



RUSS JACKSON'S 5-STEP CHECKLIST-

To save time in post and perfect your newborn photography in camera.

When I started in newborn photography, I found that I panicked my way through sessions. I would almost be overwhelmed with everything that I had to remember; getting the light right; posing the baby well without waking them up; remembering all of the poses and of course, making sure that the baby was safe!

The sessions were a complete blur, and when it came to reviewing the images on the computer, I was so disappointed with the results.

There would not be a single image that I was genuinely proud of, and I had taken hundreds! It would then take hours in Photoshop to correct the mistakes, but I knew that if I had just paid a little more attention in the session, my images could be so much better.

Sound familiar?

I started to concentrate on my posing flow, and for each different angle of each pose, I began to visualise what I wanted to achieve.

That's when I formulated my 5-step checklist to help me to get the best shot possible at the time it counted most; when I had the baby right there in front of me.

This simple checklist is perhaps the biggest thing that has taken my photography to the level that made me proud of my work. It works and not only has my photography improved, both my sessions and my post-production time have become a lot shorter!

So, what is the 5-step checklist?

After each image I take, I systematically review the picture by using my 5 step approach.

It's great because it forces me to analyse each image and fix what needs to be corrected before I move onto the next pose.

It also forces me to slow down and concentrate on the task at hand.

1: FOCUS

The first thing I check is focus. It is the most critical aspect of any photograph and the nemesis of the newborn photographer.

If the image is out of focus, it cannot be used, and it is pointless to move onto the next step.

I have a handy shortcut on my Nikon where I can review the focus point I used at 200% by just clicking the OK button on the back. This custom function is AMAZING as it allows me to check my focus in an instant.

If the eyes or eyelashes are soft, I know right away that I need to retake the image.



Why do we get so many out of focus images?

As newborn photographers, we like to have a soft dreamy image with the background and foreground falling out of focus. For this, we need a shallow depth-of-field, so we generally shoot at 'wide open' apertures ranging from f2.8 to f1.4. The more open the aperture, the shallower the depth-of-field and the more you should expect to get a higher percentage of out-of-focus images.

I shoot at f2.8, any lower than that, I find that I get too many out-of-focus images and that leads to me overshooting.

I love the look of shooting at the more wide-open aperture of f1.4, but for me, the trade-off is not worth it.

We must remember that when we work very close to our subjects, the depth-of-field is reduced. For example; if we were to photograph a child in the park and he is 5 meters away, f1.4 would be a perfect aperture. It would be shallow enough to keep his face sharp, and the shallow depth-of-field would blur out the background to give us a beautiful bokeh.



But, with a tiny newborn we tend to be working far closer (less than a meter away) and at the same aperture of f1.4 will now give us a paper-thin depth-of-field.

We are asking a lot of our very clever cameras to consistently focus on such a thin focus plain, particularly if lighting conditions are not ideal and there is little contrast on the area on which you wish to focus. A baby with very blonde or no eyelashes is much harder to focus on than a baby with beautiful long, black eyelashes for instance.

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The choice of what aperture you use is yours but always consider the following:

- Always focus on the eye that is closest to the camera.
- Make sure your focus mode is set to single focus mode (AF-S or One-Shot) and not continuous focus mode (AF-C or AI-Servo).
- Learn to toggle your focus point after you have composed the image. The slight movement you make when adjusting the composition after focusing (when using the middle focus point) can sometimes throw the eyelashes out of focus.
- If you are using natural or available light, make sure your shutter speed is high enough to avoid any camera shake.

2: CAMERA ANGLE

Let's face it, nostrils are not pretty, or at the very least, not the most beautiful part of someone's face. In portraiture, the general rule is that we want to keep the height of our camera at much the same height as the subject's eye line to ensure that we do not look up the nose. We see this all of the time when we photograph older subjects:



Shooting from a lower angle is hardly ever flattering as we tend to make the jaw look more prominent, and we look right up those beautiful nostrils!

My rule when photographing a newborn is to hold my camera at the eye line or above. This can be quite tricky as we no longer have a subject that is standing or sitting up, but a baby that is lying down. Just remember, if you see too much of the nostrils you are generally too 'low' and need to adjust your camera angle to be more in line with the eye line.



3: COMPOSITION

The composition of the image is something that can make or break an image.

Composition is how and where we choose to place the baby in the frame.

