
PRACTICING PHOTOGRAPHY: DEVELOPING YOUR EXPERTISE

Quick Guide
Written by Jenn Mishra



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Photography is one of the most accessible art forms. We all have a camera; at least the one on our phone. It's easy to open the app and snap away.

But the ability to take photographs does not make everyone a photographer. There is a difference between snapshots and photographs. This distinction is not always easy to define, but we know it when we see it.

You may have looked at images made by other photographers and said, "I wish I could make photos like that," and then dismissed these photographs as unattainable. Maybe you felt that you don't have the talent.

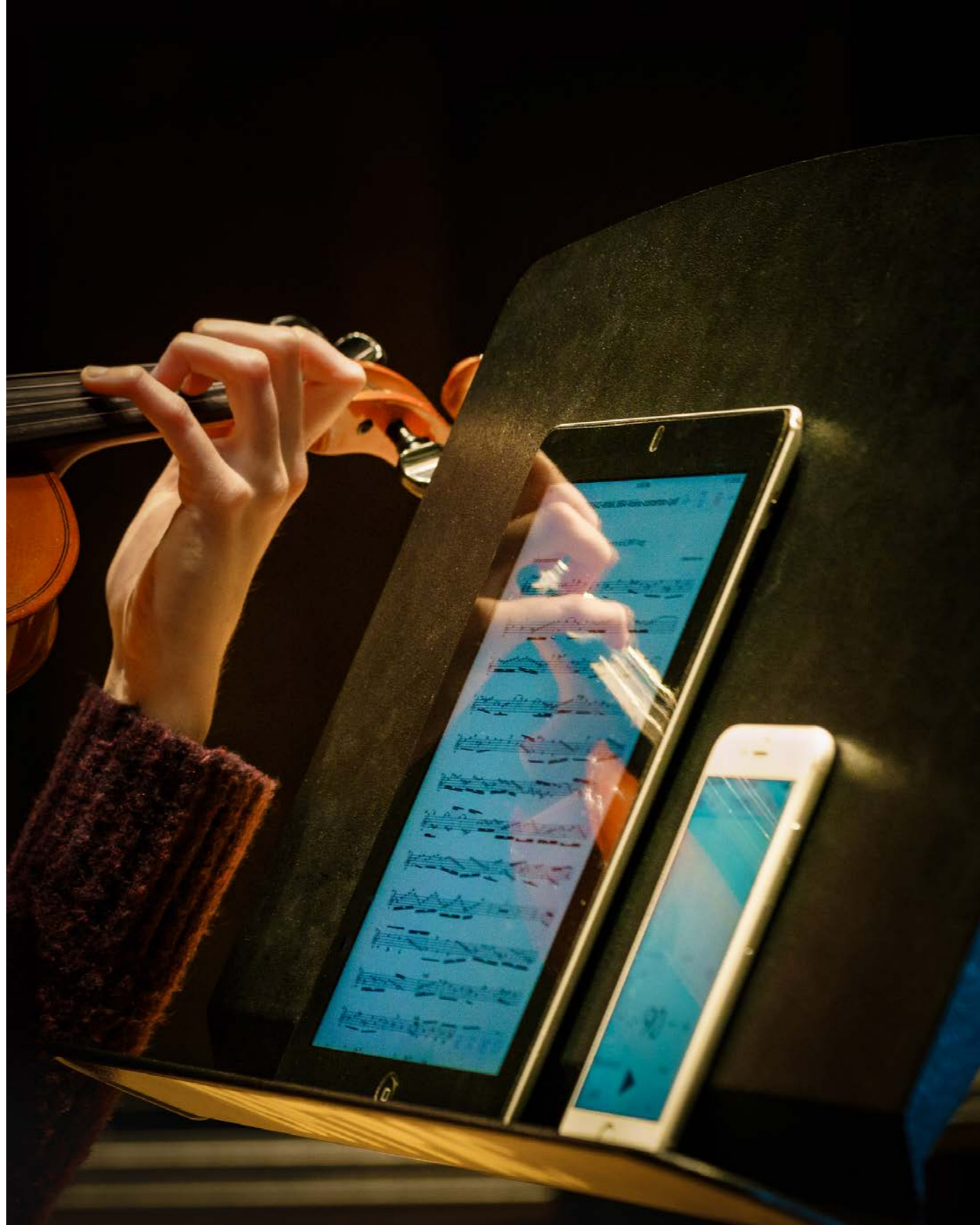
But I have good news.

