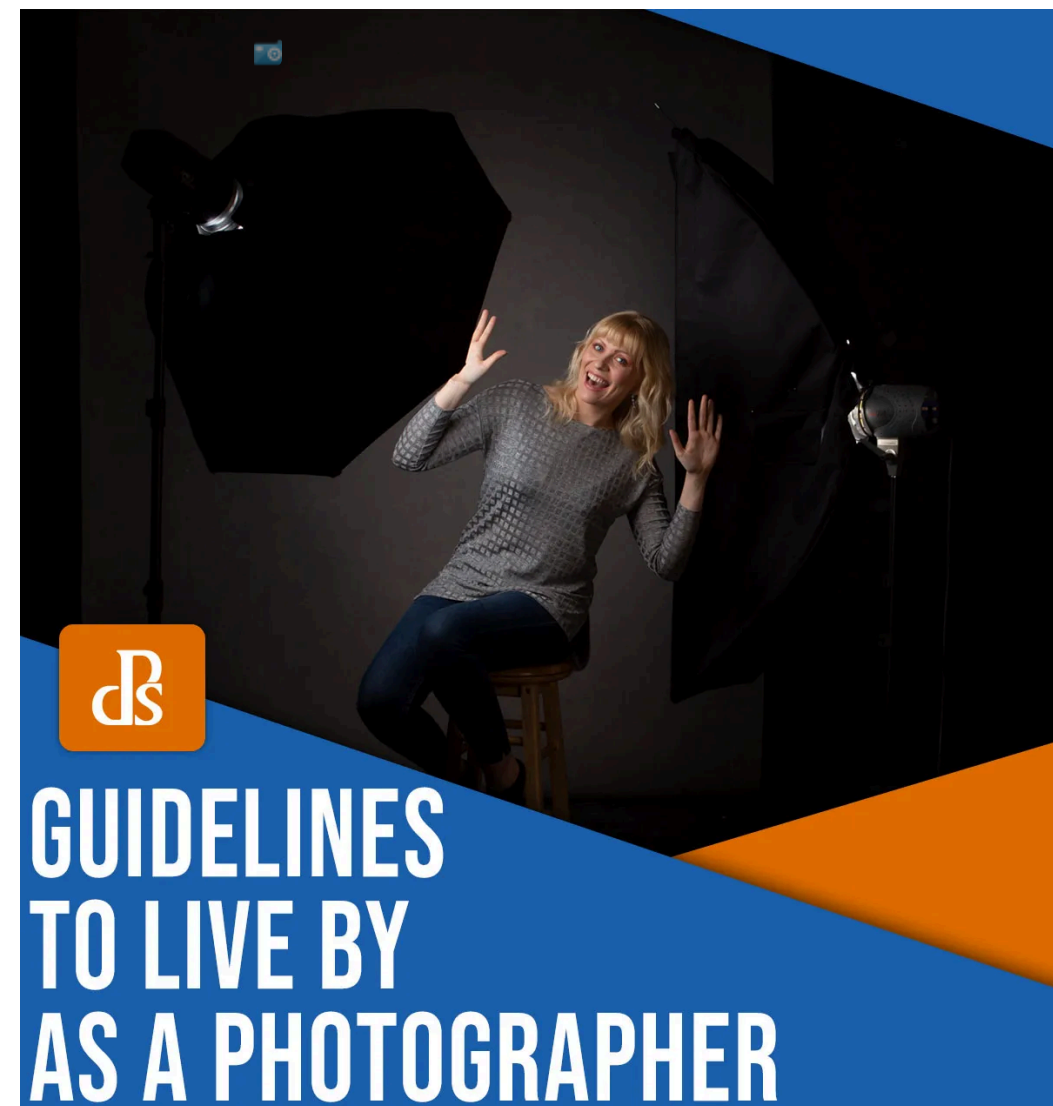


14 Guidelines for Photographers to Live By

A Post By: [John McIntire](#)



