grainhappy

PHOTOGRAPHY TUTORIALS AND TAX HELP

Q&A

This is a thank you for joining my email list! Here is a collection of conversations I've had with photographers just like you, about the most difficult stuff they're currently dealing with.

If you're struggling with a specific topic, don't hesitate to reach out and contact me! **Tweet me @grainhappy!**

Topics

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Lighting Skills

Q: Today I was trying to get some shots of smoke, but I didn't get anything great. All the shots were blurry. Help!

A: I'm assuming it was really super dark, yea? The best way to shoot smoke is to have a light behind it, but not directly behind it. Place the light to the side and behind the smoke. So! If you can imagine shooting an invisible arrow from your camera, the arrow would fly out of your camera, hit the smoke, and then zoom by the side of the light last.

If you can use a strobe or speedlight, you'll find that there's little to no blur because the flash only stays on for such a small fraction of a section that it freezes action like smoke billowing. Don't be afraid to try again! Good luck.

Q: I would say one of the hardest things I'm dealing with is getting a great sky. It can be tricky on bright sunny days when you can't be there at dawn or dusk! Even cloudy days.

A: Yes! Some pros I know of have cloud libraries that they've created specifically for sky replacement, because it is so tricky and also the timing is so difficult. Have you ever heard of Joey L? His tutorial from 2009 had a great sky replacement tutorial (check that out here: https://www.learnfromjoeyl.com/dvd/sessions/). Also, if you don't want to replace the sky, using a reflector or strobes to pump up the light on your subject allows you to lower the exposure, so if you get into doing more of that you'll find the sky isn't as blown. Personally, in my photography I mainly use natural light and I'm okay with a sky that's blown. But it's all an art and style! Keep aiming for your own unique vision.

Q: I've struggled with sharp macro shots indoors in low light using on camera flash and tripod. Any thoughts?

A: My first thought is get that flash off your camera. When we do macro ring shots, we grab a speed light, connect the triggers, and place the light wherever we want. This is all the more important for macro, because a flash at the top of your camera is permanently at one angle (so even if it does partially work, it severely limits your creativity!). If you want help picking out flash triggers, these are the ones I currently use and recommend: Yongnuo RF-603 II C3 Wireless Flash Triggers. (One note of caution! These triggers can be used as shutter releases too, which is awesome, but you need a special cord to connect it. This package INCLUDES the cord, but you have to make sure it's the RIGHT cord for YOUR specific camera. Check to make sure your camera is on the list before purchasing because there's a few different versions of RF-603 II C3 triggers!)

Q: Photographing in full sun is really difficult -- especially when fill flash is not an option and open shade is not an option. How would you deal with this? ⊖

A: I had the same exact question, and asked it to Joe Buissink during a wedding photography conference here in Nashville! One idea he had (specifically for wedding photography) was to use the dress as a sort of reflector. Pull the dress out and up to try to get more light on the face, if the dress is long enough to make it happen.

One thing that I do if we're out in the open and I can't find shade is have the subject with the back to the sun. My first thought is to get harsh shadows off the face. If you're talking about noon sun which creates those black holes where eyes should be, first check to see if you can get them facing away from the majority of the light, and if you can't do that, you can have them close their eyes and look upwards, which will put a cleaner light on their face.

Also, you said "where fill flash is not an option" – I'm assuming you know that if you buy powerful enough strobes that you can definitely overpower the sun! You would probably need to have high speed sync triggers and maybe an ND filter too, depending on how much light, but it's totally possible.

Strobes to overpower the sun: http://www.paulcbuff.com/b1600.php

Best-selling ND Filters on Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Camera-Photo-Lens-Neutral-Density-Filters/zgbs/photo/3109906011/?_encoding=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&linkCode=ur2&tag=lucraffil-20&linkId=RA2HDPBO6UXZRBIY

Q: What's the best inexpensive way to diffuse fill flash when shooting portraits, especially to reduce hot spots? ⊖

A: My first thought when it comes to diffusing any light and finding an inexpensive option is just to look around your house. You can create a softbox out of cardboard and paper towels — you can create a very large diffuser out of white curtain or white bedsheet. You could put aluminum foil around your flash (also called a "snoot") to direct the light more specifically, and then point it towards a large white wall or ceiling, to use it as a gigantic softbox.

Q: Understanding light and exposure are the biggest problems I'm dealing with now. Sometimes the background just ends up too washed out. ⊖

A: I hear what you're saying! I can almost see the image now, with the background blown out and the colors not as crisp, clear, and well exposed as you want them to be.

