Black & White Photography

Look for Contrast, Shape and Texture

The complimentary and opposing colors that bring a color image to life are all reduced to black and white or shades of grey in a monochrome image and you have to look for tonal contrast to make a shot stand out.

In color photography, for example, your eye would immediately be drawn to a red object on a green background, but in monochrome photography these two areas are likely to have the same brightness, so the image looks flat and dull straight from the camera.

Fortunately, it's possible to work adjust the brightness of these two colors separately to introduce some contrast. However, a good starting point is to look for scenes with tonal contrast.

There are always exceptions, but as a general rule look for scenes that contain some strong blacks and whites. This can be achieved by the light or by the brightness (or tone) of the objects in the scene as well as the exposure settings that you use. The brightness of the bark of a silver birch tree for example, could inject some contrast (and interest) in to a woodland scene.

Why create black and white photography?

Firstly, let's answer this question. After all, what's the point of black and white imagery when we live in a vibrant, colorful world that we can now easily capture with any camera. Well, as good as color is, it can also be distracting. Turning a photo black and white will remove the distractions color can bring to an image.

A black and white photo allows you to focus on specific formal elements of art such as lighting, texture, shadow, patterns, and composition. In a sense, it's making the life of a photographer easier by removing one of the biggest formal elements of art which is of course is 'color'. However, don't be fooled that creating good black and white photography is easier that creating good color photography. It doesn't work like that I'm afraid.

Turning an image monochrome will also give a totally different feel to image. Sometimes that will help the image, sometimes it won't and that is where your creative skills come in. A black and white photo tends to give a more somber or serious feeling and can give a feeling of nostalgia, as if you're looking back in time. Black and white photography can be a lot more emotive for these reasons. So, turning your carnival pictures to black and white might not be a good idea!

Take a look at the two images below. Which one do you prefer? And why do you prefer that?
In this example, one version doesn't look outstandingly better than the other, it's simply down to personal preference. Some people will like the color version, some the black and white version.

Millenium Bridge with St Pauls, London in color

Millenium Bridge with St Pauls, London in black and white

So, if you're going for an emotive or nostalgic feeling, then turning a photo black and white will work. If not, it will simply be for arty purposes. Before you take the photo, you should think about the output, will the image suit black and white or not? This will inform you to compose and create photography that will definitely look good in black and white!

Tip 1 – Shoot in black and white mode

There are 2 different ways to make your photo black and white; either shooting in black and white as you're working or creating the effect in post processing.

Tip 2 – Look for contrast in tones not colors

Contrast in a black and white photography is the difference between lights and darks tones. A high contrast image with contain really bright tones next to really dark tones. A low contrast image will have a much softer graduation of greys.

Hight contrast black and white image – Credit – @Pexels/Pixabay

Low contrast black and white image – Credit – @*Talles Alves/Unsplash*

When looking for contrast, consider how light will play a part. Hard light, such as direct sunlight will create shadows and strong contrasts between light and dark whereas soft light, like on a cloudy day, will created softer tones within your scene.

Remember you are working for a black and white output so utilize contrast by looking for bright and dark areas, rather than contrasting colors. Shadows accompanied with hard light can create striking contrast in images.

Tip 3 – Creating mood

Black and white photography can be very emotive. Take the below image for example.

Black and white photo of man on a bench creating an isolated, lonely feeling. Credit – Matthew Henry/unsplash

The space above the man sitting on the bench is entirely untouched – it is just pure negative space. This darkness that surrounds him makes the subject look small and creates a feeling of loneliness. The long bench beside him with empty space adds to the feeling of loneliness. The photo would not feel as lonely without the empty space on the bench, the negative space and the fact that it is in black and white. Removing the color from this scene enables the viewer to concentrate more on the emotive aspects of the photograph.

An emotive photo of a man. The Black and white effect adds to the emotional output of the image. Credit – Sergey Vinogradov/Unsplash

With the image above, a similar effect is achieved which is enhanced by the use of black and white. Imagine this picture in color, would it have the same emotion? Probably not. And that is due to the lack of color which can distract from the pose, look and composition of the model. The man looks in deep thought and you're left wondering what he's thinking about; what he's looking at or what has happened prior to this picture being taken. This emotive effect is really enhanced by the use of black and white in this picture.

Tip 4 – Minimalism + Black and White = Great photography!

Minimalism is distinguished by extreme simplicity. It is often composed in a clean, clinical way with the focus being only on a small number of objects. Removing the color from an image enhances a minimalist look.

