Quick Tips for Taking a Great Phone Photo

In-Camera Editing

While there is no shortage of tools and apps that can fix up your photo, there’s still no substitute for taking a good photo in the first place. Planning out your shot will save you a ton of time and stress later on in the editing process. Not to mention some photos just can’t be fixed afterward, no matter how much you crop and how many filters you put on them!

Framing

We’re not talking about putting a fancy border around your picture, but, rather, deciding what belongs and what doesn’t in your photo. Look closely at all that’s on your phone screen. How does it look? Adjust the angle of your phone. Take a few steps and move around if you have to. Get to a point where everything looks right to you and everything you want to capture is on your screen. Framing is arguably the most important part of taking a good photo. So, before you take your photo, ask yourself:

- What are the points of interest in this shot?
- Where should I place them so that the photo looks balanced?

Not sure how to frame your photo to look good? Try the Rule of Thirds. When composing your picture, imagine two horizontal lines and two vertical lines crossing like a tic-tac-toe grid on top of it. Place strong lines and divisions (such as the horizon) on the gridlines and let elements of interest fall on the intersections.

Focus & Exposure

Your phone camera should automatically focus, though it may not focus on the object(s) you wish to highlight. Try tapping on the point of interest on your phone screen to adjust the focus. This will bring the object into focus as well as adjusting the lighting (exposure).
Zoom

Phone cameras don’t zoom too well because they have relatively small lenses. Feel free to use your zoom, though don’t make a habit of zooming all of the way in. This is one instance where editing after you shoot is preferred—rather than zooming, consider cropping after you’ve taken your photo. Cropping maintains better resolution, so your photo stays crisper.

Flash

Avoid using the flash whenever possible. Smartphone flashes are just glorified LEDs, which are too bright and light up for too long. They also lack the warmth of traditional flashes. Try utilizing other sources of light, like lamps or even neon signs.

Try it out!

Let’s take a photo with these tips in mind. Gather up some objects of interest. They could be colorful pens, stuffed animals, or even a couple of your favorite possessions (like a skateboard, maybe). Arrange them on a table or throughout a room in a way that you think looks interesting. Then open your phone camera and:

1. **Frame it up.** How does everything look on your phone screen. Are the objects arranged in such a way that they appear balanced? If not, move around to try a different view. Still no good? Move the objects around, then. The view from your phone screen should look as balanced and well-arranged as possible **before** you shoot. Can’t get things to look right? Try arranging your view and/or objects so that they follow the Rule of Thirds.

2. **Focus, focus, focus.** Once everything is arranged and balanced in your shot, decide what your main point of interest is. Tap on the object to bring it into focus. You may notice your screen get lighter or darker. Items in the background may blur a bit. This is all great—the camera is adjusting focus and light to highlight your point of interest.

3. **Shoot!** Once you’ve got everything looking “right,” go ahead and shoot.

4. **Evaluate.** So, how does it look? Do you like it? If not, try shooting from a different angle. Even if your second (or third...or fifteenth) shot doesn’t actually look better, additional photos give you different perspectives and help you decide what take is the best.

I’m not sure I’m getting all of this.

That’s a lot of tips to keep in mind. How about an example? Check out this cool photo by an ideaLAB teen.

It has multiple **points of interest** (skateboard, computers, colorful sign).

It’s got a cool **perspective.** By focusing on the skateboard emblem, the computers are clearly placed in the background (a fancy term for this is “depth of field”).

It’s pretty well **framed,** especially since the colored stripes are placed to the left of center. By raising the camera slightly (removing a bit of the skateboard at the bottom) it would follow the Rule of Thirds even better.
Additional Composition Tips

- **Check your background.** You may take a great portrait only to realize you were photo bombed by a funny looking plant, a weird street sign, or a neighborhood cat.
- **Avoid direct sunlight.** Your subjects will be cooler, happier, and more attractively lit if they don’t have a sunbeam hitting them in the face.
- **Choose the highest quality setting** available so you lose less detail and don’t get a muddy photo. Storage space is cheap, even on your phone. If you transfer your photos regularly to the cloud or your computer, this shouldn’t be a problem.
- **Wait for the “magic hour.”** During the times of sunrise and sunset, the sky is colorful enough for even a camera phone to capture land and sky with fairly good exposure.
- **Stabilize your camera phone.** In low light, camera phones slow the shutter speed to let in more light and have a longer opportunity to capture movement. Hold the camera phone with both hands and brace your upper arms against your body when you shoot. Or, rig up a tripod!
- **Get close!** When the background of your picture is cluttered and the lighting is questionable, fill the frame of your camera phone by moving in closer to your subject.
- By mastering the technique of **panning,** you can create some very cool images. To do this, hold the camera phone with both hands—for steadiness—and frame the approaching subject on the LCD. Move the camera at the same speed as the subject, thus freezing the subject while the background is blurred through motion.
- **Get the right color tone.** Shooting in black-and-white in any light can help develop your photographer’s eye by letting you concentrate on the relationship between light and shadow without the distraction of color.
- When photographing single objects, **use a black background** to make a subject stand out. Black velvet material works great because it absorbs any light hitting it. As a result, no shadows or reflections appear in the picture.

Remember to **have fun and experiment.** It takes time to develop your photographic eye as well and become comfortable with how to use your phone camera. Take lots and lots of photos—the great thing about digital photography is that you don’t have to develop and print your photos to see how they turned out. So, shoot, shoot, shoot and then look closely at the results, asking yourself: What’s good about this photo? How did I accomplish that? What doesn’t look so great? How can I fix that?

WHERE TO GET MORE HELP:

**A lot of these tips came from these websites, where there's more advice to be had:**


**Check out a book (or blog) on digital photography!**

Even if the book focuses on using a full-on digital camera, there will be plenty of techniques and tips discussed that will improve your technique! Look at photography art books and blogs, too. Studying photographs that you like and asking yourself why they look great will help you develop your eye as well as your own personal style!
Field Notes

But I'm in ideaLAB, not out in a field?!

Sure, sure...but when you take notes while on a photo shoot, these are often called “field notes.” Sounds cool, huh? Or not. Whatever. Use this back page to jot down some notes about your photos, whether it’s when and where they were taken or tips you used to make them look better.