

Assignment

Black and White Photography

Have you ever noticed how some black and white photos just stand out? And when you go to try and take the same kind of photo it just doesn't do the same thing?

There are a couple of starting pointers about black and white photography with a digital camera. The first thing is that to make a good black and white photo you must have good texture. Texture, or what something is made of, seems to be enhanced with grey scale.

Certain textures, such as natural textures seem to respond well in black and white. Black and white is all about capturing a sense of the dramatic, so if your subject has texture that is naturally dramatic, then you have the first step to a good b&w photo. Textures such as wood grain, stark metal, repeated patterns in nature such as waves or spirals seem to work well.

With black and white, try to keep some symmetry in your texture. It's easier to create stunning black and white photos when you have symmetry in your texture because it can sometimes be lost in colour. Symmetrical textures in black and white are consistently beautiful and offer something the eye cannot capture as well when working in colour.

Grey scale is not just the absence of colour, or everything taken in shades of grey. To understand and master black and white photography with your digital camera you must understand the concept of grey scale.

Grey scale is a spectrum of black, lots of grey and white, like the colours of a rainbow but in a series of black and white and grey tones. A black and white photo is not really only black and white; it is actually lots of different shades and different depths of grey. So when we talk about grey scale it just means the way we measure tones of grey. Included in the grey scale is of course black and white.

When finding what looks good in black and white you can start with high contrasting colours in your every day subjects at home. Stark colours such as red, deep purples and bright yellows can make a really good starting point. With bold colours such as these, your camera will interpret them differently. It's almost as if the camera leaves out what the eye distinguishes as that particular colour and keeps the intensity there. I won't go into the technical stuff but just try experimenting on those colours. If you can't find these colours around your home, try going out into the garden and taking flowers that have these colours, or go to a nursery, plant store or public gardens.

Black and white is not just 'no colour'. It's so much more, so much deeper than that. The purpose of black and white nowadays (as opposed to when it was the standard and people had no choice) is that it creates a sense of stillness in time, and with the right perspective, a great story.

There are at least four 'key ingredients' that will help you to visualize whether a scene will work as a black and white image or not.

1. Look for Contrast

One of the elements that can give interest to a black and white shot is contrast. Because you can't use colour to distinguish one element of your image from another the tonal variances become all the more important. This doesn't mean you need to look for stark contrasts in every shot you want to convert to black and white - the subject matter will come into play here - but you should ponder how the contrast will come into play when composing your shot.

2. Wait for the Right Light

Linked to contrast, the lighting in a black and white shot can be very important. For example, direct lighting will often add to contrast. Side lighting will reveal any texture that a subject might have (and in portraits will accentuate features) and light from any one direction will create shadows. All of these techniques can add interest to a black and white image - however they can also be distracting - so play with light with care.

3. Shapes and Patterns

Patterns or shapes that can sometimes almost go unseen in colour (due to the colour itself drawing attention) can come alive in a black and white shot. Black and White shots that rely upon pattern can often take on an abstract quality.

4. Capture Texture

I've already mentioned this above when talking about side lighting - but revealing the texture of a subject can add a new dimension to an image. The sidelight does this by creating shadows.

Plus - A Tip for Black and White Landscapes

When shooting black and white landscapes look for 'active skies'. That means some clouds! Yes, a perfect blue sky can be darkened to give mood but, with a digital image, this can go seriously wrong in post-processing. The skies in good landscapes can be breathtaking with wonderful cloud formations and what often looks like storms about to break. Having skies with so much 'action' in them add mood and a really dynamic look and feel. Without this active element the images looked rather empty and dull. The same principle could be applied to most types of black and white images that have large parts of them dominated by any one thing. If a large part of your image is all the same tone the image can look quite lifeless (unless of course you're going for a more minimalist look).