GUIDELINES TO LIVE BY AS A PHOTOGRAPHER

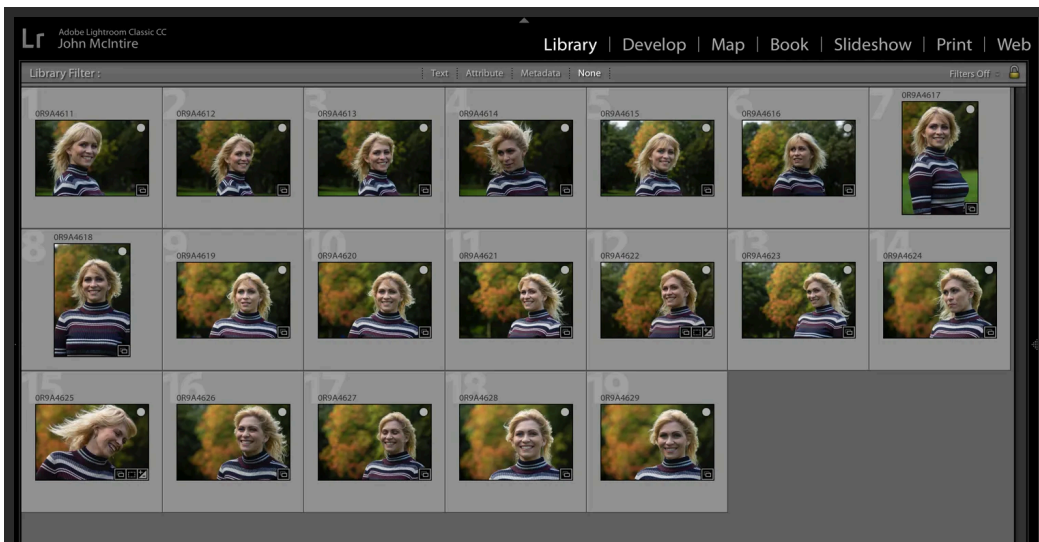
It doesn't matter if you're brand new to photography or a seasoned pro with decades of experience; at some point or another, you're going to develop some habits and behaviors that are counterproductive.

Without getting these habits in check, they can have a negative effect on your photography, whether on your **portfolio** in general, your love for the medium, or your **workflow**. Sometimes these behaviors can even be destructive to other people in ways you didn't realize.

In this article, I'll share 14 guidelines for photographers – designed to deal with some of these counterproductive behaviors and habits that I've come across. Now, none of these are *rules*, and I am not presenting them as such. If you feel that a guideline doesn't apply to you, I'm not claiming that you're wrong for feeling that way. These are merely my thoughts based on my experiences.

So without further ado, here are 14 guidelines for photographers to live by, starting with:

1. Shoot often, show few



Whether you shoot 10 photos at a time or 100, try to whittle your portfolio down to the very best and only show those images.

One of the best things you can do for your portfolio is reduce the number of images from any given session that you share with the public. It might seem counterintuitive, but by showing only the very best of your work, the quality of your portfolio and its impression on your viewers will increase.

Let's say that you have a **portrait session**, and you normally share 10-15 photos from a set. All of the images might be good, but chances are that one or two of those images are much better than the rest. By sharing all 15 photos, you aren't *adding* to the viewer's overall perception of quality; instead, you're diluting the quality of the best ones. So only share the very best shots – it's what will make them shine.

Of course, sharing fewer images also means that you won't have as many images to post on social media and in your portfolio. How do you counteract this deficit in content? Shoot more!

Now, this doesn't mean you should shoot more images of the same subject. It means you should shoot more in general. For instance, if you're a portrait shooter, then you should conduct more portrait sessions with more people.

This will give your portfolio more variety, and it'll also ensure that you have plenty of images to share.

2. Shoot outside your genre





As a portrait photographer, long exposures of buildings in the middle of the day are way outside my normal range. Shooting outside your niche every once in a while can help to give you realizations that you wouldn't have come to otherwise.

