

The Digital Camera "Tute"

Part One

by Don Butler

"Tute", short for tutorial. It's not impossible for there to be one, definitive article for operating all digital cameras, but I'll try to boil the subject down to some essentials so most digital camera owners, spinning in a confusion of controls and hard to read manuals, can relate to it and get on with taking pictures.

There's a sharp dividing line in the world of digital cameras, just as there was (and is) in film based cameras. There are simple, little or 'no controls' boxes, usually referred to as "point and shoot" and then there are others that offer more control through more features. In layman's terms, that levers and buttons or bells and whistles. And then there's the "User Manual".

Those supposedly helpful manuals are often written by engineers or computer geeks who really don't speak the common language of our world. As a result they're not as 'user friendly' as you'd like.

It gets worse if you call customer service. If you try, be prepared for 1) a person in a foreign country for whom English is obviously a second language, and 2) a person who is reading from a script of keyed responses and 3) a person who perhaps has never seen the camera you're calling about. They will tell you to try the things you already tried to comprehend in the book and call them back. They are adamant that you follow this procedure. And then when you call back, you get another idiot who doesn't know you called before and will try to start you all over from the beginning. I've been there. It's enough to make you take the camera back.

So, there is a language barrier at every turn, so far. Don't get mad at your camera, though. In all likelihood it's a lot better than this so called customer service.

For those with point and shoot cameras, the most important thing is don't shake the camera when you take the pictures. The least expensive cameras have the poorest lens, not as good at light gathering as the best, and so, the camera must use a slower shutter to make a photo. Learn to find something to lean on in low light situations. Get the camera or your hand or arm on something solid. Even in poor light, even without flash, you can train yourself to get pretty good pics this way.

When shooting action learn the art of 'panning'. That simply means moving the camera in such a way as to keep the moving subject in the middle of the view finder. At events like car races, skiing, track and field, any situation where you just know the subject will be blurred because it's going past too fast, smoothly swinging the camera along with the subject will catch it.

You'll need to do some practice, so go out in the street and take pictures of passing vehicles. Since it's digital, not film, you get to practice free except for batteries.

Next, making prints.

Not all camera counter services will take specific directions on which files to print when you hand them your memory chip. There are, though, some customer operated machines in which you insert the memory and select from the screen what you want to print. If you have to have someone else print your shots, try to retain this option.

Specialized printers, some with a way to dock the camera to them that make 4"x5" prints (or some such special size) are promoted as a way to simply print the files in your camera. This approach does seem simple but it deprives us of choices. You don't get to crop them or change things like brightness and contrast. There's no choice of paper. You must use the special paper that fits the printer. Besides, there's probably a printer on your desk near your computer. Chances are, it'll do a credible job of photo printing and all the options come back.

Learn to use the digital photo processing software that came with your camera, print on 8½"x11" glossy paper and cut it down for smaller print sizes.

One other issue worth mentioning: Chances are, point and shoot digitals use throwaway or rechargeable batteries. Be sure to carry spares. They usually won't last long and you're going to hate to be out of power before you're done taking pictures.

For The More Complicated Cameras

So, you've opted for a camera with more advanced features but you don't understand how they work. The manual, as already stated, often doesn't help much. Usually there is a basic choice allowing the user to "point and shoot", just letting the camera run on "cruise", if you will. The camera will then set things like 'Focus', 'Aperture' and Shutter automatically and you have only to 'Trip'. For normal, sun lit scenes, or with automatic flash (if the camera has that feature) that's perfectly acceptable. But you got this camera because you don't want to be limited to these 'point and shoot' conditions. Let's look at what you can do to extend your knowledge and use the more advanced features.

Every new digital camera comes with software for uploading camera files. Install it and use the computer to look at your pictures, deleting the worst of them (there's no good in filling your hard drives with pictures you don't want) and learning to edit them for the best results. Try out every feature, one at a time, and spend some time with each one. You may even find a feature that allows you to pre-program the camera for special conditions. Try that out too. Take pictures without flash, even when the camera is telling you it needs the flash.

One of the most satisfying things you can do is explore the possibilities in shooting with available light. Take the camera off "cruise" mode and try things like portraits under a shade tree for nice soft, flattering lighting. Pose your subject next to a window for good cross lighting and superior modeling of facial features.

In the next edition we'll go further into specific advanced camera features and see what advantages there are.