



# **An Excellent Photo is “Not About Gear” Composition, Lighting, Technique and Center of Interest**

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Presentation – [FlagpolePhotographers.com/an-excellent-photo-is-not-about-gear](http://FlagpolePhotographers.com/an-excellent-photo-is-not-about-gear)

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# An Excellent Photo is “Not About Gear”



## Your gear

- Does not – haul itself out of bed before dawn to get a sunrise photo
- Does not – climb, hike, crawl, run or drive to the ideal viewpoint
- Does not – provide a vision for what is possible
- Does not – decide what the composition will be
- Does not – understand what is the center of interest

# Elements of an Excellent Photo

1. Impact
2. Technical Excellence
3. Creativity
4. Style
5. Composition
6. Presentation
7. Color Harmony
8. Center of Interest
9. Lighting
10. Subject Matter
11. Technique
12. Storytelling

Based on work by the Photographic Exhibition Committee of the Professional Photographer Association ([ppa.com](http://ppa.com)) The 12 Elements of a Merit Image

# Which quote(s) are valuable to photographers? Why?

1

*“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”*

2

*“Beauty is in the eye of the photographer”*

3

*“The photographer directs the eye of the beholder to the beauty”*

# Photography

- Rule 1
  - Crafting a great photo is not math or science
  - It's art, it's subjective, it's self-expression
- Rule 2
  - Most photos will benefit from some guidelines
  - No photos will benefit from every guideline
- Rule 3
  - There are no rules
  - There are lots of guidelines and an unbounded set of ideas

# Agenda



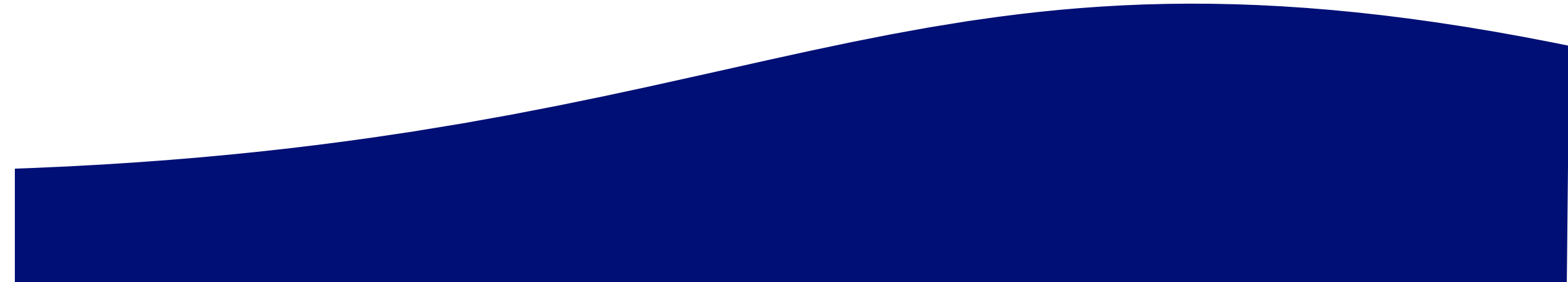
1. Creating a photo – vision, prepare, execute
2. Technique – focusing on focus
3. Composition – handful of concepts
4. Center of interest – where to rest your eyes
5. Lighting – in-camera and post-processing

Have your camera ready  
for hands-on learning



# Creating a Winning Photo

Sometimes you're at the at the right place at the right time  
More often you create a vision, prepare and execute



# Creating a Vision for a photo

## Define

Strive for the clearest possible vision in your mind

Simple, but clear

With emotional impact

*“Wow, what a great scene”* is not a vision

## Understand

Possible subjects - flowers, water, moon, tree, people ...

What subjects might work, what subjects will not work

What are the 3 core subjects, for example:

What is the main subject?

What is the foreground that leads to the main subject?

What is the background that adds, but does not distract from the main subject?

Why? Why? Why?

## Verify

Say it

Pretend you are explaining your end result to an audience

Evaluate the vision on relevancy to your primary audience

## Iterate

Try, Learn, Improve ...



# Vision?

No vision that  
works well ☹️



# Prepare

- Figure out how to create it, in the camera and in post-processing
- What weather? What time of year? What equipment?
- Cost? Time? Effort? Probability of success?
- Knowledge – especially digital darkroom skills required
- Honesty – leverage consideration of reality to drive creativity

# Execute



- Time is always a limiting factor
- Nature may be a limiting factor
- Check and recheck your equipment list
- Plan alternatives



# Activity - Prepare

- Hold up your camera
  - How many pieces of gear is that?
- How many things can go wrong? Power, memory, lens ...
- What other gear do you have in the room or your car ...
- How many times has your gear outnumbered your ideas?
- Example, Knife assigned subject – Vision: Knife on a cutting board.  
Prepare: How to standup a knife, tripod, good to go ... 😊
  1. Execute – boring - 😞 😞 😞
  2. Revise – add something to cut, background, lighting – better
  3. Revise – add action, reduce clutter 😊



**Better vision would have reduced the 4 hours to 30 minutes**



5 seconds, f/7.1, ISO 100, 75mm

# Creating a Winning Photo – Summary

**Envision the best photo possible from the scene,  
then figure out how to create it**

# Agenda



1. Creating a photo
2. Technique
3. Composition
4. Center of interest
5. Lighting



# Technique



The approach or perspective used to create the photo

- Focus, posing, angle, capture ... are part of the technique applied to a photo
- Including filters, lens choice, a certain style such as forced perspective

