

# 10 STEPS

to become a professional photographer



# 10 Steps to Become a Pro

High school is now behind you. You've maybe dabbled in college or even gotten a degree in something. Perhaps you are considering photography as a trade or skill-set to add to your arsenal of marketable skills. Or you are thinking of a career change all together. You're considering what you might do with your life, right? And the thought of working in an office cubicle forever isn't exactly enticing.

You know you really enjoy taking pictures and you've heard about people who get paid to create photographs. Maybe you've even done a few photo jobs yourself.

Have you ever thought this could be your career? Maybe you don't think you are good enough... but guess what? Everyone at the beginning of their career started out "not good enough." But, through focused practice, they got better and better at their craft, and then later they could command money for it!

This could be you – and that is where a focused photography education can come in; it will level you up in the game. But before that, you may want to take some other steps, too.

Let's explore those.

Here are my  
**Top 10 Steps to Becoming a Professional Photographer.**

— Jeff McLain  
Professional Commercial Photographer & RMSP instructor

# 1

## You need a camera.

■ Please don't think that you need the latest \$4,000 camera to begin to get good at photography! You really don't. What you need is the most basic DSLR or mirrorless camera that you can get. As long as it can focus, can shoot in Manual Mode, and can shoot Raw images - you are well on your way. You can literally build out an entire portfolio website with images shot with a "lesser" camera and no one will know the difference! No one can look at a photograph and tell what brand of camera or exact lens was used, so don't get hung up on gear at first. Just get something that can focus, shoot in Manual, and shoots Raw images.

Some example entry-level kits are: [CANON](#) or [NIKON](#)

### HANDS-ON TIP:

What camera do you use? Check the settings. Make sure it has the three capabilities listed here and **set your camera** to those modes. Instead of dreaming about a fancy camera, make a list of the lenses you are interested in working toward buying and why they are good choices for the type of photography you do.

**Lenses I want:**

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**Why I want them:**

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# 2

## You need to take more pictures.

■ If there is one thing you do a lot of as a photographer, it's taking pictures. Make your camera an extension of you – take your camera everywhere and shoot a lot. Find some inspiration and go and shoot a variety of subjects. Don't be afraid to try all types of photography! Shoot a lot of images, of a lot of things, all the time. Even if you shoot with only your phone, that's at least something! The best camera is the one you always have with you. Use what you have until you can get a real camera, as noted in Step 1. But keep shooting!! This is how you start to develop your "eye" for making aesthetically pleasing images.

### HANDS-ON TIP:

Make sure you're shooting every single day! Practice makes perfect. Also make a list of five specific images you'd like to photograph to help you improve. Plan to take at least one of those images a week for the next five weeks. At the end, evaluate them to see which ones you're proud of and which ones you might try to reshoot. Or maybe you learn through the process that shooting a specific type of image is not for you. Either way, pay attention to your craft! Then do this exercise again, and again, and again. You'll be surprised how much you improve.

#### Photo Ideas:

#### How did it go?

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# 3

## Seek inspiration constantly.

Some methods to inspire you:

Go to your local bookstore that has a magazine rack and find subject matter that interests you. In the beginning, stick to hobbies and interests that you already have! Those might give you opportunities for unique access to subjects to photograph in the future. If you can buy some of these magazines, do it – or take snaps on your phone to reference. Find images that you wish you had been the one to shoot yourself. Let yourself dream what it was like for that photographer to be hired to do that job! That could be you one day!

Another method is, of course, Instagram. There are tons of inspiring images on Instagram. Start a “Saved” collection of your photo inspirations or take screenshots and create an Inspiration album on your phone to house all those images you wish you had shot.

Emulation: If you see an image you wish you had created, try to create a similar one! Don’t outright copy it, but use it as a springboard for a new idea that is similar.

Find inspiration in other forms of art, hobbies or current events. Perhaps you also love sculpture; find a way to either photograph some sculpture, or even find a sculptor who might let you photograph them at their craft. Perhaps you love to skateboard; go to the skate park and photograph the skaters in action, as well as some portraits of them. Perhaps you have a social issue you care deeply about – imagine you were hired by a magazine to illustrate that concept in a photograph. How would you do it?

Try to shoot things outside what you normally shoot, too! Never shoot food? Take some pictures of your breakfast! Never shoot architecture? Take some pictures of a cool-looking building! Never shoot portraits? Find someone patient and give it a try!

### **HANDS-ON TIP:**

This is the most fun part of being an artist – looking at tons of beautiful artwork! Here’s an idea for a self-assignment to narrow down what style of images you are drawn to most. Get online or on Instagram and find and save exactly 15 images that you wish you had taken... not just that you admire, but that you wish you actually stood there and clicked the shutter for. Then examine them all as a group for patterns in composition, light, color, mood, etc.. Usually there are similarities. Ignore subject matter and look more for the aesthetic qualities. Then create a new image of your own that employs the characteristics you observed in those photos!

# 4

## Be willing to fall a bunch, but keep getting up!

- No matter what, photography will have some rejection involved. There will be energy that you spend in the pursuit of getting better that you'll feel was wasted because you later realize the shot was not in focus, or you blew the exposure, or someone photobombed you!

