

Congratulations on getting a new digital SLR. It's only natural that you can't wait to start using it, but it's worth spending a few minutes configuring your camera correctly first. Not only will this save you time and effort in the long run, it's a good way of familiarising yourself with your camera's layout, and its various features and functions.



Camera settings - step 1: Select the highest quality

Choosing the right file format, ISO and white balance settings will put you on the right path to top quality results. When it comes to file formats, you really will eventually want to shoot in RAW rather than JPEG. The extra data that's captured by shooting in the uncompressed RAW format gives you more flexibility to improve your shots post-shoot if necessary. Shooting RAW does mean a potentially lengthier period sat in front of your computer, but the results are worth it. For starting out on a new camera, though, JPEG is probably the best way to go until you've got everything sorted out.

Try to keep light sensitivity as low as possible - between ISO 100 and 400. Most cameras produce digital noise at high ISO settings. Noise is essentially digital 'grain' and can ruin colours and detail in a picture. If you're moving up from a Point and Shoot camera, you will be pleasantly surprised by the lack of noise at higher ISOs.

As for white balance, you can leave it on auto, but you'll become more confident at knowing when certain lighting conditions require you to switch to a specific setting, such as Cloudy or Tungsten.



Camera settings - step 2: Choose the right exposure mode

DSLRs offer a range of exposure modes, from fully automatic - like a point-and-shoot camera - to fully manual. In between these two extremes are the two popular 'semi auto' modes, Aperture Priority and Shutter Priority, which give lots of creative control. In Aperture Priority, you can dial in your chosen aperture - so you can decide how much of your scene will be in focus - and the camera automatically works out what shutter speed is needed for a good exposure. If you know what shutter speed you want to use to create a certain effect, Shutter Priority lets you select it. The camera then works out the aperture you need for a correct exposure. Simple! More information on the Learning page.



Camera settings - step 3: Get the metering mode right

Metering options depend on the camera and the brand, but the three most common on a DSLR are Multi-zone (also known as Evaluative in Canon, and Matrix in Nikon), Centre-weighted and Spot.

Multi-zone mode takes a light reading from the entire scene and then sets the exposure accordingly. It's pretty accurate and is suitable in most conditions. Centre-weighted mode takes a reading that concentrates on the central 60-70% of the frame, making it ideal for shooting portraits. Spot metering enables you to take a reading from a tiny area of the scene and is therefore the most accurate - although needs to be used with care. When shooting with a DSLR's auto-exposure mode, such as Aperture Priority, Spot metering is often used in conjunction with the camera's exposure lock (AEL) button so that the framing can be changed without affecting the exposure.



Camera settings - step 4: Decide on aperture and shutter speed

Aperture and shutter speed are the two most important settings on your camera. The combination of these two settings affects not only the amount of light you let into the lens to expose your photos, but also the way your images look.

The aperture determines the so-called 'depth of field': if you want a shallow depth of field, with a sharp subject and blurred background, you need to select a wide aperture, such as $f/2.8$. If you want everything in focus from front to back, you need a narrow aperture, such as $f/22$. The shutter speed controls whether a moving subject is frozen or blurred in your shot. The slower the shutter speed, the more motion blur there will be.



Camera settings - step 5: Set the AF and Drive modes

To ensure your shots are razor-sharp, DSLRs offer a number of focus modes. The two main settings are single-shot, for stationary subjects, and continuous or servo, for moving subjects. Most DSLRs feature multiple focus points that can be selected manually, so that you can lock focus on off-centre subjects.

The Drive modes enable you to select whether a single frame is captured each time you press the shutter-release, whether a sequence of shots are taken in rapid succession for as long as the shutter release is pressed, or whether the shutter is fired after a delay of 2 or 10 seconds.



Camera settings - step 6: Take a test shot

Now you've got your DSLR it's time to ensure you're using its LCD properly. By this we mean using the zoom buttons to zoom into parts of the image on the rear screen, so you can check for sharpness or excessive noise. And you should also try to get into the habit of checking your image's exposure by calling up the histogram, or tone chart (usually accessed through a Display or Info button). A histogram bunched up to the left can indicate underexposure; a histogram at the right suggests overexposure. If you're unhappy with any element, adjust your settings and take another test shot.

One of the greatest advantages of digital cameras is that you get instant feedback - so you can try out all kinds of settings without having to waste a roll or two of film and wait a few days for the results. So get testing, playing, poking and prodding!