
HOW TO TAKE
SHARPER PHOTOS
TECHNIQUES & CAMERA SETTINGS
PHOTOGRAPHY
SIDE HUSTLE

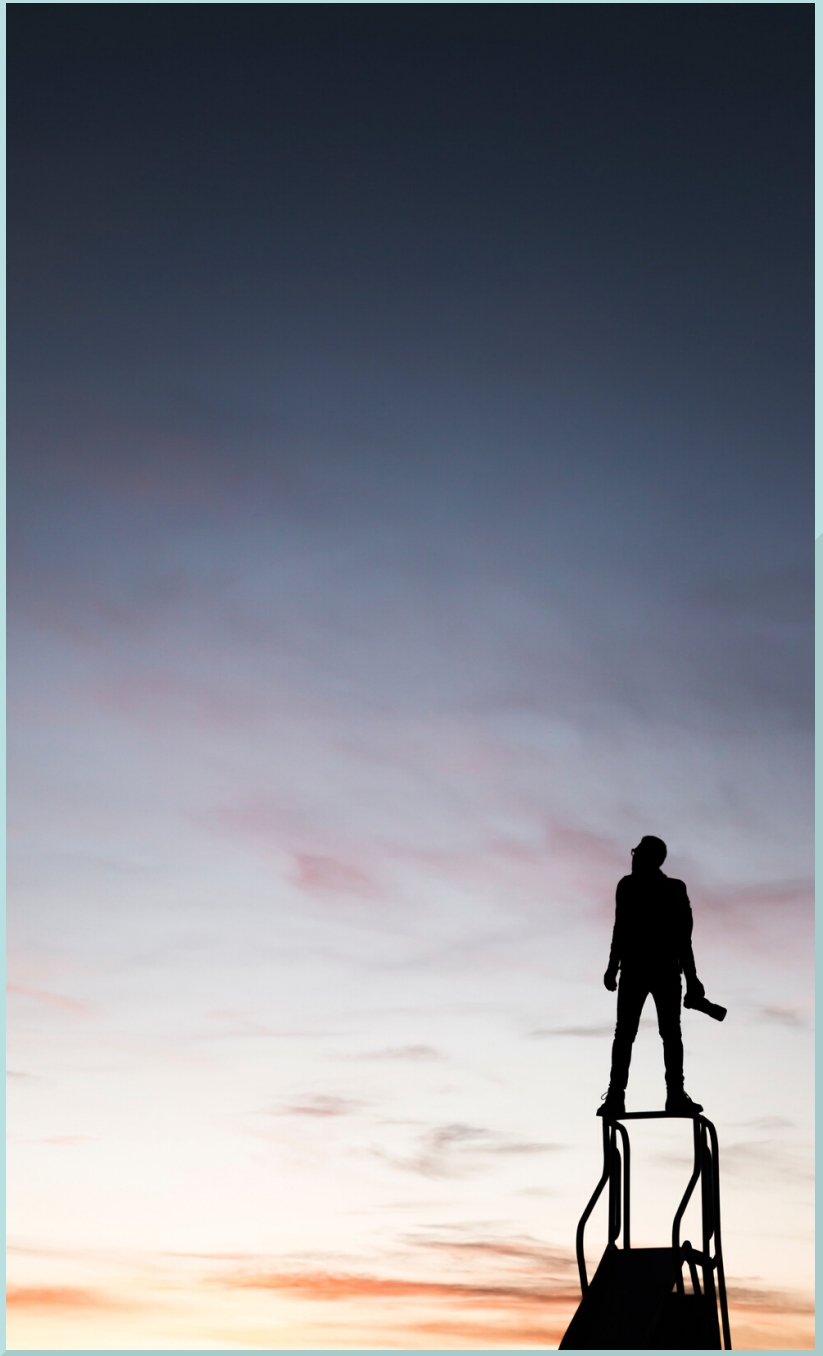
WHY SHARPER?

I'VE RUINED COUNTLESS PHOTOS OVER THE YEARS BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T SHARP. I WISH I HAD THIS EBOOK TO READ LONG AGO. I WOULD HAVE SO MANY MORE KEEPERS.

