

Ready, Set, Shoot!
Tips for Taking Great Photos By Lisa Pavelka

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Why are your images so important? You need great photos for: publication, juried shows/teaching opportunities, social networking, and professional promotion. The cost of having your artwork professionally photographed can add up quickly. Developing the skill to take high quality images can make it easier to get your work published, not to mention have control over when you can get the photos you need.

Lighting

Illuminating your work is one of the most important aspects to any good photo. Without good lighting, even the best camera and most beautiful artwork will not show well.

The first and best choice is to shoot indoors with controlled lighting. If you have a standard set-up to photograph with, you can shoot photos at any time, day or night, regardless of the ambient lighting available.

The industry standard is to use a key (main) light source and at least two fill lights (to counteract shadows).

If lighting equipment is not within your budget, the best way to shoot your work is outdoors, on an overcast day. Bright sun will cast extreme shadows in most. The best days to shoot are on those that are overcast. If possible, shoot when the sun is highest behind the clouds to minimize the chance of unwanted shadows. Don't rely on auto white balance on your camera. Check through all the settings, but the cloudy white balance setting will probably offer the closest color correctness.

Lighting doesn't have to be extremely inexpensive. Incandescent (standard) light bulbs and clip-on lamps found at hardware or pet stores are quite affordable. These can be attached to tripods or homemade stands made from PVC piping. An optional fourth light can be used to back-light your work and define the edges of a piece. Lighting will illuminate the artwork from outside a light tent/box. Be careful to not place too closely. The heat from a bulb can be a fire hazard if placed too closely to fabric or plastic.

Light Box/Tent resources:

- Building your own. Online tutorial on building your own light box: www.digital-photography-school.com/how-to-make-a-inexpensive-light-tent
- Use a ready-to-go photo system such as the **Sunpack #JB5174 Portable Photo Studio**, www.sears.com
- High end, professional quality systems from: Lite Stage, www.litestage.com

Backgrounds and Staging

The primary background should be a seamless sweep background (with paper or cloth) on a firm, flat surface or inside of a light box. Do not try to color coordinate the background color with your work (i.e. placing objects with browns on a beige or tan background). White is the best

background when the need to cut out an object in Photoshop, graphically is required. Black is the most dramatic, but it doesn't work with all objects. When pieces are properly lit, reflective surfaces such as glass or Plexiglas can give a subtle halo around the piece being photographed. This highlighting aura can be quite pleasing to showcase artwork.

You can purchase light tent or systems on the Internet or make your own. You can construct an easy and inexpensive photo stage frame for seamless paper and cloth sweeps with PVC pipes and connector joints from a hardware store. Large and colorless translucent storage bins also make great light boxes where sweeps can be taped are another inexpensive option. You can also use this to store your background materials and lights in it when not in use.

Background Resources:

- Reflective surfaces like white or black Plexiglas sheeting, offers a lovely reflective quality (www.viplastics.com)
- Gradient backgrounds for infinity effects (www.phototechinc.com)

When staging your photo, avoid props, and busy background materials. This will distract attention from your work. Also, whenever possible, prop your work invisibly using: poster tack, polymer clay supports, museum putty or wax or suspend pieces on fishing (monofilament) line.

A **Chain-Sta** device is handy for hanging jewelry pieces from with fishing line (www.chainsta.com)

Take Your Best Shot - Digital Camera Basics

When you're ready to shoot photos, there are primary settings you should be well acquainted with. First of all, never rely on the image you see in your viewfinder. The color, tone and exposure in your camera's display may differ significantly from your computer monitor.

It is well worth spending time learning about your camera with the user manual. Not all the settings on cameras are located in the same places. You should also have a digital camera that shoots at least 9 megapixels or higher. Print size for publication is typically requested at 300 dpi (Dots per Inch), jpeg format. Internet resolution is typically 72 – 150 dpi, jpeg format.

Very large file sizes shot at the highest resolution (9 mega pixels and above are best when a photo needs to be printed for publication or on photo paper.) It's not necessary to shoot photos much higher than this unless the print out will be poster size or larger. For uploading photos to the Internet, use smaller settings between 2-3 mega pixels. It's best to take photos in the largest file size. Save this as a single master image, left unedited. You can always work from the master image and create/save multiple versions of the original after editing to adjust size, color, etc.

- **Macro** –Essential for close-up (within 3 feet) photos of jewelry and artwork shots. **Tulip** Icon
- **Custom White Balance** – Never rely on **“Auto White Balance!”** Look for this setting in your **“Program”** adjustments or **“Manual Mode”** options. Color temperature varies depending on light source. You can generally scroll through these settings and check what you see in the viewfinder and what you see with your eyes, simultaneously to determine which setting offers the closest match to true color. The best White Balance varies depending on what type of light source is used.

- **Exposure** - Also known as: EV/exposure value compensation. Look for the (+/-) icon and the EV meter. This is the setting used to make adjustments when taking bracketed shots. Even though some of your photos may look too light or too dark in the display, you still need to take several shots at different exposures in order to determine which is the best one when you edit the image on your computer.

Exposure Tip: *It's always better to underexpose than overexpose!*

- **Bracketing** – Taking multiple shots at different exposure settings. Don't rely on the LCD viewfinder!
- **Focus/Depth of Field** - Most digital cameras offer fairly reliable focus when set on "**Macro.**" The greatest control over focal length is achieved by using manual mode. "**F Stop**" refers to fraction of the lens opening/the range an image remains in focus (or Depth of Field). The higher the F Stop number, the smaller lens opening (thus greater depth of field) However higher F Stops mean reduced light exposure. When using a higher F Stop number, you'll have to increase the exposure time.
- When using the more automatic "**Program**" mode while the camera is set to "**Macro,**" exposure can be adjusted using the EV/value compensation (+ /-) setting. The camera automatically selects the focal length/F Stop.
- "**ISO**" refers to the light sensitivity. This is an adaptation from traditional film. Lower ISO settings (100 or 200) are recommended for product/artwork photography. Higher ISO settings can brighten the exposure, but also make images grainier.

A wealth of more detailed information can be found in books devoted to the subject of digital photography. Also, searching the Internet is a great way to find more tips and tricks to take great images of your artwork.