Canon 5D Mark III | Canon EF 16-35mm f/4L IS USM | 35mm | 326s | f/11
| ISO 100

Even if you don't specialize in a single particular niche with your photography, you will probably wind up shooting the same genre (or a couple of genres) over and over again.

While you may be perfectly happy photographing the same subjects repeatedly, you also might start developing habits that guide how you photograph things. When you get set in your ways like this, it can become increasingly difficult to shake those systems and try things in new ways.

One way to counteract this is to shoot in a genre outside of what you normally photograph. Photographing subjects that require a completely different skill set than what you are used to will force you to actively think about what you are doing instead of going through the motions. This has helped me to come up with a solution to an unrelated problem more than once, as it helps you think about things from a completely different angle.

Shooting outside of your genre can also act as something of a palette cleanser. As a **portrait photographer**, when I do a long stretch of shooting nothing but portraits, it can feel a bit monotonous and stale. Getting out and shooting a **landscape** feels like a breath of fresh air and helps get me excited about portrait photography again.



3. Share your knowledge



Sharing your knowledge with other photographers (whether it's lighting setups, post-processing techniques, or general camera-craft skills) can help to reinforce your own knowledge and strengthen the community.

There's an old negative cliché about photographers shutting down when asked how something was done (and mentioning the words "trade secret"). Fortunately, I haven't noticed any of this in recent years, and things have opened up quite a bit. That's a great thing for everybody.

Don't be afraid to share what you've learned. Not only will you be able to help someone else, but the act of trying to communicate something to somebody else only reinforces your understanding of it.

Everybody wins here. And I genuinely believe that when one of us grows, we all grow.

4. You are not special, so don't act like it



Hey, look at me! I have some fancy equipment. Perhaps I should lord that over others who don't! No, that is definitely not what you should do.

The barriers to entry for getting started in photography are lower than ever. The only thing that could be considered a real barrier is money, but only if you want to go all-in from the start and buy the fanciest camera and lenses.

Ultimately, this means that there's pretty much nothing stopping anyone interested in photography from getting into it.

So owning a camera does not make you special. Calling yourself a photographer does not make you special. Having a great portfolio opens doors that other photographers can't access, but it still does not make you special.

All too often, there are stories about photographers treating other people like dirt, acting entitled in public, and **trashing landscapes**. Photography forums can be some of the most toxic places on the internet. Yes, I know the vast majority of photographers aren't like that, but it doesn't excuse the poor behavior of the minority.

There is no reason to act that way. Be respectful to people. Be polite. Contrary to another old cliché, your photos do not speak for themselves, and acting decent will only help to strengthen people's impression of your photography.

If you don't want to be decent and you choose the other route, you may find that it closes a lot of doors – and there are a hundred other photographers right behind you, ready to take your place.

5. Learn constantly



Make it a point to learn new things. Here, I was trying to see what happened if I mixed flash and continuous lighting. The troubleshooting that followed gave me a better understanding of my equipment.

This is one of those things that is preached often in all walks of life and is critical for photographers to remember.

The world of photography is constantly changing. New technologies make it easier than ever to create images and get them out in the world. Therefore, new techniques and methods are popping up all the time.

By ensuring that you put regular effort into learning new skills (or into reinforcing old ones), you will stay ahead of the curve as things continue to change. Not only will this help improve your photography, but it will also help to enhance the skills that you already have. Things will take less time, and you will get more efficient.

By the way, this doesn't just apply to image-making. It also applies to other important aspects of photography, such as marketing.

6. Do the things you're sure won't work



Before I set up this shot, I was certain the background was too busy, but I liked the light. I was right about the background, but what did it cost me? A bit of memory and a few minutes, plus there was always the chance that I could have been wrong.

As you learn new things, you are going to have a lot of ideas.

Many of those ideas are going to be ridiculous. There's no way they could ever work out.

So do them anyway.

Taking on difficult, unlikely, or even impossible challenges is one of the fastest ways to learn. To get what you want, you must put your problem-solving skills through their paces.

Even if the result isn't up to scratch, you will almost certainly have learned something from the process that you can use in the future.