# Use selective focus to direct the eye of the beholder

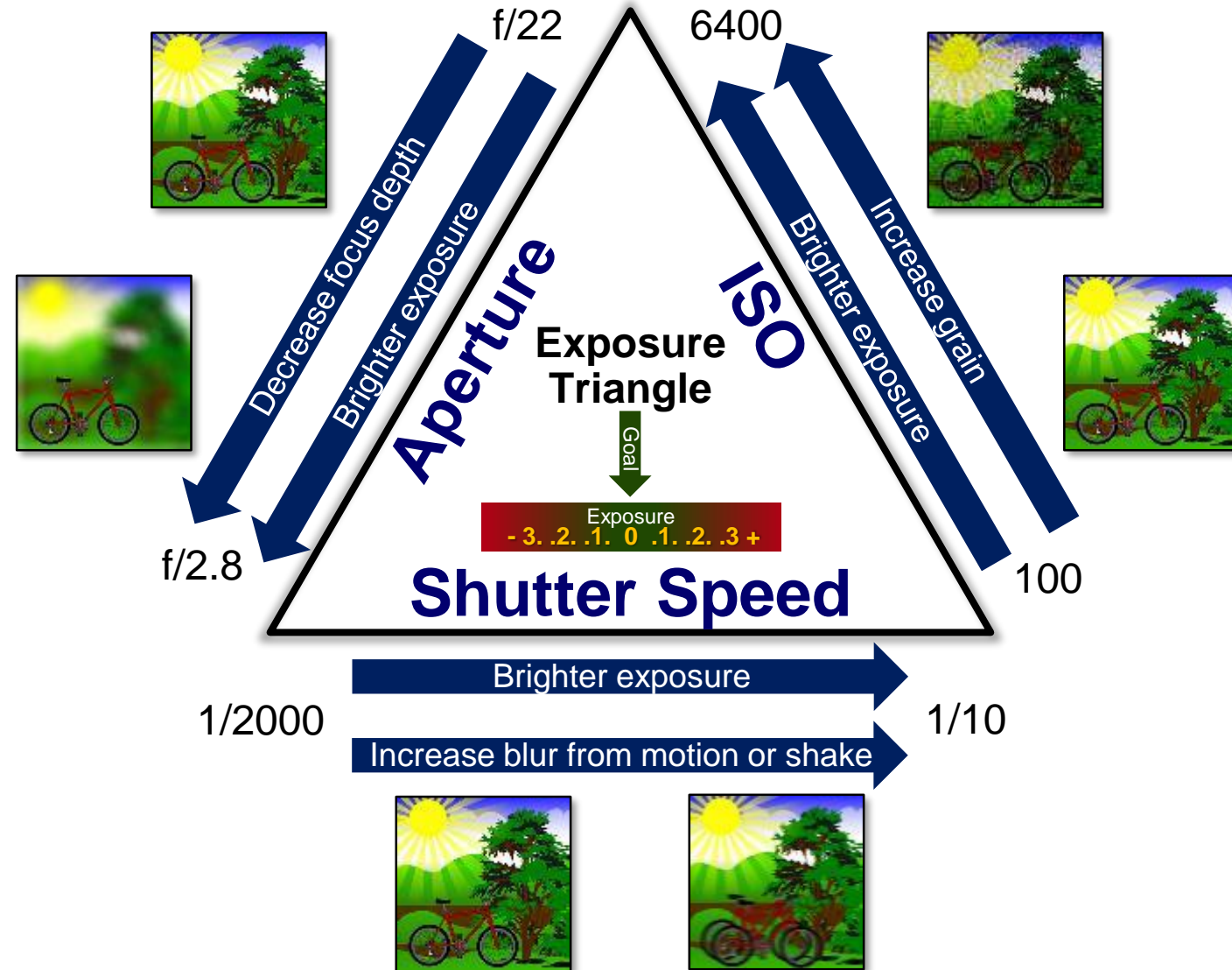
## How do we control focus?

1. Camera motion – shake, rattle & roll or steady
2. Exposure duration – shutter speed
3. Exposure depth of focus (field) – aperture size
4. Post-processing – focus stacking, blurring
5. Focus point – choosing what in the scene to focus on



# What is the role of the exposure triangle today?

- Leverage the very smart computer inside every camera!
- Exposure triangle
  1. Leverage your camera smarts when possible, by leaving 1 or 2 sides of the triangle on auto
  2. Conceptual knowledge is important, adjusting any side, impacts the other sides
  3. Mathematical knowledge is diminished, watching the camera displays the impact of every change

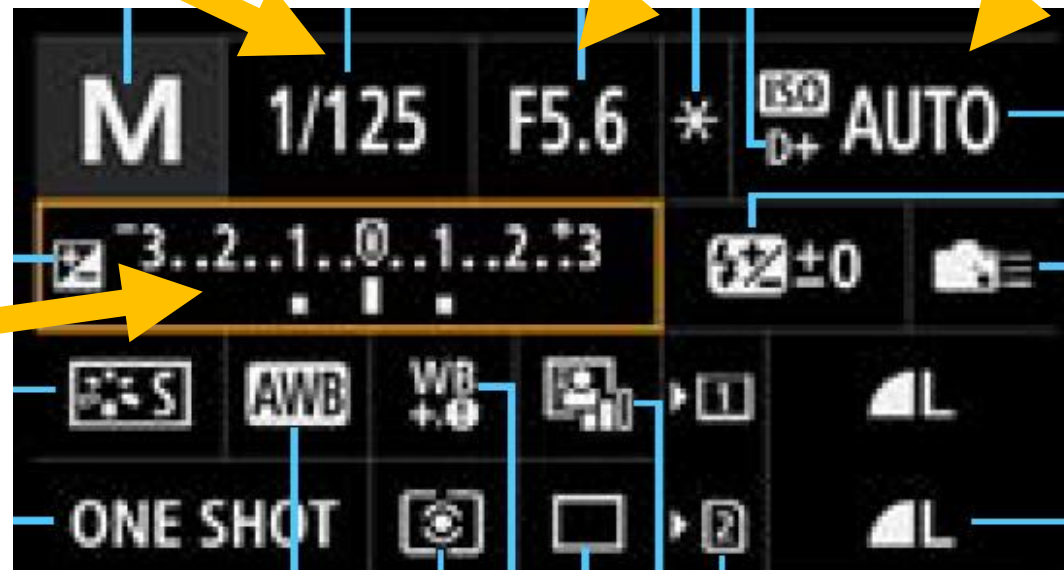


# Demo – Auto Exposure

Shutter  
Speed

Aperture

ISO



Exposure

# Using focus techniques with Speed

**The freezing of movement or showing blur has a big effect on what and how the photo communicates**

- Action stopping photo can be very impactful, because a human is poor at “seeing” motion
- Think about the motion you see in a movie theater – photos rolling by at 24 frames per second we perceive smooth continuous motion
- Cameras can show what is happening at 1/2000 or 1/4000 of a second



1/640 of a second, f/2.8, ISO 400, 70mm

# Activity - Setting the camera mode to “Shutter Priority”

- Choosing a fixed shutter speed and letting the camera automatically adjust aperture & ISO for a good exposure
- Set your camera to use Shutter Speed as the top priority (see photos below, ask for help)

## Canon – “Tv”

### Creative Zone

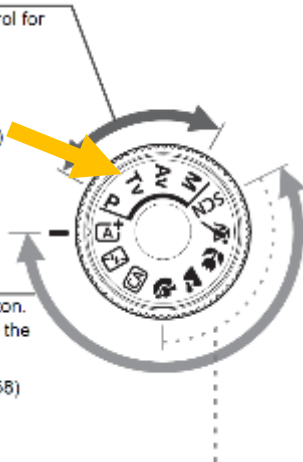
These modes give you more control for shooting various subjects.

