The Power of
Black & White Photography

by Photographer Josh Katz

Canon

BLACK & WHITE
A TIMELESS CREATIVE APPROACH

WHY BLACK & WHITE MATTERS

Creating black and white imagery is a powerful artistic choice, infinitely larger than just an editing technique. It's an impactful approach that helps you see the world differently, communicate in a dramatic visual language and create meaningful work while getting in touch with photography's history.

An endless list of the photographic greats have created striking black and white imagery since the medium was invented in the early 19th century, from legends like Ansel Adams, Henri Carter-Bresson and Helen Levitt, to the modern-day greats who continue producing compelling black and white photography.

HOW BLACK & WHITE IMPROVES YOUR PHOTOS

Black and white is a different way to view the world. Removing color from a photo allows infinite rich textures, tones, and details to sing. Strong compositions and shapes pop like never before and greater attention is directed toward the subject matter, invoking emotional impact. Imposing creative constraints is one of the best ways to grow as an artist. Perfect a great approach to black and white photography and you'll notice drastic improvements in your color work as well. This guide will help you train your photographic eye, adding a powerful tool to your creative arsenal with a complete walkthrough — from shooting to editing — for exploring the exciting possibilities of black and white photography.

SETTING UP YOUR CAMERA

SET YOUR CAMERA'S PICTURE STYLE TO MONOCHROME

Setting your camera's **Picture Style** to **Monochrome** lets you see the world through black and white as you're capturing images.

ADJUST PICTURE STYLE TO MATCH YOUR VISION

The closer your **Picture Style** is to your ideal final image, the easier it becomes to execute your vision. If you like the dramatic, high-contrast style that many photographers adore, simply increase the contrast and sharpness of the **Monochrome Picture Style**.

SHOOT IN RAW

Shooting in RAW retains the most information in your images, providing more control in the editing process. Setting a **Picture Style** when you are in RAW is nondestructive, meaning you can easily switch between color and black and white while editing — perfect for the noncommittal artist.

Warning: When shooting Monochrome in JPEG, images cannot be brought back to color.

DON'T BLOW OUT YOUR HIGHLIGHTS

When overexposing an image — also known as blowing out highlights — crucial details are lost in the brightest areas, like the sky. This offers significantly less control of tone in the editing process. Below are the three easiest ways to avoid blown highlights:

- Shoot with semi-automated modes, like **Aperture Priority (Av)**, **Shutter Priority (Tv)** or **Manual (M)** with ISO Auto. Machines avoid blown highlights much better than humans.
- Monitor your histogram to ensure your brightest points are never peaking.
- Enable highlight alert, also known as blinkies, which warn of overexposed areas in image review.

Perspective Check

Let's take a moment to appreciate electronic viewfinders and Live View for giving us a leg up on the photographic masters of past generations who saw the world in color while committing to black and white. Thanks to current technology, you are now able to see the world in black and white and switch back to color!

COMPOSITION WITHOUT COLOR

Composition gets an even greater spotlight when you're shooting in black and white. Below are some of my favorite techniques to exercise.

LARGE-SCALE SHADOW PLAY

Shadows are a black and white photographer's best friend. Look for the intersection of shadows and sun in wide scenes, like a grand architectural image, a vast landscape, a street photo, or a full-body portrait. Photographing during golden hour is the easiest way to find long, luscious shadows to engage.

