



A Beginner's Guide to Photographing Magic

7 easy things you can start doing today to make your images look **dreamy and surreal**

After conducting over 15 workshops and talking to dozens of like-minded photographers, I found that many of them are interested in adding magic to their images, but are not sure how and where to start. There's no guide into photographing magic! So I decided to come up with one! What makes it valuable are **practical tasks or challenges** that follow each tip, so that it's a ready-made action plan for improving the quality of your fine art work and adding a dream-like feel to it. See, if you can complete all the challenges and observe your own progress.

Getting people to see your work and get feedback is crucial, especially when you're trying new things and learning. Post your work using **#creativephotojourney** to share your progress in creative photography with all of us. Each week I'm sharing my favs in stories of my Instagram profile **@dashapears.art**.

Seriously, I wish I had this list when I was starting out!

1. Shoot wide open

Might seem obvious for some, but still not for everyone. ***Shallow depth of field, bokeh and blur*** make your images more intriguing since they hide or sometimes almost dissolve parts of your photo. In addition, they replicate the hazy feeling of being in a dream, when you most often don't see the whole picture clearly and only subconsciously know what space you are in. In a dream, your attention is concentrated on particular objects or subjects. And again the shallow depth of field helps you with that: it isolates the main subject of your image. When you focus your camera on the subject, all the rest becomes less important in its details, but more essential as a whole, creating the atmosphere.



You can **create bokeh** in your images by:

- shooting with the diaphragm open to its widest capacity. This will depend on the lens and camera that you're using;
- placing your subjects far away from the background (that's why portraits shot with your model stuck to the wall rarely look very dreamy). If you're shooting a portrait indoors using say 50mm 1.8, allow at least 1-1.5m between your subject and your background, if you're standing close to your model. The farther away you take your model from the background (staying close to your model - 1-1,5m), the more dreamy your portrait becomes;
- using filters and Photoshop plugins. There are plenty out there, even basic Instagram filters have it. My personal fav is Alienskin Exposure. Their blur and bokeh-imitating filters look very natural and I used them in many of my works.

Challenge:

Try taking portraits of the same model in the same location, opening and closing diaphragm of your lens. Then do the same exercise keeping the same diaphragm, say 1.8, but moving your subject to and from the background. Next, let the subject be at the same place, but move away with your camera. Compare the results. Which one looks dreamier?

Note: all the challenges can be completed with objects as well if that's easier.



2. Pay Attention to Color

Look around you: how many colors do you see? All of them! Including various possible shades. That's how it is in real life. If you limit the number of colors in your image to 4 maximum, your photo will immediately stand out, cause it will look different from what people see around them. It will draw attention. Yes it's challenging, and in portraits, of course, you'll always have the color of model's skin, eyes, hair (if you keep them nedited), but it's possible anyway. So, when planning your shoots, don't forget about your models's colors too!

Challenge:

Choose an outdoor and an indoor location with minimum colors. Outdoors it can be a plain solid color wall (no graffiti), park or forest with lots of greenery, empty beach. Indoors this might be easier. Now outdoors: try to shoot a subject in an outfit with a variety of colors (e.g. black shoes, colorful dress with a pattern, yellow hat and green scarf - you get the idea). Then shoot the subject in an outfit that only has 1 solid color (blue patternless dress) or the colors that are present in the background. Compare the two images? Which one looks more surreal? Do the same indoors. Again, compare the results.



3. Compose Carefully

The composition represents the core of a successful photo and it's essential in every genre. However, if in reportage the documentary component will be always more important than the composition, in dreamy conceptual photos, where you try to create a whole new world, your composition will be crucial. We are often surrounded by chaotically scattered objects, this is how real life is. In a dream world, you create your own rules and everything can be organized. ***The more organized it appears, the more surreal (and eye-pleasing) your image looks.*** Again: there's a mystery for the viewer: who and why made this "other" world so organized?

Challenge:

Take 3 objects (it can be anything, but it will be more helpful if they are similar in size and shape). Now take 10 images with these objects in the same location and from the same position, rearranging the objects every time you shoot. I suggest starting with just throwing them randomly on your background. This exercise will train your eye and will prove to you the importance of carefully composing your images when you're aiming in creating a dreamy atmosphere.



4. Know Your Light

The best light for creating a dreamy atmosphere is the ***soft and shadowless*** one. It means it's better to plan your outdoor shoots for cloudy days, or just shoot in the shadow. A sunny day with its sharp shadows and bright highlights will make things look more real than you might want to and no post-processing will ever be able to fix it. If there's no escape from the sun, choose the hours when the sun is low, like early morning or right before sunset. If you manage to catch the fog, your image will look even more mysterious. Soft light allows you to have less contrast in your image and this is one more thing that will inject the dreamy feel in your photography

Challenge:

Pick an easily reachable location, like a bus stop nearby or a tree by your house and take photos of it from the same position and at the same hour in different weather conditions for a week. It's even better if you continue taking the images throughout the change of seasons. This will show you how different light is in winter when compared to spring and in a foggy weather when compared to sunshine.

