

Pushing the Creative Envelope

As photographers, we all hit creative walls. We work to improve our skills, and we learn new things, and then it seems we grind to a halt. Maybe our images start looking dull to us, like they are missing something. Sometimes we over-complicate problems, searching for some magical trick out there that will give us the creative perspective we are looking for. Instead, here is a collection of tips, in no particular order, that you can go out and try today to improve your photography and creative eye.

1. Visit an Art Gallery

If you want to get better at photography, become an admirer and student of the world of art. Visit a gallery and spend the day studying the work of great artists. Or just regularly visit all the galleries that Kingston has to offer. Better yet, take a pen and paper with you. When a painting or work of art grabs your attention, jot down why. Composition, the layout of elements, the 'message', the colours - write down everything you admire about it, and the reasoning behind it. If you find something you don't care for, write that down too.

2. Freshen your Perspective

Take a day and focus on perspective. Experiment with different camera angles that you may not have tried before. This tip is only limited by how far you're willing to get out of your comfort zone. If you're shooting an outdoor portrait session, bring a ladder with you. If you don't have a ladder, climb a tree or find a perspective above your subject's head. Not only is this different, looking up is almost always flattering to your subjects features, especially if they are prone to double chins! If you are photographing flowers, consider shooting them from underneath. While this may get you dirty, I promise it will be rewarding. Play with the angle of the sun and capture the translucency of the flower as the sunlight pours through it. Expose for a sunlit background and allow some silhouette of your subject. A fresh perspective can almost always give you that creative boost you're looking for.

3. Take a Trip to the Zoo

Unless you're taking the kids out and have to look after them (or Granny, or the In-Laws, or the Out-Laws) this should be your time, with no outside pressure. No need to create a certain look or feel to the photos. It's just you, the camera and hundreds of exotic animals! Try to find a way of getting a ticket that allows you return visits at a discount - you're bound to find just the animal you want to photograph but the elements aren't helping, so make a note to return for another try.

When you go, take your pictures with the intention of hiding the location (the fact that it's a zoo). That means getting creative with the way you frame your shots. Challenging, but rewarding. If there is an unavoidable fence, an obviously fake looking rock or object, or if the surroundings just don't click, don't take the picture. (But don't be put off - just enjoy yourself and accept the constraints). Or, simply change your perspective until the framing works. And if all else fails, move on to another animal! Only one drawback is that most of these kinds of places aren't too keen on tripods - and, as KPC members, I know you like to use tripods. And quite right too - when you can!

4. Minimize Your Possibilities

That's right, *minimize*. While being able to shoot thousands of images is nice, it can also dull your creative thought process. With seemingly unlimited images you can just click away, firing off shots left and right all day long. With this mentality, you're sure to get a few keepers. Right?

Consider this instead; next time you're out taking pictures at a specific place, just set a limit in your head of only taking 24 images. Pretend you're using one roll of Kodachrome film

You will have to carefully consider each shot you take.....you'll work harder at getting 'the' shot, and eliminate those shots that we all take 'just because we can'. Do this several times and you'll get into the habit of only taking 'considered' shots - where the composition has worked well, with proper exposure. On the other hand, if you're in a 'once in a lifetime' location you won't want to be hampered by any advice that tells you to limit your photographs, so this is one of those exercises best done locally - somewhere you might be able to return to regularly.

5. Take Your Camera Everywhere

Carrying a camera is an instant way to put your senses on high alert. It causes you to look at the world as if your camera was always pressed to your eye. It gives you a reason to slow down, to take everything in, no matter where you are. Commit to carrying your camera with you *everywhere*, at least for a certain amount of time. Take pictures knowing full well that the world may never see them. Create photographs of everyday things, moments in time that normally wouldn't require a photograph. The trick will be to see these subtle events in a new way, and to find a way to make them interesting. This may sound like the total opposite of #4 above - well it is..... the idea is to do both.

6. Always Be a Beginner

The moment you adopt the view that you've learned all there is to know, that's the moment you become unteachable. We've all met our share of people who think they know it all. You try and tell them something that you've learned, and they shoot you down, saying they already knew that. Or they refuse to accept anything new because they aren't willing to change their ways. Set aside your pride and be willing to learn from others, even if you feel you're at the top of your game. If are at the top, be willing to learn from others who aren't. Those locations we tried for the Summer Program, and our Inter-Club shoots, are ideal places to chat with colleagues, swap ideas - and finding out who's *really* interested in improving and who's already got as far as they'll ever get. Stay close to the

club member whose work you see regularly doing well in competitions..... they might not even know what it is that they've got that can inspire others but they'll probably be the ones taking pictures from odd positions or in a manner that comes as a surprise..

