Manual Focus – do you need it?

Auto focus is just fine in a large variety of shooting scenarios, but there are occasions when manual focus is better. In some situations, auto-focus doesn't perform as well on some cameras, so simply rotate the focus mode selector to Manual and use the focus ring to sharpen the subject in view. It is also worth remembering that it can be easier in some situations to use the focus lock, in this instance simply focus on another subject at the same distance and then recompose the frame accordingly. In addition, you could focus on what you want, half depress the shutter button and then re-compose the shot.

1. Fine details in close proximity

When shooting a scene that compromises lots of elements, manual focus may be necessary for complete control. This is especially useful when the subject(s) exhibits small or no variation in size, shape, colour or brightness. For example a field of flowers, a nature abstract close up, a busy high street packed with pedestrians etc.

2. Obstacles are in the way

If your subject is partially blocked behind an obstacle that you are unable to move out of the way or intend to keep (adding context), manual focus can help you to pinpoint the main subject. Furthermore if you team this approach with a wide aperture, you can creatively blur the obstruction from view. For example a caged or penned animal, a person looking from a window or stood behind a gate etc.

3. Geometric confusion

Many architectural photographers will often favour manual focus over auto. This is because modern architecture often exhibits geometric patterns that can confuse the camera's auto focus. For example those shown on skyscrapers.

4. High contrast

With a scene that contains large areas of sharply contrasting brightness, your auto-focus may struggle. For example if you are shooting an outdoor portrait with the subject in the shade, but have decided to incorporate a large area of adjoining light.

5. No contrast

As with areas of high contrast, photographers may find that scenes with no contrast present the same focusing issues, i.e. the main subject of your image exhibits the same tones and colours as its background. Consider a freshly built snowman in a field of crisp white snow.

6. Dominating features

Compositions that contain objects that are bigger or bolder than the intended subject may also throw off your auto-focus For instance a person dwarfed in front of an intimidating cityscape may be lost using auto-focus, switch to manual for a quick and effective solution.

7. Night

In situations where you want to shoot in complete darkness you may find manual focus is your only option. Examples of when this may be true include: shooting star trials, the northern lights or creating light graffiti. Often focusing at night is a case of trial and error, so scrutinize results by zooming in to the images presented on your LCD and adjust accordingly.

8. Mirrors

When dealing with mirrors (and reflection from water surfaces), your AF can lock on trails of dust and dirt, there are times when it locks on the position of the mirror itself and almost none of the time it will it finds the focus in the reflected scene. Just go to Manual and make sure you're getting what you want in focus.