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It's All about Perspective: Tips for Composition and Camera Placement

So often we see photos of pets (and kids) from an adult's perspective, which can be charming and beautiful, but at the same time, a bit predictable (dare I say, even a bit boring). In this chapter, I suggest some tips for mixing things up and making your photos look like you've been floating around a movie set with a million-dollar camera rig.

Please note: When you see notations like [w2.1], it means that a related Web link (and usually additional information) can be found by visiting the book's companion Web site at www.PhotoPetTips.com.



Tip #13

Photograph Your Pet Straight On, Eye to Eye

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You can get great photos of your dog or cat (or a group of pets) by sitting on a low chair or staircase step, and looking directly into their eyes, or by having them sit on a chair or table to raise them up to a level that allows you to take their photo straight on without having to crawl around on the floor. It also helps to have someone else entice your pets from behind the camera with toys or noise-makers, or by calling their name.

I photographed this kitten at a client's home playing on her scratching post. The height of the post made it easy to capture this image eye-to-eye without crawling on the ground.



Camera: Canon EOS-D60;

Lens/Focal Length: Canon 50mm

macro;

ISO: 200; **Aperture:** f/2.5;

Shutter Speed: $\frac{1}{30}$ sec;

Lighting Notes: Natural daylight plus room light from some halogen lightbulbs provided the lighting.

photo © Andrew Darlow



“First one who blinks buys the catnip!”

Tip #14



Lower Your Perspective and Make Your Subject a Hero

To create what is known as a “hero shot” (so named because it often makes the subject look more majestic), all you need to do is lower your perspective so that you are a bit lower than the pet’s eye level (how low will depend on the pet, and experimentation is key). Like in the previous tip, toys and noisemakers work well to help create different poses.

In this photo of a Weimaraner, photographed in a park on a partly cloudy day at about 1 P.M. in late December, his owner was right next to him when I took the shot. I cropped it to a square because I liked that look much more in this case. That’s a bonus tip that will be covered again in Tip 20 and other places throughout the book—use cropping to your advantage!

“It’s good to be the king!”



Camera: Canon EOS-D60;
Lens/Focal Length: Canon 16–35mm/16mm;
ISO: 400; **Aperture:** f/19;
Shutter Speed: $\frac{1}{125}$ sec;
Lighting Notes: Natural daylight plus fill light from the built-in pop-up flash produced the lighting.

photo © Andrew Darlow



Tip #15

Photograph Your Dog or Cat from the Back

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Many of my favorite photos are those captured from behind the subject. This perspective often gives a cinematic look that shows the viewer what the subject is seeing. You can work with this approach at many levels, from super wide to a macro view.

I captured this image of a cat and a few birds at a client's home on a sunny February afternoon at about 3 P.M. My goal was to have the viewer think about what the cat was thinking at the time. These types of photos can often tell a story, and they can be completely random or set up like in a movie. The f/2.8 aperture helped to keep the focus on the main characters in the image.



Camera: Canon EOS-D60;
Lens/Focal Length: Canon 16–35mm/16mm;
ISO: 400; **Aperture:** f/2.8;
Shutter Speed: $\frac{1}{350}$ sec;
Lighting Notes: Natural daylight from the windows provided the lighting, and some additional “fill light” was added on the cat in Adobe Photoshop.
photo © Andrew Darlow



“Birdies are friends, not food!”

Tip #16



Go for the Overhead View

By photographing your pet from a slightly more overhead angle than normal (or totally overhead), you can create some really dramatic looks. Like in the previous tip, this approach can work at many levels, from super wide to a macro view.

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I photographed this Boston Terrier named Cupid at about 1 P.M. in December for a magazine's February issue (you can probably guess which holiday it was for). I photographed her from a number of different angles, but this overhead view was chosen for the magazine. The rose petals and soft material (it's a tablecloth) complemented Cupid and her big brown eyes perfectly!



“Don't hate me because I'm huggable.”



Camera: Canon EOS-D60;

Lens/Focal Length: Canon 28–135mm
IS/28mm;

ISO: 200; **Aperture:** f/8;

Shutter Speed: $\frac{1}{20}$ sec;

Lighting Notes: Multiple incandescent lightbulbs were placed camera left with a large sheet of diffusion material [w2.1] in front of them to create the soft lighting and the big catch lights in the dog's eyes. Large sheets of heavy white paper (fill cards) surrounded the subject to soften the shadows. Some daylight from windows (camera left) added to the overall lighting.

photo © Andrew Darlow



Tip #17

Shoot from the Hip!

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A walk through a city or town with a friend or family member is a great time to take photos of your dog. Fast shutter speeds and higher ISOs are key here unless you are after creative blur or motion blur. Don't worry if you don't get everyone's head in the picture. As long as the four-legged subjects get proper coverage, everyone will be happy!

This shot was taken on the way to a park along the Hudson River in New York City at about 7 P.M. in June. I love how animated pets can be. It may take a lot of shutter clicks to get pictures you are really happy with, so keep on shooting!



