

Don't Be A Bozo

Congratulations! You've just bought a groundbreaking piece of photographic equipment: a digital SLR. You may have graduated from a digital point-and-shoot, a digital "prosumer" like the Sony 717 or Minolta D7i, or maybe you're an experienced film shooter transitioning from a film SLR -- maybe something like the trusty old Canon AE-1, or a full-featured modern AF miracle like the EOS-30/Elan-7.

Your expectations are high, and you're excited. You've seen the vibrant, sharp, punchy images SLR Talk users have posted on their websites, or Phil has included in his review. You're hot to trot. You grab your camera, click on a lens, snap in a CF card, charge up the battery, power up, and pulse racing you shoot a few frames of your significant other, cat, dog, kid, or stereo equipment, and zap them onto your computer.

And lo and behold, there's something not quite right. The pictures are dull, or orange, or blue, or soft, or the highlights are blown. They don't match up to what you're used to from your digicam, your slides, or the stuff you've seen on the web.

This is a critical moment, dear reader. Most of us have been there. What you do next could determine your photographic future. It could be the difference between acquiring a fantastic new pursuit or extending an existing one in entirely new directions, or becoming disappointed, disgruntled, and maybe giving up photography altogether.

You have basically two choices.

The left-hand path is easy to take. It's not your fault. It must be the stupid camera. Or the cheap-o lens. The AF must be faulty. Phil's a paid corporate stooge hyping up an inferior product. DSLR's are overrated. So you fire off an embittered message on 300D Talk, march back to the store, and either (a) return the camera, get your money back, and resolve never to listen to people who think DSLR's are worth a damn, or (b) exchange the camera for another unit, since yours must obviously be defective, or (c) exchange the camera and/or lens for the next better and more expensive model. If (b) or (c), you're almost certainly going to return to square one, and you'll be back at the store the next day, or the day after that, and as likely as not end up choosing (a).

Now, before we go any further, let's get one thing straight. There **are** defective, malfunctioning, or miscalibrated cameras and lenses in circulation. If you happened to get one, you have a real issue that really needs to be sorted out. However, the sad truth is that you need a certain amount of knowledge to be able to test your camera system to determine this. It's not just shooting a ruler at an angle. The AF and exposure systems are more complicated than you may think.

The right-hand path is harder. It requires you to draw a deep breath, sit down, relax, and read the manual through. Then read the parts again that concern what you're trying to do. Then read those parts more time, this time trying out each of the things described in it. Then go out and shoot pictures with the camera, in the way described in the manual. And after this, if the pictures **still** come out orange, soft, dull, flat, blown, or blurred, there's just a possibility that you misunderstood something. There's always a reason a picture turned out the way it did, even if the reason is a defective camera. It's up to you to figure out the reason, and find a solution.

It's at this point that you should turn to the forum. At this point, your chances of getting help and *understanding* the help are the best. Write "Hey guys, I got a 300D, and I have this problem with my photos. The manual says to do this, that, and the other, so I tried them, and got these results. What am I missing?" You're guaranteed to get lots of informed tips, and your background reading has given you the knowledge to understand what's going on. If there *is* something wrong with your camera, someone will point it out. "Hmmm. You said you used the center AF point only, centered it on the subject's face, half-pressed until you got the focus confirmation light, and the focus point is clearly in front of her face. Looks like it happened with all of these shots. You know, you *might* have a problem with the AF calibration on the lens or the body. Maybe you should try this, that, and the other?"

Read this far? Good. 'Cause here are the good news: it's not rocket science. The 300D is an easy-to-use camera. The program modes come as close to guaranteeing that your pictures won't go disastrously wrong *if* you use them like the manual says you should use them. If you're a point-and-shooter, you owe it to yourself to be a *good* point-and-shooter. If you're a control freak, you owe it to yourself to learn about proper digital exposure technique (it's very different from the Zone System!) and stuff like white balancing, sRGB and Adobe RGB, when to use and not to use RAW. However, in either case, don't try to master it all at once. Take it one mode or one characteristic at a time.

Above all, relax, and enjoy taking those pictures. If after two weeks of intensive shooting, consulting the manual, and asking for advice, you still feel there's something wrong, there probably is. However, the odds are that your camera is fine, and very soon you'll be producing pictures that'll make you happy: either superb snapshot and album pictures, or clarity beyond your expectations. But there *is* a learning curve. A DSLR takes more to master than a film or digital point-and-shoot... and if you're an experienced shooter, you will have to re-learn some of the basics. Don't be a bozo. Take the right-hand path. Give it your best shot. You'll almost certainly be happy with your choice.

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