NOTHING WILL RUIN A PHOTO QUITE LIKE BEING OUT OF FOCUS OR BLURRY. OUR EYES ARE INCREDIBLY GOOD AT PICKING UP WHEN AN IMAGE ISN'T SHARP, AND ADDING SHARPNESS IN POST-PRODUCTION WON'T FIX A BLURRY IMAGE.

SO, HOW DO YOU TAKE SHARPER PHOTOS? FIRST YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND WHAT PREVENTS THEM FROM BEING SHARP.

FIVE REASONS YOUR PHOTOS AREN'T SHARP



01

THEY'RE OUT OF FOCUS

THE FOCUS SYSTEMS IN MODERN CAMERAS ARE INCREDIBLY HIGH-TECH, BUT YOU NEED TO KNOW HOW TO USE THEM CORRECTLY TO ACHIEVE CORRECT FOCUS. OF COURSE, 'CORRECT' FOCUS IS A SUBJECTIVE THING. WHICH PARTS OF THE IMAGE YOU WANT TO BE IN FOCUS IS PART OF YOUR OWN CREATIVE EXPRESSION, BUT IN ORDER TO CONTROL WHAT'S IN FOCUS AND WHAT ISN'T, YOU NEED TO KNOW HOW YOUR CAMERA'S FOCUS CONTROLS WORK.

02

CAMERA BLUR

ANY CAMERA MOVEMENT WHILE THE SHUTTER IS OPEN WILL CAUSE CAMERA BLUR. UNLESS YOU ARE DOING THIS INTENTIONALLY AS A CREATIVE TECHNIQUE, YOU WANT TO LEARN HOW TO MINIMIZE CAMERA MOVEMENT DURING EXPOSURES. CAMERA BLUR USUALLY OCCURS DUE TO A COMBINATION OF SLOW SHUTTER SPEEDS AND CAMERA MOVEMENT.

03

MOVEMENT BLUR

AS WITH CAMERA BLUR, ANY SUBJECT MOVEMENT WHILE THE SHUTTER IS OPEN WILL PREVENT THAT PART OF THE SCENE FROM BEING SHARP. KNOWING HOW TO DEAL WITH THIS WILL DEPEND ON YOUR SUBJECT. TAKING SHARP PHOTOS OF A SUBJECT LIKE LANDSCAPES WITH LITTLE MOVEMENT REQUIRES DIFFERENT SETTINGS TO GETTING SHARP PHOTOS WITH A LOT OF MOVEMENT, LIKE SPORTS OR BIRDS.

04

WRONG APERTURE SETTINGS

YOUR LENS APERTURE AFFECTS NOT ONLY HOW MUCH LIGHT COMES INTO YOUR CAMERA SENSOR, BUT ALSO HOW MUCH OF THE SCENE IS IN FOCUS. DEPTH-OF-FIELD IS DIRECTLY CONTROLLED BY THE APERTURE OF YOUR LENS. UNDERSTANDING APERTURE AND HOW IT AFFECTS FOCUS AND SHARPNESS IS CRITICAL IF YOU WANT TO TAKE SHARPER PHOTOS. AGAIN, APERTURE SETTINGS ARE NOT ONLY A TECHNICAL DECISION, BUT ALSO A CREATIVE ONE. IF YOU WANT CONTROL OVER WHICH PARTS OF YOUR IMAGE ARE SHARP AND IN FOCUS, YOU MUST KNOW HOW APERTURE AFFECTS THESE THINGS.

05

YOUR LENS IS DIRRRRTY

THIS ONE IS SOMETHING THAT WE OFTEN DON'T CONSIDER WHEN TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHY OUR PHOTOS AREN'T SHARP. IF YOUR LENS IS WET, DIRTY, OR FOGGY, YOUR PHOTOS WON'T BE SHARP. EVER TRIED LOOKING AT YOURSELF IN A DIRTY MIRROR?

15 SETTINGS & TECHNIQUES FOR TAKING SHARPER PHOTOS

AUTOMATIC FOCUS MODES

Modern auto-focus (AF) systems can do a pretty amazing job, but which mode is best? Most cameras will include single-shot, continuous, and auto AF modes. Each brand uses different names for each of these, but they all do essentially the same thing. If you want full control over the focus of your photos, I would recommend avoiding your camera's auto-AF mode. You don't want your camera deciding where to focus any more than you want it deciding your exposure settings.

