

Camera Settings

AUTO - The Four Letter Word In Fine Art and Competition Photos

Today's digital cameras are amazing and they provide us with capabilities that we never even dreamed about a few years ago. Even the most inexpensive cameras and smart cell phones can take a decent snapshot and the days of buying film and mailing it to Kodak for processing are over. Today, camera manufacturers provide us with lots of cool features and settings. **Unfortunately, most camera owners don't understand their cameras and choose to set their cameras for automatic operation.**



The AUTO setting is essentially for those who don't know how to use the other features and the benefits of other settings in their cameras. It is worth the time to learn to use other settings because some camera settings make a huge difference in quality. When it comes to creating fine art pieces from digital camera images, it makes sense for us to take the best picture possible. Fortunately, high quality cameras aren't necessarily a requirement but appropriate camera settings can make a huge difference. By design, when you choose the AUTO setting, your camera makes all of the setting decisions for you. The logic behind the AUTO setting makes the assumption that you probably don't know much about cameras and it also assumes that you are probably taking a snap shot. The same is true when the photographer chooses to create JPG file output files rather than RAW output files. RAW file output is not (yet) available in most smart cell phones and in lower end digital cameras. Much like the Auto setting on our cameras, when JPG files are created the camera makes decisions about colors, clarity and the dynamic range of the scene. Be aware that significant benefits exist when the photographer uses more advanced settings and selects output files to be in RAW file format. I purchased my first "professional" digital camera several years ago. It was a Nikon D70 camera with a lot of new and wonderful features. However, I didn't know about the benefits provided with RAW files back then. Unfortunately, I took that camera when I traveled to China for the first time and regret that I didn't capture the images as RAW image files. Little did I know that I could have set the camera to capture both JPG and RAW image files. Don't make the same mistake. When you capture RAW files, you have many more options when it comes to using digital photo software after-the-fact, e.g. Photoshop, Lightroom, ON1, Luminar, Photomatix Pro, etc.

Be aware that camera and cell phone manufacturers have also added other settings to make their camera appear to be easier to use and more appealing in the marketplace. Some cameras have menu selections with icons of flowers, mountains, the moon, people and fast moving objects, etc. In reality, such settings are merely specialized automatic settings that may or may not work for your particular scene. Like the AUTO setting they make all the decisions and you have to live with the results. In some cases they may work, but for quality fine art photography images it is best if you make your own decisions.

Many times when I am out on a landscape or travel photo shoot I encounter other photographers. It always amuses me that some folks have expensive top end cameras and lenses but their camera flash is in the up position on a bright sunny day. This is usually a clue that they have their camera set to AUTO Mode. If they appear to need help (and are friendly) I will try to help and I suggest you do the same. I explain to them that I am a fine art photographer and that they may want to set their camera to "P" rather than



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AUTO. I give them a few reasons why and I walk away happy that I was able to help them take better pictures. Sometimes, I encounter the same person later in the day and - you guessed it - their flash is still in the up position and they are snapping away in broad daylight. When they get home I'll bet they wonder why they have bad pictures with blown highlights and excessive noise in the digital file.

When AUTO is selected the camera will automatically choose the aperture, shutter speed, ISO and when it thinks the flash is needed. We rarely want to use the onboard flash for fine art or photo competition images. The reason is because the lighting is basically limited to a range of about 20 feet and the light is coming directly from the camera so the shadows aren't natural. I have actually seen people shooting pictures of the moon using their flash. Do they really think the light from the flash will reach the moon and reflect back to their camera sensor? As it relates to other types of shooting, a camera set to the AUTO mode will determine the aperture and shutter speed so there is no control over the depth-of-field (the depth of view in the shot that will be in focus) and no control over the focus of subjects that may be moving, etc. These **problems are easily overcome by simply changing the settings to (P)rogram mode.** Once you learn a bit more about your camera and features you may also be interested in using the (A)erture, (S)hutter and/or (M)anual modes. If you have questions about these more advanced settings, you can contact the author who is always happy to help fellow photographers. The contact information is on the web site referenced below.

This article is not intended to be technical. The main focus is to impress upon you that **when you use the AUTO mode you will be lucky to capture an image worthy of a fine art piece or an award in a photo competition. Your odds of creating a great digital image will increase greatly if you simply use the P setting rather than the AUTO setting.** The odds increase even more if you learn and use the other settings on your camera. Here is a brief description of settings that I consider using for fine art photography and competition photographs:

(P)rogram Mode is usually identified with a P on your settings dial or menu. This option is a good walking-around mode so you will be ready to grab a quick shot but you will still have more control, when needed, to increase the ISO. In AUTO mode the camera automatically uses the flash to deal with low light levels. When the camera is set for the Program mode you can deal with low light levels by increasing the ISO. Even with inexpensive cameras, an ISO setting of 800 will usually result in good, noise free, pictures and you won't be forced to rely upon the flash. For beginners, I always recommend using the Program Mode to afford the benefit of controlling the ISO settings.

(A)erture Priority Mode (also known as Aperture Value (Av) Mode) is usually identified with the A on your settings dial. This setting lets you control the aperture setting and the camera controls the shutter speed. Most professionals use this setting because it allows them to control the depth-of-field in the shot and this becomes an important element when it comes to fine art photography image captures. A downside of using the Aperture Mode is that it may not be best for sports photography or action shots when a fast shutter speed is desired to freeze the action.

(S)hutter Priority Mode (also known as Time Value Tv Mode) is usually identified with the S on your settings dial. This setting lets you control the shutter speed and the camera is responsible for setting the aperture opening. This setting is good for sports photography but it can cause problem regarding the depth-of-field in the shot. This is particularly a problem if you are doing bracketed HDR photography because the depth-of-field should be consistent for each of the bracketed shots.

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(M)anual Mode is usually identified with a M on your settings dial. This mode allows you to control both the shutter speed and aperture setting. Once you fully understand your camera and related photographic concepts you will be ready to work in this mode for special situations. For some professional photographers this is their preferred setting.

In summary, there are advantages when the AUTO mode is avoided and the same is true when image output is in RAW file format. The latter provides more advantages when it comes to making edits and RAW files can easily be converted to JPG file format if that is desired.

More about the Author:

Michael R. Anderson, was awarded a Master of Photography Degree by the Professional Photographers of America (PPA) and a Fellow of Photography Degree by the Oregon Professional Photographers Association (OPPA). His photography has received over 100 international, national, regional and local awards. He also is known for his willingness to help other photographers by sharing his knowledge, techniques and expertise. He and his wife, Lori, also have records of funding their favorite charities through the donation of their fine art photography. More about them can be found at:

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