



The Ultimate Guide to Landscape Photography

a  ultimate guide

by Anne McKinnell

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1

WHAT IS LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY?

Landscape photography is one of the most challenging and most rewarding hobbies a person can have. One of the things I like most about it is that there is always more to learn. It keeps our brains active! Between learning about what type of gear you need, how to use it, understanding light and composition, and learning to process your photos, you will quickly come to the realization that making a striking landscape photograph involves a number of essential ingredients.

The goal of this guide is to touch on each of these essential ingredients because you need to know a little about each one before you'll start making the quality of images you are after.

My journey in landscape photography began 25 years ago, and since then I've constantly thought about what makes a truly great landscape image. I hope that you will take what I have learned over the past 25 years and use it to jump start your own journey in photography and start making striking images you are proud of.



2

GEAR ESSENTIALS

I want to emphasize that gear is not the most important factor in landscape photography. The other chapters outlined in this guide are all more important when it comes to making striking images. However, you do need some gear, and it can be hard to make the right choices when you are just getting started. This chapter will help you understand the most important things to look for when buying your gear.

Your Camera

There are [three basic categories of digital cameras](#): point-and-shoot; digital single lens reflex (DSLR); and mirrorless.

Point and shoot cameras are the small digital cameras that most people start with. These cameras do not have interchangeable lenses, and they have tiny sensors that have limited image quality. Point-and-shoots are used for making snapshots.



If you are getting serious about your photography, you'll want a camera that has a bigger sensor for better image quality, manual functions, and one that accepts a variety of different lenses.

DSLRs are the most popular type of camera for landscape photography for a number of reasons. They allow you to shoot in RAW format for maximum data capture (more about that later). They have a variety of shooting modes including fully manual. DSLRs have large sensors and you can use a huge variety of lenses with them.

Mirrorless cameras are relatively new technology. They have all the same features as a DSLR, but they don't have the internal mechanism that includes the mirror, which is why the camera bodies are smaller and lighter. However, they are not cheaper! But if weight and size are important factors to you, you may want to check out a mirrorless system.

Sensor size

When it comes to image quality, the only thing you should concern yourself with is sensor size. Megapixels are not nearly as important as [sensor size](#).

The largest sensor is known as a Full frame because it is the same size as a 35mm film negative. You'll pay the highest price for a system with a full frame sensor, whether it is a DSLR or mirrorless system.

Sensor sizes smaller than full frame are known as Cropped (or Crop) Sensors. The largest cropped sensor is an APS size. You'll find a wide variety of cameras with these types of sensors at a more affordable price.

The next smaller size is the four-thirds sensor. There are actually quite a number of sensor sizes in between the three I have mentioned, but these are the most common. Sensors smaller than these three are what you find in point-and-shoots and mobile phone cameras.

Personally, I use a mirrorless camera with an APS sensor for my landscape photography because the weight of the kit makes a huge difference for me when carrying my gear on long hikes.

I recommend that when you are choosing a camera, you pick the sensor size you can afford,



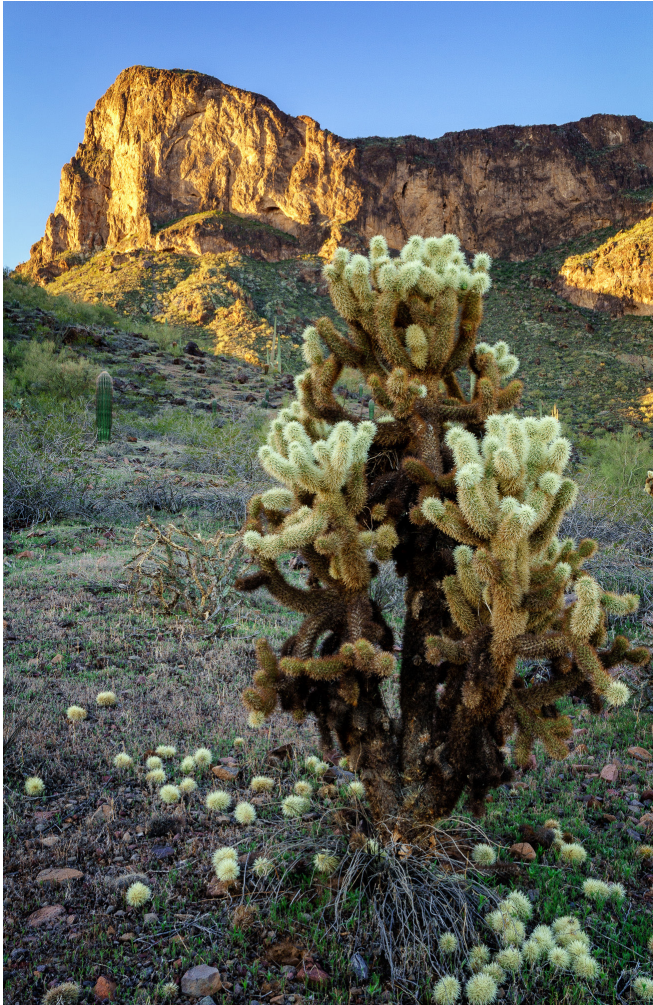
then choose the camera that feels good in your hands and has a menu system that makes sense to you. These days, all of the DSLR and mirrorless cameras available are capable of making great images so don't worry about whether Canon, Nikon, Sony or another brand is better. They are all good.

