

The Techlicious Guide to Great Photography

Simple tips for amazing results



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CHOOSING THE RIGHT CAMERA

Smartphone cameras are now capable of taking very good photos—certainly good enough for everyday shots. And if you love shooting with your phone, we have great tips [for improving your results](#).



But when it comes to trickier shots, such as low light, fast action and portraits, having a high-quality digital camera will vastly improve your photos.

Thankfully, there are tons of great options that won't bust your budget. We'll help you understand what's really important for you to consider when buying, and which options are just an excuse to charge you more money.

CHOOSING YOUR TYPE OF DIGITAL CAMERA

There are basically two types of digital cameras: [compact](#) and interchangeable-lens. Compact cameras are less expensive and more pocket-size portable. They range in features from point-and-shoot simplicity to photographically sophisticated. Interchangeable lens cameras, on the other hand, offer superior image quality, more creative freedom, faster performance and a higher price tag.



It's worth noting that while it used to be "interchangeable-lens camera" was synonymous with "[digital SLR](#)," that's not true anymore. In the past few years, we've seen new models that use a simpler internal design to deliver a camera that's smaller than an SLR, but still lets you swap lenses. These include the Micro Four Thirds cameras made by [Olympus](#) and [Panasonic](#), the [NEX line from Sony](#) and the [NX series from Samsung](#). Pricewise, they're closer to SLRs than point-and-shoots, starting at about \$600. Image quality is close to SLR levels, too.

There are two key trade-offs to consider when choosing between SLRs and compact interchangeable-lens cameras (CILCs). First is the optical viewfinder that lets you hold the camera up to your eye when shooting. That's a real benefit on a sunny day, when LCDs can be hard to see, and also helps keep the camera steady. Some of the new breed of CILCs offer eye-level viewing with an optional electronic viewfinder – basically a tiny LCD screen – but they're the exception rather than the rule, don't work as well as a true optical viewfinder, and are usually pricey (i.e., around \$300 as an add-on accessory).

The other key difference is speedy operation, particularly when it comes to autofocus. True SLRs have an edge here, though it must be said that the latest CILCs are closing the gap. Still, if you're shooting your soccer-playing kids charging down the field, you'll have better luck with an SLR.

You can find Techlicious' latest camera recommendations in our online [Camera Guides & Reviews](#).

IMPORTANT FEATURES

How Many Megapixels?

A camera's resolution is measured in megapixels. But, like many things in life, bigger isn't necessarily better. Every camera on the market today has plenty of resolution for normal picture taking. And when you start upping the megapixel count in a compact camera, you're squeezing an awful lot of light sensors into a very small space, which can actually translate to a lower-quality picture, most notably in the speckled, noisy appearance you'll see in solid-color areas. Unfortunately, choosing one camera over another simply based on a higher megapixel count is a losing strategy.

Selecting the Right Lens

Your camera's lens will have the largest impact on the quality of your images (outside of the skill of the photographer, that is). [Nikon](#) and [Canon](#) are known for their lens quality, but other manufacturers, such as Panasonic, often include equally high-quality lenses from respected lens makers such as Leica, Carl Zeiss or Schneider-Kreuznach. Look for these names while shopping.



Image: Panasonic

The lens also provides zoom power for those close-ups of smiling faces or far-away action. In this case, bigger really can be better, with some caveats. You'll find basic compact cameras offer zooms in the 3x to 5x range, which is fine for routine shooting. Cameras that are nearly as small but priced a bit higher now come with lenses in the 12x to 18x zoom range, which gives you more freedom to frame a shot from a distance – a scene in a school play, for example. Finally there are the “megazooms”, offering paparazzi-style close-ups at 30x and beyond. These zoom lengths require a larger, less portable camera, though.

The trade-offs as zoom gets longer are required light levels and wide-angle coverage. The number to keep an eye on for low-light photography is the maximum aperture, which is listed as f/something. A typical camera with a modest zoom will have a maximum aperture around f/3.5. A more expensive lens gets you down to f/2.0 or even lower, making it much easier to shoot

non-blurry photos without a flash. When you start getting into the f/4.5 range, handheld indoor shooting without a flash becomes very difficult.

The other key lens spec, which affects how many people you can fit in a group shot, and how wide your landscape photos can stretch, is the “focal length” for the “35mm equivalent.” The lower the number of mm, the wider the shot. 28mm is perfect for wide group shots and landscapes, while 35mm-38mm is fine for regular photos.

You can largely ignore anything you read about digital zoom. In most cases it simply enlarges the photo by blowing it up, something you can easily do at home on your computer. In fact, we usually recommend you turn off the digital zoom on your camera when taking pictures.

Display

Both compact and interchangeable lens cameras have LCDs on the back that let you see what you’re aiming at before pressing the shutter. These vary widely in quality. Resolution is one distinguishing characteristic – here, higher numbers are better, presenting a clearer representation of your photo when shooting and when playing it back. Brightness is another challenge, since a dim LCD screen is hard to see on a sunny day. Some manufacturers use coatings to try and tame mid-day glare, with varying degrees of success.