Seeing in Black and White

One thing some photographers and filmmakers talk about is 'seeing in black and white.' Whether they are shooting in black and white or colour, seeing in B&W is a useful skill to learn. If you can ignore the colour, you can tell whether an image will work or not when converted (or taken) in B&W. Also, what makes a B&W image good can also improve a colour image (contrast, use of light, shapes, form etc.)

So what happens if you can't see in B&W?

Well, for some photographers, you don't need to, you can let your camera do it for you. If you shoot in RAW all the time, any changes made to the camera's parameters: sharpness, contrast, saturation etc don't affect the RAW file. Neither does the B&W setting!

It DOES affect the preview you get on the LCD screen, so you will see your photo in B&W immediately after taking the shot, but the RAW file will still have all of the colour information. So you can instantly tell if the shot will work in B&W but also still have the option of keeping it in colour.

So - some more practical Black and White Photography Tips

1. Shoot in RAW

I know many members don't shoot in RAW (because their camera doesn't offer it, or they don't know how or don't like to) but for the most control in the post production phase of converting your colour images into black and white ones - you'll want to shoot in RAW if your camera does allow it. Of course shooting in JPEG doesn't stop you shooting in black and white - but if it's an option, give RAW a go, you might be surprised by what it offers you in post production. If post-processing isn't really for you, you can usually shoot the normal Jpegs in black and white. If you do this, though, you lose a lot of the control over the image. So.....

2. Shoot in Colour (if you really must)

If your camera doesn't allow you to shoot in RAW (or you choose not to) - shoot in colour and do your conversion to black and white later on your computer.

While most digital cameras offer you the option to shoot in Black and White (and can produce some reasonable results) you have more control over your end results if you have the colour data to work with in your conversion on your computer.

3. Low ISO

Shoot with the lowest possible ISO possible. While this is something that most of us do in colour photography it is particularly important when it comes to black and white where noise created by ISO can become even more obvious. If you're after this 'noise' (or grain) you can always add it later in your post production - but it's harder to go the other way and take noise out. So the exception to this is - if you don't do much post-processing and you want grain, shoot at a higher ISO (over 400).

4. When to Shoot

Many digital photographers actually prefer to shoot images for Black and White in low contrast situations. So a dark or overcast day can be a great time to shoot outdoor shots.

Ironically these are the days that those who shoot only in colour sit at home complaining about the 'poor light'. So next time you find yourself with a dark and gloomy day - go out with the intention of shooting some black and white shots.

5. Composition

Most of the general tips on how to compose or frame a good shot apply just as well to black and white photography as they do when shooting in colour - however the main obvious difference is that you're unable to use colour to lead the eye into or around your shot. This means you need to train yourself to look at shapes, tones and textures in your frame as points of interest. Pay particularly attention to shadows and highlights which will become a feature of your shot.

Versatility

B&W is a format, or style, that suits almost any type of photography. Portraits, landscapes, urban landscapes, architecture. Not only that, it's a medium that adapts really well to all lighting situations. Whereas colour photography often works best on sunny days or in brightly lit studios - low light just makes a black and white image moody.

No Distractions

Colours can be distracting in some images and can take the focus away from your subject. In portrait work you will find that taking the colour out of an image lets the subject speak for themselves. It's raw, it's stripped back, it's honest and it allows you to show the true person. It's also nostalgic *and* trendy at the same time - that's quite a clever trick!

Subtlety of Tones

In a world that often boasts about how many millions of colours a TV or monitor is able to produce - 'Mono' has such a variety of the tones. Black and White sounds so boring - but the fact is that there are so many shades in between - and there's a challenge in bringing them all out in an image!

Variety

The creative process with black and white images is very satisfying. Black and White images can be strong, high contrast and powerful - or they can be so soft, gentle and subtle.

Of course the choice of black and white vs colour is a very personal one. For every person who loves shooting mono there are others who much prefer the vibrancy of colour photography. But when stripped down to basic elements, monochrome images that have subtlety of tone and texture, and composition of lines and shapes, you'll be very glad you've gone in this direction.