GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CAMERA

Chapter 2
Whether you work with an inexpensive point-and-shoot or an expensive SLR, your camera will have a fully automatic mode. In this mode, it will make all of the critical decisions required to take a good photo. It will focus, select exposure settings, calculate correct color, and make many other important decisions.
Auto mode can’t compose your shot for you, of course, and there’s no guarantee that it will always make the best decision, creatively, but in general, auto modes on cameras today are extremely capable, and will almost always make very good—and often the best—decisions.
Because auto modes do such a good job, they provide an excellent way to practice some fundamental skills. With them, you can start shooting right away and then activate more advanced features later. In this chapter, we’re going to take advantage of Auto mode, so that you can begin practicing shooting right now. Along the way, you’re going to get an introduction to some fundamental photographic concepts. We’ll build on these core skills throughout the rest of the book. If you’re a more advanced user, there may not be anything new for you in this chapter, but give it a skim anyway. If it seems way below your skill level, don’t worry, we’ll soon be moving on to more advanced topics.
Point-and-Shoot or SLR

The digital camera market is divided into two major categories: point-and-shoot cameras and single lens reflex, or SLR cameras. While both types share many features, and both are capable of producing great images, they vary significantly in their capabilities and the way you use them.
Point-and-Shoots

The term *point-and-shoot* covers a huge range of sizes, body designs, and capabilities. While some people think *point-and-shoot* implies "lower quality" or "underfeatured," this isn’t necessarily true, so don’t be prejudiced by this term. These days, *point-and-shoot* digital cameras can have pro-quality lenses, possess extensive feature sets, and produce excellent images.
Figure 2.1 Point-and-shoot cameras run the gamut from tiny, easily pocketable cameras to larger units with longer lenses, more controls, and advanced features.
With a point-and-shoot camera, you usually use the LCD screen on the back of the camera as your viewfinder. With it, you can frame your shot and check the camera’s current status. Menu settings and other control readouts are also displayed on the LCD. Some point-and-shoot cameras also include an *optical viewfinder*, which is a small window you can look through to frame your shot.

Your point-and-shoot probably also has a built-in flash, and depending on how sophisticated it is, it might have any number of additional buttons and controls. We’ll discuss these in more detail later.
Figure 2.2 On a point-and-shoot camera with an optical viewfinder, you look through one lens, but the camera’s image sensor looks through a second lens. On an SLR, you look through the same lens that the image sensor uses.
SLR, or single lens reflex, means that your camera’s viewfinder looks through the same lens that is used to focus light onto the image sensor inside the camera body (see Figure 2.3). You’ll learn more about these differences in Chapter 3, “Camera Anatomy.” The advantage of an SLR viewfinder is that it shows a much more accurate framing than the viewfinder on a typical point-and-shoot camera, and it shows the effects of any filters or lens attachments that you might have added.
As on a point-and-shoot, many SLRs allow you to use their LCD screens as a viewfinder; however, the optical viewfinder on an SLR will always be much brighter and clearer than what you see on an LCD screen on any camera. There are other important viewfinder differences, which we’ll discuss later.

Almost all digital SLRs use removable lenses, meaning you can change to a different type of lens at any time. In addition, you can add specialty lenses, such as tilt-and-shift lenses for architectural photography or telescope mounts for astronomical photography. The capability to change lenses also means that you can improve image quality by investing in better (although more expensive) lenses.
SLRs also offer other more professional features than their point-and-shoot counterparts, such as more sophisticated focus mechanisms, faster performance, the ability to shoot raw format, advanced external flash systems, body designs tailored to rugged environments, and more (see Figure 2.3).
Compact Interchangeable Lens Cameras

Sitting between SLRs and point-and-shoots is a new category of camera that has many of the quality and usability advantages of an SLR, but that is closer to the size of a point-and-shoot. Similar to an SLR, compact interchangeable lens cameras (CILC) have removable lenses and larger image sensors, as well as high-end features such as full manual controls. But CILC cameras are smaller than even the tiniest SLR, making them much easier to tote around (see Figure 2.4).
Figure 2.4 Micro Four Thirds cameras, such as the Panasonic GF1 on the right, are just one type of a new category of camera that offers removable lenses and excellent image quality in a far smaller package than a typical SLR.
The dominant CILC cameras at the time of this writing conform to the Micro Four Thirds specification. Olympus and Panasonic both make Micro Four Thirds cameras; however, Nikon and Fuji are also making their own CILC cameras, which use a different lens mount than Micro Four Thirds.

Compared to a point-and-shoot, a CILC camera offers better image quality and more control. However, note that unlike an SLR, it won’t offer optical viewfinders—only electronic LCD viewfinders.
Unless it’s an older, extremely simple model, your camera will have a mechanism for choosing a shooting mode. The shooting mode you choose determines which decisions the camera will make and which decisions will be left up to you.

In Auto mode, the camera will make most, if not all, decisions. On all cameras, Auto mode will determine all essential exposure settings, as well as many other important parameters, such as whether the flash should fire. Some cameras will even automatically detect if you need to be in a different mode, for example, if your subject is smiling, if the camera is shaking, and more.