Image: Nikon

Another potential display advantage is a screen that’s hinged so it can be pivoted to different angles. This not only lets you shoot comfortably with the camera held overhead or down low, it can also be a good way to defeat glare.

Image stabilization and High ISO Speed

Unless you’re a robot, your hands will have some level of shake while holding your camera. This can become a serious issue in low-light situations, when the shutter speed has to slow down to create a proper exposure. It can also be magnified by high-zoom lenses. Optical image stabilization reduces or eliminates this blur. If you’re looking at a camera with a 5x zoom or higher, you’ll definitely want this feature.

ISO is a technical way of measuring how sensitive your camera’s sensor is to light. The higher the ISO, the faster the shutter speed will be. The faster the shutter speed, the less blur in your photo. Most cameras have a top ISO rating of at least 800, which is fine for normal indoor and outdoor use. For better low-light shots, ISO 1600 or higher will help, though at these levels you may start to see a lot of image noise (stray bits of color) introduced--so don’t expect miracles when you take “a shot in the dark.”

For more low light shooting tips, see [Five Tips for Taking Great Low Light Pictures](#).

Picture Taking Speed

A photo is a permanent record of a split second in time – and if your camera’s too slow, the split second you capture won’t be the one you wanted. There are two considerations here. One is the time that elapses between the moment you press the shutter and the moment the camera takes the picture. This is called shutter lag. This used to be a major differentiating factor between different camera models, but in recent years shutter lag has grown shorter and the gap between cameras has narrowed.

The second camera delay problem is the time the camera needs to get ready between shots. If you have kids, a slow camera will guarantee missed shots. These speeds can vary significantly from camera to camera and, annoyingly, they’re not included in the manufacturers’ performance specs. Ideally, you can get a few moments of hands-on time to fire off some test shots in the store – if the camera’s slow, you’ll know it quickly. A good camera reviewer will also point out problems if they exist.

One last speed bump: the camera’s “burst” or “continuous shooting” mode. This tells you the maximum number of shots the camera can take per second, without flash. A high burst rate can be a lifesaver if you’re trying to catch a baby’s fleeting expression, or just the right moment when little Casey is at bat. These figures are available for most cameras, and while you’ll have to take the specific number with a grain of salt, they’re a reasonable basis for comparison.

Taking Good Videos

Nearly all digital cameras today, of both the compact and interchangeable-lens variety, can also take movies. The quality won’t equal a standalone camcorder, but it’s often surprisingly good. You’ll find various high-def video standards represented: from 720p all the way up to 4K. It’s worth noting that even if a camera can shoot at higher definition levels, you can almost always shoot lower-res as well, which makes uploading much easier.

OPTIONAL FEATURES

Face detection: If you’ve ever taken a photo with the background in beautiful focus and your spouse’s face an unrecognizable blur, you’ll understand why you need face detection. Cameras with this option are smart enough to recognize faces and focus on them, even if they’re not in the center of the frame or the closest object to the camera. Some cameras do this automatically, others have special modes. In a higher-end model, you can even select your subject or differentiate between kids and adults. And with touch-screen cameras, you can generally tap on the face you want in focus to select it.

Autofocus Tracking: With this feature, once you select your subject, the camera will automatically keep it in focus until you take your picture. When paired with face detection,

cameras can also "remember" the person you're tracking, reacquiring a lock even if he or she leaves the frame for a few seconds.

HDR: HDR, or high dynamic range, refers to a mode in which the camera takes three images—one over exposed, one under expose and one at regular exposure—and merges them together to reveal more detail in all areas of the image. It's great for images where there is very little or no movement, like landscapes or posed portraits.

Smile and blink detection: A camera with smile or blink detection finds a face, and only takes the photo if all the people are smiling and/or if all the subjects' eyes are open.

Wi-Fi: Cameras with built-in Wi-Fi can automatically download your photos to your computer, email them or upload them to web services like Facebook or YouTube. It's a convenient feature for travelers.

GPS: When a GPS receiver is built into your digital camera, the coordinates of the spot where you press the shutter are saved with each picture. Called "geotagging," this obviously isn't a necessity, but can be fun for your vacation images. Some cameras and photo sharing Web sites, such as Flickr, let you view your photos as icons attached to a map.

HD Output: Every camera lets you view your images on your TV. But only some have the output jack (HDMI) that enables you to take advantage of an HDTV's full resolution. Surprisingly, even some cameras that shoot in HD won't let you play back the results directly from the camera, a major oversight. If you plan on viewing your images regularly on your HDTV, this feature should be on your checklist.