This leaves single and continuous AF modes. Unless you're photographing fast-moving subjects like sports or birds, I would stick with single-shot AF. I recommend always using spot-focus as it allows you to choose which focus point to use, and therefore have full control over which parts of your image are in focus.

MANUAL FOCUS

There are times that manual focus (MF) can help you take sharper photos. If you're using a MF lens you don't have any other choice, but even if your lens supports AF, learning to focus manually is worth the effort. Sometimes your AF system can struggle to find a focus point in low light or in low-contrast scenes. You may also find that your AF is missing focus sometimes, so learning to refine or check focus manually is a good idea.

FOCUS PEAKING

One of my favorite features of the Sony mirrorless cameras is focus peaking. It works by overlaying colored lines on the areas of the image that are in focus. I can't imagine going back to using an optical viewfinder without focus peaking. It's especially useful when focusing manually. If you're using a camera with focus peaking, I strongly recommend turning it on. It takes a little getting used to, but it will definitely help you take sharper photos.

HYPERFOCAL DISTANCE

You may have heard of using hyperlocal distance to help with focusing. It's one of those terms that has a tendency to make a lot of people switch off because it sounds super technical and geeky, and it kind of is. The thing with hyperfocal distance is that you can use it without really needing to fully understand the physics behind it or carry around charts to figure it all out while you're just trying to take pretty pictures.

Put simply, hyperfocal distance affects where your depth of field begins and ends. With landscape photography, you probably want as much of the scene, from foreground to infinity, in focus. Hyperfocal distance is the optimal distance from your lens that you should focus on in order to keep as much of the scene as possible in focus. If you really want to geek out on this, I recommend using the PhotoPills app. If you don't, all you need to know is that if your focus point is roughly one-third of the distance from your lens to the furthest part of the scene, you'll be in the right spot.

BACK-BUTTON FOCUS

If you're still pressing your shutter release button half-way to focus, you're making a lot more work for yourself, and probably missing focus more than you should. There's a better way. Change the settings on your camera so that your focus button is on the back of your camera instead. That way you can compose your shot, then focus, and then take the exposure. Each camera will use different settings, so you'll need to read your manual to figure out exactly how to do this.

USE A TRIPOD

This one is a no-brainer. If your camera is on a solid, stable tripod you won't get any blur from camera movement. I'm sure I don't need to tell you how important a good tripod is. Find one that suits your needs and budget and use it. It's no good to you in the back of your wardrobe. I use a 3 Legged Thing travel tripod and my camera rarely goes anywhere without it.

REMOTE SHUTTER RELEASE

Even when it's on a tripod, your big, clumsy mitts will cause camera movement when you're pressing the shutter release button. A remote shutter-release cable will get your hands off the camera, meaning it will be as still as the tripod allows it to be. As an added bonus, you can use it for long-exposures when in bulb mode.

2-SECOND TIMER

If you don't fancy adding another item to your camera bag, use a two-second timer. You set up your shot the same way you would otherwise, press the shutter-release button, get your hand off it, and wait a whole two seconds. I use this technique for 95% of my landscape photos. The only exceptions are when I need to time my shots perfectly, like when I'm trying to photograph crashing waves.

IMAGE STABILISATION

Many modern cameras and lenses include image stabilization (IS). It can be a very useful feature in some photography situations, but not all. It can be a great way to take sharper photos when shooting hand-held, but always turn IS off if your camera is on a tripod. Also be aware that it will chew through your batteries, so only turn it on if you need it. IS should be a last resort for increasing image sharpness.

SHUTTER SPEED

One of the best ways to increase your chances of taking sharper photos is to aim for faster shutter speeds. A faster shutter speed will reduce the chance of both camera and movement blur. Unless you're intentionally trying to include movement in your image, aim for a shutter speed equal to or faster than your focal length. For example, if you're shooting with a 50mm lens, keep your shutter speed at 1/50th or faster. This only applies if you're shooting hand-held, and you can shoot one or two stops slower if you're using image stabilization.

When using a tripod, you have a couple of options. You can use faster shutter speeds to freeze movement, or alternatively use much slower shutter speeds to create long-exposures. This is a great way to blur out moving objects, and works particularly well with moving water and clouds. It's also a great way to make people moving through your scene disappear.

