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Getting into a Stock Frame of Mind

As photographers, we're all drawn to different types of photography. Certain subjects, locations, techniques, and styles exert a pull on our creative minds more than others and fit better with who we are in the world. I love to be outdoors as much as I love how photography helps me capture and share that love with others. Embrace and nurture whatever it is that pulls the strongest for you. Own it! Leverage those passions as you attune your mind's eye to shooting for stock.

The key concept to keep in mind when you shoot for stock is that you are creating the raw materials for someone else to use for his or her purposes. That is the whole point of stock photography. This may be a paradigm shift from what you are used to doing with your photography, so the sooner you can start seeing in that light, the more satisfying this process will become. One of the best ways to understand this point of view is to put yourself in the shoes of the people you are trying to serve.

Knowing Your Customers

The types of people who license images from microstock sites are impossible to lump into a single category. Due to the combination of a low price point for licensing and the ever-expanding demand for images to be used in print and online projects, you will find microstock customers run the gamut from regular people blogging about their lives to large media outlets and

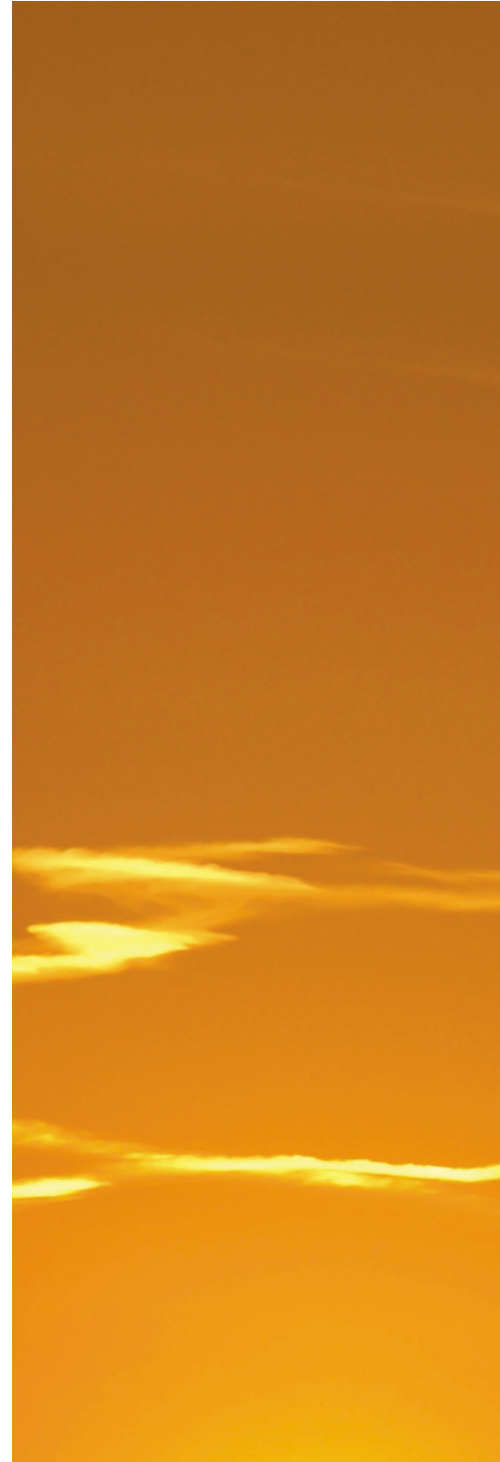




Figure 3.1 Canada Geese Migration © Rob Sylvan
([istockphoto.com/sylvanworks](https://www.istockphoto.com/sylvanworks))

Excerpted from Taking Stock: Make money in microstock creating photos that sell by Rob Sylvan.
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from graphic designers to church groups. What they all have in common is the desire to find a selection of images that fit their specific needs and projects.

You can't know who will find your stock photos useful and you have no control over what projects your shots will wind up in, but you will find more success if you can visualize examples of how a photo could be used before you start shooting. Then you can shoot with those uses in mind. Luckily, there are examples of how stock photos are used all around you. You just have to start looking for them.

