



Why your Kit Lens is Better than You Think

A Post By: **Andrew S. Gibson**

Understanding Lenses: Part I, and is the first in a series of lessons about camera lenses.



Lenses are one of the most important pieces of camera equipment you can own. A good lens, well looked after, should last you decades, much longer than any digital camera body. That's why professional photographers spend thousands on glass, and why so much has been written about which lens (or lenses) you should buy.



If you are like most photographers, you buy your first 'serious' camera (ie one with interchangeable lenses) with the manufacturer's kit lens (the EF-S 18-55mm f3.5-5.6 IS II lens pictured above is a Canon kit lens).

Most kit lenses are, by their nature, inexpensive (a polite way of saying cheap). That's understandable – all the manufacturers are in competition with each other and they keep the prices of their camera kits down by creating inexpensive kit lenses. A kit lens will get you started, and you can buy other, better quality lenses when you outgrow it.

If your only lens is a kit lens, does that mean you should go out and buy a better one straight away? No it doesn't – no matter what anyone says, or how much you lust after expensive glass, your kit lens is a great lens to get started with. If you're in a position where you can't afford to buy another lens, or you simply just don't know which one to buy, don't sweat it. You'll be surprised at just what you can do with your kit lens once you know how to get the best out of it.

Don't believe me? Then check out this [blog post by Jingna Zhang](#) – a professional fashion and editorial photographer. She's good, and she got her start with an EOS 350D and the 18-55mm kit lens it came with. The quality of images she created with that camera and kit lens, manufactured in 2006 and an outdated combination by today's standards, is very high. Take a look and you will see what I mean.



Her article resonated with me because I got started with the same camera and lens combination. I didn't know what lenses to buy for the camera, so I decided to stick with the kit lens to start with and took it with me on a trip to South America. I soon realised that the lens wasn't a great one (thankfully it has been discontinued and Canon sells a much better kit lens with its entry level cameras).



However, despite the relatively poor image quality some of the photos I took with that lens were good enough for publication. I illustrated my first published article, a piece in Practical Photography, with photos taken on that journey with the kit lens (illustrated above). Several more of the photos were published in other photography magazines. It wasn't the world's best lens, but it was good enough to get me started – the Practical Photography article was a turning point for me because it gave me the belief that I could make it as a writer.

Getting the Best out of your Kit Lens

So, how do you get the best out of a kit lens? My approach is to think of the lens as two lenses in one. If you have a kit lens of typical focal length, 18-55mm, then treat it as an 18mm and 55mm lens in one. The 18mm is a moderate wide-angle that is great for landscapes, architecture and environmental portraiture. The 55mm end is a short telephoto lens ideal for compressing perspective and taking portraits or closing in on details.

That doesn't mean you can't use the in-between focal lengths, and there are times when you can't avoid it,

but by sticking with the shortest and longest focal lengths you will learn how those focal lengths behave. Lenses are the 'eye' of your camera system and your photos will improve as you learn the characteristics of each focal length.

Some kit lenses also have another useful feature – an Image Stabiliser (Canon's term, Nikon uses Vibration Reduction and some lucky camera owners have it built into their camera bodies). An Image Stabiliser lets you take photos at slower shutter speeds than would otherwise be possible. So, theoretically, you could hand-hold the camera, set the focal length of the lens to 18mm, and take a photo without camera shake at 1/4 or even 1/2 second. That's awesome in low light and lets you explore the creative potential of taking photos in the evening or at night.

Kit Lens as Wide-Angle





The above photos were taken at the 18mm end of my kit lens. You can see how I got in close to the subject,

sometimes tilting the lens backwards to take advantage of the converging verticals effect.

Kit Lens as Short-Telephoto





These photos were all taken at the 55mm end of my kit lens. The photos have a completely different quality, thanks to the compressed perspective and limited depth-of-field.

Shortcomings of Kit Lenses

Your kit lens is probably a better lens than you think it is, but it's still not a great lens and has several shortcomings. At some point you will bump up against the limitations. This is not a bad thing, it simply indicates that you're at the stage where a different lens will help you take better photos.

These are the main limitations of kit lenses:

Focal length: You may find that even the 18mm end of your kit lens is not wide enough – you need a shorter focal length so that you can create more dramatic images or fit more in. In that case it's time to start thinking about buying a new wide-angle lens.

