

Course sample

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Photography 1:

The Art of Photography



Level HE4 – 40 CATS

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Introduction

Photography is one of the most accessible and strongest means of making images – and so of self-expression. This is because the complete picture is recorded in almost an instant, and with great ease if you are using a modern camera. Unlike drawing or painting, for example, you need no particular dexterity to begin. The important skills in photography are in the eye and mind rather than in the hand.

These skills of seeing and imagination are the main subject of this course. There will certainly be projects to help you use your camera equipment more efficiently, but the most important projects will be concerned much more with the images than with the machinery. I will not be teaching you how to transfer images to a computer, or how to process them. Manuals supplied with equipment and software cover this, and books on these technical aspects of photography are listed under Further reading at the end of this course.

Not surprisingly, it is the very ease of taking a photograph that is also the cause of many pictures being disappointing. Just because a photograph can be produced so quickly and with virtually no training, many people using a camera take only a little time to capture the image before releasing the shutter. It is as if they feel that the speed of the process has to be matched by an equally short amount of thought. This is the opposite of what should happen. Precisely because everything that you see through the viewfinder will be captured almost instantaneously, you should spend as long as the situation allows in studying it first.

Once you press the shutter release, it is all recorded in precise detail – right down to the scrap of litter in an otherwise pristine landscape image, or the tilted horizon caused by not having the camera exactly level.



Air Raid, Barcelona Robert Capa

This is not to say that you should dither and fuss every time you use a camera. Some situations, such as photographing an independently minded pet, or people in a market, just do not allow the luxury of time: the interesting expression or action that will make a good photograph is likely to last for only a split second. This, naturally, is what makes the photography of things that move difficult. Good reportage photographers, like Henri Cartier-Bresson, are successful because they have trained themselves to see and think quickly.

The principle of spending time and taking care over a potential photograph is sound. Galen Rowell, an American landscape photographer who used 35mm cameras, believed that much of the difference in quality between a large-format photograph from a view camera and a 35mm image lies in approach rather than in equipment:

'A large-format photographer would stop at a scene, consider it for a while, and then spend long minutes setting up his camera until the scene was framed exactly the way he wanted it. A typical amateur with a 35mm would stop, turn toward the scene, make a handheld exposure or two within the first minute, and leave. The reason the 35mm image doesn't look like the 4-by-5 image is more a result of method than of equipment.'

Mountain Light, Galen Rowell, Century

The same applies, incidentally, if you compare an entry-level point-and-shoot camera with a more elaborate and sophisticated model. Both need just the same care and attention in use.

As in any other graphic art, you will need a considerable amount of visual reference material: photographs as examples of how certain techniques and ideas work, and illustrations to show



Photo: Chvetsova

you how to handle the equipment and do certain things. These references are given in this course. The internet, with search engines such as Google, and in particular Google Images, is a tremendous and useful resource for finding photographs. I urge you to make full use of it.



Photo: David Hoare

Unlike painting and drawing, you cannot make photographs purely from imagination, and even for the simplest project you will need things and places to photograph. After you have used up a few obvious objects around the house and several local views, you may start to run out of subjects. One of the things the course will teach you to do is how to choose subjects, but it also helps to start building up your own store of subjects. From right now, begin collecting objects that you find interesting (and also manageable in size). Choose things for their shape (such as an old pot), texture (a piece of driftwood) and colour. If they are perishable, like a flower or vegetable, make a note of them for possible future things to photograph. This last applies also to subjects that are not moveable, such as a particular building you may have spotted.

As well as objects, look for and collect backgrounds: cloth, paper, card, plastic, pieces of leather, stone, and an old chopping board – these kinds of things. Finally, think about places: make a note of attractive and atmospheric views, and of places that might make good settings for photographing a person or a large object (such as a car). Think about how a place will look in different weather, when the sun is at a different angle, or when the foliage has changed with the season.

Learning from professional work

Photography occupies a peculiar place in art, for a number of reasons. One of the most important, and one that often causes a certain amount of confusion among the many people who use a camera, is that it spans an enormous range of activity and purposes. It is at the same time a straightforward means for anyone to keep a scrapbook of holidays, parties and the other things that go on in life, and a professional occupation for the mass media. Nor are these two opposite extremes the only ways in which cameras are used. There is, in addition, photography that records industrial and scientific projects, fine art photography intended for gallery exhibition, photography as a means of self-expression, and more.

