

Smartphone Photography Guide



Smartphone Photography 101 - The Ultimate Guide to Smartphone Photography

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When it comes to our smartphone photography, our general philosophy is to see the camera's limitations as its advantages.

Here's what I mean.

Camera phones are not nearly as powerful DSLRs. They're not even as powerful as some point-and-shoots out there. For the most part, they lack the manual controls or the hardware you need to say, create a dreamily shallow depth of field, get a crisp shot of someone in motion, or produce a shot in low light that's not peppered with noise.

Here's the good news: When you're limited technically, you have to push yourself in other ways to make a shot work. And, as you'll soon see, in pushing yourself to get great shots from your camera phone, you'll be developing fundamental skills – some of the nuts and bolts of great photography!

So let's dive into it, and learn how to take compelling shots with your smartphone camera. Once we've got the basics down, we'll hook you up with some ideas of what to photograph, to help you dive right into smartphone photography.

Know Your Camera

First things first: Get to know your camera. Test out its various modes (panorama, video, etc) in different conditions – like low light, direct sun, and when your subject is moving – to see what the different modes excel at and where they fall a little short.

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For example, my phone has both a standard mode, where I can manually adjust my exposure, and an [high dynamic range \(HDR\) mode](#), that produces a single shot from several images taken at different exposures.

My default is to shoot on HDR, as the resulting shot looks more true to life in its gradation of light to dark tones and its color (counterintuitive, but there we are!). I switch over to the standard mode whenever I need to seriously increase or decrease the exposure, or in low light conditions (where the HDR mode struggles to focus). My camera also has a lens blur function that allows me to mimic a shallow depth of field, but it's a bit clunky so I don't use it much.

Knowing how your camera's different modes work will help you have more control over the final look of your shots. All it takes is a little bit of practice!

And don't forget that you can download 3rd party camera apps that can give you additional functionality.

Nail Your Composition

Spend a bit of time on Instagram, and you'll discover that photographers with big followings have something in common, whether they photograph fashion, families, wildlife or waterfalls. That common feature: A great compositional style.

What is composition, you ask? In essence, when you compose a shot, you're choosing how to arrange the visual elements in your frame – elements like lines, shapes, colors and light. The resulting arrangement is your composition.

Composition is the placement or arrangement of visual elements or ingredients in a work of art, as distinct from the subject of a work."

Wikipedia

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Your composition impacts not only the look of your image – like whether it feels static or dynamic – but also how your viewer thinks and feels about it. A shot of a several pedestrians crossing a street may not catch your eye, but a shot of a single pedestrian could convey a range of feelings or ideas, from loneliness to adventure.

With smartphone photography, composition is key because, for the most part, everything in your frame will be in focus. You can't adjust your aperture to blur out all the background details, so you have to work a bit harder to make sure the elements in your frame make for a great shot that communicates your message.



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Plus, chances are that if you're posting to Instagram, you're going to be doing the bulk of your editing with a not-so-powerful editing app, rather than Lightroom or Photoshop. You have to get it right in-camera – your app's not going to save you from bigger mistakes!

Here are a few things we look for when we compose photos with our smartphones:

light

Light can have a big impact on the look and feel of your images. Imagine the same scene lit by the soft golden light of sunrise versus the harsh, shadow-creating light of midday.

Light can also help direct attention. We tend to look first at things that are brightly lit, or lit in way that differs dramatically from the rest of the scene.

Light can change the color of your shot, too! For example, daylight tends to be neutral or slightly blue, sunrise and sunset light tends to be warm, and the light before sunrise and after sunset is much more blue. Because cameras don't adjust for changes in the color of light as well as our eyes do, these colors can show up quite strongly in your photos.

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Above: After sunset, natural light tends to have a blue cast. My eyes knew that the snow was white, but my smartphone camera registered it as super-blue – no editing applied!

Keep the different effects of light in mind as you shoot, and look for light that enhances your message. If you don't like the effect a light source is having on your image, change it up – turn off an overhead light and shoot only with window light, come back to your shot at sunset instead of midday, or reposition yourself (or your subject) until the light falls where you want it to.

