

# PLAN FOR MAGIC

A SIMPLE STEP-BY-STEP PLAN ON HOW  
YOU CAN GET READY FOR A CONCEPTUAL  
PHOTOSHOOT





# DASHA PEARS

## WHO I AM

Award-winning surreal fine art and fashion photographer from St. Petersburg, Russia, based in Helsinki, Finland. I create art and teach others to do that. I hold photography workshops both in Finland and abroad and educate people online both privately and in groups.

## HOW DO I KNOW

I've organized over 200 personal and 150 commissioned photography shoots

I've taught over 150 students both online and offline

## AWARDS

Fine Art Photography Awards (FAPA) 2020 - 2nd place winner  
Smithsonian Magazine Photo Contest 2019 - Altered Images, Winner  
ND Awards 2019 - 1st place: Gold Star Award  
IPA int'l photography awards 2019 - Honorable mention  
IPA int'l photography awards 2018 - Honorable mention  
The Prix de la Photographie, Paris (Px3) 2018 - Bronze Winner  
Best of Russia'15 - Winner

## FEATURED

Artfinder  
Saatchi Art  
Photographize  
Beautiful Bizarre Magazine  
Hashtag Authentic Podcast  
AllAboutPhoto.com  
OpenEye Magazine  
121 Clicks

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# MAKING YOUR LIFE EASIER

You'd love to create meaningful and surreal conceptual images, but you are not quite sure how to do that and where to start from? Should you plan everything in advance or should you just go with the flow? Should you try to capture everything as it is or try to fix everything in post, so that it looks surreal but still believable?

I had all those questions myself, as before I was completely clueless about all those details. I never had any formal training in photography and I had to learn everything on my own through my personal trial and error. It took me years to systematize my process of getting ready for a surreal photoshoot. Now I want to make your path easier! So that you don't have to spend time on figuring everything for yourself, I've prepared this simple step-by-step guide on how you can turn your ideas into final images that resonate with other people.





# WHERE TO START FROM

There are 3 ways of starting working on an image:

1. You have a story, topic or theme that you want to express in a visual form
2. You have an interesting visual reference that you want to try to use in your future image
3. You have a “starting point”: a prop, a location, a face, a dress you want to build your future image around.

Below are the 12 step plans on how to get ready for a shoot in each of these cases. Note that only the initial steps in these three options will be different. Other steps will be similar, as the result is always the same: a final image that expresses your idea and looks outstanding.

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# WHEN YOU HAVE A “STARTING POINT”

This one was the simplest one for me, so I describe it first. What do I mean by a starting point?

## Step 1: Choose a starting point

Meaning choose your prop or location (easiest options, but it can be anything, like a model, makeup or hairstyle, dress, etc.). Sometimes we bump into awesome places where we want to shoot (location) or find interesting objects (props) or beautiful dresses and so on. You're absolutely sure that this prop, place or dress is a killer, but you don't know what you can shoot with them.

This is how I started many of my images. Let's say we've settled on a prop - a vintage magnifying glass.

## Step 2: Come up with a story for your future image

Now we need to imagine what could be happening to our prop. This is where we need to ask ourselves several questions:

- What could be happening with this object? What is this object usually used for?
- What could this object symbolize? What kind of associations can we draw, when thinking about that object?
- What are the qualities of our magnifying glass? In what kind of a setting could it be used?
- Who could be using this magnifying glass? What for?
- All of those questions will help us come up with glimpses of ideas which can be gathered eventually into a single plot for your future image.

After that, when you have a plot, you can decide which exact moment of the story you want to show. Or maybe you like the story so much, that you want to create a whole series with it, using the same prop and showing different moments of your story.

For example, we decided that a magnifying glass can represent or symbolise research or investigation. Now we need to decide what kind of investigation that is: is there some kind of a mystery about some person in your future photo? A story from her past? Something that this person did before? Or maybe it's an investigation of your own emotions?

