

Booklet #16: The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs

TIPS FOR BETTER PHOTOGRAPHY

by

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PREFACE

The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs (NVACC) is an informal organization started in 1997 by Joseph Miller with the assistance of Dave Carter* and Ed Funk. Our purpose is to promote communication and cooperation among camera clubs. We accomplish this by (a) publishing a monthly calendar of the member clubs' activities; (b) conducting training seminars for photographic judges; (c) maintaining a registry of trained judges who serve the clubs' monthly competitions and critiques; and (d) maintaining a directory of speakers who have been recommended by the various clubs. You can learn more about NVACC by going to our web site at www.NVACC.org.

This booklet is one of a series that was developed by NVACC during the period 1998-2008 to capture the considerable expertise of the many accomplished photographers in Northern Virginia and share it with others. Over recent years, we have seen significant change in the photographic art form and very rapid technical advance in both the media of photography (film and digital) and the tools (cameras, lenses, computers, and software). For that reason, the detail of some of these booklets may seem "dated", although the ideas and techniques presented transcend "progress" and the digital-film divide. Watch the NVACC web for new booklets as well as revisions that incorporate new technology and ideas into the existing ones.

Originally, our booklets were made available through member clubs for a small fee that covered the cost of reproduction. Now, however, the booklets are available on www.NVACC.com where individuals may download one machine-readable copy and one print copy per page for personal, noncommercial use only. Written permission from NVACC is required for any other use.

If you would like to know more about NVACC or have questions or suggestions concerning our booklets or services, please feel free to contact us at JoeMiller@NVACC.org.

* Dave Carter, the creator of this booklet and a founding father of NVACC has passed but his photographic skill and artistic vision live on in the technique of all photographers who were fortunate enough to work with him.



Tips for Better Photography

The purpose of this booklet is to help you, the photographer, improve the images you make. Over the years we have seen a number of photographers improve themselves substantially. In thinking about their development (and our own) we have listed some ideas which we hope will help you enhance your skill as a photographer. This booklet represents our personal views. No doubt you will not share all our views, but we hope they will be useful.

Each of us has used 35mm cameras for more than 45 years. We have been active in camera clubs, taught photography, given programs and workshops, judged competitions and written about a variety of photographic subjects. As teachers, we are pleased to share our experiences with you.

This booklet primarily is directed to 35mm photography, although a considerable number of our comments pertain to all formats. We believe some of our suggestions will be helpful to photographers at all skill levels.

Attitude

The right attitude is vital in becoming a better photographer. If you are content to take only good record shots, you will not become a creative photographer. Creative photography requires the belief that you can do it, and a mind open to the infinite number of possibilities. As Henry Ford said: "If you believe you can or if you believe you can't, you are right."

A good attitude nurtures motivation and desire. It is important to realize that photography is a life-long pursuit that is never fully mastered. Once you believe you have mastered photography you will stop learning.

Develop Photographic Goals

In order to become a better photographer you must develop specific goals that will lead to improving your knowledge. What is the skill level you are seeking? How good do you want to be? Are you prepared to pay the price in terms of money, time, and commitment?

What is your goal in taking the picture? For a scrapbook? For competition? To show friends and relatives? All too often photographers are content to produce shots merely to record the scene without interpretation. These are not the most creative photographers.

One of our goals when we take pictures is to produce images that can be used for classroom presentations. Another one of our goals is artistic expression. We feel

photography is a deeply personal endeavor. The development of a personal style is all important, and we recommend you photograph to please yourself and not others.

Slow Down

It takes time to make a thoughtful image. A number of decisions must be made in the creation of a good image. Slow down!

