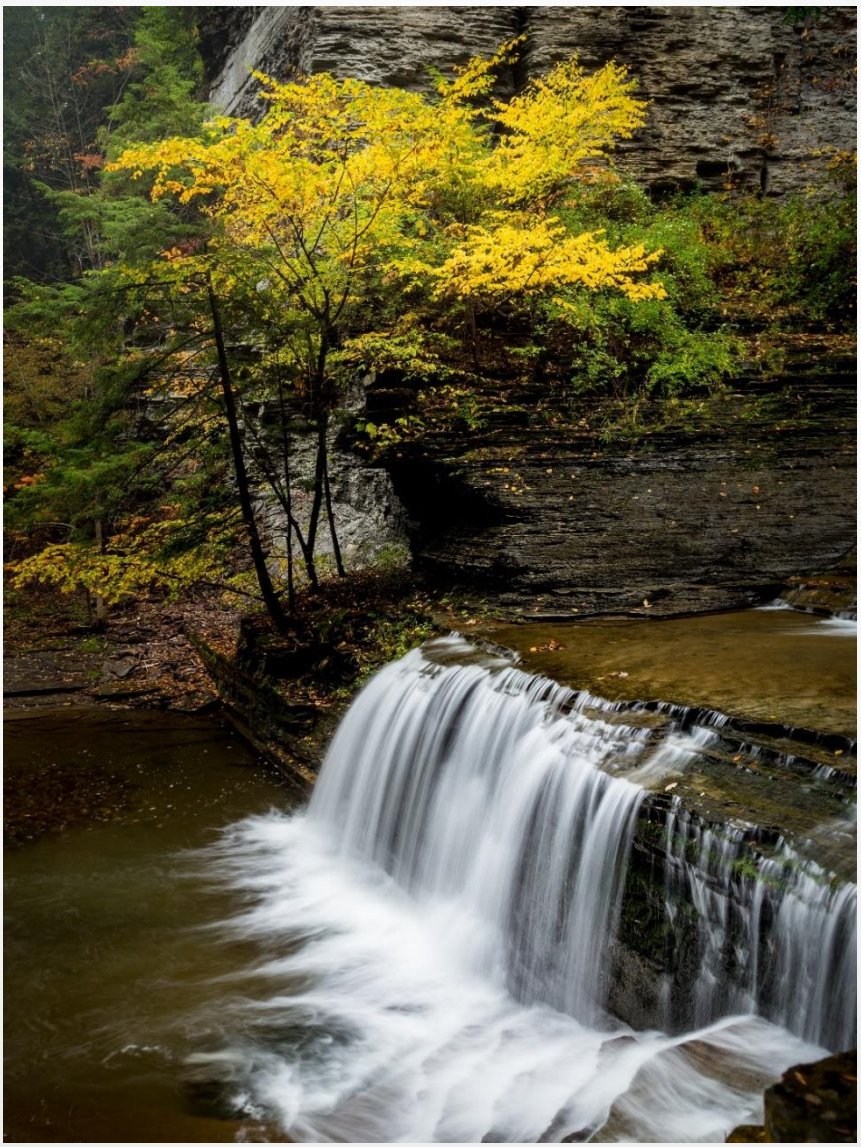
Making Beautiful Landscape Photographs

A photographer's guide to making landscape photographs.



Norman Schillawski

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By Norman Schillawski

Introduction

Have you ever gone on vacation taking lots of pictures and been disappointed with the results? Have you ever wanted to make better landscape photos? If so, this book is for you.

For a long time, I too struggled with how to make a good landscape picture. This book shares my personal experiences, techniques, and tips to make great landscape photographs.

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Our Topics

To make a beautiful landscape photograph we will explore five topics.

Elements
: What to look for to make a good landscape photograph.

Workflow
: Five steps to make a good photograph.

Equipment
: The pros and cons of different equipment.

Focusing
: An important discussion to get that sharpness and depth of field.

Adding Drama
: Weather, light, time of day are a few of the ways to add drama to your landscape photograph.

Key Elements

Finding the right elements are key to making a great landscape photograph. Here are five elements to look for in a scene. These are:

A Compelling Sky
Favorable Color and Light
Dramatic Background
Sharpness Near and Far
Leading Foreground

If you have one of these it is a great starting point. Having two or three is even better and all five make a great photograph.