Touchscreen: Some digital cameras with 3-inch or larger displays let you navigate menus with a touchscreen instead of buttons. Whether or not this is an advantage is a matter of personal preference. Some of us love the smartphone-like control scheme; some are more fingerprint-phobic and find physical buttons easier to handle quickly. If possible, try out a touchscreen model you're considering to see if the screen reacts quickly and easily to your finger movements, and the on-screen menu system makes sense.

FIVE FIXES FOR COMMON PHOTO PROBLEMS

The automatic point-and-shoot systems in today's digital cameras generally do an excellent job, but there are still many shooting situations where a little manual control can make an enormous difference. Here are some simple steps you can take to improve your pictures that will work with both simple and sophisticated cameras.



1. Out of focus photos

When your main subject isn't in the center of the image, the camera may decide to focus elsewhere. The fastest, easiest solution is to move the camera temporarily so your subject is in the center of the photo, press the shutter button halfway, and hold it. As long as you keep the shutter button pressed halfway, the camera will maintain focus on your subject, even if you move the camera to recompose the shot. Alternatively, you may be able to turn on face detection (if it's a person you're shooting) and the system will find the people in the scene anywhere on the screen. And with an advanced camera you can adjust the focal point manually, but this can be time-consuming and result in missed shots.

2. Blurry images

Movement can cause image blur, whether it's an athlete running down the field or your own hands shaking slightly as you press the shutter button in dim lighting. You can combat this by adjusting the camera's ISO setting – with a higher ISO, the shutter speed can be faster, making it easier to freeze the action. There is a trade-off here when it comes to image quality, though. As you boost the ISO, the amount of noise, or visible graininess, in your photos increases. The degree to which this occurs differs from camera to camera, so a little trial and error is a good idea, but as a rule you can go to ISO 400 or even 800 with acceptable results, and often significantly higher if you're planning to post rather than print your picture.

3. Off-color images

We don't ordinarily notice changes in the color of light – our brains make the adjustment automatically – but in fact sunlight, incandescent bulb light, fluorescent light and so on are distinctly different shades. Your camera automatically adjusts to compensate for this, but it doesn't always succeed. The most common problems are overly reddish-orange photos in rooms lit with standard household bulbs, and greenish shots under fluorescent light.

There are two approaches to tackling this problem. Nearly every camera lets you choose a white balance setting to match the environment – sunny, cloudy, tungsten (incandescent bulbs),

fluorescent, etc. Even better is taking a manual white balance reading, if your camera allows it. This sounds fancy, but it's actually a fast operation – you point the camera at a white piece of paper and press a button to take the setting. This provides the most accurate color reproduction possible, and you don't have to take a new setting for each photo. Once you take a manual white balance reading, it will stay in effect until you change it.

4. Faces in outdoor shots are too dark

Your camera tries to ensure that everything in your photo will be reasonably well lit, using an automatic exposure system. In some instances, though, this just doesn't work. For example, when you're shooting at a sunny beach or in a snowy setting, the background is much brighter than the people in your photo, so they can come out far too dark. One solution is to use your camera's preset scene settings. These vary from camera to camera, but nearly all models include settings for Beach and Snow or Backlit situations.

Another option: set your camera to fire off the flash with each shot. When left in automatic mode, the flash won't fire when the overall lighting is bright, but in an outdoor scene it can help illuminate faces and freeze action even when the sun is shining. This is called a "fill flash."

For finer lighting control, explore your exposure compensation options. Even cameras without extensive manual controls usually provide this option. Exposure compensation lets you tweak the camera's automatic setting to match conditions as you see them. Setting a positive exposure compensation makes the photo brighter, while a negative setting darkens the image. Try experimenting in your spare time, when you're not trying to take mission-critical photos at important events.

5. Cluttered backgrounds

Often we're so busy looking at the subject of our photos that we don't notice what's going on in the background. Then, when we look at the actual picture, we see a ton of distracting detail that ruins the overall effect of the image.

Strategy one for dealing with this: try repositioning your subject and/or yourself to frame a cleaner shot. Does that tree branch look like it's coming out of your child's ear? Move three inches to the right and it's gone. Is the busy wallpaper pattern going to distract from your daughter's lovely smile? Ask her to move a few feet away from the wall, allowing the background to fade into the background.

A more technological solution depends on your camera's manual controls – specifically, whether it offers "aperture-priority" mode. The camera's aperture setting determines how much light enters the camera and impacts how much of the image is in focus – what's known as depth of field. A shallow depth of field means objects that fall within a narrower distance from the camera will be in focus, which can create a nice blurry background behind the subject of your photo. The automatic setting of most cameras, though, favors maximizing depth of field. If you

can adjust the aperture manually – lower numbers equal a shallower depth of field – you can turn distracting backgrounds into fuzzy abstract patterns that make your subject in the foreground the focus of attention.

FIVE TIPS FOR TAKING GREAT LOW LIGHT PICTURES

Whether it's a lit Christmas tree, a child blowing out birthday cake candles or an impromptu dinner party, there are plenty of great low-light shots waiting to be made. Taking these pictures can be tough, though, with dark, blurry images frequently the norm. So here are some surefire tips to taking better photos in low light.



