

You need a tripod.

Whether you shoot digital, film or video, you need a tripod.

That slight blurriness that you sometimes get from your 18-250mm superzoom zoom lens (or even from your long-range-zoom compact camera) is not the fault of your camera—t's the fault of camera shake. Why do you think shake reduction has become a standard feature on almost every camera or lens these days? Shake reduction is awesome, up to a point. Buy a tripod and you have the original—and still most reliable—way to eliminate shaky shots.

Tripods are also great for shooting available-light scenes without a flash, as well as seamless panoramas, fireworks, family portraits (with you in the picture, for a change!), shots of the stars or moon, and dozens of other situations that demand long exposures. You'll get better close-up images—and more of your picture will be sharp—if you use a tripod, because you can use a smaller aperture and a slower shutter speed without fear of camera movement.



Understanding Tripods

There are seven characteristics common to all tripods:

- Collapsed size
- Size
- Load capacity
- Head type
- Feet
- Leg locks
- Common material

The more you know about each, the easier it will be to buy the perfect tripod for your picture-taking needs.

Collapsed Size – Collapsed Size is how long the tripod measures with everything folded up. This is important especially if you are travelling and need to pack the 'pod in a bag. This number will

Size – Maximum Height Extension is how tall the tripod will stand when every leg is and the centre post (a tube that the camera sits on, usually adjustable) is raised as far as it will go.

Load Capacity – Don't confuse weight with Maximum Load Capacity. The weight is how much the tripod weighs. The Maximum Load Capacity is the heaviest camera and lens combination the tripod (or tripod head) can handle. If you put a camera that's heavier than the Maximum Load Capacity on a tripod, you run the risk of a piece breaking or collapsing, causing damage to both the tripod and the camera. So, it's important to know how much your camera weighs with its heaviest lens and flash attached and buy a tripod that will handle it.

Head Type – Most tripods come with a head, but it may not be the ideal one for your purposes. The head sits atop the centre column, a tube in the centre of the tripod's construction that can be raised and lowered either with a hand crank or via a locking collar.

Feet – Feet come in rubber non-slip (used for most indoor and some outdoor shooting); spike (best for outdoor shooting, the spikes hold the tripod firmly in the ground); and custom (which could be anything, including ball-bearings).

Leg Locks – Leg locks are available in Twist (twist the leg to pull it out, twist it in reverse to lock it in position), Lever (open a lever to pull a leg out, close it to lock it) and custom options.

Common Material – (Which is what most of the tripod is made of) is either plastic (the least inexpensive, it's not very durable), aluminium (inexpensive and most commonly used, but in heavy-duty tripods can add a lot of weight), carbon fiber (a relatively new material for tripods, it's durable, lightweight, and flexible—ideal for most uses—but it'll cost ya), and wood (typically used by nature photographers who don't mind toting large-format cameras).

Putting it all together: The best tripod for you

While there are many different kinds of tripods, we can divide them into five basic groups: **Pocket, Tabletop, Portable, Medium Duty, and Sturdy Duty/Studio.**

Types of Tripods



Pocket tripods can be a real lifesaver when you're trying to shoot that impromptu family group picture and want to include yourself in it. Typically measuring less than five inches collapsed, pocket 'pods slip easily into a bag or waist-pack and are very handy at parties, restaurants, and other places where you may not want lug something bigger. They'll support the weight of a compact digital camera (be careful not to overload them!). Look for one that has some sort of adjustable head, even if it's primitive. There are even small tripods that will hold your cell phone camera steady!

Best used for:

- Self-portraits
- Group shots
- Party pictures—with you in them
- Small, light cameras



Tabletop tripods are excellent for group pictures and other situations where the camera can be positioned on a flat surface other than the ground. They're light, small, and easy to pack so they're perfect for travel. Put it on a table, set the self-timer, and you can include yourself in the shot. Or, turn your tabletop tripod sideways and place it against a wall to give you more stability when shooting. And since they hold the camera no more than 12 inches off the ground, they're great for down-to-earth subjects, including close-up flower photography.