Compelling Sky

The sky may be the most important element in the photograph.

For example, how many sunset photos have you seen where there's a big ball of the sun with a backdrop of a plain empty sky? What if the sky was full of colorful wispy clouds? Look for ways to say how beautiful or to set a mood in your images. The best mood setter is the sky.

The sky sets the tone of your image. Look for a dynamic sky that adds feeling to your photograph. A blank sky is boring, so it adds nothing.

Clearing skies after a rainstorm passes is a great time to catch beautiful dynamic clouds. However, on a gray rainy day, the sky may be nothing but gray gook. Consequently, you may want to minimize the sky and find other elements.

“After the Rain” was made on a trip in the Adirondacks. The scene is near the village of Inlet. A rain shower just ended. The storm moved away leaving the sky reflecting on the water adding drama to the photograph.

1/60 sec, f/16, ISO 100, 24mm , polarizing filter

Favorable Color and Light

Color and Light are keys to making a successful landscape photograph.

Color Palette

Watch your colors in a scene. A limited number of colors adds continuity to your scene, consequently, multiple colors become distracting. An odd color or unexpected color may distract the viewer.

Golden Hour

The golden hours are the hours before sunrise and sunset. This light is warm giving a soft golden tone to the sky. A second hour known as the blue hour occurs after sunset. The sky will take on a vibrant blue tone.

“Golden Sunset” was made at Keaton Beach. I waited several days for the sky to have clouds that reflected the color in the sky and on the water. Backlighting this image using a tree to block out the sun made a great silhouette image.

1.3 sec, f/16, ISO 100, 24mm, Rev. Grad Plus ND Filter

Dramatic Background

Backgrounds make or break an image. Dramatic backgrounds that complement the work (i.e., Sunset with dynamic clouds) are great. However, too much background may pull the eye away from the subject. Like many choices in making a photograph, it's very subjective.

> *"From Castle Rock"* is a great example of being selective as to how much emphasis to give the mountains in the background. A lower point of view may increase the height of the distant mountains, therefore decreasing the depth in the photograph. In the final photograph, the distant mountains being small adds to the depth of the photograph.

“From Castle Rock” was photographed standing on Castle Rock which is a large mountain rock ledge jutting out over Blue Mountain Lake.

1/40 sec, f/16, ISO100, 24mm

Sharpness Near and Far

The sharpness of a landscape photograph is critical. A blurry foreground makes the viewer lose interest quickly. A landscape photograph needs to be sharp near and far.

Depth of Field (DOF)

Depth of field is defined as what is in focus near to far. To show depth in a photograph a large area must be in focus. Traditionally, this is done using a small aperture opening (f-stop i.e., f/16 or f/22).

Focus Stacking is a digital technology available to make extremely sharp images. This is a process of taking several images of the scene at the sharpest f-stop (usually around f/8. Each image is focused at a different distance in the scene. These images are then processed together making one final image extremely sharp throughout.

“Windswept” is a photograph of Whiteface Mountain in the Adirondacks. The depth of field was accomplished using the traditional process of a small aperture opening (f/16).

1/1000 sec, f/16, ISO 200 80 mm

Leading Foreground

A typical landscape has three parts like a storybook. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The subject is usually in the middle, the background is the end, and the foreground is the beginning. Many times, a landscape photograph is unsuccessful with no beginning. I'm sure you have seen many colorful sunsets with nothing in the foreground to lead the eye into the scene.

Lines or Objects

Lines lead the viewer through the image. They allow the eye to follow a line to the subject. Objects in the foreground give the viewer a place to rest their eye and then look beyond.

“Upper Gorge Trail” was made along the Gorge in Buttermilk Falls State Park in Ithaca. The leading line of the creek draws you into the image and up the cascades.

1.3 sec, f/16, ISO 100, 67 mm

Workflow

A good workflow helps you see the possibilities of a scene. There is no perfect system. What works for one may or may not work for you. Here's mine.

Survey the scene

Look for what caught your eye. Is it a stunning scene? Are there interesting landscape features? Ask yourself how can you show this to your viewers. What elements are present? Is there a feature you want to highlight in your photograph? Why?