1. Raise the ISO Level

Nearly all digital cameras let you adjust the ISO setting, which controls the camera's sensitivity to light. The higher the ISO, the higher the sensitivity, which means you can shoot in darker places or take photos faster, which reduces the blur caused by camera shake.

As with most camera settings, though, there's a trade-off involved in boosting the ISO. As ISO levels increase, you'll start to see more noise in your photos. Noise is a grainy-looking imperfection, most noticeable in solid-colored areas.



The balance between more image detail and image noise varies from camera to camera as ISO increases. And the amount of image noise that's acceptable depends on how you're planning to use your photos. If you're just going to post them on Facebook or look at them on your computer screen, you can tolerate a lot more image noise than if you're planning to make 8 x 10 prints, or

want to crop a photo tightly after shooting.

You can't get a good idea of how much noise appears in your pictures based on how they look on the camera's LCD screen – you need to look at them on a large computer monitor or print out samples.

The fact that a camera offers high ISO settings doesn't mean you'd actually want to use them – all too often these top settings are more for marketing purposes than practical photographic choices. Ordinarily you'll find little to worry about up to about 400 ISO. To find your camera's top ISO setting, take a series of shots under the same lighting conditions at all the ISO settings.

For example, use a collection of canned food for this, since the cans combine areas of solid color with lettering that reveals image flaws in detail reproduction.

This is an area where a more expensive camera usually does a noticeably better job, with interchangeable-lens cameras outperforming compact models.

2. Optimize Flash Results

Ideally you shouldn't use a flash when trying to capture low-light scenes. However sometimes a room is just too dark to take a picture without added light and flash can be the difference between getting the shot and missing it entirely.

Using an External Flash

A few high-end compacts and nearly all interchangeable-lens cameras have a slot on top of the camera called a hot shoe for attaching an external flash unit. Simply adding an external flash that fires straight ahead will cut down the chance of red-eye in your portrait shots—that children-of-the-damned red glow that happens when the light from a flash reflects off the blood vessels at the back of the eye.

To really solve the low-light problem, though, you'll want a flash unit with a head that pivots up and down. This enables a technique called bounce flash – you aim the flash up at the ceiling, and it illuminates the room with natural-looking light, minimizing harsh shadows. [Bounce flash units](#) start at around \$50, with high-quality models setting you back \$150 or more, depending on the manufacturer, light output level and features provided. It's a worthwhile investment that will radically improve your indoor photography for years to come.

Using the Built-in Flash

Your basic camera flash produces a direct blast of light, creating harsh shadows and annoying your subjects. If it's a question of using the flash or missing the shot, try standing several feet away from your subject to lower the glare.

If you're using the pop-up flash on a digital SLR, try the [Lightscoop](#), an ingenious add-on that mounts on top of your camera. It has an angled mirror up front, which reflects light from the built-in flash up to the ceiling for an instant bounce effect. It's not as flexible as a true bounce flash, which lets you change the firing angle to minimize shadows, and it won't work with all camera models, but at \$30 it's undeniably a thrifty alternative.



Set a Manual White Balance

When shooting indoors under normal room lighting, you're likely to find photos come out unnaturally orange (with standard tungsten bulbs) or greenish (with fluorescents). Different light sources produce differently colored illumination, and cameras have a tough time adjusting to those variations automatically. All but the cheapest digital cameras let you improve results by taking a manual white balance reading.

How to Set Manual White Balance

The procedure is simple, even if the specific button presses vary from camera to camera. You aim the camera at a white surface (could be a white wall, or a sheet of printer paper works fine) and tell the camera "this is true white, adjust your color reproduction to match." Yes, you can tweak color after the fact, using image editing software, but spending 30 seconds taking a white balance reading is much easier.

Use a Tripod

If you're shooting low-light scenic shots as opposed to people or other moving subjects, a tripod is a tremendous assist. With the camera mounted securely, you can stretch shutter speeds to let more light in without raising ISOs to quality-crushing levels. It's best to set the camera's self-timer when shooting on a tripod in the dark, to avoid the brief shake that inevitably occurs when you press down on the shutter button.

Use a Fast Lens

Finally, some camera lenses allow more light through than others, making them superior performers in low-light photography. The figure we're looking at here is the maximum aperture (the number after "f/" in the specs)—the lower the number, the better the lens performs.

A typical zoom that comes with an interchangeable lens camera might have a maximum of f/3.5, which isn't great for low-light photography. Good zoom lenses with maximum aperture figures of f/2.8 or lower are available, but they are double or more the cost.

The alternative: ditch the zoom and pick up a low-light-loving fixed-focus lens. You'll find 50mm f/1.8 lenses from camera manufacturers selling for under \$150. A 50mm lens produces an image that's about the same size as what you see with the naked eye, and an f/1.8 lens will greatly increase your ability to get a nice sharp shot when shooting handheld in low light conditions.