- P** : Program AE (p.86)
- Tv** : Shutter-priority AE (p.110)
- Av** : Aperture-priority AE (p.112)
- M** : Manual exposure (p.115)

### Basic Zone

All you do is press the shutter button. The camera sets everything to suit the subject or scene.

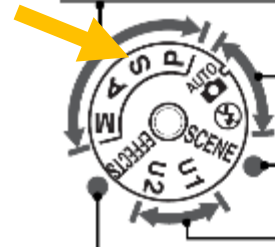
- AI** : Scene Intelligent Auto (p.58)
- OF** : Flash Off (p.63)
- CA** : Creative Auto (p.64)



## Nikon – “S”

### P, S, A, and M modes:

- **P** — Programmed auto (□ 52)
- **S** — Shutter-priority auto (□ 53)
- **A** — Aperture-priority auto (□ 54)
- **M** — Manual (□ 56)



### Auto modes:

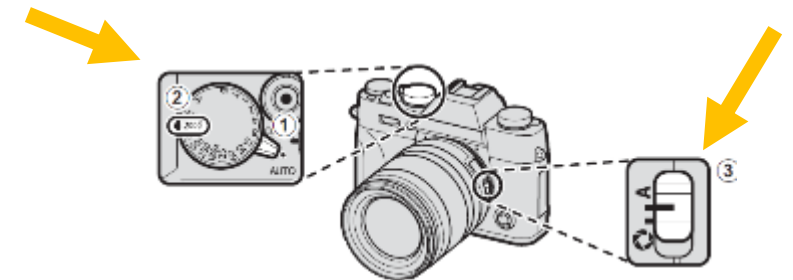
- **Auto** (□ 30)
- **Auto (flash off)** (□ 30)

### Scene modes (□ 41)

### U1 and U2 modes (□ 62)

### Special effects modes (□ 44)

## Fujifilm – “S”



Adjust settings as follows:

- ① **Auto mode selector lever:** ●
- ② **Shutter speed:** Choose a shutter speed
- ③ **Aperture:** A (auto)



# Activity – In “Shutter Priority” mode changing shutter speed


- See photos below for how to choose a specific speed. Leave your flash turned off.

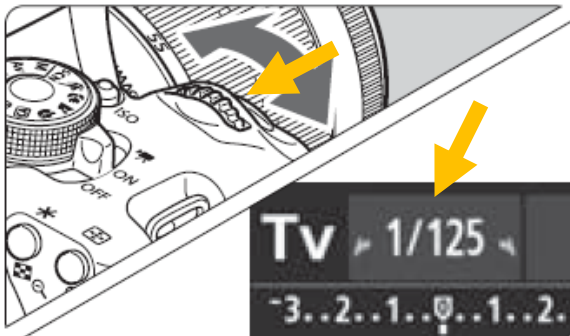
1. Take a photo around 1/125 of a second
2. Then take a photo at 1/8
3. Then take a photo at 1/1000 (if possible)
4. Review the photos. What visually has changed?

Fun fact

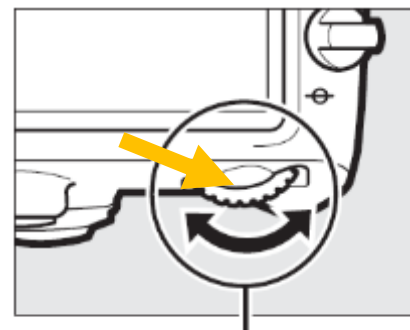
A 60 mph car travels 1 inch in 1/1000 of a second

## Canon – “Tv”

- Turning the  dial to the right sets a faster shutter speed, and turning it to the left sets a slower one.



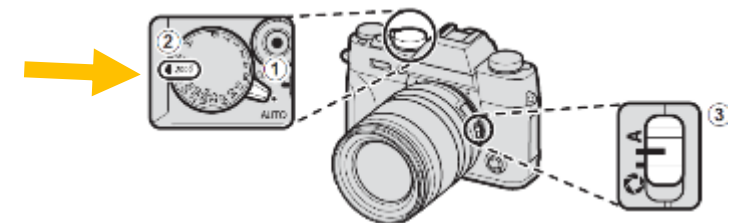
## Nikon – “S”



Main command dial

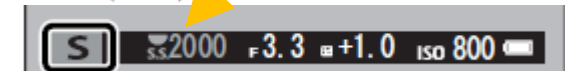


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Adjust settings as follows:

- ① Auto mode selector lever: ●
- ② Shutter speed: Choose a shutter speed
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# Using focus techniques with Speed – Part 2

- What shutter speed freezes movement?

Hummingbird wings	1/4000
Birds in flight	1/2000
Trains, autos, bikes	1/1000

Soccer, horses	1/500
Walkers	1/250
Landscapes	1/125

- How do you freeze a moving subject and “motion blur” the background?
  - Panning – move the camera sync’d to subject ⓘ
- What if you want the water to be blurred to look silky, but everything else in focus?
  - Slow shutter speed (1 sec) ⓘ



1/1000 of a second, f/4.5, ISO 1000, 70mm

# Using focus techniques with Aperture

- Aperture also has a key effect on guiding the beholders eye to the center of interest, blurred areas can help in storytelling
- Your eyes kind of know where to look, they pass right past the blurred areas to the sharply focused areas
- What aperture creates the best focus for your photo?
  - It depends on your vision for the photo  
There is no magic aperture value
  - Rule of thumb – a little in focus, a little aperture number, a lot in focus, a large aperture number
- What if you want subject, foreground and background all in focus?
  - In-camera, use “hyperfocal distance”. Rule of thumb - about 1/3 past the foreground ⓘ
  - Post-processing, use “focus stacking” – take multiple photos at difference focus points ⓘ



1/500 of a second, f/6.3, ISO 800, 400mm

# Activity - Setting the camera mode to “Aperture Priority”

- Choosing a fixed aperture opening and letting the camera automatically adjust shutter speed & ISO for exposure
- Set your camera to use Aperture size as the top priority (see photos below, ask for help)

