

SMARTPHONE PHOTOGRAPHY: THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE (+ 15 TIPS)

<https://digital-photography-school.com/mobile-phone-photography-beginner-tips>

These days, you don't need professional photography equipment to take stunning photos. The smartphone in your pocket has the power to capture the kind of high-quality shots you can find in magazines – and it's extremely easy to use, too!

That said, smartphone photography involves more than grabbing that iPhone or Google Pixel, turning on the camera, and pointing it in the right direction. To take great photos with a smartphone, you'll need to think about a variety of elements, including composition, lighting, and exposure settings. You'll also want to consider the capabilities of your specific model and even think about purchasing an accessory or two.

In the following sections, I'll share everything you need to know to tap into your smartphone's photography potential. From choosing the right smartphone photo gear to understanding the various Android and iPhone modes and settings, I'll carefully guide you through the process. I'll also share with you some simple tips so that you can get started creating awesome, beautiful, and memorable mobile phone photos of your very own.

KEY REASONS TO USE A SMARTPHONE FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

Here are a few reasons why a mobile phone can outcompete a professional camera.

1. The portability and convenience of having a camera at all times are hard to beat. Your smartphone is always with you and is always ready to capture those unexpected moments, whether you're on a train, a plane, stopped at a light, or in the middle of your lunch break.
2. The various built-in features and modes offered by smartphones – such as Portrait mode, HDR settings, and Night mode – can enhance the average beginner's images above and beyond the shots they can take with, say, a DSLR.
3. A smartphone allows you to capture, edit, and share photos all in one place; in other words, it's a one-stop shop for photography. Imagine being on a trip, capturing a breathtaking sunset, editing the image, and sharing it with friends and family on Facebook – all in the span of about 10 minutes.

15 TIPS TO LEVEL UP YOUR SMARTPHONE PHOTOS

1. Clean your lens

This tip is extremely basic, but you will be amazed by the dirt and grime that accumulate on your smartphone lens. Get in the habit of quickly wiping your phone lens before beginning a photoshoot. It'll make your photos look so much sharper!

Pay especially close attention to your smartphone camera lens during bad weather; if you're photographing in the rain, for instance, a single drop of water can turn the whole shot blurry. Make sure you wipe that lens clean at least every few minutes!

2. Tap the screen to set focus

Typically, when you point your smartphone at a subject, the camera will guess what you want to photograph. For instance, if it recognizes faces, it'll focus on the faces; if it recognizes a person, it'll focus on the person.

This method of autofocus can work well, especially if you're photographing a clear scene with an obvious main subject. But when the scene is more complex – you're photographing a bird surrounded by trees, for example – your smartphone may get the focusing wrong, and the shot will turn out blurry.

So what do you do?

Instead of letting your smartphone's algorithms determine your point of focus, simply tap on your subject, and then – voila! – you'll get a sharp result.

Note: If you want extremely fine control over your smartphone's focusing – such as when you're doing close-up photography – there are a variety of camera apps that allow you to focus manually so that you can rack the plane of focus back and forth until you get the results you're after!

3. Don't use flash

Your smartphone camera has a flash, but it is of very poor quality. The flash on your phone camera is not flattering for photos, whether you're shooting in the daytime, late at night, landscapes, flowers, or portraits.

So whenever you're shooting, keep that flash off. Instead, use natural light for great results. For instance, shoot in the early morning or the late evening to get beautiful golden lighting, or work on cloudy days for soft, evenly lit images.

4. Discreetly take photos by pressing the volume buttons

Sometimes, the perfect shot requires a touch of subtlety – such as when you notice a beautiful scene while out walking, or if you're watching your kids do something especially cute. In such instances, using the volume button to take photos is a great way to capture the image without disturbing the subjects or making them feel self-conscious.

How does this work? Some smartphones automatically set the volume buttons as an alternative shutter control, while others don't default to this option but do let you set it up on your own (this process is simple and usually involves toggling an item in the camera settings). Then, with your smartphone set, you can discreetly raise your camera and nudge a volume button upward or downward.

