

How to Make a Workshop Work

by

Brooks Jensen

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[Editor's comment: Every year in the three months of December through February, if you are on anyone's mailing list you will receive everyone's photographic workshop brochures. Here are a few thoughts about workshops from my experience and both an attendee and as an instructor.]

Notes

First, let me say that this is an article in support of workshops. You should attend. I make this as a blanket statement to every reader, regardless of level of work or experience. The simple and unarguable truth is that workshops are the best stimulus for new work and personal growth, short of receiving a huge grant or knowledge of a predictable death!

Photography is an art and art is a personal expression. As we grow, our craft can grow. Notice I did not say that it *would* grow — it *can* grow. For it to grow, growth must be encouraged and fostered.

For most of us, this is a symbiotic relationship. Our personal growth can fuel our photography and our photography can fuel our personal growth. It is necessary, however, to place ourselves into an environment that is conducive to growth — particularly one outside our daily habits and comfortable surroundings.

Show your work to your family and friends and it is predictable that you will receive glowing compliments and enthusiastic acceptance. This is surely welcome. But if we limit ourselves to this consistent “warm fuzzy” we may risk becoming repetitious and blinded.

Show your work at a gallery and it is predictable that you will receive criticism. This may range from pinpoint insight that accurately disassembles your efforts with precision, to that ever-present criticism, “I think this would look a lot better in color.” Exhibition is both flattering and devastating. It may or may not be productive or growth enhancing.

Workshops overcome the limitations of both of these traditional institutions. A workshop offers insight and criticism, but from a caring group of fellow workers. Most participants know enough to offer helpful advice both blunt and compassionate. With luck, your instructors can help, too.

I attended my first photographic workshop in 1982. Since then, I have attended a couple dozen more. I've also taught a few dozen or so. I've been fortunate to learn from some excellent teachers and fellow students. I've also suffered through some awful presentations by accomplished photographers.

Here are a few ideas about workshops gathered from my experiences. I offer them in the hopes that they may motivate some of you to attend another (or your first!) workshop. In any case, I hope they may make your next one more productive.

REASONS TO ATTEND A WORKSHOP

- Reason #1. *To meet, talk to and learn from an accomplished photographer*
Choose your workshop based on the instructor(s) rather than the location, cost, topic, or agenda. It is always the instructor's wisdom, teaching skill and abilities that make or break the success of a workshop. Notice I did *not* say it was the photographer's WORK that should determine your choice. Just because one can make a good photograph does not mean they can TEACH. Far too often, workshop attendees are disappointed by a photographer whose work they admire but whose teaching skills make a workshop a disaster. See the final caution at the end of this article.

- Reason #2. *Elevate one's peer level*
In your neighborhood, there may not be one other photographer of merit; in your town, maybe a few dozen, if you're lucky. In your state, a few more. Workshops bring these geographically divergent people together. It is the best way to meet others who are as dedicated and committed to the craft as you are, no matter what your dedication or commitment level. At the workshop you will likely find "kindred spirits" who share your perspective. These can, and often do, develop into significant friendships.

- Reason #3. *See the teacher's work*
Every workshop instructor worth their salt brings at least 200 of their own photographs to show students, both in formal and informal presentations. If they bring only slides of their printed work, choose a different workshop.

The opportunity to see their work, up close and unhurried, is one of the greatest advantages of a workshop. Galleries tend to show only finished, published, sellable, "greatest hits," or famous work. At workshops you will tend to see a much broader assortment than possible in a gallery. The better workshop instructors even bring failures, works in progress, raw prints, and, occasionally, some negatives. This is often the most valuable experience of a workshop.

Here are the four questions to ask: How did they overcome the limitations of the negative? From where they started, how did they get where they ended up? Why did they make those choices? How did they know to make those choices? These are not questions easily answered in books or gallery presentations.

- Reason #4. *See fellow students good work*
It seems there is always at least one student whose work is at least as good as the teacher's. This work may be unfamiliar because they are beginning their career, unpublished, or too shy to exhibit. Workshop exposure may be the only way to see their fine works. Incidentally, these are people with whom you can often make great print trades.

- Reason #5. *Increase in your work volume prior to going*
At a workshop, we all want to put our best foot forward and show our best work. For most of us, our best work is still yet to be done. We don't want to show the limited work we have in the box in the closet!

So, we jump into the darkroom before the workshop to make new work to show. If the workshop does nothing else than provide motivation for this work, it's probably worth it.

- Reason #6. *Develop additional written resources*
At all good workshops, you will receive a suitcase full of handout materials. This is because a good teacher knows that there is so much more to teach

than time will allow AND students will only hear what they are currently prepared to hear. Handouts overcome both of these limitations.