Talent has little to do with becoming a good photographer. With enough practice – the right kind of practice – anyone can become an expert in photography.

This isn't just my philosophy. There are mountains of research in fields such as chess, music, mathematics, and sports that support this view.

Developing expertise is about practice.

Before I was a photographer, I trained as a classical musician. When I set out to learn photography, I used a very specific system adapted from my music background. In this article, I'll share this system with you.



Photograph by Jenn Mishra

Violinist practicing. I took this image for the cover of my book iPractice: Technology in the 21st Century Music Practice Room.

I'll talk about what it means to practice photography and devoting time to developing your photographic skills, and I'll show you ways to make your practice time count. I'll talk about setting goals and being persistent. Finally, I'll talk about the importance of getting feedback on your work.

In this guide, we'll cover the following:

- Why practice is more important than talent
- The importance of devoting time to practice
- Setting goals for more effective practice
- Persistence and repeating successes in practice
- The importance of getting feedback on your images

In short, I'll show you the path to mastering photography – and it has little to do with talent.

📖 Recommended Reading: Want to expand your shooting skills and master photography? Grab our set of 65 beautifully designed and printable Action Cards that will give you over 200 photography assignments to help you take your photography to the next level. [Check it out here.](#)



Photograph by Jenn Mishra

Children learn their native language through exposure. This photo was taken at the Festival of Nations in St. Louis. These children may not have grown up with the same native language, but they can still communicate through the arts. | Sony A7II 152mm 1/160@f6.3 ISO640

BECOMING AN EXPERT: PRACTICE, NOT TALENT

Talent has very little to do with developing expertise.

Think about language.

You learned to speak your native language when you were young. You picked up the language from the people around you. If the people around you spoke English, you learned English. If the people around you spoke Vietnamese, you learned Vietnamese.

All children learn their native language.

All children.

Not just *talented* children.


Children learn language by being immersed in it, not studying it in a book. They practice making sounds. They get positive feedback when they do a good job and corrective feedback when they go wrong.

Learning language has nothing to do with talent.

Now, think about photography.

We are immersed in a visual language. We are literally surrounded by images. With a camera, we are learning to speak this visual language.

Picking up a camera for the first time is like fumbling for your first words. Just like in language, some learn quicker than others. But in the end, all children learn their language. Just as everyone can learn photography.

 **Key Lesson:** Learning photography is about practice; not about talent.

The first thing you have to do is pick up your camera.



Photograph by Jenn Mishra

I don't know if I took 10,000 photos, but I took a lot of street photos in Cuba before I started to get ones I really liked. | Sony A7R3 69mm 1/800@f7.1 ISO4000

TIME ON CAMERA

You may have heard about the 10,000-hour rule. After 10,000 hours of practice, anyone can be good at anything.

This sounds simple, but 10,000 hours is a lot of time! It's about three hours every day for about 10 years!

In reality, this number varies. But the idea demonstrates that we can only learn photography if we go out and actually take photos.

Famous street photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson, said:

"Your first 10,000 photographs are your worst."

I think he was getting at a similar idea. We're not going to be expert photographers the first time we pick up our cameras, or the second. We need to take a lot of photographs to master the art.

Musicians practice for hours each day. Some practice up to eight hours per day! Photographers you admire may be putting in a similar amount of time.


Most of us don't have this much time to devote to mastering photography, but it's important to set aside time to practice. If your goal is to improve your photography, prioritize it in your day.

When I was first learning photography, I did a 365 project: one photo a day for a year. This ensured that I spent at least some time each day practicing photography. Some days, I only had a few minutes, but other days I had more time to devote to photography.

Taking photographs every day may not work for you, but think about what will work for you. Can you schedule a few hours each week to devote to

photography? Can you photograph over your lunch hour? Before school? Only you know your own life and what is possible.

Schedule dedicated photography time and stick to your schedule.

 **Key Lesson:** Improving your photography needs time. Take lots of photos. Even bad photos will teach you something. In general, the more you practice, the more your photography will improve.

