Workshop: Take Better Photos

Light, Frame, Focus, Brightness, People, Edit

Bonus material for uniquestoremarket.com's “How to Take Better Photos” guide. A facilitator script for a coach or friend who walks one beginner or a small group through the guide's six chapters in a single live photo-walk and review session, using the exercises and worked examples from the guide.

Session objective

By the end of the session, each participant has: (1) named the light direction and quality of a real scene, (2) reframed a subject by getting closer and checking the background, (3) chosen their own focus point and seen depth of field change, (4) used exposure compensation on purpose, (5) photographed a person doing a task, and (6) picked a small best set and edited one photo with the five controls.

Format and length

75–90 minutes. One to six participants, each with a phone or whatever camera they own. Needs: a window, an indoor space and an outdoor spot within a few minutes' walk, a plain wall or sheet of white paper, and someone willing to be photographed. Ask participants to bring a camera with some photos on it from this week. The guide's day-by-day exercises are the homework; this session is a compressed live version.

Agenda

1. Opening — five seconds, ten times (8 min)

Say: the gap between a snapshot and a photograph comes down to four decisions made before the shutter: where the light is coming from, what is in the frame and what is left out, what is sharp, and how bright the result should be. Run the Ch. 1 micro-start as a round: look at a person or object nearby and name the light direction in five seconds. Do it several times around the room and note that the camera has not come out yet.

2. Ch. 1 — the same cup, four lights (12 min)

Teach direction (side light gives shape, front light flattens, back light gives silhouette) and quality (hard versus soft; an overcast day is a softbox the size of the sky). Walk through the guide's coffee cup: backlit against a window, window to the left, middle of the room under the ceiling light, and beside the window with white paper propped on the right. Participants photograph one object from different angles relative to the light, changing nothing else, then compare. Try the white paper as a reflector.

3. Ch. 2 — subtract (12 min)

Say: composition is mostly subtraction. Walk through the guide's market stall in three frames: van, sign and passer-by in the first, three metres closer in the second, two steps left to a plain shuttered wall with the vendor a third of the way in for the third. Participants pick one subject, photograph it from five distances ending closer than feels comfortable, then try three backgrounds and pick the quietest. Turn on the grid and check all four edges and the horizon.

4. Ch. 3 — what is sharp (12 min)

Run the micro-start: tap something far away, then something close, and watch the rest of the frame. Teach that focus and depth of field are separate ideas, and that for a portrait the focus goes on the near eye. Walk through the hedge portrait: distance first, portrait mode second. Pairs photograph each other once with the background close, once with the background further behind, then take three frames focused on the eye, the nose and the ear and compare them at full size.

5. Ch. 4 — brightness (10 min)

Say: the meter aims for an average mid-tone, so it makes snow or a white wall grey and a dark scene muddy. Everyone finds the exposure compensation control (the sun icon next to the focus square on a phone). Photograph something white and something black at different exposures. Walk through the figure against a bright sky: tap the face and the sky goes white, exposing about one stop darker brings the sky back, and moving the person against the hillside removes the problem. Explain why a pure white highlight cannot be recovered.

6. Ch. 5 — people without stiffness (14 min)

Run the micro-start with a volunteer: stand still and look at the camera, then walk toward you and stop. Compare the two faces. Walk through the reluctant subject in the kitchen: moved to the window, handed a mug, asked to describe what the neighbours have done to the fence. Participants photograph the volunteer doing an ordinary task for two minutes, talking throughout, then say “got it” and take five more frames. Compare the last five to the first. Remind everyone to ask before photographing strangers.

7. Ch. 6 — edit, choose, close (17 min)

Teach the five controls: exposure, contrast, highlights and shadows, white balance and crop. Walk through the guide's one frame, five sliders example. Each person edits one photo from the session using only those controls, aiming for under two minutes, then goes through all their frames from today and picks the best five. Close by naming one habit each will apply before pressing the shutter this week, and suggest looking at the edit again tomorrow.

Facilitator notes

- The commonest failure is changing settings instead of the situation. The guide's cup example changes only the light, and the hedge portrait changes only the distances; send people to move before they touch a menu.
- Participants zoom instead of stepping in. The guide says physically moving beats zooming, especially on a phone, so make them end closer than feels comfortable.
- Check that the focus goes on the near eye in portraits, and look at portrait-mode edges around hair and glasses before anyone keeps the shot.
- Posed people stiffen under a silent camera. Keep talking, give a task rather than “act natural”, and keep shooting after the posed moment.
- Make no promises about results. The aim is a habit of asking four questions before the shutter, not a set of settings to memorise.

Full guide: uniquestoremarket.com/how-to-take-better-photos