



A New York Central GP7 pulls a string of hoppers through the warehouse district in this striking low-angle shot on the author's O gauge Sandy Harbor Terminal Ry. A short telephoto lens and careful attention to depth of field combine to make a memorable photo.

Take GREAT layout photos

HOW TO CREATE IMAGES THAT LOOK AS GOOD AS YOUR RAILROAD

story and photos by Dennis Brennan

PHOTOGRAPHY IS AN ART FORM, but you don't have to be a professional photographer to create a great shot. After all, you don't have to be a chef to prepare a great meal; you only need to follow a good recipe. The following tips on camera angle, depth of field, and lens selection will help you create great model railroad images.

1. CAMERA ANGLE



The best model railroad photographs place the viewer in the scene. This creates a sense of reality, which breathes life into shots like this photo of a Lionel Standard Gauge no. 9E electric approaching a tinplate station on Brad Marples' toy train layout. Both this and the opening photo were taken with the camera positioned at or below trackside. If you were actually standing in those locations, these are views you could expect to see. That doesn't mean that every shot has to be from track level. The idea is to shoot from a realistic point of view as it relates to the scene.

2. DEPTH OF FIELD



While there is only one plane of critical focus in any photo, there is an area in front of and behind the actual point of focus that appears sharp. This is called the depth of field. The smaller the aperture and the greater the distance from the subject, the greater the depth of field. Obviously, we want our main subject to be in focus. But good model railroad photography requires

that everything from foreground to background also appears to be in focus.

However, it's not always possible to keep the foreground, middle ground, and background equally sharp. In that case, I'll opt to keep the foreground and middle ground in focus and let the background go soft, as in this image taken on Dave Jacobs' Serendip & Western RR. It comes across as natural, but

an out-of-focus foreground would diminish the impact of Dave's superb modeling.

A nondescript foreground, such as the surface of a street, can be soft and no one will notice. An out-of-focus railroad crossing sign, tree, or line pole will be obvious. In that case, I'll either remove the offending item or change the shot.

A common misconception is that a wide-angle lens has

a greater depth of field than a telephoto lens. That's because a wide-angle lens allows you to work closer with more depth of field than a telephoto lens does in the same position.

However, if you keep your subject the same size in the shot by moving the camera back to increase the distance between camera and subject, a telephoto lens will have the same depth of field.

ADD DEPTH WITH THIS TRICK

A good model railroad photo needs to be in sharp focus, and that includes the main subject as well as the foreground and background. The area of the photo that's in focus is called the depth of field. Because we work so close to our subjects, we need all the help we can get when it comes to maximizing depth of field.

Here's a little trick I use with my zoom lens that you won't find in any photo book. Focus on the closest point of your subject that needs to be sharp and note the footage indication on the lens. Then focus on the farthest point that needs to be sharp, and note the footage indication.

Now, place your actual focus somewhere between these numbers. As long as you can see the numbers within the lens window, you're in the ballpark. For example, if the near and far points are 2 and 4 feet respectively, you are well within the window. Placing the actual point of focus at a little less than 3 feet will yield a depth of field that falls within the desired range.

On the other hand, moving the focus point to 2 feet will shift the depth of field towards the foreground, while focusing at 4 feet will shift the depth of field towards the background.

Knowing what's going on with your depth of field is crucial. If you have a



single lens reflex camera, your camera may have a depth of field preview button. Pressing it closes the lens down to your set aperture, allowing you to see what's actually in focus – important information if you want quality photos of your railroad.

3. LENS SELECTION



Being an old film guy, I developed my craft using three standard lenses – wide-angle, normal, and telephoto. Today, zoom lenses are standard equipment on digital cameras. But with this enhanced efficiency, the lens distinction blurs. Often, we set the camera in a convenient position and then zoom or adjust the lens to frame the shot, giving very little or no thought to focal length.

In the wide-angle photo at the top, the depth of field extends from the foreground to the background. In the telephoto image

below it, the camera was moved back, but the depth of field still included the foreground and background.

To appreciate the difference, I have a two-part photo assignment for you. I'd like you to create an interesting model railroad shot using the widest angle of your lens. Then do the same using a narrower angle at the telephoto end. You may only move the camera.

Experience is the best teacher, so this exercise will help you see things from a different perspective.

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4. FINAL THOUGHTS



Before modeling something, I always suggest going out with a camera in hand and taking photos of the prototype. There is no better approach. The next best way to develop your skills is to study books of railroad photography.

Everything I've talked about in this article relates to how the real world is depicted in a photograph. If you can emulate that in your model railroad photography, you're well on your way to creating appetizing views of your miniature world like this breathtaking view of Don Miller's O gauge Great Northern RR (soon to be featured in CTT).

Now that you have the recipe for better photographs, I look forward to witnessing what your new chefs will be serving up on the pages of CTT's Photo Album! Submission guidelines can be found on page 14. **CTT**