## Canon – “Av”

### Creative Zone

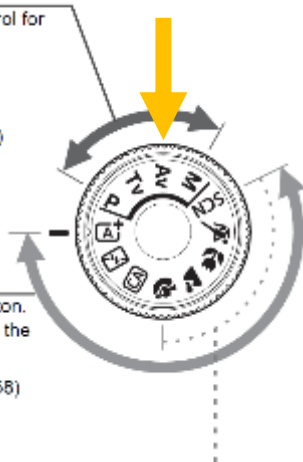
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## Nikon – “A”

### P, S, A, and M modes:

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- **M** — Manual (□ 56)

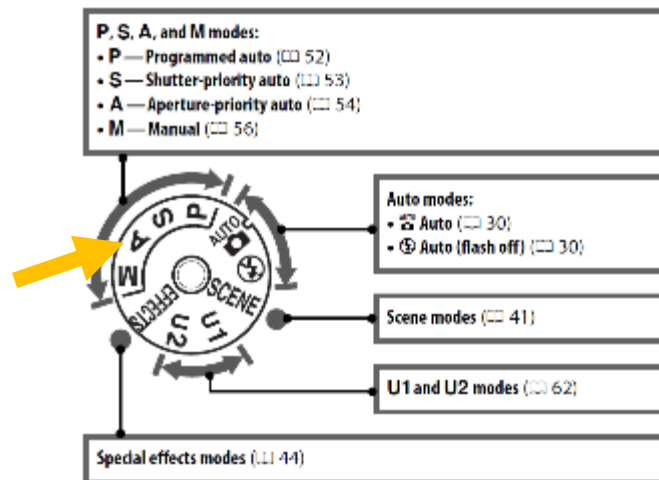
### Auto modes:

- **Auto** (□ 30)
- **Auto (flash off)** (□ 30)

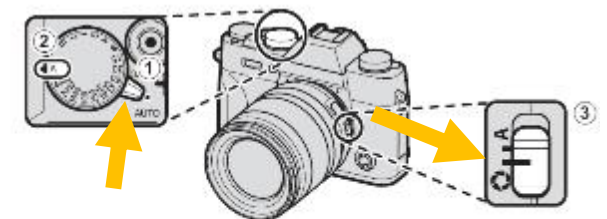
### Scene modes (□ 41)

### U1 and U2 modes (□ 62)

### Special effects modes (□ 44)




## Fujifilm – “A”



Adjust settings as follows:

- ① **Auto mode selector lever:** ●
- ② **Shutter speed:** A (auto)

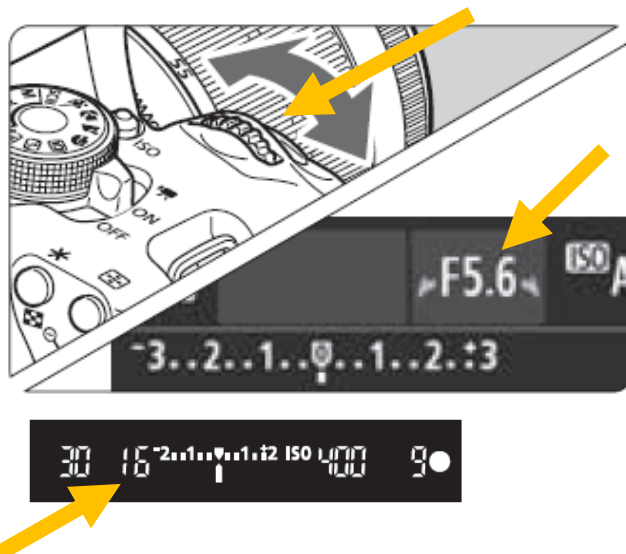
**Aperture:** Select  and rotate the lens aperture ring to adjust aperture



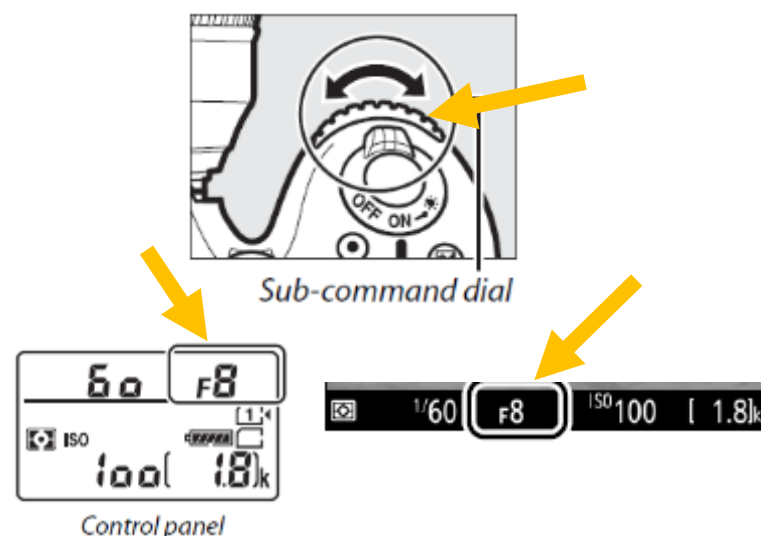
# Activity - In “Aperture Priority” mode changing aperture

- See photos below for how to choose a specific Aperture. Leave your flash turned off.
1. Take a photo around f/4 (whatever is the smallest number for your lens)
  2. Then take a photo at f/8
  3. Then take a photo at f/22 (whatever is the largest number for your lens)
  4. Review the photos. What visually has changed?

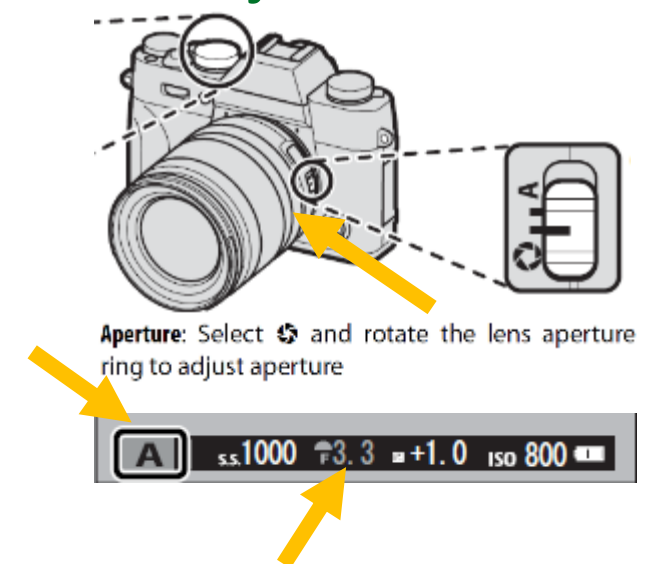
Canon – “Av”



Nikon – “A”



Fujifilm – “A”



# Agenda



1. Creating a photo
2. Technique
3. Composition
4. Center of interest
5. Lighting

5

# Composition



Bringing all of the visual elements together to express the photo's purpose

- Holds the viewer in the photo and prompts the viewer to look where the creator intends
- Do you follow the standard rules of composition? When do you break them to enhance the photo?



