

Get sharp: ten tips for better mobile photos



Overheard: "You're not a photographer, you're a writer with a smartphone and Instagram." I think that's probably fair—The latest wave of apps have more to do with Photoshop than my first Yashica 35mm camera.

That said, these apps make it easy to create eye-catching content, so here are 10 simple rules that you can follow to increase the number of pictures worth posting and sharing.

Be a square:

Hipstamatic, Instagram and others imitate the retro feel of 'toy' cameras from the 60s and 70s. The square format lends itself to portraits and single subjects (see below). But most landscapes are out. None of these apps have a panorama mode, for a very good reason.

The world is flat:

For the same reason, it's hard to show a contrast between foreground and background. For the best results, think of your photograph in two dimensions and forget depth of field. Subjects should be evenly lit from the front for clarity.

Keep subjects simple:

Don't clutter the viewfinder with too many objects, and try to find shapes that sit comfortably inside the square frame. Close up portraits, a flower, and a plate of food work well; full length photographs, bouquets and banquets are less suitable.

Look for patterns:

Hipstamatic, especially, works well with abstract subjects. So look out for textures in walls and doorways in the city. Cloud layers at sunset and sunrise also work well. Try to include symmetries that balance the composition or draw the eye to the centre of the image.

Know your filters: I can quite happily live without most of the filters in Instagram. But it's still good to know the difference between vibrant colours (Hefe), black and white (Inkwell) and desaturated (Brannon), for example.

In the frame:

Choose the frame or outline that matches the subject. Generally speaking, rough edges such as the Hipstamatic Kodak film work well with urban, textured and high contrast images. Use a clean outline, such as Blanko, for clear, sharp, vibrant pictures or to give a clear shape to busier compositions.

In the city:

Hipstamatic and Instagram work particularly well in urban settings. Street art is a popular subject as are cars, architecture and public spaces. As above, this format doesn't generally lend itself to less forgiving natural environments. Hipstamatic and wildlife definitely aren't a snap.

Freeze frame:

If you're really confident, go for action shots. However, speaking from experience, you need a bit of time to compose your shot, taking into account the slow shutter response on most of these apps. Motion blur will win you the odd abstract success but Hipstamatic and Instagram are all about painting with light, not reportage.

Hashtag with care:

I usually add hashtags to comments in Instagram. Good tags include locations, materials, time of day, colours, fashions and food. With feedback, the usual social courtesies apply, so acknowledge praise and feedback gracefully as you would on other channels.

The most important rule of all?

Take lots of photos and practice, practice, practice. The images in the video are culled from an album with more than 300 photographs. And I reckon I delete at least five for every one that I keep.

Generally speaking, this list of tips works well for me. However, it's far from comprehensive. If you've got any other suggestions, drop a note in the comments below.

