

Lens Lore for Newbies

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Canon's Digital Rebel promises to be a great camera and a fantastic bargain. It's drawing a lot of people into the dSLR arena who have so far only been using digital point-and-shoots, or 35 mm film. Many are migrating from other lens systems, or have never had to think seriously about lens choice before. A 75+ lens catalogue and a new "format" takes a while to get a handle on. I've seen a lot of questions and some misconceptions about the subject... so here's my perspective on it.

- Canon and Sigma and Nikon and Olympus and Zeiss and the rest make some fantastic lenses. They also make some duds. The brand name printed on the barrel doesn't tell you a whole lot about the image quality, and neither does the price, much of the time.
- Image Stabilization (IS) is the best thing since sliced bread, but only if you learn to use it to your advantage. It won't stop your subject from moving. It won't magically stop your camera shake and give you perfectly sharp images, either... but it goes a long way to help.
- Most lenses are at their best (sharpest, best contrast, least CA and other undesirables) around f/8. In fact, a cheapo lens at f/8 could very well make better pictures than a great lens wide-open. Having IS (like in the 28-135/3.5-5.6IS and the 75-300/4-5.6IS) can help you get to f/8, and so can the exceptional high ISO performance in the Canon DSLR's.
- If you're coming from a digital P&S, the large sensor means very narrow depth of field. You don't need the f/2 or f/2.8 lens you're used to; shoot a tight portrait, and you can throw the background out of focus at f/5.6 or even f/8.
- Don't rule out primes! They cost less than zooms, usually have brighter apertures, they weigh a lot less, and almost all primes are going to be sharper than the zooms in their range. At \$60 to \$75, the superb 50/1.8 is a must for any Rebel D owner; it's sharper and faster than the best and most expensive L zooms.
- Manual focus! This wasn't really possible with the Olympus 2100 I stepped up to my D60 from, but nowadays MF works in a pinch when AF can't keep up. The picture below is a good example; AF was too slow and doesn't track flying insects terribly well, so I used MF instead.
- Finally, a lot of the people who post on DPReview and other on-line forums have some pretty extreme uses and needs for their gear. A lot of this is pretty unique, and doesn't apply to everyone, or even most people. You don't need thousands of dollars worth of glass to be happy.

If you're new to SLR photography, you're in for a treat. It's enormously rewarding, but also quite a challenge. There's a lot of new things to learn: don't be terribly disappointed if you won't get the results you hoped for the minute you unpack the camera and start shooting. Stick with it, ask questions, and above all *experiment!* Don't try to master everything at once: leave the camera in JPG, start with the automatic modes, and take control gradually, one thing at a time. Niceties like Adobe RGB, RAW, manual metering, bracketing, and manual white balancing can wait.

Above all, enjoy the ride -- and take a lot of pictures.



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