SIX WAYS TO SPEED UP AN OLD CAMERA

There's little more frustrating than missing an amazing picture just because your camera takes too long to shoot after you press the button. There are some quick and easy adjustments that can speed up the first shot and reduce the time between shots, increasing your chances of making that magic photo. The following tips are generic, so read the manual on your camera to determine how to adjust the settings.

1. Turn off "instant preview"

"Instant preview" is the feature that lets you take a quick peek at the shot you just took before you take another one. But when the action is happening, you want to keep shooting! To check the shots, just tap the playback button. But keep yourself in capture mode when there are pictures to be made.



2. Turn the flash off

When there is good light (and only if there's good light), make sure the flash is turned off. That's because many point-and-shoot digital cameras will not fire another shot while the flash is recycling. So you will be waiting, waiting, waiting for the flash to recycle before your next shot.



If you were using the flash as a fill-flash to "fill-in" details or soften shadows in bright, outdoor light, make sure to check your camera for shadow and highlight-adjustment modes (new models only). Turning these modes on will produce a similar effect, showing more detail with less contrast than models from just a few years ago, without requiring the flash to be on.

3. Turn the flash (and AF-assist beam) on

In dark rooms and outdoors at night, turn the flash and AF-assist (autofocus-assist) beam on. Your camera needs light and contrast to focus, and the onboard pre-flash and/or AF-assist beam will significantly reduce the time it takes the camera to find your subject and focus, and decrease the number of out-of-focus shots in dim situations.



4. Skip the fancy focus modes and go with the center focusing point

When it's all happening pretty fast, use center focus instead of multi-point or any other focus mode. Then turn on continuous focusing mode if your subject is moving. Lenses are sharpest and have the best resolution at their centers. If the

composition seems off, you can always crop it afterward. Better a sharp picture that's cropped, than a missed photo any day.

5. Prefocus your subject

When you've got a subject that isn't moving (or moving parallel to the camera), prefocus the camera by pressing the shutter button half-way. Once the camera focuses, just wait for the magic to happen and fire the shutter at the right moment! (You can also use this trick to lock focus on a centered subject and then recompose



When the focus box turns from white to green you know your subject is in focus.

the shot to be an off-centered composition. Only use this trick on subjects that are several feet away, though. In close-ups you'll notice unacceptable softness if the focal point is even slightly off).

6. "Pre-capture" to make up for slow reflexes

If you simply cannot train your reflexes to nail the winning shot no matter how hard you try, check to see if your camera has a pre-capture mode, which starts taking shots and then buffering several once you've prefocused. This mode is available on some Olympus and Casio cameras.

The most important thing is to be familiar with how your camera operates, and prepare accordingly. Don't wait for a once-in-a-lifetime moment to see if your camera is quick at focusing in low light. Read the manual (as boring as it is) and do a little experimentation. You'll be amazed by how much better your photos become.

PHOTO TIPS FOR PARENTS

PHOTO CHECKLIST FOR NEW PARENTS

The first year of your baby's life is filled with so many don't-miss photos. Follow these tips for making the most of the memories and moments you'll want to remember and you'll have everything you need to make that baby's first year photo book.

1. The Big Day

This one is specifically for the dads! Pack a trusty camera that does a good job with interior lighting in auto mode, with a wide-angle to normal lens, and you should be okay. If there's daylight, open the shades in the suite. The extra light will help prevent blurry pictures and is a lot more flattering than on-camera flash.

Shot List:

- Mother and baby
- Baby hand in parent hand
- Dad and baby
- Baby sleeping close-up
- Baby sleeping from bird's-eye view
- Parents and baby

2. Coming Home

Be sure to take at least a few photos on your first day home. You may look slightly less exhausted than you did in the hospital photos and it's a great way to get into the habit of taking photos to remember your child's journey.

Shot list:

- On the front porch or in front of the house (weather permitting)
- In the nursery room
- In the crib for the first time
- On the couch with Mom, Dad, sisters, brothers, and pets

3. Week One

The first week will fly by – you won't believe it has been seven days since you had a baby. The one-week mark is a nice milestone opportunity for more pictures.

Shot list:

- Sleeping
- Eyes Open



- Active
- In the crib
- From a birds-eye view
- Cheek-to-cheek with Mom and/or Dad
- Close-up of little hands and feet

4. Tummy Time

After a few weeks, baby will be able to hold her head up for short periods of time during tummy time, which is a great milestone in both your baby's development and in your photo album!

Set your baby up in tummy time on the middle of a bed and shoot with a zoom lens from a distance – this will help blur any distracting background. If your camera has a burst-shooting mode, where it rapidly takes a series of photos when you press the shutter button, try using it here. It's a great way to capture your baby's rapidly changing expressions.

Shot list:

Capture a number of frames to see the different nuanced facial expressions your baby is making.

