

A-E-I-O-U of Photography

Over one trillion digital photos will be taken this year. But how many good photos will be captured? How many great photos? How many memorable photos? And what *is* a good, great, or memorable photo? There are five important factors in capturing that special image – one that will really WOW others and give you a real sense of satisfaction with your creation. Each of the factors begins with a vowel, making it easy to keep them in mind. I give you the **A-E-I-O-U** (and sometimes **Y**) for great images:

A – Artistic

The most common definition for the word artistic is: “relating to the arts.” Some definitions referenced elements of design, such as lines, shapes, color, pattern, and texture. But how do we be artistic with our camera? Learn to look for lines, shapes, colors, patterns, and textures. Let your mind process what you see in your viewfinder. Review the image on the display. Think about artistic elements. Move your camera. Get closer. Back up. Angle your camera. Decide if you should shoot straight on or obliquely. Understand, think about, and incorporate artistic elements in your image. These actions add to the artistic quality of an image because these design elements are pleasing to the eye. So, *my* personal definition of artistic is “pleasing to the eye.” This, of course, is subjective and does not mean pleasing to *all* eyes, but specifically to the eye of the beholder. “*Quod gustus non contendere.*” (Taste is that which cannot be contended.) Does the image please your eye? If so, it is **artistic**.



E – Emotional

Does the image make you *feel* anything? Do you feel happy, sad, amused, angry, sympathetic, or motivated? Some of the compliments I have received that I appreciate the most are those for which the photo expresses emotion. When people say, “I can almost feel the cold.” or “I almost feel like I’m there.” If the image makes someone feel amused, happy, or even mad, your image has struck an emotion and has had an impact that will probably be remembered.



War photographers, street photographers, wildlife photographers, and nature photographers all hope to make an impact and invoke emotions that result in a better understanding of our world and ultimately promote change for the better.

Does your image invoke a response? If so, the image has provided **emotion**.

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I – Image Quality



Is the image technically good? Is it clear? Is it level? Was it well exposed? With today's cameras, it has become much easier to produce a good quality image. Cameras offer autofocus, automatic exposure, automatic white balance for color correction, and even image stabilization to reduce motion blur. Some detect smiles and blinking eyes. On most cameras, you can select scene modes that provide additional information about the settings and processing required, but the camera never knows as much as you do about the conditions of the scene and your desired result. The very highest quality images are not those for which the camera settings are calculated by a computer chip, but those that are deliberately controlled by the photographer to produce the optimum image.

Even when the image on the camera card is not ideal, you still have the option of post-processing the image. You can crop, straighten, make the image lighter or darker, adjust colors, change perspective, and perform countless special effects. Some cameras even enable editing in the camera.

But, generally, an image must be sharp, color balanced, straight, and clear. There may be exceptions, but these are expected for basic **image quality**.

O – One-Subject

When you look at an image with this quality, you *know* what you are looking at. There is an obvious *subject* or an obvious *point* to the photograph. Typically there should not be two or more subjects or themes competing for the viewer's attention.

Reviewing some of my old photos, I found that I could add a focus point by cropping. I probably should have done that when the photo was taken by zooming in or getting closer to the subject, but cropping during post-processing is always an option to consider. If you have two great subjects that are competing for attention in your image, you may even be able to crop each one separately and create *two* meaningful images.

A common technique for emphasizing a subject is to have leading lines or other optical pathways that draw the eye to the subject. Think about how you can draw the eye to the subject when you take the photo.



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If the photo doesn't have subject, it doesn't make a *point*. If it doesn't make a point, it won't speak to the viewer. When people look at your image, you want it to convey a message. When they look away and they still *know* what this image was about, it undoubtedly has **one subject**.

U – Unique

If the image is one that can never be recreated, it has a quality and value that, by definition, is *rare*. No one, not even *you* can capture this same image again. It is a frozen moment in time that has never happened before and will never happen again. Admittedly, this is what photography is – capturing a moment in time, but the best moments are those that are unique.



Reviewing an old stack of slides I had taken in Washington, D.C., I found fair shots of monuments, buildings, wax museum figures, and general tourist shots. Of the roll, I discarded all but two. Most were ordinary tourist snapshots. My family was with me, but I had included none of them in my photos. Even the two I saved were not great, but not quite ordinary enough to discard. Many of those shots could be taken again and most could be improved.

Yes, having people in the shot certainly makes it more unique. And depending on your audience for the shot, that may be adequate. Baby photos certainly fall into this category, but unless the shot is really exceptional, only friends, family, and descendants will care.

The best suggestion I can provide for capturing this type of image is the old Boy Scout motto: “Be prepared.” Have a camera available at all times. Better yet – have a camera *ready* at all times. Don't miss that one-in-a-million shot. There is an all too rare and valuable quality in an image when it is **unique**.

A-E-I-O-U

Not all photos need to follow all of these guidelines, but if you keep in mind the five factors starting with A-E-I-O-U, you will find yourself producing more remarkable images and a few that will be really impressive!

Sometimes Y

Great photography often reflects *YOU* as a person – your interests, your personality, your tastes, and your passions. Make an effort to shoot those subjects that interest you personally, and you will find yourself motivated. Satisfy yourself first! You will find that you are more willing to take the time to create a great image. Capturing images that interest *you* will be the final factor underlying the other five “all-the-time” vowels in creating great images.