Doing Your Research

Magazines are a great place to start looking because each one is designed to appeal to a certain demographic. It is a safe assumption that your magazine subscriptions reflect your taste, politics, interests, and hobbies. Pick up any magazine and just look at the images. Stock images are used on covers (I've seen microstock images on the cover of *Time* magazine), as supporting elements to feature articles, and in the advertisements. All of these uses are targeted to appeal to people just like you—which puts you in a great position to start creating some of those types of images.

I was on a plane recently and spent a few minutes flipping through the in-flight magazine, a treasure trove of stock photos in use. The types of stock photos range from simple objects on plain backgrounds (like cell phones, wine corks, cassette tapes, coat hangers, and so on) to people engaged in all manner of activities (walking, sleeping, talking, and eating, to name a few) to iconic postcard images of locations around the world (the kind that make you want to travel to those locations).

You don't need to book a flight to do your research, though. Hop in your car instead and go billboard hunting. At the time of this writing, the first billboard you'll see when you enter New Hampshire on Interstate 95 is a lovely photo of a senior couple (**Figure 3.2**). As soon as I saw that billboard it brought a smile to my face because I recognized the subjects as the parents of an old friend and fellow microstock contributor. If you live in the city, you need only to step out your door to look at bus wraps, posters, shop windows, and restaurant menus.

Don't get out much? That's OK, too, because you can finally find a purpose for all that junk mail coming to your door every day. Look at the store flyers, pamphlets, coupons, and sale circulars at the holidays. You know the photos you see superimposed on all the TV sets and LCD screens in those ads? Odds are they are stock photos. My wife's grandfather once got a surprise in the mail when he opened the annual report for a school he was affiliated with and found his granddaughter and great-grandson (**Figure 3.3**) on the cover!



Figure 3.2 My Parents. © Joseph Jean Rolland Dubé (istockphoto.com/JJRD)



Figure 3.3 Mother and Son. © Rob Sylvan (istockphoto.com/sylvanworks)

Of course, the web is awash in stock images too. Microstock would not exist without the Internet, and these days the Internet seems to be increasingly hungry for microstock images. In fact, you'll be hard pressed to find any web site that doesn't have some stock element being used somewhere.

Clearly, some of the photos you will see in all of these various mediums were shot on assignment for that purpose specifically, but remember that stock photography is an offshoot of assignment photography and filling a specific purpose is still the name of the game. This is your chance to choose and create your own assignments.

Keeping Track

Now that you are seeing all these images being used in all these different places, you need to hone in on the styles and types that speak to you the most. One of the best ways to do that is to keep a file of the ones you like the most. Grab a scissor, a file folder, a notebook, and your camera. If you can, cut out the advertisement, article, or design that interests you and put it in the folder. Can't cut it out? Take out your camera and photograph it, or take some notes in your notebook. Build up a collection and keep adding to it over time. Don't be surprised to find yourself starting to think about ideas or concepts of things to shoot, so keep that notebook with you at all times to write those ideas down.

As you are building this collection of images and ideas, take time to stop and analyze what you have. Ask yourself some questions:

- What types of photos could you see yourself creating?
- What is it about those photos that interests you?
- What resources, skills, and knowledge do you bring to the table for creating those types of images?
- What are the predominant colors used in the examples you have collected?
- What themes do you see emerging?

The point of this exercise is two-fold: to help attune your eyes to spot how stock photos are used and then to hone in on the types of shots you are most interested in creating. As you identify style and subject matter that appeals to you, it can inform the choices you make about what gear to buy (do you need lighting for indoor studio work, or do you need a new macro lens for getting up close and personal with wildlife?), the types of props you will need, and the types of locations you need to access.

