Using A Digital Camera

Helpful Tips for New Users

Buying a digital camera is a lot like purchasing a new car. If you do it right, you should end up doing a lot of research, asking a lot of questions, and comparing a lot of makes and models before pinpointing exactly what you want and what you can afford. Ultimately, you should walk away with a model that suits your needs and budget.

The difference between buying a car and a digital camera is that you probably already know how to drive a car. Getting used to the way it handles takes some time, but chances are you won't have any problems driving it off the lot.

A digital camera is a different beast altogether. You might not have a clue what to do with it once you get it home. It might resemble a film camera, but it doesn't operate like one. After all, can you remember the last point-and-shoot film camera you saw that had a mode dial, menu, and icons with which to get familiar? Let's not forget the liquid-crystal display (LCD), memory card slot, and jacks for an A/C adapter, video-out cable, and serial or Universal Serial Bus (USB) cables.

We've used dozens of digital cameras of various makes and models. Along the way, we've often learned some valuable lessons. We'll share some of what we've learned and possibly enlighten you on some items you may not find in your users manual. We hope to spare you some of the frustration many owners experience with a new camera.

The manual. Keep the users manual handy. At some point you'll need it. One of the first things you'll realize about a digital camera is how difficult it is to use compared to a film camera. Unless your camera is bare-bones, you'll have menu, resolution, image quality, and flash settings to enable. A camera that lets you manually set white balance, exposure, special effects, and other settings is even more complicated. Keeping the manual nearby and earmarking sections will help you get answers quickly.

Batteries and power. Digital cameras gulp battery juice like termites devour wood, so buy plenty of extra batteries to carry with you. This is especially true of models that only have a liquid-crystal display (LCD) to frame shots instead of an optical viewfinder. In addition, use rechargeable batteries and a charger. Most cameras operate on standard AA alkaline batteries, but you'll spend a small fortune replacing them. Rechargeable lithium-ion (Li-Ion) or nickel-metal hydride (NiMH) batteries are a better alternative. Also, if your camera didn't bundle an A/C adapter, get one. You'll realize how important one is the first time you use battery power to transfer images and your camera gives out halfway through the process.

Memory and transfer. Most cameras ship with a four-to-16 megabyte (MB) removable memory storage card for saving images; CompactFlash and SmartMedia are the most popular card types. Buying an extra card lets you store more images without worrying about transferring or deleting shots. Two 16MB or 32MB cards should provide plenty of storage.

After taking a shot, use the LCD to immediately review it. If it is not satisfactory, delete it to free up space. Also note that the higher the resolution you shoot at, the fewer images can be stored. Use a lower quality and resolution (640 x 480 pixels or 1,024 x 768 pixels) setting to store more images.

We like using a card reader to speed up the image transfer process. Using the standard serial cable bundled with your camera works fine, but is frustratingly slow. Card readers only cost about $50, are easy to use, and use faster parallel or USB connections.

Prints. If you plan to print your images, remember that the higher the resolution at which you shoot, the better the print will be. For 8- x 10-inch prints, a resolution of around 2 million pixels is best. Resolutions around 1- to 1.5 million pixels are generally fine for 5- x 7-inch prints. We also find photo paper to be worth its extra cost for printing images.

Zoom. Your camera may have digital and optical zoom capabilities, but the two differ greatly. Digital zoom is less preferable because it uses embedded software to magnify only a section of an object being focused on. An optical zoom lens magnifies the entire focused object for a true image. Use a zoom lens if you have one.

Taking chances. There's much to learn about digital cameras, but don't be intimidated. Let your creative juices flow. You aren't paying for film or developing costs, so feel free to experiment with exposure and white balance settings, and take advantage of special effects, audio and video, and burst and macro modes. The more you use your camera, the better your shots will get.

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