

Indoor Card Photography Tips

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I get a lot of questions on how I photograph my cards. I'm a late night worker and I don't have much opportunity to photograph cards during the day and I don't like to be at the mercy of the weather. So, after much trial and error I've found a way to photograph my cards indoors that requires no special equipment and yields consistent and (in my opinion ;)) good results.

So what do you need to know?

Step One: Learn your camera.

Whether you have a point and shoot camera or a digital SLR (single lens release) you can take really good pictures of your cards indoors. You just have to learn your cameras tricks. So find that manual that you left in the camera box and keep it handy.

On average I'd say that stampers really do a good job of knowing their cameras but there is always more to know. **Your camera manual is your best friend.** READ IT!!! The main things you need to know how to adjust on your camera when stamping your cards indoors are **White Balance, ISO** (film speed), **Aperture control, flash and shutter speed.**

First up... **turn your flash off.** I've never ever taken a good picture of my cards with the flash on. Usually I'm too close to it and it blows the whole picture out. It's best to turn it off if you follow this tutorial.

White balance is your cameras handy dandy electronic way of adjusting the colors in your pictures for whatever lighting situation you are in. This used to be accomplished with lens filters. Every lighting situation has a different temperature or color. Indoor incandescent light tends to be yellow. Fluorescent light tends to be blueish. Most people set their camera to auto (or never set it because it comes out of the box on auto) and forget about it. For photographing a card you need to change it. The color correction is better when you set it manually. So dig out that manual and see what it says about white balance and **set your white balance to compliment your specific brand of indoor lighting** (i.e. fluorescent or incandescent).

ISO is your digital cameras approximation of film speed. I know, there's no film. But your digital camera is built to act like there is. Those of us that actually remember film cameras know that film speed has a lot to do with what kind of light you take your pictures in and it also has a lot to do with how 'grainy' a finished photo is. A low number ISO like 100 is perfect for taking pictures outside on sunny day and it makes for a crystal clear brilliant photo with no grain but it's not so great for indoor lower quality light. A higher number ISO like 400 or 800 is better for indoor lighting situations that aren't as bright but it does make for a grainier picture. Your camera most likely sets this for you but again this is where your camera manual comes in handy. Dig it out again and find how to **manually set your cameras ISO to 400.**

The **aperture** (also referred to as F-stop) in your camera is the hole in your camera that lets the light in and thus takes the picture. When it's **BIG** it lets in lots of light but it only focuses on a really shallow distance. When it's small it lets in less light but it can focus on a deeper distance. Most cameras refer to this as an F-number. F-2.8 is a **BIG** opening. F-11 is a very small opening. For photographing indoors we need to let more light in so **we want a bigger opening so we need a smaller F number.** (I know, it's confusing.) We also don't need a deep focal area for photographing a card. Many point and shoot cameras don't let you

change the F-stop on your camera but they do give you different shooting modes. The portrait mode typically has the smallest F-stop.

Shutter speed is how fast your camera snaps the picture. When your camera snaps the picture really fast it is able to stop motion but it also lets in a smaller amount of light. If you were trying to photograph a runner or a football game we'd want a high shutter speed. Our cards are sitting still (hopefully) so we don't need a fast shutter speed and we definitely want to let in more light so **we need a slower shutter speed**. BUT and this is a pretty big one, we don't want one so low that our natural hand shake will affect the picture. (If you have a tripod and you want to deal with setting it up it will take care of most hand shake so you can get away with an even lower shutter speed.) So... what am I getting at? **You don't want your shutter speed to be below 60 or your focus will not be crisp**. Shutter speeds look like a fraction usually 1 over a number. Shutter speeds are generally a fraction of a second, hence the fraction. 1/60 is a slower shutter speed. 1/1600 is very fast - think amazing sports photography. Most people don't use anything higher than 1/500. We need between 1/60 - 1/100 for photographing cards. Most point and shoot cameras don't tell you what the shutter speed is... it just takes a bad picture. So if your picture is coming out blurry a low shutter speed might be the culprit.

Step Two: Set up your space.