Camera: Canon EOS-20D;
Lens/Focal Length: Tamron 18–200mm Di II/18mm;
ISO: 200; **Aperture:** f/5.6;
Shutter speed: $\frac{1}{1600}$ sec;
Lighting Notes: Natural daylight provided most of the lighting, and the light-gray pavement offered some nice fill light.

photo © Andrew Darlow



“I love New York!”

Tip #18



Use Technology to Get the Shot from Unusual Angles

There are only a few digital cameras that allow you to see what you're about to shoot without having to look through a viewfinder or at the LCD's "live view." Live view is a video representation of what your photos will look like before you take a shot. One way to expand your options is by using a flip-out viewfinder, which can be found on some DSLR and point-and-shoot digital cameras from Sony and Olympus. Another option is from Zigview [w2.2]. The product is a digital angle finder that attaches to many SLR cameras that have live view and video out. Also available is an inexpensive and ingenious mirror attachment called the Flipbac [w2.3]. It provides a way to hold your camera at a low angle while viewing a reflection of the live image on the mirror. It also doubles as a screen protector. And don't forget video cameras. Many have flip-out screens and good-quality still-image capture modes.

Any camera with a live-view option can help expand your creative options by allowing you to hold the camera at different angles, such as directly over your pet. Or be adventurous by just setting the camera to autofocus (or use the distance scale on your camera or lens), then shoot by pressing the shutter button manually, via self-timer, or from a remote shutter release, and check the results on the LCD screen. Isn't technology wonderful?



The Flipbac Angle Viewfinder in the closed and open position.

photo courtesy Flipback Innovations



Tip #19

Go for the “Snail’s Eye View”

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By getting low on the ground and shooting up toward your subjects, you can create some really dramatic imagery. If you are outside, it’s a good idea to bring along some plastic bags to kneel or lie on while taking these types of pictures (one-gallon resealable bags work well). Just roll up a few and pack them away for when you need them. You can also find foam kneepads at most home improvement stores (look in the carpet or painting section)—they are good if you will be standing, then kneeling, because they usually attach via a recloseable fastener. For real die-hards, heavy-duty skateboard kneepads are another option.

I took this photo of a friend’s bulldog at a park from a very low viewpoint just after noon in early September. I really like how the foreground becomes an important part of the overall picture. It’s a good idea to experiment by including different amounts of foreground in your photos when shooting close to ground level.



Camera: Canon EOS-D60;

Lens/Focal Length: Canon

28–135mm/28mm;

ISO: 200; **Aperture:** f/3.5;

Shutter Speed: $\frac{1}{4000}$ sec;

Lighting Notes: Natural daylight on a clear day at about noon was the only light used. A fill flash can also be used effectively in this situation.

photo © Andrew Darlow



“I proclaim this land:
Bulldogsville!”

Tip #20



Photograph Your Pet in Your Home Using a Wide-Angle View

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Time does not stand still, but if you can get your dog or cat to stand still for a moment, you can photograph them in time, and have memories of the places that are important to you. Follow them around the house to capture multiple locations. Wide-angle views using cameras with wide-angle lenses help to fit more in a scene, but try not to make your photos too “busy.” It’s great to see how your pet, other family members, and even furnishings change over time. Another way to get a wide-angle feel is to crop a photo so that it looks like a panoramic image (either horizontal or vertical).

This photo opportunity presented itself to me when a client’s kitten decided to stroll across her couch at about 5:30 P.M. on a sunny March afternoon. I particularly like the additional cat in the photo, which leads me to another tip: Include real and not-so-real pets in your photos for an added twist!



Camera: Canon EOS-D60;

Lens/Focal Length: Canon
16–35mm/16mm;

ISO: 200; **Aperture:** f/2.8;

Shutter Speed: $\frac{1}{45}$ sec;

Lighting Notes: Natural daylight from a large window (camera right) and inside lighting from household lightbulbs combined to produce the lighting.

photo © Andrew Darlow



Tip #21

Use a tripod or similar device to stay sharp and extend your creative options

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A tripod or other device that holds your camera can do wonders in many situations. One approach is to set up a scene, set a self-timer, and run into the scene to capture yourself with your furry friends (instant modern photo booth!). Other devices are available that allow you to attach a camera and extend it to allow for interesting camera angles, or to take a photo of you and your loved ones. Two companies that make such products are the X-Pod [w2.3] and QuikPod [w2.4].

In this photo of a woman and her Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier, photographed at about 10 P.M. in June on a rooftop in New York City, I placed my camera on a tripod to help ensure sharpness, as well as a level horizon line.



Camera: Canon EOS-20D;

Lens/Focal Length: Tamron 18–200mm Di II/18mm;

ISO: 400; **Aperture:** f/6.3;

Shutter Speed: $\frac{1}{40}$ sec;

Lighting Notes: An off-camera flash placed on a stand (camera left) provided dramatic light on the model and her dog, and the slow exposure ($\frac{1}{40}$ sec) allowed for some of the city lights and sky to be recorded.

photo © Andrew Darlow

“Next time, I get to wear the green dress!”



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