

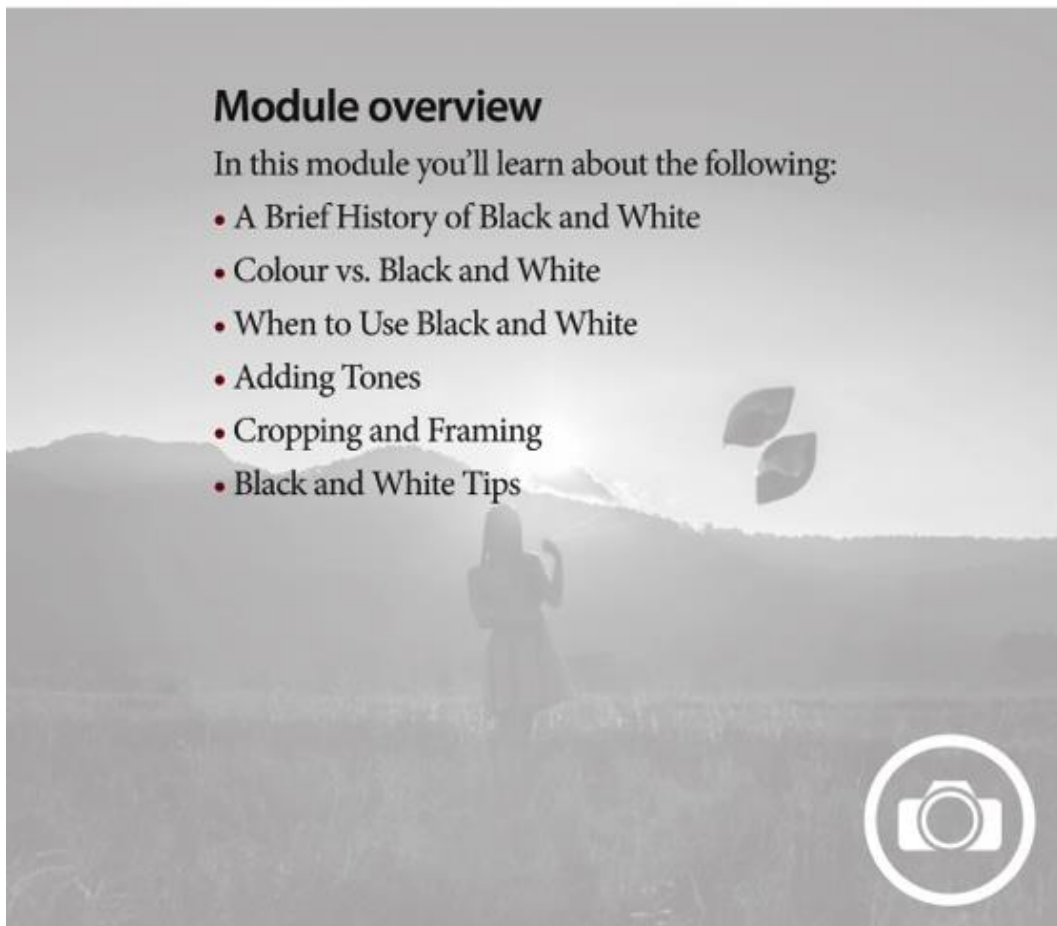


## Module 17: **Black and White**

### Module overview

In this module you'll learn about the following:

- A Brief History of Black and White
- Colour vs. Black and White
- When to Use Black and White
- Adding Tones
- Cropping and Framing
- Black and White Tips



“Black and white are the colors of photography.  
To me they symbolize the alternatives of hope  
and despair to which mankind is forever subjected.”