I'm done with the camera techno babble... mostly. Now it's time to set up your shooting space to take the best pictures. There are lots of ways to do this. You can go out and buy a really nice [light tent](#), clip on photography lights and shoot away. That's gonna cost you though. Or you can go grab a **plain**, cheap, 9x12" non-spiral **sketchbook**, a **table lamp** with a **100 watt light bulb** and a couple of **black binder clips**. (150 watt is better if you can find a lamp that will take it.)

On the subject of light bulbs... should you go out and get one of those fancy daylight imitating light bulbs? NO... they sound like a dream come true for this but they aren't. Your camera's white balance doesn't know this kind of enhanced indoor light. It will throw off the adjustment and give an odd color cast to your pictures. Just get a regular plain old 100 watt or 150 watt bulb.

OTT lights. If you have an OTT light and it's one of the bigger table versions or one of the floor versions YES please use it. (The smaller ones don't put out enough light for our needs here.) OTT lights are the only bulb that is a true imitation of colorless light like the sun. They are very expensive but if you have it by all means USE IT!! :) In this case you will set your camera's white balance to sun light.

Your card studio will consist of something like this: a stack of 2-3 books, your sketch book open to the middle (clip the pages back with the binder clips) and resting on the books, your lamp next to your open sketchbook and your card propped up on the sketchbook. **It should look a lot like the photo to the right:**



Step Three: Take Your Pictures

Once you have this all set up you just need to find a view point you like and start taking pictures. Try to keep your angle to the card so that the sketchbook stays in the background behind the card and you don't get any strange overlaps... you don't want to give away the magic behind the scenes so to speak. I usually **take 5-8 pictures of each card** that way I make sure I have good exposure and focus. The more photos you take the higher your odds are of taking a really good one.

When you start taking pictures use your cameras display to guide you. It will tell you if you are taking a good exposure or a bad one. If it blinks at you in red... your picture is going to be bad. **Read your manual so you know what the flashing lights mean.**

This is what my photos look like straight out of the camera without any Photoshop enhancements. (I did crop them). I have a [Canon Rebel Xsi](#). It's a base model digital SLR with a [50 mm Canon lens](#) (the really cheap one).



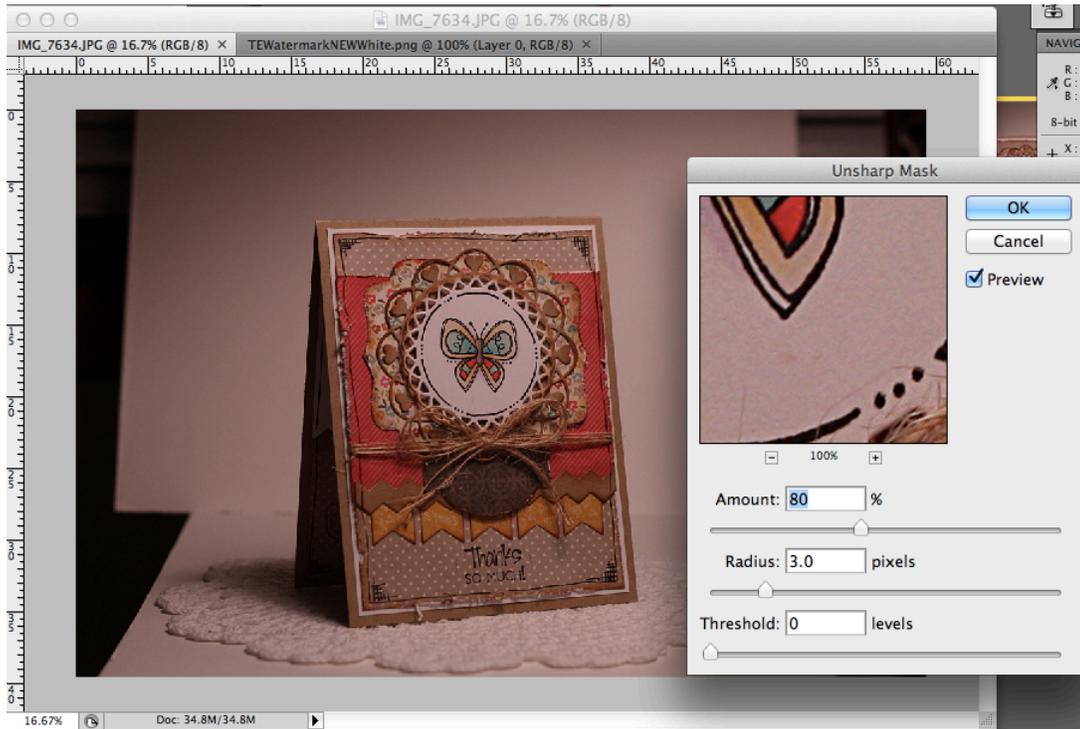
As you can see the picture(s) aren't bad but the white spaces aren't truly white. Without a tripod I haven't been able to balance ISO, shutter and aperture to get a true white straight out of my camera. It can be done, though. What I do is use the magic of Photoshop.

