

How to Focus a Camera

In order to focus a camera, you must first remove the lens cap and turn it on. The lens cap is the black protective disc on the end of your lens that can be removed by pinching either side and gently lifting off. Depending on the brand, your power buttons will most likely be a switch on the top right-hand side of your camera's body. For more recent models, one click is on and the second is for video.

My first camera belonged to the rest of the family. We shared a small stark-white device called a “Flip” (so named for the USB connector that triumphantly popped out of its side) which was eventually marred by permanent black fingerprints the size of a child’s filthy hand. It took blurry photos and grainy videos that couldn’t zoom and autofocused on whatever was in foreground of the frame. My brother and I often borrowed it to film our stop-motion Lego Star Wars movies and we once took it on a ten-minute bike ride to the local YMCA. Of course, the entirety of our footage consisted of pavement whipping by below me, as I couldn’t yet ride without my handlebars.

To adjust how zoomed in your camera is, tightly grip the body of your camera with your right hand and slowly twist the largest part of your lens with your left. Rotating it to the left should make the picture appear closer in your viewfinder, while rotating to the right makes the image appear further away. This effect is created by adjusting the focal length of your lens.

I bought my first real camera from one of my parents for supposedly a tenth of the original price. I paid \$80, so I must assume she was ripped off. A Canon Rebel Series T3 should have only cost up to \$300 new—either that or I really got screwed over. By then I was enrolled

in a High School ‘Visual Communications’ class in my Junior year for an “occupational education credit.” Basically, I got to learn how to use Photoshop and design t-shirts instead of taking whatever the modern equivalent is to Home Ec. This is why I can adjust white balance and frame a photo using the rule of thirds but can’t confidently cook anything besides spaghetti noodles and jarred sauce. Meatballs are out of the question. My teacher that year was called ‘Mr. Zarate’ and had a borderline unhealthy obsession with pop culture references. His lesson plans consisted of exclusively project-based learning. So, every week he’d brief us on a new tutorial that we’d follow by ourselves so we could turn in our work at the end of class. On particularly nice days though, he’d break us off into pairs to wander the school campus armed with cameras and an hour to capture whatever we wanted. My SD card was almost entirely filled with close-up pictures of trash and birds who’d nested in the rafters of the school’s clock tower. Things that didn’t belong. Things we kept at a distance. I zoomed in to draw them closer... to sanctify the fleeting moments before they were gone.

When focusing a camera, never use your LCD display. By placing your eye against the sweaty rubber of the viewfinder, you’ll find that your precision is far superior than the screen’s. Only use the LCD display to adjust your menu settings and to view your photos after they’ve been taken. Similarly, you might be tempted to activate auto-focus on your lens and let the camera decide when the image is sharpest, but manual focus actually provides a quicker and more accurate method of focusing the image. Remember... you’re in charge of the camera. Auto-focus is for the weak.

My uncle taught me to focus a camera. At my cousin’s birthday party, we were sitting on the couch discussing the YouTube channel my brother and I had just started. Working in Pierce

County television for the entirety of his career, my uncle is now the family expert on these sorts of things. Taking my second-hand Canon Rebel Series T3 into his own practiced fingers, he showed us how to “punch in” to the image using a small black button on the back of the camera. This meant that the display would enhance the image to a ridiculously zoomed in version so you could set the focus based on some minute detail, like your subject’s eyes. Together, my brother and I took turns aiming the camera and punching in on our family members until we could confidently count their individual freckles before agreeing that we’d focused the image to satisfaction. You don’t get that kind of precision with auto-focus; I assume that my uncle learned this from our grandfather. Every time I focus a camera, I imagine the words he might have spoken:

As you bring the view finder up to your eye, slowly slide your left hand to the front-most ring of the lens. This is the focus. Holding your breath in reverence of the process, spin the disc in either direction until you go too far past the point of clarity. Don’t worry... you’ll find it again. Tenderly readjust in the other direction until the final moment when everything snaps together in perfect crystal focus. Steading even the smallest tremors in your arms, tense the index finger of your right hand against the shutter and release—stealing a moment of time away from the universe for your own. Until long after the subject is gone.

Fittingly, my only memories of my grandfather are in photographs. He’d been a professional sports photographer for the Tacoma News Tribune before he retired. He died perhaps not young, but too *soon* due to complications from a double lung transplant, but at least they’d given him a few good years. Years later, my grandfather’s career meant two things: my

mom and uncle got to deliver the acceptance speech when he was inducted posthumously into the Pierce County Sports Hall of Fame and that our garage is filled with photo boxes that've been shuffled and scattered between too many homes. When my grandmother moved, dozens of unmarked boxes were distributed out amongst my mother's siblings while we took the lion's share. When *we* moved, we needed an entire U-Haul truck devoted entirely to photo boxes just to heave them onto shelves where they're now the sole reason we can't park a car in the garage. But in the seven years we've sheltered them, I don't think I've seen a single one of those boxes opened (though I'm somewhat tempted myself by the notoriously family-rumored photo of Charles Manson before THAT insanity went down). But besides the negatives and the slides and the originals prints rapidly gathering dust in our garage, a few of his best pictures do hang in our home. He was particularly fond of the Narrows Bridge that's displayed in our downstairs powder room. But the other photo we have hanging in the hall was *not* taken by my grandfather—it couldn't have been. In it, he's smiling, unencumbered by the nasal tubes that will become an integral piece of his daily routine in a few short years. His hair is graying but it's far from white; it will never be. His glasses are rimmed like mine with large lenses and wire-thin frames. I can hear the way they must have clinked against the viewfinder hundreds of times. And around his neck hangs the strap of his camera—momentarily resting from a life of capturing everyone else's memories. I don't know when or where or even by whom it was taken, but I can assure you that the photo is perfectly in focus.