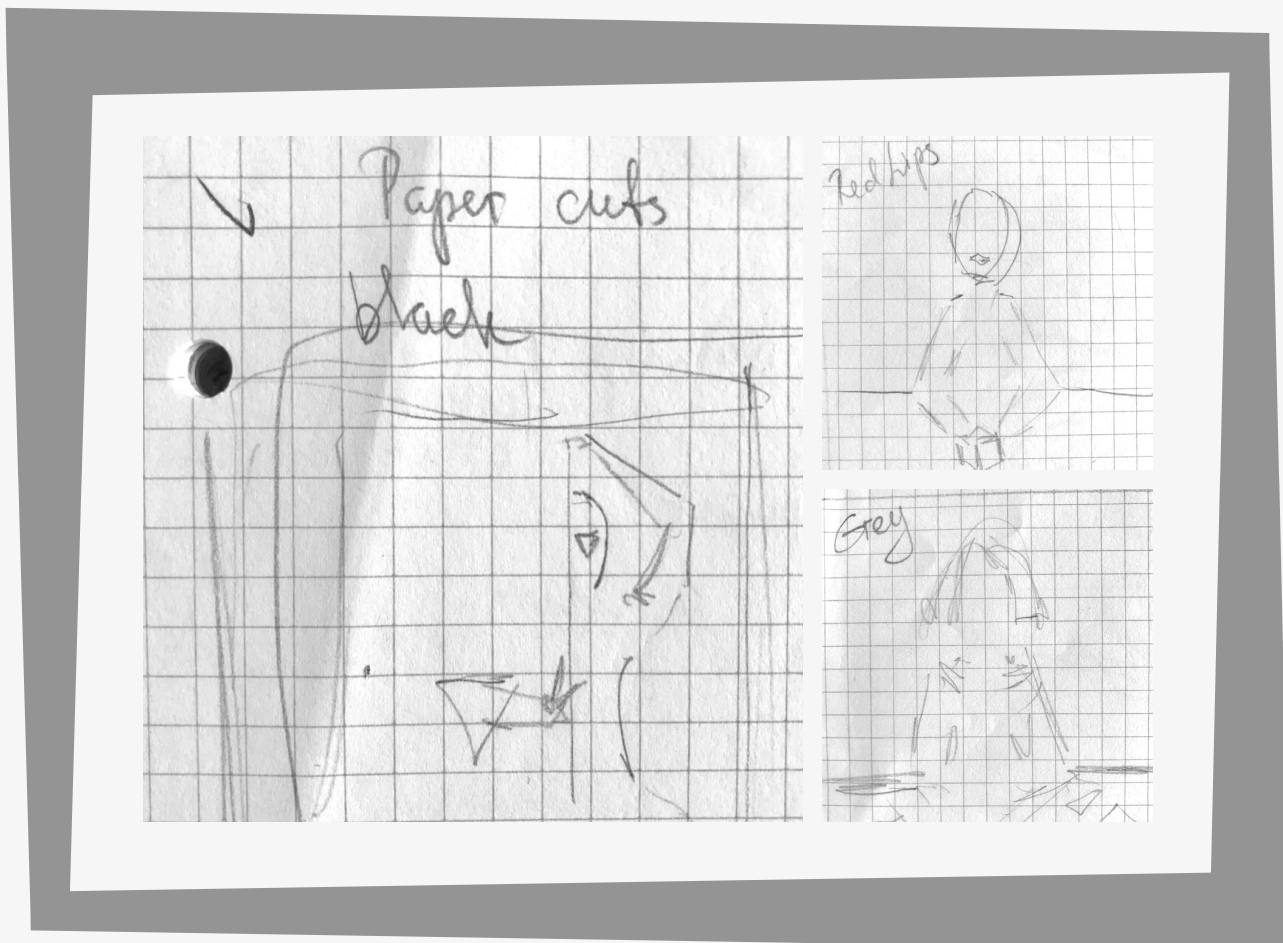
How can the glass be used? Obviously, looking at something closely. What is that something?

You need to decide if you're showing the moment of investigation being made (the person is looking at something, but still haven't found anything), or the moment of discovery (the person has found what he/she was looking for), or what this discovery lead to (the scene of how this discovery affected the main character, and the magnifying glass might not be actively used anymore, but simply present in your shot to symbolise the previous action).

### Step 3: Sketch your future shot

Sketching is not the obligatory step, but at least imagining the final shot in your head is absolutely necessary. It doesn't mean though that your actual final image will look 100% as you imagine it at this point. It can be very different, because the actual shooting conditions may vary. But you need to have the final image in your head in order to be able to plan your whole shoot and collect all your other elements, like puzzle pieces.