Step Four: Editing is the finishing touch

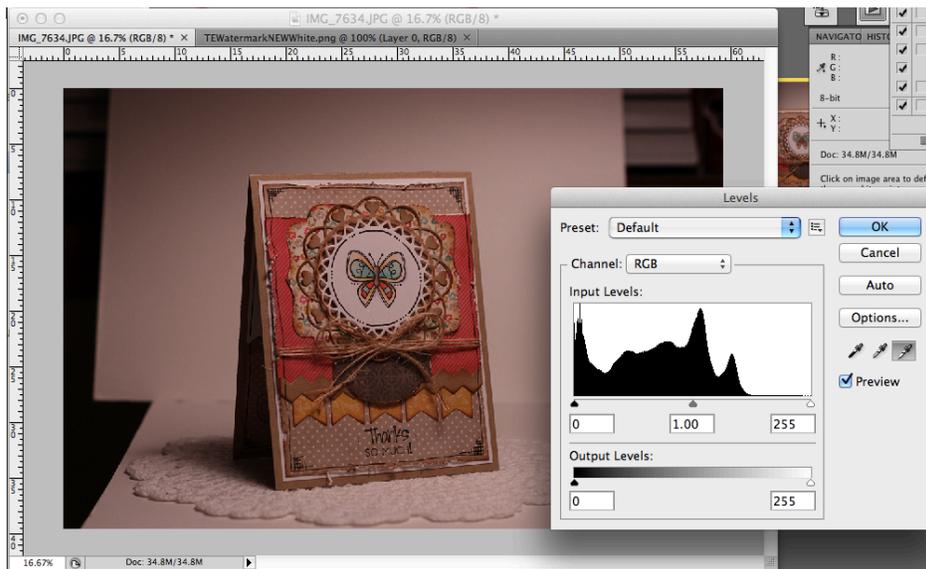
I use Photoshop CS4 to edit my photos. I'm lucky to have it because my husband uses it for work. If he didn't I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have it and I'd have to edit my pictures another way and there are lots of inexpensive effective options available. [Gimp](#) is a great free program as well as Photoshop Elements that is relatively inexpensive.

What you want to do in your editing program is **sharpen your image** and do one final **adjustment to the color balance** as well as **crop** and if desired **add a watermark**.