5. Manually set the image brightness

Did you know that you can set image brightness (i.e., image exposure) manually?

You can use this function to control the level of detail that will appear in the final photo.

The details depend on your specific smartphone model, but try tapping on the screen, then look for some sort of exposure symbol (such as a sun). Swipe up (or drag the corresponding slider) to brighten the exposure, and swipe down (or drag the corresponding slider) to darken it.

Note that the general goal is to keep as much detail as possible in the final image.

6. Make sure your smartphone's HDR function is on

HDR is a handy feature found in most smartphones today, and you might be surprised to learn how much it can enhance your photos. It stands for high dynamic range, and its primary purpose is to bring out the details in the shadows and highlights. It works by taking multiple shots at different exposures and then merging them together to create a balanced image.

Most modern phones offer some sort of HDR option, which can often be toggled on and off in your phone's settings. (It's usually tucked away in the camera app settings.)

What's important is that you make sure HDR is active when you're photographing scenes with significant contrast between bright and dark areas. It's especially useful for landscapes where the sky is bright but the land is shrouded in shadow, or for subjects that are lit from behind. As long as it's enabled, HDR will work its magic to even out those contrasts and make the image look more like how your eyes see it.

On the other hand, there are times when you might want to turn HDR off, such as when you're aiming for a more dramatic or moody effect. It's good to know how to control the feature so you can make a choice that fits your creative vision.

7. Compose your photos creatively

Composition refers to the arrangement of elements in the frame. If you want to capture stunning photos, you must carefully position people and objects in a pleasing way.

A few quick pieces of advice:

- Avoid placing your subject smack-dab in the center of the frame
- Symmetry often looks good
- Try to include a natural frame around your subject, like a window, a doorway, or an arch
- If you want especially beautiful compositions, I'd recommend using the rule of thirds, which encourages you to position key elements a third of the way into the image. See how the chairs are positioned around the bottom-third portion of the frame:

Note that you don't have to use the rule of thirds – it's not really a rule, just a guideline – but it helps create compositions that are well-balanced and dynamic at the same time.

8. Try the rule of odds

Another tip for great smartphone composition is the rule of odds, which encourages you to group your subjects in odd-numbered collections. (For some reason, odd-numbered collections just tend to look good!)

So if you were photographing a group of people, you'd want to include three, five, or seven people in a cluster – not two or four. And if you were photographing a group of forks, you'd want to include three, five, seven, or nine. Make sense?

As with the rule of thirds, the rule of odds isn't actually a rule. It's a suggestion – but a good one, so I do recommend you follow it whenever possible!

9. Test out your smartphone's photography modes

Smartphone photography

Your smartphone likely comes with several photography modes, each offering a different way to create your images.

Portrait mode, for instance, will blur the background and put focus on the subject. This is great for individual or couple photos and can give a professional touch, similar to what you could achieve with a high-end camera.

Night mode is another powerful feature. If you've ever tried to take a photo in low light, you know how difficult it can be, but Night mode takes several images and blends them together for a clear and bright shot.

And then there's Panorama. Want to capture a breathtaking landscape? Panorama mode lets you take a series of photos and stitch them together into one wide image.

You don't need to be a technical whiz to use these modes. Just find them in your camera app, select the one that fits your scene, and shoot. Over time, you'll get a feel for when to use each mode, but experimenting is the best way to learn!

So don't hesitate to try these modes and see what works best for you. The more you play with them, the more you'll understand what they can do. That's the first step in becoming a more skilled and confident smartphone photographer.

10. Straighten the horizon

A common beginner smartphone photography mistake is a crooked horizon. After all, it's so easy to accidentally tilt your phone when shooting!

Unfortunately, crooked horizons are a major problem, and unless you know how to handle them (either in the field or in post-processing), you'll be stuck with a set of bad photos.

Fortunately, dealing with crooked horizons isn't difficult. Simply take a moment to turn on your camera grid; this will display a set of lines across the screen, which you can then use to level your horizons in the field.