5. Supported Sitting

Once your baby is a few months old, they'll be able to prop him/herself up in a Bumbo-type seat, on your lap, on a few pillows and in the corner of a couch for short spells. Be sure to have an assistant nearby in case your wee one starts to topple.

Shot list:

- Smiles
- Eyes
- Varied expressions
- Full body shots showing off little feet and cute outfits

6. Messy First Food

Once you get the go-ahead from your pediatrician to introduce your wee one to baby mush, plan ahead for this milestone, as it will make for a messy, memorable experience. This is absolutely a two-adult photo shoot, so Mom and Dad should decide who's feeding and who's taking pictures.

This is one of the few baby photo ops where an on-camera flash pointed straight at the baby can make for a stronger picture, since it will emphasize the messy baby food.

Shot list:

- Tight shot of face covered in baby food



- Wider shots with messy bib & hands
- Profile shot of baby & parent offering food

7. Sitting

Once your babe can sit by herself, you'll want to capture her new perspective on the world. Put yourself in "tummy time" position to capture some shots of your little one on the floor amidst her favorite toys. Shooting on the floor, from a baby's level is a great way to see and share your world in a new way.

Consider setting up a white sheet as a seamless backdrop off the back edge of a sofa for a quick "studio style" shoot.

Shot list:

- Wide shot of your little one with favorite toys, stuffed animals, and books.
- Close-ups interacting with objects she picks up.

8. Standing Up Against Crib

You won't believe how quickly you'll move from birds-eye views of your newborn in the crib to a shot of your little one standing and peering over the edge of his crib and Pack 'n' Play. Be sure to mark this moment with some in-the-nursery shots.

Take advantage of the low height of the Pack-n-Play to shoot some straight-down shots with a wide-angle lens as your baby will surely look straight up at the camera, and this is a fun forced-perspective shot to share. In the main crib in the nursery, back up a little bit to get your baby standing up straight-on, with his feet planted between the bars of the crib.

Shot list:

- Straight down from above in the Pack 'n' Play
- Straight-on in the nursery

9. Crawling

Here's another shooting opportunity where you'll want to be in "tummy time" position yourself to get the best angle of the action. Keep shooting and keep reviewing your shots till you've got a sharp photo with good action, implied motion, and pleasing expression. Don't get discouraged if you don't nail it the first day – your baby will give you more than enough chances to get a winner.

If the controls are available, set your camera to continuous autofocus or sports mode – a crawling baby can move very fast!

Shot list:

- Overhead view of scooting baby
- Head-on shot of approaching baby with photographer lying on the floor

- Rear view of crawling baby approaching the other parent

10. Halloween and Autumn

Outdoor autumn shots can be made at any time of day, but early morning and late afternoons are best for warm, dramatic directional lighting. Some great autumn shots ideas include sitting amidst the gourds in a ground-level pumpkin display at a local farm market one crisp fall afternoon. Weekdays are much better for trying this than weekends, as the markets will be much less crowded.

Halloween shots are a particular type of fall shot, and the best time for Halloween shots is twilight. There's a short window of time late in the day when the sky, jack-o-lanterns, and lighted displays will all be nearly equal in exposure. This is the best time to make photos of your kids in costume in front of the house. You'll want direct flash, but dial it back a little bit if your camera offers this control to make the direct light appear less artificial.

Use a tripod for the twilight Halloween shots to avoid camera shakes. Alternately, set a long shutter speed (½ second or more) and don't even try to hold the camera steady as you take your shots with flash – all the background lights and displays will go all ghostly on you.

Shot list:

- Baby surrounded by autumn icons
- Interacting with seasonal props (masks, pumpkins, etc.)
- Group shots with appropriate Halloween/Thanksgiving themes

11. Winter Holidays

December is the time of Christmas trees, menorahs, and more holiday lights than you can imagine everywhere you turn. These lights can be wonderful design elements to convey the sense of season, but they can also trip up your exposure if you aren't careful. As with Halloween, twilight is best for outdoor displays, and a tripod is a fantastic way to keep the camera from shaking during longer exposures.

Indoors, try out different camera settings to balance the exposure on your baby's face and the background lights. Try using a stuffed animal as a sit-in for your baby while experimenting, which proved much less stressful for all concerned.

Shot list:

- Baby with holiday lights
- Presents!
- Different groups of family members with baby, surrounded by holiday decorations

TAKE BETTER BABY PHOTOS

New parents have a lot to worry about when they bring baby home, not the least is getting a good shot of the little one to email out to family and friends. Let's face it, nobody wants to show the world a pink, shriveled face bathed in bad light.

But if you're not a professional photographer, getting a glamorous shot of your newborn is not easy. [Olympus Visionary Nick Kelsh](#) - a professional shutterbug with numerous books under his belt and images that have appeared in *Life*, *Time*, *BusinessWeek* and *National Geographic* - understands your pain. Here are his 10 tips to better immortalizing your precious new addition.