Work the Scene

Start by making an exposure of the scene. Don't worry about whether it's good just take a photo. Next study the photo. What do you like about it or not? Ask what is the most important? Make another and do it again and again.

Remember a photograph is as much about what you don't include as much as what you do include.

Ask **What If I…** moved to the right or down or up what is the light doing …

Optimize your Exposure

Now, add in some technical questions. Where to focus for the best depth of field. Find your best focal point and aperture. What effect will the shutter duration have? Would using a filter add to the image? Study the histogram. Expose to the right without blowing out the highlights.

Overcome Camera Limitations

Are there techniques you can employ to overcome the limitations of your camera? Would a filter like a polarizer or neutral density filter help? Perhaps multiple exposures employing HDR (High Dynamic Range).

Wait for it

What is the light doing? Would it be better at a different time of day? Would different weather or a total change of season make a difference? If the direction of the light changes, would it add drama?

The Image

`*“Melting Light”* was made on a winter day at Onondaga Lake. Here’s a story about it I’d like to share.

It’s a mild winter in central New York. The weather is gray, bare trees, and dirty snow. It’s February 28th should be cold as hell instead the temperature is in the mid-60s. I head to Onondaga Lake. It’s a little after three in the afternoon.

Walking behind the salt museum, I spied a break in the ice near a tall tree. I make a few images of the ice chunks close to the tree roots. They are dingy-looking. The ice is covered with grass and dirt.

I make more images - tree backlight, portrait, landscape aspect, closer in, further back. The sun is setting as I move around the tree. I set up a vertical with the tree and the break in the ice going into the distance. I like the composition just need better light. I wait.

As the sun sets, I wait. The light softens on the water. The after sunset blue light arrives.

Two hours later, 111 images, and now 34 degrees, I finish. 6 sec, f/22, ISO 100, 24 mm

Your Gear

Your gear are tools to make photographs nothing more. Each tool has its pros and cons. What works for you is what is important.

Cameras

Today, we have a great choice of cameras. A good prosumer DSLR is inexpensive and will produce very good photographs. Many smartphones have excellent cameras built-in. All cameras have pros and cons. Many have capabilities far beyond what is necessary to make a good photograph.

What's Important

High Resolution

Megapixels coupled with large sensors provide the best data for making a landscape photograph. A good camera for landscape photography should have at least 20 megapixels.

The sensor size of DSLRs and Mirrorless cameras are best. The point and shoots and smartphones sensors are too small to make larger prints.

Live View

Live view is a great feature found in most DSLRs. It allows you to explore focus, composition, depth of field, exposure, and point of view. Some provide a histogram during exposure.

Raw Files

For the best possible quality of image, make sure your camera will capture files in the Raw format.

Dynamic Range

The digital camera is growing leaps and bounds with better technology. Dynamic range is one of these areas that has vastly improved. The larger the dynamic range the better it will be able to work in low light situations.

What's not as Important

High ISO Performance

ISO is important. However, most landscape photography uses slower sensor sensitivity and long shutter durations. My work rarely exceeds ISO 400.

High Frames per second

Nice but not necessary for landscape photography. Most landscape images are sedimentary with the camera mounted on a tripod. If you decide to photograph animals, a camera with a continuous shutter, and high frames per second would be important.

It’s important to note it is not the camera that makes a great photograph - it’s the photographer. The photograph *“Pretty in Pink”* was made in 2003 with a SONY Mavica digital camera. It made a 1.2-megapixel image on a floppy disc.

Lenses

Lenses like cameras are constantly being made better. In the past a prime lenses were considered better glass than a zoom lens. Today's high-quality zooms match primes and make your bag a lot lighter.

In my bag, I carry a mix of prime and zoom lenses.

24-105mm f/4
70-300mm f/4
50mm f/2.5 macro
85mm f/1.8

Here's some considerations for buying a lens. Buy quality, a good lens is a long-term investment. Read reviews by actual users. Ask around at photo clubs if anyone has or used the lens. Take the lens for a test drive – rent it first.

You can save money buying a slower lens. Do you really need a f/2.8 lens for your work? If you choose a f/4 over a f/2 lens the cost and weight are a lot less.