# Let me count the many “guidelines”

## Balance

## Centered/Symmetry

## Color combinations

## Depth

## Distance

## Fill the Frame

## Framing

## Isolate the Subject

# Juxtaposition

## Leading Lines

## Left to Right

## Patterns & Texture

## Points

## Rule of Odds

## Rule of Thirds

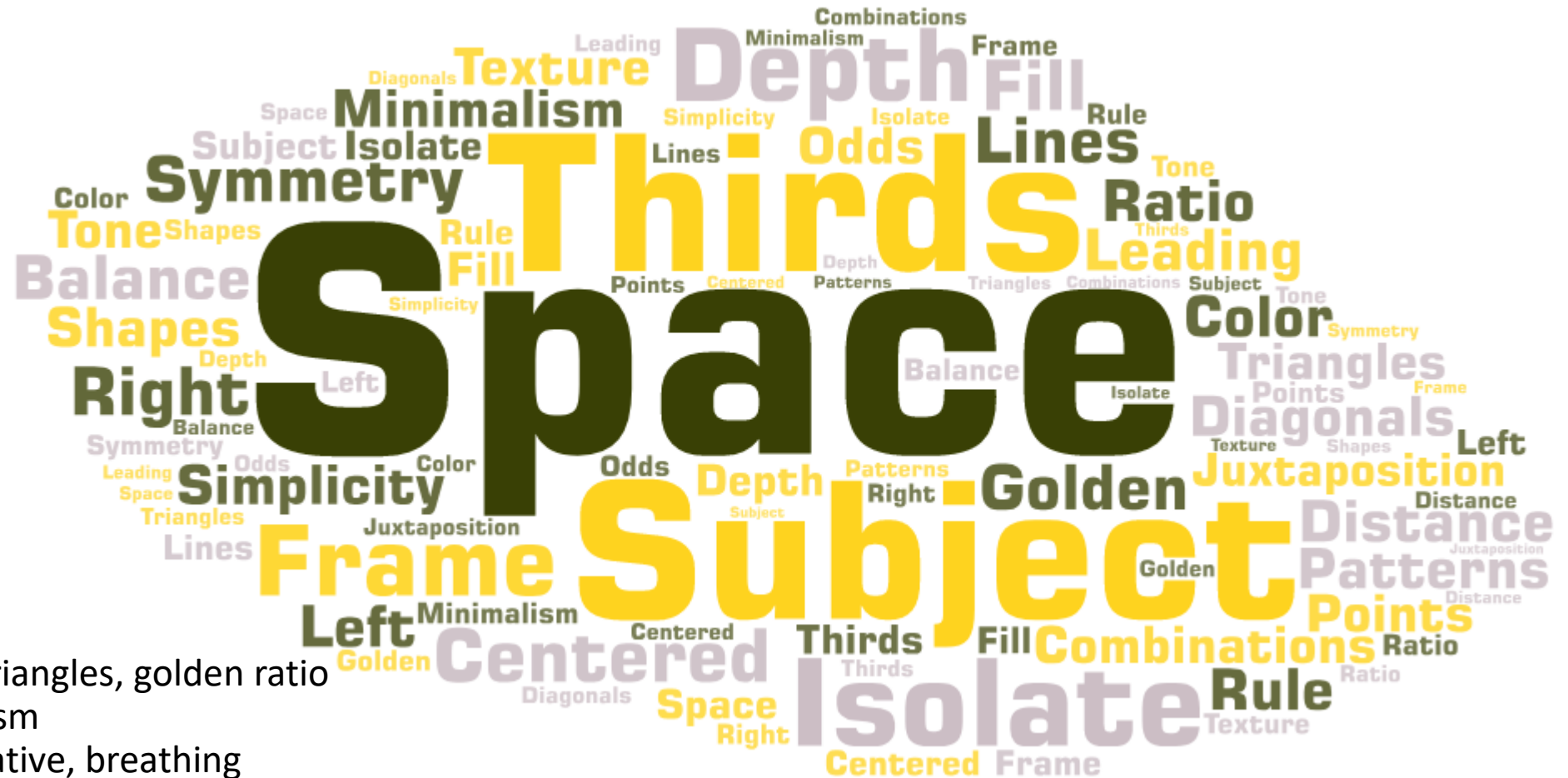
## Shapes – diagonals, triangles, golden ratio

## Simplicity & Minimalism

## Space – positive, negative, breathing

## Tone

...





# Composition – Leading Lines

## Leading Lines

Use a line to lead the viewer to the most interesting item



1/8 of a second, f/5.6, ISO 1600, 22mm

# Composition – Rule of Odds

## Rule of Odds

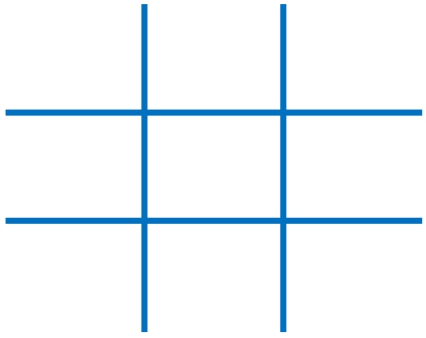
For visual  
balance and  
harmony  
use 1, 3 or 5  
items