Here's the reason this is happening: your foreground is too dark, so you have to raise the exposure of the camera to compensate. And even though the background is well lit, when you bump up that exposure on the camera, it gets all washed out.

There are a few things you can do.

First and probably most obvious, you can put flash on your subject in the foreground, so that your foreground is a lot brighter. Start by taking a photo and expose for your background FIRST. Your background should be exposed perfectly, and at this point your foreground should be dark. Now that you've exposed your camera right for the background, don't touch that exposure anymore and work with the flash to expose your subject in the foreground properly!

Second, you could try shooting closer to that golden hour near sunset. We'll typically plan our engagement shoots around 2 and a half hours before sunset so that we have the best light possible to work with. Try not to fight with a noon sun if possible!

Third, just try shooting a different angle! Sometimes the best option you have is to shoot with the sun behind you, with the sun illuminating your foreground AND background. That way, when you expose the foreground properly, the background falls right in line and the colors pop instead of getting blown out.

That said, photography is art, and you can shoot however you want! There are many occasions where I've decided that the best thing for me to do was shoot towards the sun, because I wanted an even shade on my subject's face. The background is partially blown, but I actually like it:)

Q: Sometimes what I think in my head will be great, turns out not to be. What I can do? ⊖

A: As far as seeing something in your mind and then when you shoot it, it doesn't turn out as well — have you studied light much? I'm not sure of your photography background but I know that generally when I'm really happy with photos, the light is amazing, and when I'm not happy with photos, the light is really annoying or wrong.

Obviously the content of the photo matters a lot but generally if the light is great, then the photo hits me in a way better way than when the light isn't. I'm curious if maybe trying to visualize more what specifically the light is doing (and not just the pose of the person in the photo, etc), you might hit your mark a little bit better!

The good part is, you can visualize what you want! Now you just have to get it out haha :)

Focusing Skills

Q: Hey - my hardest problem lately is getting my focus just right and in the right place. I really struggled doing a portrait shoot recently. ⊖

A: I understand – we took some time going through our autofocus system on our cameras and setting them up to be less confusing and less overwhelming. On the 5dmkiii, you can choose anywhere from using every single focus point down to I think 9 or 15 focus points. Which for me is personally all I want. That way it's not using zones and super complicated, it's just simple and easy and doesn't get in the way. Do you mind me asking what camera you have?

Nikon D3100. Not top of the range by any means and I'm a fan of bridge cameras over DSLRs to be honest but I'm liking it. My ideal camera is a Canon but I can't afford the one I want yet!

Keep savin! Haha man cameras are expensive. One thing that I want to encourage you with is: imagine your favorite photographer or someone you look up to, and imagine that they have the exact camera setup you do. What kind of shots would they take? I know personally I've struggled with thinking that gear is what holds me back, and while that's partially true, I know that my favorite photographers with the WORST cameras can take way better photos than amateurs with the best cameras. Your inner eye matters so so much more than your gear:)

Q: I have low/poor eye sight so I tend to use autofocus more often. What would be ⊖

A: Gotcha. Well, dealing with that issue, I would overcompensate by shooting a higher aperture and faster shutter than normal. The higher the aperture, the more stuff is going to be in focus. There's something called depth-of-field which you should study if you haven't yet. Basically, if you make the aperture higher (example: f8 is high, f2 is low), more of what's in front of you will be in focus. Of course, you won't get as much of that beautiful blur + bokeh that some people like to create but you'll at least have a sharp photo.

As a result of making your aperture higher, less light will actually enter the camera, so you'll have to boost your ISO. This is tricky because a higher ISO causes more graininess and actually causes the image to be LESS sharp. So you're playing a balancing act where you try to find the highest aperture you can shoot without boosting your ISO past a certain point. That will have to be something you work out by shooting different ISO's and determining for your camera where the image really starts to pull apart, and then make sure you don't go past that line.

Q: Could you explain to me how to blur something in the background of the main image?

A: Sure. There's something called "depth of field." Feel free to look up Youtube videos about it because you might find better explanations than I can give you with text. Basically, based on what settings you use, some things will be in focus, and some things will be blurred. If you can imagine a WALL, that can change thickness, this will be easier to understand. Everything within the wall is in focus, and everything outside of the wall is out of focus and blurry. When you take a regular shot of someone, they're in the middle of the wall (and in focus), and the stuff in front of them is blurry, and the stuff behind them is blurry. You can change the thickness of this "in-focus" wall by changing your aperture on the camera. Aperture is the actual size of the hole on the lens when the photo is taken. (Think of how the middle part of your eye can change its size based on whether it's dark or light out. Aperture is like that.)