This is something I wish I had learned much sooner than I did. Take those crazy ideas and run with them. If nothing works out, don't show anyone!

7. Embrace clichés



This view of Staithes has been photographed by just about every photographer who has ever set foot here. It's about as clichéd as cliché gets. Does that mean you shouldn't bother taking your own shot? No, not at all. Shoot whatever you want and enjoy it.

Canon 5D Mark III | Canon EF 16-35mm f/4L IS USM | 28mm | 1/30s | f/6.3 | ISO 400

Okay, I can already hear you groaning, but hear me out.

Every genre in photography has concepts that have been shot over and over again by just about anybody that's ever picked up a camera.

It doesn't matter if we're talking about portraits, landscapes, [wildlife](#), or any other genre. If you need a visual example, search any photosharing site for "Derwent Water." This is a

lake in England's Lake District National Park. What you should find is the exact same shot of a certain jetty a couple of thousand times over. Want another example? Search for "Skógafoss."

So what?

Have they been done to death? Yes, definitely. Should you go there and take the same photo if you want to? Yes. Absolutely.

Should you take photos of **birds perched on sticks**? Should you take pictures of interesting doors? Should you take photos of swaddled **newborns**? Should you take photos of a ring on a book so the shadow looks like a heart?

Do you want to? Then the answer is "Yes."

When it comes to clichés in photography, photographers get bored with them because we see them all the time. What you have to ask yourself is *why* they have become clichés in the first place. What has drawn people to photograph these things again and again? The answer is usually because they resonate with an audience.

In other words:

These things are clichés because people love them.

The audience for your photography should not be photographers (more on this later), so don't be afraid to shoot

something you like, or that might resonate with your viewers, even if another photographer might brand it as clichéd.

8. Shoot for fun



Going out and taking photos for the sheer pleasure of taking photos is a great way to help ensure that your interest remains fired up.

Once you've been doing photography for a while, it is likely that, at some point, it's going to stop being fun for one reason or another. This happens all the time and it usually happens more than once.

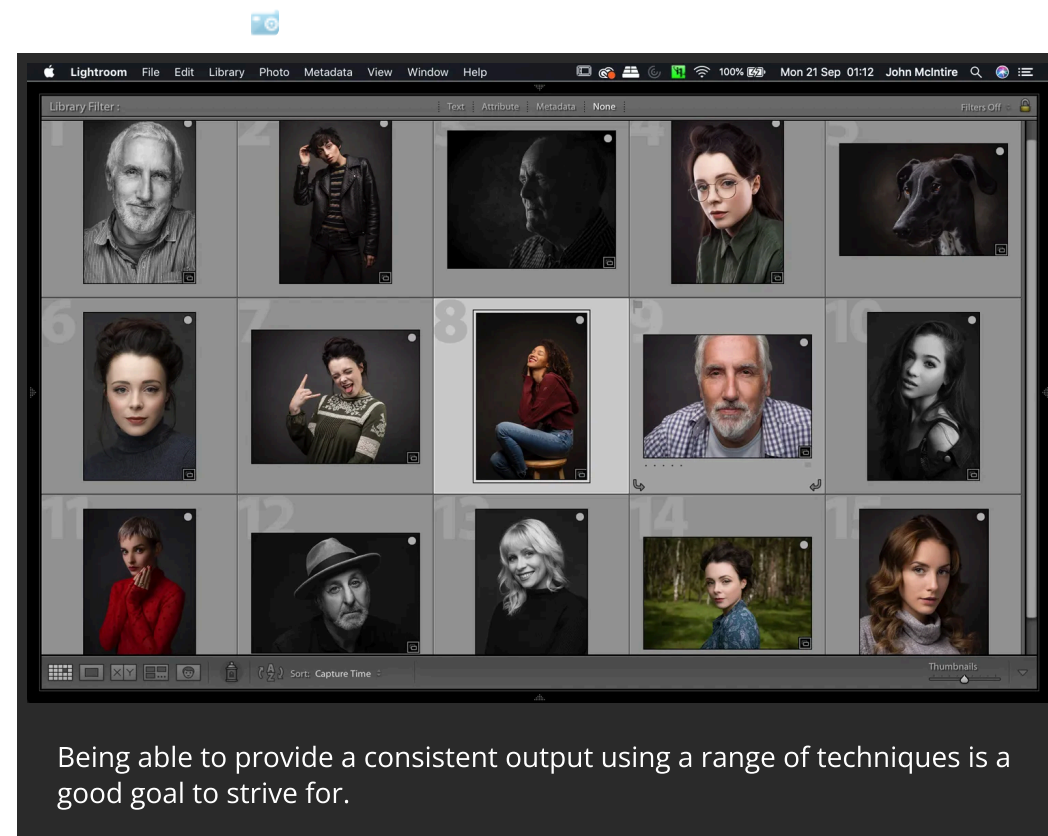
This can result in a lack of motivation that can lead to feelings of contempt for a hobby you used to love.