- Reason #7. *Learn about books, magazines, other workshops, and galleries*

The current buzzword is “networking.”

- Reason #8. *Guilt yourself into producing post-workshop work*

See increase work volume above.

- Reason #9. *Pick up new mechanical techniques*

This is a misunderstood “biggie.” Most people place great importance on the new techniques they will learn. Sure, this is a reason to attend, but it should be a relatively minor reason. Most techniques have been published and can be studied without the necessity of the workshop. If this is your only reason to go, reconsider your motivations.

The exception to this is, of course, the darkroom workshop. If you are contemplating a darkroom workshop, make sure you will have a chance to actually do work yourself. Darkroom workshops where you can only watch are of limited value. All of your best questions will develop as you work. If you are limited to watching, be sure you can at least call the instructor in the weeks that follow for telephone consultations. If they are unwilling to talk to you over the phone, go elsewhere — all they want is your money.

- Reason #10. *See perfectly valid and sophisticated approaches and styles, especially ones different than your own*

We are creatures of habit. Nothing is so deadly in personal growth and to creative art than a habit that prevents creative vision. It is a natural tendency for artists to advocate their own approach as *the* Approach and *the* Vision. It is good to be humbled by seeing someone’s work that is both very accomplished and very different than our own. Who knows, it might even open a door.

- Reason #11. *Growing past the clichés*

At every workshop, you will find a handful of Ansel or Brett, or André, or Edward clones. This faction will clearly demonstrate the limitation of blind reproduction of the “compulsories.” You will likely see 4 or 5 Clearing Winter Storms, a few Peppers of various numbers, Ship Rocks a plenty, acres of Shore Acres (just for laughs, I have a collection of 16 prints of the very same rock from there), walls of White House Ruins and an occasional truly unique and visionary body of work.

It is a fine thing to be inspired by great predecessors. Visual literacy and the ability to imitate our forerunners are important learning steps. However, it is so tempting and seductive to consider this phase a destination. Attending a workshop is an effective medicine to this disease.

- Reason #12. *Find one’s own work*

As one let’s go of “master imitation,” it becomes easier to find one’s own imagery and purpose. The critique feedback and introspection that take place during the workshop and the blank wall that follows are progress. They may not feel like it, but they are.

- Reason #13. *Increase one’s visual literacy*

Photography, like literature, has an historical backdrop. Ideally, a photographer should be familiar with the work and workers that predate him. This “visual literacy” can help one learn without “reinventing the wheel,” as it were.

Workshops can be very helpful in expanding one's knowledge about historical trends, fads, and movements as well as specific images and current ideas.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

- Pitfall #1. *Don't go to make great photographs*

Long workshops are often, of necessity, scheduled during one's vacation time. There can be a certain pressure to make great images. The temptation might be to plan to attend a workshop so a certain learning and artistic production can be squeezed into the same vacation trip. This is almost always a mistake.

If the workshop is a place to learn, it is a place to experiment. It is a place to try and fail and then try again. It is a place to listen. It is a place to imitate. It is a place to socialize and network. Unfortunately, most creative photography is a lonely act. There are, of course, exceptions. Nonetheless, most photographers find their best work comes when they work intensely and with great focus. This is rarely possible in the teaching atmosphere of a workshop.

Use the workshop to learn, and specifically to learn from other people. You will have the rest of your life to create great art and learn from experience, hopefully using some of the things learned at the workshop. If you spend your limited and valuable workshop time trying to make great images, you will likely fail to make great images and fail to learn much from the workshop opportunity.

- Pitfall #2. *Getting sucked into a dominant participant's agenda*

Photography is, for many, an ego bound arena. Every workshop has at least one or two people whose primary agenda is to impress the instructor and fellow students with his or her accomplishments. Their agenda does not focus on learning because they feel (or want to feel!) they have already "arrived." A look at their work is enough to demonstrate to everybody that they have not.

It is easy to get sucked into their need for attention — both positively and negatively. You may find their agenda fascinating and allow them to dominate the conversations. You may find them narrow and become angry at their selfishness. Either way, you will have allowed them to spoil your opportunity.

I've come to appreciate these people. They are searching for some "rite of passage," an institution which is sorely lacking from the independent artist's life. It can be effective to quickly help this person "graduate" and they will often turn into a workshop asset. Try talking about this "rite of passage" business and you may find a ground for mutual understanding and quick bond with your fellow participants.

- Pitfall #3. *Field session independence*

Often an enthusiasm can build during a lecture or print review session that yearns to explode when you arrive in the field. Filled with this enthusiasm, the immediate temptation is to go off in search of the great photograph. If you give in to this temptation, you eliminate one of the great reasons to attend a workshop — contact with other photographers. Again, don't waste time during the workshop *doing* art. You will have the rest of your life to create great works after the workshop is over. Instead, use your time at the workshop to observe, experiment, ask, probe, and develop contacts, friendships and resources.