The confusion that this causes comes from the fact that amateur photographers – who number in the many millions, are constantly exposed to the way that professional photographers work. You can see these pictures in magazines, newspapers, on books, on posters, and so on. This can be a great help if you treat these professional photographs as freely available examples and instruction. The best work is imaginative, inventive and skilful. But it can be off-putting if you treat this advertising and magazine photography as setting standards that you have to reach. The truth is that, in addition to the skill of the photographer concerned, much of this professional work looks as good as it does for special reasons. First, a considerable amount of money is spent on models, props, exciting locations and retouching. Second, it gets very prominent display, and it is surprising how the simple fact of being published gives a photograph a kind of credential. Look through the pictures that you have taken up to now, and imagine how your best would look in a colour magazine.

With this in mind, you can learn a tremendous amount by starting to look at published photographs in a new way. The next time you pick up a colour supplement, for example, don't treat it just as entertainment. Instead, study each of the main photographs – including the advertising pages – and think about how and why they were taken. Which ones appeal to you? Which do you find exciting – and which boring? Keep the best in a folder. Do this from now on as a matter of course and as you work on a particular project dealing with one aspect of photography, refer to the professional examples. When I come to deal with natural light, for example, look at each picture to see what kind of natural light was used. The time of day, direction of the sun, and so on. Notice how most car advertising photographs have taken great care over the type of daylight – cars are notoriously difficult objects to shoot because of their size and because their surfaces reflect their surroundings. As a matter of interest, have you ever tried to photograph your own car?

Look at all photographs with a critical eye, not to try and pick faults with them, but to see how the choice of subject, composition, use of colour, lighting and so on relate to what you are learning about the same things. Apart from the regularly published photographs that I

have just been talking about, other places to look are in books and magazines about photography (but be cautious about magazines that stress the equipment and gadgets), on the internet, and exhibitions of photography. You can find exhibitions in museums and major galleries and in small, private galleries. Look at the listings in newspapers.

Above all, remember that you are not competing with anyone on this course. Photography should only be worth doing if you find it personally rewarding and fun.

Equipment versus image

Photography is rooted in equipment and technology. This appeals greatly to some people; others see it as an obstacle. Neither of these reactions leads to a sensible working relationship with the camera. The attention of equipment-lovers usually wanders back to the intricacies of the machinery and the possibilities of tinkering with the controls, instead of concentrating on the image in the viewfinder. People who think they can't deal with the technology also fuss with the equipment while they are taking a photograph because they're afraid of it, so they tend to lose interest in taking the camera out regularly.

None of this is made any easier by the fact that photography is a major industry with aggressive marketing. It suits the camera manufacturers to suggest that their new models will help you to take better pictures, but this may not be so. Ansel Adams, the most famous of all landscape photographers and a supreme technician, wrote:

"There is a great illusion among photographers that creative work depends upon equipment. On the contrary, equipment is something to be selected for a specific purpose."

Camera and Lens, Ansel Adams, Morgan and Morgan

New models are being launched all the time. All this activity, and the publicity that accompanies it, has little to do with making better photographs, but a lot to do with selling cameras. Manufacturers now invent jargon to make their own technology sound unique. There are 'phase-matching focusing', 'system integration', 'auto zooming dual-portrait mode' and 'slow-synchro', among others. This jargonising is intended to sound impressive, but some of it verges on gibberish. If you can't be bothered to find out what it means in plain English, ignore it. In this course, at least, it has no place.

In fact, there is a reasonable middle ground between seeing an image, and the equipment you need. You can't ignore the technology if you hope to make the pictures you aspire to, but you should not let dominate. The most important piece of equipment you own is camera's viewfinder. How you use that makes the biggest difference of all.

Equipment you will need

To make this course as useful to as many people as possible, I am assuming that there are two levels of equipment being used.

Cameras: ideal

The rise of digital photography has changed the technological landscape, although not the creative skills needed. There are two technical features that I consider important in any camera for this course, and you will get the most out of it if your camera has these. They are changeable focal length and manual over-ride.

The first is the ability to change the focal length of the lens. There are two ways of doing this: by using a zoom lens, or by changing from one fixed lens to another (or indeed, from one zoom range to another). The focal length of the lens sets the angle of view – from wide to narrow – and has other, more subtle effects on the image, like compressing or expanding the perspective, and involving or distancing the viewer of the photograph from the scene. Ideally, a zoom lens should go from half the standard focal length to twice, at least. Focal length and its effect on the character of an image is explained in Project 1 below. It is the ability to change lenses that makes SLR cameras so useful.