But it's not just about the amount of time you put into photography. It has to be *quality* time.

Practice needs a goal.



Photograph by Jenn Mishra

Dancers in rehearsal. | Sony A7II 59mm 1/400@f5.0 ISO5000

GOAL-DIRECTED PRACTICE

Goal-directed practice is deliberate and thoughtful.

To improve, we need to pay attention when we're making images. We need to be fully present in the process. Casually taking photographs without much thought isn't going to make you a better photographer. Taking the same image again and again means that your images never change, or improve.

When musicians practice, they don't just play through a piece of music. They target technically difficult sections. They play these small sections over and over again, sometimes slowing them down or trying different ways to make the section work.

Musicians practice until the section is no longer a problem.

Photographers can do the same. We can focus on what we do well and attack weaknesses head on.



Photograph by Jenn Mishra

Egret comes in for a landing. Horseshoe Lake, Illinois. | Sony A7R3. 251mm 1/800@f8.0 ISO3200.

When you make an image, you are using a collection of technical and compositional skills. You choose the best settings on your camera for exposure and to get focus. You compose the image using principles like the rule of thirds or leading lines.

Take a moment to think about what you do well photographically and what you can't do well, yet. Be really specific.

Choose one technique to improve and set yourself a goal.

- Goals can be camera-based. Learning to use Aperture Priority mode or manipulating focus points are examples.
- Goals can focus on developing your photographic eye; for instance, composing using the rule of thirds or leading lines.
- Goals can be artistic, like finding emotion or a telling a story in a photograph.



Photograph by Jenn Mishra

With practice, I got over my fear of photographing strangers. This Indian man in Delhi caught my eye and I caught his. I took his street portrait. Later, I took others of him and his son. | Sony A7R3 70mm 1/80@f5.6 ISO2000

Let me give you an example:

One of my first photographic goals was to capture a bird in flight. I'd taken photographs of birds sitting in trees or on the water, but not one in flight. To make this happen, I had to figure out the right camera settings.

But understanding the camera settings didn't get me the photo. I also needed to go out and practice at a local lake. I lost count of how many photos I took. 100? 1000? The point was to take photos until I got one of a bird in flight.

And I did it!

My first attempt was not an award-winning photo by any means, but I captured a bird in flight! Each time I practiced, it got easier.


Here's another example:


Like many beginner street photographers, I was initially shy about taking photographs of strangers on the street. I ran across a challenge by professional street photographer Eric Kim. Kim's challenge was to go out and get turned down by 10 people. He rightly noted that it is quite difficult to find 10 people to say "no." People generally like getting their photograph taken.

Kim found a way of turning a common photographic fear into a challenge.

For each image you take, think about what you're doing and reflect on what went well and what didn't go well.

When I practice, I don't get caught up in making epic photographs. When I'm practicing music, I don't expect it to sound like I'm giving a concert. I make mistakes. I try a few things even if they don't work. When I've been out practicing photography, I'm excited if one or two images are successful.

 **Key Lesson:** Set yourself a photographic goal and take as many photos as you need to reach that goal.

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Don't get frustrated! Some photographers get discouraged if their photographs don't immediately look like ones they've seen on social media. Most photographers don't share their practice images. For every cool photograph you see on social media, there is a history of practice.

One of my favorite photographers, David DuChamin, is very open about making what he calls "sketch images." Even as a professional with decades of experience, he takes hundreds of photographs for each one he publishes. Hundreds!

Don't kick yourself if you can't get a successful image after only 10 shots.

Practice is about identifying a skill that you can't do well and setting yourself a challenge to master it. Every shutter click is one step closer to success.

SETTING GOALS


It's easy to get overwhelmed at the beginning. Don't try to master everything at once. Give yourself time. Choose just one aspect of your photography to improve.

If you need help setting a goal, find a photo you love and try to replicate one element of that photo. Figure out the camera settings you might need or scout out a place with similar light. Study the model's pose or how the lines make the composition.

I've written an e-book of photographic challenges to help photographers set goals: *32 Photo Etudes: Exercises in Composition, Light, Focus, Motion* (<https://amzn.to/2DaJE2z>). Etudes (pronounced "ay-toods") are short pieces of music written specifically to practice a particular skill isolation. Etudes aren't that exciting, but we practice them because the work will pay off later.

