

BACK BUTTON FOCUSING

This is a technique used quite commonly now to enable you to remove the Focusing from your Shutter button, to another button on your camera.

It means when you half depress the shutter button it does not focus automatically. Focus is done by pressing a button on the back of your camera, thus freeing you to recompose before taking the picture without having to hold the shutter button.

There is no magic about it and it doesn't change how your camera focuses, but it does usually enable you to react more quickly to changing circumstances and make it far easier to recompose.

It can take some getting used to, so if you feel it's of advantage to you, persevere.

The most important thing is to know what all the buttons do on your camera and be able to use them as quickly as possible (whatever type of photography you do), whether you use Back Button focusing or not.

If you are confused by it, leave your settings as they are – it is far more important to understand how your camera works first than to start changing your settings. Having said that do consider the most common requirements – to focus somewhere else in the frame other than centre and to expose for somewhere else in the frame other than centre ... how would you do it and how quickly can you do it?

The articles below give some insight to Back Button focusing, but they also talk of other changes to the camera setup e.g. quick switch from Auto to Manual focus – This is a separate matter that you can set or not, it really has little to do with Back button Focus specifically but tends to be lumped together as usually it is the button that CAN also control this switch that is used for Back Button Focus (the same button can usually also be used for EXPOSURE LOCK rather than Auto-manual focus switch).

The nice thing (although sometimes you may feel overwhelmed by choices) is that modern DSLR cameras allow you to configure almost all buttons to suit yourself and the type of photography you do.

All cameras differ but they tend to follow similar arrangements. Use the below articles as a guide. There is plenty on the Web explaining this technique and plenty of videos on Youtube – probably for your specific camera if you search for it.

BACK BUTTON FOCUSING – EASIER THAN YOU THINK!

(ARTICLE TAKEN FROM IMPROVEPHOTOGRAPHY.COM)



One of the most frequent questions I have received in the last month has been about back button focus and how to use it on Canon and Nikon DSLR cameras. In this article you'll learn what back button focusing is, and how to back button focus for Canon and Nikon cameras.

WHAT IS BACK BUTTON FOCUSING?

The camera usually focuses when the shutter button is pressed half way down, and then the photographer takes the picture when the button is pressed in fully. Back button autofocus makes it so the shutter button doesn't control the focus activation at all, but instead assigns another button on the back of the camera (hence the name) to activate focusing on the camera.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF BACK BUTTON FOCUS?

The best way to explain the benefits of back button focusing is through two examples.

EXAMPLE NUMBER ONE

First, suppose you are shooting portraits. The person who you are shooting is standing still and you want to take several different shots of the person. You take your first shot, and then change your composition and need to move your focus point to be on the person's eye. If your camera has 40+ focus points like many DSLRs do, you have to use the four-way selector to tediously move the focus point to the correct spot, focus, and then take the photo. How annoying!

You can use back button focusing to solve this problem because the distance between the photographer and the subject stays the same between both shots, but the composition changes. With back button focusing, the photographer activates focus for the first shot, and then is able to recompose infinite times as long as the distance between the camera and the subject remains exactly the same.

You'll note that there are other ways to solve this problem, such as focus and recompose (equally tedious, but sometimes it's your best bet), or holding the AF-L, AE-L button, but that is just plain annoying. Back button focusing is superior in this instance as long as the photographer is careful not to change the distance between the camera and the subject (which would throw off the focus) when using shallow depth-of-field.

EXAMPLE NUMBER TWO

While I was shooting wildlife in Yellowstone earlier this year ([read about that trip here](#)), I came amazingly close to a pack of wolves one morning (well, close as in it filled the frame with a giant 800mm lens... I wasn't THAT close...) and I shot as fast and furious as possible as the famous Alpha 06 wolf played in the snow in front of me.

Just as I was shooting madly, another photographer scooted too close in front of me and my 800mm lens began to focus on the photographer's shoulder! Focus on such a long lens can be somewhat slow, and by the time I readjusted my heavy tripod and lens, the wolf was running away and all I got was butt shots.

In the same situation, back button focus could have saved me. When the photographer's shoulder appeared in the frame, my focus would have been locked on the wolf still and I could have shot to the side of the photographer and still got sharp shots as soon as I shewed him out of the frame. Instead, I had to find focus again in low light with a plain white field of snow in front of me (meaning focus was tough to acquire).