Take a look at these two examples below. In the first example, we use a technique called long exposure photography to create a minimalist effect of a lighthouse out at sea. Using long exposures in photography is a great tip to get that minimalist look. In this photo, it's allowed the waves of the water to blend together to create this smooth effect. This eliminates the texture and tones of the water. When you use this technique with black and white photography you are sure to get the minimalist effect.
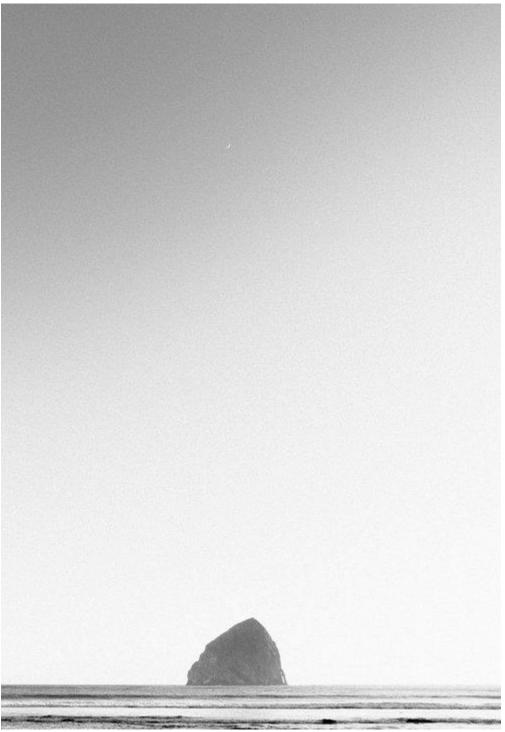
To view exactly how this shot was taken and the equipment used, click here.

Long exposure photo of a lighthouse out at sea. Turning the image black and white adds to the minimalist effect.

In this next example, the minimalist effect has been created by a clever use of composition and by removing the color from the scene. The photo's main focus is the rock with the majority of the image taken up by the sky. The composition can be broken up into 3 parts. Going from the bottom you have the line of water, then the triangle of the rock, then a sky with only a graduation of grey.

The image has been broken down to the minimal of objects and via the use of black and white photography it has minimal colors and tones, thus given a perfect example of minimalist photography.
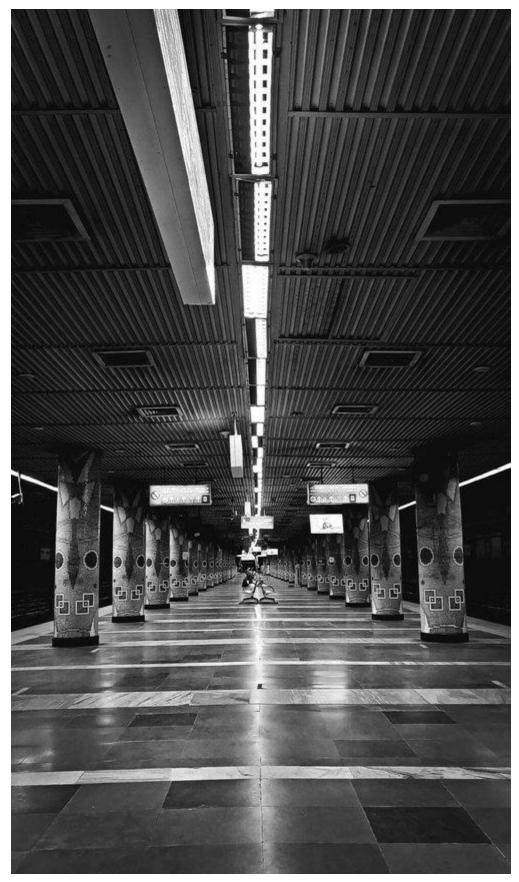
Minimalism works very well with black and white photography as the elimination of colour simplifies the photo.

Tip 5 – Find Symmetry

Symmetry is achieved when two halves of an image hold the same weight and give a perfect balance between two sides of your photograph. The human eye is naturally drawn to symmetry in photography. Symmetry suits black and white photography as, similar to minimalism, the removal of color focuses the viewer on the balance of the composition. Good places to find symmetry are the interiors of buildings or externally on architecture.

Credit – @Souradeep Biswas/Unsplash

When out with your camera consider scenes that show good symmetry and see how they look in monochrome!

Tip 6 – Look for Texture

Texture is the feel, appearance, or consistency of a surface or substance. This is hard to replicate in a two-dimensional photograph. But, the removal of colour from a photo will focus the viewer to the pure texture of the object or scene.

Another important thing to consider here is your use of light. Hard light will generally create shadows and enhance a surface texture whereas soft light will not. Soft light will take away shadows and give a flatter and less contrasty image.

A couple of good examples of this are tree bark or clouds.

Texture of Tree Bark – Credit – @Michael Gaida/Pixabay

Texture within clouds – Credit – @Tom Barrett/Pixabay

Next time you're out with your camera, look at surfaces and the way the light is hitting them. You might be surprised where you'll find an opportunity for a good black and white photograph!

Tip 7 – Create Silhouettes

In the dictionary Silhouettes are described as "the dark shape and outline of someone or something visible in restricted light against a brighter background". Due to its high contrast nature, they are perfectly suited to the black and white effect.

Silhouettes can be created very easily by placing someone or something in front a window or with the sun setting in the background. Simply use your camera's exposure compensation setting and take it down by 1 or 2 stops to get a desired effect. Shooting in contrasty situations, like silhouettes, will throw your camera's exposure meter all over the place! This exposure compensation setting will override what the camera's meter is saying and, in this case, create a darker image.

Credit – @Joe Shields/Unsplash

When the opportunity arises, learn about your exposure compensation setting, and create some black and white silhouettes.