

Kick-starting Your Photography for 2020

Many photographers find themselves in a bit of a creative rut from time to time, or they just want to try out something new rather than taking the same types of photos. The ideas collected below will be useful either way, helping you enjoy photography to the fullest and practice interesting new techniques along the way.

1. Try Out a Different Genre

One of the easiest things you can do if you're looking for some excitement is to try an entirely new genre of photography. If you're a landscape photographer, try shooting portraits. If you're a portrait photographer, find some architectural scenes to capture. Or dip your toes into one of the more difficult genres of photography to master – astrophotography, macro photography, underwater photography, and so on.

2. Start a Photo-Per-Day Project

When many people hear "2020" (or any year) and "photography ideas," the first thing they'll think of is a weekly or daily photo project. It's quite common to hear about projects like this online, and for good reason – they keep photography on your mind throughout the year.

Sometimes, photo-per-day (365 Projects) or photo-per-week (52 Projects) have a dedicated theme. The first week might be *shadows*, the next is *red and blue*, the third is *texture* and so on. Other times, it's more about creating a personal goal – making sure you actually take at least one good photo each day of the year, for example.

Even if you don't do a strict photography project, it is still a good idea to take photos regularly throughout the year, without major gaps. You don't want to lose any creativity or muscle memory for your camera.

3. Rent a Different Lens

Sometimes, a bit of new equipment is enough to spark a photographer's interest in spontaneous photoshoots and exploration.

It doesn't need to be something crazy (or crazy expensive) like a 400mm f/2.8 super telephoto. Even renting an 85mm f/1.8 prime, or a macro lens, is enough to bring out a lot of creativity and excitement that had been hidden behind the scenes. If you can borrow from a friend or swap equipment for a few days with them, even better. I'm a Nikon shooter, but I've borrowed Canon cameras in the past just to test, and it's always been a good excuse to take more photos and go out more often to shoot.

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4. Use a New Post-Processing Style

Experimentation isn't only part of photography in the field. It applies just as well to post-processing work – even more, perhaps, given the extraordinary number of post-processing tutorials available to try out wildly different types of photography.

Try out double exposure post-processing techniques. Turn your images into more of a conceptual piece, where you are blending multiple photos together into one. Or, add text to an image so it looks like a poster or magazine spread. You don't need to be a Photoshop master to make something interesting and creative – though you'll definitely improve your editing skills along the way.

5. Do Some Macro Photography

Macro photography is much more accessible than people tend to think. You don't need an expensive macro lens – just the equipment you already have, plus an extension tube. Even a 50mm prime lens and a single extension tube is going to get you great close-up images, although it takes some time to learn the right techniques for macro photography.

If you want more capabilities than an extension tube, you can find some inexpensive macro lenses that are older, third-party, or manual focus only. Either way, you won't regret getting macro capabilities in the end. It is one of the best ways to take amazing photos in almost any location and time of day. Many of the best macro photos are from any interesting backyard on an ordinary day in mid-afternoon.

6. Try Creative Lighting and Flash Gels

If you shoot with a flash, you're probably trying to do it the "correct" way – bouncing it off walls or ceilings, diffusing it to avoid harsh shadows, and carefully balancing it with ambient light. As reasonable as that may be, it only scratches the surface of the creative potential of flash.

For starters, try using flash gels to light your subject with interesting and unusual colours. Don't be afraid of harsh shadows; light the image so half the photo is an intense silhouette. Of course, none of this is a good idea for actual events, but chances are good that you'll discover a new technique you like and can carry over to the rest of your work.

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7. Print a Book of Photos

A lot of photographers have told me that they wish they printed their photos more often. Sometimes, it's because they don't have enough time or space to put a printed photo. Other times, it's just a matter of price; a good print, especially with a frame, can be prohibitively expensive. Several good prints are even worse in that respect.

Often, my recommendation is to try creating a photo book instead of a single larger print. That way, you can see several of your images at once in physical form, good for inspiration and for morale. A high-quality photo book still won't be cheap, but it beats printing several dozen images individually and finding ways to present them.

8. Experiment with "Wrong" Settings

No one should shoot handheld images with a 5-second shutter speed, or macro photos at f/2.8 with non-existent depth of field. Except when you should.

In reality, there are a lot of "wrong" camera settings that just don't work for typical images. That's fine if your goal is to get a perfectly sharp photo that presents your subject in the standard way. Sometimes, though, experimenting with unusual camera settings will give you a better result than any other method.

So, next time that you're looking for some new photography ideas, try shooting the same old subjects with very different settings (including different lenses and post-processing styles). Do a whole street photography session with a telephoto lens and long shutter speeds, or a landscape photoshoot with the widest aperture on your lens. Whether or not the photos work out, they certainly won't be ordinary.

9. Create a Photo Series

Even if you don't want to do a photo-per-day project, there's still a lot to be gained from creating a photo series – usually with a single underlying theme. Challenge yourself to shoot 25 different street photos with the colour green in all of them. Or, capture the same subject under as many weather conditions and times of day as possible.

You can go further and capture a photo series that tells a story – a sequence of images documenting the demolition of a building and the construction of its successor, or the change of a tree through the seasons. There are many stories to be told out there, not all of which can fit into a single image.

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10. Go Through Your Old Photos

Sometimes, the best way to add photos to your portfolio isn't to go out and take new ones – it's to search back through your archives to find images you missed initially.