LINES

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Lines are hugely powerful elements! See, our eyes love a good line. Whether it's wavy, straight or curved or implied (like a line created by loosely spaced people), our eyes will latch onto the line and follow it to the end.

Here's what that means for your photos: If you want your viewer to look at your subject, place them at the end of a line (or a series of lines, for even more attention-directing power!).



Above: The diagonal lines of the staircase are a magnet for your eye! Place your subject at the end of those lines, and your viewer is sure to see them!

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There are all kinds of lines out there, and they do different things for our photos. Horizontal and vertical lines tend to feel static, diagonal lines tend to feel dynamic, and wavy or curved lines are both dynamic and a little gentler. If you want to create a particular feeling in a shot, incorporate the types of lines that enhance that feeling!



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Above: In the first image, the diagonal lines of the trees and picnic table give the shot a more dynamic feel. In the second image, when those lines are straight, the shot feels much more static.

Space

Look at the two photos below. Which photo makes the subject stand out more? It's the one with all the empty space!

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Above: Against a stark blue background, the branches and leaves of the tree really grab your attention. In the second shot, it's not as clear where you're supposed to look first.

When you surround your subject with empty space – or negative space, as photographers call it – it simplifies your frame. There are fewer things to distract from your subject, so that subject really pops.

The sky makes for great negative space, but look for non-distracting space elsewhere too – in architecture or even nature! Just make sure there aren't any major elements (like bursts of color or major lines) that draw your eye away.

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Above: There are tons of elements at play in the shot above, and no real negative space. If we dropped a subject in there – like a person – all of those elements would likely distract. But, on its own, it's an interesting shot full of details!

And sometimes, you may want no negative space at all! An image that's purposefully brimming with elements can be interesting too!

frames

Like empty space, frames can help put the focus on your subject. They seem to shout out: Hey look! This thing here is so important that it gets its own frame!

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Above: Placing your subject in a frame – in this case a literal one (the doorframe) – is a great way to draw attention to them!

Frames have the bonus feature of adding cool visual interest to your shot. Get creative with your frames, finding them in trees, architectural features – you can even make frames with your hands!

color

Color can play a huge role in your images!

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Just think about it! Color can change the mood of your scene: an image filled with rainbow shades will feel a lot different than one with muted tones, and an image in color will feel different than that same image converted to black and white.

Color can also direct your viewers attention: a pop of color that differs from the rest of the tones in your scene is going to stand out.



Above: Even though the texture is pretty similar across the frame, your eyes can't help but jump to the bright pop of red.

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So pay close attention to the colors in your scene. Do they enhance your message, or conflict with it? Do they direct attention to your subject, or distract from it? If the colors aren't working, and you don't intend to convert to black and white, consider recomposing!

INSTAGRAM TIP: COLOR

Some Instagrammers take their consideration of color a step further by paying attention to how the colors mesh across different photos in their gallery. You'll find people who chase particular shades, and some whose galleries seem to change color over time. It takes work and restraint to post only photos that fit within a color scheme, but it's a great way to push yourself to get out and look for a shot!

REFLECTIONS & Shadows

Reflections and shadows are great elements to play with in your photos!

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Above: In this photograph of a puddle (flipped upside down), the reflection of the trees serves as the subject and allows the viewer to imagine the scene that exists outside of the frame.

An interesting reflection or shadow can be a subject in its own right. It can also be used to suggest that space exists beyond the frame, adding intrigue to your image.

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Above: In the first photo, strong shadows create lines that frame the napping cat. In the second, my reflection forms part of the subject (along with my rubber boots), while the reflection of the trees serves as a frame.

Plus, reflections and shadows can create other elements like lines or frames – elements that can be used to direct your viewers' attention to a particular part of your scene. Give it a try!

