

# What Works in Black & White



Any picture is just a two-dimensional representation of reality. If the colors in the scene are turned into shades of gray, from pitch black to brilliant white, other aspects of your photograph—shape, lighting, contrast, texture, tone—become the dominant elements. Let's explore factors that make or break successful black-and-white pictures.

## What to shoot in black & white

If your scene is already bland, removing color totally could elevate a boring snapshot to an interesting landscape. Or perhaps you want to recreate the nostalgia of a bygone era. Black-and-white photographs have a way of conveying an antique, sentimental feeling that isn't possible in color photographs.



## Color vs. gray tones

Learning how film and pixels convert colors into gray tones is perhaps the hardest part of black-and-white photography. Then again, if the perfect Kodak moment occurs while your toddler is wearing totally mismatched clothing, black-and-white quickly becomes your best friend.

Ask yourself whether the scene before you would look better in color or black-and-white. For instance, flowers almost always look best in color. But if your emphasis is on a dew drop hanging from the flower, perhaps black-and-white is the answer. You might also imagine a stop sign against a green background. If you want to emphasize the sign, keep the color. To minimize it, use black and white, because green and red convert into nearly identical gray tones.



## Contrast & Key

If you are using picture-editing software or a traditional darkroom to make your black-and-white photos, contrast and key are aspects you can emphasize or minimize in ways that are impossible in color pictures.

High-contrast (an extreme range between bright and dark) scenes may confine a viewer's attention to one element, while a low-contrast (with a narrow brightness range) scene may convey serenity and peace. You may also hear the terms high key (predominately light tones) and low key (predominately dark tones) in relation to black-and-white photography.

Contrast and key are not synonyms. A photograph may be low in contrast, yet high in key, such as a blond, blue-eyed girl against a white background.



## Texture, line, & shape

Maybe there's an interesting weave in your son's sweater. Or the leaves of your hosta plant have an interesting texture. Imagine how the lack of color would emphasize the texture, and how that might change the visual impact of your photo.

Likewise, lines and shapes lead our eyes through a black-and-white picture in ways they do not in a color picture. A meandering fence, rows of corn growing in a field, and layers of rock on a cliff wall all have strong lines, and removing the color from these scenes may improve them.



## Lighting

Take the color away and light does become a much more important part of your picture. Imagine a weathered picket fence with an old barn in the background. Waiting for an overcast or even foggy day will result in a soft, romantic landscape. However, shooting it late on a sunny afternoon when the sun is low on the horizon and the shadows from the fence are long and dark will accentuate the texture of the fence. The mood in this picture will be totally different.

