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CREATIVE & CRAFT

EVERYDAY PRACTICAL

Photos Worth Keeping, in 6 Days

In six short sessions, learn to see light, frame deliberately and control focus — so the camera you already own starts producing photographs instead of snapshots.

6-day guide · 6 chapters · Self-Directed Learning Framework

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was built with the Self-Directed Learning Framework (SDLF): every chapter gives you a short starting action, the one idea you actually need, a fully worked example, a checklist, and exercises shot on your own camera — no filler, no re-reading required.

Everything here works on a phone. Where a setting is named, it exists in some form in most phone camera apps and in every system camera, though the menu names differ — your camera's manual is the authority on where yours lives. Work through the chapters in order; each takes 20–35 minutes, most of it spent shooting rather than reading.

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CHAPTER 1 OF 6 · DAY 1 · 30 MIN

Learning to See the Light

> **Outcome:** "Before I shoot, I notice where the light is coming from and how hard it is."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Look at any person or object near you and work out, in five seconds, which direction the light is hitting it from. Do that ten times today.

The minimum you need to know

Photography is recording light, so the first question is always where it comes from and how hard it is. **Direction** decides shape: light from the side creates the shadows that make a face or a landscape look three-dimensional, light from directly in front flattens everything, and light from behind puts your subject in silhouette unless you compensate. **Quality** decides mood: a small, distant source — midday sun, a bare bulb — is **hard** light with sharp shadow edges and high contrast, while a large, close source — an overcast sky, a big window, sun through a curtain — is **soft** light that wraps around and flatters. The single most useful rule follows from this: an overcast day is not bad light, it is a softbox the size of the sky, and it is easier to shoot in than bright noon sun. If the light is bad, the cheapest fix is almost always to move — around the subject, or to a different time of day. Changing camera changes nothing about this.

Worked example: the same cup, four lights

A coffee cup on a table, photographed four times in twenty minutes. Backlit against a window: the cup is a dark shape against a blown-out white rectangle, and the steam glows — dramatic, but the cup itself is lost. Turned so the window is to the left: the curve of the cup gets a bright edge and a soft shadow, and it suddenly reads as a solid object. Moved to the middle of the room under the ceiling light: flat, dull, slightly orange, no shape. Back beside the window but with a sheet of white paper propped on the right: the paper bounces light back into the shadow, the contrast drops, and the cup looks like a product shot. Four photographs, one subject, one camera, no settings changed — only the light.

Checklist

- ☐ Light direction identified before framing: front, side or back
- ☐ Light quality identified: hard with sharp shadows, or soft with gradual ones
- ☐ Subject or photographer moved to improve the light rather than accepting it
- ☐ Overcast treated as good light, not as a reason to stay in
- ☐ Mixed indoor light noticed — window plus ceiling bulb rarely looks good together
- ☐ A white surface tried as a reflector to lift shadows

Exercises

1. Photograph one object four times from four different angles relative to the light, changing nothing else.
2. Shoot the same scene at midday and again an hour before sunset, and compare.
3. Find the largest window in your home and photograph someone beside it, facing in.

CHAPTER 2 OF 6 · DAY 2 · 30 MIN

Deciding What to Leave Out

> **Outcome:** "Every photo I take has one clear subject and nothing competing with it."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Take a photo you already have and crop it so it contains only what you actually wanted. Notice how much was in there that you never meant to include.

The minimum you need to know

Composition is mostly subtraction. Beginners' photos are usually not badly arranged; they simply contain too much, so the eye has nothing to settle on. Decide the **one subject**, then remove or reposition everything competing with it. Three tools do most of the work. **Get closer** — the commonest fix in all of photography, and physically moving beats zooming, especially on a phone. **Check the edges and the background** before shooting, not after: the lamppost growing out of a head is always visible in the viewfinder and never noticed there. **Use lines** — paths, fences, shadows, railings — that lead the eye toward the subject. The rule of thirds, which puts the subject a third of the way in rather than dead centre, is a useful default rather than a law; turn on your camera's grid and use it until off-centre framing becomes instinct, then break it deliberately. One more habit worth building: keep horizons level. A tilted horizon reads as a mistake in a way that almost nothing else does.

Worked example: one street scene, three frames

A market stall on a busy street. First frame, taken from where the photographer happened to be standing: the stall occupies a third of the picture, a parked van fills the left edge, a road sign cuts the top corner, and a passer-by's back blocks the produce. No subject. Second frame, three metres closer and crouched slightly: the van is out, the sign is out, the stall fills the frame and the vendor's hands are visible — but the stall sits dead centre and the background is a cluttered shopfront. Third frame, two steps to the left so the shopfront is replaced by a plain shuttered wall, vendor placed a third of the way in, the line of the awning running down toward him. Same stall, same camera, ninety seconds apart. The difference is entirely in what was excluded.