Quick tips for better smartphone compositions

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- **Straighten up:** When a line that should be straight – like the horizon – looks askew in a photo, it can be distracting. So unless you purposefully want a line to be askew, take extra care to get your lines straight. Enabling the gridlines on your camera makes this a lot easier!
- **Get your subject out of the center:** Placing your subject in the center of your frame can get a little boring after a while. Give the rule of thirds a try: Imagine your frame is divided into a 3x3 grid, and place your subject along one of the resulting gridlines or where two gridlines intersect.
- **Leave a little room at the edges:** When your subject is pressed up right against the edge of your frame, it can be a little uncomfortable to look at. Give it some breathing room by leaving some space between it and the edge of the frame. (And of course, break with this idea entirely if it doesn't suit your intended effect!)
- **Check your corners:** Before you snap your shot, do a quick check of all four corners of your frame. Is there anything there that'll distract from your subject (like a pop of color or a line)? If so, consider recomposing to eliminate distractions.

learn the secrets of great photos

The best ways to improve your photos is to build composition skills. Our photo-packed eBook, *Incredibly Important Composition Skills* will give you the knowledge and techniques you need to be a composition master!

Use the Limitations for Stylistic Effect

shutter speed

Sometimes, your phone is going to reduce your shutter speed to let more light in. And that means, anything that's moving may end up being blurry.

So take advantage of it! Purposefully create images that capture with blurry elements – they can lend your photos a more dynamic feeling. In some cases, they can even result in some pretty cool, abstract-looking shots.

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Above: To combat the low light conditions of the restaurant, my phone automatically selected a low shutter speed. As a result, the waitress walking through the shot ended up blurry. And that was great – it better conveyed the bustling nature of the place!

AUTOfocus

While we've found the autofocus on our phones to be pretty good, it's not perfect – sometimes, it misses the focus altogether. Use that! The resulting blurry shots may look a bit like impressionist paintings. Kinda cool!

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Above: To be fair to my phone, I was taking this shot while I was on a moving bicycle, and my subject was moving too. The camera struggled to find focus, but the blurry result is kind of cool!

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Dynamic range

If you're used to shooting with a DSLR or other advanced camera, you'll quickly learn that your phone can't capture the same dynamic range – the range of tones between the lightest and darkest point in your scene. But that's ok! Darker darks can add more mystery to your photo, and blown highlights can look ethereal.



And if you absolutely need to capture more dynamic range, try shooting on your phone's HDR mode (if it has one), or leave your phone in your pocket and switch back to your more advanced camera.

What to Photograph: A Few Ideas

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Even with the technical limitations of a smartphone camera, there's still a huge amount of choice when it comes to deciding what to photograph. If you're not sure where to start, here are a few basic ideas to help get you in the smartphone photography mindset. Don't feel like you have to do all (or any!) of these. Use them as a starting point to get your own ideas flowing. Pretty soon, you'll find your (smartphone photo) voice!

Daily Life

One of the big trends with photo-sharing services – especially Instagram – is to use the service as a visual diary or journal. That means that instead of just sharing your commercial work or your holiday snaps, you use photography to give people a look into your everyday life – what you're eating, where you're going, who you're hanging out with, little details in your everyday environment that catch your eye.

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There's even a dedicated hashtag – #widiw or "What I'm Doing Now" – that some Instagrammers use to show their followers what they're up to at that very moment (typically at the request of another user who's asked them to share!).

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It may seem a little silly at first, to photograph such small things. But in our experience, looking for photo-worthy moments in everyday life makes us better photographers in the long run because [it forces us to practice seeing](#). Plus, we have to admit, it's awfully nice to be able to scroll through our shots and have a visual record of moments we might otherwise forget!

Vacations & Adventures

There are plenty of reasons to take photos on your next vacation or adventure: You'll be doing cool things that you'll want to remember, you'll be visually inspired by a change of scenery, you'll have more time for it.

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But chances are, if you're like us, you'll want to capture most of those things on one of the best cameras you have – the memories you create when you're travelling are special ones and you want to do them justice!

So, when we travel, do we let our smartphone camera take a break? Nope, no sir, no ma'am! Let me tell you why.



Travelling is great for a ton of reasons (you can read some of them over [here](#)). And one of the big ones for us is that it helps us build relationships – not just with folks we meet along the way, but also with family, friends and friends-to-be scattered across the world. And part of the reason we can build those relationships is because we stay connected – even just a little bit – while we're away.

