

Getting the best from your 50mm prime Lens



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Getting the best from your 50mm prime Lens

In the years gone by photography, technology was simpler. As everything seemed to be 'larger than it is now, and so much more expensive.

In those days, if you bought an SLR it usually came with one of a range of different aperture 50mm prime lenses. This was a time when zoom lenses were 'new technology' and so were very much still a luxury purchase. Your choices whether to have an 18-55mm zoom or an 18-200mm zoom; it depended on which aperture version you could afford in the 50mm focal length.

Key Lesson: A 'prime' lens has a fixed focal length, unlike a zoom lens, which has varying focal lengths

As new technology made the zoom lens the thing to own, the standard' 50mm prime lens all but disappeared from the nation's camera bags.

The prime lens has recently had a rebirth. Because directors want a field of view that's close to the human eye, plus a cool shallow depth of field 'look.' But it's also partly because it's affordable, lightweight, fast, high quality, and – yes – it produces a sublime depth of field effect.

What you'll learn in this guide:

- Differences between 50mm lenses
- 50mm prime lens brands to consider
- How to get creative with this lens
- How to control depth of field
- How to maximize bokeh

One overriding reason to buy a 50mm lens is that it has a very wide aperture for a very reasonable price – usually far better than most zoom lenses. A zoom lens with a fast maximum aperture will cost a lot of money

Which one to buy?

This is a hard question to answer. As with most things photographic, it comes down to how much you want to spend. The f1.8 version is very good and clearly the least expensive, while the super-fast f1.2 version produces sublime out-of-focus effects (called bokeh), but it weighs 3.5x more than the f1.8 version and is nearly ten times the price! which sits in at a little less than twice the cost of the f1.8 lens and a little more than twice its weight.

That's the aperture difference.

Key Lesson:

A 'fast lens' is one that has a wide maximum aperture.

The lower the f/stop number on the lens, the wider the maximum aperture. For example, a lens with a maximum aperture of f1.2 is 'faster' than a lens with a maximum aperture of f2.8.

It's also important to note that, as you pay more for the lens, the quality of the glass improves, which in turn produces better contrast, sharpness, and a smoother bokeh effect.

Uses for a 50 mm Lens

- Portraits
- Landscapes
- Low light and night photography
- Architecture
- Street photography
- Close-ups (with an extension tube)

The fast aperture is perfect for low-light work, but it produces very little depth of focus so great care must be exercised in order to get the 'wrong' parts of the portrait out of focus.

What's bokeh and how is it used?

Bokeh is a Japanese term for the out-of-focus characteristics of a lens and is described by Wikipedia as: "...the aesthetic quality of the blur produced in the out-of-focus parts of an image...".

We all understand that, apart from regulating the flow of light into the camera to make the shot, aperture also has an effect on how much of the scene around the point of focus comes out sharp. In general, the smaller the aperture (measured in f-stops), the more that'll appear clear and sharp. Though this is a physical process governed by the diaphragm, it's also significantly influenced by a number of other factors that we, the photographer, can control. These features include the following:

- The subject-to-camera distance
- The subject-to-background distance
- The lens focal length
- The aperture
- The quality of the glass elements

Pay attention to the first four factors to get the best out of your 50mm lens. The last one is also important but once bought, is a fixed entity.

the bokeh for different lenses can be quite varied, even if it's the same focal length. Some bokeh is supremely smooth, as with the Canon EF50mm f1.4 lens. and after market Sigma's excellent f1.4 DG SM Art lens

the bokeh quality of the budget-oriented 50mm f1.8 is not quite so sublime

if you think that the 50mm position on an 18-55mm kit lens would be just as good, then prepare yourself for a bumpy ride because its bokeh could only ever be described as 'lumpy.'

Using the adage of "the closer you are to the subject, the shallower the depth of field" to get the best from this prime, always position your model reasonably close to the camera (between one and two meters away), but ensure that the background is at least the same distance away, preferably more so, and you'll experience a significant softening of the background at full aperture.

Lens handling and creativity

A 50 mm lens is light weight, compact design, speed, and unique field of view (FOV), which is very similar to the human eye. Because of that, it makes a 50mm shot look 'right' as its FOV incorporates not too much information (as a 35mm lens might) while avoiding the narrower FOV limitations of a longer focal length.

Another powerful feature of this lens which should not be overlooked is its creative potential. Most of us are somewhat programmed into using a zoom lens for all our work, so when you pick up a prime lens, like the 50mm, it forces you to be more observant. No longer can you just stand in the street and zoom into your subject from the safe distance provided by a 200mm lens. If you spot something interesting, it's up to you to react, get yourself in the best position, and shoot. It's probably harder work but ultimately far more rewarding. Another bonus of working with a small prime is that it's less noticeable. People see this and immediately react, often not in a way that's helpful to the photographer, so the stubby profile of the fifty mm brings a generous degree of anonymity to the party which should help your shooting proficiency.

Ultra-close shot of tiny florets using both a 25mm and 12mm extension tube stacked up on the 50mm lens. This close, even at a small aperture like f22, has almost nothing in focus,

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Bio

My name is David Wright.

I have many years experience writing procedures on how to test high tech electronic equipment. Re wrote technical manuals so that the average person could understand them.

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My documenting skills are excellent paying attention to details satisfying the toughest ISO auditors.

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