TUTORIAL: BACK BUTTON FOCUS FOR CANON

[Canon was the first camera manufacturer to implement back button focus in 1989](#) and has put the feature in all DSLR models made in the last 8 or 9 years (yes, even the Canon Rebel XT and XTi).

In the Canon camera menu, you'll look for an option called "Shutter/AE Lock Button" and then in that menu you'll see a whole host of options. The one you're looking for is called "Metering Start /

Meter + AF Start.” Could they have possibly made that any more confusing for us photographers? No... I think not.

The following is a cheat sheet from the Canon Learning center where you’ll find the menu option on your Canon camera to set up back button focus. If your camera isn’t listed here, just poke around a bit and I’m sure you’ll find it easy enough.

EOS Rebel T3: C.Fn 7 (option 1 or 3)

EOS Rebel T3i: C.Fn 9 (option 1 or 3)

EOS 50D: C.Fn IV-1 (option 2 or 3)

EOS 60D: C.Fn IV-1 (option 1, 2, 3, or 4)

EOS 7D: C.Fn IV-1 (Custom Controls — Shutter, AF-ON, AEL buttons)

EOS 5D Mark II: C.Fn IV-1 (option 2 or 3)

EOS-1Ds Mark III: C.Fn IV-1 (option 2 or 3)

EOS-1D Mark IV: C.Fn IV-1 (option 2 or 3)

More advanced Canon cameras have a dedicated button on the back of the camera that will be the button used to activate the focus on the camera, and other Canon cameras (such as Canon Rebels, Canon 60D, etc) will use the AF-L, AE-L button as the button that will activate focus after this option is selected.



Some advanced cameras (for both Canon and Nikon) like the 5D Mark III and the Nikon D800 have a dedicated button for AF-On. Other cameras (like a D7000 or a Canon Rebel) allow the photographer to program the AE-L, AF-L button to work for back button focusing.

TUTORIAL: BACK BUTTON FOCUS FOR NIKON

On a Nikon camera, it is a bit easier to set up back button focusing than it is on a Canon, but you still have to know exactly what to look for.

There are dozens and dozens of Nikon model DSLR cameras, so I can't go through each of them, but if you follow one of the tutorials below for a similar camera to your model, I'm sure you'll get it set up easy enough.

BACK BUTTON FOCUS ON A NIKON D7000

1) You need to assign the AE-L, AF-L button (yes, that button that you've never used before and always wondered what it does) on the back of the camera to be AF-On. To do this, go to your camera menu and look in the custom setting menu (the pencil). In the custom setting menu, go to Controls, and then choose F5 "Assign AE-L/AF-L button." Within this menu, choose "AF-On."

2) Now you need to set up the camera so it will take a picture even when focus has not been achieved. This is preferable in most situations because you may have focused and recomposed the shot. To do this, go to your Custom Setting Menu and choose Autofocus. Within this menu, select A1 "AF-C priority selection" and set it to "release." Then set AF-S priority selection to "release" as well.

BACK BUTTON FOCUS ON A NIKON D3100, D3200, OR A D5100

Check out this video tutorial that explains step-by-step how to do it.

SHOULD ALL PHOTOGRAPHERS USE BACK BUTTON FOCUS?

Definitely not! If you're not yet 100% comfortable with operating your camera or if you don't quite understand how focus works, then head for the hills, hide yourself in the corner, and grab a teddy bear for protection. Back button focusing will only make using your camera more complicated—which is why camera manufacturers for decades have used the half-press shutter method of focusing.

If, however, you're a confident photographer and you're ready to try an advanced technique that can definitely improve your focus in some situations, then meet back button focus.

I THOUGHT BACK FOCUS WAS A BAD THING!

Back focus and back button focusing are two very different things. Back focus is when the lens focuses behind the intended target, and back button focusing is a technique used by advanced photographers to focus by separating the focus and shutter activation of the shutter button.

3 REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD SWITCH TO BACK BUTTON FOCUS

Article taken from <http://digital-photography-school.com>

This article was written to expand upon some of the key points in my ebook [Tack Sharp: A Step By Step Guide To Nailing Focus](#).

Over the past couple of years (and really since writing my ebook) I've become a huge advocate for making the switch to back button focus. It was one of the most revolutionary changes I ever made to how I take pictures. It seems like such a small thing, yet it's such a huge difference in the way your camera works. I honestly don't know why this isn't the standard setting on all cameras because after getting acclimated to this setting, I honestly can't understand the meaning for or use of the 'shutter half way down' method.

