

Some Tips on how to get Great Pet Pictures

1. Start with Your Pet's Personality

Before you start photographing your pet ask yourself 'what sets it apart from other animals?' Think about what type of personality it has and then attempt to capture some of that in your shots. For example if everyone knows your pet as a sleepy, lazy or placid little thing set up your photo shoot around its bed or where it goes after a meal to lie in the sun and you'll have every chance of capturing a shot that sums up your pet. Alternatively if your pet is hyperactive, inquisitive and always on the move it might be better to do your shoot at a local park where it's racing around, jumping for balls or playing with other animals.

2. Think about Context

In choosing the location to photograph your pet you might want to consider a variety of other factors also. Choose a place where your pet will be comfortable and at ease. Also consider the familiarity of the location and the emotions that it will evoke in you as the pet's owner. For example you might have a place that you and your pet have had some special moments together that will mean a lot in the future as you look back over your shots. Lastly consider the background of your shots. Ultimately you don't want your backgrounds to be distracting from your photo - sometimes the best locations are the plainest ones - a large patch of green grass, a well lit room with white walls and plain carpet etc can be ideal. Of course this can also be too plain and sterile - if the different elements in the background of the shot don't add to it, avoid them.

3. Get in Close

Pets come in all shapes and sizes but in most cases they are smaller than a human and as a result they tend to end up getting a little lost in photos unless you make an effort to get up close to them. Of course getting close is not always easy, especially if you have a pet that likes to move around, but it's worth making the effort as the detail that can be gained and the personality that can be captured by an up close and personal photo shoot with a pet can really lift a photo to a new level. If you can't physically get close to your pet get your camera equipped with a zoom lens. The added benefit of a long focal length is that it will help with isolating your pet in terms of depth of field (i.e. give you a blurry background so that your pet is centre of attention with no distractions).

4. Get On Their Level

Get down on your pets level where you can look upon them eye to eye. Images taken by a photographer standing up and looking down on their level not only leave you too far away from your subject but they also mean the shots end up having a very 'human perspective'. Getting down on your pets level means you enter their world and get a glimpse of what life looks like from their angle - you'll be impressed by the results as they are more personal and have a real element of intimacy.

5. Mix Up Your Framing

Pets, like human subjects, look different from different angles and framing them in a variety of ways can bring out different perspectives to your shots. In your photo shoot take some tightly cropped facial shots (even focusing right in on single features like eyes, noses, ears, whiskers etc) but also make sure you take three quarter body shots as well as full body shots. In this way you end up with a series of shots that give viewers of your photos a full perspective on who your pet is.

6. Lighting

Light makes any photograph what it is and when it comes to pets it's especially important. Flash can distract pets and in some cases will even frighten them. The other issue with flashes is that they can create spooky red-eye (or other colour) problems with some animals, in the same way they do with humans. Natural light is a much better option than using flash so, where possible, outside photo shoots tend to work best (or maybe using natural light from a window). The only exception for using a flash is when your pet has very dark (or black) fur as it tends to absorb light and a flash can add detail. With dark furry pets you might want to slightly over expose your images for this same reason. Conversely, with white pets you run the risk of over exposing shots so try to find a location out of direct sunlight and definitely avoid a flash.

7. Include People

One of the best things you can do to add context to a shot is to include the special people in the life of your pet in the image. Shots with the owner or other family members interacting with your pet can make the images incredibly special for years to come. You might like to try posed shots but sometimes it's the candid shots of owner and pet at play (or snoozing together in front of a fire) that really capture the character of the pet and evoke emotion.

8. Freeze the Action

Many pets present a challenge to photographers because they are active and always on the move. The usual key with any subject that's on the move is to freeze their action by using a fast shutter speed, or panning. Most digital cameras these days will allow you to shoot in full manual mode if you feel confident to get the mix between shutter and aperture right - alternatively you can work in shutter priority mode where you set the shutter speed and the camera automatically does the rest by picking a good aperture to work with your shutter speed. Once you've got your shutter speed ready, make sure your camera is always at the ready so you can anticipate the actions of your pet. If they are a fast mover you might also want to consider shooting in continuous mode (burst mode) to take a quick series of shots in a row. This can also lead to a wonderful sequence of shots that work well together. However, some pets are 'all-action' and a slightly slower shutter speed can give some attractive movement blur.

9. Be Playful

Pets can be playful little critters and rather than attempting to contain this to get them posed for that special shot it's often very effective to go with their playfulness and make it a central feature of your image. Include their toys, stimulate them to look longingly into your camera by holding a special treat above your head (I've even heard of photographers holding dog biscuits or toys in their mouth or stuck to the camera - making the pet look more directly at the lens). Make your photo shoot a fun experience for both you and your pet and your shots are likely to reflect it.

10. Catch them Unawares

Posed shots can be fun and effective but you could photograph them candidly - paparazzi style. Try following your pet around for a while, taking pictures, and covering all the major events of a walk - digging up bones, chewing flowers, chasing insects etc. Your pet will think it's a bit strange at first but then accept it and go about his normal business.

Bonus - 11. Try a Wide Angle Lens

Consider using a wider angle lens. This allows you to get in close (point 3) but it also fits in a lot of the pet. The other benefit of it is that using a wider angle lens will often give your image a little distortion that will give your image a new creative and fun perspective. Beware of the side-effect of a wide angle lens - that of extra depth of field, bringing unwanted or untidy backgrounds into focus.