



HOW TO PHOTOGRAPH
THE HOLIDAYS

14 Tips for Memorable Shots of Your Celebrations

a  **mini-guide**

in collaboration with

 **PHOTOGRAPHY
CONCENTRATE**

Is there any better event to photograph than your very own holiday celebrations?

There's a certain magic to photographing the holidays. Everything is beautiful, your favorite people are all around you, folks are happy (most of the time) and there's a seemingly endless supply of things to shoot. When you look back at photos of holidays past, you can relive the joy of sharing these special celebrations with the people you care most about in the world. It really can be wonderful...

Until it's terrible.

Screaming toddlers. Reluctant and sullen teenagers. Bad light (and worse light). Being ordered to shoot "grip and grin" portraits for days on end. Total overwhelm.

Well fear not, my friend. Despite the challenges, photographing the holidays can be everything you dream it to be. With a little preparation, some organization, and a bevy of tips and tricks in your photographic toolbelt, you'll be able to document your celebrations in a beautiful and meaningful way. You'll create cherished images that are valued for years to come. And you'll have a blast too!

The best part of all? While the photos in this mini-guide are from our own Christmas holidays, **these tips apply to any holiday, any celebration, and any event.** Use these tips often, and you're sure to create awesome photos of your own.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS: *Hi! We're Lauren & Rob, Jill & Daniel and we love capturing the magic of the holidays. When we're not dressing up in ridiculous outfits to create awkward holiday cards (see more later), we teach photography to fun folks over at [Photography Concentrate](#). We're super excited that you're right here with us now to learn, and can't wait to share and help you take magical photos of your own. So let's get going!*

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Preparation is key to successful holiday photos.

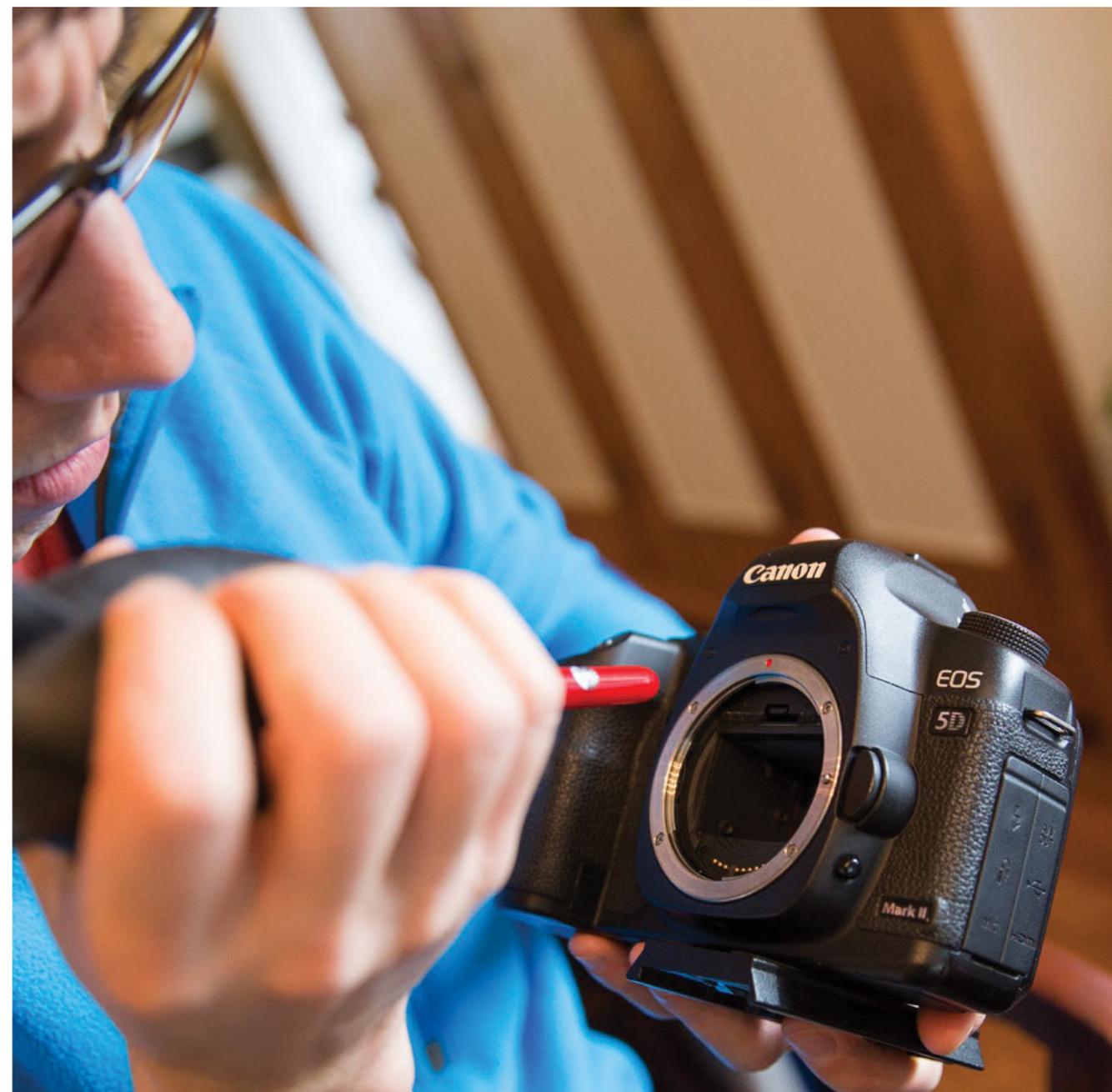
Your camera is the link between your ideas and your images, so you need to make sure it's in tip top shape before a shoot.