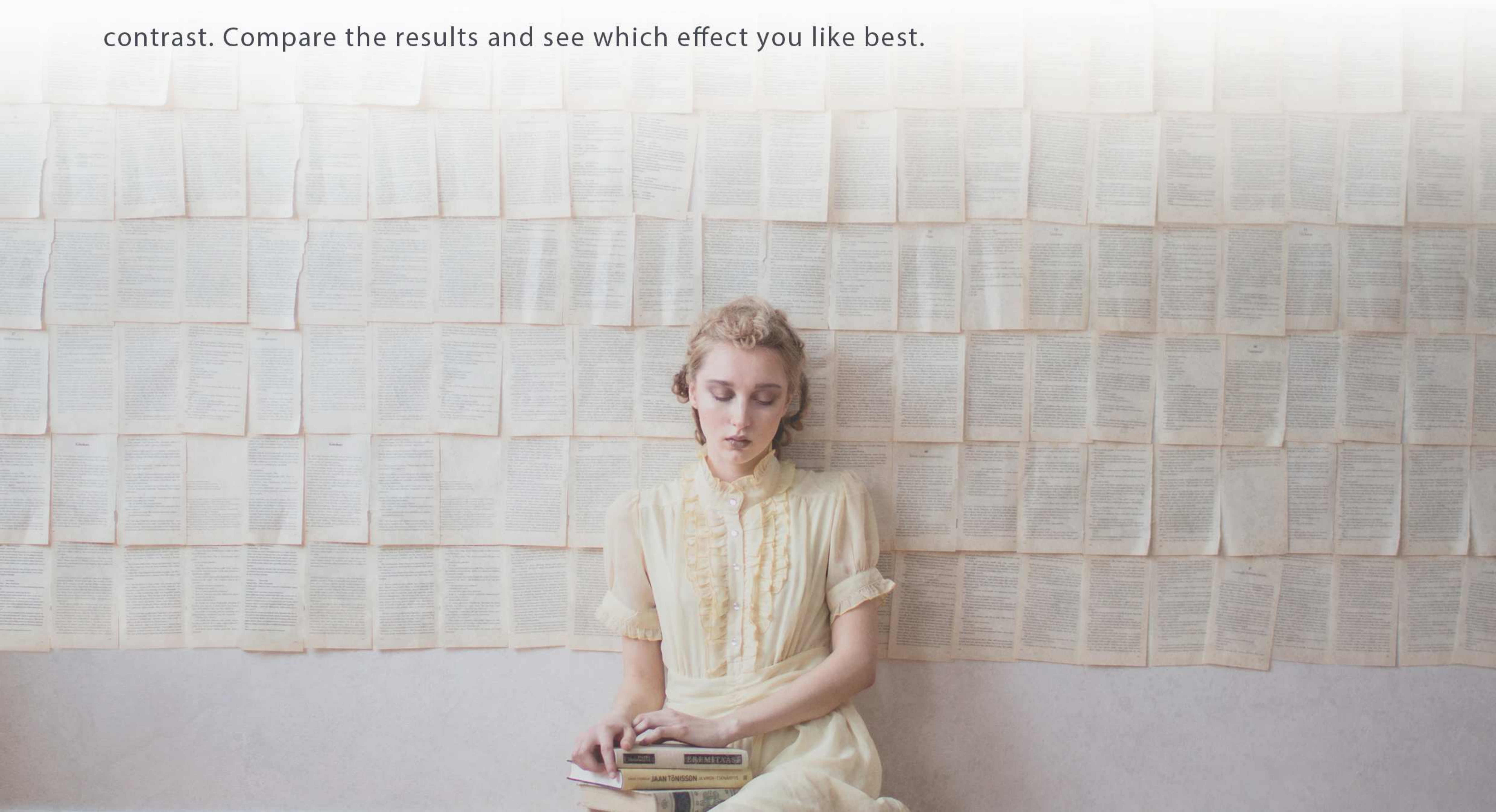


5. Use Lower Contrast

Low-contrast images look grey and less sharp. This is exactly the ***effect that you need to bring the delicacy, romance, and fragility of a fairy tale in.*** It goes hand in hand with using the soft light and shallow depth of field. When you post-process your images instead of increasing the contrast in them, lower it to get a more grey look. If you are doing it in Lightroom, I recommend adding clarity afterwards, so that you still keep a certain amount of micro-contrast. Another way to add more greys to an image is to decrease blacks. That's what I do to all of my images.

Challenge:

I do most of my contrast post-processing work in Lightroom. If you're not familiar with it, I highly recommend to check it out. When in Lightroom, create 2 virtual copies of an image, so then you get 3 identical images. Develop the first one enhancing contrast of the image in basic tools, the second one decreasing the contrast and increasing the clarity, in the third one decrease both clarity and contrast. Compare the results and see which effect you like best.



6. Use Symbols

Numerous objects from books to apples can become symbols for you to use. They will **bring an additional meaning** and also make your images more interesting for the viewer. See it this way: your image is not just a beautiful pic, it also becomes a puzzle, which your viewer wants to solve. It gives you an opportunity to play with concepts, because many symbols will be decoded differently by different people. Books, birds, flowers can be used in your photos as props. Your task will be to find the ones that appeal to you and then introduce them into your work so that your viewer can find something he or she relates to. Props will also add more **elements of a story** to your photo and will sometimes be able to drag out your viewers' past memories or experiences. Memories are often associated with dreams.

Challenge:

Take 5 simple objects (a bottle, a flower, a hat, a clock, a lamp for example) and write out all the possible abstract things those objects can stand for. Now you can choose one of these objects and create a portrait that will be built around one of those meanings.



7. Recognize Patterns and Similarities

In other words, **introduce metaphors** into your work and connect things that are usually not connected in real life. A metaphor here is presenting one object as another object or an abstract notion, based on some similarity. For example, you might remember a famous National Geographic cover image of a plastic bag floating in the water which resembles an iceberg. The author Jorge Gamboa recognised the similarity and used it for conveying a powerful idea.

Challenge:

The easiest way to exercise is with forms. Take 3 objects and use them in your image in a different role: a hat as a flower pot, cups as big eyes, a lampshade as a hat and so on. The challenge will become more interesting if you dismiss your first association with the initial object and go for second, third and fourth ones. Note that all the other elements in your image (location, wardrobe, etc.) can be very ordinary and real.



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