Best used for:

- Self-portraits
- Group shots
- Macro/close-up/nature
- Travel photography
- Small cameras



Travel Tripods will bring your camera well off the ground but collapse to an easy-to-carry size. They're great for hiking, biking, and that casual stroll through the nature centre. All will support a digital (or film) SLR with a kit lens, or even a modest zoom lens. Compact video cameras can also be used on these tripods. But be cautious if you use a long zoom or hefty tele, especially if it's front heavy—it could cause the camera to tip over! Most to just shy of eye-level, but the trade-off is fabulous portability.

Tip: These are great for travellers: Portable tripods that collapse down to 22 inches or shorter will fit in airline carry-on luggage.

Best used for:

- Nature
- Travel
- Sports
- Amateur video
- Small SLRs
- Compact cameras



Medium Duty tripods fill the gap between lightweight portable jobs and heavyweight studio tripods. They can be used for nature photography (if you have a strong back), portable portrait set-ups, and yes, studio work. The advantage over portable pods is that most models to eye level or higher, are heavier and are therefore even sturdier—better when image sharpness is critical. While many come with heads, you can buy some models without a head and then create a custom configuration by buying the head separately. Tip: If you prize lightweight yet need a sturdy platform, look into the models that have carbon fibre legs. They combine the best of both worlds, and although they're worth it, they tend to be a bit more expensive.

Best used for:

- Nature
- Birding/Wildlife photos
- Sports
- Weddings and events
- Location portraits
- Macro/close-up photography
- Medium-format cameras



Sturdy Duty/Studio tripods are just that. This is the domain of professional photographers who generally buy a specific type of tripod to fit a specific need. They are big, sometimes immovable and nearly always used with a specialized head. They are designed to handle medium- and large-format camera; in the digital era, these tripods have become a rare breed.

Best used for:

- Studio photography
- Advertising
- Still lifes
- Medium-format cameras
- Large-format cameras

Using a Tripod Correctly

1 – Find your composition first

Since it takes a good amount of time to setup a tripod, it's a good idea to find your composition first, and then worry about the tripod. So, walk around and explore your subject from different angles. It may help to look through your viewfinder as you do this to help you see exactly what the composition will look like as a photo.

2 – Point one of the tripod legs towards your subject

Pointing one of the tripod legs towards your subject will give you room to stand between the other two legs (helping to prevent you from tripping over the tripod), and it can help stabilize the camera some more when it's pointed towards the ground.

3 – Keep the centre post vertical and perpendicular to the ground

To ensure the weight of your camera is evenly distributed to all three legs, make sure the centre post is vertical and perpendicular to the ground. Using one of those bubble levels that attach to the centre post can tremendously help you level the tripod like this and show you precisely when it's good to go. These bubble levels, if they're not already built-in on your tripod, are usually specific to each tripod model and available for less than \$10.

4 – Avoid extending the centre post

The centre post is significantly less stable than the three legs spread out, so only use the centre post as a last resort. This will often cause some frustration in setting up your tripod to that perfect height, but just remember that it's helping you get the sharpest image possible.

5 – Use an L-bracket for short lenses



L-Bracket



Standard Plate

The “L” bracket is a special kind of plate that attaches your camera to the tripod head. It's shaped like an “L” (heh) and allows you to mount your camera in portrait orientation, while still keeping the camera at the centre of the three legs. Here's a few photos that illustrate the difference between the L-bracket and a standard plate:

The L-bracket has two big advantages: it keeps the centre of gravity where the tripod can best

support it (at the centre of the three legs), and it gives you a few more inches of height when you're shooting in portrait orientation (these few extra inches can certainly make or break a photo!).