Back to sketching. It's highly recommended. And it doesn't have to be a masterpiece so don't worry if you don't have any drawing skills. Check out some examples of my sketches below. The main goal of sketching is for you to understand how you will compose your future shot, how far or close to the subject, you want to be and so on. This sketch will also be extremely helpful if you try to explain your idea to others if you choose to work with a team.



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## Step 4: Think through the colors

This is a very important step, often overlooked by beginner photographers. Yet, color plays a crucial role in how your final image will look and be perceived by the audience. If the colors are random and selected carelessly, or not selected at all, then the image will not be able to grab attention or produce any significant impact. It will, of course, be different, if you're shooting black and white. However, if you choose to work with color, you must pay attention to what shades are there in your frame.

Since we have a "starting point" that we're working with (a prop, or a location, or a piece of wardrobe) the colors of this starting point will determine the general color palette of our future shoot. Let's say if you're shooting in a park on a summer day one of the main colors of your future image will be green and you'll need to select the other colors accordingly. If your magnifying glass has a red handle, you need to make it work with the rest of the scene. If you choose to shoot your model in an orange dress, then understand which other colors work well with orange. My personal recommendation is to keep the number of the colors you use in your photo to 4 maximum. It will make the image simple and clean, yet strong. If you choose to work with more colors understand why you need them, try to get really conscious about what they can add to your story, and if they don't add anything important, consider rethinking your color palette altogether.

But, Dasha, I can change it in photoshop later! Yes, of course, you can. And this is the step when you understand which colors you will alter during post-processing and which you'll leave as they are.

## Step 5: Figure out the missing elements

Depending on your starting point, you'll now have to figure out what else you need to bring your initial idea to reality. Getting back to our magnifying glass being the key prop.

Now we need to answer the questions:

- who is using it? - find a model
- how does this person look like? - decide on what kind of makeup and hair your model will have
- what does this person wear? - decide on the wardrobe for your model and think where you will get the necessary items
- where it's happening? - find a location where you'll be shooting

Understand what you need for your future image and create a checklist for those things. You can use the sample one below:

My starting point .....

I need to find

model

clothes

props

makeup & hair

location

surprise element

## Step 6: Find the model

This step will not be necessary if you're shooting still-lives or self-portraits (cause then you'll always know how your future model will look like), otherwise, you'll need to understand what kind of a face and body shape you want to have in your image. And of course, it needs to be in line with the story you came up with when completing Step 2. Answering the following questions will help:

- Is my main character male or female?
- What's the age of the main character?
- What kind of facial features, a body he or she has?
- How close I will be to my main character? - meaning do you need an "actor" model or a "prop" model. Let's say, you're shooting a close-up with your magnifying glass, then, of course, the model's personality and ability to express emotions, or act in front of a camera matters. If you'll be shooting a sort of "environmental portrait", where a location plays the main role and there's a tiny human figure in the corner of the image, then you probably won't care too much about the face of your model, since it simply won't be seen.

When looking for potential models, the first people who we turn to are usually friends and family members. If you've done a lot of work with them already, try getting out of your comfort zone and invite someone who you don't know well, but who you feel will do good in your future image. In any case, I recommend doing a test shoot with any model, before shooting any concepts. A test shoot can be a simple walk in a park and can take as little as 15 minutes. Usually, this will be enough for you to understand if a person is comfortable in front of a camera or not.



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## Step 7: Find the location

If location is not your starting point, you'll need to understand where you'll be shooting your story, where it will be set. The location will create the general atmosphere for your future image (unless you're shooting an extreme close-up), so you need to choose it carefully. Keeping in mind the main colors of your final shot (Step 4) and of course the story that you want to tell (Step 2).

Your location can be anything: your room, backyard, park, street, library, cafe, nature. There are no limits and you don't have to travel to any faraway place to find a good place to shoot. Things to keep in mind when choosing a location:

- How can my main character interact with the location?
- Is the location easily accessible? Can I come there with a model? Or a group of people? (if you're working with a team).
- If it's a public space: is it allowed to shoot there or do you need permission? When is it less crowded (days of the week, time of day)?
- Will your props survive in this location? Usually very important for outdoor locations that tend to be rainy, very sunny or windy.
- What are the lighting conditions on a cloudy day or on a sunny day? (if you're shooting with natural light).