Lenses

Once you have your camera picked out, you'll want to pick a few quality lenses that give you good focal range from [wide-angle](#), which puts everything in your field of view into the frame, to telephoto, which will allow you to zoom in to something in the distance.

Lens choice is important because your photograph is influenced much more by your lens than by your camera. Sharpness, contrast, depth of focus, clarity, and detail are all determined almost exclusively by the glass (lens). It forms the image, while the camera simply captures it.

While it may seem absurd to spend more on a lens than on the camera itself, most photographers agree that they would always prefer to have a less expensive camera with a quality lens, rather than the other way around. And because lenses don't depreciate in price as



quickly, the investment is far more worthwhile.

Prime versus zoom lenses

Lenses come in two forms; prime and zoom. [A prime lens](#) has one fixed focal length, such as 35mm. A zoom lens has a focal range, such as 18-55mm. Prime lenses are often slightly sharper than [zoom lenses](#). However, zoom lenses are much more versatile and allow you to carry fewer lenses in your bag.

I recommend that you start out with three zoom lenses that cover a focal range from 10mm to 200mm for maximum versatility. These are the three that I use for my landscape photography:

- Wide Angle Zoom 10-18mm
- Regular Zoom 18-55mm
- Telephoto 55-210mm



Tripod

For landscape photography, [a tripod is an essential piece of gear](#). When you have lots of light, you might get away with hand holding your camera. But if you want to make images in low light situations such as sunrise or twilight, you'll need a tripod so that you can use longer shutter speeds.

This is the purchase where everyone seems to make the same mistake. Buy cheap, buy twice. Most landscape techniques require long shutter speeds – sometimes very long. A bargain bin tripod is not strong enough to hold your camera steady with a telephoto lens on it. It's not strong enough if there is any wind. It's a waste of money. On the other hand if you purchase a sturdy, well-built tripod from a reputable brand it can last you a lifetime.

Make sure you check the [load capacity of your tripod](#) and ensure it can handle your camera with its longest (heaviest) lens attached. Expect to spend as much money on your tripod as you did on your camera.

Filters

Many landscape photographers also carry [filters, which can help you enhance your images](#). The two most commonly used are a Polarizing Filter and a Neutral Density (ND) filter. Graduated ND filters can be helpful as well, but become tricky to use if you do not have a clean, straight horizon.

- **Circular polarizing filter** – This is an essential piece of equipment when photographing water to allow you to remove reflections and glare from the water's surface and allow you to see through the water to any interesting rocks underneath. It can also help enhance the richness of a clear blue sky, or remove reflections from windows and other shiny surfaces in urban settings.
- **Neutral density (ND) filter** – If you decide to shoot a long exposure and it happens to be the middle of the day when there is a lot of light, you will need this gray-tinted piece of glass placed in front of your lens. It blocks some of the light from hitting your sensor, allowing you to use a slower shutter speed. These are sold in varying strengths, and can be stacked for different levels of light absorption.

Make sure to get the right filter size for your lenses. Better yet buy one for your biggest lens (look inside your lens cap for the filter size) and step down rings to your smaller ones.



3

RECOMMENDED CAMERA SETTINGS

Shooting in RAW

Most people are used to shooting pictures that come out as JPG (jay-peg) files since this is the default setting on most cameras. JPG is a compressed format meaning that some of the data the camera captures is discarded to make a smaller file size. Raw format, on the other hand, is completely uncompressed with no information thrown away.