6 – Use a tripod collar for long lenses

Since big heavy lenses will often shift the centre of gravity of your camera, it's important to use a tripod collar that evenly balances the weight between your camera and lens. Without one, you'll surely notice how your camera has a tendency to slowly shift down after you lock the head into place.

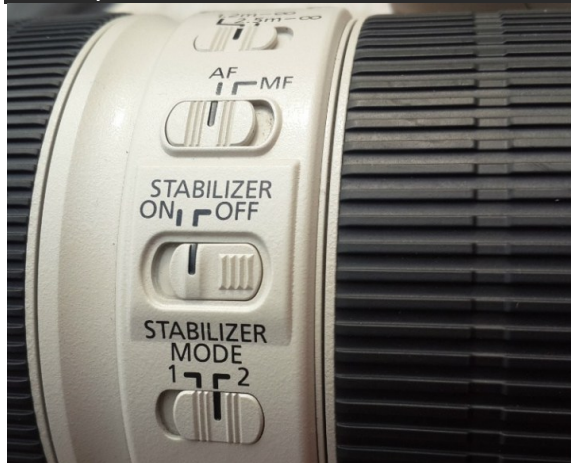
7 – Hang a camera bag or other heavy object from the centre post for extra stability

If you find yourself in some super windy conditions, it might help to add some more weight to your tripod by hanging something (like a camera bag) from the centre post. Many tripods already have a hook in place, but if yours doesn't then check to see if you can just screw in a hook from a hardware store. Be careful with this method though: if your camera bag is shaking a lot in the wind and hitting the tripod legs, you might actually lose stability.

8 - Switch-off image stabilization while using a tripod

It is fairly possible that you possess a lens which features image stabilization (IS or VR) and there are fair chances that you may be using your lens with IS/VR switched on. It is fine when you are shooting at a high shutter speed using a tripod, but as you slow things down, that's when the real problem starts.

Check your lens for the IS or VR switch.



When you are shooting with IS/VR switched on, your lens generates a minor shake (meant to counter-act your hand movements) which ultimately reaches the camera. This minor vibration can introduce shake in your photos when shooting on a tripod, especially at slower shutter speeds.

While shooting landscapes in the evening, star trails, light trails, or any long exposure shot, you need to slow down your shutter speed. As you cannot shoot these types of photos handheld, you will need a tripod. I would advise you to switch off the IS/VR on your lens in order to eliminate the minor shake that

would have been generated otherwise.

9 - Use the mirror lock-up feature on your camera

You may be aware of the fact that there is a mirror inside your digital camera (except for mirrorless cameras) that moves to expose the image sensor when you press the shutter release button. This movement of the mirror can cause a minor shake while the camera is mounted on a tripod, thus affecting the sharpness of your photos.



This shake caused by the mirror may not affect your photos while you are shooting at a fast shutter speed, but as you slow down the shutter speed the shake would become visible in your photos. In order to eliminate this, you can manually lock the movement of the mirror. This can easily be done by activating the mirror lock-up feature (look through your camera's menu settings or consult the user manual).

As you activate the mirror lock-up feature on your camera, the camera will raise the mirror up and keep it there until you

disable the feature. So, when you press the shutter release button the mirror will not move, and the chances of minor shake being generated would be eliminated.

10 - Use the 2-second timer or a remote shutter release

Do you use the shutter release button to take a photo when the camera is resting on a tripod? If you said yes, then make sure that you switch on the 2-second timer in your camera. Do not assume that if the camera is on a tripod there will be no shake no matter what. When you press the shutter button you introduce a minor shake by applying some pressure to the camera. By using the 2-second timer feature you can do away with the camera shake as you are allowing 2 seconds for the camera to absorb that minor shake before exposing the photo.

Use a remote trigger or your 2-second timer to eliminate camera shake.



If you want to be extra cautious and not take any chances, you can [use a remote shutter release or cable](#). The remote allows you to go wireless and click photos without even touching the camera, thus ensuring that your images will be crisp and sharp. A wired trigger is equally useful except for the fact that there is a cable attached to the camera, otherwise it functions exactly the same as a remote.

