

# NYI's Three Guidelines and Six Tips for Great Photos



New York Institute of  
**Photography**

Educating Photographers Since 1910.





*NYI Student William Davis*

## Photography is one of America's favorite pastimes.

Each year, we take billions of pictures to record family memories, children's parties, and vacations. Even with today's amazing digital cameras, there's a problem: The pictures taken by most untrained photographers—and at NYI, we see thousands of them each year—are no better than before. The same mistakes show up predictably, ruining what should have been memorable pictures.

Why? Simply because—no matter how advanced the camera—most people don't know a few simple, creative guidelines that can make snapshots into eye-catching photographs.

## Let's start with three simple guidelines.

### NYI's Three Guidelines for Great Photographs™

## Guideline One



### Know Your Subject

*NYI Student William Davis*

Before you take any picture, you have to answer one question:

*“What do I want to be the subject of this picture?”*

Only after you have answered this question are you ready to take the picture.

Now, this seems pretty obvious. You wouldn't be taking this picture if you didn't know what you wanted it to be about, would you? Yet, it's the single most important failing in most pictures taken by amateurs.

You know what you want to be your subject. But the picture you capture often doesn't express what you saw in the viewfinder. Let's say you took a picture of Little Sally in your backyard. Sure, when you get back the print you see Little Sally right there, but you also see the trashcan, the fire hydrant, the broken deck chair, and the telephone pole that seems to be growing out of her head.



So Guideline One is **Know Your Subject**. If your subject is Little Sally, then don't have her compete for attention with a dozen other objects. In fact, don't have her compete with even one other object. Your picture should be about her and only her. She should be the unmistakable subject to anyone looking at the print.

In the picture on the previous page, we show a close-up picture of a young child. Is there any question that she's the subject of this picture? No. Nothing distracts from her. There's no other place for the viewer's eye to go. This picture is about this child and only this child. This is the single key to better pictures—the subject is clear, obvious, and unambiguous.

But there's more to a great picture—which brings us to Guideline Two.



*NYI Student Annette Mossbacher*

## Guideline Two

### Draw Attention to Your Subject



*NYI Student Heather Herrena*

Once you know what you want the subject to be, you are ready to peer into the viewfinder and organize the image as it will appear in the photograph. At this point, it's time for you to apply Guideline Two—**Draw Attention to Your Subject**. How do you do this?

There's one sure-fire technique which was used in the picture of the child we just looked at. She fills the frame. She is clearly, obviously, unambiguously the subject of the picture.

For now, just concentrate on this one technique of drawing attention to your subject: Make the subject fill the frame. It doesn't matter if you're photographing an infant, a child, an adult, or a tiger. It doesn't matter what camera you're using. This simple trick will work every time with any camera. Just get in close and fill the frame with your subject.

So remember Guideline Two whenever you look in the viewfinder. Ask yourself: "Does the image I see draw attention to my subject?" and ask, "Do I see anything in the frame that might distract the eye of the viewer from my subject?" Which brings us to Guideline Three.

## Guideline Three



**Simplify!**



*NYI Dean Chuck DeLaney*

All right. You've applied Guideline One—you know what you want to be the subject of your picture. And you've applied Guideline Two—you've looked into the viewfinder and arranged the image to draw attention to the subject.

Now it's time to apply Guideline Three. Peer into the viewfinder and look for any objects that draw attention away from the subject. Any objects that detract attention. If you see any, get rid of them! That's what we mean by simplify.

First, where should you look? Generally, you'll find distracting objects around the edges of the frame. So look around the edges of the image in your viewfinder. Most of the offending distractions will be there.



Second, if you find a distracting object, how can you get rid of it? One way is to move it. Suppose you see a distracting wastepaper basket in the picture. Perhaps you can pick it up and move it a few feet out of view. Or you see a distracting piece of paper on the floor. Pick it up!