What results from this is a digital negative – a large file that can only be accessed through Adobe Camera Raw, Lightroom, Photoshop and other compatible image editing software products. We'll talk more about processing your photos later, but [start off by capturing a RAW file](#) so you have more information to work with when you process your photos.

Shooting Mode

Your camera will likely have a mode dial on the top where you can [choose your shooting mode](#) from one of the following; auto; aperture priority; shutter priority; program; or manual. For landscape photography, I highly recommend shooting in aperture priority mode, likely marked on your camera's mode dial as "A" or "Av".



The reason for using aperture priority is because [aperture controls the depth of field](#) in your image - the amount of the scene (in your image) that will be in focus. Generally, for grand landscapes, you will want everything from the foreground to the background sharp, so you'll pick an aperture like f/11 or f/18. But sometimes, you might want only your subject to be sharp and everything else to be blurred and out of focus. For this, you might pick f/4 or f/5.6.

More information about how aperture affects depth of field is coming up in the chapter on exposure below.

Using aperture priority shooting mode allows you to make this choice based on your artistic vision and the camera will choose the corresponding shutter speed to give you a good exposure.

Metering Mode

Evaluative or Average metering is the most common [metering mode](#) to use in landscape photography because the camera reads the light information from the entire frame. This is your best bet most of the time when the highlights and shadows are spread relatively evenly throughout the scene.



However, if there are very dark blacks or very bright whites, this can throw your camera's meter off. In this case, you might want to switch to Spot Metering. Using Spot Metering, your camera will take its reading based on one single spot in the frame, which you choose. Choose the most important part of the image, likely the main subject, and let the rest of the scene fall where it may.

***Note:** Just a word of caution. Make sure you are familiar with how your camera meter works and how to do Spot Metering before you attempt this. Remember, your camera meter will always try to measure for medium or 18% gray. Therefore, if you meter off something that is black or really light in tone, your camera will compensate and try and make it gray. So you will need to adjust accordingly by using Exposure Compensation.*



Focus Mode

Your camera likely has at least [four focus modes](#), they are; single shot autofocus; automatic autofocus; continuous autofocus; and full manual focus. If you have good eyes and focusing comes easy to you, use manual focus. For the rest of us, one of the autofocus modes is better.

For landscape photography, single shot autofocus is the best option because it will focus the camera once (and lock on) when the shutter button is pressed halfway down. The other focus modes are good when you have something moving in the frame that you want to lock on to, as you would with wildlife photography.



4

LOCATION SCOUTING

Now that you have your equipment sorted out, you're ready to do some shooting! But how do you find those specific spots where you can make images with impact?

The first step is to research the location to get a good overview of the place and see what kinds of scenes are on the menu. These days, my favorite tool for doing this type of research is Pinterest. Keyword searches on Pinterest will bring up loads of photos of any given location. You can create a Pinterest board, which is like a virtual scrapbook, where you can collect these images in one place for future reference.

The next step is to map out the specific locations you have chosen so you know how to get there on the ground. You can look on Google Maps or pick up a hard copy map at a visitor center.

Next, visit the location in person and have a walk around looking for good compositions. I like to do this during midday when I'm not likely to be photographing due to the bright, harsh, light. Finding your spot during the day means you will know exactly where to go and you'll be ready during the limited hours on the edges of the day when the light is just right.





Helpful apps

Speaking of good light, the final tool you can use in your location scouting is something that will tell you sunrise and sunset times, when moonrise and moonset occur, and the direction that those things will take place. This will help you immensely when thinking about the direction the light will be coming from on the edges of the day.

My favorite tool for this part of my research is an app called [The Photographer's Ephemeris](#). You can use it on your desktop or mobile device. It will tell you exactly what is happening in the celestial sky at a particular time. So if you want to get a photo of the full moon rising behind a bridge, you can find out when the full moon is, exactly when it will rise, its position in the sky and then it will calculate where you have to be to get the point of view you want.



5

MAKING THE MOST OF NATURAL LIGHT

Understanding natural light is a critical aspect of landscape photography. Even when you've done everything else right, if the light isn't right for your scene, your photos are not going to look their best. That is not to say there is such a thing as "good light" and "bad light". You just have to know what to do with various types of lighting situations.

Remember, you can change the [direction of light](#) simply by moving around your subject. Or, you can photograph subjects that are in the shade.

