I just bought a dSLR, what do I do next?

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Introduction – please read this.

You point your new digital single lens reflex camera (dSLR) at your subject.

You gently squeeze the shutter release. The camera locks in the focus, takes a meter reading and then waits. You see the perfect moment, you squeeze the shutter release the rest of the way, the camera takes a final meter reading, the mirror flips up, the shutter opens, light hits the sensor, time passes, the shutter closes, the mirror returns to the down position, the camera "develops" the image into a jpg. Done. Let's check the display and see what we got…

Many people I know have been stepping up to a dSLR, or have decided to learn how their point and shoot or super-zoom hybrid cameras actually work. Why? To take better pictures. To take pictures that are in focus and that are properly exposed.

Camera manuals from the manufacturers are ridiculous. For example, find the ISO control on your camera, look up ISO in your manual, and you'll see something like... "This control is used to adjust ISO. You can set the ISO from 100 to 6400. To lower ISO, turn counter clockwise, to raise ISO, turn clockwise." Well that explains it all perfectly, right? Wrong!

Books on photography abound. They will teach you everything you want to know and more about exposure, color balance, ISO, etc. But they are big and long and really, do you need or want to know how a sensor is designed, how it is made, and how it works? Maybe. But to be able to quickly get using your camera with great results, knowing a bit about how and why you got great results, and to be able to repeat great results - for this, these books are too much.

Books written for your specific camera model are a good compromise. But again, they are relatively long and more detailed and overly complicated if you just want to quickly go out and get great images.

I own Canon, Nikon and Olympus equipment – in alphabetical order. There will be no brand bashing here. Competition is necessary, they all make great products, and you need to decide with which to park your money. This book will have various examples on lenses and cameras but I am not suggesting which technology to invest in.

This book was designed and written to be read in under 30 minutes, one section at a time, with the goal of getting you out there with your new camera, taking great pictures, with a basic knowledge of photography and cameras so that you can repeatedly take great pictures and know how and why.

Photography is also art as much as science, the proportions debatable. So throughout the book I will intersperse some compositional tips that have nothing to do with the camera but with how to take and compose better images. These will be labeled “tips”.

So let's begin.

Some of the differences between types of cameras.

I think the most obvious difference is the removable lens. So the theory is, spend "enough" money on the camera body to meet your needs and make you happy, then invest in good lenses.

The camera is a black box with a sensor. It used to be that camera models took 6 or more years to be updated. Now it is a couple of years for professional cameras and often less than a year for consumer grade equipment.

Spend as much as you can afford on glass, the lens. Good lenses will always be good and can last decades. Nikon lenses built as far back as the 60's will still work on a Nikon dSLR today. They won't auto focus, but if it was good glass, it still is good glass and it will take great pictures.

Here are but a few differences between various styles of cameras:

Point and shoot	**Hybrid / Super Zoom**	**dSLR**
automatic modes	auto and some manual	fully manual with some auto
fixed lens	fixed lens with larger zoom	interchangeable lenses
little manual control	more control	full creative control
slow acting camera	faster acting camera	very fast camera response
basic lens	better lens	you decide on lenses
small sensor	small sensor	larger sensor
weak flash	flash and possible hot shoe	possible flash and hot shoe
no viewfinder	small electronic viewfinder	optical viewfinder

Shooting modes.

Your camera will have various shooting modes. Automatic, Program, Shutter Priority, Aperture Priority, Manual, Scenes and possibly differently named variants. Below is a list of other ways they may be labelled.

Program, P
Aperture Priority, A, Av (Aperture Value)
Shutter Priority, S, Tv (Time Value)
Manual, M
Automatic, Auto, iAuto (Intelligent Automatic)
Scenes

We will go through all of these; but for now, to begin enjoying your camera, set it to Auto and go take pictures. You will learn much from the results you get.

Memory and image quality settings

If you haven't already, insert a memory card and format it. Always format the card in the camera and not on the computer. When you wish to reuse your card, don't just delete the images on it, format the card.

Today, memory cards are relatively cheap. The argument always comes down to whether you should buy the biggest and fastest cards, or several smaller and/or slower ones. For our purposes, buy 2 of the biggest and fastest that your budget allows.

I am a fan of always setting your camera to the highest resolution. You paid for a certain level of quality, why shoot at a lesser quality setting? This involves two camera settings. One will be image size, choose the largest. For example 1024x768 is larger than 640x480. Secondly, set the jpeg settings to the highest setting. These may be named differently on various cameras, but superfine is better than fine, which is better than normal. As the quality settings go up, you'll notice the count of the remaining available images on your camera go down. Quality at the cost of space. These settings will be found in one of the menus depending on the camera make/ model.

Auto (Shooting mode)

It does what it says; it does everything for you automatically. You just need to point and shoot. But what is this "everything"?

It sets the exposure. The amount of light required to create a properly exposed image. That includes the aperture, the shutter, and ISO. We will discuss these later. But you still need to focus the image.

Every camera has its own focusing system, but they are basically the same. For now, keep it in the default-focusing mode.

When you point a camera at your subject, the meter will start reading the light for exposure, but to focus, you need to gently squeeze the shutter half way to activate the focusing system. Once focus is locked, compose your image, then press the shutter the rest of the way, or as a good friend of mine says "just click".

Most camera default focusing systems focus on items near and around the center of the image. So if you are trying to focus on something near the edges, point the camera so that your subject is in the center, squeeze to focus, then reposition your camera for your desired composition. Then just click.

When taking a picture, camera strap around your neck, bring the camera up to your forehead, gripping with the right hand, and using your left hand under the camera/lens palm up. When squeezing the shutter release, squeeze lightly. Get a feel for your shutter release. The whole point here is to minimize or avoid camera shake. Many beginners squeeze with so much vigour and use poor camera holding positions that the downward press actually moves the camera which results in a soft (ie. not perfectly focused) image..