

Making sense of digital compact camera modes

New York Times — Ivan Berger

Leave your digital camera set on Auto and you'll get good pictures most of the time – but the computing power inside allows you to get even better ones – if you can decipher the myriad shooting modes./

Represented by icons of faces, mountains, sprinters, palm trees, or crescent moons, each mode is a bundle of adjustments that preset the camera lens, flash and the processor to deliver what the manufacturer thinks is the best picture. Camera makers have come up with more than 100 scene modes from conventional settings like `fireworks' or `beach' to special ones like `ebay' for low resolution close-ups for online auctions.

The range of modes can be overwhelming.

The main ones like Aperture priority, Sports, Portrait or Landscape are usually on a dial but many others may be hidden in the screen menu.

Modes names don't always tell the whole story. For instance, `Sports' is also good for children or pets in action as its purpose is to freeze movement. Portrait mode, with its shallow focus, is not a good choice for groups whose members are at different distances from the lens... landscape may be a better setting in that situation.

So some knowledge of what the modes can do is useful.

Indoors, a camera set on Auto would use the flash, blasting nearby subjects with light while leaving the background in darkness. Better scene modes for indoor photography typically turn the flash off to expose the whole scene equally or use a reduced fill-in flash only, open the aperture to let in more light and turn on the stabilizing feature to compensate for the hand shake that comes with the longer shutter times needed.

Portrait mode normally sets a wide aperture of the lens so the background behind your subject may be softly focused. A landscape mode narrows the aperture so both foreground and background stay sharp. Some portrait modes automatically enhance skin tones, or have 'soft' settings that selectively smooth out wrinkles ! For shooting after sunset `Night' mode will turn off the flash, hold the shutter open longer and change the ISO sensitivity (like increasing film speed).

Because most manuals don't tell you what modes do, only what they are generally for, it is best to experiment to figure them out.... See what modes allow you to alter white colour balance, which ones enable you to turn on/off the flash, which work best for close-ups, what choice of file size / quality the camera gives you, and so on.

You may find that there are half a dozen settings that you will use most and the others much more rarely....