

The Essential Guide to Levelling Up Your Photography Skills!

A road map for your photographic journey to help you progress from taking pictures to making art!

These are the show notes for the Shootorials Podcast, Episode 01. To listen to the podcast go to shootorials.com.

Photography is more than just a hobby or a profession—it's a journey of continual learning and personal expression. Whether you're someone who snaps pictures with your phone or a professional with a studio filled with equipment, every photographer follows a path of development. In this post, we'll explore the typical journey that photographers make as they evolve from beginners to advanced practitioners, highlighting key stages and tips to help you grow your skills if you want to move up a level.

1. The Beginner: Discovering the Joy of Photography

For many, the photographic journey begins with the simple joy of taking photos. Beginners often start with basic equipment like smartphones or entry-level cameras, focusing on capturing important family events, special occasions, or daily moments. At this stage, the goal is straightforward: to take better pictures with minimal fuss.

If you're at this point, you're probably getting praise from others. Friends, family, and your followers on social media all tell you that you take great pictures, they love your work, and sometimes suggest that you should turn what's a hobby into a profession.

Here's what you need to do to level up your skills and move to the next phase of your photography journey:

- **Understanding Your Equipment:** Learn the basic functions of your camera or smartphone. As painful as it might seem, read your manual and start figuring out what all those buttons do. Experiment with different settings, even if it's just switching from automatic to portrait mode.
- **Composition Basics:** Start with simple rules like the rule of thirds to make your photos more engaging. You don't always need to follow the rules to create a great photo, but learning some simple rules will make you more conscious of what makes an interesting photo so you can consistently take impactful images and are not condemned to getting good photos by accident.
- **Light Awareness:** In everyday life, notice how light falls on people's faces. Pay attention to how dark or bright the light is across the face, the direction of shadows, and how soft or hard the transition from light to shadow is. Look at your photos and try to determine what makes the light flattering in some pictures and not so flattering in others.



In the early stages of your photographic journey you discover the joy for taking photos. It doesn't matter if you're using your phone or a cheap camera, it's just fun taking pictures of your friends and family, capturing daily moments and the world around you.

You're operating on pure intuition. Sometimes you take a picture that's outstanding; sometimes your images just look bad. You're friends and family praise your talents you and tell you what a natural photographer you are.

To level up your photography at this stage, get to know your equipment, watch some videos that cover composition basics, and most importantly start to become aware of light and how it looks as it falls across your subjects.

2. The Intermediate: Enhancing Your Craft

As you gain comfort with your camera and begin to appreciate the nuances of your photos, the desire to improve becomes a driving force. Intermediate photographers invest more in their equipment and education. They are less satisfied with just taking snapshots and want to create more impactful images. They begin focusing on better composition, posing, experimenting with lighting, and understanding the technical aspects of photography.

This is an exciting stage as a whole world of possibilities opens up to you, but it's also frustrating as you move through the learning process. There's a gap between the images you want to make and what your images actually look like. Your skill level isn't quite up to the level of understanding you have of what makes a great photo. A mistake many photographers make at this point is thinking they need a better camera or lens to improve their images. But the truth is your gear doesn't matter. Instead, you need to understand the visual language of photography better, that is, how framing, composition, angles, lens choice, posing, expression, styling, color... and a whole lot of other factors influence how impactful your photos are.

Here's what you need to do to level up your skills and move to the next phase of your photography journey:

- **Technical Proficiency:** Get comfortable with manual settings on your camera to gain more control over exposure and focus. You want to get to a level where you don't have to think about the dials and buttons but can focus on the artistic aspects of your work.
- **Creative Composition:** Challenge yourself with more complex compositional techniques, such as leading lines, angles, or framing. Learn the psychology behind composition, and you'll be able to impact the viewer's emotional response to your images.
- **Lighting Skills:** Learn how to manipulate light to your advantage. Start experimenting with external flashes or reflectors to enhance the lighting in your photos. Knowing how to control and use light is the most powerful skill you can develop if you want to transform your photography.



As you progress, you become hooked on photography. You are looking at other people's photography online or in books or galleries and a world of possibilities beyond simple snapshots open up to you. As your technical knowledge improves you're able to capture some great shots purposely, and not by accident.

However, this can be a frustrating period in your development because your technical or artistic skills are not yet at a level where you can produce images that are as beautiful as the ones you'd like to create.

This is the stage where you need to take more control over your shots by learning to shoot manually. Experiment with light and play with flash and reflectors. Instead of doing "walk up shots" play with various angles and framing and start to become aware of how doing this changes the emotional impact of your photos.

3. The Advanced: Mastering the Art

Advanced photographers have a solid grasp of the technical aspects. They no longer have to think about all those camera settings and begin to focus on the artistry of photography. This stage is about refining skills, developing a

personal style, and expressing ideas or stories through images. Advanced photographers often engage in more conceptual or thematic work and may specialize in areas such as portrait, landscape, or street photography.

Interestingly, although your skills have improved tremendously, this is the stage where you start to doubt your abilities. In earlier stages, you were blissfully unaware of what you were producing. Now, you understand the breadth and depth of knowledge required to truly master photography, and you become painfully aware of how little you know. Imposter syndrome sets in. Accept this as part of the process and trust yourself.

Here's what you need to do to level up your skills and move to the next phase of your photography journey:

- **Advanced Composition and Lighting:** Explore dynamic lighting setups and sophisticated compositional strategies to create mood and atmosphere.
- **Narrative and Conceptual Depth:** Focus on storytelling and conveying emotions through your images. Consider what you want your viewer to feel or understand from your work.
- **Continual Learning and Collaboration:** Attend workshops, collaborate with other artists, and continue learning new techniques and perspectives.



The advanced photographer has developed an intimate understanding of their camera and makes adjustments almost without thinking. At this stage you have a more nuanced understanding of composition and light.

However, the more you know, the more you realize you don't know. You start to doubt your abilities. Even though you produce great images by design and not by accident, you feel like an imposter.

To level up, don't believe that you have to develop your personal style. It's easy to get stuck taking the kinds of photos you take best. Keep growing. Keep challenging yourself. Collaborate with others or even work with a mentor to push your comfort level and elevate your skills.

Regardless of what stage you are at, the most important thing you can do is practice. Always have your phone or camera handy. Take every opportunity to shoot. Don't let a week pass without taking time to play and experiment. Be fearless. In the words of Ms Frizzle: "Take chances. Get messy. Make mistakes."



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Your photographic journey is uniquely yours, but it often mirrors the stages many others have traveled from beginner to advanced. Each level has its joys and challenges, but the continuous process of learning and growing is what makes photography such a rewarding pursuit. Whether you're just starting or a seasoned pro, remember that every shot you take is a step forward on your journey. So keep shooting, keep learning, and most importantly, enjoy the ride!

Are you ready to take the next step in your photographic journey? Share your current stage and what you're working on in the private [Facebook Group](#) I've set up for Shootorial newsletter subscribers.

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