To help stop this process before it starts, regularly shoot something just because it would be fun to do so. You don't have to use the images for anything, but doing fun

photoshoots will help make sure you are still connecting with the reasons you got into photography in the first place.

If you're already experiencing a lack of motivation, do whatever you can to make sure that, the next time you pick up a camera, it is to do something solely for the sheer pleasure of photography.

9. Strive for consistency



A consistent output might just be one of the most underrated things a photographer can focus on.

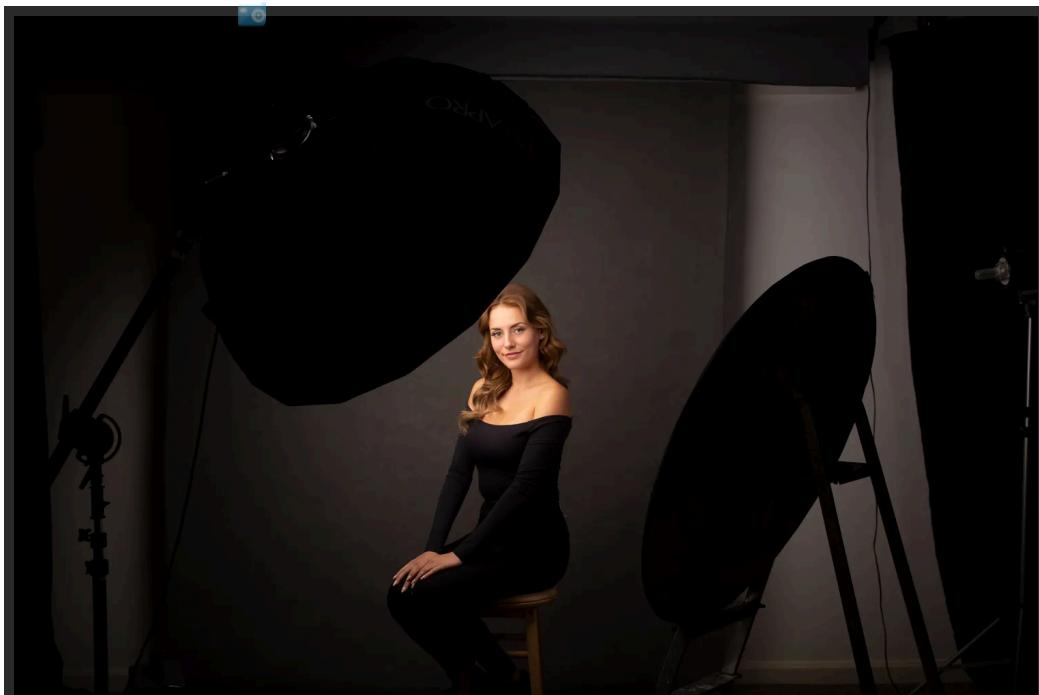
To be clear, in this instance, I am talking about consistency in quality. I'm talking about ensuring that every time you pick up a camera for a purpose beyond self-gratification, you are producing the best photos you can with a variety of techniques.

