

## Which mode is better? Aperture priority or shutter priority?

<http://www.digital-photo-secrets.com/tip/1330/which-mode-is-better-aperture-priority-or-shutter-priority/>

Digital cameras come with a variety of different automatic modes, each with their own distinct purpose.

By learning some of these modes, you can ease the transition from automatic photography to manual photography.



That's certainly the case with shutter priority and aperture priority modes. I've recently discussed both those modes in my newsletters, but which one is better and why?



You can use aperture priority mode to take pictures like this one

### What does each mode do?

Before we can decide which of the two modes is the best, it only makes sense to talk about what the two modes.

Each has its own emphasis. Aperture priority mode allows you to specify the aperture to use when taking a picture. The camera does everything else for you.

Similarly, shutter priority mode places an emphasis on shutter speed. When using that mode, you pick the shutter speed leaving everything else to the camera.

The question is really the following: Out of each setting, the aperture or the shutter speed, which is more important for you as a photographer to control?

Although many will argue that both are important, if I had to pick one, it would be the aperture for a lot of reasons. I'm not saying shutter speed isn't an important setting to isolate. It's just not as important as aperture in terms of what it means for the entire photo.

### Why aperture priority mode is clearly the winner

Almost all professional photographers who understand manual mode have certain set of steps they go through every time they take picture. Can you guess what the first step is?

That's right, they pick an aperture. The aperture you choose isn't just some unimportant variable. It's absolutely central to the photographs you take. All else, in almost all of photography, is secondary.

Why is that? **Well, the aperture determines how much of your image is in focus and how much of it is out of focus.**

Photographers have a term for this. They call it **the depth of field.**

When you have a bigger depth of field, more of the image is in focus. When you have a shorter depth of field, less of it is.



All of this has a huge impact on the photograph. Depending on what you're shooting, you may or may not want to have a bigger depth of field.

Let's say, for example, that you're shooting a close-up portrait out on a busy street.

- If you increase the depth of field, the background comes into focus completely, and it can be distracting.
- However, if you decrease the depth of field, the background becomes a blur, and the image appears more concentrated and visually appealing.

Most of photography is about figuring this out. You need to develop an eye for certain scenes and the aperture that goes with them.

Close-up portraits, like I said above, tend to work well with wide-open small f-number apertures.

Large and open landscapes, on the other hand, tend to work well with closed off large f-number apertures.

As the aperture closes, and the f-number goes up, the depth of field goes up as well. And when you want to get an entire landscape into the shot, it helps when it is entirely in focus.

Some scenes are intermediary. We call this the "anything goes" zone where the aperture doesn't really matter that much.



The hills are alive with the sound of music. Use large f-number apertures (like F22) for pictures like this one

What types of photos fall into this category? Sunsets, art on walls, pictures of clouds, and basically anything that doesn't have a lot of depth to it.

The sunset is too far away to have depth, so we pick an aperture that's good enough for the relatively "flat" thing we're trying to photograph.

The same goes with walls or people standing in front of walls. There isn't much depth to photograph, so depth of field doesn't really matter that much.

### Here's a handy reference with f-numbers:

- **The portrait and macro zone** (F1.4 to F5.6) When you take pictures in this zone, you want the background to appear so blurred that it's practically out of the shot. This works great with pictures of peoples' faces, flowers, bugs, and closeups of animals.
- **The "it doesn't really matter" zone** (F8 to F10) Your subject, when shooting in this zone, doesn't have a lot of depth. Maybe you're shooting something far away like the sunset, or you're shooting something flat like the side of a barn. Either way, these intermediary apertures gives you enough depth of field to work with.

- **The landscape zone** (F11 to F22) To put it bluntly, you're shooting the long rolling hills from The Sound Of Music, and you want every blade of grass to appear in crisp and smooth detail. With these apertures, you're practically guaranteed they will. Just remember to bring a tripod. You'll probably need a longer exposure.

### Contrast with shutter priority mode

Shutter priority mode can also be useful as long as you know when you need it.

Just like aperture priority mode, shutter priority mode only gives you control over one setting, and that is the shutter speed.

Although shutter speed isn't as central to a photograph as the aperture, it's still pretty important. Sometimes it's more important, especially when you're shooting sports.

That's because, with the right shutter speed, you can freeze action.

Water is another example where varying the shutter speed can change the look of the image. In the photo to the right, a fast shutter speed was used to freeze the water in place. If a slower shutter speed were used, the water would look to 'flow' in the photo.



### Here's the tradeoff.

You pick a faster shutter speed so you can freeze the action, but then the camera picks a wider aperture to let more light in.

Your athlete appears perfectly frozen with no blurs, but the background is a little out of focus.

Contrast this with an image, like the one to



the right, in which your athlete is motion blurred, and the background is more in focus.

The **latter**, when shooting sports photography, is **clearly the better option**. By picking shutter priority mode and choosing a shutter speed of, say, 1/500s, that's the kind of photo you're telling the camera to take.

Eventually, as you learn to use both modes, you'll get a clear grasp of what's more important in each picture you take. About **90%** of the time, you'll be picking the **aperture first**, and for the other **10%**, the **shutter speed will be first**.

Once you've figured out which is more important for each individual type of shot, you'll be completely **ready for manual mode**.

After all, the only difference between manual mode and aperture priority or shutter priority modes is one extra variable.

When you learn that every image hinges on a single aperture or shutter speed variable, the rest of the manual camera settings fall into place. It's like solving a math problem.

So for now, get on out there and practice with aperture priority mode. Get a real sense of how each of the different apertures I've listed works with each type of scene.

As soon as you've figured that out, switch over to manual mode, and try to take the same pictures using the apertures you chose earlier. At that point, it's a simple matter of matching up the shutter speed. You'll have manual mode figured out in no time!

Got any questions about aperture priority or shutter priority modes? Send me an email or leave a comment below, and I'd be happy to answer.