## Step 8: Find wardrobe, makeup and hair

Getting back to the main character of your story: how does this person look like? Clothes, makeup, and hairstyles contain a lot of information on a character: likes, tastes, social status, personality traits, sometimes education or profession. These elements can tell a whole story by themselves. At this step, you need to make sure that what you select for your model will not conflict with the story you came up with during Step 2, but will on the contrary support and expand it. At the same time, you need to keep in mind that clothes, makeup, and hair of your main character need to work well with the color palette of your final image (Step 4).

Of course, it doesn't mean that you need to get a fancy dress or work with a professional makeup artist for your every shoot. This is the step where you understand:

- if you need a dress, or you can do well with a white sheet or a piece of fabric and wrap it around your model's body.
- If you need any makeup at all and if the face is going to be seen or not.

A few tips on getting the clothes for your future shoots:

- Check your wardrobe and your model's wardrobe

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- Check local second-hand shops and flea-markets
  - Buy and return clothes (be very careful with the items though and check the store's return policy before you do it)
  - Collaborate with designers and fashion schools graduates

## Step 9: Follow the light

Or simply understand what kind of light you need to bring your story to life. If you're like me, in search of a dreamy and mysterious feeling in your photos, then the soft ambient light that you can get on a cloudy day is the one you should be after. A strong, directed light creates a more dramatic impression, especially when combined with deep shadowy areas, think of horror movie scenes. Bright sunlight makes everything crystal clear, there's no mystery to it, only sharpness. So, understand what kind of light will suit your story more and figure out how you can get it. It can be natural or artificial, the key is to understand what kind of emotion it adds to your story.

When you answer this question the next step is to understand how and when you can shoot with this light, "when" will only apply to the natural light of course.

If you're after a dreamy and mysterious feel in your images:

- Get to your location and see how it is light on a sunny day, where the light comes from and when the place you need is in the shadow.
- How much time you have with the soft light and when you get the best light possible. For example, it can be right before sunset and if the sun disappears fast, then you have only 30 minutes. If you shoot indoors, the sun might be very bright in the room in the first half of the day, but then it moves and you have the rest of the day time for your shoot. It will always depend on your local lighting conditions.
- If your location is a public space with a lot of upper electric light, find out if it's possible to switch it off, otherwise, it will interfere with the soft natural light that you're after and the final result will suffer.

## Step 10: Figure out the shooting process: gear, equipment, assistants

Imagine it in all the details and understand how you will shoot the scene and what equipment you need to get the best result. Especially, if you're planning to work alter your future image in post. For example, if you're planning a composite image (when you'll be shooting parts of your image separately and then combining them later in Photoshop). It will include your gear, other equipment, possible help or other people.

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**Gear:** Depending on the pose of the model and position of your other main elements you'll need to understand what type of lens you'll be using for this particular image, and if the result you're after is even possible to get with your gear.

For example, I often shoot models lying on the ground. Those shots have to be done by a wide-angle lens. A simple portrait 50mm will not do the trick in the majority of cases. At the same time, if I want to emphasize the dreamy atmosphere of my location, I'll choose the 50mm and will use it on a maximum open diaphragm, so that I get a very blurry background. Yet another case: when I shoot at a location, where I want to play with lines and make them more prominent, I'll use 35mm.

**Other equipment:** Here's you can also think of whether or not you'll need a flash, reflector, torchlight, and so on.

## Step 11: Do the final check

The world around us is often not ideal and often we need to make changes to our initial ideas and stories in order to be able to work on them with the resources we have in our disposal. This is the step when you look back at all the details of your future shoot and see if it all comes together; if your story is clear and consistent, even though you couldn't get the model or the dress that you imagined during Step 3. The key here is to understand, that it doesn't have to be ideal and 100% the way we imagined it in the very beginning. Often things and conditions that we have to work with make the final image even better.

If something still looks out of place, go back to that step and correct it. If you're good to go, head on to the final step of your preps!

## Step 12: Create a schedule for your shoot

Scheduling a shoot goes without saying when you're working with a model and team (say a makeup artist). However, even if you're working alone on a self-portrait, I find that putting your creative effort into your calendar helps to avoid procrastinating on it. Cause in many cases, if it's not in your calendar, it's likely to never happen.

When you work with other people, scheduling may be tricky, because you need to keep in mind the best time for the shoot light-wise, the best time for being in the location crowd-wise (if it's a public space), and no doubt the personal calendars and availability of your team members and of course, your own time-table. I suggest coming up with several options that work for you and location first and then offering them to the key people you need for the shoot, letting everything and everybody else adjust accordingly.