First up, make sure your camera is clean. Use a rocket blower to get any dust off your sensor, and a Lens Pen to clean your lenses. Then ensure your batteries all fully charged, and your memory cards cleared. And check that you have extra batteries and memory cards too. Have more than you think you need – you don't want to run out of space right at a critical moment!

Once your gear is ready, the most important thing to do is **keep your camera in a central place so that you can grab it and shoot at a moment's notice.** We like to keep ours on the kitchen counter, right in the middle of all the action.

Use more than just one camera as well! Your DSLR is great for portraits, your camera phone is perfect for spontaneous laughter over dinner (make sure to clear up some storage space on it before the holidays!), and a point and shoot is handy if you're heading out to skate on the pond and want something portable.

The most important thing is not *which* camera you have, but simply that you have a camera on you, and that you *use* it. Choose the one that will be used, and then get shooting!



FURTHER READING:

- [How Should I Clean My DSLR's Lens?](#)
- [How To Clean Your Camera Sensor & Lenses](#)
- [The Ultimate Guide to Buying a New Camera](#)

The holidays are chock full of lighting opportunities.

Open your eyes to the variety of different light sources that the holidays present. It might be the lights on the tree, a bonfire, or candles in the window. **Start to consider every source of light a potential way to illuminate your images, and you're on your way to some memorable photos.**

During the day, windows can be a fantastic source of natural light indoors. To really take advantage of them, make sure to turn off any artificial lights (like overhead lights) so you avoid mixing colour temperatures of light.

At night look for other light sources, like tree lights or fireplaces. Turn off the room lights and turn off your flash. Then increase your ISO and use a low aperture value to get more light into the camera, and try shooting with the available light around you. It can add a lot of atmosphere to your shots!

If you need to use a flash, try to improve the quality of that light. Direct flash (when the flash is pointed directly at the subject with nothing in between them) can be quite unflattering. So use a diffuser to soften the light and make it more flattering (you can buy them at a camera store, or make a DIY one by taping some white paper over your flash). If you have an external flash, point it up to the ceiling, or back over your shoulder to soften the light and give it more direction.



The lights from a Christmas tree become a creative way to illuminate a portrait.

SETTINGS: ISO 800, f/2.2, 1/100s, Canon 6D, 50mm



FURTHER READING:

- [Fantastic Fundamental Light Skills Tutorial](#)
- [How To Bounce Your Flash](#)
- [The Awesome Light Hiding In Your Home](#)



The trouble comes when photos are a jumble.