**Robert Frank**  
(1924)

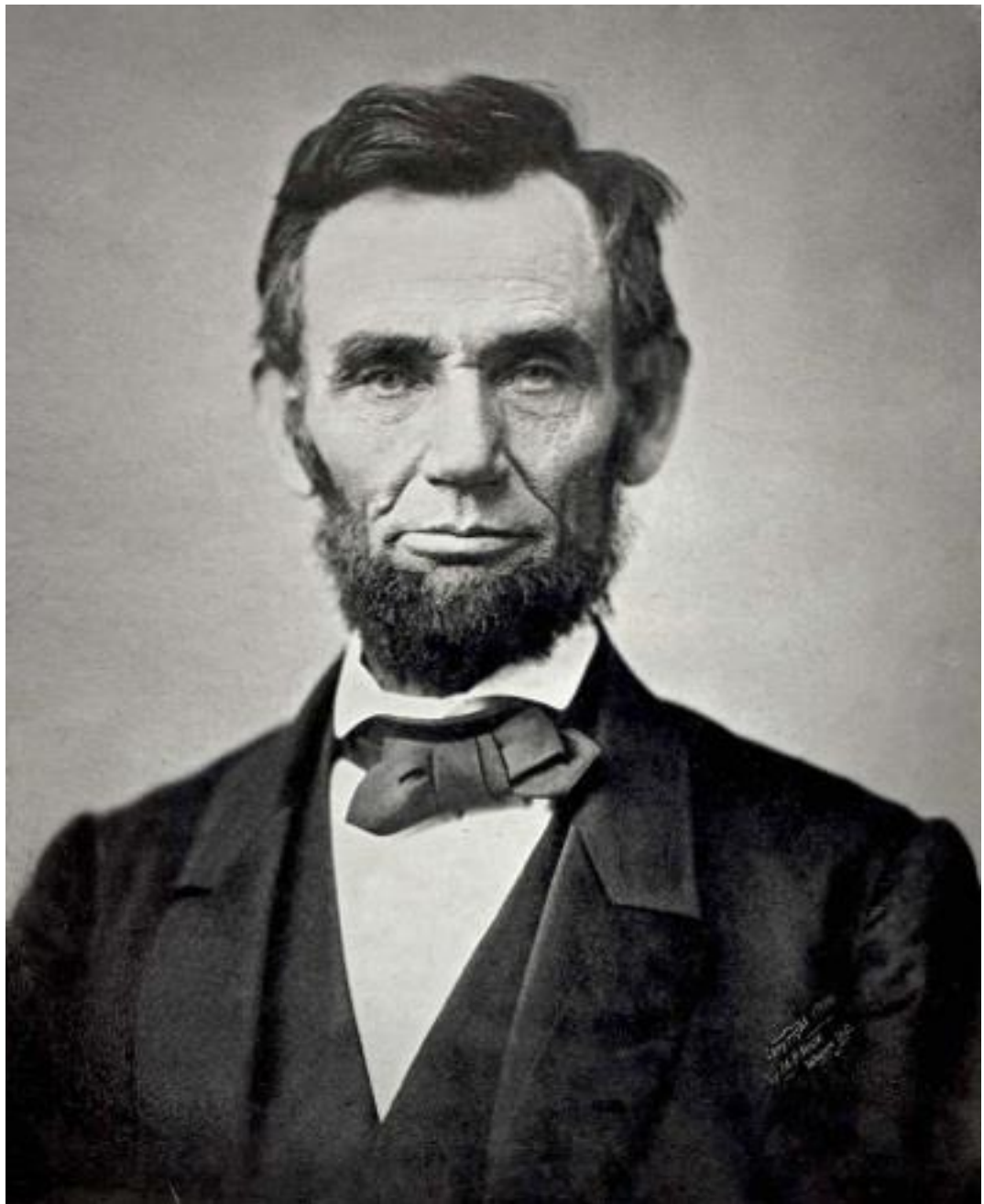
**Tip:** if you're interested in black and white photography, you will need to learn some basic photo-editing skills.

Increasing contrast, adjusting shadows and highlights are crucial to creating great black and white images.

## 17.1 A Brief History of Black and White

As you already know, the earliest photographs were all black and white. The technology was still in its infancy and although many colour photography experiments were attempted, it took almost a century before colour could be used. We take colour for granted today, but it wasn't until the 1970s that taking colour photographs become an affordable option for the average person.

So for over 150 years, the majority of photographs were taken in black and white. With the invention of colour film, some photographers still stuck with black and white and even today some digital photographers will only use black and white.



Portrait of Abraham Lincoln taken in 1863 using the Daguerreotype process.

