

Get the White Balance right in Winter

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Winter photography brings lighting challenges, from dreary days, snow and frost, to artificial lighting when the weather dictates you retreat indoors. Here's how to deal with them by choosing the right white balance setting...



For outdoor shooting

Direct sunlight sets the colour temperature to 5000K, which is typical of midday sun, so this will work well on a mild, sunny winter's day. Cloudy adds warmth to the light on overcast days, while shade introduces a slight pinky-orange tone to eliminate the blue cast that

shadows take on in shade – it can also improve outdoor portraits, creating more natural skin tones, even in direct sun. For snow, avoid a blue cast by using the shade setting. If your camera has a 'snow' setting, this can sort out the correct white balance for you.


For indoor shooting

Incandescent and fluorescent neutralise the slightly yellow or green colour cast that you get from household bulbs, while flash brings a touch of reddish warmth to take the edge off the flash's bright light.

For total control

Preset manual is also known as the 'white card' setting. With it selected, hold a white card in front of the lens, press the shutter, and the camera will lock in the colour temperature of the light reflected from the card to create a new white balance setting. You can also use it with snow: point the camera at a clean patch of snow to create the new white balance setting. It's also ideal for indoor scenes with mixed lighting, such as a room with daylight streaming through a window and fluorescent lighting in the ceiling.

Another way to get accurate colour is to select the colour temperature yourself, using the colour temp K option. Colour temperatures vary from warm at the low values, to blue and cold at the high values, with white (neutral) in the middle. If you're shooting indoors in candle light, start with 2000K. Household light-bulbs are around 3500K and fluorescent lighting 4000K. Outdoors, the colour temperature will usually be anything from 5000K (normal daylight) to 9000K (dark shade). For overcast conditions, select around 6000-6500K, while shade is in the region of 7500K. Around 8000K is a good starting point for snow; if it's still too blue, go a bit higher, while if it's looking a touch pink, dial it down slightly.

You can also fine tune your white balance setting to compensate for variations in the colour of the light source or to deliberately introduce a colour cast into the scene. Select any of the white-balance options (apart from preset and colour temperature), then press  and use the multi-selector to fine-tune the white balance on the blue (B)-amber (A) axis and on the green (G)-magenta (M) axis. When you're happy with your choice, press OK to save the setting and go back to the shooting menu. A fine-tuned white balance will have an asterisk next to it in the control panel.

Mix it up

You can play around with the tone and mood of an image by selecting an 'inaccurate' white balance setting. For instance, incandescent will create a blue cast, which can be very effective for early morning shots or photos in rain or snow – but do remember that everything in the scene will have a blue cast, including any people. At the end of the day, white balance selection is really a matter of personal preference, so play around with it until you get the effect you want.

Quick tips

- Check the results of your choices on the camera's LCD and adjust according to your preference. If your camera has Live View, this will show the effect of your choice in real time, before you capture the image.
- If you have the option, shoot in RAW (NEF) – this captures a much broader range of tones in the scene than you'd get with a JPEG, giving you far more scope for colour-correcting any white balance anomalies on the computer afterwards.