Setting Up For Digital Photography

By Tom Furlotte

A digital camera should be set up to work the way you need it to. Some of the initial settings you should make include the file type, the file size, the white balance, the exposure mode, the focus mode, the metering pattern, the ISO rating, and the drive mode.

The file type determines the way your image is processed by the camera. Most cameras use some combination of the choice between a JPEG (jpg), a TIFF (tif), or a RAW file. The JPEG is the most universal file and is fine for regular snapshots and use on the web. The TIFF is a large file that is useful for enlargement and fine detail images. Both of these files can be used in most imaging software. The RAW format contains the data captured by the camera as an unprocessed file. Special software is needed to work with RAW files but they allow the most control of the image. **RECOMMENDATION**: Jpg

The file size option selects how much image data is saved in the file. This is important with JPEGs since these are compressed files containing only a portion of the image data. A large JPEG contains as little as 25% of the actual image data. A small JPEG could contain only 6%. This option allows you to take more pictures on any given card size, but the smaller, more compressed files limit printing to smaller sizes. **RECOMMENDATION**: Fine (largest available)

White balance settings give you the choice of telling the camera what kind of light you are working in or of letting the camera figure it out on the fly. Many cameras allow you to measure the light quality in advance and preset it. **RECOMMENDATION:** Auto

Pick the type of exposure control that suits the situation and the results you need. Programmed auto exposure works for general use in even light. Shutter or Aperture priority modes allow for semi-auto exposure with more predictable results in some specific applications, and Manual gives you full control over your image. **RECOMMENDATION**: Program

Use single autofocus mode most of the time. (Be sure of turn off the AF system that chooses the subject that is closest to the camera. This causes more headaches than it is worth, in my opinion.) Continuous AF can be useful for moving subjects and is usually coupled in use with the continuous shooting drive mode. **RECOMMENDATION**: Single Spot

Set the exposure metering pattern mode to measure the important part of your image. Choose a multi-pattern meter for general photography. Use a center-weighted or spot meter if your subject is contrasty or backlit. **RECOMMENDATION**: Multi-pattern

Use the slowest ISO rating that the situation will allow and you will get the best quality. The higher the ISO the greater the noise generated in your image. Think of noise as the digital equivalent of grain in film. **RECOMMENDATION** : 400 ISO

Save the use of continuous drive for sports and other subjects in motion.. Single shot drive works most of the time. **RECOMMENDATION**: Single Shot

These settings are a good place to start. You may find better choices for your own needs when you become more familiar with your camera and the techniques of the photographic process.