You can also handle crooked horizons in post-processing. Most editing apps include some sort of straightening option, though you will lose pixels in the process, so it's always best to get it right in the field!

11. Use leading lines

Leading lines are lines that lead the viewer into the frame and draw attention to the main subject. And these lines, if used correctly, are insanely powerful.

When you're shooting with your smartphone, look around for roads, buildings, or even furniture that can help lead the eye to the subject. Technically, a leading line can be pretty much anything, from outstretched arms and tree branches to road signs and buildings, so even if you can't see any obvious lines, I encourage you to keep looking!

Once you find a leading line, adjust your position so that it points to the main subject. Your composition will instantly improve! Here, I used the row of chairs to direct the viewer toward the building in the background:

12. Photograph in natural light

Earlier in the article, I mentioned the value of natural light, but it's so important that it deserves its own section. You see, there is something so pure and clean about photographing in natural light. It looks great, it produces beautiful photos, and it's always available.

Morning and evening light are special because of its golden hues and soft, flattering effect. Overcast light is nice, too. And even high-contrast light produced by the harsh sun can look amazing (especially in black and white).

If you shoot in heavy shade or at night, you can still use natural light, but you'll need to use a tripod to prevent image blur. (Fortunately, there are plenty of high-quality yet relatively cheap smartphone tripods to choose from!)

13. Try not to zoom

Unless your smartphone offers a proper telephoto camera, I recommend you do as little zooming as possible. Most zoom functions use digital zoom, which simply crops the image to magnify the subject. In other words, it doesn't actually get you closer to the subject; instead, it just removes pixels. Recently, smartphone manufacturers have developed algorithms that allow for slightly better results when zooming digitally, but it's still always better to get close to your subjects instead of relying on your device's digital zoom capabilities.

If you own a smartphone with a zoom capability, and you're not sure whether the images are simply cropped or whether the device boasts a genuine telephoto lens, go ahead and read the specifications sheet (you can find this on the manufacturer's website). In general, this should clear things up, and you can determine the best approach for photographing distant subjects.

14. Consider using a sophisticated camera app

I know that you might be comfortable with the built-in camera app on your smartphone. But as you grow in your photography skills, you'll find that more sophisticated camera apps can provide you with greater control and creativity.

Many advanced camera apps offer manual controls. Imagine being able to adjust the shutter speed, ISO, and white balance, just like professional photographers do with their DSLRs. And as I mentioned in a previous tip, some of these apps let you focus manually to pinpoint exactly where you want the sharpest details in your image.

Some apps also allow for a more artistic shooting process. They apply filters to your camera feed in advance so you can see the world in high-contrast black and white, intense grunge, monochromatic blue, and much more. If you're in a creative rut, trying such an app can certainly help you out.

Note that camera apps like Adobe Lightroom Mobile and ProCam offer significant manual capabilities and are generally user-friendly, so don't be afraid to experiment with them and see what you think. Process your images using an editing app

15. Process your images using an editing app

The work doesn't stop once you've captured a nice photo. With a little post-processing, you can turn a good image into a great one. Most smartphones come with a range of easy-to-use editing apps that can help you enhance your pictures.

It is recommended to start with the basic:: Crop your photo to improve the composition, then adjust brightness and contrast to make the image pop. You might also tweak the white balance or add a bit of sharpening. Don't be afraid to play around with these settings. Often, a little tweak here and there can make a world of difference.

Many of these apps also offer filters and presets. These are ready-made settings that apply a particular look to your image with just a single tap. They can be a fun way to explore different styles, but be sure to use them judiciously. Sometimes, less is more.

With a bit of practice, you can capture amazing smartphone photos of landscapes, people, and so much more – even if you're an absolute beginner.

Keep in mind that photographing with a smartphone should be simple. At the same time, an iPhone or Android camera is a genuinely powerful tool to explore the world around you, capture memories, and express your artistic vision. There's no right or wrong approach, so feel free to experiment and find what works best for you.