

HALLOWEEN PHOTOGRAPHY TIPS: HOW TO TAKE GREAT HALLOWEEN PHOTOGRAPHS

<http://www.ritzcamera.com/static/articles/tips/halloween-photography.html>



October is a great month to take pictures. The humid hazy days of summer have given way to crisp cool days with clear air and bright blue skies. The perfect combination for sparkling photographs! The sun is lower in the sky, providing wonderful long shadows in early morning and late afternoon. So conditions are perfect for photographers ? amateur or professional ? to get out there and take great pictures.

October starts with the wonderful colors of fall and the harvest, and it ends with a bang with Halloween ? one of the year's greatest photo opportunities.

Let's cut to the Main Event ? Halloween ? and discuss how you can make all types of dramatic and eerie Halloween photographs. This is a great opportunity to use your camera. Enjoy!

Pope Gregory III started it all in 739 A.D. when he officially designated All Saints Day, but he wouldn't recognize Halloween as we celebrate it today. It's become a night of fantasy for children of all ages ? a night of glowing jack-o-lanterns, spooky costumes, and kids trick-or-treating. It's a night of spooks and spirits.



Some years, it's not even confined to just one evening. If Halloween falls on a weekend, or even Monday, the festivities

and parties will likely start on Friday night, carry through the weekend, and culminate with Trick or Treating on Monday. And, that's not all, in some parts of the world — for example, Mexico — November 1 is "Dia de los Muertes" (Day of the Dead), a major holiday with both comic and solemn overtones to commemorate the memory of departed ancestors. (In case you're wondering, the picture on the left is a "typical" Day-of-the-Dead party favor. Some party. Some favor!)

It's easy to turn Halloween fantasy into permanent photographic memories if you keep just two things in mind: First, NYI's three Guidelines for Better Photographs. Second, the "spirit" of Halloween.

Let's start with the NYI Guidelines. As with any picture you take any time, good photographs depend upon your fulfilling NYI's Three Guidelines. Before you press the shutter, you must decide on the answer to the three questions we call our Three Guidelines: One: What is the *subject* of the photograph? Two: How can I *focus attention* on that subject? Three: How can I *simplify* the subject?

For example, look at this picture of "Ms. Dracula." Here's a subject that can sink her teeth into you! All Three Guidelines are clearly met. There's no doubt as to what the photographer had in mind. Those fangs are clearly the subject here. They're right up front and stand out loud and clear. There's nothing to distract you from the intent of this picture. Ms. Dracula's eyes are staring right at you, and make it absolutely clear that you ? the viewer ? are about to be lunchmeat! Ouch.



But, as we've noted, the Three Guidelines are only part of the story on how to get great Halloween photographs. The second key is to capture the "spirit" of Halloween. What's the "spirit" of Halloween? Fantasy. Fear. The supernatural. The eerie. The unworldly. And how can we capture this "spirit" in our Halloween photographs? The best way is with the right dramatic lighting. Since nighttime ghouls are so central to the holiday, this often means shooting at night or in dim light.

"Hey, shooting at night? No problem, right? Just use a flash, right? Wrong! Halloween should look dark. Using flash will give you bright lighting of scary creatures. Is that what you want? No. They look a lot more frightening when you view them in the dim light of the crypt or the glow of the moon. Lighting? Yes. Perhaps, "ghoul lighting." (We'll explain this in a moment.) Perhaps, candlelight. But flash? Usually, no!"

We divide Halloween subjects into three basic groups, and each calls for its own type of lighting: 1) Glowing Jack-O-Lanterns; 2) Kids and adults in costumes; and 3) Kids out trick-or-treating. Let's look at each category separately.

Jack-O-Lanterns

Here's one area where it's almost always better to avoid the harsh, show-all light of the flash. Let's say you've just finished carving a scary, snaggle-toothed jack-o-lantern. Let's take some pictures of it right away.

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You can end up with a photo like the one on the left of the carved pumpkin where you carved it ? say, on the doorstep. Problem: The setting is apparent. And the setting can distract from the subject. Better to place it somewhere that is less distracting ? for example, in the garden where the leaves can form a background for the jack-o-lantern ? as in the picture on the right.

Better, but not perfect. Why? Because the real magic of the jack-o-lantern doesn't emerge until it's dark and you've lit a candle inside to capture that ghoulish glow.

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So you wait until dark to shoot. Now, we have some new problems. If you don't override the "automatic flash" on your camera, your flash will fire and you'll end up with a picture like the one on the left, above. In this strobelight, you don't see much of the inner glow of the candles, but you see every "complexion" defect on the pumpkin's skin and a shiny highlight that screams "Flash!"

On the other hand, if you override the flash and make sure it doesn't fire, you end up with a picture like the one on the right, above ? lots of candle glow, but no sense of pumpkin! This isn't exactly right either!

What to do? How can you get a combination picture that shows the glow of the candles, and also shows the pumpkin?

Call in the pyromaniacs. What we do is place the jack-o-lantern in the fireplace and make a small fire from a few sheets of newspaper behind it. Result? You get something like these:



How do you get these different effects? By varying the lighting. (By the way, one thing is constant. To get enough candlelight inside the pumpkin, we use three candles. Our experience is that one or two are not enough!) The picture on the top left is taken with just the three candles inside the pumpkin and the fire behind. The picture in the top right is lit the same, but we've also added strobe. Personally, we think the flash is a little too bright. So we shot the picture on the right using strobe again, only this time we put one finger in front of the flash to cut down the amount of light that hits the subject. Which of these pictures do you like best? It's a matter of choice.



Here's another photography technique for low-light Halloween photographs. Take a tip from the pros. When they want to show a scene at night, they often shoot before it's totally dark. They shoot during twilight when the sky has that rich blue/purple color shortly after sunset. Like them, you'll find that finished prints or slides make the scene look darker than it really is so that the viewer will assume it was shot at night.

