



How to Take Sharp Images (11 Simple Tips)

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HOW TO
TAKE

SHARP PHOTOS



If you want to capture sharp images consistently, then you've come to the right place.

Because while achieving clean, crisp, sharp photos may seem difficult, it's actually pretty easy – once you know the right techniques. And that's what I'll share in this article, today: my top 11 best tips, techniques, and secrets for sharper images.

So whether you're a beginner struggling to deal with blur, or an experienced photographer looking for that extra bit of crispness, read on!

1. Hold your camera correctly

What's the number one most common cause of image blur?

Camera shake.

When you press the shutter button, if your camera is moving even *imperceptibly*, you may end up with a blurry photo. This is especially true when shooting with telephoto lenses, at high magnifications, or in low light.

That's why, if you're looking to take sharper photos, you should brush up on your handholding technique. Grip your camera in one hand and cup a second hand under the lens. Keep the camera close to your body, keep your elbows tight, and – when possible – support yourself with a wall, a tree, or another solid object.

Also, make sure to press the shutter button *gently*, don't punch at it.





Proper handholding technique will provide a major increase in sharpness, *but* it's not foolproof. If you shoot in low light, you may struggle to get sharp handheld shots, which is where my next tip comes in handy:

2. Use a tripod

If sharp photos are your goal, then using a tripod is the absolute *best* thing you can do for yourself.



You'll need to buy a sturdy tripod, though; a cheap, plasticky model will offer limited gains (and may even increase the blur, depending on other factors).

If you're shooting long exposures at night, then a tripod is essential. I'd also recommend taking a tripod for most landscape photography, as well as situations where you're using a long lens.



Before grabbing your tripod, though, ask yourself: Is it really practical to bring this with me? If your tripod is relatively heavy and you're going on a long hike or traveling by plane, you may be better off without it. (Pro tip: If you like to do photography while traveling, invest in a good travel tripod. They're sturdy *and* compact!)

3. Select a fast shutter speed

Here's another major culprit of blurry photos:

A too-slow **shutter speed**.

You see, the shutter speed refers to the length of time the camera sensor is exposed to the light. And if the shutter speed is too long, elements of your image will have time to move (and your setup will have time to shake, as well).

If you're using a tripod and your subject is stationary (e.g., a desert landscape), you generally don't need to worry about using a fast shutter speed. But if you're handholding your camera *or* you're hoping to freeze fast action, then a fast shutter speed is essential.



How do you pick the right shutter speed for tack-sharp images? If your subject is *stationary*, use the **reciprocal "rule"** for handholding:

Your shutter speed should be faster than the lens's focal length.

So if your lens is 50mm, then shoot at 1/50s or above. If your lens is 100mm, then shoot at 1/100s and above. If your lens is 200mm, then shoot at 1/200s and above. Make sense?

The rule isn't perfect, and I recommend choosing your shutter speed conservatively (a too-fast shutter speed is rarely harmful). In particular, you'll need to err on the side of caution when

using a long lens, shooting at high magnifications, or shooting with an unstable foundation (e.g., you're standing on a chair).

Keep in mind that you cannot choose your shutter speed in isolation. If you increase the shutter speed, your images will turn out darker – unless you increase the **ISO** or widen the **aperture** to balance out the exposure.

4. Choose a narrow aperture

Aperture impacts the **depth of field** (the window of focus) in your images. And another reason for a blurry shot is either *missed focus* or a *too-thin depth of field*.

Now, by narrowing your aperture, you'll increase the window of focus in your images. An aperture of f/16 may keep the entire scene sharp (depending on various factors, including your lens's focal length). Whereas an aperture of f/2.8 will generally give a tiny window of sharpness.

So if your images are blurry because the depth of field is too thin, just dial in an aperture of f/8, f/11, or even f/16, and you should see a significant increase in sharpness.

Technically, if your images are blurry because you missed focus, you should work on your focusing technique (as I discuss below). But by narrowing the aperture (and consequently deepening the depth of field), you can give yourself a bit of extra leeway when shooting.

Note that narrowing the aperture will also darken the image, so you'll need to keep an eye on your exposure as you make adjustments. You can compensate by lowering the shutter speed or raising the ISO, but these have significant consequences, as I explain throughout this article.

5. Keep your ISO as low as possible

In several of the above tips, I've discussed the possibility of raising your ISO for a brighter exposure – and in certain cases, this is a good idea. A high ISO *will* increase the image exposure so you get a detailed photo.

However, high ISOs come with a downside, called *noise*. Noise is essentially little speckles of light and color across your shots, and when it gets out of hand, it can seriously impact sharpness.

So what ISO should you use for sharp images? It depends on your camera, and high-ISO noise performance is improving all the time. These days, you can often get away with an ISO of up to 800 or 1600, especially if you use a recent full-frame camera.

And if you're in a situation where you *need* a fast shutter speed (e.g., you're shooting an indoor sport), it's better to boost the ISO than to underexpose all your photos.

But whenever possible, set your ISO to its base value. *That's* how you'll get the sharpest photos.

(Note that you can also reduce noise in post-processing. But this generally comes with a slight dip in image quality, so be careful!)

6. Turn on your image stabilization

Many cameras and lenses offer image stabilization, which is designed to cleverly counteract camera shake.

So if your equipment has this option, use it. Image stabilization certainly isn't perfect, but it'll let you handhold at very slow shutter speeds, especially if you're using top-of-the-line image-stabilized equipment. In some low-light situations, you can even get away without using a tripod.

