

Through The Lens

*A guide to digital photography for computer enthusiasts.
After the click of your camera, you're only half done!*

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Decisions, decisions: What lenses to buy?

by Lynda Buske

As with so many things related to photography, the type of lenses you purchase should depend on what type of photography you do, where you do it, your physical or psychological limitations, and your budget. Let me explain...

Typically, a DSLR or mirrorless camera comes with a “kit” lens which may or may not be the ideal lens for you. Usually, it is not a particularly exciting or high-quality item. Consider buying the camera body without the kit lens or keep it as a backup. I once received a fixed-length “nifty fifty” (50 mm)* and still use it for portraiture and some closeups. For anything other than the kit lens, you should think about the following factors:

Do you mostly take photos while on vacation?

If you mostly enjoy photography when on vacation, you may not be willing to lug multiple lenses as carry-on luggage, or on and off buses, etc. You may want one lens that will succeed in capturing the vast majority of shots you wish to take. For this situation, a zoom lens with a range of say 18-28mm on the wide angle end through to 200-400mm for zooming might be ideal. As a general rule, zoom lenses with a very wide range (e.g. 8 to 10x or more) may not be as sharp as those with a shorter range, such as a 2 or 3x zoom.

Do you regularly shoot within a 200km radius of your home?

If you are like me and shoot regularly (almost daily in autumn!) in the Ottawa area, you can leave some gear in your car to cut down on prep time. For me, this includes my tripod, older back-up camera, rubber boots for wading into rivers and plastic bags for when I shoot so low I want the camera on the ground. In the late summer, I also throw a stepstool into the trunk so I can get above tall reeds. On the day of the shoot, I then add my knapsack that will have all my main gear (body, lenses, filters, etc.). With this type of photography out of a car, packing light is not necessary and the camera/lens weight is not a factor unless I’m going to hike a long distance.

Do you enjoy spending time on wildlife photography?

If you are an avid bird/wildlife photographer, you may consider purchasing a very long lens (e.g. up to 600-800mm zoom). However, these are pricey and very heavy (the lens alone can be 4lbs or more). If you are shooting water birds or mammals, I imagine a good tripod would take the weight off you. However, if you like to shoot song birds while walking through the woods, they are typically overhead. Not only do you have to factor in the weight of carrying the lens to the site, you must think what it will be like to hold the camera over your head for 15-20 minutes while you wait for the right moment. Birds are known for their lack of cooperation!

Do you mostly do landscape photography?

Landscape photography often demands a fairly wide angle (18 – 35mm) to capture wide vistas, but having a longer focal length (up to 200mm or longer) available can be nice to capture details, especially in distant parts of the scene.

Do you want to try macro photography?

Most standard lenses do not allow you to get closer than about a foot or two from your subject. With a good number of pixels, you can certainly crop closer when you get home but to get super close you will probably lose too much resolution in the resulting image. You may also not get as soft a bokeh (out-of-focus background) as you would like even at the widest aperture. Macro lenses allow you to get extremely close to your subject. A true macro lens has a magnification ratio of 1:1, and a minimum focus distance around 30cm. A magnification ratio of 1:1 means that the ratio of the subject size on the sensor plane is the same as the actual real-life size of your subject.

Are you willing to change lenses multiple times during an outing?

I often bring my macro lens on an outing and will switch back and forth between it to my zoom multiple times depending on what I'm shooting. However, not everyone does this and that is what I mean by psychological limitations. I see people lug around a lot of gear but then not be bothered to make the swaps and just take the shot with a lens that will do a good enough job. While I usually bring my macro with me, I admit that it is the lens I will leave behind if I'm flying to another country and touring around.

Do you like to shoot inside buildings?

An ultra-wide-angle lens (18 mm or less) would probably be the best choice if you like to capture the interior of churches or other buildings. Personally, it is not a priority for me so I just use the wide angle on my cell phone and its ability to cope with low light.

There are lenses such as a fish eye lens that can give a special effect. My thoughts on this type of lens is that I would tire of the effect quickly. I would look instead for software that maybe give you the fish eye (or other special effects) on a normal image.

What are your budgetary constraints?

What is biggest bang for your buck? Do you want to buy only the optimal lens that will get the most use for the type of photography you do? Or are you willing to spend money on other lenses that you may only use a few times a year? Do you simply get pleasure out of adding gear to your collection? All these scenarios are valid as long as you feel you are getting value for the money you invest. Check lots of lens reviews before buying, then research the best place to buy those lenses in Canada. Call a friend (like Chris Taylor).

What are your physical limitations?

Even before you buy an extra lens, there are physical considerations that can affect all sorts of camera equipment purchases from the camera body weight, type of strap you buy, flip out display screens if you can't bend down low, etc. If you want super light with lots of manual overrides and good quality zooms, there are many bridge cameras that are very light but do not typically have interchangeable lenses.

Those who shoot with a DSLR or mirrorless know that the heaviest part of the camera is often the lens. How long will you be carrying the camera? Can you carry a heavier camera if you had a better strap design for your body? For instance, if you have neck issues, a traditional strap could cause undue strain whereas a sling strap that crosses your body would not. Think of these types of options before you rule out a lens based on weight.

*in this article, focal length numbers are for full frame and if you use a camera with a smaller sensor such as APS-C or micro four thirds, apply the appropriate factor to the focal length.