Sidelight

Sidelighting occurs when light hits your subject on one side casting a shadow on the other. It is often thought to be the most pleasing type of light for landscape photography because the contrast between light and dark emphasizes texture and shape.

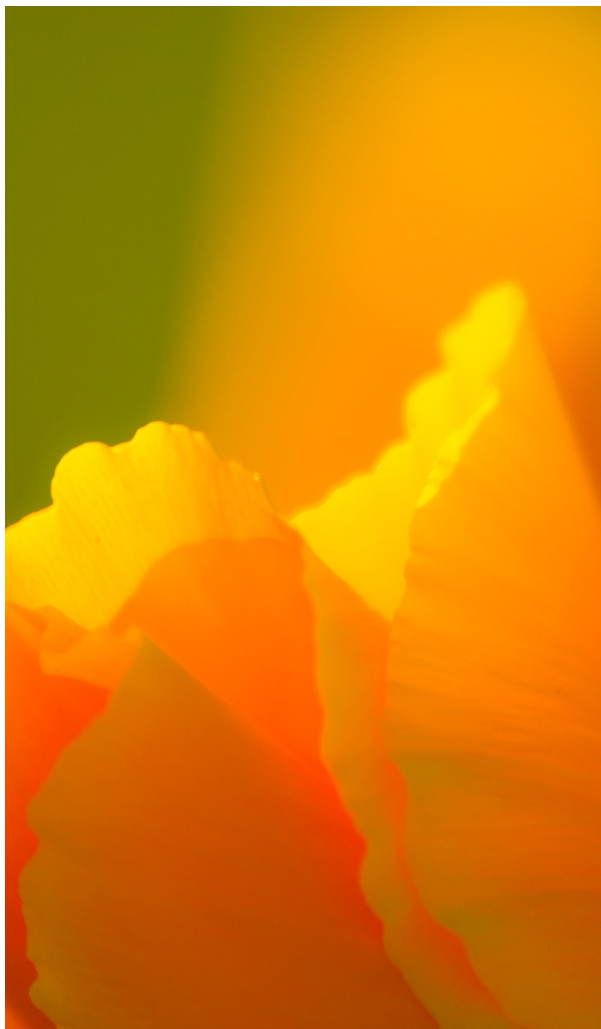
If you have a round object with light hitting it on the side, it will have a shadow on the other, and the gradation of light will emphasize the round shape. Similarly, subjects with textures will have shadows that serve to emphasize the texture. Without the shadows, the texture will be more difficult to convey in an image.



IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE PALOUSE REGION IN WASHINGTON, SIDELIGHT EMPHASIZES THE CURVES IN THE HILLSIDE.

Backlight

Backlight occurs when the light source is directly in front of you, hitting your subject from behind. It is a bit more difficult to create a good exposure in these kinds of high contrast situations, though.



Backlighting is wonderful when your subject is somewhat transparent, like the petals of a flower for instance, because it will make your subject appear to have an inner glow. This is especially effective when you have a dark background. In this situation, make sure you meter on your subject and allow the rest of the image to fall into shadow.

Backlighting is also useful when you have a subject with a great shape that you can make into a silhouette. To do this, meter on the sky portion of your frame so the sky will have a proper exposure and your subject will go completely black.

When you have backlight and you want to meter on a specific portion of the frame, this is a good time to use spot metering instead of evaluative metering mode. It's a little bit more difficult but well worth the effort for the dramatic images you can create using this method.

Front light

Front light occurs when the sun is behind you hitting your subject directly in front of you. This is my least favorite type of light because it is often intense and unforgiving causing a scene with a lack of texture and depth.

However, used at the right time it can be the best kind of light! When the sun is low in the sky, such as [at sunrise and sunset](#), the light is not so harsh and it can cast a golden glow on your

subject, especially when your subject is tall such as a mountain or a cityscape. The golden light will fall on the tallest part of the scene, casting its golden glow, while the rest of the scene remains in shadow creating a dramatic shot.



Diffused Light

Diffused light happens on an overcast day or when your subject is in the shade. Under this type of light, your subject will have soft pastel colors and soft or no shadows. You will not get the same sense of shape and texture that you would under different types of lighting situations. As well, your scene will have very low contrast.

However, this is the best type of light for creating soft, gentle images. For example, flowers and colorful scenes work especially well under diffused light.



But remember, when you have a bright overcast sky, it is best to exclude it from the frame and get in closer to your subject.

