Digital Photography School

How to Take Great Group Photos

A Post By: Darren Rowse

Photo by rentoholic 17

In this post we want to give you 12 tips for taking **great group photos**.
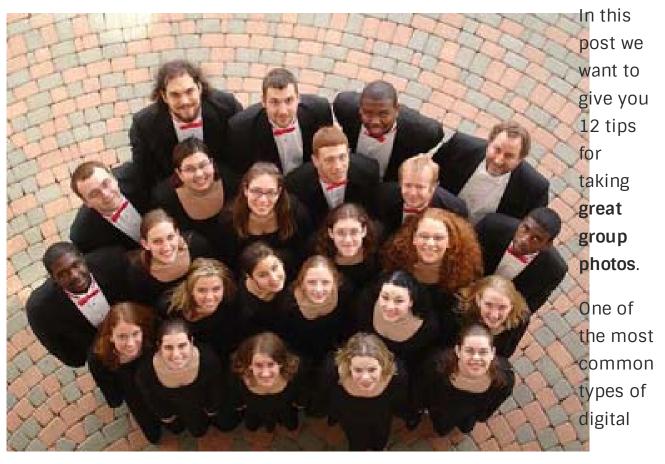
One of the most common types of digital

photographs is the '**group photo**'.

They happen everywhere from weddings, to camps, to parties, to sporting teams, to school etc.

There must be thousands of group photos taken each day around the world – however unfortunately many of the group photos that I see in my friendship group and on Flickr would leave their photographers disappointed with the results for a variety of reasons.

Common group photo mistakes and problems include:

- one or more subjects always seem to be looking away or in different directions (ie at different photographers)
- subjects blinking (there's always one)
- someone being missing from the photo
- different moods in the group (some smiling, some serious, some playing up to the camera etc)
- the group being too far away or not all fitting into the shot

While there will always be such challenges with Group Photos there are a number of things you can do to help improve your chances of getting the shot you're after:

1. Prepare

There is nothing that will make of people posing for a photograph turn upon you faster than you not being prepared. People don't like to be kept waiting so think ahead about some of the following aspects of your photo:

- scope out the location of your shot before hand
- think ahead about how you will pose people and frame your shot
- one of the group's head hiding behind another person
- make sure everyone you want in the shot knows you want them a few minutes ahead of time
- make your your camera is on and has charged batteries

2. Location

Photo by Erin

The place that you have your group stand is important to group shots for a number of reasons. For starters it can give the photo context for example a shot of a sporting team on their playing field means more than a shot of them in front of a brick wall. The other reason that choosing locations carefully is important is that it can have distractions in it.

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Choose a position where your group will fit, where there is enough light for the shot and where there is no distractions in the background. Also avoid setting up a group shot directly in front of a window where the light from your flash might reflect back in a way that destroys your shot.

3. Take Multiple Shots

One of the best ways to avoid the problems of not everyone looking just right in a shot is to take multiple photos quickly. I often switch my camera into continuous shooting mode when taking group shots and shoot in short bursts of shots. I find that the first shot is often no good but that the one or two directly after it often give a group that looks a little less posed and more relaxed.

Similarly – shoot some frames off before everyone is ready – sometimes the organization of a group shot can be quite comical with people tell each other where to go and jostling for position.

Also mix up the framing of your shots a little if you have a zoom lens by taking some shots that are at a wide focal length and some that are more tightly framed.

4. Get in Close

Try to get as close as you can to the group you're

Photo by Mark MacClean

photographing (without cutting some members of it out of course). The closer you can get the more detail you'll have in their faces – something that really lifts a shot a lot.

If your group is a smaller one get right in close to them and take some head and shoulder shots. One effective technique for this is to get your small group to all lean their heads in close to enable you to get in even closer. Another way to get in closer is to move people out of a one line formation and stagger them but putting some people in front and behind.

5. Pose the group

In most cases your group will pose itself pretty naturally (we've all done it before). Tall people will go to the back, short people to the front. But there are other things you can do to add to the photo's composition:

- If the event is centered around one or two people (like a wedding or a birthday) make them the central focal point by putting them right in the

middle of the group (you can add variation to your shots by taking some of everyone looking at the camera and then everyone looking at the person/couple).