Unfortunately, technological advancements in modern equipment tempt us to photograph faster. Think carefully about the image you are making. In spite of modern technology and all its advances, the best pictures are really taken several inches behind the camera — in your mind. In many ways, this booklet is about the thought processes which go into a fine picture. *The fastest way to become a better photographer is to slow down.*

Learning How to Become a Better Photographer

Learning comes from many sources and the dedicated photographer will utilize all of them. Camera clubs can provide learning opportunities. A well organized club can offer speakers on a variety of subjects. Competitions show the work of club members. A good judge will provide helpful comments. Learn who the good judges are. However, be aware that a mediocre judge, of which there are many, may offer confusing and misleading comments. If well run, field trips and workshops also can offer learning opportunities.

The best learning opportunities are not so obvious. We cannot stress enough the importance of surrounding yourself with the best and most creative photographers you can find. Develop a corps of friends who will spend time with you in the pursuit of photography. Have them critique your work and learn to critique their work. It is essential that you develop the capacity to verbalize why an image works or fails to work.

We wish to emphasize the importance of self-discipline. Try to shoot regularly, at least once a week. When shooting, be patient, slow down, and work your subject. Think about what the obvious approaches are, then consider alternatives. The best photographers may spend hours on a single subject.

Consistently give yourself challenging assignments. Imagine producing 15 excellent images on any one of the following topics:

A bridge	A car	A high school	A pet
A cemetery	A spouse	A baby	A shopping center
Rush hour	A teenager	A university	Work

Lunch hour	Play	Reflections	Fabric
Textures	Fruits	Good	Evil
Vegetables	Deserts	Pretty	Ugly
Tension	A newspaper	Relaxation	Weekends
A church	Government	Good taste	Bad taste
A park	Dreaminess	Water	Motion
Your house	Wind	Darkness	Happiness

Go no further than 25 miles from your house. As Freeman Patterson is fond of saying, "If you can't see what is around you at home, what will you see when you get to Tangiers?"

Learn to appreciate the styles of different photographers so you can learn from them. Find role models for yourself. Arrange to get together with them to discuss and critique your work. You will be surprised how many photographers are willing to help you. Eventually, you must be the ultimate judge of your photography.

Reading is an excellent way to learn. Read books, not magazine articles. You want to discover another photographer's perspective on what makes the ideal image. Books give an author more space to get ideas across. We have included a recommended bibliography of books which are especially helpful. Read about artistic photography, not just the technical aspects.

Learn to become self critical. What level of excellence do you really seek? Are you prepared to pay the price in terms of time and effort. Unfortunately, photography is not a cheap activity. Good equipment is expensive and film can be a considerable investment. In our view, when one considers the many pleasures that accrue from photography, the costs are clearly justified.

Visual Design (Composition)

We prefer the term visual design rather than composition because to us visual design suggests a more active and involved role by the photographer. The approach described below was taught to us by Freeman Patterson. This method emphasizes design-based pictures rather than subject-based pictures. The building blocks of visual design are lines, shapes, texture, and perspective. Shapes include squares, triangles and circles and derivatives of these such as rectangles and ovals.

Lines. Lines take on various meanings depending upon their direction. Vertical lines suggest strength. Horizontal lines suggest stability and tranquility. Oblique lines suggest

action and movement, either real or implied. Curved lines slow the eye down so that we see detail along these lines. We often use leading lines, that is, lines that lead the viewer to a point in the picture. Make sure no line leads the eye where you don't want the eye to go. It is important to make sure that the lines in your picture are consistent with the message or feeling you wish to convey.

Shapes. Shapes also have specific functions. Rectangles and squares suggest stability. Triangles point the eye either toward or away from the subject or other important parts of the picture. It is important that you do not point the viewer's eye where you do not wish the eye to go.

Triangles. Consider a still life of a bowl of fruit with a triangular patch of light on the table. If the triangular patch of light points to the bowl of fruit, it takes on the same importance as a leading line, in fact, it may be even more powerful. If, however, the triangular patch of light points away from the subject, it leads the eye away, possibly even out of the picture. Then you may wish to use the edge of the frame to cut off the point of the triangle so that the eye is not led where you do not wish the eye to go.

