

*Bree Hulme*  
EDUCATION

# *The White Balance Guide*

Why Is It So Important To Your Photos?



Let's talk white balance. Specifically, setting custom white balance for natural light photographers.

## What is White Balance?

White balance refers to the process of removing or neutralising colour casts in your images. All light sources produce a colour cast. And while our eyes are pretty good at correcting for this in real time, a camera captures the subject as it looks in life.

During the white balancing process, you adjust the colours along two spectrums:

- The blue-yellow spectrum, also known as the colour temperature
- The green-magenta spectrum, also known as the colour tint

Colour casts prevent you from capturing accurate, true colours in a scene and they tend to look bad - messing with portrait skin tones, creating muddy shadows and sickly highlights, and they can create unwanted moods in your photos.

You can adjust the white balance of your images in two ways:

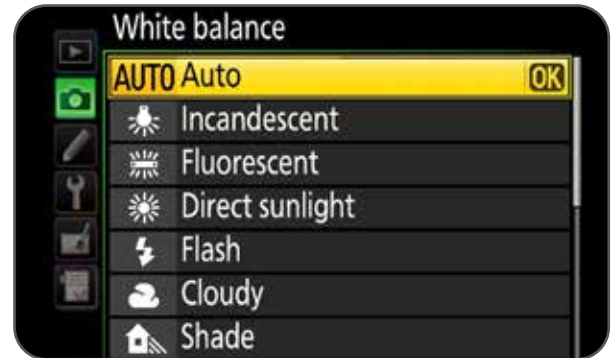
- In camera, before taking a shot
- Afterward, in post-processing



## In Camera White Balance Settings

In camera, you can select from a number of options for white balance: a white balance preset, an auto white balance setting, a custom white balance using Kelvin values, or balancing off a grey card.

Balancing off a grey card changed my photography! It made a huge difference to my raw images and ultimately cut down on my editing time.



But while these white balance options allow you to handle colour casts in the field, they come with some drawbacks:

1. Unless you are in a studio shooting with studio lights, the light will likely change over the course of your shoot. You'll need to periodically update your white balance preset or redo the grey card process as the sun goes behind clouds, as it sets, etc. This is definitely true for natural light photographers even when shooting in a studio space. Some sessions the light is consistent the entire sessions, but on days where there is patchy clouds or changeable weather, I may need to reset the white balance a few times during a session. Or I may need to do some post processing corrections.

2. White balance presets, while easy to use, are only approximate. They often won't produce a perfect result. Hence why I use grey card white balance.

That's why many photographers also have to do some post-processing white balancing.

## How To Set White Balance Using A Grey Card

Setting a custom white balance in camera using a grey card is simple and straight forward. As I said before it completely changed the quality of the Raw images I was producing and saved me so much time in post-processing.

All you need to have is a grey card either purchased from a photography gear shop or you can create your own card. In the past, I did have a fancy grey card that came with my screen calibration software, but along the way it got lost at a shoot somewhere.



Then thanks to the advice of Damien Symonds of [Ask Damien](#) I created my own grey card and printed this myself. It works perfectly. Damien's main tip is that the grey card must be printed on a black and white laser printer, not a bubble jet or ink jet printer.

Below is the grey card I created and printed for you to use.



At the beginning of every session I set my camera to custom white balance and take a photo of the grey card. For my camera (Nikon D800) the steps to configure manual white balance with a grey card are:

- Press WB and rotate the command dial to PRE
- Long press WB (PRE will start to flash inside the viewfinder and on the control panel)
- Take a photo with the whole frame filled with the gray card
- If the white balance is set the Gd (good) will flash inside the viewfinder and on the control panel
- I also take the extra step of taking a photo of my set up with the grey card visible so if need be I have it in post-processing if the white balance needs adjusting slightly.



Sometimes during a session I may have to reset the white balance, if the sun comes out or disappears again. My camera is able to save up to 4 different custom white balance settings so it is quick and easy to flick between a couple of different settings on a cloudy/sunny day where the sun comes and goes. But if I do miss changing the settings I can adjust the white balance in Lightroom in post processing.

Every camera will be a little different with how you go about setting a custom white balance using a grey card, but it is so worth looking up how to do it on your camera so you can get a better result in the images you take for your clients.

# White Balance in Post Processing

Most editing software offer a similar process, which involves using the white balance eyedropper to identify a neutral tone and fine tuning via the Temperature and Tint sliders.

You can white balance each photo individually, or you can create a white balance adjustment for one (or a handful) of photos, then sync the adjustment across an entire set.

However, similar to in-camera white balancing, there are a few points you need to keep in mind when adjusting your white balance in post-processing:

1. You'll need to set aside extra time in post-processing to do your white balancing. And while you can save time with batch processing and presets, if you're capturing lots of images under different lighting conditions, you may prefer the relative ease of in-camera white balancing.
2. Unless you take photos with a grey card in the frame, you may struggle to get a perfect white balance result with editing.
3. For complete white balancing flexibility in editing, you must shoot in raw. While JPEGs allow for some white balance adjustments, you'll be limited an often-unacceptable amount – whereas RAW files let you completely set and reset the white balance.

So while post-processing and in-camera white balancing are both serviceable, you'll ultimately need to choose the option that works best for you.

# How To Adjust The White Balance Of Your Photos In Lightroom

For those instances when I did not change the white balance when my light source colour temperature changed, Lightroom white balance correction is a quick and a relatively painless process:

- First, open an image in the Develop module
- Find the WB section on the right-hand side
- Select the eyedropper tool
- Click on a part of your images that should look neutral grey or white
- You may need to try a few different places to get the best white balance for your image.
- You can also adjust the white balance manually using the Temperature and Tint sliders.

I always do white balance adjustments first, before applying presets to make sure that I have a good working base to start from. Then I apply my presets before moving to Photoshop for cropping and skin softening/smoothing as needed.

I hope this guide has helped you make the jump to setting a custom white balance for your shoots. I truly believe it will give you better photos when working with natural light and give you a more consistent end result for your clients.

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