Learning Photography in the Digital Age

The must-read guide for photographers
looking to accelerate their progress
and avoid frustration

Written By

Lauchlan Toal

Learning Photography in the Digital Age

A guide by Lauchlan Toal

Learning photography is not the challenge it once was. Today, more than ever before it's possible to become a skilled photographer given just a short period of time. To be completely honest, photography is an incredibly simple art form and by making use of the resources you have available in this internet age you can easily master the fundamentals of making great images. This book will help guide you in finding the right ways to accelerate your learning, and allow you to teach yourself photography without having to deal with the typical frustrations and wasted time. Will it still take some time and effort? Of course, just like all art it takes practice. Fortunately, this time can be enjoyable with the right approach.

Why Learn Photography?

Unlike most books, I'm not going to list off a bunch of esoteric reasons why photography is worth learning. You've already started the process, so ask yourself why. Why have you chosen to seek out ways to take better photos? This is the most important factor in how effectively you will learn, so really dig into this question and come up with the truth. If you're to maintain your interest in improving yourself you'll need to know exactly why you're spending your time on this. The "why" is the force that keeps you going, it's the reason what you learn doesn't go through one ear and out the other. In short, if you don't have a reason why you want to learn

photography your chances of success are slim to none. Luckily, if you do have a reason, you're going to have a lot of fun.

What it Used to be Like

Back before digital cameras and the internet, learning photography was a real challenge. It was very similar to the skilled trades, in that you often had to serve an apprenticeship under an experienced photographer. There was a lot of gear to familiarize yourself with, as well as difficult processes of film development to master. You simply couldn't afford to buy the equipment and experiment until you got the hang of things, the wasted film and chemicals would set you back thousands of dollars. Some photographers were lucky enough to have parents who owned a darkroom, or would work at photography stores to build their expertise and teach themselves without a formal education or mentorship, but these people were relatively rare. Now technology has reversed everything, and being self-taught is the norm rather than the exception. If you want to get really serious about the craft, you can still find work assisting professional photographers, but this is no longer a necessary part of your learning.

The Learning Cycle of Photography Today: IRPS

Now that we no longer have to worry about developing film and have a wealth of online resources available to use, the process of learning photography is vastly simplified. Mastering the art is no longer a linear progression of apprentice to photographer, but rather a cycle of constant improvement.

The cycle starts with your interest in photography, the fuel that drives the entire process. You already started the process when you thought about why you want to learn photography! The next step is reading. Thanks to websites, blogs, libraries, ebooks, and even camera manuals, you can have a decent grasp of photography fundamentals even before you pick up a camera. Then you apply what you've read by practicing. Practice is the only way to move new techniques from your temporary memory into your permanent toolbox. Finally, there's the act of seeing things in a new light. Editing your work and revisiting concepts to refine your vision and grow as an artist. And then the process repeats itself! You once again go back to learn new things, implement them, and further improve your artistic eye. As you do so, you'll pick up new interests, specialize in different genres, and generally become a better photographer.

You can easily remember the process as IRPS - Interest > Reading > Practicing > Seeing. The IRPS cycle is key to becoming a good photographer, and if you stop progressing through it your abilities will stagnate. Thankfully, the process has been made enjoyable and simple with the modern tools available to you.

Reading - The Fastest Way to Learn

The second step in the IRPS cycle, reading, is at the heart of learning photography today. Even before you touch a camera you can learn the fundamentals of photography and be ready to apply them when you do pick up the camera. With the abundance of educational blog posts and websites available, you can find multiple explanations for any given technique, making it easy to understand even the most complex elements of photography.

If you still don't have a camera, this is the perfect time to learn the basics. By spending a week or two immersed in different blogs you'll be able to learn everything from how to operate a camera to the exposure triangle and more. Having this knowledge will allow you to better understand what features you need in a camera, and when you buy one you'll be ready to start taking pictures immediately. Two of the sites which helped me a great deal when I was starting out were *improvephotography.com* and *digital-*

photography-school.com. There are hundreds of great sites out there though, so be sure to Google things you don't fully understand and you'll stumble upon some fantastic articles.