CLOSE-RANGE SHADOW PLAY

No matter how near or far you are from your subject, great shadows will take your image to the next level. Get closer to your subject to explore how shadow play alters your composition. On a sunny day, crack the blinds of a window with direct sunlight to create interesting light patterns similar to a Film Noir-inspired portrait or still life. Backlighting can also create stellar silhouettes.
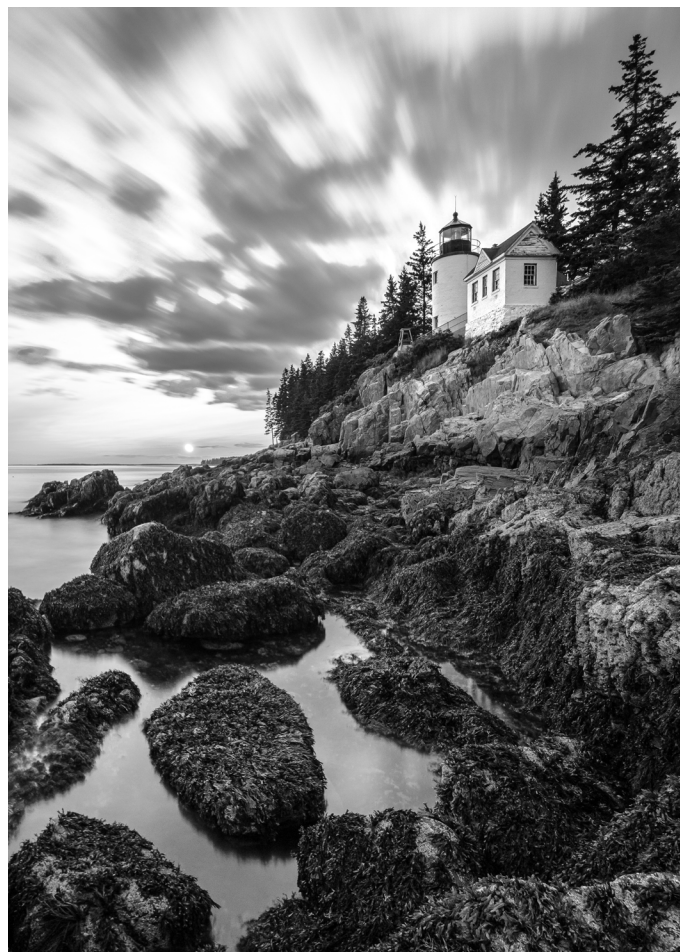
LEADING LINES

Leading lines are a classic compositional element that are powerfully emphasized by the removal of color, and they're plentiful everywhere. In the country, look for roads, rivers, and treelines. In cities, find architectural elements like columns, ladders, rows of windows, and so on. Interesting lines tend to reveal themselves from far away and high above, so go climb your nearest mountain or rooftop!

NEUTRAL DENSITY FILTERS FOR ADDED TEXTURE

Neutral density filters allow you to create daytime long exposures, smoothing out bodies of water to create amazing, reflective textures in black and white. Channel your inner Ansel Adams.

NEGATIVE SPACE

Find simplicity and let your subject breathe. Bland, gray skies suddenly create opportunities for striking contrasts.

LIGHT TRAILS

Nighttime long exposures create stunning leading lines, known as light trails, that the human eye can never see. Grab a tripod and find a busy street! For an even greater long exposure challenge, try panning the camera with a moving subject to create captivating light trails.

Watch this tutorial to see how I created this nighttime panning image with two Canon Speedlite 600EX II-RT Flashes.

CAN ANYTHING BE PHOTOGRAPHED IN BLACK & WHITE?

Almost every subject matter can be powerfully photographed in black and white – architecture, portraits, sports, landscapes, you name it.

SHOOTING CHALLENGE

Go photograph your favorite subject and create an image demonstrating each of the composition techniques described above.

EDITING TECHNIQUES

There are many popular editing styles for black and white photography that can easily be mixed and matched. Below is my editing workflow, which provides plenty of customizability for finding your perfect style. I recommend following along, step-by-step, until this process becomes second nature.

Housekeeping → **Tonality** → **B&W Mix** → **Color Grading** → **Final Flair**

1. **Housekeeping** — *Begin by cleaning up your image to achieve its full potential.*

   - **White Balance** – Adjust the **White Balance** to maximize tonal range. This sweet spot is easiest to find by switching the RAW file back to a color profile and finding the most neutral, true-to-reality White Balance.
   - **Color Profile** – Switch the color profile back to **Monochrome**.
   - **Basic Adjustments** – Adjust the exposure, shadows, and highlights to look neutral and balanced.
   - **Crop** – Crop as desired.