When I was learning photography, I transferred the idea of a musical etude to photography. Practicing difficult photographic skills in isolation meant that later I could get on with the fun part of making images.

This e-book provides exercises that structures practice around the most common photographic skills.

 **Key Lesson:** Set both long-term and short-term goals. Short-term goals are concrete and can be mastered quickly. Mastering short-term goals will give you the motivation to tackle the more difficult skills.

PERSISTENCE IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

One thing that the experts in any field have in common is persistence.

Photographic experts don't take a couple of images and declare they are done, or that they've mastered the skill.

Photographic experts don't take a couple of images and declare they can't do it, they aren't good at street photography, or are not meant for studio work.

Experts persist.

There are two patterns to learning: gradual improvement and epiphany. Most skills improve gradually with practice, but other skills seem to emerge suddenly.

GRADUAL IMPROVEMENT

Most skills improve gradually with practice. We will get quicker or achieve success with fewer shutter clicks.

It helps our motivation to track improvement. Musicians use all sorts of methods to track improvement. One of the most common is to track how fast they can play a difficult passage using

beats-per-minute. Using a metronome, they note how fast they can play a passage perfectly. Then they increase the speed.

Putting a number on photographic improvement isn't always easy, but it can be done. When I was learning the photographic technique of panning, I tracked my "keeper rate" (the percentage of photos that were successful).

Panning is moving the camera along with a subject so it stays in focus but the background blurs. Sports photographers use this technique a lot.

Panning is a difficult skill to master. I need to move my camera at the same pace as the moving subject. Just because I understood the technique doesn't mean I could do it. I needed to practice panning – a lot!

A bike race was the perfect opportunity. Racers would go around and around a course passing me dozens of times. Each time, I'd try to pan.

Most of the time I'd fail in my attempt to keep the riders in focus, but sometimes I'd succeed. As I practiced, I got better. More and more of my shots were in focus.



Photograph by Jenn Mishra

Each year, bikes race through downtown. It is a highspeed event, and the twists and turns make the race interesting. Perfect for practicing panning! | Sony A73 70mm 1/25@f4.5 ISO5000

At every race I photographed, I'd look at how many shots I'd successfully panned. My rate gradually improved. I still can't pan on every shot, but I can get a successful image more often than not. That's improvement!

EPIPHANY

Other skills are more elusive. It seems like I try and try, and nothing seems to work. Then one day, I can do it. I can see it! It's like my brain wakes up with a new outlook.

I had this type of experience when I was learning to see directional light.

I was taking a studio photography class and I realized that I couldn't really see where the light was coming from. I seemed blind to the shadows that the studio lights cast on my model's face.

To practice, I went online and looked at hundreds of photographs. I studied where the light in the image might be coming from. I looked at highlights and shadows.

I was slow at first – really slow.



Photograph by Jenn Mishra

I loved the way the lighting and the shadows changed as this late-night street cellist played. Bourbon Street, New Orleans. | Sony A7R3. 72mm. 1/125@f5.6 ISO8000.

Frustratingly slow. I felt that this was something I should be better at. How hard could it be to see shadows? But I kept after it. I'd study images and go out into the field and look for shadows.

Then one day, I could see it! I could all of a sudden see where light was coming from.

It was as if I had always had the ability to see directional light.


Practicing these types of skills can be frustrating because they don't seem to improve no matter how much you try. Stay motivated! You never know when you'll have that "aha" moment.


FEEDBACK

Finally, for the hard part. Feedback is essential to improving your image-making.

In some ways social media has made getting feedback on our photos easy. We post a photo and see how many people like our photo. The images with the most likes are the best, right?

But “likes” are superficial. These are quick pats on the back. They can be motivating, but “likes” won’t help us improve. We need others to look at our photographs and give a detailed assessment.

 **Key Lesson:** Balance motivational feedback with detailed assessments of your images.

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Musicians spend many years learning from a teacher, usually in a one-on-one situation. The teacher listens to them play and tells them what they need to practice. The teachers hear what the musicians can’t. They direct the practice. Later, students learn to direct their own practice and identify what needs improvement.

Learning photography isn’t always this structured, but we can seek out people to critique our images or provide coaching. These photographic experts can identify elements in our photography that need improvement.

