

A person is silhouetted against a bright sunset over a body of water. The person is holding a camera up to their eye, capturing the scene. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm orange glow that reflects on the water. The sky is a deep blue with some scattered clouds. The overall mood is serene and artistic.

SHORT GUIDE:
**SHOOTING
SILHOUETTES**

BY JASON D. LITTLE

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CONTENTS

- » Silhouettes >> P.03
- » The Beauty of Silhouettes >> P.05
- » 7 Key Points to Shooting Great Silhouettes >> P.07
 - Choose a Suitable Subject
 - Set Up Your Lighting
 - Pose Your Subject and Frame the Shot
 - Prepare Your Camera for the Shot
 - Focus
 - Post Processing
 - Optional Tools
- » Final Thoughts >> P.13
- » Some Inspiration >> P.15

SILHOUETTES



SILHOUETTES

We spend an awful lot of time and anxious energy fretting over how to light our subjects; specifically, we tend to fear shadows. Hard shadows can ruin nearly any photograph. Whether we're shooting portraits, macros, or products, – we typically aim for soft, even lighting.

The fact is, however, we all need a break from the norm; we need to take advantage of opportunities to do things a different way. Those beautifully lit portraits that we all seek to make are important; they may even be the staple of your photographic repertoire. But there is another way to think about lighting – a way that is, perhaps, counterintuitive but can be equally, if not more, evocative as any perfectly lit shot.

Portrait photographers know of Rembrandt lighting, split lighting, butterfly lighting, and all styles of lighting designed to light the front of the subject. But what about backlighting?

THE BEAUTY OF SILHOUETTES



THE BEAUTY OF SILHOUETTES

A silhouette: that dark, featureless subject outlined against a bright background – a photographic phenomenon created by backlighting; a photographic phenomenon that is capable of conveying mood, drama, mystery and emotion in ways unmatched by more conventional portraiture. Silhouettes are incredibly simple in form, yet they possess a great deal of aesthetic and atmospheric power.

They impart that power to the viewer by giving us the freedom to further use our imagination as we interpret these images.

Fortunately, silhouettes are also relatively easy to create. The tips that follow will help you get started.

7 KEY POINTS TO SHOOTING GREAT SILHOUETTES



HOW TO PHOTOGRAPH SILHOUETTES

1. Choose a Suitable Subject - “Suitable” is admittedly a rather open-ended term; indeed, anything can be made into a silhouette, but some simply work better than others. Bold, distinctly shaped forms separated from their surroundings tend to work best.

2. Set Up Your Lighting - There’s actually nothing to set up here. Your flash serves no use for this project; in fact, all that stuff you learned previously in your photography education about how to light a subject is off the table. The goal is to put the light completely behind your subject; you don’t want any light falling on their front side.

The very best way to go about this is to position your subject in front of a rising or setting sun. The sun isn’t an absolute must, however; any light source that is large enough and bright enough will do.

3. Pose Your Subject and Frame the Shot - If you’re working with a person, be sure to pose them in an open area or in such a way that doesn’t cause them to blend in with surrounding objects. Furthermore, try to avoid photographing people straight-on; instead, photograph their profile. This will make their features more distinct and more recognizable.



