

The Eye, the Shutter, the Light, the Color

An Introduction to Photography



Oak Meadow

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Introduction

Photography is a relatively new art—less than 200 years old—but one that changes the way we interpret the world around us and, quite simply, the way we see. This course will teach such fundamental concepts as frame, focus, and composition, while also exploring the more interpretive side of photography, what remains largely undefined. Students will complete weekly assignments designed to deepen their understanding of the material, while giving them hands-on experience, practice with their camera, and a chance to creatively convey their unique vision of the world. Students will also keep a journal, where they will collect ideas, magazine clippings, inspiring images, and some personal writing about their experiences.

Course Materials

In addition to this coursebook, the following materials are needed for this course.

Understanding Exposure (Third Edition) by Bryan Peterson: This book is to be used throughout the course for inspiration and further study. You are encouraged to read (and reread!) it at your own pace.

Camera: Students are expected to have a working knowledge of and general familiarity with the camera they choose to use for this class. It is fine to use either a 35mm camera (point-and-shoot or SLR/single lens reflex) or a digital camera, as long as the student understands its basic functions.

Journal: Blank notebook, any size, lined or unlined, whatever format you are most attracted to. This journal should be separate from the notebooks you use for other classes. (More on the journal usage below).

Making the Most of Your Journal

This is where you will collect ideas, thoughts, images you are drawn to, or things you don't get to shoot. Add clips from the newspaper, *National Geographic*, or magazines; a dream, poem, advertisement, or anything that inspires you or creates an image in your head. This is a way of demonstrating your understanding of our weekly focus.

Spend the equivalent of ten minutes or more per day writing or adding to this journal. You are collecting imagery here. At the beginning of each week, please date the page and write down the subject we're working with that week. If you are enrolled in Oak Meadow School, this journal will be collected

at random during the semester to see that you are doing it and you will be graded based on your participation.

Shooting

Each week, you will shoot approximately 24 photos (the equivalent of one roll of film). You can shoot all in the same day, or take a few photos every day. Try to think about photography every day, even if you don't shoot every day. Write down your thoughts and ideas in your journal. The documentation of these ideas will be interesting to look back on, and will contribute to your consciousness of the visual world around you. Follow the assignments each week. If along the way you find a subject that interests you but doesn't fit with the weekly theme, shoot it! Sometimes inspiration comes when you least expect it. Just include an explanation with your photos that describes what you were up to.

For Enrolled Students

Weekly assignments almost always include shooting photos. You will shoot about 24 photos per week. If you want to edit your roll down to the best photos, make sure to post a minimum of ten images each week. If you are having particular trouble—for example, all your photos are really dark (under-exposed)—definitely post the images so your teacher can help you figure out what you are doing wrong. You may choose not to edit your assignments so you can get feedback on your work as a whole, and eliminate technical problems quickly.

Submitting Your Photos to Your Oak Meadow Teacher

If you are using a digital camera, upload the images each week to your computer. From there, you can upload the photos you want to share to [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com), as outlined below. If you are shooting with 35mm film, you will need to get your film developed each week. Please allow time for development—most places take somewhere between one hour and three days for processing. Ask for your film to be put on disc or a flash drive. There is usually an extra charge of about \$5. This way, your images are scanned and can be transferred to your computer at home. From there, you can upload the photos you want to share to [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com), as outlined below.

You will share your photos with your classmates and teacher using [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com). You will need to create a personal Flickr page for this (this is a free service). Your teacher will send you commentary about your posted work privately, by email, after viewing your photos on Flickr.

To help you establish a Flickr page, your teacher will send you information via email. Take some time to become familiar with the site so that you can easily upload your photos and share them with the group each week. Email your teacher if you are having any trouble. When the course is completed, you will have a comprehensive photo portfolio on Flickr, and be able to continue using your personal Flickr page to share your photographs with others.

Problems with Technology

Among students, there are varying levels of technological knowledge and access. There are obviously other ways you can process, send in, and share your work. You could send your work on disc, or send hard copies of your photos by mail. Using the [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/) site is highly recommended because learning how to share your work online is very important in photography. It is a technology-driven field. If you have any questions about what is acceptable or how to do something, don't hesitate to ask. Email is the fastest way to contact your teacher, who will try to get right back to you so as not to hold up your projects. There are no stupid questions, so don't worry.

Let's Begin!

Viewing the world through the eye of a camera offers a whole new way of looking at life. Let's begin our journey into a new way of seeing.