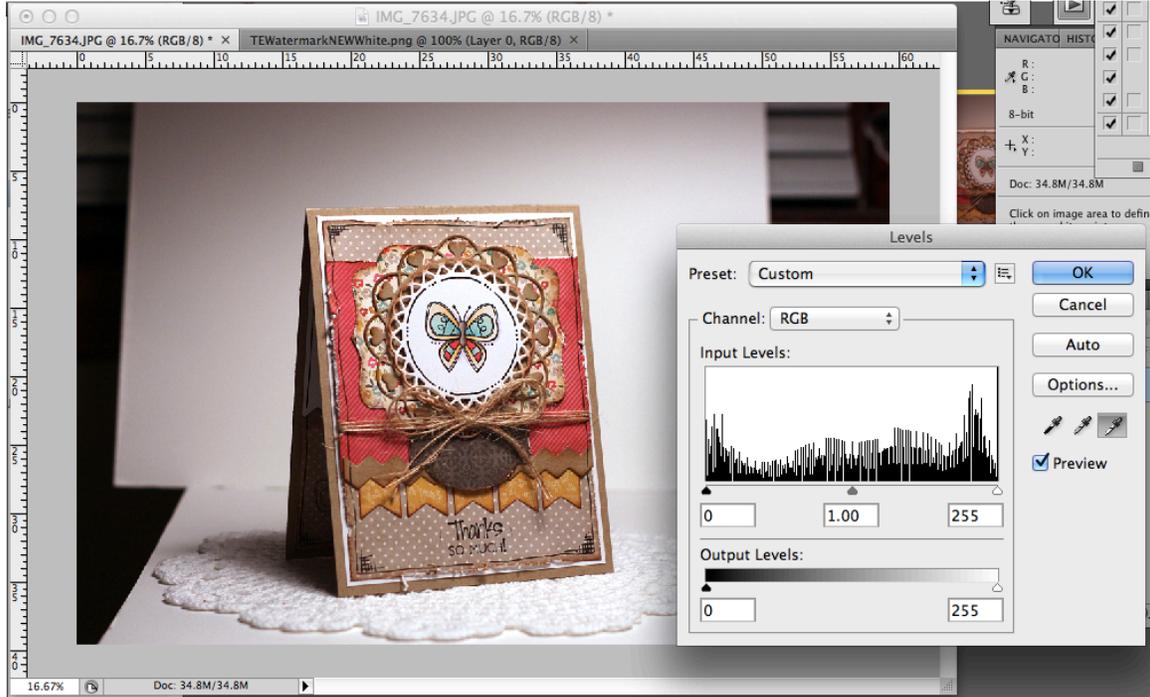
Most photo editing software programs have a way of **sharpening** your image. This take a bit of the blur out that is typical of a pixelated image. In Photoshop this can be found under Filter/Sharpen/Unsharp Mask. I used Amount 80, Radius 3.0 and Threshold 0.



Next up is **Levels**. The Levels palette is found under Image/Adjustments/Levels. The Levels palette adjusts the levels of red, green and blue in your image. This particular trick has probably made the most profound improvement in my pictures and my husband is the one that showed this to me. When you open the Levels palette there are three droppers to the right of the palette under the Options... button. One is filled black, one grey and one white. Select the white one and click on something in the image that is supposed to be perfectly white but isn't. This is most successful if you click something in the picture that was closest to the light source (your lamp). When you do this it adjusts not only the color balance but the exposure so the area that you clicked becomes a true white. Before...



After:



If you make a mistake with the Levels dropper and don't like the result just use `ctrl + z` (command + z on a Mac) and it will undo what you did and you can click somewhere else. I usually try a couple of locations before I settle on the one I like the best.

Almost all photo-editing programs have something that lets you adjust the levels of red/green/blue in your photos. You just have to dig around and find it. :)

At this point I crop my photos down to 1000 pixels tall and add a watermark. Occasionally I will add the fuzzy white border but not always. To add a watermark in Photoshop I just open the watermark file while my photo is open, copy and paste it right into my photo. This pastes it into a new layer that I can move around. If need I resize it using the Transform function under edit and then I save my file as a .JPG and I'm done. ☺

So there you have it! Nice, crisp, clear and bright indoor photos of your cards. If you've stayed with me this long I do appreciate it.





All stamps courtesy of [Taylored Expressions](#).

This tutorial has been adapted and updated with new photos and information from a [blog post](#) written in 2011 for [The Greeting Farm](#).

Card Supplies:

Stamp: Easter Doodles (Taylored Expressions)

Ink: Memento Tuxedo Black, Ranger Vintage Photo Distress Ink

Paper: My Mind's Eye Collectable 6x6: Unforgettable, Kraft Cardstock (Bazzill), Choice Snow White (Taylored Expressions)

Dies: Layering Doilies, Banner Stacklets 1, Banner Stacklets 2, Label Stacklets 2, Chevron Border Die (all by Taylored Expressions)

Accessories: Twine Thread (May Arts), Ink Blushers, Best Glue Ever (Taylored Expressions), Distress Tool (Prima), Sharpie Pen, Copic Markers