On the other hand, if you find the 55mm end doesn't get you as close as you would like to your subject, then you need a telephoto lens. This could happen if you are photographing wildlife or sport, for example.

Autofocus: The autofocus on kit lenses tends to be slower and noisier than that on more expensive lenses. If the autofocus performance of your kit lens is holding you back, it may be time to upgrade.



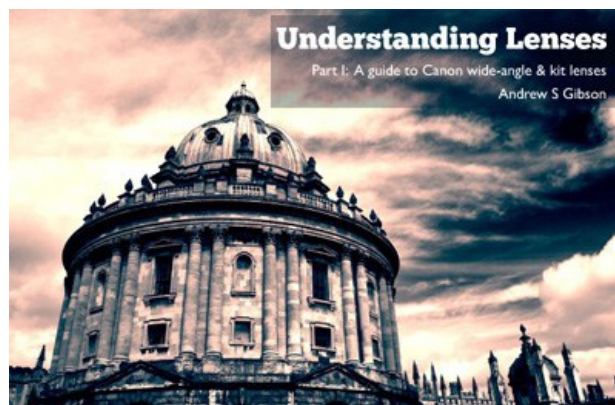
Aperture: Kit lenses are 'slow' lenses. This means they don't have a very wide maximum aperture. The reason is simple – the wider the maximum aperture the larger the lens body and lens elements required,

which pushes manufacturing costs up. Kit lenses are made with relatively small maximum apertures to keep the price down.

The maximum aperture at the 55mm end of most kit lenses is around f5.6. If this isn't wide enough, you could buy a zoom that covers the same focal length with a maximum aperture of f4 or f2.8, or a prime 50mm lens with a maximum aperture of f1.8 or wider. The wider apertures on these lenses help you take photos in low light or to use narrow depth-of-field creatively.

Build quality: If you tend to knock your camera around a bit, or shoot in bad weather, then you may need a lens that is built better than your kit lens. The top lenses in each manufacturer's range have metal bodies, metal mounts and weatherproofing.

Understanding Lenses: Part I

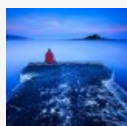


If you liked this article then take a look at my latest eBook, [Understanding Lenses: Part I – A guide to Canon wide-angle and kit lenses](#). In the next lesson I'm going to take a look at wide-angle lenses, how to get the best out of them and some of the points you should consider before buying one.



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Andrew S. Gibson is a writer, photographer, traveler and workshop leader. He's an experienced teacher who enjoys

helping people learn about photography and Lightroom. He's written over 25 popular **photography ebooks** (use the code DPS20 for a 20% discount on your first order). Download his **Composition PhotoTips Cards** now for free!

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Some Older Comments

Kishore Jothady

July 26, 2013 05:51 am

Most of my prize winning photographs are shot on a 18-55 Nikkor kit lens. The images shot with this lens have given tough fight and won hands down even in international competitions. So, why should I abandon it and spend more of my hard earned money on buying expensive lenses? Finally, it is the man behind the camera which matters. If you can produce good images with a kit lens, you are a master.

dj pitt

May 2, 2013 04:21 am

Thanks for your article. I have usually seen that a majority of people are desirous to lose weight as they wish to look slim in addition to looking attractive. Nonetheless, they do not usually realize that there are other benefits to losing weight also. Doctors state that over weight people come across a variety of conditions that can be perfectly attributed to their excess weight. Fortunately that people who are overweight in addition to suffering from several diseases are able to reduce the severity of their illnesses by means of losing weight. It is possible to see a gradual but noticeable improvement with health while even a bit of a amount of weight-loss is attained.

CL

April 18, 2013 11:43 am

I disagree with some who said kit lenses are poor quality. They may be poor quality in built mostly plastic but the glasses are good for the price. I shot mainly with 18-55 until I upraded to 16-85. I need

the extra to go wider and closer.

Ryan

December 1, 2012 04:45 pm

I'm just gonna say what I think here, Since everyone else doesn't seem to care what they say.