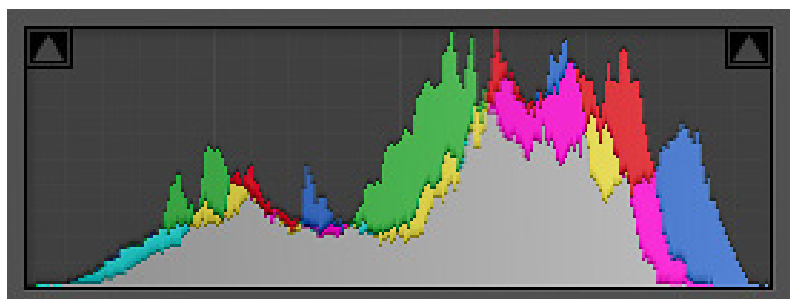


6

GETTING A GOOD EXPOSURE

Getting a good exposure means using a balanced aperture, shutter speed, and ISO so that you don't have any areas of the frame that are too bright (known as blown out highlights). The problem is that if you have blown out highlights, there is nothing you can do in post processing to fix it. It will forever be a white spot. You may also want to make sure that you don't have any areas that are too dark unless solid blacks are what you are after as in the example of creating a silhouette.

When you make an image, you can see the areas of light and dark [using your camera's histogram](#). Using a histogram is easy! It is simply a graph with the darks on the left and the brights or white on the right.

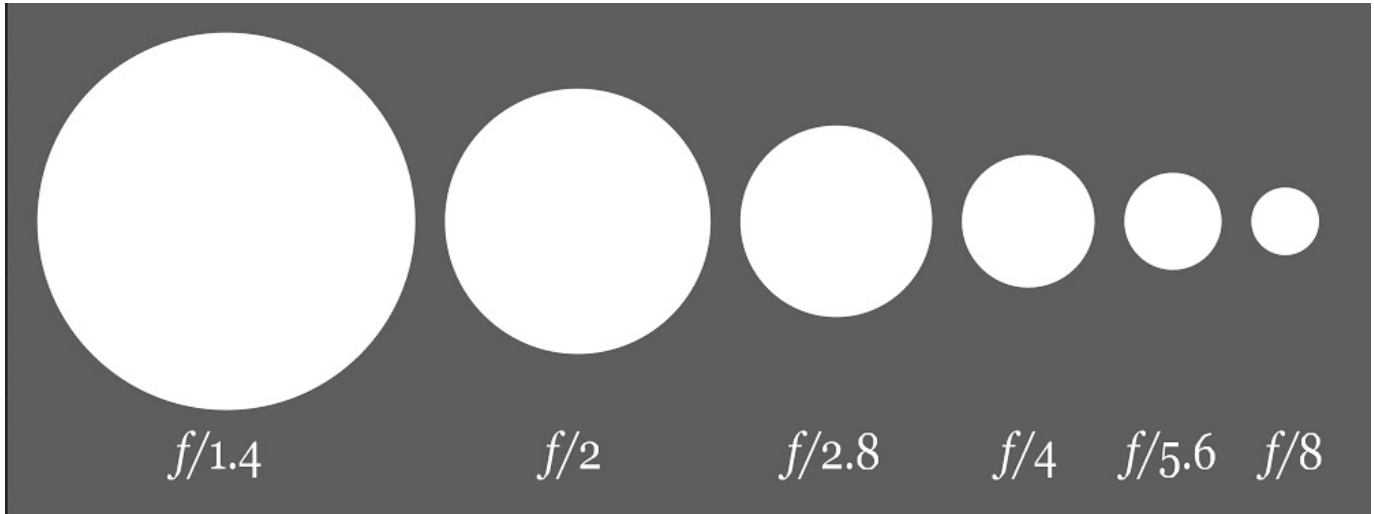


All you really need to do is make sure there is not a spike on the right edge of the graph. If it spikes before the edge, that's okay. You only need to be concerned if the spike touches the right edge. If your image is too bright, you can use your camera's exposure compensation to reduce the brightness.

So, how do you get the right exposure balance? For landscape photography, we are usually most interested in aperture because it affects the depth of field of the photo, so let's start with selecting the correct aperture for the scene.