1/1600 of a second, f/2.8, ISO 400, 400mm



# Composition – Rule of Thirds



## Rule of Thirds

Place the most interesting item on the lines or intersection



1/500 of a second, f/7.1, ISO 100, 300mm

# Composition – Motion space and negative space

**Leaving Space**  
Breathing  
room and  
implied motion

Negative space can  
provide balance or  
context to the subject

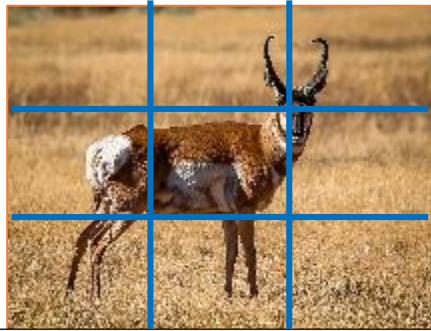


Motion space for the  
hawk to move into

1/640 of a second, f/4.0, ISO 400, 300mm - Rhonda



# Composition – Summary



**Rule of Thirds**  
Place the most interesting item  
on the lines or intersection



**Leading Lines**  
Use a line to lead the viewer to  
the most interesting item



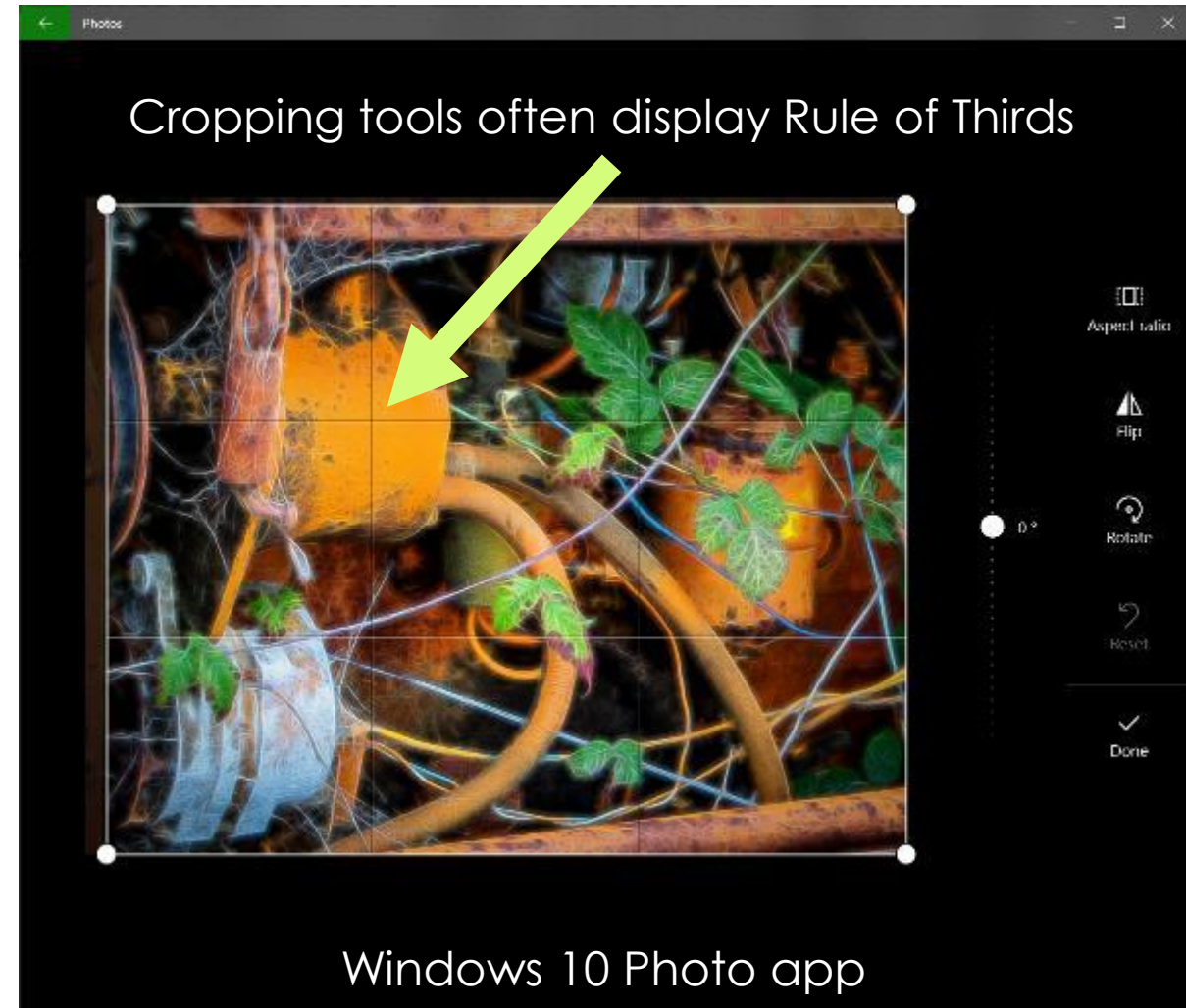
**Rule of Odds**  
For visual balance and  
harmony use 1, 3 or 5 items



**Leaving Space**  
Breathing room and  
implied motion

# Is composition an in-camera or post-processing activity?

- Answer is – Both
- Guideline – leave room when you frame a photo in your camera for post-process cropping



# What composition guidelines are used in this photo?



Space?  
Rule of thirds?  
Rule of odds?  
Leading lines?



