

Near/Far Landscapes - 8 Essentials

The most common idiom of landscape photography is the “near-far composition”, a simple foreground-meets-background composition, with everything in focus. Here’s a recipe for this style of image — and the same ideas will serve you well in other kinds of photography, too!

1. Pick a wide lens/focal length — You’ll want a lens that has a wide view (16mm on most dSLRs and such, 24mm on full frame dSLRs). Wider than this is fine, but if you don’t go that wide, you’ll likely be unable to keep the background in focus.

2. Pick your foreground carefully, and get close to that foreground — In the classic near/far composition, a smaller foreground element is rendered large by getting close to it with a wide-angle lens. But not too close, typically you’ll need a few feet in order to keep that subject and the background both in focus, try for a distance of about 3 feet. (If you get too close, you’ll find it impossible to keep both the foreground and background in focus at the same time.)

Because the foreground element is going to be “front and center” in your image, make sure it’s interesting! Nothing can ruin a near-far composition like a weak foreground, the “near” part will be the major subject of your image.

3. Set up your tripod — You’ll probably need one—we’re going to use a small aperture (large f-number), which will require a longer shutter speed, you’ll almost always want a tripod to keep your camera stable.

4. Set your exposure mode: Aperture Priority — Canon labels this mode **Av**, Nikon labels it **A**, but nearly every DSLR and mirrorless camera has a mode which allows you to set an aperture, and asks the camera to estimate a good shutter speed based on the light.

5. Set your aperture — Use one of the highest f-numbers the camera and lens will allow for your particular composition. f/16 is a good starting point. (You can probably go to f/22 or, for some lenses, even f/32, but generally f/16 will be sufficient.)

6. Set a lower ISO — You’ll probably need a tripod anyway, so get the best image quality your camera can produce, typically with an ISO of 100.

7. Focus — Focus on a point in your image about twice as far from the camera as the closest thing in your image. If the foreground is about 3 feet away, try to focus about six feet away, maybe a little less. If you're in autofocus, you may need to either switch to manual focus to make sure the camera doesn't refocus, or use the technique where you half-press the shutter to focus on a particular thing, then hold the shutter half-pressed while you move the camera to your desired composition. (I find the former easier on a tripod, the latter easier when shooting handheld.)

8. Take a look, and shoot! — The tripod will also afford you an extra moment to look, really look at the image, and check if the foreground looks good, or if other distractions are intruding on the image. Take a moment to look, and then, if things look good, press the shutter!