



## THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK TWENTY.

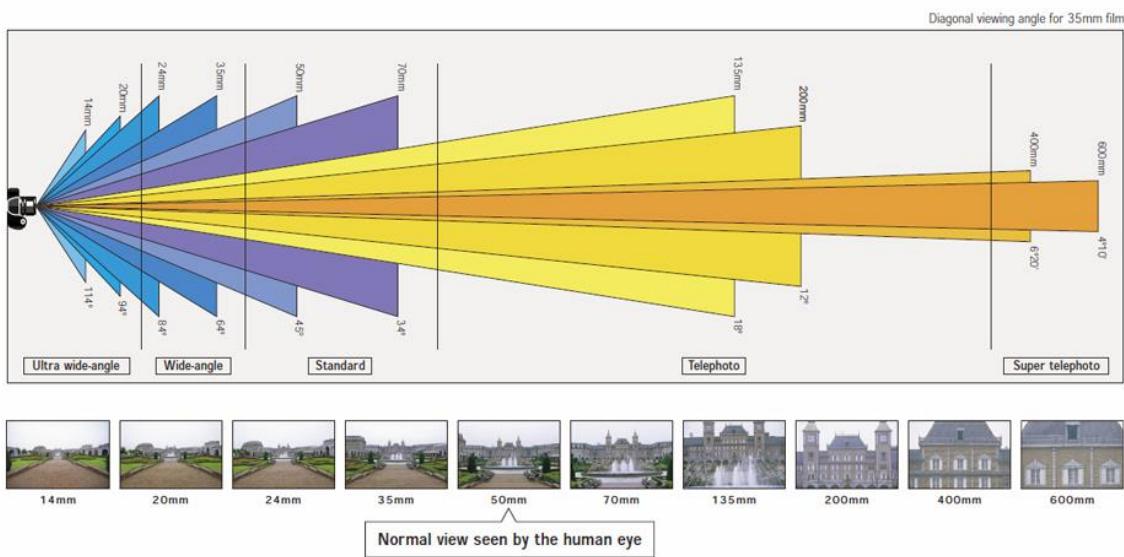
### Master Your Optics

If there is one question that I hope I can convince you to retire and never to ask of another photographer again, it is this: which lens should I use? It's a great question, but one we're better off asking ourselves, not others. I think I know why the question is asked and it has something to do with the way we talk about lenses. "This is a great landscape lens!" he says. "This year's best portrait lenses!" the magazine cover boasts. "That's not a great street photography lens," she tells another photographer. It's such a bunch of bologna, which is unfair because Bologna is a great town, but like the luncheon meat, the idea that a lens (or specifically one focal length or another) is specific to a genre is best avoided. Lenses should be chosen on the basis of their behaviour, but it's no wonder we don't. We keep getting told there's a right lens for this and a wrong lens for that.

Every focal length behaves differently, and that's what we're talking about here, not whether one lens focuses faster than another, has "great bokeh" or is sharp from corner to corner (a criterion I've

not considered once in my 30+ years behind the camera). Those behaviours are a result of the way they magnify (or don't, in the case of wide-angle lenses) or the angle of view. Longer lenses have a tighter angle of view and they have a compressing effect on the background and foreground. Wider lenses are much more inclusive, separate elements more than compressing them, and tend to exaggerate the effects of perspective. Each lens feels differently.

*The chart below from Panasonic shows the different angles of view for lenses from 14mm to 600mm, followed by corresponding images representing the magnification. This is helpful as a starting point, but photographers have to get a much better sense of the behaviour of different focal lengths on the look and feel of the image.*





*A focal length of 150mm allowed me to step back and isolate this scene while also pushing the two characters—a laughing child and her mother—closer together. A wide-angle lens just wouldn't give you a look and feel like this, no matter how close you got.*

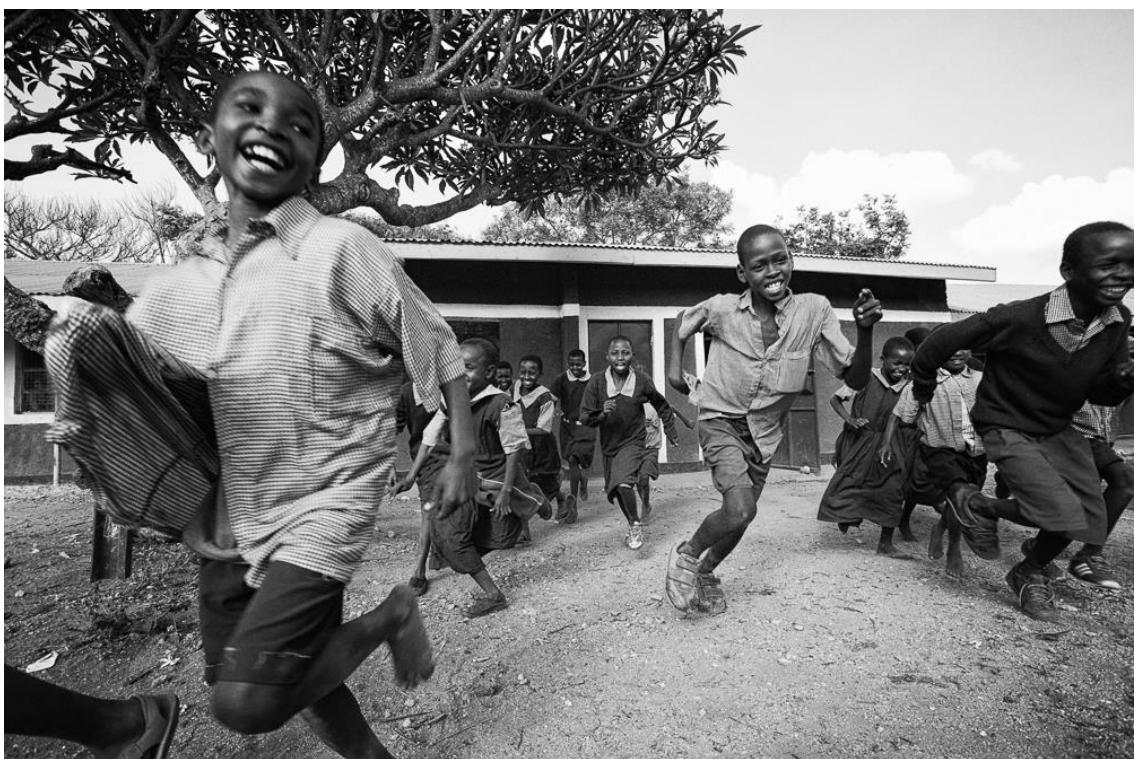
No photographer needs to know which lenses are “best” for portraiture or landscape photographs because that’s the least possible creative way of thinking. The better question is, “What do you want the photograph to look like, and to feel like?” Remember [Platon](#)? I introduced you to him in the Study the Masters section of Week Seven. Most of his portraits are [shot with a wider lens](#). Does he do this because he has really wide subjects? No. He does it because the wide lens exaggerates features, and allows him to get closer. I’ve made portraits with focal lengths from 16mm to 300mm. Similarly, I’ve made landscape photographs with the same range of focal lengths. Sometimes you want vast and expansive, with a strong foreground element well separated from the background. Sometimes you want to really let the lines play out with energy and strength. Wider lenses do that well. And sometimes you want to pull it all together, push a subject against a more distant object, or just keep extraneous elements out. Long lenses do those things well, regardless of the subject. Wildlife lens? Nonsense. No such thing. If I had my way, I’d photograph bears with a 16mm lens because I like the feeling of intimacy that necessarily comes when you’re that close. But I also bring longer lenses. When on safari in Kenya, I use every focal length from 24 to 1200mm.