- Pitfall #4. *Price*

Be forewarned. Don't underestimate the cost of a workshop. From my experience, at the very least a workshop will end up costing twice the cost of tuition. More often it will cost three times and occasionally four times the cost of tuition! This total cost factor includes the cost of travel, restaurant meals, film, mat board and other odds and ends one buys before going to a workshop. Yes, workshops are expensive. They are even *more* expensive when one is unprepared to maximize their effectiveness.

PHOTOGRAPHERS AND TEACHERS

I started this article with a few comments on the positive contribution an effective workshop instructor can make to one's photographic growth. Since this is the most important element in the success of a workshop, let me add a few more comments about workshop instructors.

The main workshop instructor, usually a "star" personality, is, obviously, the principle reason most photographers choose a particular workshop. As Americans we worship stars. It's fun and exciting to hang around a star for a few days. There is nothing wrong with this motivation.

There can be a difference, however, between a "star photographer" and one who can help you improve your craft and imagery. Far too often, photographers are successful on the "workshop circuit" because of their pleasant or entertaining personality or the fine quality of their own photographs or publications. It is very easy to confuse these wonderful personality characteristics and technical expertise with those of a superb teacher. I would hope a clear distinction could be drawn between the two.

It is an old maxim that "Those that can, *do*. Those that can't, *teach!*" This is intended as a put-down of teachers. But, the truth is not so simple. Often those that can, can DO very well, but can't TEACH worth a hoot. Teaching is a skill as complex an art and as difficult to master as photography itself. It is a rare combination to find both skills in one person. From my own experience, only 1 in 20 accomplished photographers are effective teachers.

In essence, be careful of "instructors" who are not instructors. In my definition, a teacher is one who helps the students achieve their goals and objectives by using skillful means, compassion, wisdom, encouragement, and dedication to the student's agenda.

This is further complicated because photography is a tough way to make a living. Fine art photography is even tougher. Print sales are sporadic, produce a marginal income, and very few people can make a living selling their photographic artwork. Unfortunately, many would like to.

Among those who are, shall I say, "struggling artists" are many people who have discovered that teaching workshops is a great meal ticket. They not only get a handsome salary for a few days work, but their transportation is fully paid, which allows them the opportunity to photograph all over the country without having to pay for expensive transportation. They also find that teaching workshops is a terrific marketing tool for selling books, posters, expensive prints, and future workshops.

In short, non-teachers generally strive to further their photographic careers and reputations. I cannot blame them for wanting to achieve these objectives. However, the proper and appropriate solitary objective for a workshop instructor should be to offer high-caliber instruction, personal contact with

students, and the means for each and every one of them to further their artistic photographic objectives, goals, and potential. All other benefits to a workshop instructor are icing on the cake and should be viewed as a bonus and not detract from the spirit of compassionate teaching and an attitude of service.

For example, many instructors' attitudes toward field instruction appear to be, "If you want to tag along and watch how I photograph, you're welcome to do so." Although this can be an effective method of DEMONSTRATION, it does not replace and should not dominate INSTRUCTION through helping the student in a problem solving, hands-on situation. Demonstration without any hands-on student participation is an insensitive approach to teaching.

In my opinion, any instructor who attends a workshop with the objective of creating some of his own personal work during the workshop outings has missed the objective of being a workshop teacher. Workshop instructors, if they cannot resist the temptation to become absorbed in creating their own photographs, should not bring a camera into the field, unless for use of shooting Polaroids for instructional demonstration.

An instructor who accepts the responsibility to serve the students, understands the role of leader — that of skilled and sensitive servant.

Unfortunately, not all photographers who teach workshops are great organizers. Workshop teachers are often invited to teach because they are effective artists. True to the stereotypical image of an artist, they are often scattered and intuitive thinkers. This is a virtue for creating art, but a disadvantage when teaching. One of the most consistent failings I have seen is a lack of pre-workshop preparations including pre-workshop communications with the attendees on proper preparation for the workshop.

Therefore, from my experience I've compiled the following list of items to take to a workshop to maximize the benefits. In addition to the obvious camera gear and clothes list, consider these items also:

THINGS TO TAKE/PREPARE

- **Polaroid back and film**

Since this is a learning experience, get immediate feedback from the instructor. Polaroids are, in my opinion, one of the most valuable tools you can have with you at a workshop.