Consider another picture, one of a river which runs through a canyon. The angle of view is low, just above the water. The camera looks toward the end of the canyon where the setting sun casts a triangular highlight on the water. The sun is a small circle in the picture and it is important because it explains the reddish hue in the picture. The triangular highlight points the eye towards the sun so that we see immediately what we are intended to see, even though it occupies a small area in the picture.

Rectangles. We are constantly amazed at how frequently we find rectangles in landscape photography. Consider a typical landscape where the rectangle at the base is field, the middle rectangle is forest, and the top rectangle is sky. Or consider a picture taken from the edge of a river showing bands of marsh grass alternating with bands of clear water. These are examples of stacked rectangles. In both cases, the suggestion of tranquility stems, in part, from what we know of the function of rectangles. A picture of a building may be primarily stacked rectangles suggesting stability of the structure.

Rectangles can appear in any orientation. They may be vertical, as perhaps gravestones in a cemetery, or they may be on an oblique angle. Rectangles are the shape we most often find in pictures.

Circles. Circles are the shape we least often find in pictures, but they are, nevertheless, very important. In particular, the eye is drawn to the perfect circle. Imagine a field filled with circular bales of hay. The repeated circular shapes provide interest, rhythm, and create a clear pattern. The circle is meant to be dominant.

The photographer must be aware of circles. Because of their visual dominance, circles can draw the eye away from a part of the picture which you consider to be important. A circle does not have to be large to be dominant. Consider an old abandoned truck. On the side is a metallic emblem of a running bulldog. More area appears in front of the

bulldog than behind so there appears to be space to move into, a standard "rule" in composition. In that space is a small, circular hole where a screw once went. That small circle immediately attracts your attention. A picture of the bulldog, with equal space on both sides, that leaves out the screw hole is a much different image which draws the eye to the bulldog and not to the circle. Ovals are Balance can be achieved between the left and right side of an image, between the top and bottom of an image, and between opposite or adjacent corners. For example, a rectangular-shaped subject placed along a diagonal is balanced between triangles in the opposite corners, formed by the subject and the edges of the frame.

We don't suggest that all images should be balanced. Balanced images suggest peacefulness. Unbalanced images, on the other hand, produce a feeling of tension, and that may be the feeling you wish to communicate. Thinking in terms of balance or imbalance helps you communicate the feeling you wish to convey.

Corners. The corners of an image require special attention by the photographer because the viewer gives them special attention. Be aware that elements placed in the corners have disproportionate visual appeal. As such, they greatly effect the balance of the image. Consider an image where there is a large triangle in the upper left hand corner and a small triangle in the lower right hand corner. We may wish to reposition the camera so that there is a better balance between the areas of the triangles in the two corners.

Color and Tone. In critiquing and judging images we find a surprising lack of awareness of the importance of the role of color and tone in balance. All colors are not created equal. Some colors, such as red and bright yellow, command disproportionate visual attention. When they occur in a picture, their placement is critical. Consider a picture of Buckingham Palace with a guard in bright red jacket. Even though the guard may occupy a small area of the picture space, the visual attraction of bright red draws the eye. Where we place the guard will determine whether the picture is balanced or unbalanced. If the guard were wearing another color, let's say gray, placement would not be as critical visually.

An understanding of tone is essential in both black and white photography and color photography. Tone is the brightness of an area in a picture. It is not correct to speak of a red tone; tone is brightness irrespective of color. It is important to realize that the viewer's eyes are attracted to light tones. Light tones can and do draw attention away from the subject. Thus, light tones must be carefully controlled because of their dominance. Even if they are a part of the background and out of focus, they will command visual attention. If they must be included, they will be less intrusive if spread throughout the picture space. The careful photographer must always be aware of the role of color and tone.

Background. Far too often the importance of the background is overlooked. You may or

may not wish background elements to be important. How one controls the background will determine where the viewer looks. If the background is sharp it may compete with the foreground, which may or may not be what you want. Consider a child on a swing. If we include the mother in the background, her facial expression may reveal a concern whether the child is going too high and that becomes a part of the picture. How clearly we make the mother stand out by means of focus and camera position will determine the extent to which she becomes a part of the picture. If we show the child's face to emphasize the child's determination to go as high as possible, we may not want to include the mother in the background.

