

LIGHT STALKING

QUICK GUIDES

***Black and White
Landscapes***

How to Capture a Proper Tonal Range

The art of black and white landscapes is both a timeless and dramatic way to view the world. Instead of focusing on color, you can create images based strictly on light and tonal range – this allows you to view the gradual (or not so gradual) changes in your image and see the “soul” of a photograph without distractions.

Since you can't really see the world in black and white, there are several important things to know before you set out on your next landscape photo shoot to ensure that you create the perfect black and white image.

1. CHANGE YOUR VISION

Shooting successful black and white landscapes require that you change the way you look through your viewfinder – that is, you need to start viewing in tones rather than color. The tonal range of your landscape is basically the amount of highlights, shadows, and every shade of grey in between; highlights are your bright whites, shadows are your dark blacks, and midtones will be any combination of the two.

In [mrpunto](#)'s image to the right, you can see that there is a full tonal range throughout the entire image, with the darkest shadows being the rocks and the brightest whites within the clouds. The grey-ish tones in the water and the sky are your midtones.

When you look at your landscape, envision it as a black and white image – for example, the shadows of a tree will be your darkest areas while sun reflections (or the sun itself) will be your highlights. This can be a bit difficult at first, but you'll soon be able to recognize how your scene will look when desaturated and compose your shot accurately.

EXERCISE: VIEWING IN BLACK AND WHITE

Before setting out to shoot a black and white landscape, look at a color photo and try to guess what parts of your image will be highlights, shadows, and midtones. It may help to print it out and circle the areas that you think will be brightest and darkest.

Once you've completed that, convert the image to black and white on your computer and see how well you did. What colors were lighter than others? Did you make any incorrect predictions?

This is a good exercise to help you start viewing your world in black and white, and will also guide you to make correct predictions in the field.



Photo by mrpunto

2. USE THE HISTOGRAM

The histogram is your best friend when shooting black and white images as you can instantly see the level of highlights and shadows present in your photograph. We have a detailed explanation of [how to read your histogram](#) if you're not familiar with using it to your advantage.

In short, a histogram with a spread from left to right will be a dramatic black and white image – this indicates that a full tonal range was captured and will tell you the percentage of each tone. The example to the upper right has the darkest blacks and brightest whites present without being over/underexposed.

However, a histogram with the tones gathered in the middle will provide you with a low-contrast image, like the one to the bottom right.

Neither histogram is better than the other in this respect – it depends entirely on the kind of scene you're going for.

A bit of “chimping” (when you check your LCD screen after every shot) may be needed to get the results you want as what you see in the field can change dramatically once you upload it to your computer – there is no better way to evaluate what your black and white photo will look like until you read your histogram.



Photo by Maurice Polizio



Photo by Collin Key

3. COMPOSING YOUR BLACK AND WHITE LANDSCAPE

While you should approach a black and white landscape as you would normally in regards to composition, there are a few things to be aware of which may affect how you compose your shot.

Since you're dealing strictly with tones now, you should try to use that to your advantage when choosing a specific subject (if you have one) – this is especially important with foreground interest. Instead of relying on color to separate your subject, focus on the tones to create a dramatic photograph – as seen to the top right where the darkness of the trees is used to contrast with the white environment.

You can also compose your image to follow the light rather than the context of your landscape. Sunrise/sunset images are fantastic subjects for this as the low-angle can create intricate paths of light throughout your scene. In the image to the bottom right, one of the most attractive aspects are the fluid shadow patterns over the snowy landscape.

Also notice here how the dark tree contrasts well with the white ground and light grey sky – this is another fantastic example of using the tonal range to separate the subject from your surroundings.



Photo by Pim van den Heuvel



Photo by Jenny Downing

4. DODGING AND BURNING

Ansel Adams, a pioneer in black and white landscape photography, was infamous for his usage of dodging and burning to not only increase the tonal range of his landscapes, but to direct the attention of his images – in other words, where he wanted the eyes to be drawn to. This darkroom technique is often used in digital photography, and we have our own tutorial on it [right here](#).

ADDITIONAL TIPS:

- Explore the art of infrared photography – it can create a stunning high-contrast image to a traditionally bland scene. [Click here](#) to view a wonderful collection of infrared photographs.
- Snow is a fantastic subject to photograph as a black and white image, and the winter landscape can offer many beautiful scenes. Instead of hunkering down until the spring, explore the starkness of the winter landscape and use snow to add some contrast and interest to your photographs.
- Clouds can really transform a black and white image – especially when using infrared to darken the tones of the sky. Pay attention to your cloud formations as that can be as important to your image as the subject itself.
- While I'm on the subject of clouds – long exposure photography with fast-moving clouds can give you a smooth, dream-like quality to your images with soft and gradual transitions in the sky. Alternatively, it can provide harsh, defined changes in tones – it depends entirely on the type of clouds you have and how long your exposure is. When transformed to black and white, you can create an eerie composition.
- While shadows can give you a high-impact image, they can also be distracting – the same goes for bright highlights. It's important to watch

your histogram to make sure you don't have any blocked shadows (tones that are underexposed) and/or blown highlights (tones that are overexposed) as they can potentially ruin a solid black and white landscape.

- Finally, always shoot in RAW to give you a full spectrum of tones and a bit of room to work with in case you do over/underexpose certain parts of your landscape. Our detailed explanation of what RAW is and how it can benefit your photography [can be found here](#).

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