*These two images share a similar theme and both make use of a slow shutter speed, but the way they treat space is very different. The top image was made quite close with a focal length of 28mm, while the bottom image uses a focal length of 85mm to further compress the image and compliment the much flatter perspective.*

See where I'm going with this? To let others tell you which is the best focal length for a subject is to abdicate the responsibility and opportunity to make your own decisions. No painter knowing he was going to paint a cityscape would ask his friend what colour or brush to use for the task. The questions come back over and over again: how do you want the image to feel? What do you want to accomplish with it? And if you don't know, then you better have a couple lenses available to experiment with and find out. This is one reason I love zoom lenses. I can carry two lenses and get exactly the look I want from any one of a number of possible focal lengths. Some will suggest you ought to zoom with your feet, which is also nonsense because walking alone will not replicate the look of a particular focal length. I also love prime lenses; after so many years I'm beginning to get into a groove and I know what focal lengths I like, but they're very limiting if what you want to do is try them all and see what feels best to you for a scene.

And that's my final point: this is about taste. I could travel the world with only a 16-35mm zoom lens. I love the wider focal lengths. It has become a way of photographing that represents well how I immerse myself into an experience. Some will find a comfortable place on the other end of the spectrum and never use anything wider than 50mm and their work will be uniquely their own. And yes, some will have their own preference for portraits, or their own favourite landscape lens. But we can only discover that for ourselves, and be willing to change as our tastes do.





*Two more images, very typical of the kind of feeling of immersion or inclusion within a scene that I want to create with my photographs, both made at 17mm. Nothing you do with a longer focal length will take advantage of the laws of perspective (specifically, foreshortening) this way.*

### Creative Exercise

I have a couple thoughts about this week's Creative Exercise. First, sit down in front of Lightroom or a collection of your own favourite images and see if you can guess the focal length used. Was it a 16mm or a 50mm? What makes you think so? Get good at knowing how each focal length behaves in terms of what kind of look and feel they give to a photograph and you'll be better able to anticipate which lens you might use from one experience to another. To begin, maybe just see if you can group the images into wide, standard, and telephoto. Once you're good at that, see if you can get within 10mm of the focal length used. Second, look at your work from the last year and see which lens you used the most. Why is that? What is it about the look that lens creates for you that you love so much? You might find that while you made way more images with one lens, it's the images made with another lens that you prefer, though fewer in number. It might be time to start using that lens more.





### Study the Masters

Robert Doisneau (1912–1994) is one of my favourite photographers, perhaps because like his contemporary Cartier-Bresson, he was one of my first. His work is characterized by a playful spontaneity, the kind of life and spark I want in my own work. The playfulness and humour in some of his work hints at what Elliott Erwitt would eventually give us so well and unrestrained. His quote, "I don't photograph life as it is, but life as I would like it to be," is an ideal that has guided my own work and thinking. There's a romanticism to the idea of people like Doisneau, walking the streets of Paris with his Leica in his hand, which may be why my work has often been much closer to this than to commercial photography. Take some time to look at Doisneau's work [in this video by Ted Forbes on The Art of Photography](#), and [here to what seems to be the single best online archive of Doisneau's work](#).

I love this quote by Doisneau: "The marvels of daily life are so exciting; no movie director can

arrange the unexpected that you find in the street." It is particularly ironic since the photograph above, *Le baiser de l'hôtel de ville*, was posed.

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### **Further Study**

- [Robert Doisneau](#) is my favourite book of photographs from Doisneau. At some point, I will also get the now out-of-print [Robert Doisneau, A Photographer's Life](#) (only used copies are available).

### **Final Comments**

Don't forget you can access all [the Vision Collective Archives here](#), and if you're looking for me, you can find me on [my blog](#), on [Facebook](#), and on [Instagram](#).

For the love of the photograph,  
David duChemin