McKissick Museum
College of Arts and Sciences

Introductory Object Photography Guide

In these times of self-isolation and self-reliance, here is a short guide to making your photography look more professional without the use of expensive equipment or fancy setups.

Before going into techniques, how do we define a "good photograph"? For this guide, a good photograph of an object:

1. Shows plenty of detail in the brighter and darker areas;
2. Is sharp;
3. Does not distort the proportions of the object;
4. Highlights the subject.

We can easily accomplish these goals with good light, an uncluttered space, and a few items readily available in the home.

Choosing the Right Space

The best light for photographing objects will be soft indirect light that will not cast sharp shadows. For this, desktop lamps or direct sunlight should be avoided, as the contrast between brighter and darker areas will result in a loss of detail.

Photo #1: A table next to a window without direct sunlight is a perfect spot to setup

Ideally, the best rooms to set up a table to take photographs will have a north-facing window, which naturally provides the desired light source (photo #1). If this is not possible, a garage or other

enclosed space may be used, where you are out of direct sunlight. If neither of these options is available, you can work outside on an overcast day; keep in mind that this option is not ideal, and will not provide consistent results.

Keep your light sources consistent! When taking photographs, turn off any lights in the room; if different light sources are mixed, the colors of objects will be distorted and unnatural and cannot be corrected later in photoshop (photo # 2 and 3).

If the object is still casting dark shadows, you can brighten the darker areas using a sheet of white paper (photo # 4 and 5). Place the white paper on the opposite side of the light source and angle it so that the light reflects towards the subject lightening the shadows (photo # 6). If your window is on the right side of the frame, your paper will be placed on the left side, just out of view. You can use a shoebox or any other similar item readily available to prop up your light reflector.

Photo #2 Mixed lights add a yellow orange cast to parts of the image that cannot be fixed.

Photo #3 Neutral and accurate colors.

Photo #4 Left side is lighter and the texture on the camera grip is visible.

Photo #5 Left side is dark and has no detail.

Photo #6 The reflector is held up using a notebook.

Choosing the Right Background

Use a neutral, uniform background to make your object stand out and be the main focus. Avoid distracting backgrounds. The best option, if available, is to use a large sheet of paper (photo # 7) or piece of cloth – such as an ironed bed sheet or table cloth – to create a gently sloping curve and seamless background (photo # 8). The effect will be of a professional photo setup where the subject of the image is suspended in space. You can pin or tape your background to the wall or other support. To control the curve of the sheet of paper, you can add a piece of tape to the front of your paper so that it does not slide out, reducing the curve. If you are using a chair or other irregular support, add a straight edge such as a ruler or piece of wood to give your setup more stability (photo #9).

If you do not have on hand the materials to create a seamless background, you can use two separate pieces of material set up at a right angle to create your set (see photo # 10). In this setup, there will be a visible line where the floor meets the back wall. Make sure that your setup is large enough to accommodate your object. **Do not worry if the photo shows more than just your object we will be able to crop it in photoshop.**

Always use a neutral color for your background, ideally white, off-white, or light gray. The light reflected off of colored backgrounds will drastically change the appearance of your subject; i.e., a red background will make objects look more reddish than they are in reality.

Photo #7 Sheet of white paper taped to a step ladder and the table.

Photo #8 to avoid the cloth drooping as seen here add a straight edge to support the sides a shown in the next image.

Photo #9 We used a ruler to support the cloth and get a more even effect.

Photo #10 The edge where the two surfaces meet can be noticeable and distracting.

To help with accurate color rendition, include in one of the images that you submit a folded sheet of white paper so that we can use it to calibrate the colors. This image is especially important if your background is not white or neutral gray.

Camera Angles, Close-Ups, and Distance from the Object

When photographing your objects, there are three main points of view commonly used in product photography:

1. Bird's eye view (photo #11 and 12);

Photo #11Bird's eye view gives an accurate description of the object but can be flat and, at times, not engaging.

Photo #12 When shooting from above, make sure that your phone's screen is parallel to the table to get the best results.

2. 45-degree (photo #13 and 14);

Photo #13 The 45-degree angle presentation is the most natural way to present the objects.

Photo #14 Try to present the object as if you are sitting in front of it.

3. Low point of view (photo #15 and 16).

Photo #15 The 45-degree angle presentation is the most natural way to present the objects.

Photo #16 Try to present the object as if you are sitting in front of it.

For simple documentation purposes, **the bird's eye view is the most common and precise.** However, for use in catalogs and website presentation, having a mix of all points of view allows for some creative latitude and a more exciting catalog/website. For this reason, it is highly recommended to take photos from multiple points of view. When photographing from the bird's eye view and the low point of view, try to keep the phone/camera parallel to the front of the object to avoid perspective distortion. There are cheap and free camera apps available for Android and Apple phones that show if your phone is being held level, which can help with these perspective issues (see links at the end of this guide).

In addition to these multiple points of view, we also recommend photographing close-up details of objects, such as maker's marks, stamps, patterns, or other similar aspects. These photos will help highlight aspects of the object that may not be otherwise viewable.

The cameras on most smartphones are wide-angle, which will distort your subject when it is too close to it (photo #17). If you are far enough from your subject, this distortion will be minimized (photo #18). The easiest way to judge the best distance is to pay attention to the screen and to glance back and forth between your object and the screen. Many phones now have multiple camera lenses, using the setting with a smaller angle of view (objects will appear closer on the screen) will also reduce the distortion provoked by the lens. **Remember: the purpose of these photos is to provide the best recreation of the object that is possible.**

Photo #17 The side of the object closer to the phone is enlarged and distorted.

Photo #18 The proportions of the object remain more natural and less distorted.

Tips on using your phone

To focus on the object and make sure that it is exposed correctly, tap on the object on the screen; this will sharpen the focus and exposure. To reduce camera shake and motion blur hold your phone with both hands while leaning on something (photo #19) to steady yourself. When pressing the shutter button, do not tap it but press and hold until the phone takes the photo. Do not worry if you press the shutter button for longer than necessary because it will simply take extra photos that can be easily deleted later. **Please do not tune or edit the images. We will do that for you.**

Photo #19 Leaning on the table and holding the phone with two hands keeps it from shaking.

Extra resources:

For more videos with suggestions and resources on how to photograph objects at home here are some YouTube links:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8zcs4MvwGg
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfcPIBGJT5o
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXYaWoO6q04

For apps that offer additional controls when taking photographs:
https://www.tomsguide.com/round-up/best-android-camera-apps
https://www.mytechb.com/best-camera-app-for-android-free-download/
https://www.freemake.com/blog/top-5-photo-camera-apps-for-iphone/
https://www.digitaltrends.com/photography/best-camera-apps-for-the-iphone/