I have a Nikon d7000 with a kit 18-105mm. I also have a 50mm f1.8G. The sharpness from my kit lens is excellent when the lens is used properly. (proper settings) My 50mm is sharp as well (again when used with the proper settings) people on here that have a beef with this post are the people who either spent a lot of money on lenses or they got frustrated with their kit lenses, without doing research and blew a ton of \$\$ on expensive "pro" lenses. And of course got better over time and said there new lenses were way better than the kit ones. And they could say the heave pro glass.

All that matters here is that you know how to properly use your lens with your DSLR. And get shots that make you smile! :) I was caught up in this as well until I started using my Photoshop to bring out sharpness and details with the kit lens. Now I'm good! I'm not saying that I'm not going to buy better glass, I will. But not everyone has \$1,000s of dollars lying around to throw into expensive glass. And if your lens works for you then that is what counts, not necessarily what "the pros" think.

Just my 2 cents

David Wahlman

November 28, 2012 10:19 am

Thanks for sharing. It's encouraging cause I get so tired of just having my kit lenses. Thanks

Dave Moser

October 27, 2012 03:49 pm

I've been photographing for just over four years. I abandoned my kit lens only a few months into my photographic journey but in the last six months or so I've rediscovered how versatile it is along with another taboo item - my on-camera flash. Using the on-camera flash (dialed back: normally to -1EV) compensates for the small max aperture of the lens and the focal length suits me really well for family photos.

Eric

October 20, 2012 11:23 pm

Kit lens are generally work very well in most situation, even if low light, kit lens lead us to learn to improve the light. If no flash allowed, buy a good prime. Very lens have its pros and cons, learn the limitation, everything can be better!

Josh Humble

October 11, 2012 08:52 am

I have to disagree with the author. Today's kit lenses are NOT built like yesterday's kit lenses. Unless I'm missing something, the author failed to mention one of the biggest disadvantages of a kit lens - and

that's glass quality and sharpness. Yes, a kit can help a person starting out, but as anyone's eye becomes more disciplined, optical quality, constant aperture, etc., are going to be a big deal. I agree with @bryan about purchasing a quality prime lens. For example, A fixed 50mm is a fast, inexpensive, simple quality lens for someone learning photography. A fixed focal length - if fully explored - also teaches one about the qualities of that perspective, and what their lens is best used for. Today's kits are made for versatility with focal length and convenience, not quality, and this is important for anyone learning the craft.

NS

September 26, 2012 09:32 pm

thanks! Will help me use my 18-55 lens better

Gonzalo

September 26, 2012 08:21 am

The Nikon 18-55 kit lens may be cheap and slow but it is SHARP as razorblade. It is a great lens. Tell me: what percentage of your photos you shoot below f/5.6 ? For most people is few unless you are bokeh'ing a lot of your pictures. What is the sweetest spot for most lenses, even primes? The answer is f/8. Yes it is OK to have great fast primes, including wide angles and telephotos but you are an ID10T if you think your kit lens is crap or, conversely, if you think all the expensive stuff is gonna turn you into a better photographer

Barry Moss

September 18, 2012 09:44 am

I've been using a Canon 18-200 kit lens with my 50D for a while now and it's the lens found on my camera most of the time. I do have some other nice glass: a 10-20 EF-S lens for wide angle and a 70-200 2.8L IS. Both of these get used, but the 70-200 is too heavy for when I'm wandering around on vacation, unless I specifically plan to photograph some low light subject.

THE aSTIG @ CustomPinoyRides.com

September 16, 2012 09:04 pm

I couldn't agree more to this.

I do Car Photography for <http://CustomPinoyRides.com>

Almost all the photos you'll see on that website from 2009 to 2011 have been shot with a kit lens.

Everything from static, action, rolling shots, and strobist shots. It has the most useful focal length and sharpness for automotive photography.

With the help of that lens, the website has grown to one of the biggest automotive websites in my side of the world. Amazing!

Dale Vande Griend

September 7, 2012 06:23 am

Proves that great photos are a result of the photographer and not his/her equipment.

Mei Teng

September 4, 2012 10:49 am

When I first started photography, my kit lens offered a great starting point.

wedding photographer como lake

September 2, 2012 12:10 am

The list of good pictures that have been taken, now like in the past, with a "cheap" lens is infinite.. Good timing, good light and passion of being in the right place will give any photograph the mood that boring sharp pictures can't give. Or better said, they will be even more boring, it will be even more clear since they are so sharp.

