

Bill's Simple User Guides
By Bill Benitez

Better Pictures with Inexpensive Cameras

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Introduction

Thousands of people are taking pictures everyday with inexpensive and one-use cameras. These cameras have limitations that make it difficult to take quality pictures difficult. However, much improvement is possible by learning a few simple techniques. This user guide will describe some of the problems inherent in these cameras and many methods to overcome many of the limitations. To help improve your pictures, this user guide is set up with each chapter devoted to one of the limitations of inexpensive cameras and the best way to overcome that limitation.

As you improve your photographic techniques, questions may arise. Help in dealing with these problems is available by sending your questions via email to billbenitez@ureach.com.

One

Plastic Lenses

Inexpensive camera have plastic lens while better cameras have glass lenses. Glass lenses can be constructed to transmit light and images that are sharper and brighter. While plastic lens quality has increased over the years, it still falls far short of that of glass lenses.

The difference between plastic lenses and quality glass lenses cannot be overcome entirely by improving your photographic techniques. A cheap plastic lenses in a \$10 to \$40 camera will never be able to resolve images as sharply and clearly as a glass lenses in a quality camera. In spite of this, you can improve the quality of your pictures with an inexpensive camera by improving your overall picture taking techniques. The suggestions that follow should help you do that.

First, make certain that you hold the camera still while taking pictures. It is amazing how many snapshots are ruined because the camera shakes while they are taken. Remember that even the slightest movement will cause blurring and magnify the lack of sharpness inherent with plastic lenses.

People often shake the camera while clicking the picture. You can avoid shaking the camera by taking a short breath and holding it just before taking the picture. While holding your breath, squeeze the button firmly but slowly. Do not punch the button because this will shake the camera and cause blurring of the image.

Make certain your thumb and fingers are clear of the lens and the flash. You should keep your fingers away from the lens at all times. One touch on the lens will leave a fingerprint that will deteriorate the quality of the image.

Clean the lens with a soft cloth regularly. Even if you don't touch the lens, it may accumulate some dust that could affect the image. If your camera has a lens cover, keep it closed when you are not using the camera. Keep the camera out of heat and dust because they can damage your camera.

Two Fixed Focus

Inexpensive camera lenses are fixed focus whereas better cameras have either manual or automatic focus. The process of focusing moves the lenses in relation to the film surface in order to sharpen the image. Fixed focus lenses do not move and therefore cannot sharpen the image beyond that point which is set during the manufacturing process.

Normally these cameras are set to facilitate sharpness from about 3 feet to infinity using a relatively wide-angle lens with a compromised relationship with the location of the film surface. This compromise provides an adequately sharp image when used within the parameters described in the camera instructions.

While the instructions that come with inexpensive cameras are brief, reading them carefully can help you overcome some of the shortcomings of fixed focus lenses. Most cameras will give you the area covered by the fixed focus lenses as a range. This will probably be something like 3 feet to infinity. That means that if you get closer to the subject of your picture than 3 feet, the picture will be blurred. Since infinity implies an unlimited distance, in theory you cannot be too far from your subject in theory.

In fact, you can be too far from your subject and most people do stand much too far from their subject to take pictures. To improve your pictures and overcome the fixed focus limitation, use the following rules:

1. Move in as close as possible to your subject. If you are taking a picture of two or three of your friends, move in until they fill the entire frame of the viewfinder. With an inexpensive camera this will mean being no more than 4 or 5 feet away.
2. For pictures of individuals alone, move in as close as the focus area will allow, usually to about 3 feet.
3. If the person is standing, turn the camera to the vertical position and you can get closer and still get in what you want. The closer you can get the larger the image will be in the picture. The larger the image, the better the overall quality you can get even with the limitations imposed by fixed focus lens.

Three

Built-in Flash

Most low-priced cameras have built-in flash units with a fixed amount or power or brightness. Built-in flash units have serious limitations and cover only a limited range of about 4 feet to 12 feet. You can overcome a significant amount of this limitation by simply adhering to the range described in the instructions. If your subject is more than 12 feet away and there is no other light source as bright as the sun, don't take the picture. If you do, it will come out very dark because of a lack of sufficient light. If you go to a stage show or recital and take a picture from the audience, it will not come out unless you are less than 12 feet from the stage.

You cannot take good pictures of a large room using the built-in flash because the section of the room within the flash range will be bright and the area beyond the range will be dark or completely black. If the camera instructions indicate that the camera is for flash and sunlight, limit your pictures to flash within the range indicated or outdoors in sunlight. This will greatly improve the quality of your pictures.

One final thought on flash pictures, be careful to keep your thumb or finger from in front of the built in flash. This is a common problem that either completely blocks or seriously reduces the amount of light reaching the subject.

Four

Wide Angle Lenses

The wide-angle lens limitation is easy to overcome by carefully composing your pictures. Here are a few basic rules for wide-angle lenses.

1. Move in close to the subject. Wide-angle lenses generally make the subject seem further away. Most snapshots are taken from too far away.
2. Since wide-angle lenses tend to exaggerate angles, get on the same level as your subject. Don't take pictures of kids by pointing the camera down at them. Get down on their eye level and move in close to get really good photos of them.
3. Point the camera from as level a position as possible for the subject. If you are shooting a large subject, try to find a raised area to stand to improve the angle of the picture.

Five Correct Exposure

Inexpensive cameras have only two exposure settings, flash and sunlight. This is very limiting but workable. I already covered flash settings and the limited distance range of 4 to 12 feet. Remember that anything closer than 4 feet will be burned up with light and anything further than 12 feet will go dark.

Sunlight can be an excellent light source but it can be very harsh. Here are a few rules that will improve your pictures in sunlight.

1. Never shoot into the sun with an inexpensive camera. While pictures shot into the sun can be creative and interesting, they can only be handled successfully if you can control the exposure. Since inexpensive cameras do not facilitate adequate control, the picture will not turn out well. If you must shoot into the sun, make certain that the built-in flash works in sunlight. The flash may fill in the dark shadows created by the sunlight.
2. Avoid shooting pictures of people in direct sunlight if you can avoid it. Ever notice how pictures shot in direct sunlight have harsh shadows that are almost completely black. This is caused by the extreme difference in light between the shadow and the sunlight. Instead, move to the shaded side of a building or to the edge of the shade of a large tree and compose your picture. You will still have the brightness of the sunlight but without the harshness of the shadows.
3. Try shooting people snapshots on cloudy days. When the sun goes behind the clouds the light will be excellent for portrait style snapshots. Just move in close, shift the camera to vertical and the improvement will be significant.
4. You can improve many pictures in sunlight by using the flash. Some cameras allow the flash to be on in sunlight. The flash will fill in the shadows if you are close enough to the subject.