HANDHELD - NO IMAGE STABILIZATION

Full Frame	Crop Sensor	1/10	1/20	1/25	1/60	1/80	1/100	1/200	1/400	1/640	1/1000
16mm	10mm	FAIR	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
24mm	15mm	POOR	GOOD	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
50mm	32mm	POOR	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
70mm	43mm	POOR	POOR	POOR	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
200mm	130mm	POOR	POOR	POOR	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
400mm	250mm	POOR	POOR	POOR	POOR	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
600mm	380mm	POOR	POOR	POOR	POOR	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
940mm	600mm	DON'T	EVEN	THINK	ABOUT	IT	BAD	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	GREAT

HANDHELD - IMAGE STABILIZED

Full Frame	Crop Sensor	1/10	1/20	1/25	1/60	1/80	1/100	1/200	1/400	1/640	1/1000
16mm	10mm	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
24mm	15mm	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
50mm	32mm	POOR	POOR	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
70mm	43mm	POOR	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
200mm	130mm	POOR	POOR	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
400mm	250mm	POOR	POOR	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
600mm	380mm	POOR	POOR	POOR	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT	GREAT
940mm	600mm	ICK!	SICK!	STOP!	NO!!!	POOR	FAIR	FAIR	GOOD	GREAT	GREAT

APERTURE SWEET SPOT

Every lens will have an aperture range that is sharpest. Shooting within this range will maximize your chances of taking sharper photos. It's usually in the middle of the aperture range around f/8. Every lens is different, so it will take some experimentation. When shooting landscapes, I rarely shoot outside f/8-16. Any higher or lower and my photos never seem to be as sharp. I find f/11-16 gives me plenty of depth-of-field in 95% of my photos.

You should be aware that a larger aperture (lower f-stop number) will have much more shallow depth-of-field than a smaller aperture. Try to avoid the temptation to close your aperture too much though. Image sharpness drops off significantly above about f/16.

FOCUS STACKING

For the 5% of times that you can't get a large enough depth-of-field with one shot, you can take a couple of shots and focus-stack them. It's a simple technique that allows you to keep everything sharp from a foreground element right in front of your lens to mountains and clouds on the horizon. Simply focus and take your shot the way you usually would then refocus on the foreground element and take another exposure. Painting the sharper exposure into the foreground in Photoshop is simple.

CLEAN YOUR LENS

I shouldn't need to tell you this, but we all need reminding sometimes. Always carry a clean microfibre lens cloth with you and use it. Clean the front and back elements of the lens because they can both get dirty. I also use alcohol lens wipes because they clean off grime and salt that a lens cloth often smears over the glass. While you're at it, clean your sensor, or pay a professional to clean it for you.

FAULTY AUTO-FOCUS

Sometimes, even when you're doing everything in your power to take sharper photos, you still find you're coming home to find they're blurry, or a little soft. It could be that your AF is faulty. It happens. Some cameras are particularly prone to this, so a quick google search might tell you whether it's a common problem with the gear you're using. If you think that might be the case, it's worth taking it to a professional to assess.

GO TAKE SHARPER PHOTOS

Learning how to apply these techniques and camera settings will go a long way to helping you take sharper photos, but like everything, you need to practice. Slow down when you're shooting and think about your settings and how they will affect the sharpness of your image. As you do this it will start to become second-nature and you will find yourself coming home with more razor-sharp keepers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name's Rowan, and I'm a landscape and travel photographer. Whether in my stunning home country of New Zealand, or some other faraway land, you'll never find me far from adventure and usually with camera in hand. My website combines a passion for photography and teaching.

With a background in paediatric nursing, I discovered a love for photography while working for aid and development organisations in Africa. Since then, I've built up a portfolio of travel and landscape photographs from six continents.

I truly believe anyone who wants to can learn how to take beautiful photos. You just need a passion for adventure and a willingness to learn.

FOLLOW OR CONTACT ME

FURTHER READING

- How to turn photography into a side hustle.
- Photography business tips and tutorials.
- Photography technique, tips and tutorials.
- Recommended products and resources.

THANK YOU

PHOTOGRAPHY SIDE HUSTLE