

The Gray Card

A Classic Tool

Getting the proper exposure is the first step in making a photograph. Cameras contain light meters to aid in this task. The built-in meter works on the assumption that you are photographing an “average subject”. This ideal average subject will consist of objects that are dark toned, medium toned and light toned in some combination that will reflect 18% of the light falling on it. When the subject is lighter or darker than “average” you must correct your meter reading to make the subject appear like it should. Otherwise a dark subject will appear too light, or a light subject will appear too dark. You could guess how much to correct the exposure or do a series of exposure brackets hoping to get the right one, but the surest way to the proper exposure is to use the venerable gray card. This classic tool allows you to measure the intensity of the light instead of the reflectivity of the subject. The resulting exposure will be correct for any subject in the same light regardless of its reflectivity.

To use a gray card it should be held in the same light that is falling on the subject. Usually it will be at the subject position, but sometimes this will not be possible. As long as the light on the gray card is the same light falling on the subject the reading will be correct. The subject cannot be in the shade and the gray card in the sunlight or vice versa. Point the camera at the gray card and fill the frame with the card. Take a reading off the card making sure not to let your shadow fall on the card and orienting the card at a right angle to the camera position from which you intend to make the picture. The easiest way to get this reading is to use manual exposure and spot metering if your camera allows it. Otherwise use exposure lock or use the +/- function to correct your subject reading to the gray card reading. If you don't have spot metering, use your zoom lens to fill the frame with the card—taking note of the aperture change when zooming if your lens has a variable aperture.

The gray card is invaluable when photographing white flowers against a dark background as is often found in nature. Or white birds on a lakeshore. (Remember this when the camera club makes its trip to Reelfoot.)

Digital photographers photograph the card on the first of a series of images to make batch corrections for exposure and color a breeze.

When it comes to alternate subject metering techniques, the gray card is still the best option for accurate exposure in difficult lighting conditions.