You will start out creating a collection of images. But you will find in time that you are learning a lot about yourself, and this I think is incredibly useful. When you are first starting out, I highly encourage you to find ways to create stock within your current means. What do you do for a living? What are your interests and hobbies? Where do you live and what is interesting about it? Who do you know and where can you gain access? What gear do you have and how can you maximize it? You'll be amazed at all the opportunities for creating stock that are all around you. Yes, you will also find that many of these types of stock images—such as flowers, pets, keyboards, and brick walls to name a few—are incredibly overdone and oversaturated. Don't let that stifle your creativity! You need to crawl before you can walk, so start slow, set goals, and keep moving forward. Besides, if I had succumbed to the notion that the world already has enough photos of Christmas trees, I'd never have created my most successful stock photo to date.

Thinking Like an Image Consumer

When I worked as an instructional designer, I would work with the client to transform whatever training materials the organization had into smaller, easily digestible, and more simply communicated lessons. A big part of the process was finding or creating visuals that could assist in effectively communicating the core messages each lesson was trying to teach. Sometimes a simple visual that just said, "Here is what this thing looks like," fit the bill. Other times a more

complex image demonstrating some action was required. One of the most common types of images we looked for (and which were very hard to find) showed the same two people engaged in dialog with a variety of expressions and gestures that we could use in different sections throughout the training.

In all these cases, the person looking for stock images has a specific need to communicate a specific message, and the role of the stock image is to aid in that communication as simply and effectively as possible. As the photographer, this is where you need to shift your thinking from “How can I best capture a given scene?” to “How can I capture this scene to most effectively communicate a message that will be useful to someone else?”

Many of the most successful microstock contributors started out as graphic designers or still have their design day jobs. These people are successful because they know what is useful. They have a great eye for composition and know how to communicate visually. Take your growing clip file of images and spend time thinking about what messages are being communicated in each one. Try to imagine yourself in the role of the designer for each clipping in your file.

Greater Than the Sum of its Parts

Let’s walk through a real-world example of how a simple object found its way into someone else’s project. I have a photo of a frying pan in my portfolio (**Figure 3.4**). The classic cast-iron frying pan is an iconic kitchen staple. It’s easily recognized for what it is and what it does. I shot it on a white background (which we’ll cover in more detail in Chapter 6) in the simplest way possible.



Figure 3.4 Frying Pan

Tip

As an aside, an issue that you will continually have to grapple with is how to keep your production costs as low as possible while producing high quality work and not caving in to feeding your gear habit at every possible turn. I would encourage you to always try to live within your photographic means.



New Development

Creator Amanda Rohde (istockphoto.com/hidesy)

Started 2003

Home Australia

Total portfolio 13,000 images

Total downloads Over 570,000

About this photo Amanda says, “This was taken on my parents’ veranda, with a large piece of hessian as the background, and a torch to add to the natural lighting. My camera was the 1ds Mark II at the time, and my lens was a 24-70 f2.8 Canon. I think it’s successful for a number of reasons—: The concept is obvious, but reasonably broad; it encompasses growth, protection, development, infancy, and environmental concepts. The colors fit with many of the colors used in these types of designs, and the torchlight adds warmth to the image. The hands are just right for the image. They aren’t smooth, well-manicured hands, but are hard-working, older hands, which enhances the earthy tones to the image.”

Amanda’s tip “Research what your target audience wants. Think about things that you enjoy photographing, and work out how they should be photographed to provide a useful product to designers. Study advertisements that you see—billboards, magazine ads, television, brochures, reports, church newsletters, junk mail—the list of places stock photography is used is huge. At the beginning of my time on iStockphoto, I spent months cutting up magazines that I bought by the stack from garage sales, and put them in scrapbooks for ideas, inspiration, and composition.”



Figure 3.5 New Development. Downloaded over 8,900 times.



