

The Exposure Triangle Cheat Sheet

PHOTOGRAPHY · QUICK REFERENCE

Three dials decide every photograph. Decide which one matters most for this shot, then let the other two follow. Print this, tape it inside your camera bag lid.

WHICH DIAL LEADS

- ☐ Portrait or subject isolated from background: pick aperture first (f/1.8 to f/2.8), then shutter, then ISO.
- ☐ Moving subject: pick shutter first (1/500s walking, 1/1000s sport, 1/2000s birds), then aperture, then ISO.
- ☐ Landscape or long exposure on a tripod: pick aperture first (f/8 to f/11), then shutter, then ISO at base.
- ☐ Handheld in low light: keep shutter at or above 1 over your focal length, open the aperture, let ISO rise.

APERTURE

- ☐ f/1.4 to f/2.8: subject separation, creamy backgrounds. Watch for soft focus if you miss the eye.
- ☐ f/4 to f/5.6: balanced — street, travel, environmental portraits where a little context stays sharp.
- ☐ f/8 to f/11: landscape sweet spot, most of the scene sharp corner to corner.
- ☐ f/16 and beyond: starbursts and maximum depth, but diffraction softens fine detail.

SHUTTER SPEED

- ☐ 1/50s: the slowest most people can hand-hold on a 50mm lens; use image stabilisation if you have it.
- ☐ 1/125s: safe for standing people and slow walks.
- ☐ 1/500s: freezes children, pets and traffic.
- ☐ 1/2000s and faster: sport, birds, water droplets.
- ☐ Under 1/10s: tripod, remote release and mirror lock-up.

ISO

- ☐ ISO 100 to 200: base sensitivity, cleanest files, use outdoors or on a tripod.
- ☐ ISO 400 to 800: overcast days and indoor daylight.
- ☐ ISO 1600 to 3200: events and evenings; still printable at reasonable sizes.
- ☐ ISO 6400 and above: only when the alternative is a blur — a noisy keeper beats a clean miss.

START SETTINGS BY SUBJECT

- ☐ Portrait, daylight: f/2 · 1/250s · ISO 100
- ☐ Street, daylight: f/5.6 · 1/500s · ISO auto (cap 3200)
- ☐ Landscape, tripod: f/9 · 1/60s · ISO 100
- ☐ Indoor event: f/2.8 · 1/200s · ISO auto (cap 6400)
- ☐ Night skyline, tripod: f/8 · 15s · ISO 100

FIELD NOTE

Meter for the brightest area you want to keep detail in, then add +0.3 to +0.7 EV for lighter skin tones. Check the histogram, not the LCD: the glow on the back screen lies in daylight.