A mish-mash of moments, in random order, isn't very much fun to look through. In order to create a set of images that your friends and family will really enjoy viewing, you'll want to try to *tell the story of the event*. Here are a few tips on how to do that:

- **Understand story structure:** A good story sets the scene, introduces the characters and relationships, has building action, and then a conclusion. Find ways to do this with your own holiday photos. Shoot the preparation and get detail shots to help give a sense of the scene (like wrapping the gifts, or putting up the decorations), document the characters (your friends and family that is!), look for action to bring excitement to the story (the annual and highly competitive game of Trivial Pursuit, the kids wildly

opening their presents, the flurry of cooking the big meal), and then find a way to show that the story is over (gift wrap covering the floor, your relatives driving away, the kids passed out in their beds).

- **Use the “Wide, Medium, Tight” trick:** A super fast way to tell a story in any moment is to shoot one shot wide (to set the scene), one shot medium (to give a sense of the action), and one shot tight (to show the details that bring the story to life). Using this trick can help you find the story in all the great moments that happen during the holidays.



FURTHER READING:

- [*Storytelling Tips for Better Halloween Photos*](#)
- [*Finding Focus When You're Visually Overwhelmed*](#)
- [*5 Lessons Comic Books Can Teach You About Photography*](#)

Composition is how you arrange the elements in your frame.

It can make the difference between everyday snapshots, and holiday photos that make people say “Wowzer!”. Here are a few things to try:

- **Use the Rule of Thirds to achieve balance:** Imagine your frame is divided into three equal segments, both vertically and horizontally (see diagram on the right). Try to place your subjects roughly along one of the lines, or on one of the points where the lines intersect to draw more attention to them, and create pleasing balance.
- **Use frames to add interest and draw attention:** A frame can be anything that is in front of, or behind, your subject that surrounds them and *frames* them (Go figure!). Get creative here – doorframes, windowframes, tree branches, hands – there are lots of things that can be frames!
- **Leave negative space:** The holidays are full of details, but too much stuff in one photo can be cluttered and overwhelming. It can help to leave some negative space (space where there aren’t any elements) to give your subject room to breathe.
- **Use layering to create depth:** Put objects in the foreground, middle ground and background to add more interest, and draw your viewer in.



The Rule of Thirds involves segmenting your frame into three equal parts, both vertically and horizontally. Placing objects of interest along these lines, or at the intersections of the lines, can create a more interesting and balanced image.

SETTINGS: ISO 3200, f/2.8, 1/400s, Canon 6D, 50mm



FURTHER READING:

- [*Incredibly Important Composition Skills Tutorial*](#)
- [*Why You NEED To Learn Composition*](#)
- [*More on The Rule of Thirds*](#)

Don't be afraid to stop down.

A lot of people are worried about losing focus in a critical area when they lower their f-stops (for example to f/2.8).

If you aren't using those lower ranges very much, then it would be a great idea to practice before you find yourself shooting important photos.

Lowering your f-stop can really help in those situations where the location or background is either busy, distracting or just simply boring.

When you are shooting a single person, you can stop down to f2.8 or even lower if you are looking for an even more intimate feeling to your image.

When you shoot even lower than f2.8, it is very important to make sure the eyes are in sharp focus. When we look at photos, we tend to be forgiving of out of focus areas such as the nose or the ears, when the eyes are nice and bright and in focus.

While lowered fstops are especially successful when you are shooting one person, you certainly can use the same style when you are shooting a group of people.

When photographing a group, f/2.8 would be the lowest you would probably want to risk going to and at that lowered range, it is important to have the people on the same plane and not standing one behind the other.



SETTINGS: ISO 2500, f/1.8, 1/125s, Canon 6D, 50mm



FURTHER READING:

- [*Fantastic Fundamental Light Skills Tutorial*](#)
- [*How To Bounce Your Flash*](#)
- [*The Awesome Light Hiding In Your Home*](#)

They may seem old-school, but don't neglect traditional portraits.