The second ideal feature is manual over-ride. Most camera functions nowadays are automated, from exposure to focus, and while this is a wonderful convenience, it does put a gap between you and the process. If you are able to adjust focus, aperture and exposure manually when you need to, it will certainly help you to know your equipment better. The value of this will come through as you follow the projects.

Cameras: entry level

You can, in fact, undertake this course with more modest equipment and a less versatile camera, provided that you appreciate the limitations. SLR cameras and lenses are, after all, costly, and even if you were prepared to go out today and buy them all at once, you might still be wondering whether you will maintain sufficient interest in photography to justify the expense. You may just want to improve the way you use your own simple camera, and not plan to take your photography to a more advanced level.

If you have a basic compact camera, and as long as you accept that there will be certain kinds of picture you cannot take, it will be suited to most but not all of the course. The main difference will be in the focal length of lens: a fixed-focal length lens will let you compose only within a normal angle of view, whereas some of the projects suggest that you explore

wide-angle and telephoto ways of looking at things. Also, most compact cameras will not allow you to do some of the projects that involve varying the settings – like exposures, depth of field and shutter speed. Automation is a mixed blessing.

These limitations are not big stumbling blocks on this course, but you should be aware of them. As a means of distinguishing between the two levels of camera ownership, those projects and assignments unsuited to a simple camera are flagged. You should skip over these if your camera lacks the necessary features, but nevertheless read them through in order to follow the points being made.

Accessories

There are a few accessories that will be useful. The most important is a tripod. Its most obvious use is to keep the camera steady when the shutter speed is too slow for you to hold by hand without risking a blurred image. Although you might think that you will be taking very few photographs in poor light that needs a slow shutter speed, one of the things I shall encourage you to do is to explore different situations and conditions for making pictures. A tripod has another use, hardly less important: it helps in composing a photograph. Many of the projects that follow are about designing a picture, and this often means making, and holding, quite small adjustments. If, for example, you are photographing an arrangement of objects at home, you will find it much more valuable as a project if you can lock the camera and its view in one position while moving the objects around. Lightweight tripods are generally inexpensive, and although not as sturdy as a heavier model, useful nevertheless. When you buy one, look for a plain, solid construction, and avoid gimmicks.

An accessory to use with a tripod is a cable release, which attaches to the camera (although not on simpler cameras). The idea of this is to trigger the camera with the least movement – and so avoid camera shake.

Flash

Many cameras these days are supplied with a flash unit; sometimes this is even built in. This is many people's introduction to lighting, although it is not as versatile as you might think. Later in the course I will look at more interesting ways of creating lighting effects, and at that point you will need a light source that can be moved around and does not have to be stuck on the camera itself. I will leave this until 6: Artificial light; so wait until you have already been through half of the course and have enough experience to choose the best one for you.

Digital viewing

Make sure that your computer monitor is calibrated (the system software will include a way of doing this, and there is third-party calibration software that you can buy). The screen background to a digital photograph – the 'desktop' – affects the viewing. I suggest that when studying images you keep it free of clutter and also, very important, neutral grey. If you can set your desktop pattern to mid-grey (that is, with 50% brightness), do this.

General advice

A proper place to study

You should find somewhere quiet and comfortable in which you can study and sort through your photographs. Even though most photography involves getting out to other places, a large part of this course is concerned with looking at what you have done and evaluating Photographs. A desk with good lighting is ideal. You might also find it helpful to have some kind of board on a wall nearby on which you can pin or tape prints that are a part of your current project. In addition you will certainly need a board on which to lay out work for your projects.

Noting, filing and indexing

Next, you will need a large notebook or notepad, in which you write up projects and your personal appraisal of what you have been doing. This becomes part of your learning log, essential for students who wish to have a formal assessment at the end of this course, and very desirable for all students. You should also, as I said earlier, keep notes of all the photographs that you take in a field notebook. There are several good reasons for this. One is that as you take more and more pictures, you will find it less easy to remember when and where they were taken. And if you give them numbers, this can be the start of a filing system. Also, information about the photographs may be useful to you later – the subject, what was happening, and some of the technical details, like the f-stop and aperture that you used. In addition, by recording your thoughts about the photographs at that time, you will be able to chart your progress in seeing and evaluating pictures. Most digital cameras and computers are supplied with image browsing software, which allows you to view an assembly of thumbnail images, and this is essential for keeping track of them and choosing which to view larger or print.

