



When to Use Continuous Shooting in Photography

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From the perspective of someone whose first language is not English, the term “shooting” does not immediately conjure the idea of cameras. However, it makes sense at some level, because the Continuous Shooting mode on your camera is a very fast-paced tool indeed. In this article, I will introduce the Continuous Shooting setting in photography and explain how to use it... usefully and peacefully.



NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 400mm f/4.5 VR S @ 400mm, ISO 400, 1/2500, f/5.0

Back in my early days with 35mm film, my camera of choice was a Nikon FM3a. A beautiful SLR with manual film rewind. Each “click” had to be followed by an automatic thumb movement that rewound the film to the next frame. Of course, the frame rate with manual rewind was not breathtaking.

After some time, I bought an external MD-12 motor on eBay. It was a hungry, heavy monster that needed eight batteries, but it was capable of rewinding film at the blazing speed of three frames per second (FPS)! If you can’t remember what those cameras sounded like, [the Australian Lyrebird in this video](#), starting at 1:50, will remind you.

I then switched to digital cameras, which already had continuous shooting built into their algorithms, and the golden era of “pray and spray” could begin. But the beginnings were quite tentative. My first DSLR, the Nikon D70, had the same frame rate of 3 FPS as my Nikon FM3a. Not having to feed the MD-12 beast and not having to pay to press the shutter button, however, was a nice addition.

Today I shoot with the Nikon Z9, which can manage 20 FPS or more depending on the mode. It’s a great achievement, but what is all this speed for, and how can it be used effectively? That’s what I’ll cover in this article.



What Is Continuous Shooting in Photography?

Continuous shooting is a mode where your camera continues taking photos automatically as you hold down the camera's shutter button. You don't need to press the shutter button for each photo; rather, you can hold down the shutter button instead.

Continuous shooting does not always mean that you're taking dozens of photos per second. Most cameras today have a "high" and "low" continuous shooting mode. The "high" mode might be able to take 10 or more photos per second. Meanwhile, the "low" mode may only take 3-4 photos per second (sometimes even less). But it still counts as continuous shooting, so long as the camera keeps automatically taking pictures as you hold down the shutter button.

Why Use the Continuous Shooting Mode?

The purpose of continuous shooting is to make it easier to take multiple photos in a row. For that reason, it is usually used whenever the subject of your photo is too fast and difficult to predict.

Although I agree with Henri Cartier-Bresson's concept of the "decisive moment," my perception of the world – and my reaction time – are not so fast that I can always press the shutter at the *most* decisive moment. It may work in street photography, but not so much in wildlife photography. That's why I often use continuous shooting and then choose the right photo afterwards, once all the photos are safely on my computer.

A classic example of the appropriate use of continuous shooting is when photographing birds in flight. The smaller the bird, the faster it can flap its wings, and the harder it is to catch the right moment. Getting the right wing position on a hummingbird is down to luck – or taking a high number of photos per second. This is the time to use "continuous high" if you can, since it will maximize the FPS of your camera.





NIKON D500 + 300mm f/2.8 @ 300mm, ISO 2000, 1/1000, f/6.3

However, continuous shooting is also useful even when the subject is barely moving. For example, your subject could blink or change their expression in a small way. However, you usually don't need to photograph slow-moving subjects in 20 FPS of detail. Keeping your camera on "continuous low" and shooting at 3-4 FPS is plenty in such a situation.

And why not take single frames? Along with the aforementioned problems of blinking or changing expression, there is also the simple value of taking photos for backup. Maybe there is some motion blur in one of your photos, for example. This is especially true if it's getting dark and you're right on the edge of using a safe [shutter speed](#). By taking multiple photos, you make it more likely that one of them is sharp. And by using continuous shooting, you can take those photos as quickly as possible!



NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 400mm f/4.5 VR S @ 400mm, ISO 2500, 1/60, f/6.3

A unique type of photo that benefits from continuous shooting is if you want to create a composite to show multiple versions of your fast-moving subject in the same frame. A good example is [the jump of Orlando Duque and Michal Navratil from the railway bridge in Vyton, Prague](#), taken by [Dan Vojtech](#). This composite was created by taking multiple photos with continuous shooting and then stitching them together in Photoshop. (By the way, a bit of historical interest. The Vysehrad castle in the background dates back to the second half of the 10th century and was the seat of Czech kings.)

To end this article, let me show you an example – not from bird photography, but from family photography. If you’ve ever photographed children, you’ll probably agree that these energetic creatures are not easy to capture in a photo. They’re always jumping, running, and climbing. The following four photos were taken just 1/10th of a second apart, yet each one tells a slightly different story. If it weren’t for the “continuous high” setting on my camera, I never could have captured the full progression.



NIKON D500 + Nikon AF-S NIKKOR 50mm f/1.8G @ 50mm, ISO 2000, 1/1000, f/2.2



NIKON D500 + Nikon AF-S NIKKOR 50mm f/1.8G @ 50mm, ISO 2000, 1/1000, f/2.2



NIKON D500 + Nikon AF-S NIKKOR 50mm f/1.8G @ 50mm, ISO 2000, 1/800, f/2.2



NIKON D500 + Nikon AF-S NIKKOR 50mm f/1.8G @ 50mm, ISO 2000, 1/800, f/2.2



NIKON D500 + Nikon AF-S NIKKOR 50mm f/1.8G @ 50mm, ISO 2000, 1/800, f/2.2

And that's why it pays to learn about continuous shooting as a photographer – so that you don't (metaphorically) face-plant when you're taking photos of a fast subject!

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