This has happened to Every. Single. One. Of. Us. You have to get up, brush it off, and try again and again and again, over and over. And no matter what, you'll improve through that process if you keep creating. You'll have images you LOVE and you'll have others you don't. But through this action, you'll begin to have more consistent images you love, versus "rejects."

That's the point when you'll begin to shoot more professional imagery. It's a lot like learning to ski or snowboard or skateboard. You'll fall a lot at first, but then you improve. Consider it a part of the process! (photography leaves a lot fewer bruises, too!)

### HANDS-ON TIP:

Get your images critiqued! Send [@rockymountainschoolofphoto](https://www.instagram.com/rockymountainschoolofphoto) a few of your photos on Instagram OR shoot us an email at [rmsp@rmsp.com](mailto:rmsp@rmsp.com). You can also use the [#rmspphotocritique](https://www.instagram.com/hashtag/rmspphotocritique) hashtag on Instagram for a chance to get critiqued without talking to someone!

Hearing from a professional about what is working and not working in your images is one of the best ways to improve your craft. Take notes of what you do well and what you need to work on – and make those changes in your work! And if you want to receive a super duper thorough examination of your work with some specific instruction on steps to improve, sign up for an hour of [Private Instruction!](#)

**Ok... so you got a camera,  
you're shooting a ton, you  
are good at being inspired  
to shoot, you keep having  
mixed results and now  
you want to know how to  
Level Up from there?**

# 5

## Learn how to shoot in Manual mode.

Professional photography is all about control. Pros have complete (or near-complete) control over their cameras, lighting, and subject matter in order to achieve consistent, reliable results. The first step to that equation is getting off the Auto mode on your camera and shooting in Manual mode. This gives you all the creative control. If that seems a bit daunting at first, you're in luck: you can baby-step into this with shooting in Aperture Priority or Shutter Priority. Forest and Sarah have a great [beginner exposure video](#) on RMSP's YouTube channel here.

And make sure to download our [Basic Exposure Guide](#) here!

If you don't care to watch videos or read lengthy manuals, that is where in-person education can make learning fun and quick! Check out local classes or look for an RMSP [Short Course](#) in your state to get started.

### **HANDS-ON TIP:**

Take an hour a week and focus only on technical skills. Don't try to take "good" pictures; just try to take well-exposed pictures. If you take a picture that's not perfectly exposed, DON'T just move on to creating the next image. Instead figure out why the image turned out poorly and reshoot until it looks perfect. When you're done, switch your camera back to whatever mode you're comfortable with and continue practicing normal creative shooting.

Pro Tip: Once you do this often enough, you'll get so good at making accurate exposures that you won't need to even think about your settings anymore, and you'll be shooting on Manual full-time!

# 6

## Understand LIGHT & how it relates to the camera.

■ This one is a little harder to grasp without proper training. But, light has measurable color and measurable intensity. It also has observable qualities. A professional photographer does not simply “hope for the best lighting.” They harness this understanding of light.

In times when the natural light is not doing what they hoped, they employ their professional skills to actually light their own scenes, regardless of what the natural conditions may be. If your client wants a sunny day, but it's cloudy outside, you need the skills of a professional to be able to recreate the sunny day with the technology that professionals use.

You can certainly attempt to learn these skills online, but your learning curve will be very long and probably frustrating because you don't have immediate feedback from instructors at the time of the shoot, or afterward. That is why in-person education can be really helpful. Not only do you learn about lighting's characteristics more thoroughly, but you gain access to the professional lighting tools pros use and the invaluable feedback from the instructors helping you learn these tools.

### **HANDS-ON TIP:**

A great way to practice “seeing light” like an artist is to photograph the same object in the same place at every hour of the day (this works best with the object near a window). Make sure to properly expose each image (and set your camera to Daylight White Balance), and then shoot the object at 8am, 9am, 10am, etc., every hour of the day, and then compare all the images side-by-side to see the differences in the quality of light in each image.

Identify the direction the light is coming from, if it's creating hard or soft shadows, what color the light is, and how it may appear to change the shape of your subject. If you don't see the changes very well, try the exercise again near a different window.

Once you start noticing how the light changes, add in a secondary artificial light source like a lamp and do the exercise all over again. You'll start to see how harnessing the power of artificial lighting can give you control over the lighting in your scenes.

# 7

## Begin to focus your work.

As your photographic skills improve, your work will become more technically consistent. But, with this it can also be scattered in subject matter and style. Because there are a ton of directions to go in with photography, most professional photographers tend to specialize in a few areas of expertise.

Think about it: when you go to the hamburger restaurant, what are you going there for? A hamburger! You aren't going there for a salad. The same with other businesses. You aren't going to the oil-change garage because they have good coffee. You go to the coffee place for that! Same with photography – you need to begin to look at your own work through the eyes of a buyer and begin to focus your work down to two very important things: 1. What is my subject? 2. What is my style?

What do you shoot? And How do you shoot it? This “refining” process takes time and focused dedication, but it pays out in the end because buyers will know exactly what you shoot and what they will get when you shoot for them. Just like when you order a Big Mac, you know exactly what you are going to get.

