Day 21: Work the Scene

About Working the Scene

Don't just take a few pictures and move on.

Take many shots from different angles and perspectives.

Overcoming Resistance to Working the Scene

- Remember digital is free
  - No film charges
  - No development charges
- Data is cheap
- You should ignore your "hit rate."
  - No one is examining your hard drive to look at the other pictures you took.
- This does not mean "machine gun" a scene

Application

Portraits, fashion, models: The top photographers use many angles, shots, and perspective.

Landscapes: The top photographers take thousands of photos and hope to get just a few.

Those who have studied the top pros discovered that they all work in the basically same way - by working the scene hard!

How to do it

Find your spot and work it from every angle

The same holds true if you are shooting a subject or a person..

If you have a tripod, consider using a “sketching” process first.

Additional Commentary



Sometimes the process of working the scene will have totally unexpected results. On this sunrise shoot, I was actually photographing the beach, which is behind me in this shot. Because I kept looking for different angles and different shots, I noticed the clouds behind the hotel. That resulted in a better picture than anything I got by looking out to sea that morning.

- *Exposure: Shutter Speed 1/6 seconds; Aperture f/16; ISO 100*
- *Focal Length: 23 mm*
- *Location: Don Cesar, St. Petersburg, Florida*

In today's lesson you will not learn a new camera technique or compositional element, but don't let that worry you. What we are talking about today will be a very important way for you to improve your photography. What we will talk about his "working the scene." If you have gotten down what we've covered so far, this is a way to dramatically improve.

Working the Scene

Working the scene simply means taking a lot of pictures of the same thing but in different ways. When you have a subject you want to photograph, whether that is a place, person, or a thing, don't just take a shot or two and move on. Rather, take many photographs from different

angles, from different perspectives, with different focal lengths, and so on. Sometimes the changes should be very minor, as in a slight deviation from the prior photo. Other time the changes should be major, where are you rethink the entire photo.

Why You Should Work the Scene

Why should you do this? A lot of reasons. Here are a few:

1. You might not have actually got the shot the first time. Sometimes pictures don't look as great as we think they do when we first see them on our LCDs. In addition, there may be a lack of sharpness or other defect in the picture that you could cure by taking another shot.
2. You will have better ideas. Often the first shot that comes in to our mind is a rather obvious shot that could end up being somewhat boring. By working received we can generate additional ideas that might prove to be more creative.

Another reason is that this is simply how great photographers work. Those that have taken a look at how others work have discovered that they tend to work in remarkably similar ways. They might snap a shot or two here and there, but once they find a subject that really interest them, they work it hard. They will work it from every conceivable angle and perspective. I have found, in observing other photographers whom I consider to be very good at what they do, this is generally how they work.



Here is an example of working the scene in a different context. I lined up the scene and took many different shots with different waves. I didn't actually move much, I just kept trying different shots as the waves came in and let the elements do the work for me.

Overcoming Resistance

You will face internal resistance to working the scene. Sometimes the resistance is real. We might not have all day to shoot and we might be holding up traveling companions. Most often, however, the resistance is imagined.

It is as if we believe that someone in the world is measuring our "hit rate." But that simply never happens. No one looks at your hard drive determine the percentage of great shots you took as compared to the duds. Think about this from your own perspective: when you see a great picture you do not think about other possible failures that photographer took. You don't know if this was one shot or one of many (and you don't care either). All you know is that you are looking at a great shot.

If you are a photographer from the film era, this can be a significant mental hurdle. Back in the film days every shot cost you money. You had to buy the film, which came in rolls of 24 or 36 (which seems *so tiny* now). You also had to pay additional amounts for processing of every shot you took. The costs could add up fast. Back then, most of us would never rattle off several slightly different variations of the same shot because it would cost a fortune. Now, however, digital is free (once you have the camera). You can take many slightly different shots of the same thing and it costs you nothing. We should all take full advantage of it.

Note that I'm not saying to simply "machine gun" a subject. You shouldn't waste time ratting off worthless shots. Volume on its own won't get you anywhere. And this is not a call to work fast. Rather, take your shots at whatever speed you are comfortable. Consider them carefully. Often working slow can significantly improve results. But at the same time you should still take different variations of the shot.