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See, by sharing photos of your travels while you're travelling, you keep your loved ones up to date. You give your friends the chance to enjoy your adventures and give you travel tips of their own. And if you drop the local hashtags on your shots, you give locals and other travellers in the area the opportunity to engage with you. Scroll through the photos associated with those hashtags, and you'll find out what cool things other people in the area are doing – instant travel guide!



Above: Before we visited Alberta's Icefields Parkway, we'd seen tons of photos of it on Instagram. When we came across a particularly stunning shot, we made a note of its location and plans to check the place out. The photo of the canoes above was taken at one of those spots!

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Before we had smartphones, we all tried to keep up with blogging while we were away from home, but we struggled with it. The process of uploading, editing, exporting and posting our images ate into time we felt we should be using to experience and photograph our surroundings.

Now, with smartphones and sharing services, we can take a photo and have it online, edited, with a caption, in a minute or two. Plus, we get all those bonus benefits of plugging into an online community that just doesn't exist with a standalone blog.

So for us, when it comes to photographing our travels, we take a two-pronged approach: We shoot with our DSLR as much as we can, saving the bulk of the editing and sharing for when we get home. But when we come across a scene we want to share immediately, we shoot it with our phone too. (Lauren and Rob have a DSLR and point-and-shoot equipped with [near field communication](#), so they can easily share shots from those cameras via Instagram as well.)

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Above: While flying at an altitude where large electronics had to be tucked away, I was able to grab this shot with my smartphone.

And for times when we can't pull our more expensive gear out – like when it's at risk of getting damaged or the situation prohibits proper cameras – we use our phones exclusively and are glad for it! A quick example: Say you're interested in snapping some underwater shots on your next trip but can't bear to shell out for an underwater housing unit for your DSLR – a much more affordable waterproof case for your smartphone can make it possible!

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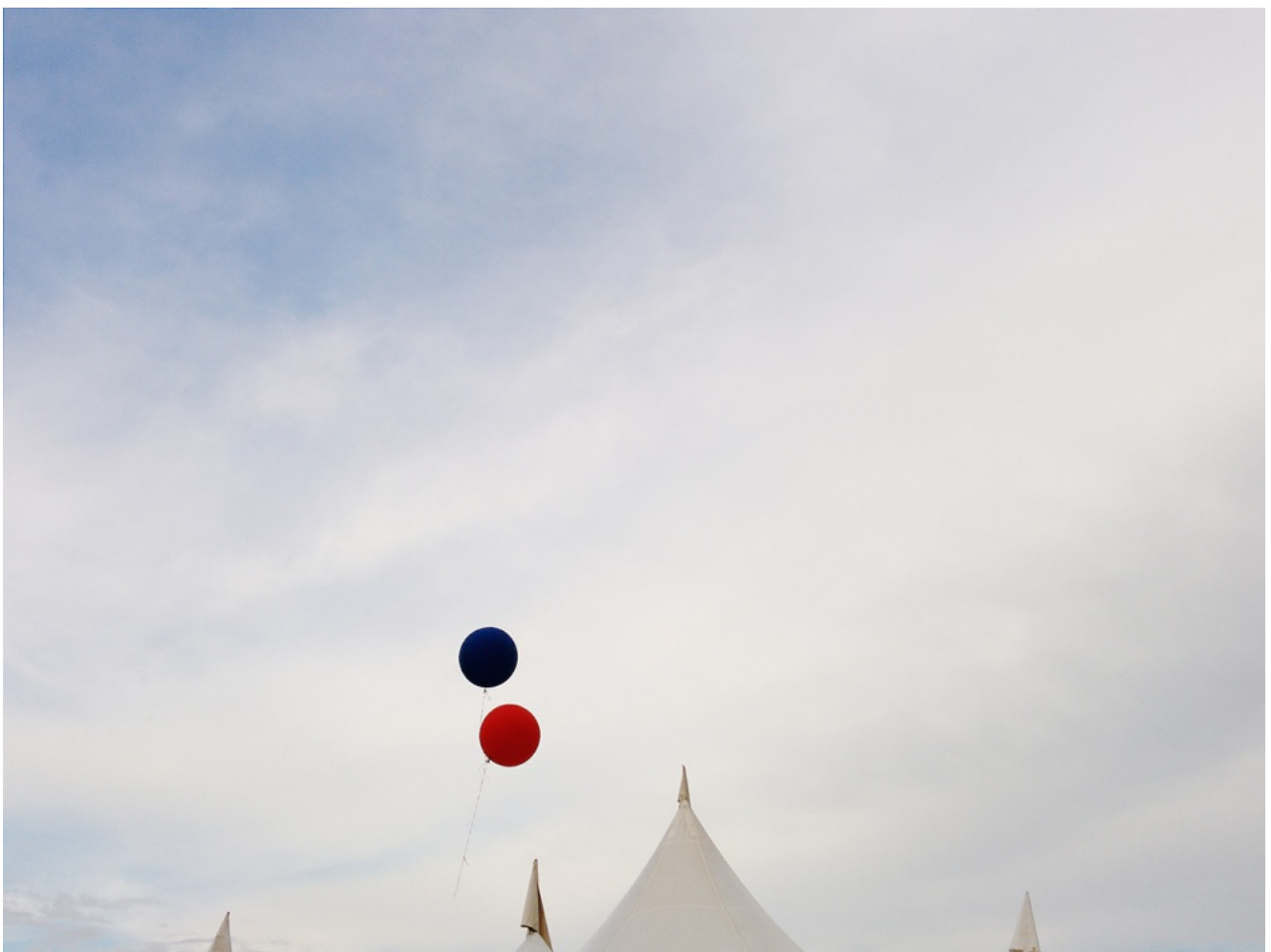
Above: I recently went cross-country skiing for the first time in ages. My skiing partner predicted (correctly) that we'd do a lot of falling, and so I left my DSLR at home and stuck to my phone's camera.