Find people who will give you honest feedback. Be ready to hear both the good and the bad. Replicate what you’re doing well and change everything else.



Photograph by Jenn Mishra

I took a lot of advice from online forums before I finished post-processing this image. Manarola. Cinque Terre, Italy. | Sony A7II 16mm 30sec@f16 ISO100

Our photographs are part of us and it's hard sometimes not to dismiss negative feedback. Even if you disagree with the feedback, think about whether you *could* have shot the image differently and try it.

Finding a good photography coach can help identify what you do well and what elements of your photography still need practice.



Photograph by Jenn Mishra

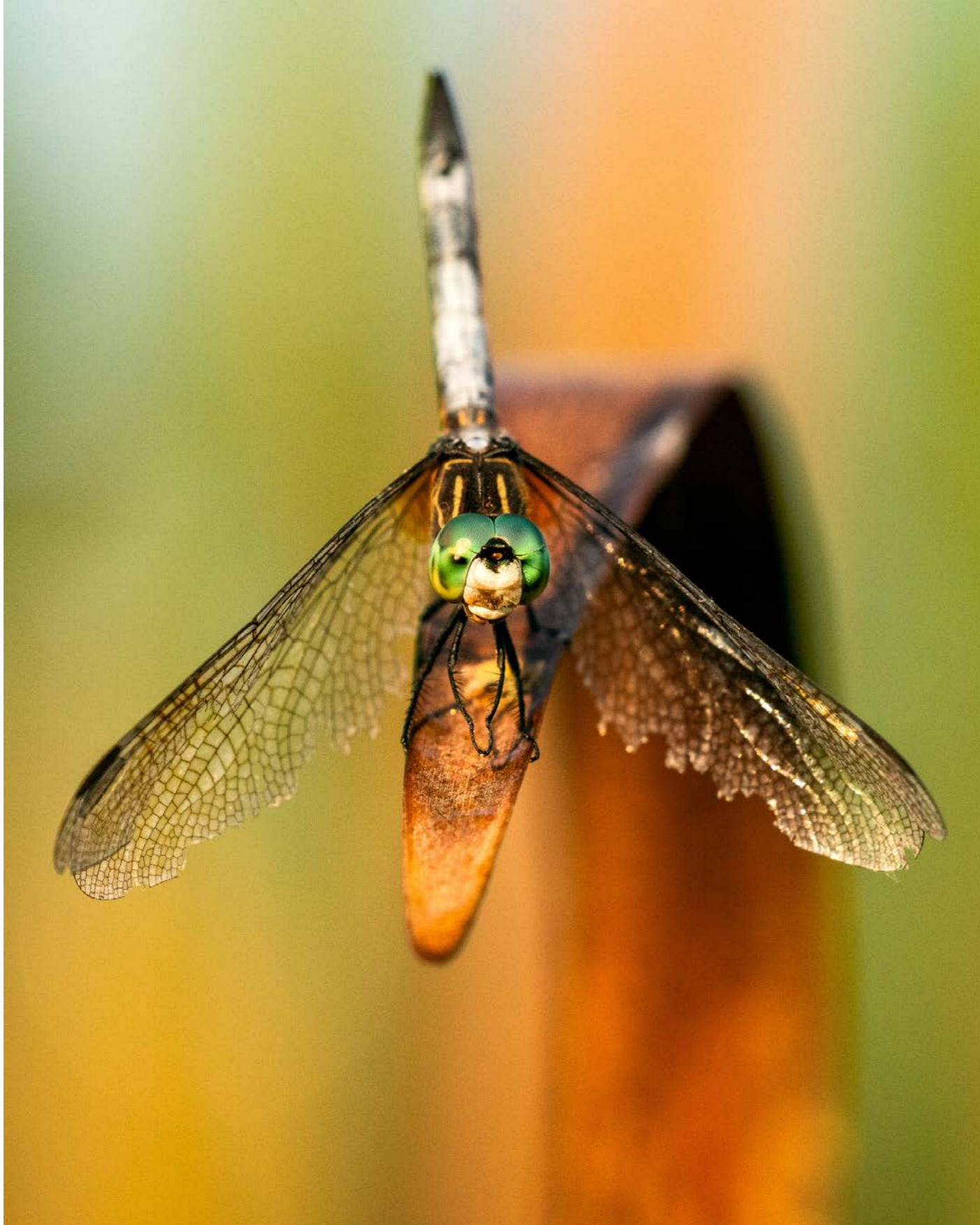
FINAL THOUGHTS

The secret to becoming a photographic expert is goal-directed practice. It's about picking up the camera, going out, and taking the shots. It's about setting yourself challenges designed to improve elements of your photography.