Grey Whale Cove

- *Exposure: Shutter Speed 1/4 seconds; Aperture f/16; ISO 100*
- *Focal Length: 17 mm*
- *Location: Grey Whale Cove, San Mateo County, California*

Different Applications

We've talked about working the scene, how you do it, and why you should do it. But is this advice really for you? After all, there are lots of different types of photographers. The answer is "yes" - this advice applies to nearly everyone. Consider the following examples:

- **Portrait photographers:** When is the last time you saw a fashion photographer snap one shot and declare "mission accomplished"? Never. They take dozens and perhaps hundreds of shots. They declare each one "beautiful" but they keep shooting anyway. At the end of the shoot - where they may have taken hundreds of shots - they will whittle it down to a small number. So if you concentrate your photography on shooting people, keep that in mind.
- **Landscape photographer:** In the realm of landscape photography, the photographers of National Geographic were always considered among the best. When they would go out

on assignment in the hopes of getting 6 - 12 "keepers" for publication, they would take several thousand shots. I have read that 10,000 shots per assignment was pretty common. While I'm not saying you should take anywhere near that many shots, if these photographers were the best at what they did and this is how we did it, it seems like we ought to apply that to our own photography.

Even if you're not a fashion photographer or a National Geographic photographer, why not learn from those who are the masters of the craft? If these photographers still need to take multiple pictures of the same thing in order to ensure they are getting the best shot, then don't you as well?

Sketching

Take multiple shots is difficult if you are someone that uses a tripod. Every shot involves moving the tripod and resetting everything. However, you can work the scene *before* taking final shots by using a process referred to as "sketching."

In sketching, you will take many shots from different angles and perspectives as sort of test shots. You don't worry about the overall exposure or sharpness of these test shots - you won't be keeping them. Therefore, go ahead and crank up the ISO and open up the aperture all the way so you can use a fast shutter speed and work quickly. After that, just walk around your location or subject and get a sense of things. Take your test shots and note which angles and spots you like the best. When you have one or two that you like, put your camera back on the tripod and reset your exposure settings. Then take your final picture.

The main downside to working with the tripod is the lack of mobility and how difficult it is to try different shots. By using the scheduling process, you can overcome that, but then still have all the benefits of the tripod for the final shot(s).

An Example

Here's an example from my own work that might help you visualize this process. I was in New York and decided to go out photographing at night. I had never photographed from the Manhattan Bridge before, so I decided to give that a shot. I walked across the bridge and back, looking for good overlook spots. I shot from about 6 different spots and took many pictures from each spot. I ended up with this shot, which I was happy with:



As already mentioned, I didn't just walk up to the bridge, fire off a shot, and walk home. I took many, many shots. At the same time, I wasn't just rapid firing indiscriminately. I was trying hard. Nevertheless, there were failures. Lots of them. Hare are but a few of them:



There were no alarms or bells that went off when I took the picture that I ultimately decided to use. At that time, this was simply one of a bunch of shots I took. When I took this shot I had no idea that this shot was the one I would ultimately use. In fact, the final image was actually only a test shot that I took after setting up my tripod. However, I was never able to capture all the elements of the scene as well again. I didn't know it at the time, it just worked out that way.

The final picture may only be incrementally better than the other shots I took, but the point that it *is* better (in my mind at least). How much money do we all spend trying to get photos that are a tiny bit better? Why not take a few extra shots and achieve the same thing?

Day 21 Assignment

On Assignment

Description:

Head to the closest landmark for your city, town, or area. I'm talking about the most famous building, vista, plaza, bridge, or other thing for your area. Pretend you are on an assignment from a famous magazine and you need to get *the* photograph of it. Work the scene until you have it.

Keys to Success:

- Get the shots that seem obvious to you. Take them first and get them out of the way. But don't overlook them. Sometimes what is obvious to you isn't obvious to others.
- After that, it is time to get creative. Think about different focal lengths (zoom in and out), different perspectives (high and low), and different angles (right and left). Walk all around your subject. Work it!
- Don't forget to work with your exposure controls to set different moods and create effects.

Upon Completion of this Assignment:

This is your chance to put everything you've learned so far to work. Use the exposure, shooting, and composition tips to create the best picture possible of your local landmark. Your local chamber of commerce should want this picture!