We cannot stress enough the importance of composing for the background. This applies even when the background is totally out of focus. As mentioned earlier, we must compose for tonal values. If the background contains no useful information, keep it as simple and unobtrusive as possible. If you cannot get the background you want, consider not taking the picture at all. Many images fail because of bad backgrounds.

The Viewfinder. It is a good habit to compose in the viewfinder and remove elements you do not want in the final picture. While there are ways to remove unwanted elements later by cropping or with a computer, we strongly believe that you should make the picture as good as it possibly can be when you photograph it. Remember that most viewfinders don't allow you to see 100% of the picture. Be aware that unwanted elements may intrude at the edge of the frame. Unfortunately, viewers often give things at the edge of the frame disproportionate visual attention. It is essential you get to know your viewfinder. As the photographer, you are responsible for everything in the picture space.

Negative Space. While you know it is often desirable to fill the frame, always be aware of the importance of negative space. Negative space is not unused space. It provides "breathing room."

Proportion and Dominance. Proportion and dominance are essential elements in visual design. *A difficult lesson to learn is that you don't have to make an element large for it to be dominant.* Consider, for example, a small yellow flower in a vast field of grass. The flower occupies only a small portion of the picture space, but it is visually dominant because it is different in color, shape and texture compared to its surroundings.

Learning Visual Design. Learning to use the principles of visual design is a long, arduous process. It may take you years, but the dividends are well worth the effort. Learn all you can about visual design. Study pictures carefully and shoot a lot of film. Remember the story of the couple visiting New York City who asked a policeman, "How do we get to Carnegie Hall?" He replied, "Practice, practice, practice!"

Lining up the Camera. Special care should be taken to keep your horizon straight provided it is straight in the scene. A small level may be useful in this regard. It is

especially important to line up your vertical lines properly, especially if they are close to the edge of the picture. If your camera offers interchangeable viewing screens, we recommend an architectural grid to help you correctly place both horizontal and vertical lines.

We sometimes see dramatic pictures of converging lines where buildings appear to be falling over. That may work. If you must be off, make sure it is not by a small amount which may suggest carelessness rather than intent.

Center of Interest. Not every picture has, or should have, a center of interest. Most, if not all, abstracts and pattern shots are designed to let the eye roam. Do not be alarmed if the eye has no place to rest. This is a fiction perpetrated by many judges. In fact, the eye does not fixate anywhere for more than a few seconds. Eyes are meant to wander. Even if there is a center of interest, the eye continues to roam. Thus, it is essential that all elements in the picture space contribute to the image. Eliminate all elements that do not make a contribution.

A Recommendation. We strongly recommend the book, "Photographing the World Around You" by Freeman Patterson. It provides a good discussion of the role of building blocks in visual design. Many books in the bibliography provide a variety of pictures to be studied carefully in terms of visual design.

Develop Your Own Style

There are different styles of photography. You have to discover a style that best suits you. Your job is not to select a style of others, but to try different styles and eventually find your own unique approach to pictures. Originality is the key. We suggest that you try to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. Look at a flower. Don't just look at the flower as most people see it. Rather, look at it from a different angle, as a macro view, or as an abstract. You will eventually come across your own unique view. Let that suggest your style.

Keep your mind open. Avoid the commonplace. That is, avoid the usual approach. Slow down and take your time. Developing your own style is an arduous process, but the satisfaction is well worth the effort.

Avoid becoming too technical in your approach to photography. In some ways, the more you worry about equipment and technique the less you will learn about visual design. So what if an innovation is not perfect the first time you try it? Your own style will develop slowly. Don't be discouraged if it takes years. Photography is a lifetime avocation.

Isolation often results in a unique view, often one having simplicity. We prefer to photograph this way. We know photographers who are able to produce wonderfully complex images. These usually involve a broad view having a number of different

elements.

