

# Street Photography – Tips

## Getting Over Your Fear

I've been capturing shots of complete strangers for a long time and while I've become much more confident and carefree, I still freeze up feeling terrified like when I first started.

Photographing people on the streets candidly from close distances can be terrifying, especially if you tend to be introverted like I am. The most common comment I see about street photography is that people are too nervous to try it or that they go out to try it and then freeze up. FYI, we all freeze up.

Street photography is so rewarding once you fight through these barriers, especially if you're introverted, but the problem is that most people stop before they ever learn to get through it.

So if you're completely new to street photography or haven't had much practice with it, what are the processes and techniques to help you get over your fears? Ultimately, time and practice is the only true way to do it, but there many steps you can take to make it easier on yourself from the very beginning.

### **1. Shoot from the Hip and Zone focus**

Shooting from the hip is when you photograph without looking through the viewfinder. It is easiest to do with a light, wide-angle prime lens where you are used to the perspective, so that you can frame correctly without looking. Zone focusing, or pre-focusing to a specific distance, is necessary for shooting this way and is a subject that needs its own article.

But shooting from the hip does not mean that you should swing your camera all over the place and shoot randomly. It's quite the opposite, I generally shoot from the hip with my camera right below my neck. It's the same frame that my eyes see just ever so slightly lower so that it doesn't look like I am taking a picture.

In addition, if you are not in a crowded area then it can help to keep your camera strapped to your wrist at your side and out of view until you need to take a shot. This will keep people from noticing your camera at a distance.

### **2. Pretend you're photographing the background**

I do this all of the time, especially when I've staked out a general spot and am waiting for people to enter the scene. Try not to look directly at your subjects and make it seem like you are photographing the background behind and a little to the side of them. Then, after you capture the person, keep the camera still like you are still framing what is behind them.

### **3. Confidence**

This is the true key to not being noticed. When you look confident you look like you know what you're doing, then people will ignore you. It's when you look scared and tentative that people will start to notice you because they will pick up on that nervousness. After all, if you look nervous then you must be doing something wrong, right? So, if you look confident then you must be doing something good. Even if you don't feel confident, act confident and bold.

#### 4. Choose your subject wisely

“Be careful who you shoot; they may shoot back” is probably the most important tip. You need to pick your subjects wisely. If you see someone that you think is dangerous, such as a drug addict or someone with an angry look, then don’t photograph them. If you pick your subjects wisely then you will not be as afraid because you know that you won’t get into an altercation. The times you do get caught will hopefully turn into friendly affairs, where you tell people what you’re doing, show them the photograph with an enthusiastic smile, give them your card, and offer to send it to them.

#### What to look for when shooting in the streets

##### **The Decisive Moment**



Henri Cartier Bresson, 1932. The “Decisive Moment” of the man about to land in the puddle.

“The decisive moment” was a phrase coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson, one of the earliest practitioners of street photographers. “The decisive moment” is the same as the “Kodak moment” where everything comes together in a perfect moment and you hit the shutter. So essentially it is capturing the photo with the perfect timing.



Eric Kim / Seoul, 2009

But, realise that “the decisive moment” is a bit misleading. There can be many “decisive moments” when you’re out shooting in the streets. This means if you see a good street photography scene, don’t just take one photograph. Take a ton of shots (I recommend 10-30 photos if possible). Even Henri Cartier-Bresson took 20+ photos of a single scene (if he thought it was interesting enough). Then afterwards in the editing process he would choose which image he felt was the best.

You can catch “the decisive moment” by the position of a person in the frame, in their facial expression, in their hand gesture, or their action or movement.

## **Juxtaposition**



Eric Kim / Zurich, 2011. Note the “juxtaposition” of the figure on the left and right

In street photography, you can create a strong image by juxtaposing elements in your frame. Juxtaposition is essentially a fancy word for contrast. But to be more specific, juxtaposition is when you put two different elements in a frame that directly contradict one another (while having a relationship). For example: taking a street photograph of a fat man next to a skinny man, a grandmother next to a child, someone in a red shirt in front of a green background (juxtaposing colours), etc.

To create a strong juxtaposition shot, you can either start off by looking for an interesting background (let’s say a billboard of a man looking happy) and waiting for someone who looks really happy to enter the frame.