If you do choose to submit a learning log for formal assessment, you may wish to keep another, more personal, field notebook at the same time. Some people find the idea of a learning log that will eventually be read by others a little inhibiting. If you feel this way, make your personal notebook the place where you make more informal notes and jottings. One of the most famous photographers of this century, Edward Weston, who kept a series of what he called daybooks, alongside his photographs. These give a valuable insight into the creative decisions that underlie his pictures.



Brett-Pt. Lobos Edward Weston

Digital storage

Initially, images are downloaded from the camera or its memory card onto a computer's hard drive. However, this is not the place to keep them exclusively, for two reasons. One is safety, as a crashed drive can result in total loss. The other is simply that over time you will need more space. Digital files are best archived off the primary hard drive, and in a secure location away from heat and damp. Make sure that you keep at least one extra copy of each image, and in a different location. Possibilities include an external hard-drive, which you can link to your computer and set up for making regular back-ups, and DVDs or CDs.

Project: Getting to know your camera

The better you know your own camera, the less you will have to bother about the techniques of operating it. Ideally the camera should be so familiar that it is like an unconscious extension of your eye. This takes time and constant use to achieve, but becoming familiar with your own camera will certainly make an improvement to your photography. The more you use your camera, the less you will need to think about it.

Take your camera and put it in front of you on a table. Get out the manual that came with it. Many people ignore the manual and surprisingly few read it from cover to cover, but this is exactly what needs to be done. There are so many different camera models that no general book on photography, or even this course, can teach you the specifics of your own equipment. If you haven't already done this, go through the manual now. If you can't find it, or never had one, write to the manufacturer with name and model number of your camera (a photography shop will give you the address). More importantly, at each point when the manual describes some camera action, do it.

Was there anything in the manual that you did not understand? Not every manual is well written. But don't ignore something that wasn't clear. If you still don't understand it after re-reading, ask someone – the shop where you bought the camera, for instance.

Next, there are certain basics in photography that you should become familiar with right from the start. These are:

- what the f-stop numbers stand for
- how the lens aperture controls the light reaching the film
- how the shutter speed controls the light.

Your manual should cover these points. The projects and exercises below will also give you some understanding of them.

The lens

The most important part of a camera is its optical system. The focal length of the lens determines the angle of view – how much of the scene in front of you will be captured. Measured in millimetres, it is actually the distance that the lens must be from the CCD sensor or the film to make a sharply focused image. When 35mm was the norm, describing a lens simply by its focal length (120mm say, or 28mm) was an easily understandable shorthand for the angle of view, with 50mm being accepted as 'standard'. This is less obvious now, because there are sensors of different sizes in digital cameras, and only so-called 'full-frame' is the same as a 35mm film frame. A more common size in digital cameras is the Four Thirds system (4/3), with proportions of 4:3 instead of the full-frame 3:2, and a smaller size,

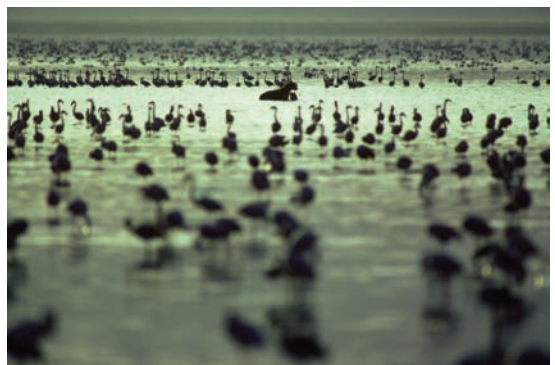
so that a standard focal length is a little less than 25mm. Sometimes, you will see the term 'equivalent focal length', which means a focal length converted to its equivalent for a 35mm camera; this is done for people who are familiar with the notation for 35mm/full-frame cameras.

As more cameras are now fitted with zoom lenses, fewer manufacturers see the need to spell out the focal length in millimetres. The numbers, in other words, are not as important as the visual effect, which is whether the view will appear approximately as we see, or wider, or narrower, and this is the subject of the first project.

