Getting started

Shutterfly helps you create beautiful prints and products such as photo books and cards. We’re going to help you take great pictures, too.

Ever look at a professional photograph and wonder, How do I take a shot like that? It’s easier than you think. While a high-quality digital camera helps, learning the tricks of the trade are equally important. Let’s get you started with 10 basic rules of photography that’ll help improve your pictures.

Follow the “Rule of Thirds”

Here’s an example of a traditional portrait picture. It’s not bad, but it’s not very dynamic, either. The subject is at the center of the image, and gets lost in the background. Nothing grabs your eye.

Try incorporating the “rule of thirds” into the composition of your photos. Take your image and separate it into nine equal parts by drawing horizontal and vertical lines—think Tic Tac Toe. Place your subject at one of the intersecting points, like this picture does, to make for a more compelling image by creating more energy in the frame and a creative tension between the edge of the image and the subject. Studies have shown that people’s eyes usually go to one of the intersection points of the grid rather than the center of the shot. The “rule of thirds” works with this natural way of viewing an image rather than working against it. Many cameras come with a ‘grid’ setting, making composition even easier.
Use leading lines

When shooting landscapes outdoors, look for lines before bringing the camera to your eye. Are there clouds drawing your attention up and away or down to a tree? Are there lines in a road, on a building, or on a fence? Much like the "rule of thirds", leading lines guide your viewer to see the important part of your photo and bring focus to your subject. You want people to look into your pictures, not out of them. Whether the lines are straight or curved, whether they’re shot head on or at an angle, whether they meet or diverge, it creates interest within the picture. This picture is a great example where the road brings you down into the landscape, then up to the sky. Leading lines work well indoors and outdoors.

Shoot the “Golden Hour”

The first hour immediately after sunrise and the hour prior to sunset (even a good 15 minutes after sunset) are commonly known as the “Golden Hour” for photographing landscapes or subjects outdoors. Shooting in the middle of the day, under a blinding sun, tends to wash out the details in a picture. During the “Golden Hour”, though, the light from the sun hits the earth at a low angle, making your pictures pop with beautiful, warm colors. Keep your camera steady in low-light situations like this and take lots of pictures – the light changes dramatically over the course of just a few minutes.
Fill the frame

In this picture, the background elements serve as a distraction from the subject, which is the girl. There’s a cool distance between the photographer and the subject that reduces the emotional impact of the picture. While you could always crop the sides of the picture after the fact, that would reduce the image resolution.

Instead, make sure that before you press the shutter, the subjects of your photo cover the entire frame. Don’t be afraid to get up close and personal. Move in closer than you normally shoot, or use the zoom feature. The results speak for themselves – a more intimate, more interesting image.
How to take great pictures: the basics

Make portrait subjects look toward the frame

Here’s a portrait of a child painting. But who is he looking at? Apparently not the person taking the photo. There’s a missed opportunity to have the subject connect with the photographer, and by extension the person viewing the picture.

Most portraits look better when the subject is looking towards the center of the picture rather than away. You can see the difference with this picture. The child is looking right at the camera, engaging the photographer, which grabs the attention of the viewer.
Arrange group shots

In a portrait, the subject is the main focus, so eliminate any distracting elements in the foreground or background, or move to a simpler location, before you snap that picture.

In this picture, there’s no clear focus. Two of the subjects are seated, one is leaning against the railing. There are snowboards and a bowl of snacks that pull the viewer’s eye away from the people.

This photo is much better. The subjects are closer together and there’s nothing else in the picture competing for the viewer’s attention. And whether there are two people in the picture or ten, don’t worry about placing everyone by order of height — this isn’t a class photo.
How to take great pictures: the basics

Arrange portraits around an object

Here’s a standard group shot – a family sitting on patio, in a row. It’s a nice picture, but there’s no clear relation between the people and the setting. There are too many background elements that are unrelated to the subjects.

Find an object that your subjects can gather around. Like taking a picture from an unusual perspective, it makes the composition more visually pleasing. In this photo, the tree trunk serves as a nice visual balance to the two children. It also connects them with the environment in which the picture is being taken, whether that’s indoors or outdoors.
Shoot at child-level

Giving a camera to a child is probably one of the best ways to get a good picture, since children look at the world from a vantage point that adults don’t. You can make your photography more creative by shooting subjects at that level as well — beneficial when you’re shooting flowers, pets and especially children.

Just compare the impact of these two pictures. Shooting children from a standing position, as the first photo does, literally and figuratively “looks down” on the subject and makes for a less interesting image.

In this picture, the perspective is right at child level, and it makes for a more equal relationship between photographer and subject – making for a better-quality photo. So get down low and shoot!
**Don’t use flash at night**

Flash cameras are often useful in low-light situations when you want to highlight details on a subject. The trouble is that the flash cancels out much of the glow from other lights, which affects the vibrancy of the photo.

A lot of the wonder of night photography has to do with the lights that we see without the flash. If you want to make a better photograph, turn off the flash and experiment with shooting nighttime scenes. Having a tripod or resting your camera on a stationary object helps keep things sharp. (Even so, don’t make your shutter speed too slow or the picture will be blurry.) Take advantage of the glow from streetlamps, passing cars and, in this example, floodlit buildings.

**Shoot now, delete later**

It happens to everyone at one point or another. You’re shooting an event with your digital camera. You find yourself instinctively going to the camera’s playback mode to view the picture you just took, and see if it’s worth keeping. In that amount of time, something magical happens—and you miss it.

It’s actually an easy thing to avoid. Simply edit your shoot later and focus on the event now. Buy as large a memory card as you can afford so that you’re able to take hundreds of pictures without running out of card space. This will give you the maximum advantage in capturing memorable moments.