If you already have a camera, and a firm grasp of the basics, there's still value in reading. You always have room to improve, and reading about techniques you've never tried, searching for ways to improve your shots, and seeing what other people have done can inspire you to push your limits and elevate your photography. While you don't want to get stuck reading all the time and never shooting, spending an hour or two every week on some good blogs is a good way to stay fresh. If you're not sure where to look, I'd suggest checking out *fstoppers.com*, *slrlounge.com*, and *photographylife.com*. All these sites cover a diverse range of topics and generally offer high quality information that's well worth reading. There are lots of more niche sites that you may also want to check out if your photography falls into a specific genre, so be sure to search online too every now and then to find new sources of information.

Another good place to find reading material is on forums. While the posts are less comprehensive than the ones on blogs, you can often find a diverse range of opinions, unorthodox solutions, and people looking for the same answers as you. When you're faced with a challenge, especially a technical one, you can usually find the answer discussed somewhere on a

forum. And if it hasn't been answered already, it might be worth signing up to one of the forums and asking - the chances are high that someone can help. If you do sign up to a forum though, make sure to give back. No one likes someone who signs up, asks a question, then leaves. Thank people who answer your question, and contribute to other threads where you can. No need to pretend to be an expert - you can always find people with less experience than you in some aspect of photography, and people facing the same issues you've overcome.

Practice - The Key to Mastery

As with all skills, practice makes perfect. Even back in the days of film cameras practice was a vital component of learning photography, and we're lucky that digital cameras have made practicing much easier and less expensive. In the past, shooting photos simply for practice was difficult to justify due to the costs of film. Now it's practically free to take photos, so getting thousands of practice shots in is no problem. Additionally, your camera has many tools built into it that will help you develop your skills without suffering frustrating set-backs.

Practice - Using Liveview

Do you own a camera that was made within the last 10 years? If so, your camera probably has a feature that will help you a great deal when you're learning about exposure - liveview. Liveview is the handy mode that displays exactly what your camera's sensor sees on the rear screen. It allows you to do some handy things like zoom in to get perfect focus, but for learning photography its greatest advantage is that you can see exactly what exposure you're going to get. This means you can see what effect your settings have on the image even before taking a photo, and can see changes in real time. Without a doubt, this is the best way to fully understand exposure and how you can control it.

In order to access liveview you may need to tweak your settings. Often cameras have two liveview modes, one which shows the exposure that you have set in the camera, and one that shows an exposure that the camera thinks is right but which has no relation to your settings. You're going to want the one that is based on your settings, which is often called "movie mode" or something similar. The one limitation of this mode is that you can't set your shutter speed slower than 1/30 of a second because that's the speed at which the display refreshes, so for longer exposures you can't get a preview in liveview. Also worth noting is that for some cameras and lenses you may not be able to change the aperture in movie liveview, and

would need to switch out of liveview mode completely or switch to photo liveview in order to change the aperture - when you switch back to movie liveview you'll be at the desired aperture.

Another benefit of using liveview is that you can see different white balances in action. When you're learning about different colour temperatures and white balance settings it's extremely useful to cycle through all the white balance settings while pointing your camera at different scenes. While you can easily change white balance in post-production if you shoot raw files, it's still worth knowing how to set it in camera.

Practice - Leveraging the Power of Unlimited Exposures

They say it takes 10 000 hours to master any given skill. While this is overkill if you simply want to become pretty good at photography, you're still going to need to spend time taking photos in order to improve. Luckily, you have free reign to take as many photos as you want! With digital cameras, the only barrier to taking more photos is the longevity of the camera, and most cameras can take well over 100 000 images before wearing down. By the time you've taken that many shots you'll probably be wanting to buy a new camera anyway. So take as many photos as you can when you're starting out! Test out everything you've read about online

and dabble in as many genres as you can. Having a broad knowledge of photography will allow you to tackle any situation with confidence.