Many photographers give up too early. They cite lack of talent or enough time. Other photographers spend years treading the same path rather than setting themselves challenges and pushing their skills to the next level.

The fact is that even prodigies practice. No one picks up a camera and creates amazing photos from their first snap.

My photography goals were unique to me. They addressed weaknesses that I'd identified in my own photography. This self-reflection pushes expert photographers to grow.



Photograph by Jenn Mishra

I practice macro photography at a local pond. If I can capture this dragonfly close to home, I'll be able to capture more exotic wildlife when I travel. | Sony A7R3. 1/2000 at f8.0, ISO2000.

Don't wait until you're in an epic place to start practicing. Practice beforehand so that you can get epic shots. Experts aren't getting epic shots because they're in an exotic place. There are plenty of bad photographs from epic destinations. Experts can make beautiful photos in even the most mundane place.

Photographers sometimes give up when they see too big of a difference between where they are and where they want to be. Make the best photographs you can, right now. Don't expect to be as proficient as a photographer who has been practicing for 20 years.

Practice is a journey, and you're on the road to success.

Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) What is goal-directed practice?
- 2) What is the 10,000-hour rule?
- 3) Why don't all photographers become experts?
- 4) Why is talent less important than practice in mastering photography?
- 5) Describe the two patterns in learning photographic skills.
- 6) How many images should you make to master a particular technique?
- 7) Why is feedback important in improving your photography?
- 8) What role do "likes" on social media play in providing feedback?
- 9) What is a photo etude?

Shooting Exercise

Here are a few genre-based photography exercises to get you started:

Landscape Photographers

- Compose using foreground elements
- Master focus stacking
- Use long exposure for smooth water

Portrait Photographers

- Master eye focus
- Position one off-camera light
- Describe a specific pose to a model

Street Photographers

- Ask 10 strangers if you can take their photograph
- Anticipate the motion of a crowd
- Select an interesting background and wait for the right person to walk by

Wildlife Photographers

- Use a fast shutter speed to freeze action
- Master eye focus
- Position yourself for best light on the animal



Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (*and FREE!*) photography resources:



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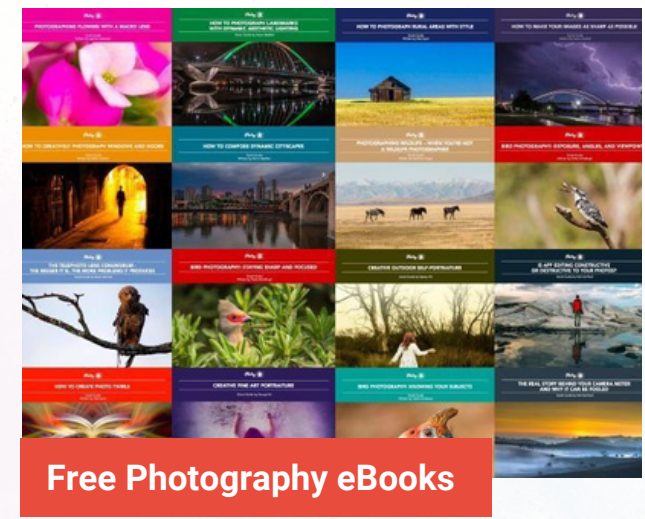
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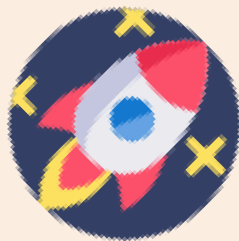
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Jenn Mishra is a fine art travel and landscape photographer based in the St. Louis metro area. Jenn is an active photographic educator and has been invited to speak at conferences such as Out of Chicago. Her photos have been featured in a number of solo exhibitions. Her studio is Wits End Photography.

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