As much as I recommend getting into the field and taking pictures as often as possible, that isn't always realistic. Even if you have the time and circumstances are right, photographers seem to overlook their old work more often than they should. It's always a good idea to review your old photos on occasion to see which ones are unexpected successes or could be improved with your current post-processing skills.

11. Practice Abstract Photography

One of the good things about abstract photography is that the subject is that you don't need to go anywhere fancy to practice it. Like macro photography, it's possible to take good abstract photos almost anywhere – you just need to look at the world in a less literal way. Abstract photos are not “of” anything aside from light, shapes, and colour. That's what makes them so flexible.

12. Scout for New Locations Nearby

It might feel as though you've exhausted all the local spots for photography, but that rarely ends up being true. If you're a landscape photographer, have you scouted all the waterfalls or forests within a short drive of your house? For portrait photographers with a go-to location, are there parks or interesting buildings that you haven't tested yet as backdrops? In either case, the answer is that you'll almost certainly be able to find new places to photograph that you haven't explored yet.

You don't need to live in the middle of the mountains or the rainforest to find good landscapes and wildlife to photograph. Likewise, you can take great street photos even if you aren't in New York City or Paris. We often overlook great nearby locations just because they're familiar to us, but they can be a gold mine for great photographs.

13. Limit Yourself

Some of the best creative work comes from working around limits and restrictions, even artificial ones that you assign to yourself. Try it sometime; allow yourself just a single prime lens for a day of shooting, or only take portrait orientation images. The specific limitation can be anything, reasonable or absurd. Stand in one place the whole time or shoot all your photos without looking at the LCD or viewfinder.

The photos you take, good or bad, aren't as important as the exercise in creativity. Self-imposed restrictions are good practice for real photoshoots. Sometimes, you may not be able to use a flash due to venue rules, or your movement is restricted because you're photographing from a small overlook. There are always going to be some limitations when you're practicing photography, so it's a good idea to prepare yourself for them ahead of time.

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14. Team up with Another Photographer

If you know any other photographers, it can be a great idea to team up with them for a day of shooting. You'll probably learn some new techniques along the way, or at least be inspired by each other's processes. At a minimum, you'll spend some time out shooting and working with someone else who enjoys photography.

Ask to join someone in our photography club. The point is simply to spend time with other people who share an appreciation for photography, as well as taking some new photos along the way.

15. Drive to Dark Sky Areas

If you enjoy landscape photography but can't find many locations nearby to shoot, consider driving somewhere with a darker sky and shooting the Milky Way. That certainly isn't possible for everyone, or at least it can take way too much driving, but it might apply to you. We live in an area with quite a bit of light pollution, but it is possible to find nearly clear skies within only 15-minutes of the city.

Invite some friends along, photographers or not, and make a fun trip out of it. With the amount of light pollution today, not enough people have a chance to see a (relatively) clear Milky Way, and they might be very excited about the chance. There are several dark sky maps available online, such as this one, which you can use as a good resource.

16. Loan yourself out to a charity

You have skills people want. Charities generally want quality photos but cannot afford to pay. Fill your karma bucket and try helping some needy local charities.

17. Recreate a Photo You Like

Sometimes, you'll see great images online or elsewhere that make you wonder what techniques the photographer used. The best way to figure out is to try recreating the photo for yourself.

This is similar to how many artists will attempt to recreate famous paintings from scratch, learning new techniques along the way. That's the goal here, too – adding new techniques to your toolkit for later, not trying to steal someone else's work. It's disingenuous, and perhaps copyright infringement, to publish your version of another photographer's image while passing it off entirely as your own.

Then again, you also don't need to recreate an image you liked without any modifications. I once saw an interesting macro photo of a water droplet in mid-air, a map of the world behind it (so a globe shape appeared in the water). Rather than recreate this exact image, maybe try the same water droplet setup but with a slice of an orange in the background. At the end of the day, you're still learning the same skills, but with an image that is more of your own.

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18. Photograph Friends and Family

Even photographers who don't usually shoot portraits are almost always better than non-photographers at photographing people. But I find that many photographers, regardless of their usual genre, just don't take enough pictures of their friends and family.

This isn't just for your own sake, although that's an important part. It's also something that many people find useful to have, for many reasons – their personal website, social media, spouse's desk, and so on. And, of course, it provides a chance to practice different lighting and shooting styles with someone who will forgive you if the photos turn out badly.

19. Use a Compact Camera for a Day

One of the earlier ideas in this list is to limit yourself – and that's easy to accomplish just by changing your equipment. Try taking photos for a day with a compact camera or smartphone, putting all the care into each image as you would with a DSLR. Use your tripod or lighting setup as normal, and same with post-processing. (Most flashes can be set to go off when they detect another flash, including the pop-up of a point-and-shoot.)

In this case, the results definitely won't have the same pixel-level quality as from your main kit. But this exercise will bring out a lot of creativity, too. You can't rely on shooting portraits with a shallow depth of field, so you need to be more careful about backgrounds and lighting. For landscape photography, you'll have much less dynamic range, so you need to wait until the sky and foreground have balanced light, or else shoot bracketed exposures to blend.

No matter what workarounds you use, you'll come away with a better sense of how to push your camera's limitations – and a stronger argument for why the camera doesn't really matter in the first place.

20. Find Local Events to Photograph

The last idea on this list, and one of the easiest to implement, is to be on the lookout for local events that are good for photography.

In almost any town, there will be fireworks or parades at some point in the year. The same is true of outdoor concerts, especially in larger cities, as well as other events like sports and seasonal festivities. The specific event doesn't matter; these are great opportunities for photography in almost every case.

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