Lesson

1

Light

The Quality of Light

We'll start with light, since all photos are dependent on and affected by the light. Photographers are acutely aware of the nuances of light, in the same way that a clothing designer might notice the cut of someone's clothing, or the material from which it's made. There are two main qualities of light—hard and soft. *Hard light* is undiffused light, meaning that it comes directly from the light source, which could be the sun, a bare bulb, a streetlamp, or any other source. *Soft light* is scattered light, meaning that as it passes from its source to the subject, it is forced to pass through things that cause it to be less harsh. The softening effect could be caused by clouds overhead, forest foliage, or a lampshade. An easy way to distinguish between hard and soft light is by looking at the shadows. Both produce shadows, though hard light makes more distinct borders, while soft light gives a shadow a more mutable border, or none at all. Soft light is generally the most flattering to a subject, though hard light can lead to some interesting effects with distinct shadow.



Soft light. Notice the great difference between color and detail in the foreground, where the light is being reflected *to*, and the background, where the light is being reflected *from*. The light has become diffused by the time it has reached the subject, because it has passed over multiple surfaces already.



Hard light. Notice that when shooting with the sun overhead at midday, you will get dark “raccoon” shadows under your subject’s eyes and throughout the face. It’s better to shoot earlier or later in the day, or when there is some cloud cover, to avoid these shadows.

The “Magic Hour”

Natural light is affected by the time of day, the time of year, and weather conditions. The “magic hour,” as they call it in film, occurs just before sunset and just after sunrise, when the sun is at the most extreme angle with the Earth, and when its light is passing through the most atmosphere, which creates a natural filter. The “magic hour” is a great time to shoot because the quality of light is so special. The shadows are most vague and the light is diffused. The opposite of “magic hour” light would occur at noon, when the sun is directly above. This light is fairly harsh in comparison, causing shadows that appear to blacken out the features of a human subject, especially the eyes. Colors may appear washed out because of the harshness of the light.



Magic Hour. This photo was taken in the last hour of sunlight, before sunset. Notice the long shadows and rich yellow light.

Assignment

Describe yourself in photos.

To introduce yourself, do an autobiographical shoot (around 24 photos). Include self-portraits, photos of where you live, what you do, what your interests are, and what is important to you. Try to think about how the photos will read to someone who doesn't know you at all, or someone meeting you for

the first time. To brainstorm, make a list in your photo journal to get started. Do a quick list of your favorite activities, your daily routine, and the defining details of where you live. Be creative. Remember that photographs can tell a story, only you are using images instead of words to create a description.

SHARE YOUR WORK

Post your photos on [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com).

Lesson

2

Composition

Composition is the artful placement of a subject within a frame, or the arrangement you choose for visually creating a photograph. Much of the art of composition lies in what you include and what you choose to leave out of a photograph. This is the design aspect of a photo. You most likely will know by instinct that one photo of the same subject looks better than another, but not quite be able to explain why.



Composition. These silhouettes make a nice subject, framed slightly right of center. Notice the way the floor is picking up light in the foreground, as it passes from the main source and hits the broken glass.

Ways to Alter Composition

- Change your distance from the subject—take a few steps forward or backward to see which looks better.
- Change the angle from which you are shooting—try a low angle looking up, or a high angle looking down.

- Include less or more in your frame.
- Balance the dark and light elements.
- Before you shoot, move your camera around until you are sure that you have what you want to include in your viewfinder.
- Try putting your subject all the way left or right in your frame, as opposed to always centering a subject.
- With group portraits, try not to put your subjects in a straight line—instead, vary the composition by staggering them, and putting them at different levels to make the composition more interesting.
- Fill up the frame with your subject. Trust that your subject is a good one, and get in closer.

Foreground and Background

A photograph takes a three-dimensional part of the world and reduces it to a two-dimensional flat plane—a print. An easy trick in composition can solve this flattening effect by giving an image more depth. By including something in the foreground of your photo when shooting something in the distance, you create the sense of the distance that is between the foreground subject and the background. Another way to do this is to include a doorframe, window frame, or some natural element in the frame.

Assignment

Document your family.

To practice this week, photograph your family (about 24 shots). Try to include shots that aren't posed; for example, your family members doing what they do on a daily basis. Think about composition—where you place the subject within the frame—try to vary the size of the subject by changing your distance from them as you shoot. Some photos should be a full frame of a family member, others may show the environment they are in, what they are doing, or include them as only a portion of the composition.

SHARE YOUR WORK

Post your photos to [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com).

Lesson

6

Black and White

Now that we've focused on color, we will look at black-and-white photography.

Today, color photography is dominant. We see color in advertisements, family photos, school portraits, and on television. Black-and-white images seem exotic and artsy in a world that is full of color. This reduction of a colored world to two basic colors and the gray shades in between was the original way everything was photographed, before color film existed and became prevalent.