When you apply this photography technique, if you're using a film camera, use fast film. Whether you use a single lens reflex (SLR) or point-and-shoot, load your camera with a film that is ISO 400 or faster. You'll be thrilled with the results. Try it!

If you're using a digital camera, try boosting your camera's effective speed or ISO. While this may add a little noise to the photo, that won't be inconsistent with the subject matter.

Gremlins and Goblins and Ghouls

Everybody enjoys putting on a scary Halloween costume and having fun. In fact, you may be surprised to learn that in recent years, sales of costumes for adults have outpaced costumes for kids! Whether you pose portraits of your favorite poltergeist while he or she is getting ready to haunt the neighborhood, or you "grab" candid of spooky partygoers or paraders, the steps are the same.

Let's say you want to take a portrait of your little boy (or kid brother) in a "scary" costume before he goes out trick-or-treating. First, figure out what's the best part of the costume. Is it just the mask on the face? Or is it the mask and the torso too? Then get in close and fill the frame with the parts you've decided are best. A pro tip: It's usually better if you don't shoot from head to toe since shoes are often the weakest part of a costume. (One year we wanted to go to the local Halloween parade disguised as a rabid raccoon, but we just couldn't locate the right footwear.)

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If you're shooting a child or a group of children, bend down low to kid's-eye level. Don't shoot from adult level down on these little ghouls ? you'll trivialize them. Or if you're limber enough, bend down to below kid's-eye level or even lie down for the shot. Nothing makes a monster more imposing than looking up at the scary countenance.

If you're shooting two monsters, get them as close together as possible and, again, get close enough to fill the frame with the best parts of their costumes. People tend to drift apart when there's a camera pointed at them. You want just the opposite ? no space between those monsters ? like this:



Important Halloween Photography Tip: Make sure to take a photo of your favorite creature with and without the mask. That way in future years everyone will be able to identify the little devil behind the mask, and this year you may be able to use the picture for your holiday card. After all, if all you take is a picture of your nephew dressed and masked as Spiderman or one of the Fantastic Four, viewers won't know who's under that mask.

The same Halloween

photography tips go for portraits of adults in costume, only you don't have to get down so low to be at eye-level. But don't forget the possibility of bending low or even lying down to make the monster look taller and scarier.

And don't forget Fido or Cleo. Put a mask or silly hat on the family pet, and shoot ? but fast. The suffering beast will probably be too embarrassed to suffer this indignity for more than a few seconds.

© NYI Student Joan Howe



When you turn to groups of monsters, aim for the two elements that help any group

photograph. First, show relationship by having them close together, touching one another wherever possible ? you know, arm over the shoulder, etc. Second, make it casual. Try to get them to laugh and relax.

With groups of monsters ? young or old ? it's the same. First, pack them together, have them touch, and fill the frame with them. Second, keep it casual. Don't line them up like soldiers at attention. If you're photographing three, group them in a triangle ? this arrangement usually looks best. In a larger group, like the one shown below on the left, have some kneel or crouch down in front of the others so you get an up-and-down arrangement. Regardless of the grouping, before you shoot get them to give their scariest growls and grunts and moans. In this case, it beats laughing!



Now, how should we light these posed creatures? When possible, try "ghoul lighting." We mentioned "ghoul lighting" before. What is it? Remember how, as kids, we would shine a flashlight up at our face from below the chin. This is "ghoul lighting." It's different from our everyday lighting which is almost always from overhead, whether it comes from the sun or from room lights. Ghoul lighting creates shadows on the face that are eerie, other-worldly, exotic ? in a word, "ghoulish." If you're taking a closeup of a face, here's what we suggest: Don't use your flash. Rather, have the vampire hold a flashlight about six inches under his chin and point the light up onto his face. Then just bare a few fangs, and Eek!

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Candid pictures at parties and parades use pretty much the same photography techniques. While you may have to react faster, the secret is to decide on the best part of the costume before you shoot, then get in close enough to fill the frame with this part. Chances are, you'll have to use strobe to get enough light, but often you'll get a better-lit picture if you just use available light. Of course, if you plan to use available light, once again we suggest you use a fast film ? ISO 400 or faster. With a digital camera, you'll probably want to use your flash.

Trick-or-Treat

We really have two different types of situations here. First, Halloween photographs you take from inside your house of goblins who come trick-or-treating to your door. Second, Halloween photographs you take from outside a neighbor's door when you follow around

after your own baby goblin. We made the portrait of this scary trick-or-treater using the ghoulish lighting technique that we described above.

When you're taking pictures of monsters coming to trick-or-treat at your door, you have to be ready. Kids come and go mighty fast. Here's one time when flash on camera can come in handy.



It's best if you have two people in the house. One to answer the door. The other to take the picture from behind so that the photo includes both the person answering the door and that porchful of ghoulish visitors. Tell the ghouls they'll have to grimace and groan before treats are dispersed ? then snap the shutter while they're howling.

If you are following your own kids with your camera on their trick-or-treat rounds, try to capture their expressions of glee when candy is poured into their outstretched hands. As always, get in close. And ? very important ? position yourself so that the door won't swing open and block your view.

In sum, the key to great Halloween photos boils down to following the three NYI Guidelines and capturing the spirit of the occasion ? ghoulish celebration and silliness. So, for all types of great Halloween photographs, know what you want the subject of each of your pictures to be, and make it important in the frame usually by making it big and up front in the frame. Then add the "mood" that captures the spirit of Halloween by the ghoulish way you light your pictures and/or the silly way you pose your subjects.

If you apply these simple ideas, you're going to make this a Halloween you'll never forget!