Another strategy could be looking for certain emotions in people when you’re out on the street, and trying to find emotions of other people in the street that either are similar or dissimilar– and include them in the frame.

## Emotion

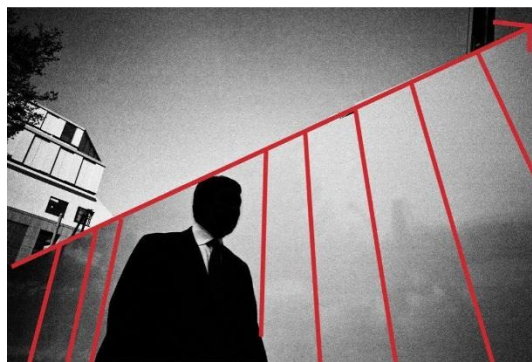
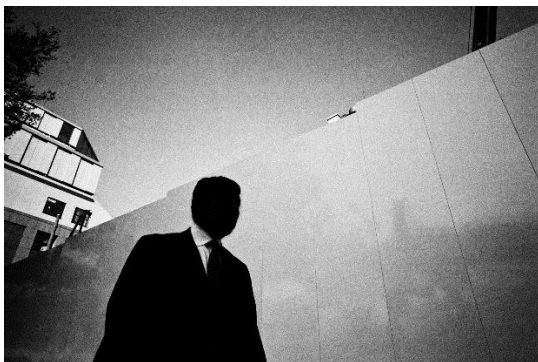


Eric Kim / London, 2012. Note the emotion in the man's face and hand-gesture. What do you think is on his mind?

The most memorable street photographs are the ones that have strong emotion and show some sort of reflection on the human condition. This can include happiness, pain, sadness, loneliness, humour, anxiety, youth, and love.

To find emotion in street photography is difficult. First of all, you have to find the emotion in the streets through peoples' body language or facial expressions. Then you have to be quick enough to take the photograph before people notice you. However if you do it well, you will create a compelling and emotional image that people can connect with on a deeper level.

## Graphical/Visual Elements



Eric Kim / Tokyo, 2012 (note the strong graphical elements and diagonal leading-line)

Not all street photography needs to be super emotional. Some street photographs are purely visual images that appeal to our sense of geometry and composition. These images are generally shot in good light with nice lights and shadows, have strong diagonal lines, leading lines, curves, and shapes of interest.

## Focusing on Details



Eric Kim / Downtown LA, 2011 / Sometimes just by focusing on the hands, you can make a more powerful image.

Some of the best street photographs focus on the details, not the whole picture. When you are shooting on the streets, you can focus on small details. This means rather than taking a full-body shot of someone on the streets, focus on their hands, their face, their earrings, their hands, their feet, or anything else they are holding.

By showing less of what is going on in the photograph, you create more mystery in your image. Sometimes, less is more.

## Urban Landscapes



Eric Kim / Pittsburgh, 2014

I don't think street photography has to include people in it. Sometimes you can create compelling urban landscapes that show some sort of human condition and reflection on society.

The hardest thing to do in urban landscapes is to find a scene that somehow elicits a sense of nostalgia, emotion, or societal critique. For example, photographing a run-down building can make a strong societal statement.

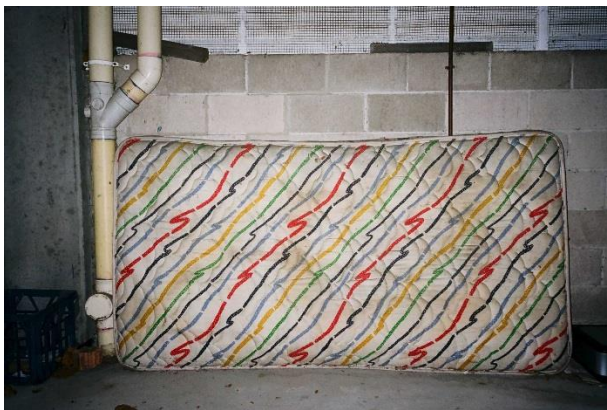


Eric Kim / Detroit, 2014

When photographing urban landscapes, it is also extremely important to have a nice composition, sense of symmetry, and balance.

