Using a Tripod

PUBLISHED - 28 APR 2016



Tripods were absolutely essential in the early days of photography, when exposures were made on glass plates with sensitivity as low as just ISO 1-3. These days, with many Nikon cameras able to capture a black cat in a coal cellar hand-held, thanks to the incredible leaps ISO capability has made, you might be thinking, do I really need a tripod? But the answer is still 'yes' for many types of images and situations – find out why in our comprehensive guide…

So why use a tripod?

Tripods come in handy for many different reasons - read on to find out when you might need one....

Sharper images

The more pixels your camera's sensor packs, the more likely it is that tiny movements will be recorded as blur in your shots, so with a high-megapixel DSLR such as the D810, it's definitely

worth using it tripod-mounted at anything under 1/125sec. Even at fast shutter speeds, blur is less likely with the camera rock-steady on a tripod (always using a cable release to fire the shutter) – and the larger you're intending to display your image, the more important this becomes.

Spot-on composition

Using a tripod slows you down a bit, giving you the time and space to perfect your composition, getting everything level and double-checking the exposure, the depth of field, and what's in and out of frame. If you want to shoot multiple frames at different exposure settings, such as for high-dynamic range (HDR) images, using a tripod is the best way to ensure you keep the composition perfectly the same between frames; it also enables you to shoot panoramas with each component shot on the same plane.

Longer exposures

With a tripod you have the freedom to shoot really long exposures without the fear of camera shake, which enables you to create dynamic streaks in the sky from scudding clouds, milky surfaces on lakes or the sea instead of choppy waves, and ethereally smooth waterfalls rather than flash-frozen fingers of water.

Optimising depth of field

For maximum depth of field, where your shot is sharp from front to back – typical of landscapes – you need to shoot at a small aperture, probably around f/16 or f/32, which requires a fairly slow shutter speed (unless it's extremely bright or you've whacked the ISO right up), so it's best to shoot on a tripod. At the other end of the scale, when you're photographing in extreme close-up (macro), you want to render just the subject sharp, with everything in front of and behind it thrown beyond focus, and as such a very shallow (minimal) depth of field is hard to achieve when hand-holding, it's far better to again shoot tripod-mounted.

Better portraits

One downside of shooting portraits hand-held is that the camera can get in the way of you and your subject, which can make the experience feel awkward, especially with a camera-shy model. With the camera on a tripod, it's far easier to engage with your subject because you're not hidden behind the viewfinder. Another benefit is that you'll have a hand free to adjust the lighting or hold a reflector, too.

The right tripod and accessories

What should you consider when buying a tripod?

Choose the best you can afford

The last thing you want is a flimsy, cheap model that's not going to last and that lets you down by not keeping your camera all that steady, or is difficult to set up.

What are you using it for?

If you're travelling a lot with it, say by plane or hiking, a smaller, lightweight tripod might be your preferred choice, while if you're going to be home or studio-based, weight is going to be less of a consideration. If you tend to use heavy lenses, look for a model with strong legs and a tightly locking head – ball heads don't cope as well with lenses much over 300mm. For professional-looking pans and tilts when shooting videos, choose a tripod with a fluid or (at the very least) a fluid-effect head.

Not necessary, but nice

If you've never used a quick-release plate, you won't know what you've been missing until you try it – but being able to mount and detach your camera from the tripod head so easily and so quickly is definitely worth paying for, especially if you're going to be shooting in extremely cold conditions where you want to minimise the exposure of your fingers to the elements!

How to use your tripod

Tripods can seem like intimidating contraptions if you're not familiar with them - read these simple steps to help you use your tripod with confidence!

Extend the top sections first

The lower segments of a collapsible tripod's legs are designed to slip inside the upper sections when the tripod is folded away, and are therefore thinner and less stable. So, if you don't need to use the tripod at its full height, it's better to extend the more stable, upper leg segments instead of the lower ones.

Use the extending centre column with care

Tripods usually have a centre column that extends to allow high-level shooting, but this doesn't create a particularly stable platform, so it's better to use the legs extended instead, and then to only use the column extended when the legs are at their full length and you still need extra height.

On the level

It's generally better to get the tripod head level by adjusting the legs, using the spirit-level built into the shoulders, rather than by adjusting the tripod head itself, as this ensures the tripod will be properly balanced and therefore far more stable, and also that the camera stays level when panning. Also, use a spirit level in your camera's hotshoe to get your horizon straight in camera, rather than having to correct it in post-production.

When you’re not on solid ground

A tripod works best on a solid surface, but that's simply not always going to be available. If your only option is sand or a soft grassy surface, push the legs in as deep as they'll go, or look for flattish stones to balance them on. Some tripods can be fitted with 'shoes' to spread their weight on soft ground – they act a bit like snow shoes.

Weight to go

If you're using a lighter-weight tripod, give it a bit more heft by weighing it down. Hang something heavy like your camera bag underneath it – there's often a hook provided for just this purpose.

Carrying your tripod

Transporting your tripod needn't be a chore....

Walking with your camera tripod-mounted

If you're not walking too far and you want to ensure you're ready to shoot at the drop of a hat, keep your camera mounted on the tripod, over your shoulder with the lens nestling into your shoulder (and the lens cap on). Another option is to slip the legs under your backpack's front straps, with the camera pointing backwards and the lens sitting securely on your shoulder. Or, keep the tripod tucked right into your body by carrying it with one hand, legs up, camera down and lens pointing upwards. Whatever you do, wrap the camera strap tightly round your hand to be on the safe side.

Flying with a tripod

Check with your airline if you can take a tripod on as hand-luggage (put the ball-head in your carry-on backpack) – many will allow this. Another option is to buy a tripod that will fold down enough to fit into your carry-on backpack. Otherwise, it's going to have to travel in your hold luggage.

Quick tips

- Switch off your lens's Vibration Reduction feature when using it tripod-mounted.

- Use mirror lock-up if it's an option (especially if you're shooting for more than 1/15sec).

- If your lens has a tripod collar, attach it to the tripod rather than the camera.

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