

# CAMERA BASICS SERIES - SHOOTING MODES EXPLAINED

Quick Guide  
Written by Angela Fulks



# Before you dive into this guide, here's a few other free resources to help you learn photography:



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Shooting modes may be confusing for people just starting out in photography. After all, there are so many letters and icons on that mode dial! What do these letters and icons mean?

Let's break down their meaning and get a better understanding of how these shooting modes affect our photography.

**This is what we will be covering in this guide:**

- Auto mode
- Program mode

- Shutter speed priority mode
- Aperture priority mode
- Manual mode
- The differences in the Nikon and Canon mode dials
- A note on scene modes

 **Recommended Reading:** Want a step-by-step guide on photography skills with your DSLR? Grab a copy of our best-selling guide, the [DSLR Crash Course](#).




Photograph by Angela Fulks

*This photo was shot in auto mode and, to be honest, it's a perfectly fine photograph. The camera focused on the butterfly perfectly. The only thing I don't like is that the camera flash did pop up, due the scene being too dark for my camera. You can see the flash reflecting off of the branch underneath the butterfly. This is one thing to be aware of when shooting in auto mode – the camera flash will fire if the scene is too dark for the camera.*

## AUTO MODE

As the name suggests, using auto mode will give your camera full control of shutter speed, aperture, and ISO. The camera will guess what settings to use based on the conditions you are shooting in and what it sees in the viewfinder. It's true that our cameras may not always get this right, but cameras today do a pretty good job of getting it close most of the time.

Shooting in auto mode has some great benefits, especially for beginner photographers. Finding out what we love to photograph is so important, and using auto mode is perfect for doing that without bogging us down and making us decide what each setting should be. Use the auto mode while developing your photographic instincts or simply getting used to the feel of your camera in your hands. There's no right or wrong way to use this mode.

 **Key Lesson:** Auto mode gives your camera full control of the settings when taking a photograph, even whether or not to use the camera flash.




Photograph by Angela Fulks

*This photo was taken using program mode with the ISO set at 200. The camera read the scene well using this mode, and I'm pretty happy with how this photo turned out. The butterfly is in focus and the photo is well lit.*

## PROGRAM MODE

In program mode, you will control the ISO, but the camera will control the shutter speed and aperture settings. This mode can be helpful when you aren't totally confident about shutter speed or aperture settings but want a quick way to brighten or darken your photograph. It's also a good way to learn how the ISO setting will affect noise in our photos and practice adjusting it accordingly.

 **Key Lesson:** The photographer controls the ISO setting when shooting in this mode.




Photograph by Angela Fulks

*This photo was shot in shutter priority mode and looks quite a bit darker than the other two modes so far. The camera chose an aperture of f/8. At this aperture, more of the photo is in focus but the photo is also quite a bit darker.*

## SHUTTER PRIORITY MODE

Shutter priority mode will give you control over your shutter speed and ISO while the camera controls the aperture.

If you are shooting in a situation where you need to freeze the motion of your subject or even want to experiment with motion blur, then this is the mode to use! It's an easy way to photograph when at a sports event or to add motion to your photo by just adjusting your shutter speed.

 **Key Lesson:** Shutter priority mode gives the photographer control over the shutter speed and ISO settings.




Photograph by Angela Fulks

*In aperture mode, I chose an aperture of f/7.1, an ISO of 400, and the camera chose the shutter speed at 1/250. The photo is still quite a bit darker than the first two examples, but the depth of field is much shallower than in shutter priority mode. I like this photo much more than the photo shot in shutter priority mode.*

## APERTURE PRIORITY MODE

This mode allows the photographer to control the aperture settings while the camera decides what the shutter speed and ISO should be.

Aperture controls depth of field and this mode makes it really easy to switch between a shallow depth of field and a deep depth of field while the camera does the rest!

 **Key Lesson:** The photographer has control over the aperture and ISO settings in aperture priority mode.




Photograph by Angela Fulks

*I wanted to kick up the creativity in this photo a notch and give the illusion of movement of the butterfly's wings. The best way to accomplish this was to take full control of the settings by using manual mode. I lowered the shutter speed to 1/30 and waited for the wind to catch the wings and then pressed the shutter. This resulted in motion blur at the top of the butterfly's wings!*

## MANUAL MODE

Manual mode leaves the photographer in complete control of the shutter speed, aperture, and ISO. This allows us to spread our creative wings in our photography however we choose! Manual mode will let us change the shutter speed, aperture, and ISO independently of each other, but the camera will not adjust anything based on changing shooting conditions like it will in other modes.