# STARTING WITH A REFERENCE

So you found a great image on Pinterest or Instagram or elsewhere. You feel inspired by this image and you want to create something that's similar to it. Happens to many of us, right?

Many people call those images “inspirations”, but in fact, they are simply references that you build your future work upon. It doesn't necessarily mean that you want to bluntly copy the image that you found, but most probably just want to try and understand how it was done: how this or that surreal element was shot, how it is to work with this or that material, fabric, type of a face, etc. And that's OK! There's absolutely nothing wrong with finding references and trying to introduce ideas from them to your images. This is how you learn your craft and also understand what you as a photographer are more interested in. It's a natural process and there's no need to stress about it.

Yet, there are things that can be done to prevent you from unconscious falling into plagiarizing someone else's work. Let's dive into those.

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## Step 1: Think of a story

Let's say you found a portrait of a girl with flowers in her hair (let's take something really simple) and you really want to try and shoot something like that yourself. Now try to come up with a story about this girl. Often creating stories might be intimidating, especially if you're not used to doing it. Below are a few questions that will make the process easy for you.

- Why do you like the reference image? What elements would you really like to borrow from it?
- What don't you like in the image and how would you change it?
- Who is this girl? Why does she have those flowers in her hair?
- Who put those flowers there?
- What kind of flowers are there? Are they freshly cut or dry and dead?
- How is the girl feeling about herself?
- What happened to her before the moment that will be shown in your photo?
- What will happen after?

The list of questions can go on and it might of course vary depending on the reference. The key advantage of asking yourself those questions is that this exercise alone will help you to come up with things in your image that will be different from the initial one.

## Step 2: Find more references

This is an important step, because, if you'll be borrowing ideas from just one image the chances of you creating something too similar are very high. Search for more images that inspire you and gather them in one place: it might be a Pinterest board, an Instagram saved collection, a folder on your computer or an actual folder with print outs. Of course, browsing the works of other photographers is something that we want to do in the first place. It's the easiest option.

However, I highly recommend trying searching for inspiration in other types of art (both visual and not) and nature of course. Watch movies, go to exhibitions, listen to lectures on fine art, listen to music and read books. Inspiration and great references are everywhere, you just need to train your mind to notice them outside the field of photography. And when you do and learn to introduce it into your work, no one would be able to accuse you of stealing something.

## Step 3: Combine the references and imagine your final shot

When you have several references (I'd recommend having up to 10) again ask yourself the 2 main questions:

- Why do you like the reference image? What elements would you really like to borrow from it?
- What don't you like in the image and how would you change it?

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## Step 4: Think through the starting points

Now you need to bring your final image together. For this, you need to evaluate your resources and think of which elements of the image can be your starting point. If it's a model, who you wanted to work with for a long time already, then your starting point will be her face and body, including skin tone and color, the color of her hair, her height, etc. If it's a space that you feel will make a great location for your future portrait, then you start with this space and its qualities, the color of the walls, general style (urban, futuristic, baroque, classic, old, rusty and abandoned - the options are endless.)

The next steps will be just as the ones described in the previous way of planning your future conceptual work. That's why I will simply enumerate them here. The detailed descriptions were already given earlier.

## Step 5: Understand the color palette

## Step 6: Figure out what the missing elements are: props, clothes, makeup, location, etc.

Mind here that not all elements might be present in your image. For example, you may choose to shoot without props, makeup or without a model even, and that's fine too.

## Step 7, 8, 9: Find your missing elements one by one

## Step 10: Understand the lighting of your shoot

## Step 11: choose the gear and think through the shooting process, find equipment, if needed

## Step 12: Do the final check and schedule your shoot

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# STARTING WITH A STORY

Perhaps the hardest way, but also the one that pays off the most is starting with a story, a theme or a topic in mind. A topic can be either set for you by someone else (a photography class or a competition) or you can choose the topic yourself.

## Step 1: Understand the main message

Very simply: why do you think this topic is important? What's your opinion on it? And why do you think people should take time to reflect on this topic when looking at your future photo. It doesn't mean that you need to give all the answers in your work.

You might ask questions too so that people choose the answer that is right for them. You leave the interpretation of your work open to the viewer - which is one of the best things about conceptual photography.