But it's not always easy or even possible to move the object. What if the distraction is a telephone? Or the Empire State Building?

You can't move it, but you can move your camera. Often, just taking a step or two will do the trick.

Or you may be able to move your subject—especially if it is a person. When he or she moves, the background changes and your goal should be to get the offending object to disappear from your viewfinder.

Or—and this is often the best solution—get in closer and fill the frame with your subject so that the distracting object in the background disappears. As you've already guessed, this solution ties right in with what you've learned about filling the frame with your subject. It's usually the easiest as well as the best solution.

These Three Guidelines are simple, and they are the key to successful pictures in every situation. Look in the viewfinder and, before you shoot, apply them to every picture you take anywhere.



## The Guidelines in Action



*NYT Student W. David Blair*

This is a wonderful example of a photograph that accomplishes Guideline Two—giving emphasis to the subject—in this case the Washington Monument, by framing it in a riotous display of springtime cherry blossoms. Far from distracting from the subject, the blossoms make this an exciting photograph.





*NYI Student Murnice Kuesel*

Here's a tight portrait of a boy and his dog. The subject is both of them and their loving relationship. Notice the tear in the leg of the jeans that exposes the boy's knee? Is it a distraction? We don't think so. It adds to the informality of the photo and also provides a strong base on which his loving dog rests its head. Now cover the knee with your hand and notice how the picture changes. Some people will prefer this cropped version.

# Six Tips:

## Tip One



### Watch for Interesting Angles

*NYI Student Melissa Burns*

Most amateurs shoot standing up, with the camera pointed straight ahead at eye level. That's the way we view the world most of the time, and that's exactly what results in boring photographs—showing your viewer something they've already seen. Why not try something different?

Smart photographers look up and down, exploring images from unexpected angles. Pros often shoot at knee level or lie flat on the ground for a dramatic, low-angle shot. A good overall scenic view of a park or town square can often be captured better from an upper story window. Remember—you don't need a fancy camera to find a fresh angle. All you need is imagination.

Explore: If an unusual angle will help focus attention on your subject, use it.

Sometimes it's necessary to use a low angle just to make the subject look normal. Small children, for example, should be photographed from their height rather than yours. Theirs is a small world. Don't photograph it looking down on them.

## Tip Two



## Experiment

*NYT Student M. Milliman*

Let's learn from professional news photographers. Before anything else, they generally make a "safe" picture. That is, a straightforward image that tells the newspaper story: Who, what, when, where, and how. Then (and this is the tip) they keep shooting, seeking interesting angles and framing possibilities that might tell the story better.

It's worth spending a few extra moments to get a more powerful picture. That's because the extra pictures you take, trying for a better angle, are the ones that will transform you from a snapshooter to a photographer. As you demand more from your pictures, you'll often find that you don't take the first version of the image you see in your viewfinder. You'll look around and find a more interesting image right away.

You'll find your eye seeing "a picture" in your viewfinder, and this is the real beginning to great photographs.



## Tip Three



## Consider Black-and-White Photography

*NYI Student Chris Kirkendall*

Whether you take the picture with your camera set to black-and-white, or use an image-editing program to take out the color later, there are some photographs that just look better in a monochromatic form. It could be sepia-and-white or blue/black-and-white, as well.

This quiet portrait of two boys achieves a sense of timelessness, and we're not distracted by blue jeans, or greenery on the other side of the little wooden bridge where they're sitting. With the colors removed, our eyes are drawn to their faces and the matching white shirts they're wearing.

Clutter could also destroy the calmness of this photo. Imagine a stray bottle or paper coffee cup down in the lower left portion of the photo. Maybe there was one there and the thoughtful photographer removed it.

## Tip Four

**Decide:  
Horizontal  
or  
Vertical?**



*NYI Student Ludmila Popova*

Before you press the shutter, try most photographs from a horizontal viewpoint, then turn the camera 90 degrees to consider taking a vertical shot. Obviously, if you are taking the Eiffel Tower or a full-length portrait of a person, you will probably use a vertical shot. But even with subjects that don't have strong vertical elements, such as landscapes, try viewing both horizontal and vertical images before you take the picture.

