

## Exercises in Black and White Photography

Black and white photography exercises can help you gain an understanding of how it differs from colour photography. Concentrating on black and white images helps develop your photography in many ways.

“Colour is descriptive. Black and white is interpretive.” Elliott Erwitt



© Kevin Landwer-Johan. Nikon D700, 120mm, 1/800 sec, f/2.8, ISO 400, Manual Mode, Spot Metering.

### Thinking in black and white

Loading a black and white film into your camera forced you to think in black and white. This is different with digital photography because it's easy to convert a colour image to monotones.

There are plenty of tools to help you do this. The Nik Software Silver Effects Pro is a superb Photoshop plug-in for converting colour images to black and white.

Purposefully photographing in black and white is different than converting during post production. A photographer must think differently when their intention is to create photos without colour. You see in colour, so you must learn to disregard the colour and think in black and white. Good black and white photography is not about taking the colours out of a photo.

Black and white photography relies on contrast and tone range and how these relate within your compositions. You must learn to look at the tones, not the colours, as you compose your photos.

Light has a huge influence on the tones in a photograph. The camera records reflected light to make photos. The amount and quality of the light used defines how a subject will appear when you take a photo of it. Hard light or soft light will produce very different results. This is the same with colour, but it's more pronounced in black and white photography.

One of the best ways you can learn to do this is by practicing black and white photography exercises.



© Kevin Landwer-Johan. Nikon D800, 35mm f/1.4, 1/100 sec, f/4, ISO 100, Manual Mode, Spot Metering.

### **Choose One Subject for These Black and White Photography Exercises**

Find one or two interesting subjects to photograph for these exercises. You may even choose to set up a small still life scene with various objects you have around the house. This will allow you to make comparisons and see differences.

You need to find things you can move around and place in different locations.

Look for things that are not all black or all white. A mixture of tones will produce the most helpful results. If you photograph something(s) with white, black and mid-tones you're going to be able to see the effects more clearly in your photos.

The main aim of these black and white photography exercises is to help you develop a better understanding of tone. Don't try to make masterpiece photos that you'll hang on your living room wall. If you do, that will be a bonus.



Soft light, outdoors on a cloudy day using Averaged light metering. Nikon D800, 55mm f/3.5, 1/800 sec, f/8, ISO 400, Manual Mode, Pattern Metering.

## Lighting for Black and White Photography Exercises

The reason you need to photograph something you can move is so you can photograph it in different locations and lighting conditions.

The type of light you photograph your subjects in, directly affects how they will look. Using hard light will produce very different-looking black and white photos than when you use soft light.

Strong light creates high contrast, no matter what tone your subject is. Soft light makes an even exposure much easier. Think about the quality of light and how it affects the look and feel of your photographs as you work.

### Hard light

Place your subject in a location with hard light. Outside on a sunny day is ideal because you'll be able to see where the shadows fall.

If you can't manage that, using an on-camera flash with no diffuser will produce a hard light. You'll need to take test images and study them to see where the shadows fall.

Take a series of photos from the first angle you think of. Expose some normally. Use averaged metering and set your exposure so the meter reads zero, or let your camera choose the setting if you use an auto mode.



Hard light, outdoors on a sunny day using spot metering from the highlight on the steel jug. Nikon D800, 55mm f/3.5, 1/800 sec, f/11, ISO 400, Manual Mode, Spot Metering.

Next, expose for the highlights.

Take a light meter reading from the brightest part of your composition.

To do this, set your camera's meter to spot and point the spot at the bright area to take your reading. If you use live view, your camera may display the way your photo will look when you use manual mode. This way, you can adjust the exposure for the highlights based on what you see on your monitor. On many mirrorless cameras, the viewfinder will display the exposure the same as this when you are set to manual mode.

After taking a few photos with these settings, use the same technique to set your exposure so the shadow areas will be exposed well. Take another series of photos.



Hard light, outdoors on a sunny day using spot metering from the darkest area on the black jug. Nikon D800, 55mm f/3.5, 1/250 sec, f/11, ISO 400, Manual Mode, Spot Metering.

If you're finding this exercise valuable and you have time, repeat this process.

Move around your subject and make compositions from different angles. Remember, the first angle you think to take a photo from is the most obvious, but not always the most interesting. Look at the way the light is falling on your subject and how the shadows look. Repeat the process and take photos at the three different exposure settings.

### **Soft light**

If you're photographing outdoors in the sun, move your subject into a shady area. Find somewhere outside where there's still plenty of daylight.

If you're inside and have been using your flash, take this next series of photos without using your flash. You may need a tripod if there's not much light.



Soft light, outdoors on a cloudy day using spot metering from the highlight on the steel jug. Nikon D800, 55mm f/3.5, 1/2500 sec, f/8, ISO 400, Manual Mode, Spot Metering.

Repeat the same series of exposures as you did when you were photographing in hard light. Think about the tones in your composition when you are making your exposure readings and looking at the results.

If you've been photographing outdoors, move your subject inside and away from any windows or other strong light and repeat the whole process. This lower contrast situation will produce different results again. The variation will be subtle, but it's interesting to see.

During this process, make notes about what you are doing and your thought process. You don't need to record your camera settings as these are included in the EXIF data. (Whenever a photo is taken with a digital camera, data relating to that photo gets stored with the image in what's known as the Exchange image file format (Exif)). Instead, write down what you are observing with the tones, light and shadows. Why did you take photos from these angles? How has the light and tone affected the way you've chosen to compose your photos?



Soft light, outdoors on a cloudy day using spot metering from the darkest area on the black jug. Nikon D800, 55mm f/3.5, 1/80 sec, f/8, ISO 400, Manual Mode, Spot Metering.

### **Make the most of shadows**

Especially in hard light, shadows have a major impact on black and white photography exercises.

Think about where the light is coming from in relation to where you are with your camera. How does this change the way the composition looks when you move around your subject? How does it change when you move your subject?

This is easier to see when you are working with the sun as your light source. Using flash, you'll need to refer back to your monitor often to see the variations. Look at the differences in the shadow areas in the different sets of photos. How different do they look when you exposed for the shadows and when you exposed for the highlights?



© Kevin Landwer-Johan. Nikon D800, 35mm f/1.4, 1/200 sec, f/3.2, ISO 160, Manual Mode, Pattern Metering.

### **Think creatively**

Once you've uploaded the photos to your computer. Select one image from each setup and each exposure setting. Simply desaturate all of these photos. This is not an ideal means for converting your photos to black and white, but it will suffice for this exercise.

Now look at these and compare them. Think about the way they look and the differences between the exposure settings. Consider how the various light has had an effect on the tone of your subjects.

Under hard light and soft light, you'll notice the tone of your subjects looks different. Each set of photos taken at the various exposure settings will produce very different results. This is particularly noticeable with those taken under hard light.





© Kevin Landwer-Johan. Nikon D800, 50mm f/1.4, 1/400 sec, f/4, ISO 250, Manual Mode, Pattern Metering.

Choose one photo from each set to make some further post-processing adjustments. Work with the sliders for:

- contrast,
- shadows,
- blacks,
- highlights
- and whites.

Experiment with these various settings. Play with them. Discover how much impact post-processing has on these black and white photography exercises. What you can do with post-processing monotone images is beyond the scope of this article, so just have some fun with it.