

Back Button Focus Techniques

By Grant Gillespie

Our November speaker, the incredibly creative and talented Hayley Roberts mentioned that photographing herself over and over again, she'd be lost without Back Button Focus. Christmas break is an excellent time to practice a new way of shooting. Here's 2 techniques.

Auto Focus

Modern digital cameras have quite clever Auto Focus – depress the shutter, camera auto focuses and takes the shot.

One can even position a particular part of the image within the auto focus points, depress the shutter button half-way, recompose the image (move the camera), and as long as the shutter remains half depressed, the desired part of the image will remain in focus when the shutter button is fully depressed and the camera takes the shot.

Cameras can be a lot smarter than that, too. I shot a wedding for a particular 'look' (high key, shallow depth of field) and Face Detection was delightfully fast at recognising faces, focusing and even exposing for the faces, sometimes against overwhelmingly bright backgrounds.



Back Button Focus

Focus and recompose can be mighty handy and works quite well if you take one shot then move on. Taking multiple shots with the camera refocussing every shot can waste valuable time and possibly miss a 'decisive moment' while the auto focus achieves the same setting as the previous shot.

Separating the function of focus by assigning Auto Focus to a programmable button on the (back of the) camera, the photographer can take control of when the camera auto focuses. It will focus when the button is pressed and hold that focus until the next time the button is pressed. Think of it as assisted manual focus. You choose when and where to focus, then take as many shots as you need before you change the focus.

There are 2 general steps to setting up Back Button Focus

1. turn off Shutter focus control
2. assign Auto Focus to a programmable button

The steps involved vary from camera to camera. Search your camera model and Back Button Focus to find the exact method.



There are 2 basic techniques for Back Button Focus

- when the subject remains roughly in the same distance from the camera between shots (same focal plain)
- when the subject is moving towards or away from the camera

If the subject is in the same focal plain

- these stalks of wheat, a portrait, a bird flying along or you want to be in the shot yourself
- focus on the wheat you want, the portrait subject, the bird or others in the shot
- press the Back Button to lock the focus. Subjects can move around without triggering any Auto Focus delay.

If the subject is moving away/toward the camera, like the boys running up the path, hold the Back Button down, causing the camera to continuously Auto Focus on the subject. Depending on camera, this may work better with Continuous Auto Focus selected. Search or experiment to find out which is better.



Further Reading:

- <http://www.digital-photo-secrets.com/tip/4374/back-button-focus/>
- <http://www.zachandjody.com/blog/tuesday-photography-tips-tricks-back-button-focusing/15588/>
- http://www.cpsphotography.com/focusing_and_back_button.htm
- <http://digital-photography-school.com/back-button-focus/>
- <http://www.clickinmoms.com/blog/how-to-use-back-button-focusing-tutorial/#>