In black-and-white photography, the photo is stripped of many of the clues and elements we are used to, because it's void of color. This can have many effects:

- The subject becomes more abstract
- The viewer must look harder to decipher the subject
- The composition becomes more graphic
- The subject can be seen objectively or journalistically

All of these things can be used as advantages, depending on what we are trying to convey in our approach to a certain subject.

Black-and-white photos come out the best when shot in diffused light as opposed to hard light. It is also favorable to shoot on a cloudy day rather than on a very sunny day. The bright sun tends to create deep black shadows on the subject, and dissolve details. Subjects that are dependent on the recognition of a color would be better shot in color (for example, a red ball in a green field). The effect of black and white would be lost in this case. On the other hand, try shooting portraits, silhouettes, and detailed landscapes with black and white.

Black-and-white photography can also be useful in the approach of intimate subjects, things we want to capture that are very close to us personally. Sometimes how we think about the subject or how we've learned to understand it obscures our ability to take a picture that values the aesthetics of light and composition over personal sentiments, such as your living space or a portrait of someone close to you. The photographer is made to see the world in a new light, one different from how they normally view the world. In the limitation provided, the photographer is made to concentrate on how the colors in the photo will transform into the starkness of black and white, and shades of gray. This can provide new challenges and a playground in which to further explore the composition as a whole.

Likewise, black-and-white pictures can help a photographer approach a new subject. Colors will begin to stand out, and it may be frustrating not to be able to capture them, so we are made instead to rely on the other elements of light, shadow, composition, and frame to capture our subject in the most pleasing way.

Since the color wheel is nonexistent, what's left is black (obscurity), white (non-obscurity), and the scale of gray in between. On the black end of the scale, things are harder to see as they only have a bit of light to work with. On the white end, things are clear and the view unobstructed (especially when shooting in diffused light). The gray scale can be used in the conveyance of mood and tone. A portrait of a person with half of their face in darkness conveys a different sentiment than one in which all of their attributes are visible.

Look through the camera as if you were looking onto a paper that you could saturate in ink, or only put a few dark lines. Move the frame to explore different options, such as feelings of pleasure, gravity, normalcy, stress, mystery, or knowledge.

Also pay attention to your light source. When the world of the photograph is light and dark, where the light is coming from makes all the difference.



Black and white. This seemingly simple scene, when reduced to black and white, takes on a classic feel. We are able to appreciate the diffused quality of light, and the quiet mood, without being distracted by color.

Assignment

Black and white.

Use black and white photography this week to shoot subjects of your choice. (Most digital cameras provide a black-and-white option through “Scene Mode” or “Photo Effects”; check your camera’s manual for specific instructions.) To get an understanding for the way black and white is different from color, shoot some subjects that you are familiar with, and shoot at several times of day. Write a short response paper explaining the differences you observe, telling whether you like black and white or color better and why.

SHARE YOUR WORK

Post your photos on [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com) and submit your paper via email. If you really like black and white, you may want to use it for one of your next lessons, or for your final project.

A vertical beige rectangular graphic on the left side of the page. It contains the word "Lesson" in a red sans-serif font at the top, and a large red number "14" below it. The background of the graphic features faint, light-colored line drawings of mushrooms.

Lesson

14

Focus

Most cameras with an autofocus function will try to focus on what is in the center of your frame. If the center of the frame happens to fall on the background, then that is where the camera will focus. In order to use the autofocus to your advantage, prefocus by pushing the shutter release halfway down while putting your subject in the center. This will allow the camera to focus on your subject. Then you can move the camera, keeping your finger on the button, to place your subject in the place you'd like it to be. Now press the button the rest of the way down for a photo with the focus and composition that you want.

Focus is especially relevant when using an SLR camera, as you are actively choosing the area on which you wish to focus. To imagine the different planes of focus possible within any given photo, think of a family standing in front of their house. The focus could be on their faces, the house behind them, or the clouds in the distance, far behind them. Under certain conditions, all would be in focus; under others, only one of these planes would be in focus at a time. With an autofocus camera, the focus can easily be a mistake — for example, if the subject is on the left and the camera mistakenly focuses on the fence in the center of the frame instead of the subject. Where you focus influences how the subject is seen. You may even choose to make a subject out of focus at times.

See the next page for two examples of these distinctions.



Focus 1. In the top photo, the focus is on the couple lying in the grass, with the hammock in the upper foreground.



Focus 2. In the lower photo of the same scene, the focus is on the hammock. The couple can still be seen in the background, but the subject has changed from the couple to the hammock.

Assignment

Focus.

Shoot this week with attention on focus. Practice focusing on several different aspects of the same composition to show the different planes of focus that exist in one photograph. See how changing the focus can change the actual subject of your photo, and how an intentionally blurry image can work just as well as a clear one.

SHARE YOUR WORK

Post photos in which you have made intentional decisions about focus on [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com).