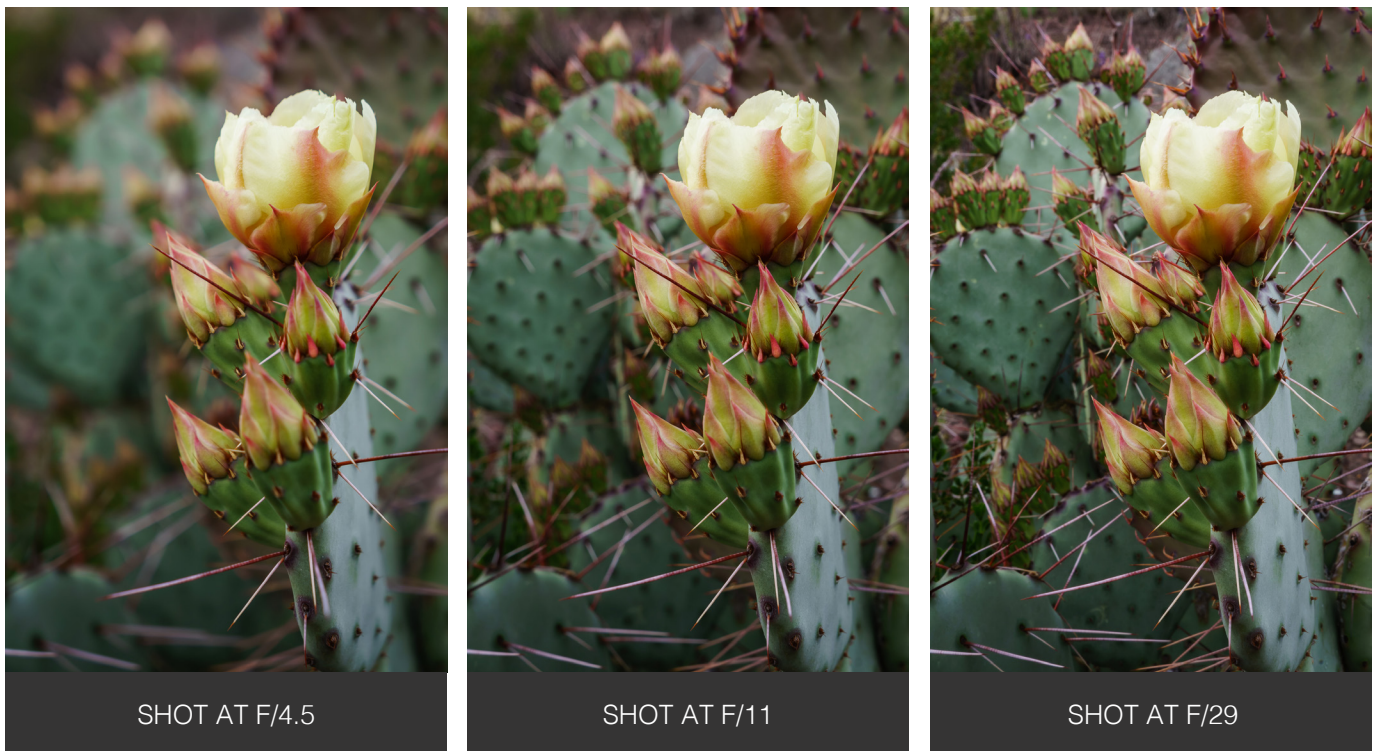
[Aperture is the variable opening](#) in your lens through which light travels to your camera's sensor and its size is expressed in f-stops.

The smaller the f-stop number, the larger the opening. That's kind of confusing isn't it? It's because the f-stop number is actually a ratio. But I don't want to get into too much mathematics here, just remember it's like a fraction and $1/2$ is bigger than $1/8$ so $f/2$ is bigger than $f/8$.



The larger the opening the more shallow the depth of field. In other words, the amount of your scene that will be sharp, measuring from the object you focused on, is smaller.

These three images illustrate the effect of aperture on depth of field.



Once you have the aperture selected, the other two factors in exposure are ISO and shutter speed. ISO is the sensitivity of your sensor to light. A low ISO is good when you have lots of light. [A high ISO](#) might be necessary if you are shooting hand-held in low light situations.

However, increasing the ISO causes noise in your image, so for landscape photography, we usually use the lowest ISO and if we need more light we reduce the shutter speed and use a tripod.

When you are in the field, set your ISO to 100. This is usually the lowest setting on most cameras. Then set your camera to aperture priority shooting mode and set the aperture you want for the depth of field you desire in the image. Then, the camera will calculate the appropriate shutter speed to create a balanced exposure. Remember to keep your eye on what that shutter is, because if it is any slower than about 1/100th of a second, you'll need to use your tripod.