Tripods

A sturdy tripod is required for maximum sharpness when using long shutter durations. Buy one that will serve you well. Avoid the cheap flimsy tripods. The tripod is the one component that gives you control over your camera, so it’s worth choosing very carefully indeed.

Three major considerations

It is important to consider height, weight, and the head of the tripod. Height has trade-offs. For example, if you choose a taller tripod its bulk may make it hard to pack and travel with. If you decide on a carbon fiber tripod, it will be much lighter but more expensive.

Finally, choosing the tripod head is critical. Most common are three-way and ball head for landscape photography. When choosing your tripod head, make sure that it will support the weight of your heaviest camera and lens combination. The last thing you want is the head slowly sagging due to the tripod head not being capable of supporting the weight.

The photograph *“Roaring Taughannock”* required a 1.6-second exposure duration with a tripod. A good tripod is essential to successful low-light photography. 1.6sec, f/22, ISO 100, 55mm

Filters

Filters are instrumental to make a great landscape photograph. Some will argue that you can fix it later in post-processing. This is true sometimes but not always. Choose to get it right in the camera.

Types

There are many different types of filters. Some screw into the lens and others use a filter holder system. Filters themselves are designed for various applications like polarizing or color correction. This discussion will be limited in scope to applications for landscape photography.

The most common filters for landscape photography are:

- ND (Neutral Density)
- Grads (Graduated Neutral Density)
- Polarizers

ND Filters

ND or neutral density filters are designed to reduce the amount of light that flows into your camera. For example, an ND filter is the dark lens that an arc welder uses. This filter is extremely dense reducing the light reaching the welder's eyes.

ND filters lengthen the duration of the shutter. For example, photographing a brightly lit waterfall. Without the ND filter, the water is frozen due to the fast shutter speed. Adding an ND filter lowers the brightness allowing you to use a slower shutter duration to blur the water.

Common ND filters are 3-step, 5-step, 10-step. These decrease the amount of light 3, 5, or 10 stops, respectively.

There are variable neutral density filters that allow you to dial in the amount of decrease. Be careful. My experience is the cheaper made ones often apply unevenly and may cause a color cast.

Grads or Graduated ND Filters

Grads are like solid ND filters in that they reduce light. The difference is the grad's density changes across the filter. One end starts dark then the density gradually lightens over the length of the filter.

Grads are used when the exposure exceeds the ability of the camera to capture the dynamic range. Without a grad, your exposure choice will either blow out the highlights or block up the shadows. Using a grad, the darker area of the filter lowers the amount of exposure of the highlights while the lighter area keeps the shadows.

An example, you are photographing a late afternoon landscape with a bright sky. Using a grad will reduce the brightness of the sky while retaining the shadows.

Note: There is a Reverse Graduated ND Filter. This filter is designed for photographing sunsets. The density changes from the middle of the filter. This lowers the intensity of the sun at the horizon keeping the foreground and sky properly exposed.

"Sunset Sky" was photographed at Little Tupper lake. A three stop Grad Filter (soft) was used to darken the sky. f/16, 1/6 sec, ISO 100, 24mm

Polarizing Filter

A polarizing filter is like polarizing sunglasses. It reduces glare on wet surfaces like rocks in a stream. It can be used to see below the surface of the water. Fishermen have used polarized glasses for years. A polarizer will intensify colors too.

The effect and intensity is controlled by how much you rotate the filter and the angle of the sun. The strongest effect is facing 90 degrees from the light source.

Make sure you get a circular, not linear filter. The linear does not work with autofocus or the built-in exposure meter of your camera. Be careful using a polarizer on blue skies. It will enhance the blue sky but many times it will tend not to apply evenly. This is where photoshop or lightroom might do a better job.

“Fishing at the lower falls” was made using a polarizing filter. It adds clarity to the water, a punch to the fall color, and allows a longer exposure.

.8 sec, f/22, ISO 100 40 mm

Good to Have

Here’s a list of things that come in handy:

Shutter cable release
Focusing Loupe
Hip Waders
Dry suit
Rain Gear
Knee Pad
Gators (not the Florida ones)
Lens cloth to clean with
Lens cloth to dry with
Lens hood
Pull on Boots
Sunscreen
Insect Repellant
Hand and Foot Warmers

There’s a lot more but hopefully, you get the idea. You won’t make a good photograph if you're not comfortable in the environment.