# Any composition guidelines in this photo?

Space

Large factor  
in layout



# Any composition guidelines in this photo?

**Thirds**

A little





# Any composition guidelines in this photo?

**Odds**

Secondary



# Any composition guidelines in this photo?

## Leading Lines

Two routes  
to the  
action





# Agenda



1. Creating a photo
2. Technique
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4. Center of interest
5. Lighting

8

# Center of Interest

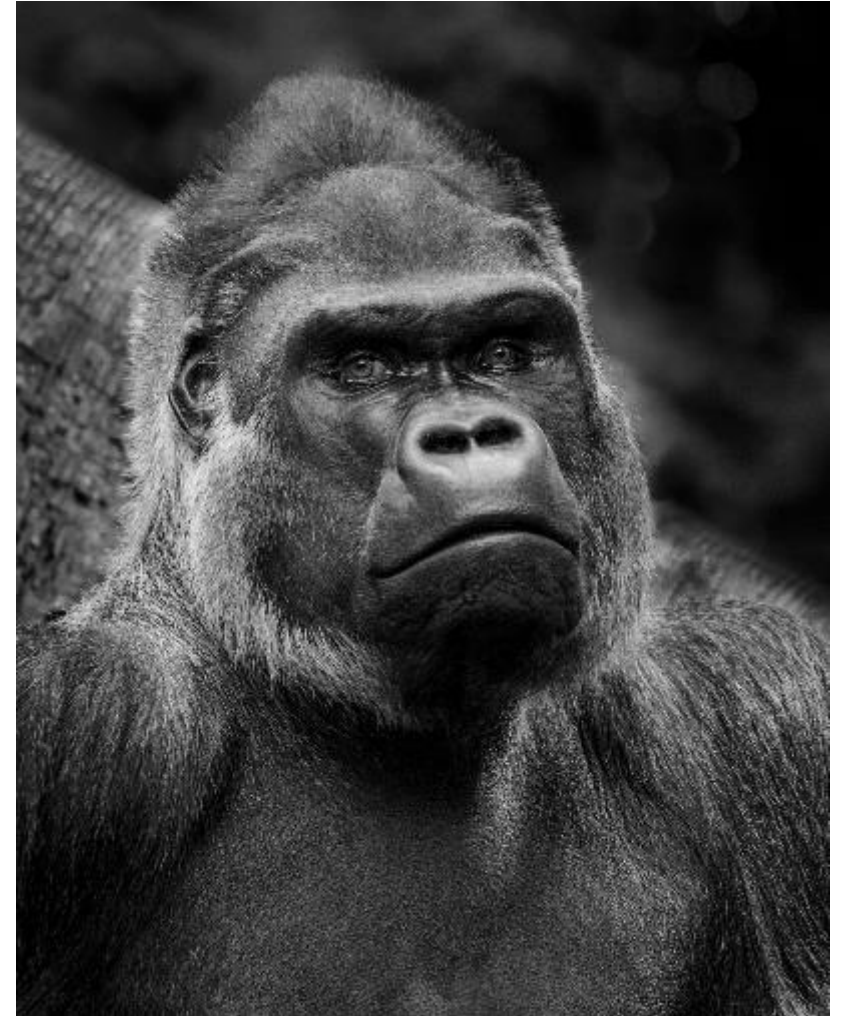


The point or points where the viewer should stop as they view the photo

- Can be subtle or strong, regardless, they allow the eyes to pause in preconceived areas
- Occasionally there will be no specific center of interest

# Center of Interest – a natural place for your eyes to rest

- A strong center of interest does not need to be a spectacular subject
- A strong center of interest does not need to be huge, only large enough for the viewers eyes to rest on
- Play with the background, eliminate areas that draw the eye away from the center of interest
- Multiple points of interest may lead to the center of interest



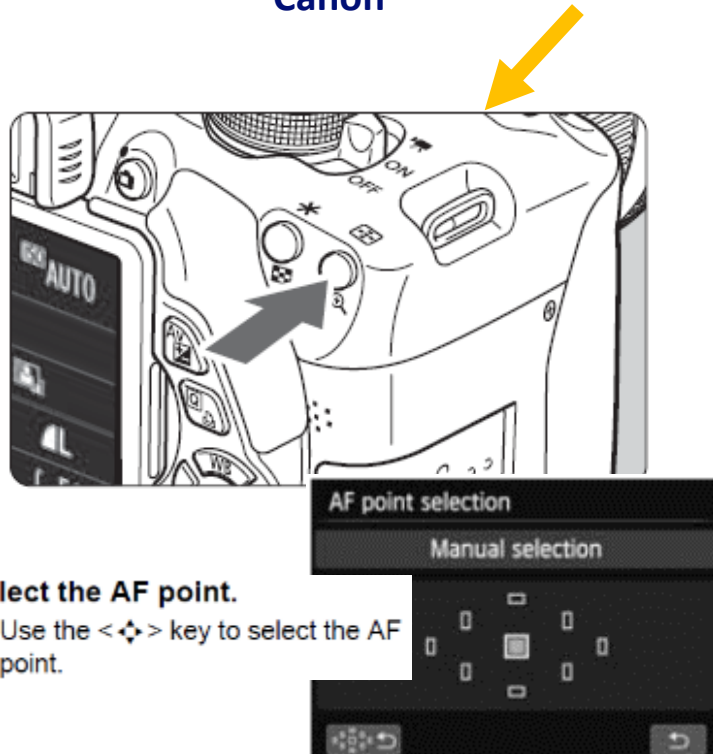
1/125 of a second, f/5.6, ISO 3200, 371mm



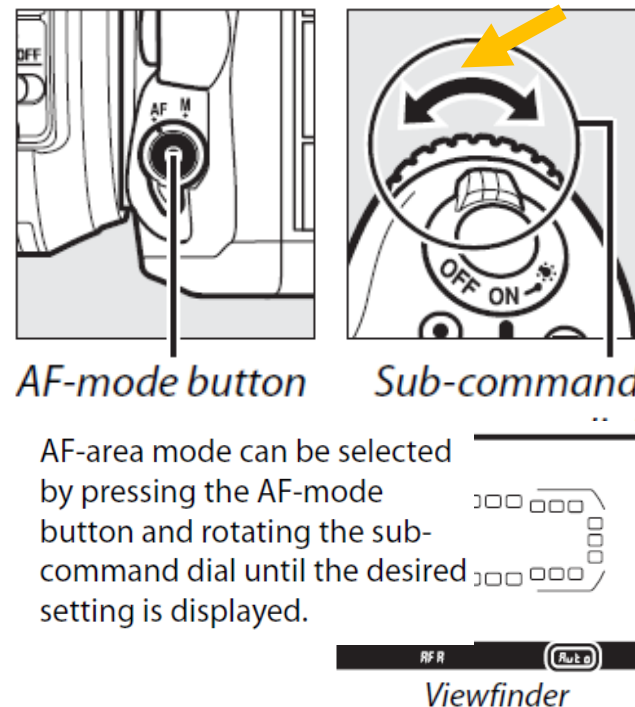
# Activity – Focus Point Control

- “Autofocus” single, continuous, manual, tracking, zone, wide, AI Servo ... 30 pages for your 400 page manual ☹
- Single topic here is move the single point of focus to a different location
- Usage case: Rule of Thirds + Center of Interest may not be the center of the frame
- Chane tip – set default autofocus point to high center to keep feet in the photo when focusing on the eyes