7

COMPOSITION TIPS

When you are just getting started in landscape photography, it can be hard to know what to include in the frame to make a compelling composition. In this chapter, I'll show a few different types of compositions to help get you started so you know what to look for in the field.

Of course, there are [many more composition options](#) than these to explore, and some that you'll discover on your own through experimentation. But this will give you a starting place on which to base your own vision in photography.

Rule of Thirds

The rule of thirds is probably the most well-known “rule” in photography. I like to think of it as more of a guideline. As you grow in your photography, you'll probably start to break these rules and come up with your own unique ways of composing images. But you have to understand the rule before you can break it.



Using the rule of thirds, the frame is divided into three vertical and three horizontal sections, like a tic-tac-toe game. The idea is that your main subject should fall on one of the lines in order to

create a dynamic and interesting composition. Locating your subject on the intersection of two lines is ideal.

A centered horizon gives equal importance (visual weight) to both the sky and land portions of your image, and the viewer is left with no direction where to look. For example, by placing the horizon along the bottom third line, you will give more visual weight to the sky area and direct the viewer's eye to that area. A higher horizon placement will have the viewer's eye going to the bottom of the image where there is more emphasis.

Symmetry

Symmetry is the exact opposite of the rule of thirds. A symmetrical composition has the center of the subject exactly in the middle of the frame with equal weight on either side. The two sides of the image are often a mirror image of each other. This works especially well with subjects that are naturally symmetrical like plants or architecture.

Another way to use symmetry is to put a shoreline in the center of the frame, especially when you have a reflection to balance out the image.