It is hard to make interesting urban landscapes– but to better capture them you can read my guide on urban landscapes.

### Commonly Found Objects



Eric Kim / Melbourne, 2012. A photograph of a colourful mattress I saw in a garage

Sometimes the most interesting street photographs are of stuff on the ground. So take photos of common objects you find in public places. Get close up to them, juxtapose them against other objects, and experiment using a flash. Try to be creative and find ways to make them interesting.



# Guide to Zone Focusing for Candid Street Photography

By: James Maher



Glance, 34<sup>th</sup> Street - 1/320th at F11, ISO 800 (17mm) – Canon 5D Mark II.

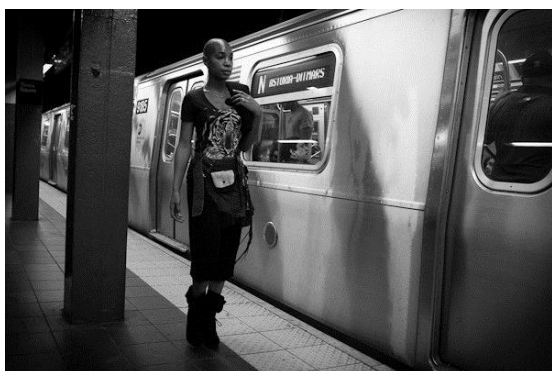
Capturing strangers candidly, yet tack sharp, is probably the toughest technical skill to learn in street photography.

With a genre such as landscape photography, you can find your location, plan your shot, wait patiently for the correct lighting, and make sure that you are ready to pounce when the perfect moment hits. But candid street photography is an entirely different beast. Often, you are presented with a moment so quickly that your reaction time is severely tested. It is so tough to frame correctly, focus correctly, and capture a spontaneous shot at the right moment, all while trying to keep things candid.

The solution? Learning to zone focus. Not every street photographer zone focuses, but the ones that do swear by it. While I use autofocus when I can, I too swear by it. And with a little practice, it's not all that hard to learn.

Honestly, it's way harder to explain it than it is to actually do it.

## Depth of Field (DOF)



Tiger - 1/250th at F4, ISO 3200 (28mm) – Canon 5D Mark II.

Before we go into what zone focusing is, we need to talk about the factors that go into creating DOF. If you know this already then feel free to skip to the next section.

The term Depth of Field refers to the area in front of and behind a subject that you focus on that will appear acceptably sharp. For instance, say you focus on a subject that is 10 feet away. Depending on your camera settings, that might mean that everything from 8 feet away to 14 feet away will be

acceptably sharp. That would be your depth of field. Also, keep in mind that the area behind your subject that is acceptably sharp will always be greater than the area in front of your subject, and in many cases much greater.

Depending on four factors, your aperture, your focal length, the distance that you are focusing at, and on your camera's sensor size, your depth of field can change drastically. Here are the four factors in detail:

1. The smaller your aperture, the more DOF there will be in a scene. So if you are shooting at F16, much more of your scene will be sharp than if you are shooting at F2.8.
2. The wider your focal length, the more DOF there will be in a scene. So if you are shooting at 28mm, much more of your scene will be in focus than if you are shooting at 100mm. This is why I rarely zone focus using a lens longer than 35mm.
3. The further away you focus, the more DOF there will be in a scene. So if you focus on a person 10 feet away, then you may have a range of three feet in front and six feet behind your subject that will be sharp (depending on the other three factors), whereas if you focus on a person that is 3 feet away, you may have a range of 3 inches in front and 6 inches behind your subject that will be sharp.
4. The larger your camera's sensor is, the less DOF there will be in a scene. If you are using a full frame camera like the Canon 5D, then there will be less DOF than if you are shooting with a camera with a smaller sensor, such as the 7D, 60D, or a micro-4/3rds camera, with the same settings.

Keep in mind that the term 'acceptable range of sharpness' is just an opinion. As your subjects veer further from the focus distance of your lens, they will appear less and less sharp, whether or not they are in the 'acceptable' range on the chart. So practice with your own camera and lens to figure out what is 'acceptable' to you. This website is only a general guide to get your started.

### Zone Focusing



Traveller - 1/400th at F8, ISO 1600 (17mm) – Canon 5D Mark II.