Of course, storage space may become an issue if you're taking thousands of high resolution images. A good mindset to have is that you don't need to keep every photo. Keep only the ones that you'd be willing to edit and display. Most of your practice photos won't be very good, so be picky about what you keep. Not only will this keep your hard-drive free, it'll also be motivational. Only seeing your best shots will boost your self-esteem and inspire you to take more great photos like that. So don't be disappointed if you end up deleting 99% of your photos one day - you took those photos as practice, so that the next day you only have to delete 95% of your shots.

Seeing - The Tools You Have to Develop Your Artistic Vision

In the following pages we'll discuss some of the ways you can continue to improve your photographic eye, even when you're not taking pictures. Indeed, sometimes it's easier to learn when your not struggling to capture a fleeting moment or deal with challenging conditions. Sitting back and giving yourself time to absorb new information will allow for deeper learning and translate into better photos the next time you shoot.

Online Communities - The Perks of Being Social

With so many people interested in photography, there are a ton of sits dedicated to sharing images that you can join. If you're fairly social or a bit competitive then joining an online community will be a huge motivational boost for you. When you post your images and get people liking, favouriting, and commenting on your work you'll feel amazing, and this rush will inspire you to take better photos to get more positive responses. It will also play a huge role in developing your sense of judgement, as you can see which of your photos do well and which get ignored. Even more importantly, when you're immersed in a community of photographers you'll see other photos that inspire you, as well as ones that could be better. You'll pick up on what works and what doesn't, and incorporate that into your future photos. Many photographers will also be happy to discuss their approach to taking a shot, letting you learn how to create results like theirs. If you enjoy a little competition, you'll appreciate that most sites keep track of how many likes or views your images have received, so you can push to beat your personal bests or even compete against other photographers. Some sites, like *viewbug.com*, *dpchallenge.com*, and *gurushots.com* are even specifically geared towards contests.

Sites worth checking out that are less about competition and more about sharing are *flickr.com*, *fredmiranda.com*, and *500px.com*.

Critiquing - Give and Receive

Building on the idea of sharing your work online, critiques are one of the best ways to improve your photography. Big image sharing sites have a variety of groups or sub forums where you can give and get critiques, and I'd also recommend checking out *slrlounge.com* and *fstoppers.com* for their critique sections (fstoppers is less geared at critiques than slrlounge, but still useful).

Receiving a critique is a straightforward process, and can give you some invaluable insights into how you can improve. Simply post your image, along with relevant information and your camera settings and mention that you want a critique - it also helps if you say what element of the image you're most curious about (like if lighting was an issue and you want tips for that) but asking for a general critique is okay too. Keep in mind that the responses you get will vary in tone. Some people like to keep things positive and frame suggestions within compliments. Other people will get straight to the point and say what's wrong with the image, and hopefully offer tips on how to fix it. Some people fail to offer suggestions and simply point out flaws, which is somewhat rude but still useful. Take the critiques you receive and think about how you can do better next time, and don't let the more direct comments bug you - you're still getting information

that you can use to polish your skills, so don't take it personally and thank everyone who comments.

Giving critiques can be even better for your growth. Being critiqued will often result in technical advice about camera settings and such, but by giving critiques you can also focus on the artistic side and really train yourself to think about colour, composition, and the meaning behind an image. This is better than just looking at images for two reasons.

1. It forces you to look at the photo in detail and think about things you might have ignored.

2. It forces you to put your thoughts into words. This leads to higher retention, and makes the process far more valuable for you.

When you give a critique your best bet is to be as positive as you can, pointing out the good parts of an image even as you offer suggestions on how it could be better. This isn't just because you want to be nice, it's also so that you continue to cement examples of good photography work in your mind. By giving excellent critiques, you train your mind to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a photo and how they could be resolved. This training will come in handy when you take your own pictures.