### **HANDS-ON TIP:**

Do some soul searching here and write down the subjects that you really like to photograph the most. Is it sports? Humans? Animals? Food?

Write down the top three things you like to photograph (even if it's really hard to narrow it down!). Try to focus on creating the most work of those subjects to refine your imagery in a few specific areas. This will help you so much when it comes to getting clients, because your specialty will be obvious to them.

#### **Top three things I like to photograph:**

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# 8

Consider the types of clients that might be interested in your work.

- Throughout the processes I've mentioned above (and especially if you do the exercise associated with #3), you'll begin to see a pattern to the types of images you like to shoot, the type of lighting you like to use, and other variables such as location versus studio, people versus still-life, props versus no props, natural light versus artificial light. And you can also begin to quantify your imagery in terms of descriptors such as: clean, airy, light, dark, moody, sinister, angelic, fun, playful, etc...

These are terms that you can use for your branding. Once you have a body of work that can be encapsulated this way, it allows you to know how to describe your work to buyers. It will also help you identify what you shoot, how you shoot it, and most importantly for a career, who will buy it.

McDonald's is not going to buy images you've shot of cars on-location. And BMW isn't going to be interested in your studio food shots. Narrow down who your potential clients are.

## HANDS-ON TIP:

Write down the names of the types of people who might buy your photographs. Are they engaged couples looking to hire a wedding photographer? Magazine editors looking for photo stories in your area? Companies that prioritize environmental shots of athletes? Write down specific people or companies that might fit the bill. If you can't think of any specific people or companies to write down, do some research to find out who they are based on the type of work you're creating.

### Potential Clients:

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_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

# 9

## Utilize business skills to start a business.

■ You made it this far. Awesome. Well, I have some news for you: professional photography is a BUSINESS. You are offering a service or product to the marketplace. Therefore, you are a business and you'll need some hardcore business skills to keep the paycheck coming in!

Some of these skills will start with the basics, such as writing a business plan. You'll need to know what you offer, who you offer it to, and who your competition is. You'll need to know what you'll charge, if that will satisfy your business costs (aka "overhead") and how much you'll pay yourself each week, or month. You'll need to know how to reach your clients and how to develop those relationships, too.

Attempting to learn the ins and outs of professional photography on your own, with all of its technical aspects, artistic aspects, plus the addition of learning supplemental lighting technology, computing, editing, and design can be daunting. Add in ALSO trying to learn how to form a business... you could be trying for years! (And most photographers do spend years doing all of this.)

Consider a focused, immersive photographic program like our [Professional Intensive](#), which can help you learn all of these subjects in a condensed amount of time.

### HANDS-ON TIP:

If you want to get a jump start on practicing these business skills, you'll want to start analyzing your own cost of doing business, looking at buying things like business insurance and a business license, searching for physical space to rent if you need it, finding the right support people to help you through this process (think accountants, lawyers, bankers, etc.) You need to think about every layer of this process in order to start a business that will thrive (and be legal).

Check out our "[Business Startup Checklist](#)" for more information on the things you need to do to get started.

# 10

## Market yourself to your target clients.

■ Lastly, once you have all of these bits in place, you need to let your potential clients know that you exist. Also known as “hanging your shingle.” (The shingle being the little sign outside your “shop”.)

Some of the best advice I got once I had reached this point was, “Sometimes you just have to hang your shingle,” which meant that I needed to get my marketing efforts together to let my potential buyers know who I am, what I shoot, how I shoot it, and how they can reach me. And I needed to do this “On Repeat.” Over and over again. Not annoyingly so – but consistently reaching out to let potential buyers get to know me and what I do.

This sort of marketing is called “targeted,” where I have a narrow focus of people who are the most likely to hire me, which increases my chances of being hired four-fold! But to get to this point, you have to travel through Steps 1-9 first, and then get the word out to the right potential clients in a way that makes them interested.

You can try to go it alone, or you can consider a professional photography program to help get the training you’ll need to achieve all of these steps in much less time. That’s the best news here: All of this can be learned. And the best part of the process? You’re building a career based on something you love.

### **HANDS-ON TIP:**

This is crucial. You can make amazing work all day long, but if the right people don’t know about it, you won’t make any money from it.

If that’s your goal, you must do a lot of market research, identify your target market, tailor your brand and strategy to that client, and then do a heck of a lot of legwork to get them to notice you. So, do the legwork.

The best way to get work is to put your work in front of the right people in the right places at the right time when they are looking for someone like you to solve a problem for them.

In a nutshell, it looks like this:

**Basic Gear > Get Stoked about Photography > Practice > Learn the Fundamentals > Practice > Expand with Added Technology > Practice > Distill Your Work to the Very Best of What You Do > Practice > Understand How to Operate a Business > Practice > Market Yourself and Continue to Shoot on repeat!!**

### **Want more help?**

We teach all the nitty gritty intricacies of launching, marketing and running your own photography business in our 8-month *Professional Intensive* program.

Walking through these startup steps is just the beginning; having a marketable product and clear vision of your business are equally important.

**That's where we come in.**  
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