11 – Shoot at the lowest ISO possible

The lower the ISO, the less sensitive the camera's image sensor is to light, and the chance of noise and grain is lessened. While you are shooting with your camera on a tripod, likely you may be working in low light conditions or doing long exposures. You would usually shoot at high ISO in order to compensate for slow shutter speed, but that is not necessary while using a tripod.

If you are shooting in low light conditions, using high ISO would obviously introduce noise or grain into your images. As you are already using a tripod, you do not have to worry about camera shake because of slow shutter speed. Without any second thoughts set the ISO sensitivity to the minimum value available on your camera, this will result in a sharp and grain free image.

Why It's important to carefully setup your tripod

Although setting up your tripod may seem like a slow and tedious process, it's important to do it carefully to ensure you get the sharpest image possible. Ensuring that your tripod is in a stable position will also help prevent it from toppling over and damaging your camera and lens.

And, finally, the more time and care you take in setting up your tripod, the more you'll be forced to concentrate on your composition. Knowing that it's going to take you a long time to set up that tripod, you'll be more careful about what composition you choose.

ALTERNATIVES TO TRIPODS

There are other kinds of camera supports that might be a better fit for your style of photography. Action photographers and hikers should consider Monopods for their light weight and simpler construction. They have only one leg, but they can give you that bit of steadiness that sometimes makes a big difference. You may also want to consider Car Window Mounts and Suction Mounts for specialized applications.

Types of Tripod Heads



Ball Heads

Ball heads are the most popular tripod head for photography. The rotating ball lets you position the camera in almost any way imaginable, with a locking screw letting you lock the ball in position. It gives you the most flexibility in how it interacts with the camera but can be difficult to make minor adjustments in position.



Pan & Tilt Heads

These tripod heads have 2 axes allowing you to pan or tilt the camera independently. To move the pan & tilt head, you have to twist to unlock movement making it really easy to get your camera in position. They take up more space than a ball head but are easier to make minor adjustments.

Fluid Heads

A fluid head is essentially a pan & tilt head but geared for video work. While you can lock or unlock the pan and tilt, the fluid head also features “drag” which controls how much friction there is when panning or tilting. This makes it easy to get smooth moving shots when recording video.



Pistol Grip Heads

A pistol grip head is very similar to a ball head. Instead of having to use a knob to loosen the ball, you'll use a pistol grip. Some photographers like how quick and easy it is to reposition the camera without fumbling with the tripod head. I personally don't like pistol grips because they can loosen over time, unlike a traditional ball head.



Gimbal Heads

The tripod heads we've gone through so far aren't strong enough to hold an enormous long lens like a 400mm f/2.8, 600mm f/4 or a 200-400mm f/4. Most commonly used for wildlife photography, gimbal heads hold the lens centred to the tripod with the flexibility to move as if you were hand-holding the lens. It's really not meant to be locked down other than to attach or remove a lens



Monopods

While not really a tripod head, I thought I'd make a mention of the monopod. If you're walking around with your camera, it doesn't always make sense to set up a tripod for the shot. Sports photographers use monopods rather than gimbal heads to support their long lenses as they chase

the action. Wedding photographers might use a monopod to stabilize their 70-200mm lens from the back of the church or just to give their arms a break from carrying a heavy lens. Videographers use monopods to stabilize all of their lenses as they move around a venue to get different shots and angles.



What about Arca-Swiss?



Arca-Swiss actually isn't a tripod head. It's the type of plate the camera attaches to that's mounted on top of the tripod head. Also known as the "universal tripod mount", Arca-Swiss plates are usually long, straight mounts measured in millimeters. The L-Brackets made by Really Right Stuff feature Arca-Swiss plates and all of their ball heads feature an Arca-Swiss mount.