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Here's an example: you decided to take a topic of protecting the environment. So, you start asking yourself the following questions:

- What's my position on this matter?
- Why do I think it's important to protect the environment?
- What is the first thing we need to protect: oceans, forests, etc?
- What kind of thought do I want to plant in my viewers' minds?
- How do I want them to change their behavior?
- Do I have all the right answers on how to protect the environment? Or do I want to leave the topic open to discussion?

## Step 2: Do the research

Before you state your position on some topic, it might be useful to understand the actual state of things in the world. Find facts, statistics, talk to other people about this issue, understand which points of view are already out there, try to evaluate them and come up with your own conclusions.

If you choose to create an image about your personal story (say a past event that influenced your life) learn about people who have experienced similar situations and what their reactions to those were. This will allow you to represent the matter more fully and predict reactions that your future image will cause on the viewers.

While you're doing the research, you'll be already getting ideas on how you can visually represent the concept or story in your work. Don't forget to write them down, or sketch bits and pieces right away.

Another thing that you might do here is do the research for visuals: how was this concept represented in the works of other artists and photographers in particular. This step can have its advantages and downsides at the same time and you should be aware of them.

On one hand, you'll get tons of visual ideas on how you can tell your story. On the other hand, you might be tempted to use the exact same things in your photography and the most unpleasant thing is that you might do it subconsciously, because your brain does record all the information that it sees and draws connections between things.

At the moment when you find an idea for your image, you might be 100% sure it's yours, however, it might be just something that you had seen previously, but forgot. That's why some celebrated artists shut down all visual references when starting working on a new project. It might be beneficial to come back to researching visuals, when you already have your future final shot in mind.



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## Step 3: Set the rules. Create limits

Already on the very first step, you can get ideas on how to shoot your future image. Yet, if the ideas don't come, you might find yourself facing an infinite number of possibilities to reflect your thoughts and opinions in your work, which in turn might result in experiencing a "blank canvas" syndrome when you know you want to shoot something, but you don't know-how.

Here's where you need to create a number of rules for your future work and set certain limits. Working within limits helps you to get more focused and results in better productivity. Often those limits are set by life itself because your financial or time resources might be limited. Let's say, you want to shoot something on a seashore, but you live in a place with no access to the sea and no opportunity to fly there easily. Now, if you still want to have the sea in your image, you need to think of how you can add it to your image: will you get a stock photo and work with it? Will you paint a wall half blue and make it look like the sea? Maybe you decide to take a piece of fabric to represent the sea in your image?

Write your rules down and follow them, while working on the topic. Those rules can include: shooting in a certain space only, working with a limited number of colors, working only with objects and not people, not showing faces, shooting with some particular type of lens, shooting from a particular angle, working with only some particular materials (fabric, paper, trash, plastic). You get the idea.

The following steps will be again very similar to what we discussed in the previous two options:

Step 4: Imagine and sketch your final shot

Step 5: Understand the color palette

Step 6: Figure out what the missing elements are: props, clothes, makeup, location, etc.

Step 7, 8, 9: Find your missing elements one by one

Step 10: Understand the lighting of your shoot

Step 11: choose the gear and think through the shooting process, find equipment, if needed

Step 12: Do the final check and schedule your shoot

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# TIME NEEDED FOR PLANNING, PREPARATIONS AND SHOOTING

Getting ready for any staged photo shoot is never fast and can hardly be completed in a day or two. Sometimes it can take about a week, in other times it might take up months. It will all depend on your resources, availability, client needs (if there's a client), deadlines (if you're taking part in a photo contest, for example) and your ability to concentrate, of course. So don't stress about not being able to find the necessary elements right away. Sometimes, the final work becomes even better with time, when you have a chance to look at your idea from different perspectives.

The best news is that, if you've done your homework right and planned your shoot well, your work on location will be a breeze and won't take too much time. Mine usually doesn't take more than an hour.





# FIND YOUR WAY AND SHARE RESULTS

Hope that with these step-by-step plans it will be much easier for you to start turning your ideas into final shots. The world needs to see those! When you upload the work online, make sure you use the hashtag **#easilyplannedconcept**. Now your challenge is to try all of the methods and choose the one that's more suitable for you.

One final thought: remember there's no right or wrong in being creative. Those plans are not some strict sets of rules you have to follow. They are my ways of working on shooting a conceptual image and they proved helpful to dozens of my students. However, they are not a panacea and you eventually will need to find your own way that works best for you. I'd be happy to know if my step-by-step plans helped you in that.