Gabriele Lopez

Rick

September 1, 2012 02:50 pm

I painted a red stripe on mine and wa-la! Instant L.

Jay Rodriguez

September 1, 2012 02:03 pm

Great blog post!

I am one of the many that stood with my kit lens, and almost everyday I use it at least once because of the DOF and the wide angle range I get from this lens after so many years of practicing with it.

I greatly applaud your encouragement on keeping the kit lens... because it can typically be an awesome lens!

Jay

August 30, 2012 05:08 pm

Even if you buy more expensive lenses a kit lens will make a great macro lens with a reversing ring. You will be less worried about exposing the rear element and (at least the Canon) has a recessed rear element.

Kenny

August 29, 2012 10:50 am

I have come to love using my kit lens. I have used it more than my Tamron 24-75 2.8 here for my landscapes, and plan on using it for car shows because of the wider focal length. Here are two I did for a church with my kit lens. One taken in full day light and one taken with an overcast and rain.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/sampsonimages/7876536282/in/photostream>

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/sampsonimages/7859667384/in/photostream/>

Roman D. Sanz

August 27, 2012 02:12 am

Hello Amanda...

Sorry, your photos can be better. Wide better. Can't be taken in consideration to define "good results" from a kit lens.

This is my fb, just to be open wide to and very welcome to any critics. But need to ask for friendship first. Kind of "wat to know who can see my works".

<http://www.facebook.com/roman.d.sanz>

I use a prime lens 35mm on D frame camera. Of course Nikon (hehe)

An example.[eimg url='http://romandsanz.blogspot.jp/2012/04/flowers-at-night.html' title='flowers-at-night.html']

Betina

August 26, 2012 10:32 am

I am new to the world of DSLR and I have taken a few decent photos with my kit lens but I am an still learning the ropes of the camera and such. I did not know if the lens was of good enough quality to do what I wanted with it or if I needed a better lens. I bought my camera used and got both the kit lens as well as a nice prime lens and I tend to use the prime more often due to the type of photos I take but I will definitely give this kit lens some more attentions as I attempt to hone in my skills.

kat

August 26, 2012 07:09 am

One thing that really caught my attention about this article is the point that your one lens turns in to two treat it as 18mm and 55mm. Says a lot.

Angela

August 26, 2012 06:44 am

I started with a kit lens and I got so I could do marco with it or as close as you can get. I got some real great shots with the kit 18 to 55 lens and nikon d60. I it is a great way to start because if you are like me older and trying to learn all this tech stuff it takes a while. I still have the lens and do not plan on parting with it, it is good to refresh the brain. LOL

Robert Korn

August 26, 2012 05:48 am

Great article, too many photographers get caught up in gear envy and buy far more than they need when starting out.

Major pet peeve however, your statement that using the telephoto end of the lens has a different quality because of the "limited depth-of-field" is patently false. Actually the telephoto end of kit lenses is usually limited to F5.6 as opposed to F3.5 or so on the wide end and will not give you shallower of depth of field. Depth of field is determined only by aperture and image magnification, it has nothing directly to

do with focal length.

marius2die4

August 26, 2012 04:10 am

Olympus have some very good kit lens. I have some pics on my blog with kit lenses:
<http://marius-fotografie.blogspot.ro/>
or
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/marius2die4/>

OnyxE

August 25, 2012 11:13 am

I always used a telephoto lens with my camera and just recently found the 18-55 mm could give me more of a wide angle affect so I'm still learning what I can do with it. But it's certainly better than a telephoto for some scenery photos.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/marionlynne777/7806029508/in/set-72157631121337508/lightbox/>

Norm Levin

August 24, 2012 03:24 pm

@mukesh and everyone else-I'd say that about 90% of the images on my home page were taken with my kit lens. My #2 lens of choice is a Nikon 70-200 f2.8, which is used mainly in dim churches and temples, when I can't use a flash.

alvin

August 24, 2012 02:36 pm

Ponder this!