Figure 3.6 Delight

Figure 3.7 Take Flight

Figure 3.8 Coffee at Cafe



An object on a white background is a perfect example of raw material just waiting to be put to use in a larger project, which is why you will see so many examples of this type of stock everywhere. In this case, an art teacher (and microstock contributor as well), Mark Evans, was putting together a poster (Figure 3.9) for an annual student art exhibition at his school in Melbourne, Australia. The exhibition included work from visual arts, food technology, media, woodwork, and metalwork students. He sought out various stock images that were representative of those disciplines and crafted them together to create the figure in the poster. My frying pan never looked so happy.

When I shot that frying pan I did not intend for it to be a work of art, but because of its ability to communicate a simple message, it found a new life in a fun project all the way on the other side of the world from my kitchen. It's been downloaded more than 100 times, and I can only imagine all the other places it has been.



Figure 3.9 Crescendo Exhibition Poster.



Figure 3.11 Searching. Downloaded over 700 times.

Searching

Creator	Steve Cole (istockphoto.com/stevecoleccs)
Started	2006
Home	USA
Total portfolio	900
Total downloads	Over 72,000
About this photo	Steve says, “All my shoots are carefully planned out days or weeks in advance for finding the right location, model, and props. Little things to make it seem a little more real and add that special detail. We spent a few hours on this mountain shooting different concepts. I asked the model to stand on the rock and, what do you know, the wind started blowing his shirt around in just the right direction, adding more action. Captured with a Canon 1DS MKIII and Elinchrome Ranger 1200WS Power Pak.”

Steve's tip

Excerpted from *Taking Stock: Wake Up and Get More Out of Your Camera* by Steve Cole. Copyright © 2011. Used with permission of Pearson Education, Inc. and Peachpit Press.

“Shoot loose! Crop later! Quit thinking about the megapixels, f/stops, shutter speed, and so on. Think concept first and technical second. Focus

Spectrum of Stock

If an isolated object on white is on one end of the stock photo spectrum, the conceptual stock photo would be on the other end. My photo of the flock of geese flying in the classic V formation at the beginning of this chapter (Figure 3.1) is actually an image I created in Photoshop by merging a photo of a sunset with geese in flight from another photo. I did actually shoot both images at the same location, but not on the same day. It was in a field I used to pass every day on my commute to and from work (another reason to always have your camera with you). I shot the geese one morning on my way to work and shot the sunset another time on my way home. No one has ever asked if the photo is “real” or not, and I hope I didn’t ruin the illusion for you, but that is not really the point of a stock image. The point of a stock image is to communicate.

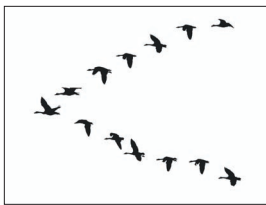


Figure 3.11 Different versions of the same flock of geese images.

The sight of a flock of geese in formation is an iconic symbol of the changing seasons. Seasonal changes are rich in metaphor and meaning. Images of spring might conjure thoughts of new life and new beginnings, while images of autumn can conjure thoughts of maturing. Migration brings to mind transitions and change. A sunrise is a new beginning, and a sunset is another ending. I’ve since seen that flock of geese image used in very concrete ways alongside news stories about avian migration; I’ve also seen it as the cover art on a music CD.

Having done the work to isolate the images of the geese to use with the photo of the sunset, I thought those geese images alone would make a useful element all by themselves. I created two versions—one of the geese in silhouette and one just a straight photo—and put both on white backgrounds (Figure 3.11). Together, the three images have been downloaded more than 1,400 times.

Ingredients of a Stock Photo

Now that you are seeing stock everywhere and thinking about how different images are used in different projects, I want to focus on some key ingredients that help set stock photos apart from ordinary snapshots. Hopefully, you are starting to keep a list of concepts and ideas that you are excited to create. As you create your list, scout locations and assemble props you’ll need to focus in on what exactly it is you want a specific photo to communicate. What will its core message be? Are you trying to evoke a specific feeling, or are you making a photo that is simply representative of a particular item?