So! If the aperture is wide (a big hole, like f1.4 or f2), then the wall of focus is thin. Meaning, if you focus on someone, their eye could be in focus but their nose could be out of focus.

If the aperture is tiny (a small hole, like f18 or f22), then the wall of focus is thick. Meaning, their eye is in focus, their nose is in focus, the foreground is in focus, and the background is in focus.

Q: Catching a moving butterfly with a macro lens indoors without flash is hard! Any tips?

A: Haha oh man. That is difficult! I think patience is the name of the game there. But make sure that your autofocus on your camera is set to be as fast as possible. On my camera, (Canon EOS 5D Mark III) I can choose the type of autofocus, and sometimes if something passes into the frame, the autofocus doesn't just snap to that new thing, sometimes it can hold the focus of the far object it was focused on before. This is helpful for ceremonies if I'm focused on the bride and someone walks in front of the camera. It never breaks the focus on the bride. But for you , I would totally recommend changing your autofocus to the setting where it switches immediately to new objects that enter the frame! That split second really counts. Also because there's so much movement of the butterfly, you could keep your focus locked about a foot away, (or a different specific distance for a shot you envision) and then just focus all your energy on trying to get that trigger finger to snap at the exact right time.

People Skills

Q: The biggest problem I have is taking good photos, I understand exposure and how my camera works, but good photos elude me.

A: You know, I just looked through a handful of your images and I notice that most of the subjects don't seem to be people you're interacting with. For my personal style of photography, the interaction between me and the subjects (usually couples) is usually the biggest importance. We want images where the couple is at ease and comfortable in front of the camera (sometimes looking, sometimes not), but what we find is that as the session progresses, they get more and more comfortable in front of the camera.

So! For you, even though you're not necessarily working with couples, I want to challenge you to put yourself in the image without actually BEING in the image.
What I mean is this: next time you go out to shoot, AFFECT the world around you. Tell someone they look nice. Say hi to those guys in the golf cart. Dance and sing for the little girl on the playground. Snap a photo of someone renting a bike instead of just a row of bikes, but get to know them for a quick minute, explain who you are and that you publish street photography on your blog and you would love to snag an image where they're looking at the camera. No pressure with the expression (NEVER ask for cheesy smiles, in my opinion), but get those eyes on the camera.

What I think will happen is this — your photos will take on a certain life to them that they don't have now. They will take on the life and excitement that you put into them. They will reflect how YOU interact with the world, and not just how you silently watch the world go by.
Challenge yourself to not only document the world around you, but change the people you're with by passing joy, humor, love, kindness, gentleness, whatever, to them. Affect someone else, and if you also have your camera then ask them if you can take their photo, JUST AS THEY ARE. If you do that, I bet you anything you'll find a new kind of life in your photos.
:):)

Q: What do I do when guests gather around me and start shooting photos of the Bride and Groom when I'm trying to get my shots?

A: Oh boy. This is one of the most frustrating things that can happen at a wedding hands-down. Especially in post when you find great shots but then you notice their eyes are looking slightly to the left at someone else's camera.

We've learned over the years to be more straight forward with anyone who is making our job more difficult at a wedding, and it truly makes all the difference. You don't have to be a jerk though, you just need to frame what you're saying through the right lens and make sure you're working with the right brides from the get-go!

We always work with brides that want specifically the type of photography that we shoot, so when people hire us, they're not just hiring people with expensive cameras, they're hiring us for our vision and style. This is important for many reasons, but for this specific question it's important because we know going into a wedding that a bride will prioritize our shooting photos above their relatives shooting photos.

So! Back to the wedding day – here's the picture – we're trying to take photos of the bride and groom and Uncle Bob and Uncle Dan have their cell phones out and start taking photos over our shoulders. You can do one of two things – either turn around and speak right to Uncle Bob and Uncle Dan and say, "I'm sorry, I need to make sure I have the full attention of the bride and groom, so please don't shoot any photos right now. You're welcome to take photos later."

If you'd rather not be that forward, take a second and go talk to the bride. Explain that it's really distracting to you that other people are taking photos, and you want to make sure you stay on schedule, and also that you get some great shots. Ask her if it's okay if she says something to them about it, or better yet, ask her if it's okay if you say something to them.