Focusing

Focusing on a landscape photograph requires knowledge and application of three parts. These are the plane of focus, hyperfocal distance, and depth of field.

Plane of Focus

The plane of focus is an area that is parallel to your sensor where everything is in focus. The depth of this area changes dramatically based on lens choice and aperture choice. A wide-angle lens (i.e. 24mm) will have a larger depth of focus than a telephoto lens (i.e. 300mm). A wide-open aperture setting (i.e. f/4) will reduce this depth while a small aperture opening (i.e. f/16) will increase the depth.

1/400 sec, f/5.6, ISO 800, 300mm

To clarify, let's look at the photograph *"Dragonfly at Beaver Lake"*. This photograph has a very narrow area of focus. Look at the reed and dragonfly closely, only the reed and body of the dragonfly are sharp. The image quickly blurs in front and behind the reed.

The key is the plane of the camera's sensor. The camera's sensor and the body of the dragonfly are exactly parallel. If the sensor were at an angle to the dragonfly, the front or back of the dragonfly's body would blur.

The shallow depth of field is due to the lens choice and aperture. We will examine the depth of field shortly.

Hyperfocal Distance

Hyperfocal distance is defined as the focal point where all the objects from ½ of the focal point distance to infinity are acceptably sharp. This will vary depending on lens choice and aperture settings. The hyperfocal point tells you where to focus but alone does not ensure near to far focus.

Depth of Field

Depth of field is defined as the area Near To Far that is acceptably sharp in the image. Good landscape photographs demand a large depth of field.

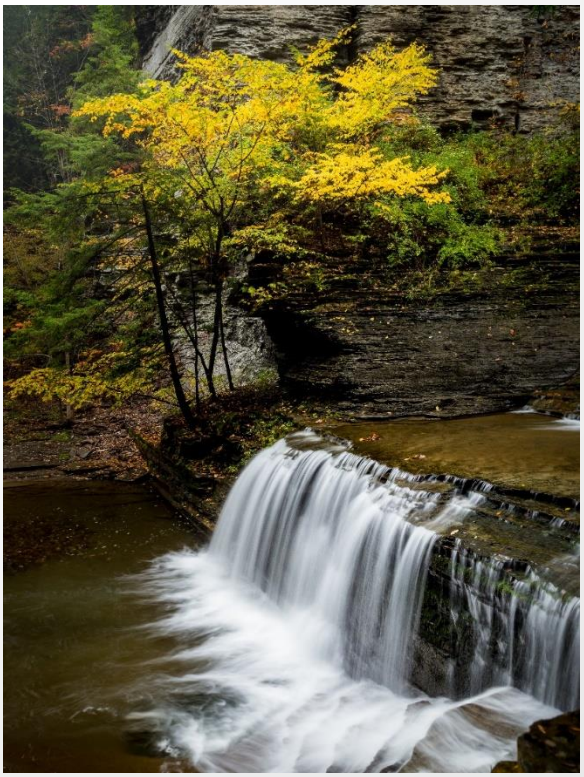
Depth of field is controlled by your lens choice and aperture choice (f-stop).

Lens choice will either expand or compress the depth of field. A wide-angle lens will expand it and a telephoto lens will compress it.

Aperture choice will expand or decrease the depth of field. A small aperture opening (i.e. f/16) will have a large depth of field. A large aperture opening (i.e. f/4) will have a shallow depth of field.

Rose Bud
1/400 sec, f/5.6, ISO 400,
300 mm
Shallow Depth of Field

Autumn Falls
.6 sec, f/16, ISO 100, 28 mm
Deep Depth of Field



Determine Focus

To find the focus point using hyperfocal distance, there are various charts and apps. I find this is cumbersome and not very accurate. For example, the hyperfocal point is 33.5 feet. How do I set my camera for 33.5 feet?

Another approach is to focus 1/3 into the scene. If you're looking across the bay as the sun sets, can you tell how far 1/3 is? Will the foreground be in focus?

So, here's what I do…

The hyperfocal distance is the area ½ in front of the focus point to infinity, so do this:

First, find the closest object in your scene and double the distance, now you have the proper focal point for the scene.