Figure 3.12 Abuse © istockphoto.com/knape

Communication is Key

Think about being afraid for a moment. Imagine your eyes widening, your senses on full alert; perhaps the hair on the back of your neck stands up, and your pulse quickens. Tapping into emotion as a means of communication is extremely powerful because it is a message that translates very quickly and bypasses spoken language.

The wide eyes in **Figure 3.12** immediately grab your attention and begin to communicate a message of fear, which is further supported by the enclosing dark vignette around the edges and completely brought home by the large male hand covering the mouth. I've seen that photo used in projects ranging from violence prevention programs to a low-budget horror film poster. It completely succeeds as a communication device.

Contrast that against the sense of fun and adventure in **Figure 3.13**. The clever use of starfish in an anthropomorphic pose, their arms held whimsically in the air while the surf crashes in the background screams fun vacation getaway. Just because you are intending to communicate an emotion doesn't mean you have to actually use a real person in the shot.



Figure 3.13 In the Mood for Love—Couple of Starfish. © Angel Herrero de Frutos (istockphoto.com/pinopic)

Simplicity of Message

Like a good joke, a good stock image needs to communicate its punch line very simply and clearly. If you have to explain the joke, it probably wasn't very funny or it was too complex. You won't have the opportunity to explain your stock image to anyone, so it has to do that job all on its own.

If you are going to photograph an apple for stock, then strive to shoot the quintessential apple, the personification of applehood, the crispest, healthiest dang apple the world has ever seen. Anyone can drop an apple on a white background and shoot it, so your job is to rise above the rest and create an image that takes *appleness* to a new level. **Figure 3.14** is a great example. The angle it was shot at makes the fruit look like it is standing tall and ready for duty. The bright green leaf jutting off the stem speaks of freshness, as if it were just plucked off the tree. The skin is free of blemish and the reflection of light on the top just makes it shine.

You don't have to shoot against a white background to be simple though. Take that same apple (OK, not that same exact apple) and put it in the hand of a lovely young woman laying in the dappled sunlight of a late summer's day, and you can still communicate a message of health or happiness just as simply and clearly (**Figure 3.15**).



Figure 3.14 Red Apple.
© istockphoto.com/DNY59



Figure 3.15 Happy Woman. © Lise Gagne (istockphoto.com/lisegagne)

Give Equal Weight to the Background

It is easy to become so focused on the subject of a photo that we can forget about the background. This is a critical (and all too common) error when shooting for stock. The background is a key contributor to the usefulness factor of a stock photo. Think back to how you are seeing photos used in advertisements, on magazine covers, alongside articles, on packages, and so on. In many cases, the designer of the project has placed text, logos, or other images on top of the original photo.

Looking back at some of the examples I've shown here, you can see the background lends just as much to the photo as the subject does. In the case of a subject on a white background, like the apple or my frying pan, the background can very easily be removed completely or expanded in any direction, as the final project requires.

However, the background doesn't have to be pure white to be useful. An expanse of solid color or the use of a shallow depth of field that throws the background out of focus is equally successful at supporting the simple message of the subject, while still providing what is called "copy space" within the photo. Copy space is the area of a photo that doesn't contain the subject and provides a natural location for a designer to place text or some other design element (**Figure 3.16**).

Leaving room for text and other design elements makes a stock photo more useful.



Figure 3.16 Example of how copy space is used.

You have to think about the background when you are composing the shot. We'll talk more about the shooting aspect later, but for now embrace the notion that the background is a key element in your photo's ability to communicate its message. The background needs to support the subject, fit the context, and become an asset to the people who want to use your work in their projects. Remember, when a person licenses your photo for use, he is paying for every pixel, so make them all count.

Assignment

Look through your clip file and take out your favorite three to five pieces. Put yourself in the role of the designer for each piece and visit a few microstock sites to search for images you could use to create a similar project. Take note of the messages you are trying to communicate and the types of images you actually find.

Pick one of the images you found and try to shoot a similar concept (don't just copy what you see, make it your own) that could be used in the same way. Don't focus on the technical quality of your final photo, but rather just focus on the process. ■