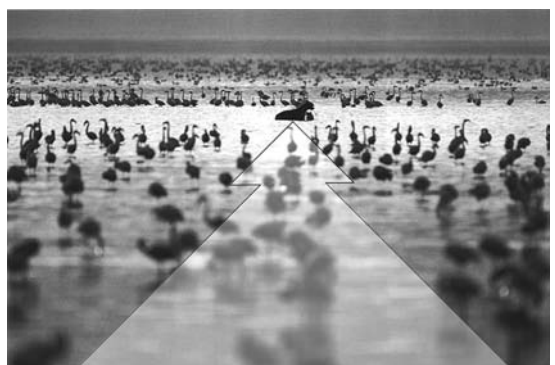
Finding the standard focal length for your camera depends on the type of camera you have. Standard means an angle of view similar to the way we see although because of our peripheral vision, the comparison can never be exact. A useful guide is when the focal length is roughly the same as the diagonal measurement across the sensor or film. With a 4/3 digital camera this will be about 20-25mm, with a full-frame digital or a 35mm film camera, it will be about 40-50mm.

If your camera has a fixed lens with a fixed focal length, it is likely to be a little wider than standard; if it has a zoom lens, this will cover a range with standard close to the middle. Some cameras will show the focal length as you operate the zoom, others not. If you can set the lens to what you know is standard (20-25mm with a 4/3 camera or 40-50mm with a full-frame) do so now.

A 600mm lens was focused on the distant subject to give a very shallow depth of field. Attention is rapidly directed to the subject which is placed near the top of the frame.



The black-and-white image demonstrates how selective focus leads the eye of anyone looking at the picture to just one place in the frame.



Exercise: Focal length and angle of view – all cameras

1 – 3 photographs

Point the camera at any scene, and keep both eyes open – one eye looking through the viewfinder, the other looking directly at the scene. If the lens is approximately standard in focal length you should notice that the objects seen through one eye should appear to be about the same size as through your other eye. This is what is meant by standard. If your camera is fitted with a zoom lens, adjust it by eye until the two views (unaided and through the viewfinder) appear equal. If there is a focal length scale on the body of the lens, make a note of the setting; if the lens does not have focal length markings, as many are nowadays, simply note how far the lens protrudes from the body when the zoom is set like this, and remember it. Now take a photograph and remember where you stood to take it, as you will need to return to this spot.

Now, if you have a zoom lens, set it to its widest view; if you have interchangeable lenses, fit your wide-angle lens. The size of objects seen through the viewfinder will now appear smaller than they do to your unaided eye. Take one photograph.

Adjust the zoom to its furthest telephoto setting, or fit a telephoto lens. Objects through the viewfinder now appear larger than they do unaided. Take one photograph.

Have all three photographs printed onto A4 or 8x10 inch paper (or just the one photograph if you have a single fixed lens). Stand in front of the same scene at the exact position where you took the photograph and hold the 'standard' print in front of you at eye-level. Move it towards or away from you until the printed scene appears to be the same size as your view of the real scene. Make a note of the distance from your eye. What is it? You should notice that this is a comfortable viewing distance.

Do the same with the wide-angle print. To make the objects in the scene appear the same as in real life, you will need to hold the print much closer. Note the distance. Do the same for the telephoto print, which you will need to hold much further away.

Project: Focus

When you focus on something, its image is made sharp; if you focus beyond it or in front the image will look soft. With an SLR camera, you view directly through the lens, and the way of focusing is completely straightforward – you focus visually until the view looks sharp. Auto-focus cameras do this for you, but you should remember that they normally focus only on a small central area in the viewfinder – usually marked as a small rectangle. If your subject is off-centre, it will not necessarily be sharp, although the more sophisticated cameras may compensate for this, for instance by attempting to recognise a face in a scene and focusing on that. Your manual will explain this more fully.

There is normally no question about where you should focus – right on the most important point of interest in the picture. But if there is considerable depth in the picture, from foreground to background, much of the view will be out of focus.

Exercise: Focus with a set aperture – cameras with a manual option

2 – 3 photographs

Find a scene which has depth – a wood full of trees, for example, a row of cars seen from an acute angle, or a crowded market. From the same place.

Take two or three pictures, each focused on something at a different distance. (For this to work, the lens aperture must be wide – at its lowest f-stop number.)

When the photographs are processed, compare them. Notice first how the sharp focus draws the attention, and also how a sharp subject stands out very clearly against the out-of-focus surroundings.

Which version do you prefer? Enter in your learning log, as clearly as possible, why you prefer one photograph over another.