Editing - A Step Above Critiquing

Editing is a key part of the photography workflow, and you should be getting some experience with Photoshop and Lightroom, or another program, as you progress. However, the best way to develop your artistic eye is not through editing your own images, but by editing the photos other people have taken.

The internet has billions of images on it, taken by all skill levels of photographers. This is a phenomenal way for you to pit your eye for colour and contrast against others. When you're starting out, you'd see photos that look like they have odd colour balances or seem poorly edited. Save these photos and apply some simple edits to them. A curves adjustment layer is probably the best way to do this, it lets you adjust colour and contrast at the same time with a great deal of sophistication. It will be easy to improve upon some of these photos, and you'll gain an appreciation for good imagery that you can apply to your own work. It's also worth trying this on some excellent photos. Top-tier professionals and people whose work you love. Often you'll try to edit their photo and you find that no matter what you do you only make the image worse. This is fantastic - it means you've found someone who you can learn from. Study their work and seek to make photos to rival theirs.

Other Resources

You're almost set - just a few more things and you'll be ready to go out and turbocharge your learning. You've learned the IRPS process, and the details of how to make use of it. Now I'm going to discuss a few more resources that you can use to learn new photography techniques and improve your abilities.

YouTube

YouTube is an incredible platform with thousands of high quality photography tutorials, gear reviews, and industry news. It's so diverse that it's easy to get lost in hours of videos, which is why I recommend using it only after you've failed to find sufficient information on blogs, or have some spare time to kill. YouTube really shines when it comes to Photoshop tutorials, since you can see every single step as the video walks you through the edit. With articles, sometimes it tells you to use a tool which you can't seem to find anywhere, but in a video tutorial you're able to follow the mouse everywhere it goes and get a feel for the software's interface. YouTube's also great for gear reviews, though evaluating image quality is difficult due to the low resolution of video relative to stills. For photography techniques, YouTube is a little more hit and miss. Sometimes a video is the perfect way to learn, other times it's just a confusing mess

that could have been explained easier by a 400 word article rather than a 10 minute long video. All in all though, YouTube is definitely a site worth checking out when you want to learn something new.

Meetings and Conferences

Don't discount the old fashioned ways of physical meet ups! While there's vastly more information online, there's something to be said for the more interactive environment that you get with a conference or club. Body language is a big part of communication, and a one on one discussion with a skilled photographer could be worth more than dozens of online articles. Local clubs are a great way to find people to talk to, and often involve critiques, contests, and tutorials as well. Conferences can be expensive, but often have excellent guest speakers presenting on advanced topics - great if you have a bit more photography experience and are struggling to find new things to learn. A unique medium for photographer meet ups is the photo walk, where many photographers go to a location and take pictures around the area. It's a great way to talk to other photographers and compare photos, and they're often lead by talented experts who will share tips along the way.

Online Courses and eBooks

Naturally, I have to mention this since you're reading an eBook right now. There are a variety of free and premium offerings out there, and the information available is typically much more comprehensive than what you'll find on blogs. They'll give you pretty much everything you need to know about a subject, saving you tons of time which would have otherwise been spent hunting through obscure blogs and scouring forums. High quality education does tend to come at a price though, ranging from $10 for an eBook to several hundreds of dollars for a top-notch online course. As you're just starting out you're best to learn from free resources, but when you've mastered the basics and want to take your photography to the next level a good course might just be the best bet. Always make sure that you're buying from someone you trust though, so check out their blog and any free material they offer to see if you like their teaching style and find them reputable.

It's Up to You Now

This guide has shown you all the best ways to accelerate your journey towards becoming a talented photographer. Now, all that you need to do is apply these methods and start seeing results. Whether you're a fanatic willing to spend hours every day practicing, or a hobbyist with only a few

minutes to spare, I hope that you use this guide to find even more enjoyment from photography. That's really what photography is about, learning enough to take images that make you happy. Capturing memories of family, vacation moments, beautiful landscapes - whatever makes you smile. So go out, have fun, and enjoy the process.

To find more from me, visit *http://www.unlockcreativephotography.com*