 **Key Lesson:** Manual mode gives the photographer full control of their camera! The settings can be changed independently of one another in this mode.



## SYMBOLS FOR THESE MODES

Shooting modes are marked differently on different camera brands. Here is a list of how these modes are indicated on Nikon and Canon cameras.

### NIKON DIGITAL CAMERAS:

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- Auto Mode: shown as a green camera symbol
- Program Mode: shown as the letter P
- Shutter Priority Mode: shown as the letter S
- Aperture Priority Mode: shown as the letter A
- Manual Priority Mode: shown as the letter M

### CANON DIGITAL CAMERAS:

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- Auto Mode: shown as a green circle around an A or an A+
- Program Mode: shown as the letter P
- Shutter Priority Mode: shown as the letters TV
- Aperture Priority Mode: shown as the letters AV
- Manual Mode: shown as the letter M



**Key Lesson:** Shooting modes are labeled differently on each camera brand.



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Photograph by Angela Fulks

## A NOTE ABOUT SCENE MODES

You have probably noticed that there are additional symbols on the mode dial of your camera. These are called scene modes and they are an extension of the Auto Modes. These tell the camera to guess the best settings for a particular genre or type of subject matter. For example, landscape mode is usually represented as a mountain symbol. These modes take the guesswork out of photographing the scenes that the camera is seeing through the viewfinder. Scene modes may be handy in a pinch, but I wouldn't recommend using them, especially when trying to learn how to work your camera yourself.

I don't believe that there is a right or wrong way to learn how to control our cameras, but perhaps learning how to use each shooting mode before moving to the next will ease the transition between auto and full manual mode. You may even find that one specific mode works better for you and your photography than another. Never be afraid to experiment with these to help you along the way in your photography journey!

## Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) True or False: Auto mode gives your camera full control of the camera settings.
- 2) True or False: The photographer cannot control the ISO setting in program mode.
- 3) True or False: Shutter priority mode gives the photographer control of the shutter speed and ISO settings.
- 4) True or False: Aperture priority mode does not give the photographer control of the ISO setting.
- 5) True or False: When shooting in manual mode, the camera can still override the settings the photographer has chosen to use.
- 6) True or False: There is no right or wrong way to learn when shooting beyond auto mode.



## Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (*and FREE!*) photography resources:



### 3 Free Photography Cheat Sheets

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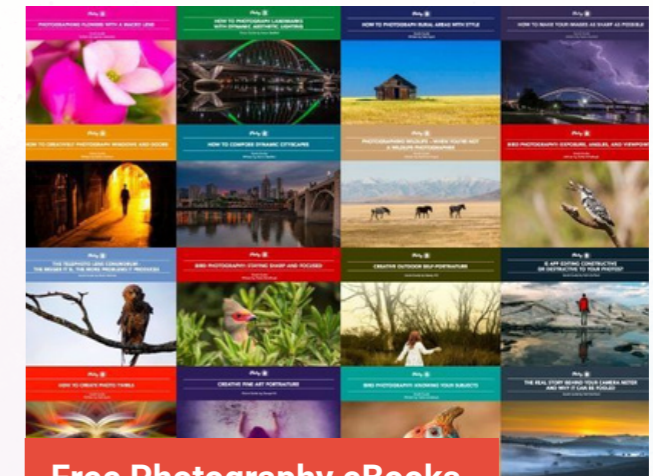
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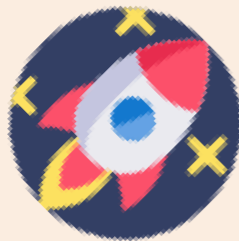
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Angela Fulks is a photographer and paranormal investigator who lives in St. Louis, Missouri, with her family of seven. She photographs weddings, portraits, and all the spooky places she can find.

You can see more of her work on Instagram:

<https://www.instagram.com/angela.m.fulks/>

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