Checklist

- ☐ One subject chosen before the shutter, not discovered afterwards
- ☐ Moved physically closer rather than zoomed
- ☐ Background checked for clutter and for things growing out of heads
- ☐ All four edges scanned before shooting
- ☐ Grid turned on and the subject placed deliberately, centred or off-centre
- ☐ Horizon level unless it is tilted on purpose

Exercises

1. Photograph one subject from five distances, ending closer than feels comfortable.
2. Shoot the same subject against three different backgrounds and pick the quietest.
3. Turn on your camera's grid and shoot twenty frames placing the subject off-centre.

CHAPTER 3 OF 6 · DAY 3 · 30 MIN

Controlling What Is Sharp

> **Outcome:** "I choose what the camera focuses on, and I can make a background blur or stay sharp."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Open your camera, tap somewhere far away, then tap something close. Watch what happens to the rest of the frame. That is depth of field, demonstrated in ten seconds.

The minimum you need to know

Two separate ideas often get confused. **Focus** is where the sharp plane sits, and on any camera you should be choosing it rather than letting the camera guess — tap the subject on a phone, or use a single focus point on a system camera. For portraits, the focus goes on the **near eye**, always; an in-focus nose with soft eyes reads as a mistake to everyone, even people who cannot say why. **Depth of field** is how much in front of and behind that plane is acceptably sharp, and three things control it: a wider aperture (a smaller f-number) blurs more, getting closer to the subject blurs more, and pushing the background further away blurs more. On a phone, the first is largely fixed, which is why the other two matter so much — the most effective way to get a blurred background on a phone is to move the subject away from it and step in closer, not to switch on portrait mode. Portrait mode simulates the effect and gives itself away around hair and glasses, so use it, but get the distances right first.

Worked example: a portrait against a hedge

Subject standing with her back against a hedge, phone at arm's length, portrait mode on. The result: background blurred, but the fake blur cuts into her hair on the left and leaves a hard halo around one shoulder. Second attempt, portrait mode off: she moves four metres forward, away from the hedge, and the photographer steps in until she fills the frame from the shoulders up, tapping her near eye to focus. The hedge, now four metres behind her and out of the focal plane, goes genuinely soft — no halo, because nothing was simulated. Third attempt, portrait mode back on with the new distances: slightly more blur than the second, and this time the effect has less work to do, so the edges hold up. The order matters — distance first, software second.

Checklist

- ☐ Focus point chosen by you, not left to the camera
- ☐ Near eye focused on for any portrait
- ☐ Subject moved away from the background before reaching for portrait mode
- ☐ Moved closer to the subject to increase background blur
- ☐ Wider aperture used where the camera allows it
- ☐ Portrait-mode edges checked around hair and glasses before keeping the shot

Exercises

1. Photograph one object with the background close behind it, then four metres behind it.
2. Take three portraits focusing on the eye, the nose and the ear, and compare them at full size.
3. Shoot the same portrait with and without portrait mode at the same distance, and look for artefacts.

CHAPTER 4 OF 6 · DAY 4 · 30 MIN

Getting the Brightness Right

> **Outcome:** "I adjust exposure deliberately instead of accepting whatever the camera decides."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Open your camera, tap a subject, then slide the little sun icon up and down. Most phone users have never touched it.

The minimum you need to know

Your camera's meter aims for an average mid-tone, which means it is systematically wrong in two common situations: it **underexposes** a bright scene like snow or a white wall, making it grey, and it **overexposes** a dark one, making it muddy. Every camera offers **exposure compensation** — the slider that appears next to the focus square on a phone, or the +/− dial on a system camera — and using it is the single biggest improvement available in a menu. The asymmetry worth knowing: a shadow that is too dark can usually be lifted later, but a highlight that has gone pure white contains no information at all and cannot be recovered. So when in doubt with a bright sky or a white shirt, expose a little darker and lift afterwards. If your camera can show a **histogram**, the useful reading is simple: data piled hard against the right edge means blown highlights. Finally, shoot **RAW** if your camera offers it and you intend to edit — it holds far more recoverable detail than JPEG, at the cost of larger files.

Worked example: a figure against a bright sky

A person standing on a ridge with a bright overcast sky behind. Tapping the face to focus makes the camera expose for the face, which is much darker than the sky — the face looks correct and the entire sky turns to featureless white. Sliding exposure down by about one stop brings the sky back as actual cloud with texture, and the face goes too dark. That second version is the one to keep, because the face can be lifted in editing while the white sky in the first version is empty data. Third attempt: the photographer moves so the person is against the hillside instead of the sky, which removes the problem rather than managing it. That is usually the better answer — exposure compensation handles the situations you cannot move out of.

Checklist

- ☐ Exposure compensation used deliberately, not left at zero by default
- ☐ Bright scenes pushed brighter, dark scenes pushed darker, against the meter's instinct
- ☐ Highlights protected in high-contrast scenes — expose darker, lift later
- ☐ Histogram checked for data jammed against the right edge, where the camera offers one
- ☐ RAW used when the shot matters and will be edited
- ☐ Repositioning tried first, before compensating for a difficult background

Exercises

1. Photograph something white and something black, each three times at different exposures.
2. Shoot one backlit subject at the camera's setting and at one stop darker, then compare recoverability.
3. Find the exposure compensation control on your camera and use it twenty times today.

