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Filters for Better Color

Text and Photos by Jack and Sue Drafaht, November, 2000

Sometimes the difference between a good photograph and a great photograph is how a photographer uses photographic tools. Take color filters, for example. Most photographers have them, but how many regularly use them? Photographers are always in a hurry to get the shot, and often feel it takes too much time to put on a filter. It's really a shame though, because filters can both correct for technical film deficiencies, and expand the photographer's creativeness.



One problem with filters is proper storage and safe transport. Filters are very fragile and can be easily damaged. Plastic cases are great for permanent storage, but they don't work well in the camera bag. Several manufacturers make filter pouches and we have found that they work great. We just select those filters we want to use for the photo session, put them in the pouches and

slip the whole pouch into the camera bag.

So which filters do you decide to take with you? If you have been in photography for very long, you probably have collected a wide selection of color filters. You probably bought a couple of filters when you purchased your camera and lens. Then each time you added a lens it inevitably had a different thread size, so you had to add additional filters or adapters. You might even have purchased a filter system that adapts to accommodate several lens diameters with one set of filters.

You need to analyze the subject matter you plan on shooting and allocate some extra time for proper filter selection. You have two different directions to consider when selecting filters: color correction and image creativity. Both can improve the quality of a color image as a corrective filter fills the gaps where film fails, and a creative filter expands your photo capabilities.



You don't have to put the filter on the camera lens to add color to a photo. Here, a red filter was placed over the main light, so that only the areas that it illuminated took on the filter's color.

Corrective color filters are known by many common names, but they all do the same job. Sometimes they may be called conversion filters, light-balancing filters, or even color-compensating (CC) filters. They compensate for lighting problems that the film cannot correct. You have to remember that, unlike the human eye which adjusts for different color temperatures, film is locked into one specific color temperature. Most films today are balanced for sunlight and flash, which cover most situations, but not

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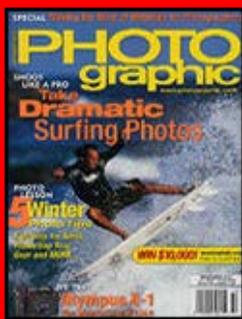
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all. As the sun rises or sets, the color temperature drops and your images take on a very warm tone. When you move into the shade, the lighting now comes from the overhead blue sky, so the color temperature becomes higher, or very blue.

If you are using color-negative film, the exposure latitude and post-printing process can correct most of these color problems, although you can achieve more consistent color correction if you use compensating filters, rather than relying on your photo lab. Slide shooters have more problems since the slide is the final product. With slides, what records on the film is all you get, so you will find that most slide shooters rely on compensating filters.

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Corrective filters come in many different flavors, and can often be quite confusing to a beginning photographer. The first filter in your pouch should be the blue 80A filter to correct daylight-balanced film when used under tungsten lights. This filter compensates for the heavy reddish cast you would get if you shot under this warm color light source without filtration. Since this lighting variation is so extreme, we highly recommend this filter for both negative and slide shooters. The 80B and 80C filters offer less correction than the 80A.



As you'd expect, colored filters let you add color to your photos. Just attach the filter to your lens, and it will give your photo its color cast. But remember, adding color doesn't necessarily make for a better photo!

Fluorescent lighting presents its own set of special problems. There are more than 40 different types of fluorescent tubes, and each has a different color balance. There are general FLD filters that correct some problems, but for absolute color correction, testing is necessary. Since we can't take the time for testing, we have found that a CC30 magenta filter gets a close color balance with most fluorescent images.

Another major color problem is the blue cast caused by taking pictures in the shade. Unfortunately, there is no one simple answer to this problem. We can't give you a specific filter to correct all images, as the blue cast changes depending on how deep the shade. We can tell you that the yellowish Series 81 filters correct for this problem, starting with a small blue-cast correction using the 81A. As the letters increase from 81B, 81C, 81D, to 81EF, each filter gets a little warmer in value and increases in density. We eventually bought the entire series and ran several tests in deep shade and decided that if we could only select one filter, it would be the 81C.

On the creative side, you have hundreds of filter choices that can alter the way your camera lens and film record a scene. The most popular filter, the polarizer, has no color at all. This filter can block or pass light waves as they are reflected off a surface. To see its effect, simply turn the polarizer's front ring slowly and different surfaces will increase or decrease in exposure and color saturation. Be sure to get a circular polarizer when using autofocus lenses.



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If you have to shoot under tungsten lighting on daylight-balanced color film (left), a No. 80A filter will correct the color balance (right). The filter didn't make off with the picture from the panel at right, however! See the text for many more ways that photo filters can improve your color photos.

One of the best uses of a polarizer is for rainbows. Since they are naturally polarized, rainbows can be enhanced by using a polarizer. With a polarizer you can also decrease reflections coming off bodies of water. If you have ever seen travel brochures offering locations with deep blue water, the photos probably were shot using a polarizing filter. If you want a really dark sky, keep the sun at a 90° angle to your camera lens (i.e., don't shoot directly toward or away from the sun). The situation becomes tricky when you want dark skies and decreased water reflections. You may have to turn the filter to achieve a polarized compromise between both subjects.

If you have a brightly colored subject and want even more saturation, the polarizer may be just the ticket. Keep turning the front ring until you achieve the desired results. The down side to using this filter is that it requires almost two more stops of exposure. You may have to use faster film or wider apertures to maintain a sharp image.

Another colorless creative filter that is great for enhancing color images is the ND, or neutral-density filter. This filter is absolutely necessary for taking long exposure pictures in daylight. Waterfalls look great when you can blur the water by extending the exposure to more than 30 seconds. The problem is that your film and aperture combination may not allow exposures long enough in daylight. Neutral-density filters come in dozens of densities, but the most common is the two-stop or 4x ND filter. When you add this filter, you can make exposures four times longer, so an 8-second exposure now becomes a 32-second exposure. Magically you have your blurred water even when the sun is shining!

Special-effects filters can help you create just about any type of color enhancement you desire. There are filters that produce color rays, starbursts, soft focus and even multiple images.

One of the newest filter types to come on the scene is the graduated filter. This filter has graduated color on one half of the filter and is clear on the other. When placed over a lens, a bland-looking sky will be enhanced by the color filter, while the bottom portion remains natural.

Let's face it, there are certain photo situations that film has a tough time handling. For those times there are color correction filters to save the day. On the other hand, filters are photographic tools that, when used properly, can help enhance and increase your photographic potential.