- For formal group photos put taller members in the group not only towards the back of the group but centered with shorter people on the edges of the group.

- Try not to make the group too 'deep' (ie keep the distance between the front line of people and the back line as small as you can). This will help to keep everyone in focus. If the group is 'deep' use a narrower aperture.

- Tell everyone to raise their chins a little – they'll thank you later when they see the shot without any double chins!

6. Timing Your Shoot Well

Pick the moment for your shot

Photo by andrew.smith

carefully. Try to choose a time that works with what is happening at the gathering that you're at. I find it best to do a group shot when the group is already close together if possible and when there is a lull in proceedings.

Also towards the start of events can be a good time as everyone is all together, they all look their best and if there is alcohol involved no one is too under the weather yet.

7. Think about Light

In order to get enough detail in your subjects you need to have sufficient light. The way you get this varies from situation to situation but consider using a flash if the group is small enough and you are close enough for it to take effect – especially if the main source of light is coming from behind the group.

If it's a bright sunny day and the sun is low in the sky try not to position it directly behind you or you'll end up with a collection of squinting faces in your shot.

8. Take Control

I've been in a number of group photos where the photographer almost lost control of his subjects by not being quick enough but also by not communicating well with their group of subjects. It is important to keep talking to the group, let them know what you want them to do, motivate them to smile, tell them that they look great and communicate how much longer you'll need them for.

Also important is to give your subjects a reason to pose for the photograph. For example at a wedding you might motivate people to pose by saying '((insert name of couple being married here)) have asked me to get some group shots' or at a sporting event 'lets take a group photo to celebrate our win'. When you give people a reason to pose for you you'll find they are much more willing to take a few minutes to pose for you.

Another very useful line to use with group is – '**If you can see the camera it can see you'**. This one is key if you want to be able to see each person's face in the shot.

If there are more photographers than just you then wait until others have finished their shots and then get the attention of the full group otherwise you'll have everyone looking in different directions.

Of course you don't want to be a dictator when posing your group or you could end up with lots of group shots of very angry people. The best photographers know how to get people's attention, communicate what they want but also keep people feeling relaxed and like they are having fun.

9. For large groups

Photo by EssPea

Large groups of people can be very difficult to photograph as even with staggering people and tiering to make the back people higher you can end up being a long way back to fit everyone in.

One solution to this is to find a way to elevate yourself as the photographer. If I'm photographing a wedding and the couple wants one big group shot I'll arrange for a ladder to be present (I've even climbed up onto church roofs) to take a shot looking down on the group. In doing this you can fit a lot more people in and still remain quite close to the group (you end up with a shot of lots of faces in focus and less bodies). It also gives an interesting perspective to your shots – especially if you have a nice wide focal length.

10. Use a Tripod

There are a number of reasons why using a tripod when taking photographs of groups can be useful. Firstly a tripod communicates that you're serious about what you're doing and can help you get their attention (it's amazing what a professional looking set up can make people do). Secondly it gives you as the photographer more freedom to be involved in the creation of the posing of

your subjects. Set your camera up on your tripod so that's ready to take the shot in terms of framing, settings and focus and then it will be ready at an instant when you get the group looking just right to capture the moment.

11. Use an

Photo by Austin Henry

Assistant

If you have a very large group and assistant can be very handy to get the group organized well.

An assistant is also incredibly handy if you are taking multiple group shots (like at a wedding when you're photographing different configurations of a family). In these cases I often ask the couple to provide me with a family or friend member who has a running sheet of the different groups of people to be photographed. I then get this person to ensure we have everyone we need in each shot. Having a family member do this helps to make sure you don't miss anyone out but also is good because the group is familiar with them and will generally respond well when they order them around.

12. Smile

Yes YOU should smile! There's nothing worse than a grumpy stressed out photographer. Have fun and enjoy the process of getting your shots and you'll find the group will too. I usually come home from a wedding which I've photographed with an incredibly sore jaw-line from all the smiling because I find the best way to get the couple and their family to relax and smile is to smile at them. It really does work.

PS:

One more quick tip. Get a little Creative. Check out the shot below which is one of the more unique group photos that I've ever seen!

Photo by weaving major & tractor dan

This post has been updated from its original form – originally posted in June 2006.

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