We've recorded some great sights that would have otherwise gone unrecorded, if not for our trusty smartphones!

Events

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Nowadays, when you attend an event there's a good chance that it will have its own hashtag. Here's the idea: If you share anything on social media about the event – a Twitter tweet, a Facebook post, an Instagram photo – you can tag it with the custom hashtag, so that other social media-using attendees can get your take on the event. It's a fun way to connect with other people who are into similar things as you, and to get more eyes on your work!



While you can share and hashtag images of the event that you took with your DSLR, the general trend with event-specific hashtags is to post phone shots. And in cases where you don't want to be lugging a heavy (and more valuable) camera around – say at a rowdy music festival – your phone camera may be perfect for the job.

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Both shots in this section were taken at the 2014 Edmonton Folk Music Festival using my smartphone camera. By shooting only with my phone over the course of the weekend festival, I sacrificed image quality (especially on the night shot), but saved myself from lugging around and worrying about my DSLR.

Watch for event-specific hashtags popping up at weddings, music festivals, fundraisers, workshops and even plain old parties. And if you're hosting an event of your own and expect your attendees to be social media types, hook them up with a unique hashtag they can use when they share photos of the festivities!

People & Pets

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If you're a professional photographer or an avid hobbyist, chances are that you've taken some shots of your family and friends with your best camera. Chances are, too, that they may be some of your favourite images because they capture the people in your life that are most important to you.

But unless you're one of those admirable, dedicated folks who always has that camera on them all the time, at the ready, you're likely not taking as many photos of people as you like. Especially of those candid moments, where there wasn't a specific reason to tote your bulkier gear along – like a quick trip to the park or an impromptu soccer game.



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So make an effort with your smartphone instead. It is your phone after all, so you probably have it with you on all of those occasions anyway! The photos may not be technically as strong as they would be if you used your DSLR but – and here's the important part – they will be there. Pull out your phone, snap the shot, and the memory is preserved.



We humans are inquisitive creatures. We love getting a look into someone else's life – and that means not only seeing what you do and what you like, but also seeing who you are and who you share all of that with. So, if you're up for it, share the smartphone photos you capture of your friends, family and pets – and of yourself too!

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We personally gravitate towards candid shots and save the more creative stuff for our DSLRs, but there are tons of great photographers creating impressive portraits of people and animals with their smartphones.

Whole communities dedicated to sharing smartphone portraits have sprung up on social-sharing sites. You can easily find them by looking at photos submitted under the hashtag #portraits, and seeing what other portrait-related hashtags people have added to their shots. You'll be sure to walk away with tons of ideas on how you can use your smartphone to capture great images of people and animals.