Zone focusing is pre-focusing your camera to a certain distance away, say 10 feet, guessing the DOF that you will have at that distance with the settings you are using, and then photographing subjects as they enter that range, and hopefully as close as possible to the actual focus distance on the camera. It is also being able to change your focus distance quickly and accurately, without looking, as a subject moves closer or further from you.

The reason for doing this is that both using autofocus and turning the manual focusing dial takes time (and often will be noticeable to your potentially candid subjects) and most of the time things happen so fast on the street that you need to be focused ahead of time. If your camera is already focused to an average distance away, then you can just wait for your subject to enter that range and there will be no delay from when a moment happens to when you are able to click the shutter. It



will be instant. In addition, this will allow you to shoot without looking through the viewfinder, if you decide that you want to 'shoot from the hip.'

Here is a specific example based on common settings that I use. With the 5D Mark II and a 28mm focal length, if I pre-focus my camera to 8 feet away at F8, then everything from around 5.5 feet to 15 feet away will be 'acceptably' sharp. Of course, as you get to the outer areas of that range the subject will not be perfectly sharp, but for fast-moving street photography, it gives me a serious range to work with. At F11 or F16, even more so.



The only problem is that you need to have a lens with a manual focusing meter, such as the one in the photo above, that shows you the distance that the camera is focused at and is easily manipulated. Many cameras and lenses don't have this but some will tell you the focal length in the camera's menu or viewfinder. While not perfect, this will work somewhat.

But if you want to do candid street photography then I highly suggest getting a lens with a manual focus meter.

So it should be obvious to you why we generally want the range of sharpness to be as great as possible when zone focusing (unless you want more bokeh for aesthetic reasons). It is for when we mess up slightly in guessing how far something is away so that there will still be enough leeway for our main subject to be sharp, or so we can get multiple subjects at different distances to all be relatively sharp. These are two reasons that many street photographers prefer to use wide-angle lenses, such as 28mm or 35mm. My go-to focal length is generally 28mm.

It is also the reason why you want to shoot at a high ISO in street photography (unless the light is strong). If you shoot with a high-ISO, it allows you to shoot with a smaller aperture. With my 5D Mark II, ISOs of 800, 1600, and 3,200 are usually my standards (unless the light is strong). For many cameras, the ISOs may not be ideal at these levels, however that is quickly changing these days with each new camera released. Test your camera at different ISO settings to see what its acceptable range is.

### **Guessing Distances**

If you are like me then you often do street photography in less than ideal lighting, such as in the subway system. When you're shooting at F16 in bright sunlight, you don't have to think as much about it. It won't matter much if your subject is 9 feet away versus 10 feet away. But when you are shooting at F2.8 in the subway, it really does matter.



Reflection, Subway - 1/250th at F2, ISO 3200 (35mm) – Fuji X100.

For this reason, it is important to learn the distances away from your camera's lens, all the way up to around 12 feet away. I suggest using a tape measure and measuring out the distances, from 2 feet from your lens all the way to 12 feet.

Go out and practice. Find different objects and try to guess how far they are away. Before I go out I will still pick an object around eight feet away and focus on it to make sure I'm guessing my distances right. It's a skill that you need to constantly calibrate. I have gotten a lot of strange looks over the years from people who have seen me focusing intently on lampposts 8 – 10 feet away.

The other reason to get good at guessing distances is that people move and scenes develop. You might want to capture a person walking towards you at both 10 feet and 5 feet away. So when you hold the camera you want to always have one of your hands on the focusing ring. Practice manual focusing back and forth from 10 feet to 8 feet to 6 feet and so on. Eventually, you'll be able to capture someone walking towards you sharp at both 10 feet away and 6 feet away, without having to look through the viewfinder. It's an incredibly effective technique. Doing this well, however, can be tough.



Couple, St. Marks St - 1/320th at F5, ISO 1600 (28mm) – Canon 5D Mark II.

My final word of advice is that if you have the time to autofocus or manual focus with a viewfinder on a subject without them noticing, then do it. That is much more consistently accurate than trying to guess distances and zone focusing. But for a majority of the time, zone focusing will be your best and quickest weapon on the street.