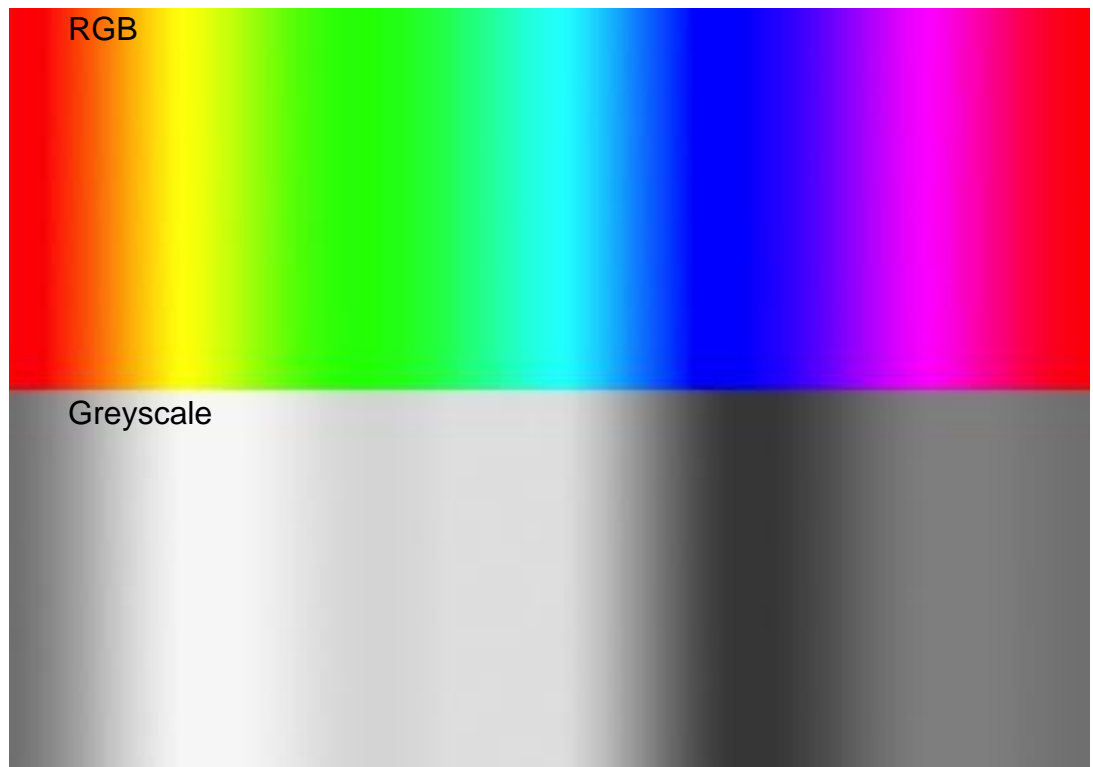
**Tip:** study the greats, the photographers who almost exclusively shot in black and white.

One of the godfathers of modern photography, Ansel Adams, was the master of black and white landscapes.

Anyone of note in the music industry over the last 30 years has probably been photographed by Dutch photographer Anton Corbijn; his signature style is stark, grainy black and white images.

Other notable black and white photographers are Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, Dorothea Lange, Annie Leibovitz and Diane Arbus.

Digital camera sensors use a colour system known as RGB (red, green, blue).



Here's the RGB colour spectrum as seen in RGB mode and greyscale mode (black and white images will be in greyscale). This gives you some idea of what happens when you remove all of the colour from an image.



So the question is: if colour photography is possible, then why use black and white?



**Tip:** if you're shooting in JPEG, set to black and white mode and you will not have colour versions.

If you want colour backups, then shoot in JPEG + RAW mode, using the black and white setting. Then you will have black and white JPEG file and the RAW will be in colour.

To convert the RAW files to black and white, simply reduce the saturation to the lowest amount when you process your files.

Black and white photography is still relevant; and despite all the advances in camera technology, people still shoot in black and white. The reasons for this are numerous. In some cases, it's just a matter of personal preference – but it helps to know when to shoot in black and white and when to shoot in colour.

## 17.2 Colour v Black and White

First, let's look at an example of when you should use colour. Do you remember the complementary colours? If you do, then you'll know that red and green complement each other and add contrast. Here the green background makes the red flowers stand out more.



So what happens if this is converted to black and white? The colour contrast is gone and the flower loses its impact.



**Tip:** your portrait model shows up wearing a garish outfit with clashing colours!

Shoot in black and white: problem solved.

Therefore, put simply, you should use black and white when the colours are not important.



Does the colour serve any purpose in this image? Not really: in fact, the orange and purple straps are distracting.



With the colour removed, the image has more depth, contrast and texture than the original. This is where shadows, highlights and midtones become even more important. When everything is either black, white or grey, the midtones take on a new significance and a greater tonal range is needed.

In the flower example, the tonal range was not there, which meant the red (or grey) flower was lost in the background because the midtones were so similar.

**Tip:** lens filters are great for black and white photography.

A polarising filter is great for landscapes, especially when there are clouds in the sky. It adds contrast, which is important for black and white photography.

One of the best filters for black and white photography is red. This drastically increases the contrast. They were popular in the days of film photography and are still used today.

They are not recommended for color photography, unless you're in an experimental mood.

Which of these images is better: (i) the colour version?



Or (ii) the black and white version?



If you said colour, you were correct. If you said black and white, you are also correct. That may seem like a contradiction, but the point is that sometimes a photograph works as black and white or as a colour image.

In cases like this, there is no right or wrong – it's all a matter of personal preference.



**Tip:** not sure when to convert to black and white?

Sometimes it's hard to be objective about your own work, so if you're uncertain about whether a photograph looks better with or without colour, then show both versions to people and see which one they prefer.

You could turn it into a social media experiment and ask people to vote on which one they prefer.

What about these two?