Street photography

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Sometimes, as a photographer, your goal is to go unseen by the world around you and capture a moment that's unspoiled by your presence. That's really the heart of street photography!

Street photography is photography that features the human condition within public places and does not necessitate the presence of a street or even the urban environment."

Wikipedia

But with a camera around your neck, it can be hard to blend in, especially nowadays when there are more photographers out there. The average person on the street may be more attuned to the photographer's presence and more likely to change their behaviour as a result (for example, by politely stepping out of your shot).

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Above: With this shot, I could have got away with using my DSLR, but using my smartphone made me a little less conspicuous.

While we wait for Google to invent an invisibility cloak, we have to find other ways to blend in.

Enter: The smartphone. Because most of us have them – and a lot of us have them out, all the time – people may not take much notice when you use it as a camera. It doesn't guarantee invisibility, of course, but it can help to take some of the pressure off the folks around you, making you more able to capture that unspoiled scene. And because it's light and easy to wield, it may also allow you to take shots in situations where a larger camera just wouldn't work.

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Above: When I took this photo, I was packed into a busy (and moving!) subway car and had to keep one hand on the subway handrail. With a larger camera, I might not have been able to compose the image. I might have also drawn too much attention to myself and inadvertently spoiled the moment!

There are a few things to think about here.

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First up, respect: Just because you can take a shot with your phone doesn't mean you should. It's your job to think about how your photo can affect the person you're photographing, especially if you intend to share it. If you're planning to get into street photography, it's not a bad idea to know the laws with respect to photography and image sharing in the place where you live. We say that not to deter you from taking photos – street photography can be incredibly important, not to mention that it's lots of fun – but just as a friendly heads up!

Second, quality: Though some smartphone cameras offer impressive quality, they're still not on par with DSLRs, and even some pocket-sized point-and-shoots. If you intend to print your work, you may want to weigh the invisibility benefits against the quality costs. You may find you're better off working with a proper camera in some cases.

Link-throughs

If you host a blog or another kind of website, smartphone photography and social sharing sites can help you engage an existing audience, and build a new audience, for your work!

See, when you post an image to a social sharing site, so long as you have an open profile, pretty much anyone on that site can find it. And with the help of some thoughtful hashtagging, you can increase the chance that it gets in front of folks who will like what you're doing.

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Above: A smartphone photo of homemade popsicles, shared on Instagram to direct people to the food blog where the recipes were published.

So whenever you publish a great new blog post, or add new images to your portfolio, consider sharing a relevant image on a social sharing site like Instagram to give folks a heads up. Make sure you provide them with a link to your work, too!

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The general rule of thumb here is to make sure your image meshes with the style of the social sharing site. For Instagram, that generally means sharing a photo snapped with your smartphone. If you can, then, make a habit of grabbing a few shots of your work on your phone, for sharing purposes.

There's a fine line between giving eager readers a heads up and spamming people, so keep a close eye on how people respond to your images.