NO MORE SWITCHING YOUR LENS TO MANUAL FOCUS

This little advantage takes some getting used to, mainly because for the first few weeks after switching to BBF you'll likely keep switching your lens to manual focus out of habit. When your focus is set to your shutter button, you have to switch your lens to manual focus so your camera doesn't refocus when you go to take the picture. Otherwise, you'd set your focus

manually, then you'd press the shutter half way down and the camera would override what you manually set. How annoying! When you switch to BBF you no longer need the focus mode selector on your lens because the camera will no longer refocus when you press the shutter down. In most cases, your AF-ON button will be used for focus and focus only. So you're free to use your shutter button as just that, a shutter!



For this shot in Riomaggiore, Italy I had my camera up on a tripod and dialed in focus manually using Live View on the back of my camera.

NO MORE REFOCUSING EVERY TIME YOU LET GO OF THE SHUTTER

This was one of the most frustrating things I ran into when I used the 'shutter half way down' method of focusing. Sure you can lock in focus by holding the shutter half way down, then focus will stay locked as long as you hold your shutter in limbo. But then you have to hold your finger there! If you really think about it, doesn't that sound absurd? If you let go or accidentally lift your finger just a little bit, the camera will refocus as soon as you press it down again. Or press the shutter a little too hard and you will take a picture before you're ready.

With BBF, you can set focus and it will stay set until you decide to change it. For wedding photographers, that means that you can be at the end of the aisle while the bride and groom are giving their vows. You aren't moving and neither are they. You can use the center AF point and focus on the bride's face with your telephoto lens and then you're set for as long as you're in that position. With the old method, you'd have to refocus on the bride or groom's face with each shot. That's how you end up with throw away shots where you accidentally

focused on the ministers face instead of the bride or groom. And let's just hope you don't have to hand over a set of photos of the kiss with a blurry bride and groom and a sweaty, tack sharp minister.



Once I set focus on the town of Varenna on Lake Como I no longer needed to worry about focus (with a subject this far away focus was at infinity). With BBF I didn't have to worry about my camera refocusing when I was ready to press the shutter down.

USE SERVO FOR ALMOST ALL OF YOUR FOCUSING NEEDS

The two main types of auto focus on your camera are (on a Canon) One-Shot and AI-Servo. On a Nikon they are called AF-Single (AF-S) and AF-Continuous (AF-C). One-Shot means that when you press your AF-ON button (or the shutter half way down) your camera will set focus one time based on where the subject is at the given time. If your subject moves or if you move, you have to reset your focus. This method wouldn't work very well if you were photographing your kids running around the sprinkler in the summer, or photographing a football game with fast moving subjects.

That's why there's another method of focusing called AI-Servo (AF-C on Nikon). This method blew me away the first time I discovered it. Servo focusing actually tracks focusing on moving subjects. So if you're at the park with your dog playing fetch and your dog is running full sprint to bring the ball back to you, you can place a single focus point of him in Servo mode and fire off as many shots as your camera can take before the buffer runs out. Assuming that you have a fast enough shutter speed, you should have a very high percentage of sharp, in focus images.

So the thing I started to notice about having the camera in Servo mode is that I could use Servo just like One-Shot. You see, to use Servo focusing with BBF you have to continuously hold down the AF-ON button to track focus. So if you have a still subject you can simply tap the AF-ON button and focus will stop adjusting when you let go of the button. I've found that if you have a still subject and hold down the AF-ON button in Servo mode, the camera will keep trying to work to find focus. So the subject will start going slightly in and out of focus because the camera thinks it should be looking for a moving subject. But again, if you simply tap the AF-ON button and let go when you see that your subject is in focus, you are good to go. When you practise this and it becomes second nature, it's a very fast process that really takes no brain power or time at all.



When I photographed this helicopter it was headed straight for me, holding down the AF-ON button in AI-Servo I was able to track focus as it moved closer to me.

CONCLUSION

If you're interested in learning more about things like back button focus, servo modes, and tips on how to set these up on your camera then be sure to [check out my ebook Tack Sharp](#). If you have any questions or input, as always, feel free to leave me some comments below. I'll do my best to respond in a timely manner.

If you haven't already, be sure to follow me on [Google+](#) and [Twitter!](#)

FURTHER READING ON THIS TOPIC BY JAMES BRANDON

[Advanced Tips for Tack Sharp Images](#)

Many videos available on YouTube e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PN9R0D3pF0>