CHAPTER 5 OF 6 · DAY 5 · 30 MIN

Photographing People Without Making Them Stiff

> **Outcome:** "I can direct someone simply and catch them between poses instead of in one."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Ask someone to stand still and look at the camera. Then ask them to walk toward you and stop. Compare the two faces.

The minimum you need to know

The hard part of photographing people is not technical. A camera pointed at someone makes them self-conscious, and self-consciousness is visible in every frame — the fixed smile, the locked shoulders. Three things dissolve it. **Give a task**, not a pose: walking, pouring, looking at something, doing the thing they are good at. Bodies doing something look natural in a way that bodies being photographed do not. **Keep shooting past the moment** — the frame you want is usually the one after the posed one, when they relax because they think you have finished. **Talk**, because silence behind a camera is what makes people brace. Technically, keep it simple: put them in soft light, ideally beside a window or in open shade rather than direct sun, which makes people squint and casts hard shadows across the eyes. Shoot from around their eye level or slightly above — from below is rarely flattering — and give a specific small direction rather than "act natural", which is the least actionable instruction in existence. And ask before photographing strangers; in much of Europe, publishing a recognisable photo of someone taken in public can need their consent.

Worked example: a portrait of a reluctant subject

Someone who says they hate being photographed, in a kitchen. First frames, posed against the wall: shoulders up, a smile that arrives and leaves on command, eyes slightly wide. The photographer moves her to the window, gives her a mug to hold, and asks her to look out at the garden and describe what the neighbours have done to the fence. She starts talking. Her hands do something, her shoulders drop, and her face does five different things in thirty seconds. The keeper is a half-smile mid-sentence with soft window light across one side of her face — a frame she was not aware of. The technical settings never changed between the bad frames and the good one.

Checklist

- ☐ Subject given something to do rather than a pose to hold
- ☐ Soft light found — window light or open shade, not direct midday sun
- ☐ Camera kept at roughly eye level or slightly above
- ☐ Shooting continued after the posed moment, when they relax
- ☐ Conversation kept going instead of silent shooting
- ☐ Consent asked for before photographing strangers, and privacy rules respected before publishing

Exercises

1. Photograph someone doing an ordinary task for two minutes without asking them to pose.
2. Take ten frames, then say "got it" and take five more — compare the last five to the first ten.
3. Shoot one person in direct sun and again in open shade, and note what happens around the eyes.

CHAPTER 6 OF 6 · DAY 6 · 30 MIN

Editing Lightly, and Choosing Ruthlessly

> **Outcome:** "I can improve a photo in five adjustments and pick the few worth keeping."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Open your best photo from this week and move only the exposure slider, nothing else. Stop when it looks right, and notice how small the move was.

The minimum you need to know

Editing has two parts, and the second matters more. The first is **adjustment**, and five controls handle almost everything: **exposure** for overall brightness, **contrast** for punch, **highlights and shadows** to recover the bright and dark ends separately, **white balance** to fix a colour cast, and a **crop** to finish the composition and straighten the horizon. That is the whole toolkit for most photographs. The failure mode is obvious in other people's work and invisible in your own: saturation pushed until skin goes orange, shadows lifted until the picture turns grey, clarity raised until everything has a halo. A useful discipline is to edit, walk away, and look again the next day; the overdone version always announces itself overnight. The second part is **selection**, and it is what separates a portfolio from a camera roll. From a hundred frames, keep five. Showing someone your three best photographs makes you a better photographer in their eyes than showing them forty, of which three are good.

Worked example: one frame, five sliders

A window-light portrait, shot deliberately a little dark to protect the bright window behind. In the editor: exposure up a third of a stop, so the face reads correctly. Shadows lifted slightly to open the dark side of the face — slightly, because pushing this one is what makes photos look washed out. Highlights pulled down to bring back texture in the window frame. White balance nudged warmer, because the overcast light outside had left a faint blue cast on the skin. Finally a crop: a little off the left edge where a radiator intrudes, and a two-degree rotation to level the windowsill. Five moves, about ninety seconds, no filter, no saturation. Then the harder step — of the thirty-one frames from that session, three are kept and the rest deleted, including four that are perfectly fine and simply not as good.

Checklist

- ☐ Edits limited to exposure, contrast, highlights/shadows, white balance and crop
- ☐ Saturation and clarity left alone unless there is a specific reason
- ☐ Shadows lifted sparingly, so the image keeps real blacks
- ☐ Horizon straightened and distracting edges cropped out
- ☐ Edit re-checked the following day before being called finished
- ☐ Selection done ruthlessly — a handful kept, the rest deleted

Exercises

1. Edit one photo using only the five controls, and time yourself — aim for under two minutes.
2. Take an edit you were happy with yesterday and look at it today, then tone it down.
3. Go through this week's shots and pick the best five. Delete at least half of the rest.

You've completed this guide.

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