Art Projects

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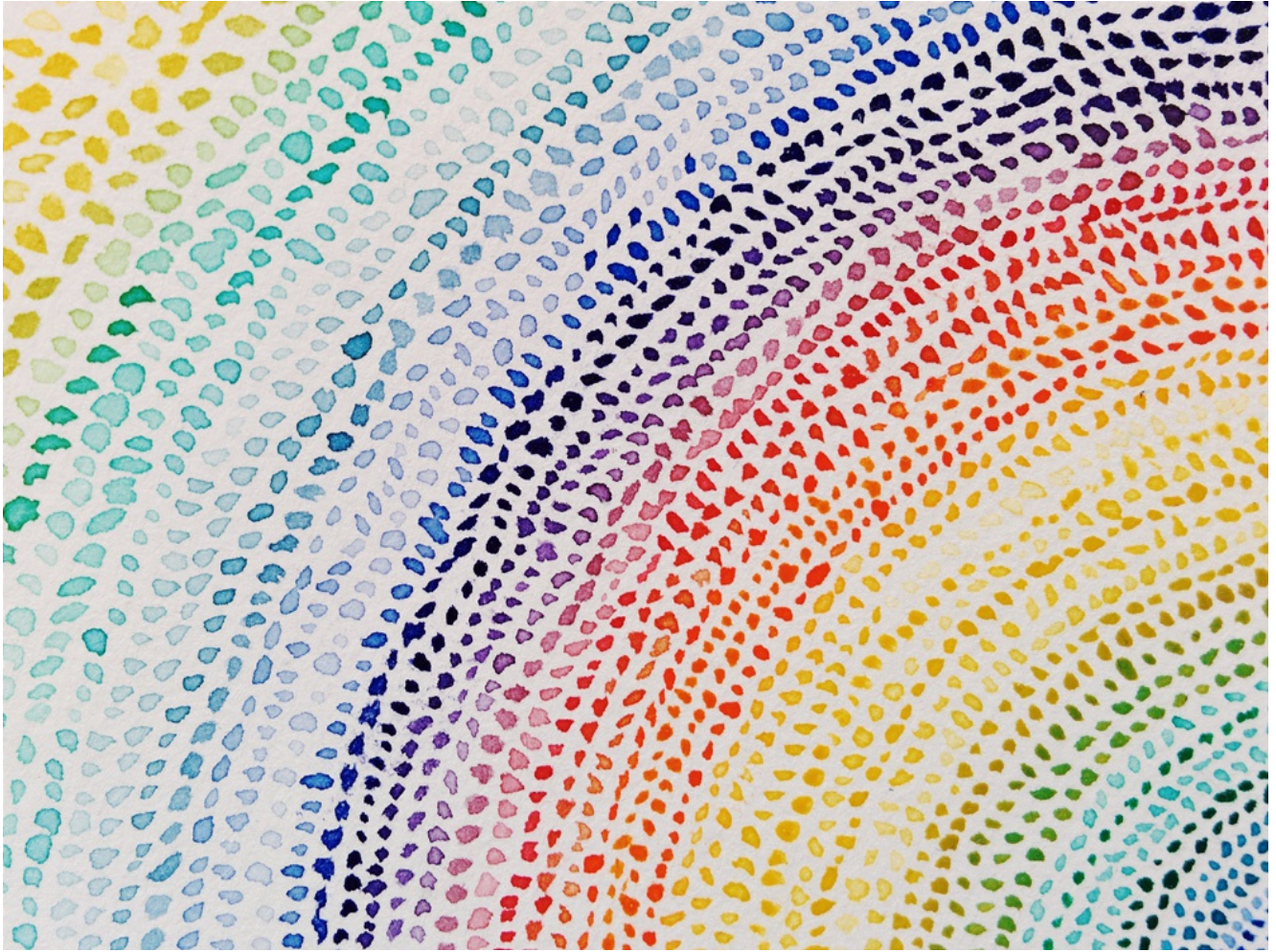
While we've talked so far about sharing photos in their own right, these days more and more people are using photography – and image-sharing sites – to share their non-photographic artwork. This is especially true of sites like Instagram and Tumblr (the latter of which isn't specifically geared towards photos). In our own Instagramming experience, we've come across drawings, paintings, paper art, collages built from flowers, famous paintings rendered in Playdough (yep, really!) – all snapped and shared with the artist's smartphone!



Above: A smartphone shot of a paper parrot – part of a series of paper animals I've been sharing on my Instagram account.

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If you have non-photo art you want to share, consider posting shots of it alongside your photography, or create a totally new account dedicated to your craft!



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Above: A shot of a finished watercolour painting, and a behind-the-scenes look at a similar project, both taken with my smartphone camera.

While it's great to show your audience the finished product, people really enjoy getting a glimpse of the behind-the-scenes action too! Consider zooming out every now and then, to compose a photo that captures your process (or your mess!). It's a great way to engage your audience with your art, and allows you to keep with the spirit of sharing service that's more geared towards photography.

Out of the Box Ideas

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If you're looking for ways to make your photography stand out – whether you're shooting with your smartphone or a different camera – check out awesome eBook, [The Creativity Field Guide](#). Learn a bit more about it in the box below, then [head this way](#) for the full details and to grab a copy for yourself!