Choose whatever approach works for you. Above all else, take pictures you like. Don't shoot to please someone else. That, by the way, is one danger of entering competitions because you may shoot what you think the judge will like, not what pleases you.

Light

Light is the essence of photography. Do all you can to take pictures in the right light. What light is right depends on what you are trying to do.

Times have changed. When we started to photograph, the Kodak instruction sheet that came with the film told us to take pictures between 1 Cam and 3pm, with the sun over our left shoulder. Now, many photographers feel that the best light is from just before sunrise to an hour or so after sunrise and from an hour or so before sunset until dark. Darkness does not mean we should stop taking pictures because night photography can be very exciting.

Generally, there are four directions of lighting: overhead, front, back, and side. Each yields different results. Front lighting (over the photographer's shoulder) and overhead lighting produce the least texture and depth. Many photographers avoid front and overhead lighting. Side lighting produces the most texture and depth, and is the preferred choice of serious photographers. This is also the light which gives the best results with a polarizing filter. Back lighting (the sun in front of the photographer) gives particularly dramatic lighting, sometimes with a rim of light around the subject. Back lighting can present difficult exposure problems. If the subject is a person, often the face will be in full shadow.

You must accept the reality that all films cannot record the full range of light. Consequently, we often wind up with hot spots or a bald sky in our pictures. We can solve this problem by eliminating the sky from the picture and selecting a background which does not contain highlights. Learn what you can and cannot do with the lighting you have. Many photographers stay home on cloudy or rainy days, but there are things best photographed under these conditions. For example, fall foliage is often enhanced by cloudy weather, provided you do not include the sky in the picture. Also be aware that a polarizing filter may work on a cloudy day and can be used to further enhance the color of leaves. A cloudy day reduces the harshness of shadows and often brings the range of light within the limitations of film.

Learn all you can about light and its uses. Be ready to photograph when the light you want is available. Photograph in different kinds of light to give variety to your pictures. Study lighting in pictures. You will benefit greatly from a knowledge of light. Ideal light is magic. Whenever you see *magic light stop whatever you are doing and photograph.*

Weather

There is no kind of weather where you cannot make photographs. Inclement weather may enhance photographs. Fog, rain, snow, and other weather conditions help you create unique images. Learn what can be done in various kinds of bad weather. Never tell yourself you can't take pictures because the weather is unfavorable.

Technical Aspects

Exposure. Exposure is critical. Even the finest adjustment makes a difference. Learn how your meter works and its limitations. In spite of technical developments, all meters give inaccurate readings in certain situations because meters are designed to read mid-tone and what the film sees may not be mid-tone. Learn to recognize mid-tone. Sometimes we bracket as a way to ensure accurate exposure. Spot meters, when used correctly, are especially useful, particularly when the mid-tone area is small. In slides it is important to expose for the highlights and let the shadows fall they may. With print film, expose for the shadows.

Exposure establishes mood. The "correct" exposure is determined by what mood you wish to convey. Generally, an "under exposed" image suggests something ominous or dramatic, while an "over exposed" image suggests a light-hearted mood.

In most cameras there are three exposure modes: aperture priority, shutter priority, and program. We use aperture priority almost exclusively because we want to be in control of the depth of field.

Focus. In spite of the popularity of auto-focus lenses, we almost always focus manually. The autofocus mechanism can be fooled and we prefer to retain as much control as possible. Freeman Patterson recommends focusing one-third up the viewfinder, not one-third into the picture. Others recommend focusing at a point one-half into the picture. Try different approaches and see what works best for you. In any event, remember that the smaller the aperture opening, the greater the depth of field. Use your depth-of-field preview button whenever possible. If the image is too dark, wait a moment and let your eye adapt to the darkness. A rubber eye cup will help.

As mentioned above, the smaller the aperture opening the greater the depth-of-field. However, there are other factors that influence the choice of the optimum aperture opening to use. Generally, most lenses are sharpest in the middle aperture range.