(There is a lot of value in consistency of **style** and presentation across a portfolio, but that is another point for another time.)

It will not serve you well as a photographer to have a well-curated portfolio that you show to potential clients if you are unable to reproduce the same quality of photos over and over again.

Having a good portfolio is only the first step. If you get something good that you feel is portfolio-worthy, hammer down the techniques and make sure you can get similar results whenever you need to.

10. Learn to love the process, not the output



Once you put an image out into the world, you have zero control over how it is received. Instead of worrying about how other people react, focus on and learn to love the process instead of people's reactions.

Is there a part of the image-making process that you don't like? Perhaps **retouching**? Early **sunrises**? Do you just slog through it to get to the end result? Have you gone through steps you don't like to get an image that you love, only to upload it somewhere or add it to your portfolio and find that it gets no response, or that people hate it?

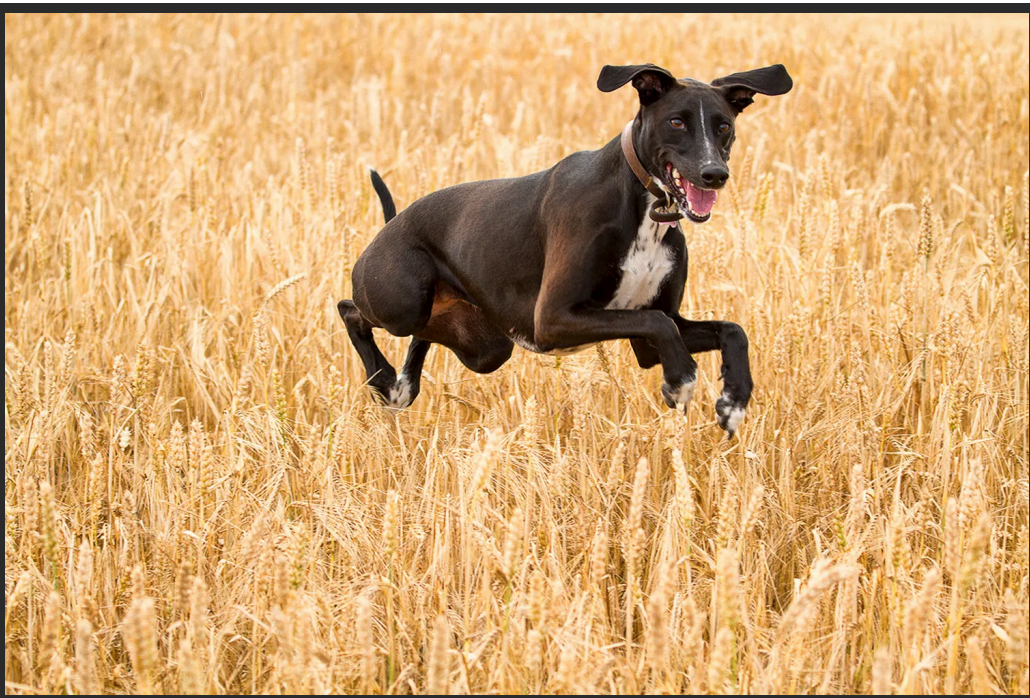
I suspect something similar has happened to every photographer at one point or another. But what do you do when an image or a body of work doesn't get the response you like or the one you expect?

Nothing. There is nothing you can do. You cannot control how other people react to things. If you can learn to accept that the only thing you can control is the process of creating the image, and then learn to love and focus on that process, you will be able to detach from the things you can't control.

When the inevitable does happen and you don't get the response you expected or wanted, you can shrug it off and move on to creating the next image.

11. Embrace harsh feedback





This is one of my most favorite images. I wouldn't change it for the world. Yet if I put my photography cap on, I can nitpick it until the end of time. That's good. I can still love this image and know to look out for things I could do better (like the awkward crop, the overly contrasty subject/background, and the slightly too-slow shutter speed) in the future.