Get closer

Most amateurs never shoot a close-up and close-ups are so powerful. Fill the frame with your baby's face and leave out the lamps and furniture and all of that other visual clutter. A good close-up of a baby can be other-worldly.



Push the button a lot

That's another way of saying take lots of pictures. The more pictures you take the luckier you get and when you're photographing babies you want to do everything to increase the luck factor.

Experiment with the flash off

A flash on a camera is a very handy thing; it allows you to take sharp pictures in dark rooms. But it does something else, too - it ruins the mood. It's about as romantic as the headlights on your car. A picture taken with a flash is the signature look of amateur snapshots. Use it if you're shooting snapshots, but if you want to take pictures that will make other people say, "Hey, you're a great photographer!" turn off the flash.



Find some beautiful light

If you want to shoot some beautiful baby portraits this may be the most important step. With your flash off, put your baby in some soft window light or the light of an open outside door. This is the light Rembrandt built a career around. If you get just how profound this tip is, you are well on your way to moving up the photographic food chain.

Don't try to out-think your baby

Shoot pictures when they're in the mood. That's probably after a nap and after a snack.



Keep your backgrounds simple

You could not possibly err on the side of too simple with this. Try to find clean, simple backgrounds.

Take advantage of the moment

You have what every professional photographer wants—access. Store your camera in the same place all the time and always turn your camera off with the same settings. Be ready for the stuff only parents see.

Crank up your ISO

Some people rarely take a picture with the ISO below 400. Do pictures get a little noisy (grainy) when the ISO is high? Sometimes. How often will get you get complaints from viewers when you've captured a great moment and there's a little noise? Never.

Learn to file your pictures

If you can't find them you can't share them and sharing these gems is what it's all about. The birth of a baby is a great time to get photographically organized. Create a logical system on your computer that you understand and will use. Key word: use.

Back up your pictures

All of your valuable family pictures need to be in two places. Backing up your photos to the cloud will ensure your memories are safe, even if your home is lost in a fire or flood. Plus, you'll have an easier time sharing photos with friends and relatives.

See our recommendations for the [Best Cloud Storage Solutions](#).

PHOTO TIPS FOR SPECIAL SITUATIONS

PHOTO TIPS FOR JULY 4TH FIREWORKS

Heading out with the family for July 4th fireworks celebrations is a time-honored tradition. And, if you're like me, you enjoy capturing those memories in pictures. But photographing fireworks with no camera shake and proper exposure is difficult, unless you know these simple tricks.

1. Use a tripod

When you take picture of fireworks, the camera needs to hold the shutter open long enough to “see” the fireworks. The longer the shutter is open, the more susceptible your photo is to motion blur. So use a tripod to make sure there’s no movement. For open areas, use a standalone model with telescoping legs like the [Dolica AX620B100 Proline](#) (about \$40 on Amazon). A more mobile option is the [Joby Gorillapod](#) (see photo, around \$18 on Amazon), which wraps around trees and poles or stand up on the ground.



2. Use the “fireworks” scene mode

Most point-and-shoot cameras have a button or menu item with “SCN” or “Scene” that lets you choose various scene modes. Select the one that looks like a spray of fireworks and/or says "fireworks". Most cameras sold today have a "fireworks" mode.



3. No “fireworks” mode? Put it in “landscape” mode

Your camera automatically tries to find an object on which to focus. When presented with a black featureless sky, the camera doesn’t know what to do. Putting your camera in “landscape” mode presets the focus to infinity and narrows the lens opening, which keeps both near and far objects in focus.



4. Turn off the flash

Turning your flash off will let the camera know that it only has available light to take a picture. This is important because the camera will then keep the shutter open long enough to capture the fireworks. The flash button is usually a separate button on the back of the camera. On some cameras, you can’t turn off the flash unless you put it in a scene mode or program mode (P).



5. Turn down the ISO

High ISO will crank up the sensitivity of the camera so it can see details in the dark. However, the fireworks themselves are quite bright. So, to avoid overexposure and reduce film noise, take your camera out of Auto ISO and change the setting to ISO 100 or even lower. The ISO setting is usually found under the main menu. You may have to put your camera in program mode to change this setting.

FUN HALLOWEEN PHOTO EFFECTS

Between the kids' costumes, jack-o-lanterns and trick-or-treating, there are a lot of photo moments to capture. To get great photos in these difficult lighting situations, though, you'll have to do a little more than just point and shoot. Here are some tips for taking your photos up a notch, plus ideas for special effects that will make an already spooky holiday even spookier.

Photographing jack-o-lanterns

Great jack-o-lantern shots capture both the glow coming from the pumpkin and the textures of the pumpkin's skin and surrounding objects in low light.

Take this shot at twilight (about 20 minutes after the sun goes down) when the glow from your pumpkin will produce about the same amount of light as the sky. With the exposure for everything same, your camera will easily capture details in the entire shot.



