

7 Tips for Understanding Your Histogram

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1) Pixel particulars.

Your histogram provides a graphic representation of the range of tones in your image. The ones on the left are the darkest. Tones on the right are the lightest. Histograms plot the luminosity (*the brightness*) of each & every pixel on your screen. Luminosity is measured on a scale of 0 to 256 (*this comes from how many permutations there are in a JPEG image*).

2) Analyzes afterwards.

Whereas a light meter looks at what you're going to photograph before you take the shot, your histogram informs you about after. How does this help? It lets you know if you achieved the tones you wanted or whether you need to make adjustments & try again.

3) Exposes your exposure.

Are parts of the image over-exposed? (*These are the "blinkies."*) How about under-exposed? Knowing which provides clues about how to adjust your camera settings. To correct for over-exposure increase shutter speed, stop down the aperture, and/or lower the ISO. Do the opposite to correct under-exposure.

4) Details those details.

Where your histogram indicates over-exposure (*those highlighted "blinkies"*) the image will lack detail. Under-exposed spots also lack detail, but in the shadows.

5) Lopsided loses.

Generally speaking, when the info on your histogram's piled up to the left you're getting the message that, overall, your image is under-exposed. Info piled to the right means you've got lots over-exposed (*by the way, we call this "Expose to the Right" [ETTR] & if you shoot in RAW you'll be surprised how much of the image you can salvage in post-processing!*). But "generally" is the key word here! If the scene is all white (e.g., *a snowshoe hare in snow*) the histogram should read heavy to the right & vis-a-versa for a dark scene. (*There is no "correct" shape for a histogram; it will depend on the shot.*)

6) Tells the truth.

You probably don't want to use your histogram for each & every shot, but I highly recommend giving it a look-see in tricky light. What looks just fine to the naked eye is often not fine at all. Your histogram does not lie!

7) Can your sensor cope?

Since your histogram communicates contrast, count on it to tell you if the range of brightness to darks is too much for your sensor to handle.

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Award-winning naturalist photographer, Jeff Parker, leads friendly & informative photo tours & workshops focused on the flora & fauna of North, Central, & South America – and now parts of Europe, too.

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