Posed portraits have a bad reputation for being stiff and boring. But they are an important part of the family record – capturing relationships in a beautiful way. With a few tricks, and some planning, you can create valuable portraits that everyone enjoys!

First, let everyone know ahead of time that you're planning to do portraits so that they can be ready. **Set aside a specific time to do portraits, and pick the time carefully.** Earlier in the event is better, before everyone gets tired and cranky. Then write out all the groupings you'd like to do so you don't forget anyone.

When shooting, keep it short and sweet. These are important shots, but no one wants to sit still for 10 minutes while you're fiddling. **Figure out your settings and location before you bring people in.** Then move quickly through each grouping. Everyone will appreciate your efficiency on the day, and the fact that you took the time to create these portraits years down the road.

FURTHER READING:

- [51 Ways to Get People To Smile For A Photo](#)
- [5 Simple Tips for Shooting Gorgeous Portraits Indoors](#)
- [Portraits: Making The Shot – eBook](#)



You have to make your friends and family look great.

If you want your family and friends to get excited about you documenting the holidays, you'll want to make sure you can make them look amazing in a photo! That's where some quick posing tips come in handy. Keep these in mind while you shoot:

- **Shoot from slightly above your subjects:** This makes them bring their chins up, which elongates the neck, and gets rid of unflattering double chins.
- **Get heads close:** The easiest way to make people look like part of a loving group is by getting their heads nice and close to each other. It also makes your composition easier!
- **If it bends, bend it:** A simple posing concept – if a body part bends, make it bend! Keeping everything straight looks unnatural and static. Get your subjects to bend their arms (usually by holding on to each other), and bend a knee (usually the one closest to the camera) to create a more flattering and dynamic pose.

FURTHER READING:

- [*Stree-Free Posing: Family Edition*](#)
- [*Tips for Posing Sitting Down*](#)
- [*Striking the Pose – eBook*](#)



Video captures more than photos can alone.

These days almost every camera will also take video, and for good reason – it adds two things that photos lack: sound and movement. And those two things are incredibly powerful when it comes to capturing memories.

A couple quick tips for your videos:

- **Look for action:** Video needs movement to be compelling, so look for action taking place to capture with your video.
- **Hold steady:** Shaky footage is simply not fun to watch. When taking a video, plant your feet and hold steady. Use a tripod, a monopod, or rest your camera somewhere like a table for extra steadiness!

Hint: Use what we've talked about regarding storytelling, composition, and available light to improve your videos!



FURTHER READING:

- [*Our Favourite Camera for Video: the Canon 70D*](#)
- [*Recommended Tripods*](#)
- [*Best Video Settings for Canon DSLRs*](#)



Part of the fun of the holidays is sharing them with your loved ones.

So why not share your camera as well? It's not only a ton of fun, but will also result in some great images as well. Everyone has their own perspective, and getting to see what your friends and family find interesting and photo-worthy is a blast.

To make things easier, start off by getting all the settings right so all they have to do is point and shoot. Then hand over the camera with a super quick tutorial and some tips. "Shoot what looks interesting to you" is good advice!

With really young kids, you can help them by holding the camera as they press the button. You'll start their love of photography early!

For extra fun, try using a [Fujifilm Instax camera](#) for Polaroid-style instant photos. Or grab a [Fujifilm Instax SHARE printer](#) that everyone can print from their smartphones with. Both are great ways to get everyone involved in the fun of documenting the holidays together!

FURTHER READING:

- [Secret Weapon: The Fuji Instax](#)
- [Review: Fujifilm Instax SHARE Smartphone Printer](#)
- [Max Learns Photography!](#)



To get our eldest son interested in photography, we got him his own camera. And to keep ourselves from panicking every time he used it, we got him a Tough Cam that is water, drop and dust-proof. At 2 years old he figured it out right away, and it's so much fun to see him documenting his own life! (i.e. taking pictures of his favorite toys).

This is one of the biggest mistakes photographers make during the holidays.