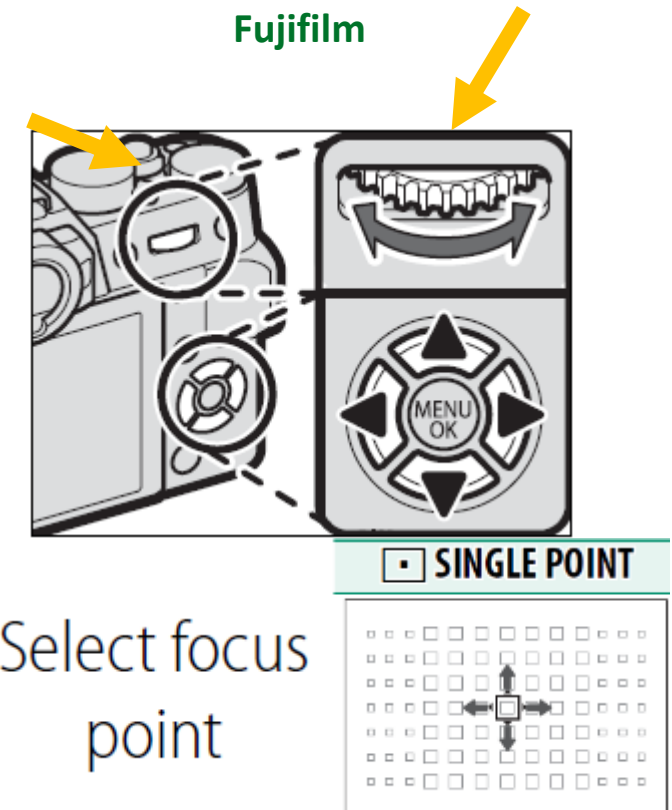
Canon



Nikon



Fujifilm





# Agenda



1. Creating a photo
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# Lighting



Defines dimension, shape and roundness in a photo

- The strength of your subjects will be enhanced by the lighting choices you utilize
- Whether the light applied is artificial, natural or added in post-processing, proper use enhances a photo

# Using light to direct the eye of the beholder

- Brightness draws the eye of the beholder
- Natural – ever changing, golden hour (30 minutes), ideal, hard to control
- Artificial – configurable, DIY options (lamp, white sheet over a window, holiday lights)
- Post-processing – easy to adjust overall light, harder to light specific items

Natural



Artificial



Post-processing



After dark can be magical!

Where is the light coming from in relation to your scene and to your camera?

How strong is the light?  
Is it diffused (sun behind a cloud), are there many sources (multiple windows)

What color is the light?  
Bright white from snow, more yellow at sunset, more blue right after sunset

How to change the light? Wait, change the scene angle, move to a new location (under a tree), artificial light ...

Rule of thumb - start with the light on your back, then move and evaluate other angles

**Ask yourself:  
Would different lighting work better?**

30 sec, f/9,  
ISO 100, 34 mm

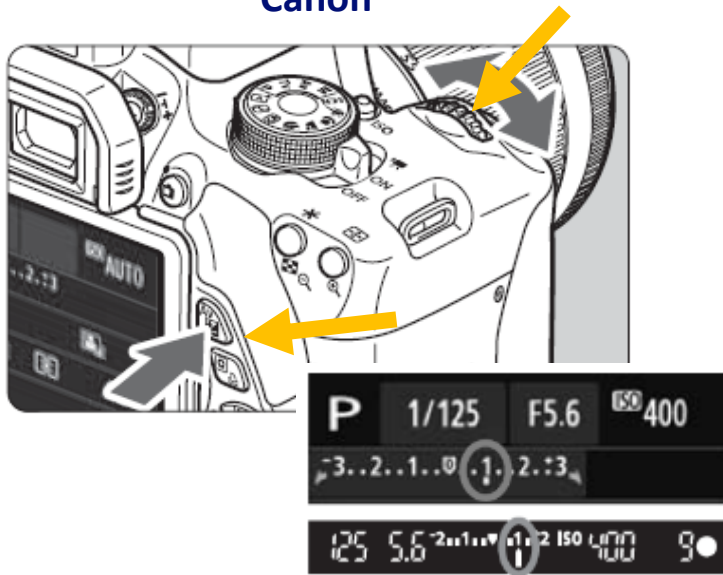




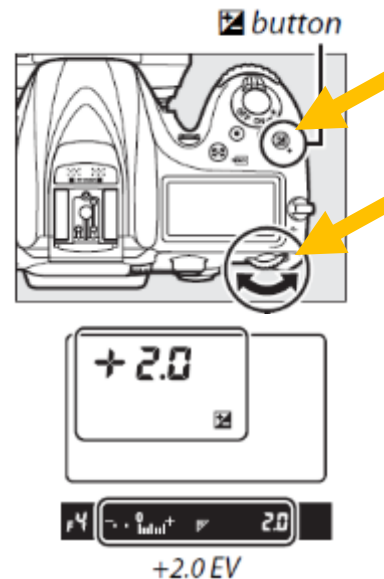
# Last Activity – Under and Over Exposing in-camera

- See below for common ways to change your exposure and find the current exposure
- Take a photo underexposed by 2. Underexpose is to the left of center.
- Now a photo overexposed by 2
- Review the photos
- When might you under or over expose a photo? Snow – try under or over exposing by 1

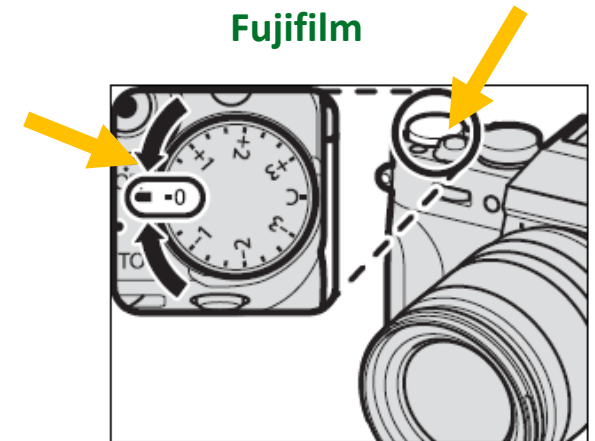
Canon



Nikon



Fujifilm



Rotate the dial to choose an exposure compensation amount.

# Using a Vignette to light center of interest

- If the edges have bright areas that are distracting the eyes from the Center of Interest, use a dark vignette to remove the bright outside area
- Most post-processing apps have a vignette tool
- An example using the Windows 10 Photos app



With no vignette



A light vignette



A heavy vignette



# Take control of the scene, remake it in your vision!

## The Elements

Impact

Technical Excellence

Creativity

Style

**Composition**

Presentation

Color Harmony

**Center of Interest**

**Lighting**

Subject Matter

**Technique**

Storytelling

Title

## Questions?

Chane Cullens – [Chane@CCullens.com](mailto:Chane@CCullens.com)

Presentation – [FlagpolePhotographers.com/an-excellent-photo-is-not-about-gear](http://FlagpolePhotographers.com/an-excellent-photo-is-not-about-gear)