

9 Tips for Getting Backgrounds Right



Backgrounds present both opportunities and challenges to photographers. On the one hand they can put a subjects in context and make it stand out in a way that highlights it wonderfully - but on the other hand backgrounds can overwhelm subjects and distract from them.

Some of the common problems that photographers have with backgrounds include:

- **Distracting Focal Points** - we've all seen this happen - we line up a shot of a friend to take as a portrait and just as we press the shutter someone else pops their head up over their shoulder with a silly face. The result is that the real focal point of the shot becomes the face pulling person. This is an extreme example of distracting focal points in the background but it's something that happens quite a lot.
- **Protruding Elements from Subjects Heads** - I nearly didn't include this one but it's so common that I just had to mention it. When shooting a portrait one of the common mistakes is for some background element to look like it's sticking up out of a person's head - like a horn. It's often trees (as in the photo to the left) but could be anything. These shots can be quite comical but can also really throw the composition of a shot off.
- **Competing Lines** - if your subject has lines in it and your background also has strong lines they can compete in such a way that the image becomes busy or so that the lines clash with one another.

9 Strategies for Dealing with Distracting Backgrounds

1. Check your Background Before Hitting the Shutter Release

Ok - this strategy isn't rocket science, in fact you'd think it almost goes without saying - but unfortunately it doesn't and many of the mistakes that I see in photographs could have been avoided simply by checking the background before taking the shot and taking some sort of evasive action.

Always scan the background of your shots before taking a shot. Look for colors that don't fit with the rest of the image, bright patches that might distract the eye, lines that clash, people that don't belong etc.

2. Move Your Subject

This is once again a fairly simple technique but is probably the first thing you should consider. Quite often asking a portrait subject to take a step to the left or right will fix things either by putting the distraction behind them or by putting it out of frame.



3. Change your Shooting Angle

If you have distracting elements in the background of a shot but can't move your subject another strategy is to move yourself and shoot from a new angle. This might mean rotating around your subject but could also include getting down low to make the sky the background or even getting up high and shooting down onto your subject to make the background the ground.

4. Using Aperture to Blur Backgrounds

One of the most useful things to learn as a way to combat distractions in backgrounds (and foregrounds) is to use the power of your lens to throw the background out of focus using depth of field. What you're trying to achieve with this technique is a nice blurred background where you can't really make out what's going on there.

The easiest way to do this is to use a wide aperture (the smaller the number the wider the aperture). The wider your aperture the more blurry your background should become.

The quickest way to see the impact of this strategy is to switch your camera into aperture priority mode and to take a number of shots at different apertures. Start with an aperture of f/20 and work your way down - one stop at a time. Once you get down to under f/4 you'll start seeing the background in your shots getting blurrier and blurrier.

5. Using Focal Length to Blur Backgrounds

Another way to help get your backgrounds nice and blurry is to use a lens with a long focal length. Longer tele-photo do help a little to get narrower depth of field (although the amount is less than many think). In actual fact the impact is smaller than it seems and the

main reason for the change is that with a longer focal length the subject actually takes up more space in the frame. Lots of arguments have been had over whether focal length impacts this - you can read more about it [here](#) and [here](#) - I'll leave it to the experts to discuss the finer points but will say that using longer focal lengths does seem to have some impact and is worth experimenting with.

6. Place Subjects In front of Open Spaces

Placing your subject a long way in front of other objects will also help to make those objects more blurry. For example if you have the choice between shooting your subject standing right in front of a brick wall or standing in front of an open field - the open field shot will have a much more blurred background simply because the brick wall is just centimeters from your subject and inside the focal range whereas an open field stretches off into the distance where everything will be out of focus.

7. Fill your frame with your subject

One of the most effective ways of removing distractions from backgrounds is to remove the background altogether by totally filling the frame with your subject. Get up close and/or use your zoom lens to tightly frame the shot and you'll not only remove distractions but could end up with a high impact shot as well.



8. Make your Own Background

Sometimes there just isn't any suitable background and so you might want to consider making your own. This could range from buying a purpose built studio background or simply buying some cloth to do the job for you.

I know of one keep photographer who goes out shooting photographic portraits and carries large colored sheets of card with him to put up on walls to act as a background.

The other thing to keep in mind is that in many instances you can move things around in the background of your shots (especially if you're shooting indoors). For example I was recently photographed in my home for a newspaper and the photographer had me move a

number of pieces of furniture during the shoot because they were distracting in the shots. It took a little effort but the impact in the shots was quite incredible.

9. Post Processing

I'm no expert in using photo editing software but there are numerous ways of editing a shot after you've taken it to get rid of distracting elements. These can include blurring techniques, actual removing of elements and replacing them and techniques such as selective coloring (ie making your subject stand out by making your background black and white (or at least sucking some of the color out of it)).