It's quite simple: they are so busy documenting that they forget to include themselves in the images! Remember: you're an essential part of the story too. So you need to put in the effort to get yourself in some of the images. Here are a few tips:

- Put your camera on a tabletop and set the timer – then do the photographer-run into the shot! It may be overly staged, but it's better than nothing!
- If you have a tripod and a remote, it's even easier. Have them both ready at hand so you're more likely to use them. And when you're shooting, take lots of photos so you're certain to get a good one.
- Let your friends and family take shots of you. And if you're out and about, ask a friendly stranger to grab a quick portrait. I honestly love doing this for others, because I know just how important it is to get everyone in the shot!

FURTHER READING:

- [*How To Take Your Own Family Portraits*](#)
- [*4 Tips for Photographing People Laughing*](#)
- [*How To Create A Simple Photo Booth*](#)



Don't forget to shoot vertical.

- While it is natural for your eye to shoot horizontal, it's important to utilize the often overlooked vertical position.
- Simply turning your camera to vertical can help you out in a number of situations such as when you want to draw your audience's attention solely to your subject.
- It also makes sense to use vertical when you have a tall subject that you'd like to draw maximum attention to (anyone said a tree? ;)
- Backgrounds that might be annoying can be easily eliminated by having a longer shot instead of a wider one.



Here's how your brain messes you up when it comes to photos.

You THINK you'll remember all the wonderful moments happening around you. You THINK that you don't need to take the shot because the image will stay in your mind forever.

But it won't.

Those memories will start to fade as soon as they are made, and within months you'll be struggling to recall. They can even be transformed and distorted each time we revisit them. **Our memories are simply nothing compared to the lasting power of a photograph.**

So take more photos than you think you'll need. That's the simple advice we always give to ourselves during any big event and even still, as we sit down to review our images, we always wish we had taken more.

FURTHER READING:

- [10 Mistakes You Need To Make When Learning Photography](#)
- [What Excuses Are You Using For Not Taking A Photo?](#)
- [Shoot First. Ask Questions Later.](#)



When it comes to sharing, speed is key.

Make sure to share your photos with the folks you shared your holiday with! Post a few shots to your social media accounts during the holidays to get the excitement up.

Then put in the effort to get the final images out there as soon as possible after the holiday, while everyone is still excited about the day. Checking out holiday photos in July just doesn't have the same magic.

When choosing which images to share, share the best, not all of them. There's nothing more exhausting than going through hundreds of holiday snaps. Take the time to choose the very best photos, and craft your story. That way your family will enjoy the experience of looking through them!

But don't stop there. Make an album for yourself. Create some loose prints to frame for your walls, or just to put on the fridge. Holding tangible images in your hands is a valuable experience, and well worth the time. Tip:

Create an online gallery of the photos, and make the files big enough to make small prints (around 1200 px). Then your friends and family can download whichever ones they want to print, without it taking extra work for you!



Your precious photos are in great peril.

You've put all this work into these wonderful holiday photos, you have to make sure you keep them safe!

As soon as possible, back those photos up to a computer. You'll want them to be backed up onto multiple hard drives in case one of those hard drives fails (which is unfortunately inevitable!). You'll also want to make sure that you have one copy of those files in an offsite location. That means that it isn't in your home.

You can either have them on a hard drive that you store in another place (the office, a friend's house, or a safety deposit box), or you can use online cloud storage.

Do NOT delete the photos from your memory card until you are sure that they are properly backed up!



FURTHER READING:

- [Backup Or Die - Full Tutorial](#)
- [Flames, Explosions, And The Safety Of Your Photos](#)
- [Understanding Single Points of Failure With Photography](#)





The holidays aren't just for photographing – they're for enjoying too.

As fun as it is to photograph the holidays, don't forget to enjoy them too! This is a time for connecting with the people you love.

So put down the camera (and the camera phone) and play with the kids. Pitch in with the cooking. Sit on the couch and enjoy the fire.

It isn't always easy to find that balance between documenting and experiencing, but keeping it in mind will help you have the best chance of enjoying yourself.

Shooting the holidays shouldn't be stressful – it should be fun!



NEXT STEPS:

- [*Mastering Composition & Light bundle*](#)
- [*Capture your memories with video*](#)
- [*Backup to safeguard your photos*](#)