Second, determine the f-stop by making trial exposures at different f-stops. Look for sharpness from your closest object to infinity.

Last, if your camera has live view, you can review the focus using the DOF preview button. It will be dark, but your eyes will adjust for it. A loupe is a great device to see the screen blocking out extraneous light.

Focus Stacking

Focus stacking is a digital technique that allows you to make the entire photograph tack sharp using the sweet spot of the lens usually f/8 or f/11.

The method is to make multiple exposures using the same f-stop focusing at different distances in the scene. You then upload them into post-processing software and let the software do its thing.

You must ensure that during the exposures your camera is secured to a tripod to prevent any movement.

Adding Drama

Sometimes it's a moment in time, the light characteristics, the weather, or a camera setting that dramatically tells your story. Here are examples of some of the favorite things I look for while making a landscape photograph.

Weather Conditions

Nothing like photographing in the rain. We run to get our camera while others run for cover. *"Storm over Niagara Falls"* is a beautiful stormy image as a rainstorm overtook the falls. f/14, 1/500 sec, ISO 400, 22mm

Fog and Mist

Early mornings are the best time to find atmospheric conditions that add drama to your photograph. *"Francis Pond Sunrise"* is filled with mystery from the foggy mist and silhouetted islands. f/16, 1.3 sec, ISO 100, 105 mm

Implied Motion

A slow shutter duration allows the water to blur in a photograph, as a result, this implies motion. This is a very useful technique for waterfalls and objects in motion. A neutral density (ND) filter may be needed to slow the shutter duration.

"Feng Shui" was photographed in the Adirondacks. It was at dusk. A shutter duration of 8 seconds and a polarizer were used. f/16, 8 sec, ISO 800, 65mm

The Blue Hour

Most photographers are aware of the golden hour, but many fail to stay after sunset for the blue hour. This hour has incredible blue light.

"Syracuse City Lights" was photographed about 30 minutes after the sunset. The rich blue light upon the still water is beautiful. To make the photograph the shutter duration was 30 seconds. This made the water very soft and smooth.
f/5.6, 30 sec, ISO 100, 97mm

Moment

There is no substitute for being there. Often one waits and other times it's over as fast as it appears. You never know when that exact moment will occur. As the great photojournalist, Arthur Fellig said F8 and Be There.

"Sunrise at the Stream" - The sunrise started gray and bleak then the clouds opened for only a few minutes. The saturation was so strong, it was reduced in post-processing. f/18, .8sec, ISO 100, 47mm

Storytelling

A great landscape photo is like a story. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

“Soft Adirondack Snow” begins with the pine tree and shrubs and then the soft white snow leads you to the mountains and early morning sky. f/16, 1/15 sec, ISO 200, 100mm

Overcast Sky

Overcast skies have two varieties. One the sky is just gray gook. The other has clouds filled with texture. With gray gook eliminate or at least minimize, the amount of sky. *“Fall at Little Tupper Lake”* is a good example of an overcast sky with texture. f/22, 1/6 sec, ISO 100, 24mm

Gray Gook

"Cedar River" is a good example of minimizing the bland poor sky. f/18, .6 sec, ISO 100, 84mm

Aspect

Often overlooked is the aspect ratio of the frame. This can dramatically change how a viewer looks at the scene. We are all familiar with landscape and portrait but often forget square and panorama.

"*Sunset at Sylvan Beach*" done as a panorama adds a strong horizon flow to the image. f/22, ½ sec, ISO 100, 24mm

“The Cowsheds” makes use of the square aspect. The viewer reads the image in a circular pattern.
f/16, .6 sec, ISO 100, 24mm

Wrapping it Up

Throughout this book, we looked at many different parts to make a beautiful landscape photograph. Each of these is a starting point and I encourage you to study more.

Spend time learning. Study the Masters of photography. Go to museums and study art. Look at an artist's painting, think about what you would do with your camera to take a photograph like it. Ask the questions. What is the light doing? What is the artist's point of view? Are there lines?

Photography is an art. The camera is our paintbrush.
Go create some great photographs.

About the Author

Norman Schillawski is an award-winning photographer and workshop leader. He is known for his landscape photography and his love to teach others to be better photographers. Learn more about him and see more of his work at:

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