7. Pick a Colour, Any Colour

Pick a colour and create a portfolio around that colour. If you have time, do this with several colours. Go out and create images that obviously focus on a single colour. If you choose blue, consider subjects where this colour is evident. Focus on pictures by water, or the sky. Go out past sunset and into the realm of “nautical twilight,” when the setting sun casts shades of deep blues across the sky and earth. Find textured walls that are painted in different colours and shades of blue. If you choose yellow, scout out a field of sunflowers. Shoot subjects straight into the sun, bathing the frame in golden sunlight. You can make the colour even more obvious in post processing by applying filters of your chosen colour over the image.

8. Shadow an Admired Photographer

For the most part photographers are nice, generous and giving people. Sure, there are plenty out there who won't want to hook up with a photographer looking for a mentor, (in the case of wedding photographers, you can't blame them - you could become their competition), but who wants to shadow or even follow the work of someone like that? Find a photographer that inspires you and form a relationship with them. If you're lucky, you will be able to learn from that person, and maybe even shadow them. Ask to hold lights for them during their photo shoots, or just carry around their gear. You will learn a lot just observing how they interact with their clients. Becoming a great photographer is a tough road to take by yourself, having a mentor can make the difference between success and failure.

9. Discover the Golden Ratio

Also known as the Golden Mean, Divine Proportion, the Fibonacci Rule, the Rule of Phi, etc. The Golden Ratio is a common ratio discovered by Leonardo Fibonacci and found throughout nature, architecture, and art. The ratio is believed to make things appealing to the human eye. In nature, it is also believed to be the most energy efficient form of design among living things. There is some debate around it, but it is very interesting. The Golden Ratio is basically the “Rule of Thirds” on steroids. Becoming knowledgeable on topics like the Golden Ratio can drastically increase your chances of creating images that attract viewers attention. (That ratio, by the way is 1:1.618)

10. Find a different camera mode

If there is a setting on your camera you are unfamiliar with, go to your camera and dial over to that setting. Now, commit to yourself that you won't take your camera off that setting until you are fully comfortable with it. If you are only comfortable with 'fully' automatic, I wouldn't suggest going straight to manual. But certainly get out of the automatic settings and into the creative ones. You should view the automatic settings on your cameras as poison to your creativity and photographic skill. These settings take away your say in how the image will look, just short of composing the frame and pressing the

shutter. Start out with either Av (Aperture Value) or Tv (Time Value) mode. Dedicate at least an entire day to shooting under just that one setting. If you get stuck, the most readily available resource is your camera's manual. Most photographers don't realize how much they can learn by simply reading the manuals that came with their cameras. Once you fully understand one 'Mode', move to the next one, and work your way up to the infamous "Manual" setting. I was quite lucky, in a way, to have learned from my first camera - a completely manual Praktica SLR - which didn't even have an exposure meter, so I had to get a light meter to work out the exposure and then apply them to the camera.

11. Find something you're not comfortable shooting, and go after it

Getting better at anything involves getting out of your comfort zone. If all you do is photograph families and seniors, go out and shoot landscapes one weekend. All of the sudden, your images are going to require completely new camera settings. No more people to pose, no more shallow depth of field or fast shutter speed requirements. Now you have to think about your subject in a new way. A landscape doesn't listen to you. You can't tell it to move left or right, or use a flash to reveal a bit more light in a certain area. For the most part, landscapes require deep depths of field, slower shutter speeds, tripods, and a whole new eye for composition and lighting. If you spend time photographing things you're not used to, you will come away with new ideas for what you *are* comfortable shooting. And a deeper understanding of your camera too.

12. Use a Tripod

Something interesting happens when you attach your camera to a tripod. Suddenly, everything slows down. There's no more snapping photos left and right and quickly filling up memory cards. When you use a tripod, you really have to take the time to compose your image. This mainly happens because you can no longer move the camera around freely. You now have to adjust the tripod to be level with the horizon. You have to move it left or right manually to adjust the position of your subject. Just by doing this, you have to actually slow down and really think about your image.

There you have it, 12 ideas you can implement immediately. Of course you can't do all of these at once, but any time you feel you need a boost, be sure to check back here. If you have more ideas and/or tips, it would be great to get some feedback, and if these tips have helped you in any way, that would be good to hear as well.