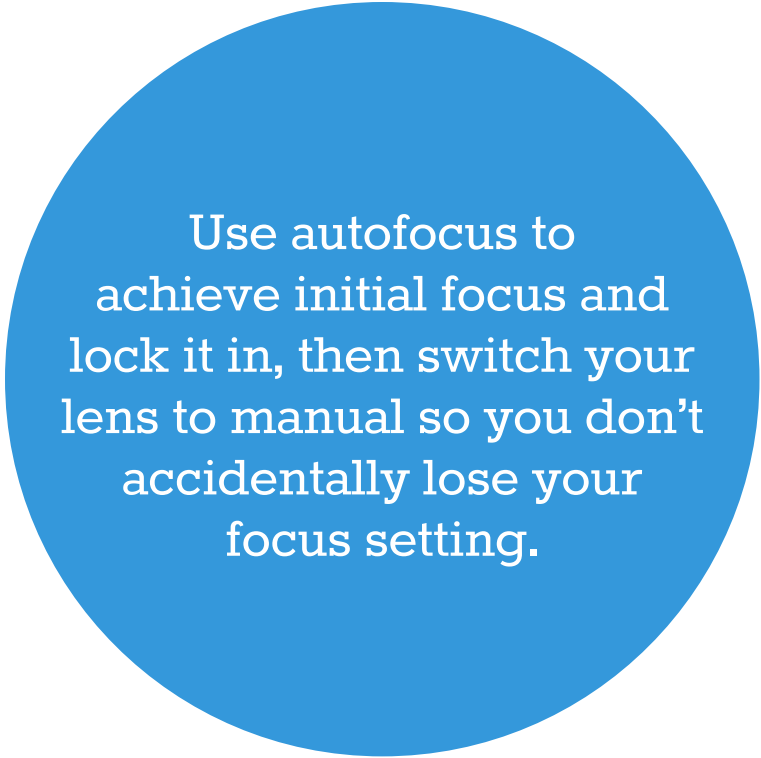
HOW TO PHOTOGRAPH SILHOUETTES

4. Prepare Your Camera for the Shot - Shooting in manual mode is the ideal method of creating a silhouette. Again, you will probably find that the process goes against the grain of what you're used to as you expose for the background and not the subject.

Quite simply, this is how you get a dark foreground and a bright background – a silhouetted image. If you find that light is spilling over onto the front of your subject, just underexpose the background and your subject will become increasingly darker.

You can accomplish this in auto mode as well. The trick is to keep the camera from doing what it does so well – metering a scene for even lighting. To prevent this, point your camera at the brightest portion of the sky and press the shutter button half way to initiate the metering process.

Then, with your finger still on the shutter button, move the camera back to your subject and take the shot.



Use autofocus to achieve initial focus and lock it in, then switch your lens to manual so you don't accidentally lose your focus setting.

This method works the majority of the time, but if you want to be a bit more precise you should use “spot metering”, if your camera possesses that feature. Spot metering will allow you to meter for a very specific part of the frame (the background in this instance), thereby increasing the accuracy of your desired exposure.

Either approach can lead to successful silhouettes. Use the one that you're most comfortable with or whichever works out best for you. Given that all you've got is a memory card to erase as opposed to rolls of film to buy, you can experiment as much as you want or need to.

5. Focus - The subject needs to be in sharp focus in order for your silhouette to have definition. How to get the subject in focus may not be so straightforward considering the metering steps discussed above. The camera will have to focus on the background in order to take a meter reading, which means that focus won't be accurate when you move back to your subject.



There are a couple of ways to tackle this problem:

- Use manual focus to re-focus on your subject after you've metered the shot, or pre-focus before you meter.
- Set a small aperture (larger f-number-, f/8 or f/11, for example) to increase depth of field, which will increase the odds that your subject is clearly defined.

6. Post Processing - As always, what you do in this phase is entirely up to you. It's likely, however, that you will want to boost shadows, blacks, contrast, and clarity; these adjustments will help define the subject more clearly. A small bump to vibrancy and saturation might be useful as well, just to add some pop to the background; especially if the background is a colorful sunrise or sunset.



HOW TO PHOTOGRAPH SILHOUETTES

7. Optional Tools - Making a silhouette really only requires your camera, your subject, and a bright background. But if you happen to be working in a particularly low light situation where a slow shutter speed is necessary, then a tripod will certainly come in handy. And, if you like, you can use a circular polarizer to create more contrast and saturation for the background.

FINAL THOUGHTS



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While the basic process will remain the same, your specific camera settings will probably be different for each silhouette you shoot because subject and lighting conditions won't be identical on each occasion; so again, we see the luxury that digital photography has afforded us – we can adapt and experiment with no limits.



SOME INSPIRATION



SOME INSPIRATION

As you begin to think about and prepare for shooting silhouettes of your own, we'll leave you with some images to inspire you.













Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (*and FREE!*) photography resources:



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You can see Jason's photography on his [photography blog](#) or on [Flickr](#).

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