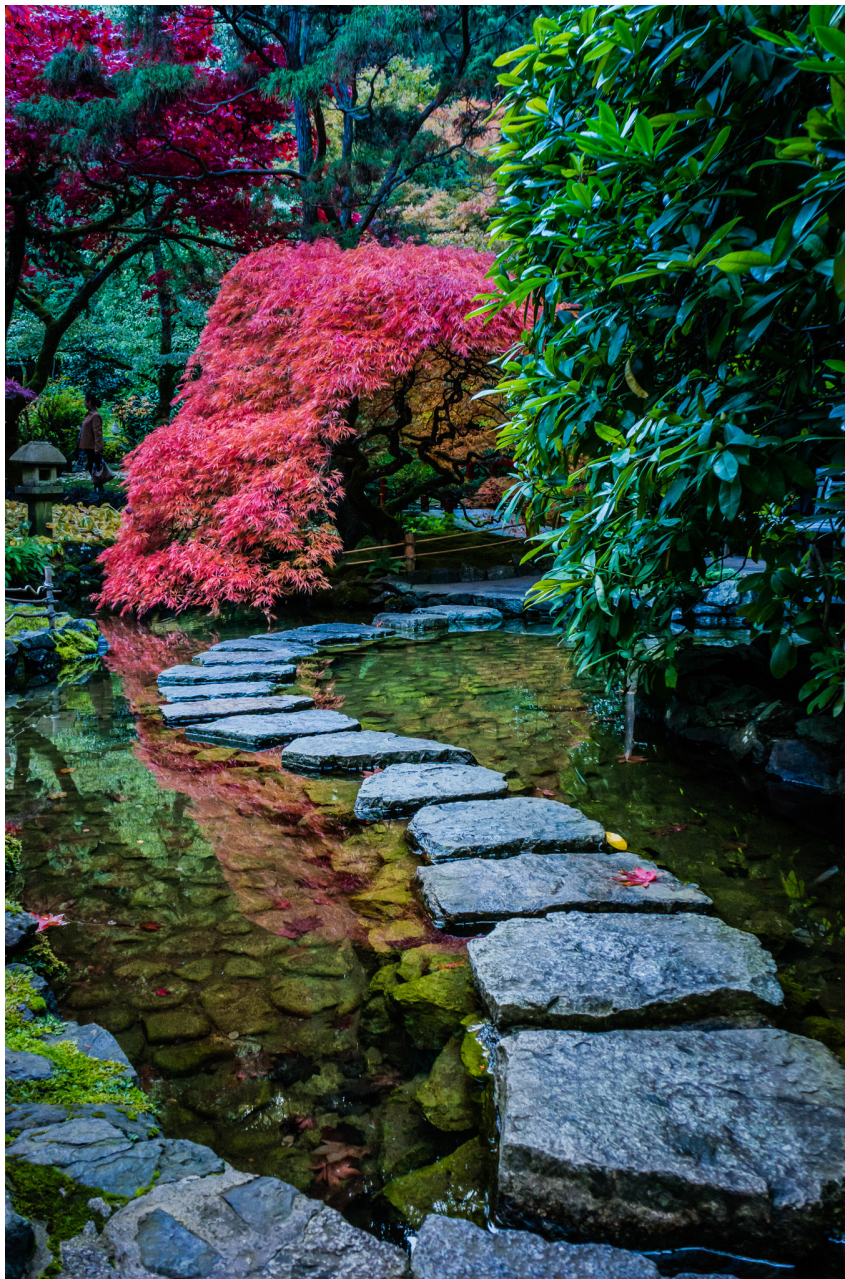
Leading Lines

Another effective type of composition [uses leading lines](#) to draw the viewer's eye to the main subject. The lines can be man-made such as roads, fences, or bridges, or they can be natural

elements such as rivers, shorelines or rocks.

Usually, the lines start from the bottom of the frame and move upward and inward to draw the eye into the image, connecting the foreground and background, and often leading to the main subject.

In the field, when you find a subject you want to work with, take a look around and see what lines you can use in your composition that would lead up to the subject creating depth and perspective in your image.





8

PROCESSING YOUR PHOTOS

Processing your photos is an important part of digital photography. In the old film days, the lab technicians who processed the negatives and printed made a lot of decisions about color and contrast that affected the final outcome. These days, that job has become yours. If you find that your photos look gray and dull, it's probably because you haven't processed them.

When you shoot in RAW format, as mentioned earlier, you have collected the highest amount of data you can which will help you when it comes to processing. You'll need to use Adobe Camera Raw, either on its own or within Lightroom, Photoshop or other Raw compatible software.

I recommend that you [go with Lightroom](#). Not only does Lightroom include Adobe Camera Raw for processing your photos, but it also provides an excellent way to keep your photos organized and accessible. I do all of my basic processing in Lightroom and only use Photoshop if I want to do something unusual with my image.

***Note:** check out the dPS course [Lightroom Mastery here](#).*

Using the sliders in Adobe Camera Raw, you can make subtle adjustments that will have a huge impact on the end product. For most of my images, I make adjustments to the following settings:

- White Balance
- Contrast
- Vibrance and Saturation
- Sharpening
- Noise Reduction
- Cropping

A little processing can go a long way. With solid ingredients like good composition and effective use of light, a little processing can turn a good image into a great one.



9

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

If you want to take your landscape photography to the next level, beyond just snapshots and postcard-like images here are a few places to start, and links to articles on this topic in more depth.

Add a Foreground Element

One of the biggest hurdles in photography is the fact that our majestic three-dimensional scene is rendered into a mere two-dimensional image, and the physical depth that we experience in real life is lost. To resurrect this spacious feeling, we can create the illusion of depth where there is none, by using strong elements in the foreground.

Read more about how to add a foreground element to your images here:

[How to Use Foreground to Create Depth in Your Images.](#)



Use Shadows to add Depth to Your Images

In music, they say the spaces between the notes are just as important as the notes themselves. Similarly, in photography, it is the spaces that are not in the light that can add impact to an image. Shadows help tell a story and enhance the mood and visual power of a photograph. In fact, they can be so interesting, that they “overshadow” the subject itself!

By focusing your attention on the shadows, you can create beautiful compositions full of contrast, form, and minimalist simplicity. An object and its shadow will strengthen each other. Sometimes you might even want to cut the object out entirely, and play with capturing only the interesting shadows that are cast by it.

Read more about how to use shadows in your images here:

[Add Impact to Your Photos by Including Shadows.](#)



10

SUMMARY

Landscape photography can be a fun and rewarding endeavor. Use these tips as a starting point for your journey and continue exploring this wonderful world and all it has to offer and share your images with others to enjoy as well.

Remember, photography is a journey, so continue to learn and grow as a photographer. Look back on your work from a year ago and see how far you've come. Then think about what you can learn and master next. Have fun, and enjoy the ride.

About the Author



Anne McKinnell is a photographer, writer, and nomad. She lives in an RV and travels around North America photographing beautiful places and writing about travel, photography, and how changing your life is not as scary as it seems.

You can read about her adventures on [her blog](#) and be sure to check out her [free photography eBooks](#). You can receive the free eBooks as well as other free resources by [signing up for her newsletter](#).

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