"A kit lens is valuable tool, it can do almost everything except do your laundry" -Jay Javier

Rene

August 24, 2012 07:58 am

The author of this article helped me to see my 18mm-55mm lens in a totally different perspective. I'm still basically an amateur still learning how to understand noise in my photos, so every article I read of this magnitude takes me one step closer to understanding the depth of my lenses. I'm a Canon owner...love my camera, and always looking for information on how to get the best use out of my camera and the lenses I have. I would like to upgrade to a newer model, but before I can learn to walk, I must learn to crawl...thus learning the ins and out of using my camera and the lenses to their fullest potential. Great article, in my opinion. Now if someone can write an article on how to best use a 500mm lens, especially when shooting the moon and other night shots with it, I'd be more than grateful.

Mukesh

August 24, 2012 03:59 am

Hi Norm, are you saying that all the pictures on your website were taken using the kit lens you've mentioned?

Norm Levin

August 24, 2012 02:37 am

The author uses a Canon kit lens as apparently most of the commentators. Let me add a few words from a Nikon user. I bought a D90 a few years ago, which came with an 18-105mm f.4/5.6 zoom. Now that's a very wide and as I've learned, useful range of focal lengths. On the D90, the relatively weak sensor didn't allow me much latitude in low light situations. When I upgraded to the D7000 with its much faster sensor, suddenly my kit lens went from OK to super. Really. I've used it at dozens of weddings and bar/bat mitzvahs where very often the lighting is less than desirable. Now the lens mechanics are starting to slip, meaning the focal length slides when I point the camera up or down. That's correctable. As far as sharpness, I can make 12x18 prints with amazing detail. Eventually, I'll get one of the Nikon wide-small tele zooms. Until then, I've made excellent images with my kit in a wide range of situations. You can see examples here:
<http://www.naturalportraitsandevents.com>

Andrew

August 24, 2012 02:01 am

For my D300 I use my 18-200. I can see its limitations but none the less I find inadequate in most situations. I am looking for a very fast fixed wide angle or perhaps a 10-24. Not certain the better route.

Michael Minick

August 24, 2012 12:30 am

I use Olympus kit lenses (14-42 & 40-150) with my E series 4/3 bodies and I think that they are great lenses. I don't see enough benefits in buying upscale lenses. Those Oly fit lenses are a cut above the typical kit lenses which others manufacturers supply. I also dug out my '68 Pentax 50mm f1.4 which, while it seriously lacks today's quality in some respects, provides me with quite different looking photos without going into Photoshop to PP. Not every photo has to be tack sharp.

ccting

August 23, 2012 11:29 am

Well, i see no wedding photos from both of you using kit lens.. I can't believe that you could use kit lens for every wedding shot.

Amanda

August 23, 2012 11:12 am

I am still using just my kit lens :) I do really want a new lens but, I think the photos are coming out great. Take a look at some examples on my facebook page.
www.facebook.com/hobbsphotographymonroeville

Tod

August 23, 2012 09:13 am

I've just purchased my first SLR with 2 kit lenses. the 55-250 has limited useability but the 18-55 is a real work horse and takes great pics and has also been a great lens to learn basic techniques on. Last week I purchased my first after market lens, a \$30 plastic Holga boy does it take great shots

Filip

August 22, 2012 03:33 pm

I agree on so many levels with the author!

I shot my first wedding with a kit lens - 90% of the images were done with it, even inside the church!

I was really worried but it came out great! The only thing is I have fallen in love so much with primes I am looking to switch to them completely lol :D

barry

August 22, 2012 11:29 am

An 18-55 is actually a 28-88 fwiw on a Canon crop

Kerry Garrison

August 22, 2012 09:04 am

Today's kit lenses are really quite good. When they started coming with image stabilization that was a major game changer. The only reason to change it is for different focal lengths or for larger apertures. Until you are ready for that, modern kit lenses are great.

Kerry Garrison

<http://cameradojo.com>

bryan

August 22, 2012 07:40 am

I disagree, for a few reasons. Kit lenses are certainly not useless, and limitations are sometimes helpful to grow, but:

1) the cost of a kit w/lens is usually more than a body with either a new 50mm fast prime or a used better lens. If nothing else, buy the body solo and get one of the hundreds of kit lenses listed weekly on ebay for peanuts that don't even sell.

2) Kit lenses are always EF-S (or whatever the Nikon equiv is), I just think EF-S lenses are a waste of money, because they're useless if you ever upgrade to a full-frame camera.