- **Tape Recorder**

- 10-20 hours of blank tape
- external microphone

The simple truth is that effective listening also involves mental questioning, relating, organizing and brainstorming. Humans cannot possibly hear everything that is said to them in the intense environment of a workshop. Note taking is useful. Tape recording and re-listening is better. If the instructor was good and the workshop lively, listening to the discussions again via tapes will be a pleasure. (And if the instructor was bad or the group dead, you can always record over the tapes!)

In addition, next month or next year, you will be at a different point in your photographic career. Re-listening to the tapes then will likely allow you to hear things you were not prepared to hear the first time around.

Common courtesy requires that you be sure to ask the instructor and the

other participants if they mind if you record the event. I have often found them more than willing. As an offer of friendship, I have found it useful to make copies available to the other participants if they'd like to have their own.

- **35mm camera**

Snap shots will be valuable in time. Far too often, since the workshop is perceived as a place of ART, snapshots seem inconsequential. I have often found that reviewing snapshots has reminded me of things I was too busy to see or fully comprehend while absorbed in a given subject. It is also interesting to photograph other people photographing and then study their technique and approach later via your notes and snapshots.

In good workshops, relationships are founded. A few weeks after the workshop is over, send a snapshot of a new friend to them along with a note of gratitude. I am amazed how many doors of long-term friendship have opened from this simple idea.

- **Ektachrome slide film**

In case there is overnight slide processing nearby. Alternatively, consider Polaroid slides if you have a processor.

- **Books, magazines, topical interest items**

Take any new books or things of interest you have along that line that may be of interest to the others or that might stimulate conversations or ideas.

- **Mail order catalogs**

e.g., *Light Impressions*, *University Products*, *Calumet*, *Shutterbug*

- **Thermos**

Other than air to breathe, coffee is the next most important survival tool for a long workshop.

- **Cushion to sit on**

Hard chairs win the battle after about 4 hours.

- **Extra pens and paper**

Good workshops are on the move. You may not always be at a place where your notebook is handy. I always include both a pocket notebook and my micro tape recorder for impromptu notes in the field, cafe, car and even rest room! Creative ideas are not picky about when they pop into consciousness. Be prepared to capture them whenever they arrive.

After all, part of the reason you elect to attend a workshop is to place yourself in a highly charged, creative environment that will allow a great deal of subconscious as well as conscious growth. If you are not prepared for this subconscious overload and the subsequent spewing out of creative ideas, you run the risk of diffusing much of the benefit of the workshop.

- **Business cards of your own to pass out**

These can be essential to make contacts and develop relationships that last beyond the workshop.

- **3x5 cards to write names on for those who don't have cards**

- **List of prepared questions for the instructor**

Play a game with yourself before the workshop. Imagine the workshop instructor is with you in your photographing or darkroom sessions over the

weeks and months before the workshop. (Most workshops require advance registration, so you probably know long beforehand that you are going to attend.)

At every opportunity, think what you would like to ask the instructor at that moment of peak activity. Jot this question down. By the time the workshop comes around, you'll have a nice list of objectives with which to begin the workshop with a running start.

- **Paragraph stating your expectations for the workshop**

This will not only focus your energies before the workshop but will also give the instructor some direction. It has been my experience that instructors often arrive with only a vague outline of the objectives and schedule for the workshop. A typical beginning question from instructors is, "What do you want to get out of this workshop?"

Every workshop instructor leaves time available for adapting his or her presentation to the needs of the students. If you arrive with a well-defined expectation, you are much more likely to influence the instructor's free time and get your objectives met.

- **Negatives**

Take negatives of particularly troublesome images. Don't just take your successes! Sure, it's nice to show off a little. Everyone does and this is a fine time and place to do so. But remember the reasons for going are primarily (or should be) growth, not validation.

- **Field notes on how you exposed, composed and the lighting conditions**

If you take field notes, bring them. If not, try to reconstruct the situation for the prints and negatives you take. Questions about these issues will surely surface and without this information, the instructor can offer little specific help.

- **Your light meter**

Workshops are an ideal time to check your light meter accuracy. During the field sessions, compare your meter's reading of a test subject to the reading someone else gets with their meter. If you do this with the dozen or so other participants, you'll get a good idea of your light meter's tendencies.

- **Checkbook**

Almost without exception, workshop instructors bring work to sell at the workshop. They are often artists in mid-career and are quite collectible. They will likely offer a substantial discount from their gallery prices.

Workshops are also a fine opportunity to buy or swap prints with one's fellow students. Students are typically at the beginning of their careers and either have no gallery representation or little sales experience. If their work is of a desirable quality, some truly outstanding bargains can be arranged.

- **Finally**

If you fail to make great art or great strides in your art career, it is always an acceptable compromise if you can just remember to have *fun*.