Everyone at a wedding always wants to please the bride, so if you frame what you're saying by mentioning the bride, it's pretty powerful: **"The bride kindly asks everyone to stop taking photos so that we can make sure we stay on schedule, because it's very distracting!"**

> Smile politely, make sure everyone heard you, and start shooting again uninterrupted!

Business Skills

Q: I'm currently having problems acquiring new clients. I'm interested in food, product and nature photography the most. Any ideas?

A: I feel like there's always work for product photographers, because there's always new businesses trying to sell their stuff (and they generally have pretty bad photos of their products if they're just getting started. So, as they build their business, you could work with them and build your business!

You could be really proactive with that and reach out to online businesses that are close to you and offer reduced/cheap product photography to build your client base and make a sweet portfolio + website ON YOUR OWN TERMS, and get a bunch of testimonials from business owners that say that you're great to work with, etc.

When we first moved to Tennessee, we did a lot of free work for friends/friends of friends, because we wanted to fan the flame before we started really getting hired. The more work we did, the more people saw our work, then we started getting calls. Obviously you have to set your own boundaries between free/paid work (be careful, because some people get stuck just giving their work away too cheap for too long), but for us is was really helpful to do that at the beginning.

Q: How do you convey experience, equipment cost, learning AND your style into your prices?

A: Prices are funny because honestly what every photographer brings to the table is different. It's not just about equipment and what lenses you have, it's the whole experience. For wedding photogs like us, the bride and groom have to click with us, not just have us on as hired hands. One thing that's super interesting to me is that there will always be people who will always think you're too expensive, and other that are willing to pay it. Obviously we're searching for clients that are willing to pay what we say we're worth (but at the same time, if we had no boundaries, we could totally end up with clients that don't value our work at all and would rather buy a new TV than have beautiful photos to hang in their house.) It's just a matter of priority and we want to find clients that really put a high priority on amazing photos!

In my opinion, you can charge more when you bring a better experience and a better product.

Think about it from your *perfect* client's point of view. What do they like and want in a photog? Who even is your perfect client? If you figure that out, then you'll have a better idea of how to market to them and create a website just to attract them.

Misc

Q: I'm having trouble getting sharp photos out of my DSLR and I'm not sure if it's me or the camera.

A: What settings do you typically use? As a general rule, photography is less about the camera, and more about your eye (and how you see the world, and how you use light), so I definitely believe you have good enough gear. In fact, this is an interesting situation where you have good gear and know you can get more out of it, so you have to rise to the occasion! Here's my point: a few years ago I

bought some pro audio equipment (I'm also a musician) and I still wasn't pleased with the quality of the recordings I was making, but for the first time I could finally blame MYSELF and stop blaming my gear (which was a blessing in disguise, actually). I was happy to finally realize that my knowledge is what was standing in the way, which helped me turn on the afterburners and really go after it full force, versus before where I might have just blamed my gear and left it at that.

Q: How do I compete with other photographers with my $850 camera when theirs is $3000? It's not easy. ⊖

A: I totally hear you. But let me ask you this — what would happen if you had that 3000 dollar camera and your favorite pro photographer had your 850 dollar camera?

I would argue that your greatest asset is your inner vision, your inner eye. It's what truly helps you take better photos, and photogs that really master light aren't bound by their gear as some amateurs or semi-pros are.

You have a gifting that allows you to see the world differently from someone else, and *yes*, someone else's camera may be better in low light or have more megapixels, but think of cameras from 50 years ago! They were nowhere near as sharp as the iPhone in your pocket, and yet some amazing, moving, emotional images were created by the photographers at the time.

Work with what you have and don't look at the guy that has different gear! Trust yourself, go with your intuition, and realize that there's something that you have that no one else can ever beat — your unique vision.

Q: Inspiration is hard sometimes -- finding creative ideas for photoshoots is an area I'm having slight difficulty with. Any suggestions? ⊖

A: The first thing that comes to mind is — how much other photography do you look at?

I'm a songwriter too and I've heard that one of the tricks to staying fresh and being able to create easily is to feed your brain a lot by reading. In the morning, read a whole bunch and then when you sit down to write you'll have fed your brain so much that it has a lot to work with.

I think the same is for photography, or design, or any other creative outlet. Get lost for a little while looking at your favorite photographers or designers and when you find stuff you absolutely love, pin it or save it somehow so when you try to come up with new ideas for your own shoots, you'll have a lot of fresh ideas to pull from to influence you.

Good luck!