Keep in mind that image stabilization helps with camera movement but not subject movement – so if you're shooting low-light action, it won't offer improved sharpness (though a few lenses do offer sharpness gains when panning in low light; for more details, consult your lens manual).

And one more thing:

If you mount your camera to a tripod and drop the shutter speed below 1/80s or so, then turn *off* image stabilization. You won't need the stabilization – your tripod will keep your pictures sharp – and active image stabilization on a rock-solid base can actually increase blur.



7. Improve your focusing technique (and use the right settings)

If you often find that the *wrong* part of your photo is sharp, then you're dealing with a focusing issue.

First, I'd recommend [checking your focusing settings](#). When photographing stationary subjects, make sure your camera is set to AF-S (One-Shot AF on Canon). And when photographing moving subjects, set your camera to AF-C (AI-Servo on Canon).

Also, adjust your focusing points. The best choice will depend on the scenario, but a single-point setting generally works for still subjects, while a group of AF points or some form of AF tracking is better for moving subjects.

When focusing on fast-moving subjects, make sure to look through the viewfinder, not the LCD. And pan your camera along with the subjects (and continue to pan, even after you've hit the shutter button).

When focusing on stationary subjects, it's often best to use the focus-and-recompose technique, where you grab focus on your area of interest, continue to half-press the shutter button (this will *lock* focus), then recompose until you get the result you want. Only *then* should you press the shutter button down the rest of the way.

Pro tip: If you're photographing a subject in near darkness or up close and your lens keeps missing focus, just switch over to manual focus. Then carefully adjust the point of focus using the focus ring on the lens barrel. Sure, it's a slower technique, but at least it gets the job done!

8. Make sure your lenses are sharp

This one is for DSLR and mirrorless owners:

Invest in the best lenses you can afford, because they can majorly impact image sharpness.

Kit zooms (such as the 18-55mm glass that's often bundled with beginner cameras) tend to be on the soft side, especially compared to pro-level lenses offered by major lens manufacturers.

If you don't have a big budget but you want to upgrade your lenses, check out fixed-focal-length options (called *primes*). These tend to cost very little, yet the image quality is outstanding.

Alternatively, you can look for pro-level zooms on the used market; you can often grab them for half the price you'd pay for a new item.



Shortly after buying my first DSLR, I was in the market for an everyday zoom lens that would give me both wide and telephoto zoom capabilities. I bought a [Canon EF 28-135mm lens](#). It was a good lens (and reasonably priced), but the sharpness was lacking. A few months later, I borrowed a [Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L lens](#) ("L" is Canon's professional series of lenses), and I was amazed by the difference in sharpness. While the first lens was good for what I paid for it, I ended up going for an upgrade (and the new lens is almost permanently attached to my camera!).

By the way, before you go spend a fortune on new glass, it's worth asking: Are my lenses *really* that soft? Sure, you may not use thousand-dollar lenses, but plenty of lenses are good *enough*,

especially if you mostly just share your images on social media.

9. Get your eyes checked

It may surprise you, but poor vision can decrease image sharpness, too! You may fail to acquire perfect focus, you may accidentally focus in the wrong place, or you might not notice if your lens has a focusing problem.

So get your eyes checked! I recently got mine tested for the first time in a number of years, and I was surprised to find that they'd deteriorated significantly. Getting new glasses improved a number of areas of my life, one of which was my photography.

On a related note, if your camera has a *diopter*, then adjust it. A diopter is a little wheel positioned next to your viewfinder, and it lets you tweak the sharpness of the viewfinder image. The diopter is particularly useful for people with poor eyesight because it can compensate for bad vision (that way, you won't have to wear glasses when out shooting!).

10. Clean your equipment

Over time, your lenses will pick up dirt, dust, smudges, fingerprints, and various other items – all of which can decrease sharpness.

So purchase a camera cleaning kit (you can [buy them on Amazon for just a few dollars](#)), then dedicate an hour or so to cleaning *all* your lenses. You'll need to work carefully, because bad cleaning technique can permanently scratch or stain your lens elements.

Similarly, if you have a DSLR or mirrorless camera, dust can get into the sensor and cause unwanted blotches. I'd recommend letting professionals handle a sensor clean – it can be damaging when done wrong – but if you've noticed unpleasant spots all across your pictures, then it might be time to get one done.

11. Use your lens's aperture sweet spot

As you adjust your lens's aperture, the image will become *softer* and *sharper* depending on the setting.

Wide apertures, such as f/2.8, tend to be softer, whereas the "sweet spot" range is generally around f/8. (Go too narrow, and you'll start to see softening due to diffraction, so I'd recommend stopping before f/13 or so.)

Of course, the specifics depend on your lenses, so be sure to carefully test each one; take a series of shots at different apertures, then pixel-peep on your computer to identify the sharpest files.

By the way, if you own a zoom lens, you may also want to test sharpness across its focal length range. Many zooms get softer as you move toward the extremes, and by identifying the optimal focal lengths, you can get even sharper images.

How to take sharp images: final words

Now that you've finished this article, you know that capturing sharp photos isn't *hard* – it simply involves improving your knowledge and technique.

So follow the tips I've shared above, and your images are basically guaranteed to improve.

Now over to you:

Which of these tips do you plan to use? And do you have any tips of your own for taking sharp photos? Share your thoughts in the comments below!

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