If either a horizontal or vertical composition is clearly better for showing your subject, then use the one that works better.

When in doubt, shoot the scene both ways and leave the final decision for later when you see the prints, or view your images on your computer screen. Use all your options.

## Tip Five



## Don't Use Flash When It Hurts

*NYI Student Edmund Coppa*

While standing on a mid-Manhattan street looking up at the Empire State Building at twilight, you can see tourists' cameras flashing from the observation deck. But that little electronic flash is designed to light up subjects from about 3 to 12 feet away. It won't illuminate the miles of caverns in New York. And it won't illuminate the musicians on stage when you take a picture from the 35th row of the arena. In fact, the flash may actually hurt the picture. At the Empire State building, many amateurs shoot through a glass partition. What the camera "sees" when the flash goes off is the glare on the glass. And that's what you see in the picture. In the 35th row of the arena, the flash lights up the backs of the people in front of you. They become the subject of your picture, whether you intended it or not.

Another example: Flash will hurt your picture if you have two subjects where one is three feet from the camera and the other is eight feet away. The flash will either turn the closer one into a bright, burned-out blob or fail to sufficiently light the subject farther away, or both. Solution? Either turn off the flash or move the subjects so they are an equal distance from your flash.



## Tip Six



### Rule of Thirds.

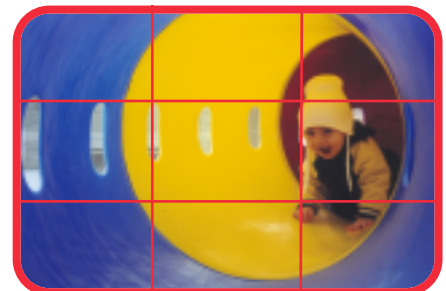
*NYI Student Nuttakit Piyapant*

We've said that the sure-fire way to draw attention to your subject is to make it big and up front. Make it fill the frame. Now, let's refine this slightly.

Ask yourself, where should your subject be in the frame? Should it be dead center? To the left? To the right? The simple truth is that if you place the subject dead-center, the picture is often boring. You may be able to make it more interesting by placing your subject off to one side or the other.

Okay. The first question is: Should you place your subject on the right or the left? It doesn't matter. Either side works.

Second: How far off-center should you place your subject? Here's where we come to "The Rule of Thirds."



Don't crush your subject against the edge of the frame. Rather, place your subject about one-third off to either side.

Third, which way should your subject face? Usually, it's best to have your subject face into the picture—not out toward the edge.

## About NYIP

The New York Institute of Photography, established in 1910, is the world's oldest and largest photography school. Founded as a residential school, NYI has also offered correspondence training since 1922 and has been exclusively a home-study school since 1975.



NYI's multi-media Complete Course in Professional Photography consists of printed lessons enriched by dozens of audio and video programs. Students submit Photo Projects that are evaluated by working professional photographers, thus bringing the classroom right into the student's home. NYI has more than 20,000 active students in the U.S. and over 50 countries abroad.

In addition to the Complete Course in Professional Photography, NYI also offers Photoshop for Photographers (Complete Course in Digital Photography) and the NYI Short Course: Fundamentals of Digital Photography. The Fundamentals Course is designed for amateur photographers who want to take great photographs with a high-performance digital camera for family, fun, or business purposes.

**For information about all of NYI's programs and to request a free course catalog, visit us online at [www.nyip.com](http://www.nyip.com)!**

## **The New York Institute of Photography**

211 East 43rd Street, Suite 2402, New York, NY 10017  
Tel: 212-867-8260 Fax: 212-867-8122 E-mail: [info@nyip.com](mailto:info@nyip.com)