal length and shooting distance are constants, depth-of-field is far shallower at f/2.0 compared to f/11.
2. **Focal Length** - A lens of a shorter focal length will create greater depth-of-field than longer focal lengths. For instance, a 28mm lens will generate more depth-of-field than an 85mm lens when shot at the same distance from the subject.
3. **Distance** - The closer you are to your subject, the less depth-of-field will be generated.

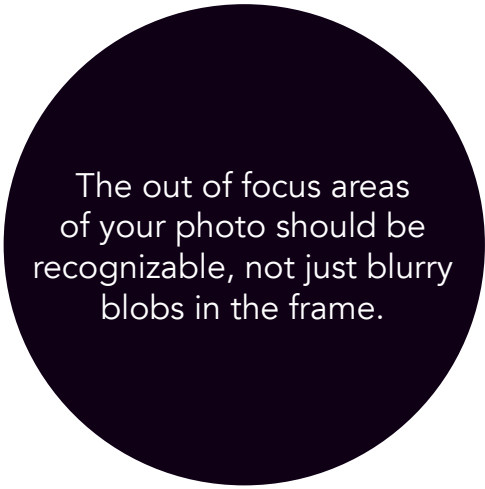


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## USING SELECTIVE FOCUS FOR BETTER IMAGES

In selective focus photography, the in focus parts and out of focus parts are equally important, but nothing about the technique is particularly difficult.

Here are some tips that will guide you on your path to successfully implementing selective focus into your photography repertoire.



The out of focus areas of your photo should be recognizable, not just blurry blobs in the frame.

1. **Use a Large Aperture** - Given that selective focus is about zoning in on a specific part of a scene and throwing the rest out of focus, you'll want to use a large aperture — at least f/2.8. Be sure to check your focus, as accurate focusing becomes a bit more difficult when working with shallow depth-of-field.
2. **Identify Useful Out of Focus Areas** - The out of focus areas of your photo should be recognizable, not just blurry blobs in the frame. If you're shooting an insect, for example, it might be a good idea to include some surrounding leaves as the defocused elements of the shot. Just make sure that they are still recognizable as leaves and don't appear as random green spots.
3. **Assess the Angle** - This will get easier over time, but you will find that getting just the right angle will be incredibly effective in adding punch to your selective focus images. The goal is to take an angle that causes the surrounding defocused elements to be farther away from the main subject. This further enhances the selective focus effect.
4. **Choose a Longer Focal Length** - Use your longest lens or a zoom lens extended to the far end of its range. Longer focal lengths create a compression effect that throws the background out of focus.
5. **Keep Composition in Mind** - Put the subject in focus in such a place that allows the viewer's eye to wander off and still be able to enjoy the rest of the image.






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## WHEN TO USE SELECTIVE FOCUS

The selective focus technique can be used in nearly any genre of photography.





The selective focus technique is easily achieved and easily adapted to your own creative vision.

- 1. Macro Photography** - Due to the technical quirks associated with macro photography, attaining a lot of depth-of-field in small subjects can be pretty difficult. Thus, selective focusing is a means of making your work a little easier as well as serving as an aesthetically powerful way to draw the viewer's attention to a very specific part of the subject.
- 2. Portraiture** - Using a long lens and a wide aperture you can put all the emphasis on your subject's face (or eyes), yet still provide some mood and atmosphere with the defocused elements.
- 3. Subjects with Repeating Patterns** - Stadium seats, picket fences, wildflowers, rows of trees. Using a wide aperture and a moderate angle to the subjects, focus on the second or third or eighth object in the row and the rest will be rendered beautifully out of focus.

Two notable exceptions might be landscape and product/commercial photography where the success of the shot hinges on being able to clearly see all the elements in it.

Again, the selective focus technique is easily achieved and easily adapted to your own creative vision. Not only will you create images that strongly emphasize your subject, they will also be free of distractions and further augmented by gorgeous bokeh.

## About the Author



Jason D. Little is a photographer (shooting macros, portraits, candid, and the occasional landscape), part time writer, and full time lover of music.

You can see Jason's photography on his *Photography Blog* or on *Flickr*.

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