3) (and maybe the most important) People buy DSLRs expecting a huge jump in image quality and to have the ability to exploit depth of field and shoot in lower light. Especially on a medium-sensor camera, which is already compromising your low light/DOF flexibility, an f4-5.6 zoom takes away a couple crucial stops that really make the difference between point-and-shoot and DSLR.

I have several friends who ran out and bought kits against my advice, and their cameras sit on their

shelves because they realized it didn't give them much more versatility than their current P&S, and it was a drag to carry around. Once I lend them a cheap \$100 f1.8 50mm, they realize what their camera is capable of and what they were missing, but too many people never make that leap.

I'd argue a bottom-of-the-line DSLR with kit lens is not really any more versatile than a good P&S like the G12. Sure, image quality is somewhat better, but as far as useability and creative control, you can practically get the same photos out of both. The middle-quality DSLRs are much better, with more manual controls and better quality, but the 5D shows just how much difference a full-frame sensor and EF lenses make. I'm not trying to be snobby, and not everyone can afford a 5D but I really think an 85mm or 50mm f1.8 is a better way to take advantage of the versatility of a DSLR and learn how to control DoF and action than a kit lens. Restricting oneself to a single focal length is way builds character and creativity, restricting oneself to a slow lens that can't shoot in low light and can't blur backgrounds satisfactorily is just frustrating.

Mark Guest

August 22, 2012 12:10 am

A really enjoyable read. It resonated with me as I only bought my 2nd hand 350d last October with the 18-50 and 55-200 kit lenses.

You've taken some lovely photos with this kit.

Having an interest in wedding/event photography I've just invested in the efs 17-55 f2.8 though and will never go back!

Mukesh

August 21, 2012 09:36 pm

This article landed on my Google search results page in the nick of time. I've been debating the purchase of a better lens for my 500D for a while now; reading this article made me realize that I probably haven't explored the limits of my kit lens. Thanks!

Paul Deveaux

August 21, 2012 02:43 pm

What I have found is that in most situations the kit lens is sufficient to get the job done. Only in extreme lighting conditions has mine ever let me down. What really happens is that if I don't take a prime or a telephoto and the kit lens is in the bag that's what I end up using. I rather like the challenge of dealing with the limitations of the kit lens - it makes me a better photographer.

Todd Sisson

August 21, 2012 12:35 pm

Hey too true! We earned a living for 3 years off 'kit lenses' when we started out. Actually, I have only really started to splash out on big money lenses over the past couple of years - and becoming a bit of a prime lover check out my zoom vs prime death match: <http://bit.ly/MyJ0qf>.

Fancy Dancy lenses are usually worth the dough, but not always that much better than a kit lens. The

main thing with cheap optics is to learn their strengths & weaknesses.

Great write -up!

Cheers - Todd

Marcy

August 21, 2012 10:17 am

I'm so spoiled by my light, fast, SHARP fixed lenses that I just find myself annoyed at the quality of photos I take with my kit 17-85mm lens... they always seem so soft. =/ But, I do like having that 17mm wide angle at times. I guess i need to get better at figuring out how to fix that in postprocessing.

Amanda K

August 21, 2012 04:37 am

Funny timing, as I was lamenting the poor quality of my kit lens over the weekend while on a commercial shoot. I prefer my 50mm, but it doesn't work in every situation. As I research a new lens, I look forward to more posts on the topic.

Barry E. Warren

August 21, 2012 02:35 am

I use my 18mm 55mm kit lens when I shoot portraits, and macro. Nikon put out a pretty nice kit lens. Now many lens later it still serves its purpose's .

Mridula

August 21, 2012 01:54 am

I just love my 18-55 kit lens. Almost all my landscape pictures are from it. I have a 55mm fixed and a 75-300 too but my kit lens is by far my most used lens.

<http://blogs.gonomad.com/traveltalesfromindia/>

rohit kothari

August 21, 2012 01:49 am

its a great writ up and even i have cursed alot my 18-55 mm lens and bought 50mm (portrait) and 55-250mm (for travel zoom shoot) but one day when i was in tour (Ladakh) i forgot my wide angle, i just have 55-20mm lens and that lens is not at all good for landscape and that time the only lens help me is my 18-55 mm lens and you wont belive it the quality he gave me that time was amazing now my kit lens always use to be in my camera kit no matter what people will think about it :)

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