2. **Tonality** — *The foundation of a black and white image's style is tonality. Some images look great with a dramatic, high-contrast look, others look better with low contrast and deep grays, and some call for the perfect in-between.*

   - **High Contrast** – Generously raise the contrast and clarity. Then, raise the highlights and whites while lowering the shadows and blacks. This technique creates a dramatic, punchy look with deeper shadows and brighter highlights.
   - **Low Contrast** – Gently lower your contrast and clarity. Then, lower the highlights and whites while raising the shadows and blacks. This polar-opposite technique creates soft gray tones giving the image a gentle, nostalgic look.
   - **Neutral Middle Ground** – Sometimes less is more. Skip this step entirely for a neutral look with medium contrast.

3. **Black & White Mix** — *Color still plays an important role while editing in black and white. Adjusting the tonality of individual colors can emphasize, or de-emphasize, desired contrasts.*

   - Adjust each color to emphasize your desired tonality. This step is great for making subjects pop from the background.
   - For quick editing, auto mode is highly effective.

4. **Color Grading** — *This step offers a great opportunity for infusing subtle color into black and white images. When it comes to color grading, less is more. These are the three most popular styles:*

   - **Neutral Black & White** – To achieve a perfectly neutral color, identify any lingering color in your image and push the shadows, gently, in the opposite direction. For example, an image with a red hue can be neutralized by grading the shadows with blue.
   - **Sepia Tones** – Create this classic style by adding subtle oranges or yellows into the shadows.
   - **Blue Tones** – Achieve this popular look by adding subtle blues or purples to the shadows.

   Contextually Relevant Fun Fact
   The sepia tone comes from a cuttlefish known as Sepia officinalis, whose ink was popularly used for image development in the late 19th century. The blue tones, meanwhile, were popularized by cyanotypes. Both of these styles are known as monochromatic photography.

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5. **Final Flair** — *While each of the details in this step are completely optional, consider experimenting with these techniques to add a nostalgic flair inspired by film photography.*

   - **Faded Blacks** – Flatten the bottom of the tone curve, making the deepest blacks a softer gray. This pairs beautifully with the high-contrast look.
   - **Grain** – Add subtle grain for a grittier look.
   - **Vignette** – This is a great technique for pushing the viewer's eye into the center of the image with dramatic emphasis.

Vignetting can add a subtle flair to your black and white images, as shown in the below examples.

Original image

Image with added vignette, grain, and faded blacks

EDITING CHALLENGE

Try editing a single image with each of these different styles, seeing which looks best. Remember that each style conveys a different mood, so what works perfectly for one image may not work for another.

NEUTRAL BLACK & WHITE

LOW CONTRAST

HIGH CONTRAST

SEPIA TONES

LOW CONTRAST

HIGH CONTRAST

BLUE TONES

LOW CONTRAST

HIGH CONTRAST

CONVERTING IMAGES INTO BLACK & WHITE

Black and white editing is a fantastic way to breathe new life into images you originally shot in color. It's even a great hack for saving images that don't work in color!

GRAINY, HIGH ISO IMAGES

Grain looks amazing in black and white – just like a gritty film photo. When a photo seems too grainy in color, try editing in black and white to make the graininess work for you. Many photographers even add artificial grain while editing to mimic this iconic film style.

OVEREXPOSED HIGHLIGHTS

While it's always best to avoid blowing out your highlights, this happens to the best of us. Editing in black and white with a high-contrast style makes your blown-out skies look like an intentional stylistic decision!

REVITALIZING OLD WORK

Plenty of excellent color images look even better in black and white. Reexamine your image catalog with black and white in mind – be ready to fall in love with old images previously gone unappreciated.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Katz is a documentary photographer, published author, photo educator and sponsored skateboarder living in Brooklyn, NY. He creates digital photography courses, leads workshops, creates videos for Canon and shoots YouTube videos about photography.

His first photo book, "On the Roof: New York in Quarantine," was published by Thames & Hudson in November 2021 with 100% of his profits donated to Doctors Without Borders.

Josh's less professional hobbies include talking to strangers, designing scavenger hunts, cooking, reading about anthropology + urban planning + American history, and trying to visit every U.S. national park.

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