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# How to Take and Make Good Camera-Phone Photos

*By Roy Furchgott*
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The thing about the camera in your phone is that it will never match your digital camera for quality. On the other hand, it's always there. That's valuable when Goofy grabs the kids at Disneyland and there's no time to dig into the bag, retrieve the camera and boot it up. A quick snap with the phone may be the best you can get.

So what to do about the quality? There are two options. One is to use photo-editing tools to improve your images. The other is to use the tools to make your photos worse, which is exactly what photo artists do to make their photos, uh, artful.

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This photo had everything going against it: poor lighting balance, incorrect color and blurred focus. (By Roy Furchgott)

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But let's start with the assumption that you just want better pictures. Phones are limited by their tiny sensors, which are usually less than three megapixels. The minuscule sensor captures light poorly. In less than full sun, images are often grainy and the colors are weak. Because the viewfinder isn't always accurate, framing tends to be off.

But all is not lost. "In a lot of situations you can make a photo dramatically better, even if you can't make it perfect," said Geoff Baum, director of Photoshop.com, which provides a free online editing program with all the basics for retouching a phone photo. To fix a shot, upload your image and start with the crop tool (hopefully you shot wide, knowing how inaccurate the framing can be).

Next, try the Auto Correct, which adjusts lighting and contrast. Then adjust the saturation to dial in color intensity (be sure to check the "preserve skin tones" box or people may end up looking vampire pale or Martian green).

Finally, you can take care of the grain, but there is a trade-off. You want a sharp picture, but the way to reduce grain is to reduce sharpness. Fiddle until you hit the right balance (some more sophisticated computer programs have a de-speckle tool that reduces grain while preserving sharpness).

Your goal may be more than a competent snapshot, as it was for Shawn Rocco, a staff photographer for the News & Observer in Raleigh, N.C., who discovered the charm of the camera phone on an assignment. "I was bogged down with two cameras, a recorder, and I think I had my video camera. I felt like I was missing all of the moments I needed," he said. On a whim he took a shot with his cellphone. The result had a pleasingly hazy look. "They get kind of a painterly quality to them," he said. He has since published a book of his phone images.

But even artful photos must still conform to the rules of good composition; a software program can do only so much to rescue a bad shot. For instance, said Rocco, don't always shoot from standing eye level. "Get low, get high," he said. "It's amazing how different the world looks from one foot off the ground."

Put people and objects in the foreground, and shoot the less obvious details of a scene. "Give your photos a more personal touch by not focusing on the most touristy, in-your-face object," Rocco said.

The practical aspects of photography also apply. Make sure that your phone is on the highest-quality setting. "It sounds like a no-brainer, but a lot of phones default to a lower resolution," he said.

Don't limit your number of snaps. "It's not like film where you paid $4 for the film and $10 for the processing. You can take as many as you want," Rocco said. The more shots you take, the more likely you are to luck into a good image while developing your eye.

Also, back up, back up, back up. Load shots onto your computer often, or upload them to a photo-sharing Web site using a program you can load onto most phones, such as Shozu. That way you'll always have a copy.

If you've followed the rules of composition, cropped and corrected but still have a cruddy image, you might still salvage it by, yes, making it cruddier.

Steven Parke, a photo illustrator who is frequently retouches movie posters for Hollywood studios, said he often "fixes" phone photos by exaggerating the flaws. "If you have something grainy, you can go back and add more grain. It's counterintuitive, but the way the eye reads it brings the picture together," he said. "You can add effects that make it look like, 'I meant to do that.' " You can add grain by increasing sharpness or, if you're using a computer to edit, you can buy "plug-in" filters that add special effects .

Black-and-white photography is practically the definition of arty, but it's also a great way to disguise goofs, Parke said. Once, faced with uncorrectable skin tones, he was forced to experiment. "The color was so atrocious I didn't know if I could fix it," he said. "I shifted it to black and white, and it looks great."

Parke sees a growth in phone photos as a backlash to preternaturally sharp digital shots. "You can take a good solid shot easily," he said. "So people are out to take something less perfect, something that has a personality." In fact, there are a number of filters that can be added directly to many phones to create images, create effects or emulate other cameras.

With a little practice, you'll have the most riveting "bad" photographs you've ever seen.

*Roy Furchgott is a Baltimore writer who has had lots of practice fixing bad photos.*