One of the fastest ways to learn as a photographer is to solicit feedback from other photographers. Often, the best sort of feedback can also be the harshest, and it can be utterly deflating. Have you ever asked for a critique only to receive a huge list of errors? It can feel soul-crushing, especially to a new photographer. Unfortunately, embracing that sort of feedback remains one of the best ways to improve fast.

The trick is to learn how to detach from the emotional attachment you have with the image you created.

How do you do this? I wish I could say. The answer is different for everyone. Once you have managed to do it, you'll find it much easier to take on even the harshest feedback.

Now, harsh feedback does not always mean good feedback. A critique should never include prescriptive mandates, personal

attacks on character or motivation, unsolicited criticism, or abusive comments toward people in the images.

Also, take statements such as “I would have done such and such” with a grain of salt and judge their relevance on a case-by-case basis. If you come across any feedback like that, feel free to ignore it. The sort of person who behaves in that way does not have you or your photography in their best interests. They are only stroking their ego at your expense.

12. Don't force your ways onto others



In the studio, I like to bring the lights in as close to the subject as I can. This works for me, and I encourage other photographers to try it. Does that mean it's the right way to do things? Not a chance. It's one of a million ways and none of them are the single right way.

As photographers, we learn in different ways from different sources at different speeds. And we take the bits that work for

us and apply them in a way that gets the results we want.

Everybody is different. It doesn't matter if we are talking about **lens choice**, **lighting choices**, or retouching techniques. There is no right way, or proper way, to do anything in photography.

The only right way is the way that gets the job done.

I like to do my **dodging and burning** on separate gray layers. Other photographers like to do dodging and burning with **curves layers**. There are about a dozen other options that I can think of that all result in the same thing. It doesn't matter what your preference is. If someone prefers a different method to you, great.

Yes, you can and should advise others on how you go about things; that's all a part of sharing your knowledge, after all.

Just try to leave the prescriptive mandates such as *right* and *proper* out of it.

13. Stop marketing to photographers

If you are trying to get attention for your photography and you want to build an audience, then there is one demographic you should stop targeting:

Photographers.

Photographers rarely buy photography. A lot don't even consume it for any reason other than comparison. Sure, peer recognition and validation feel nice, but when it comes to getting your work out there or starting a photography business, it has very little tangible value.

It's as simple as that. Instead of posting your images where only photographers see them, look for the places where people are interested in the sort of subjects you cover.

Is this easy? No. If marketing were easy, then we'd all be rich and famous!

14. Your work is neither as good nor as bad as you think it is



To be honest, my own impression of my photography is not great. It goes with my overly self-critical nature. Whenever my images place in a contest (as this image did), it always comes as a surprise. It is hard to have an objective view of your own images.

Canon 5D Mark III | [Canon EF 50mm f/2.5 Macro](#) | 50mm | 1/125s | f/6.3
| ISO 100

Most of us don't have a good grasp on how other people see our work.

Some photographers think everything they produce is fantastic. Some think everything they produce is utter rubbish. (Before anyone asks, I'm in the "utter rubbish" category.)

The problem is that we, as humans, are rarely objective



For the more confident personalities, it can be disheartening or downright depressing to think a photo is great only to have it be rejected by a wider audience. If this happens enough times, it can spell the end of your passion for photography.

For the self-critical camp, that's only the beginning of the battle. I mean, what's the point in even trying when you know that whatever you do is going to wind up terrible, anyway?

If you fall into one of these extremes, one answer is to try your best to remove any self-judgment from the process, good or bad. Try to come at your images with an analytical approach, and as mentioned above, focus on the process – because you have no control over how anyone else might react.

Guidelines for photographers to live by: final words

I hope this article has provided you with some food for thought on how some of the habits and tendencies we can

develop as photographers negatively affect our output.

Even if you feel none of this applies to you, I hope you can see how evaluating your habits can lead you to a deeper understanding of how what you do and think affects your photography.

So remember these 14 guidelines for photographers; that way, you can learn and grow as much as possible.

Now over to you:

Are there any guidelines that I missed? And are there any additional negative behaviors that you often witness from photographers? Share your thoughts in the comments!

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