The reciprocity law. There are several combinations of apertures, shutter speeds, and film speeds that will yield a given exposure. If the film speed remains constant, doubling the size of the aperture requires cutting the shutter speed in half. For example, if the exposure is correct at f/11 at 1/125 of a second, it is also correct at f/8 at 1/250 of a second. Which combination you use depends upon how much depth of field you need and how fast a shutter speed you need to stop the motion of the subject.

It is obvious that 1/125 of a second is twice as long as 1/250 of a second. A film speed of ISO 100 is twice as fast as ISO 50. Both represent a change of one stop. However the f/stop scale is not as obvious. The f/stop scale in one stop steps (moving from the largest aperture opening to the smallest aperture opening) is f/1.4, f/2, f/4, f/5.6, f/8, f/11, f/16, f/22, and f/32. Learn to think in stops. Do not *relegate to your camera the choice of aperture openings*.

Cameras and Lenses

We feel too much emphasis is placed on the technical aspects of photography and not enough on visual design and individual style. That is why we relegate our tips on equipment to the end of this booklet. Nonetheless, technical considerations are important because good craftsmanship is a precursor to becoming a good photographer. We are assuming, as a minimum, your camera will allow you to interchange lenses and select the aperture opening and the shutter speed. There are a number of manufacturers that produce excellent cameras. None of our discussions is based on a particular brand. Our booklet, "Selecting 35mm Camera Equipment" will serve as a useful companion.

The choice of a lens is more important than the choice of a camera body. It is useful to have a variety of good lenses. Everyone will have their own preferences, but we suggest at least three lenses: a wide angle zoom lens, a short telephoto zoom lens, and a true macro lens in the 100mm to 200mm range. There are, of course, many other lenses, but these three will suffice for most situations. Zoom lenses have become so good we now recommend them over fixed focal length lenses because of their flexibility in achieving better composition. Try to avoid zoom lenses that cover a wide range of focal lengths as their optics usually are not as good as zooms with a shorter range.

Because lenses take pictures, not camera bodies, get the best lens you can afford. Far too often we have seen photographers purchase a camera body from a respected manufacturer and then select an off brand budget lens. Don't make that mistake. It is better to purchase a medium priced camera body and buy a more expensive lens. Generally, it is better to use lenses made by the maker of the camera body.

Camera Support

There is no substitute for a good, sturdy tripod, which not only helps make the image sharp, but is an invaluable aid to precise composition. We recommend the sturdiest tripod you are willing to carry. There are other types of camera support systems such as monopods, supports for the car window, and bean bags. None of these will do for you what a good tripod will do.

Photograph an object with a tripod, then try to duplicate the same composition without a

tripod and compare the results. You will find the tripod picture is sharper and the composition is more precise. We strongly believe that a good tripod is an invaluable tool. The selection of a good tripod head is equally vital and we recommend the Bogen geared head, Model No. 3275.

Film

Because we often shoot for classroom presentations, we use transparency film (slides). Our personal favorite is usually Ektachrome 1 DOS or 100SW. While there is a wide variety of films available, we feel it desirable to limit one's choice in order to learn what a particular film can and cannot do. For specialized purposes you may wish to choose other films. For example, Kodachrome 200 is excellent for night photography, Ektachrome 64 is our choice for flower photography and copy work, provided you are using daylight. If you have tungsten light, use Ektachrome 64T.

There is a trend today for manufacturers to produce films with highly saturated colors. While these may work well on an overcast day, they often produce colors that are not realistic. We prefer films which produce moderately saturated colors.

It is still true that slower films have less grain, are sharper, and have better colors than fast films, but technical advances have reduced the differences. Nevertheless, we do not recommend fast films except for special situations.

A Final Word

We trust that these comments will help you become a better photographer, but the dedication and effort must come from you. Don't be impatient. Improvement is a life-long process. We hope you derive immense pleasure from photography. We certainly have.

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