This one is less clear cut. The colour does serve a purpose – the green background provides a good contrast and helps the subject stand out more; but there's just enough tonal range in the black and white version to supply the contrast.



Another example of an image that works in colour as well as in black and white. The black and white has enough dynamic range.

**Tip:** due to the rise of the digital camera, it's now possible to buy old 35mm SLR cameras for next to nothing.

You might not be able to pick up 35mm black and white in your local area, but it's easy to purchase online.

Shooting black and white film can be challenging, but it can be a good exercise by limiting yourself to 36 shots.

## 17.3 When to Use Black and White

Strong textures and detail.



Look for natural and artificial structures that have detail, pattern and texture. Statues and sculpture make great subjects for black and white images. Also, look for buildings (old or modern) that have interesting or unusual architecture.





**Tip:** when shooting black and white portraits, try asking your subject to wear black and/or white. This can avoid the lack of contrast created by some colours looking very similar in greyscale.

High contrast.



High contrast means strong differences between light and dark, and it works really well for black and white. High contrast can work with colour images but it can often obscure the colours, which makes them superfluous.



The location for this image was predominantly grey, so it was perfect for black and white conversion.

**Tip:** many people will tell you to keep your ISO down, especially when shooting black and white.

However, black and white photography is far more forgiving in terms of ISO noise.

Digital noise looks far worse in colour images. With black and white, the noise is grey, which makes it far less noticeable.

Creating mood.



A quick snapshot can be given a slightly sinister tone by converting it to high contrast black and white.



Black and white is great for street photography and can give your images a documentary feel.

**Tip:** if your camera has a HDR mode, try shooting with it and then converting the images to black and white.

Sometimes HDR colour images can look slightly cartoonish, due to the increased colour saturation.

This isn't a problem with black and white images and they often benefit from the increased dynamic range.

## 17.4 Adding Tones

It's possible to add coloured tones to black and white images. In the late 19th century, a process called sepia toning was invented. It was a way of adding some colour to a black and white image. Essentially, the sepia process added a slight orange tone to black and white prints.

With digital photography this process is much easier and you can add any colour to a black and white image, although some tones work better than others. The two best options are a warm orange/brown or a cool blue.



The tones should be subtle and only be really noticeable in the midtone range. If the shadows and highlights have a heavy tone, then the effect has been overdone.





**Tip:** look for patterns and textures when shooting black and white.

Also try to avoid large empty spaces when composing your shots; that big clear blue sky will just be a large patch of grey.



Here we see the comparison between the original image and the two-tone images. The warm tone gives the image a summer/autumnal feel, while the cool tone gives a more wintry look.



Here's what happens when you overdo the toning effect. The whites are now blue and the image has a garish, unnatural look.

**Tip:**  
performing  
musicians  
can make  
great  
subjects for  
black and  
white  
photography.

Their  
instruments  
will provide  
many strong  
lines and  
shapes.

## 17.5 Cropping and Framing

Cropping your images and adding borders can give them a different look. In this case, cropping to a square format and adding a black border (as well as some grunge texture layers) give these photos a vintage feel.



**Tip:**

exposure bracketing is always useful if the situation allows. It's especially helpful when shooting black and white.

You can even use stock images of old film to create a real vintage look.



## 17.6 Summary

- Despite being the oldest form of photography, black and white is still popular and relevant today.
- It might sound obvious, but it's important to think about how the lack of colour can affect your images.
- Think about when to use black and white: it's not ideal for every situation.
- Shooting black and white in JPEG+RAW mode will give you the option of having both colour (RAW) and black and white (JPEG) images.
- When shooting black and white, look for lines, shapes and textures.
- If a colour photograph doesn't look right, try converting it to black and white.
- Adding warm or cool tones to a black and white image can change the mood of your image. Just be careful not to overdo it.



## **Assessment 17**

- 1) What is the name of the colour system used by digital camera sensors?
- 2) What is the name of the system used for black and white?
- 3) True or False? Every photograph will be improved by converting it to black and white.
- 4) Is black and white good for low contrast images?
- 5) What does a red lens filter do?
- 6) When adding coloured tones to black and white images, should the whites remain white?
- 7) If you want your image to have a cold, wintery feel, which colour tone would you add?
- 8) True or False? When you shoot a black and white JPEG image, the colour information is still recorded.
- 9) How would you shoot black and white images using a non-digital camera?
- 10) True or False? When shooting in black and white mode, the RAW image will be in colour.

### **17.8 Assignment**

Set your camera to black and white mode and shoot in JPEG and RAW. Look for subjects that you think will work well in black and white. Look for strong lines, shapes and textures.

When you've finished shooting, look through the images and compare the black and white JPEG to the colour RAW file.

If you were successful, the black and white images should be the better versions.