If you miss this window, put your camera in HDR mode (High Dynamic Range) mode. In HDR mode, the camera takes an overexposed shot to capture the pumpkin skin detail and an underexposed shot for the candle's glow and then merges them together without your intervention. If your camera doesn't have an HDR mode, you can merge photos of different exposures together using [Adobe Photoshop Elements'](#) Photomerge Exposure editing mode.

Be sure you can't see the flame of the candle when taking your shots. It will appear too bright as a spot in your picture. And use a tripod and set the camera's self-timer to avoid the brief shake that inevitably occurs when you press down on the shutter button.

Creating ghosts in your photos

You can create ghosts two ways. If your camera supports long exposures—at least 8 seconds—you can have the person or object remain in the frame for part of the exposure, about 5 seconds. The space where the person was is double exposed, making your subject appear somewhat translucent.



The other way to create a ghost is to take two photos and merge them together. In Photoshop Elements, you create two layers. Make sure the photo containing the person is the layer on top and then experiment with the transparency of that layer to create your effect.

Making ghost writing

For ghost writing, you'll need a camera that supports exposures of at least 8 seconds, with 16 or 30 producing even better results, a tripod or flat surface, a flashlight or two and darkness. The trick is to use the flashlight to draw pictures or words in the air. The long exposure captures the trailing light as a bright image floating in the air.



Keep in mind that the camera captures the mirror image of what you draw, so you'll have to write your message backward (hard) or flip the photo in your photo-editing program (easy).

Shooting spooky silhouettes

Around sunset, take photos against the beautiful orange and red sky without a flash to create a silhouette of your subject. Make sure you have a clear sightline to the sky, so your subject doesn't have to compete with other objects on the horizon. The technique works great with kids in funky costumes.



EIGHT TIPS FOR TAKING GREAT PICTURES OF YOUR PET

Andy Katz, professional photographer and a Sony Artisan of Imagery, has eight great tips that will help any pet owner take better photos of his or her treasured companion.

1. Create an effect of movement

Shoot at a slow shutter speed while holding the camera still so the background is still but your pet is in motion. If you're not using a tripod, keep image stabilization on to keep the background sharp.

2. Take a lot of photos to get one great shot

With the large memory cards in modern digital cameras, "Pixels are free", says Andy, so keep shooting your pet and sort through the shots later to find the best.

3. Beautiful light makes for beautiful photos

The best light is early morning and late afternoon, it has warmer color and creates more interesting shadows than at noon. If you are shooting at noon, place your pet in shade or shadow for prettier light and more detail. Flashes look unnatural, so stay with natural light, use a slower shutter speed if necessary.

4. Use color if it adds to the photo, or B&W to bring out the details

Always set your camera to shoot in color and then decide later whether color adds to the photo. If not, remove the color with your photo editing software, such as Adobe Photoshop, to accentuate the details.

5. Shoot RAW, if possible to ensure you get all the details

A RAW file contains all of the information captured by your camera's sensor. When your camera converts an image to a JPEG, it compresses the image and some data are lost. It's better to keep the files RAW and convert them to JPEG after you have finished editing or cropping them.

6. Use selective focus to change a photo's mood

Choosing whether to place your pet in focus or the foreground/background can completely change the mood of the photo. Try it both ways and see which image you prefer.

7. Highlight the eyes

Find a shot that creates highlights in your pet's eyes. If the eyes look good, your pet will look good. Look back at the photo in #3 above. Your eyes are drawn to the dog's eyes and there's a vibrancy that you wouldn't get if the highlights weren't there.

8. Let your pet be a pet

Don't get caught up in having your pet pose for a photo. First of all, given that they're animals, pets don't listen very well and you're likely to get frustrated. Secondly, letting your pet act like a pet will give you more natural photos that capture your pet's true character.

HOW TO GET GREAT GROUP SHOTS

Graduations, weddings, reunions, birthday parties—there are many occasions that call for a group shot. Taking the perfect group photo, though, can be challenging. People look away, blink, fix their hair.

Here are easy tips you can follow for getting that group shot right. But you don't have to take the perfect shot to end up with one; you can easily merge two or more photos together using applications on your smartphone or computer.



1. Get in close

The closer you get to your group, the more detail you can capture in their faces. Have people lean in toward the center to create a smaller target area.

2. Pose your group

For larger groups, you'll want to stagger people in rows, so you can still see everyone's face while fitting them into a smaller area. Don't make the group too deep, though, or not everyone will be in focus.

3. Keep People Still

If you're going to merge your shots, you'll want them as similar as possible to make the merge easy and undetectable. So encourage the group to remain in the same place.

4. Take Multiple Shots

Digital shots don't cost anything, so fire away. If there's good light and you're shooting kids, try putting the camera into burst mode.

5. How to Merge Photos

If your group shot didn't work out as you expected, a little processing after the fact can often fix things up. For Macs and Windows PCs, use [Adobe Photoshop Elements](#):