Q: Confidence in my ability (or lack of it) is the hardest thing! ⊖

A: Confidence is such a funny thing. Once you have it, you've got it, but if you don't have it, getting it seems so difficult. One thing I'm curious about is if you have strong opinions about other people's work — and I ask that because I'm curious if you have strong opinions about other people's work, if that same critiquing eye can look at your work in the same way and see it for what it is, and start to have confidence that you know what you're doing. I know for me, a little while ago I started trusting myself and my eye more, and it's so funny to me because photography really truly is just art, which means that no one except the artist themselves can really judge it.

You see Picasso creating art that is far and beyond crazy, and he was totally judged by his generation and pretty much nothing came of it, and now people are paying millions for it. So that just goes to show that even if everyone around you looks at your stuff and says it's crap, there's still a possibility that the next generation will say it's amazing! And truly what I take from that is, be yourself, and love what you do, and create the best art you can.

What others think of it is truly insignificant, if you see it through that lens.

Q: It's hard when I take a huge amount of shots and then I have to go through and select the best ones. It gets overwhelming at times.

A: For sure! We take a looooot of shots during a wedding day, total somewhere between 3k-5k. Now, our photography is capturing natural emotion, so that's why we're shooting so much (to capture those moments), but to speak to what you're saying about it being overwhelming, I totally get it.

One thing I might suggest to handle that amount of images is to use a software where you can quickly cull through without having to wait for each image to load. We use a software called Photo Mechanic, and it's so much faster than Adobe Lightroom for culling.

If you'd rather try to fix the problem not by culling faster, but by shooting less, I would suggest to you to create fake boundaries with yourself on a shoot. Start by telling yourself you can only take one photo every 10 seconds. Each time to press the shutter, start counting down from 10, and don't allow yourself to shoot more often than that.

Then! Instead of 10 seconds, shoot for 15 seconds between shots, and then 20 seconds between shots.

What I want you to see is that if you are FORCED to NOT shoot, then you have to think a lot more about what you're actually shooting. You start seeing the photo differently because you're not just moving on to another photo after another photo. You're sitting with just one photo and you try to nail it the first time.

Q: Motivation has been a problem for me!

A: You know, I talk to a lot of people on twitter and I've heard a lot of people have trouble with motivation and getting out and using their gear! You're certainly not alone in that regard. I've been struggling with motivation myself (I'm a full time photog but also a musician) and it's hard. I'm currently trying to find that fire that will help me make time for music, and get to the gym, and eat right, etc.

I think at the end of the day it's about discipline and just forcing yourself to do something you don't want to do, until it becomes a habit. But right now in my life that habit of NOT going to the gym and that habit of eating poorly is stronger, so I have to fight to get that back to healthy.

ALL THAT SAID, you're not alone. See if you can sit down with a calendar and put a few things on it that you've been trying to do. Schedule stuff for a week or farther out, and that way when the day comes you'll have already set aside the time, and already told the "future you" that it's important to use your time that way.

Marketing/Social Media

Q: Posting on social platforms takes a lot of time to manage and I would like to do it successfully without taking up too much of my time.

A: Might be smart to just knock **one** out of the park! Facebook is starting to charge businesses to have their content end up on people's newsfeeds, so I know some marketers are looking towards Instagram this coming year (2015).

Maybe for now just choose one! That way you could focus there and then as time goes on, you could connect other platforms so if you post that one place, it's also shared other places. It would definitely be the best if you posted content specifically for the different social networks because they all are different in their own way, but it's better to have duplicate content up on multiple social

networks than no content at all.

Q: I've been trying to make a graphic logo, which has been frustrating and taking a lot of time because I'm not a graphic designer and Photoshop is still new to me. What do you think I should do?

A: If you're not a graphic designer, it's better to hire someone for something like that. Take a look at http://fiverr.com — you could get a logo for five bucks made by someone who has spent way more time than you at this. Also, the advantage there is you can look through pre-finished logos and pick one that's just like something you would want, and then have them customize it for you. Obviously you won't be getting world class work, but compared to trying to take time away from your photography to design something when you don't really have design skills, fiverr is definitely a better option.
Personally, I would stay away from watermarks that go over top of the image beccause I feel like it takes my eye away from the image and is really distracting. But I understand you want to protect your work.

Take a look at JeremyCowart.com – he's a pro photographer who doesn't have any watermarks that you can see on his work. I think it makes such a difference because when you look at his photos, you don't get distracted by any graphic design – you just focus on the image.