

Magic bullets for B&W beginners

In this article, I am going to lay out a camera, lens, exposure, film, developing, paper and printing regimen that will speed you on your way to achieving print *Nirvana*.

Camera:

A good one that works, and that feels at home. Learn how it works, and keep clean and in good working order. Find out what CLA means.

Lens:

The best one(s) you can afford. Lenses are a place where money usually pays dividends. Don't get too hung up though, they can't make you a great photographer. Be a photographer with good gear, not a gear head.

Exposure:

If you can, bracket. If you can't, overexpose just a bit. If you are just starting out, shoot a whole series of shots of the same thing in the same light across all the stops, just to see. Realize there is no correct exposure, merely choices that have consequences.

Film:

Pick a film, maybe two if you need high and low speed, and don't shoot anything else until you can speak about those emulsions with the competence that can only be earned from experience and a multitude of scenarios.

Developing:

If you are trying to read Ansel Adams' *The Negative* and it isn't making any sense, put it down for a month. Repeat, until it makes sense. Pick a readily available developer that isn't exotic. Follow a conventional developing regimen. In the beginning, exotic developers, stand developing, etc. are an utter waste of your time, and you won't learn squat. In developing do everything exactly the same each time. If you think something can be better, *change one thing at a time and one thing only* and keep notes, otherwise you are just flailing. An intimate understanding of cause and effect is the basis of the technical part of photographic mastery.

Paper:

Sealed name brand paper that is in date, and has been stored correctly. You won't know if you are off or if paper is off when you are just starting out. Film and paper are lousy places to cut corners until you have the skills to evaluate that great open box bargain you bought out of a car trunk in the middle of the summer.

Printing:

Much the same as developing. Run a safe light check. Read the last sentence again. If you have lousy negs, go make some good ones. Beyond learning what a crappy neg is, struggling to print a really bad one won't teach you much in the beginning. Later, when you are rocking you can go back and print those difficult negs. At that point they may not be difficult at all.

Summation:

There is no camera, no lens, no film, no developer, no kind of developing, no paper, and no printing method that will make your work sing in the beginning. All the really cool stuff on [APUG](#) about developers, stand developing, pre-flashing, split grade printing, yada yada, is great reading, but can be usefully applied and evaluated only by the photographers here that have the discipline, consistency, and experience that allows the tiny little differences these things offer find a useful place in the tool set.

The magic bullet for beginners is consistency with well established processes, and careful and methodical observation of cause and effect.

Your creativity will truly be stifled if you do something that just rocks, but you don't know what you did. Don't be a someone with a thousand monkeys with typewriters hoping that one of them writes MacBeth.

The other thing is to have fun.

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PDF formatting by a fellow member of the forum.

This is for the benefit of every beginner, everywhere. Please feel free to use it in any way that might help new film photographers.