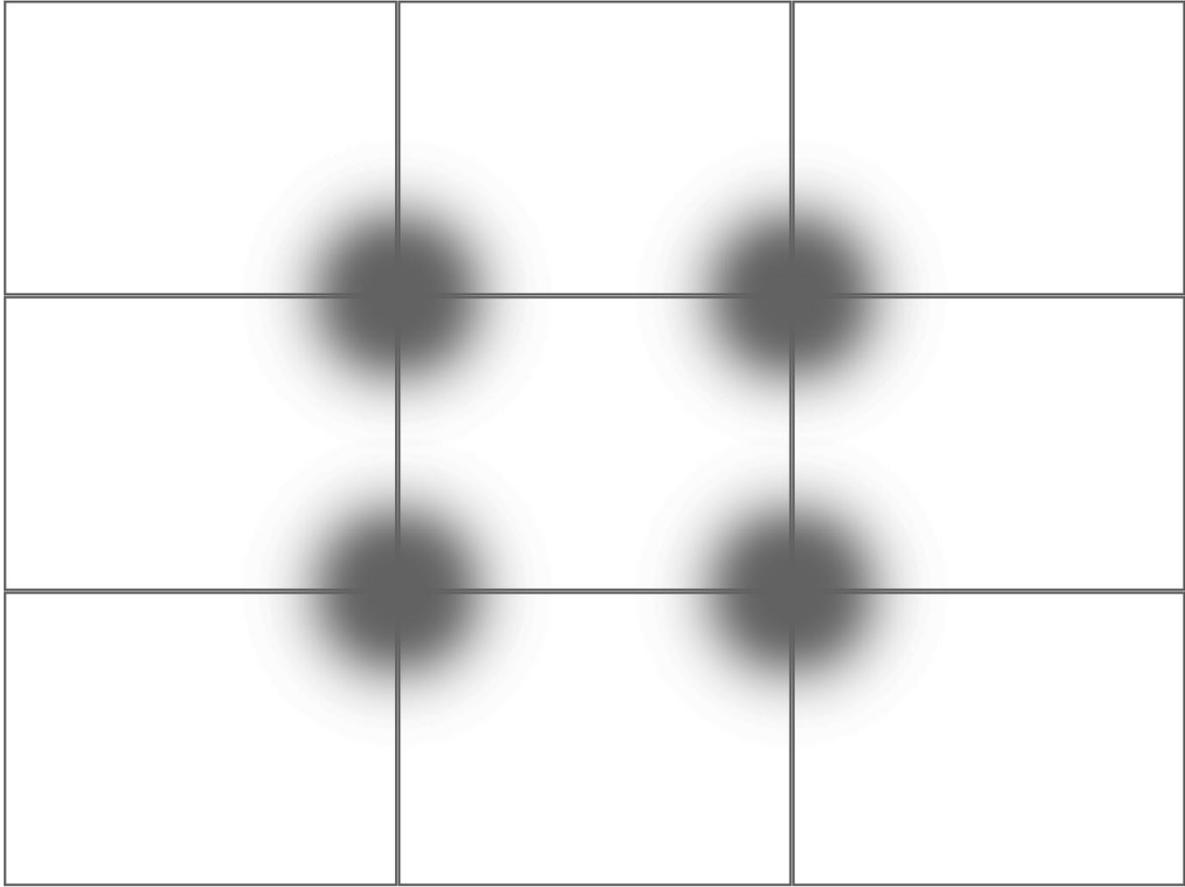
Several composition rules are taught when we study photography. However, we must remember that photography is an art form and there is no right way and wrong way. Rather than rules, we should perhaps see them as guidelines.

It is also important to remember that you will often break one rule to fulfil another. For example: to achieve great symmetry in the image you will often break the rule of thirds and vice versa. It all depends on the pose, and it also depends on you as an artist.

Here are three of the most common composition guidelines that will massively improve your newborn photography:

- **The Rule of Thirds.**

This rule segments the frame into three equal sections both horizontally and vertically.



Placing the main point of interest (in our case the babies face) on one of the intersecting lines will make the image feel more balanced and interesting.



Examples of using the Rule of Thirds when composing an image.

- **Negative Space**

This concept uses space to create balance in your image. This extra space is referred to as negative space. Negative space is the part or parts of the image (mostly in the background) that are empty or less interesting than your subject.

Despite the name, it is not bad. Using negative space correctly will draw more attention to your subject which can only be a good thing. The key is to **BALANCE** your subject within this negative space, and this is where the rule of thirds often comes into play.



Examples of using negative space when composing an image.

- **Symmetry**

Usually, symmetry is used when you have a geometrical shape within your image; these include triangles, circles and diamond shapes. I mostly compose using this rule when photographing a close up of the baby's face. If I am photographing a baby in a round bowl from above, I will also look to centre the bowl in the frame to achieve absolute symmetry.



Examples of using symmetry when composing an image.

4: POSE (*and details*)

I included this in my five-step checklist because in the past I have created what I thought was a beautiful newborn image only to receive feedback that the baby looked uncomfortable.

Now, I was sure that the baby was in a deep sleep and perfectly comfortable in the pose, but to the viewer, it may not always look that way.

As newborn photographers, we all know that newborn babies are very flexible in the first weeks after being born and when in deep sleep, they can easily curl up into the beautiful 'womb-like' poses. It is very easy to over-extend or tilt the head a little too much, not harming the baby in any way but

making the angle of the head look a little strange. When I get to this step on my checklist I ask myself the question:

Does the baby look comfortable in the pose?



Be careful not to tilt the head too much.

On this step I also take the opportunity to quickly check that all of the details are nice and neat:

- Is the headband straight?
- Are the fingers open and relaxed?
- Is the bonnet on straight and symmetrical?
- Are there any wrinkles in the background fabric?
- Has mum taken the hair elastic off her wrist!
- Are there any other little distractions that catch my eye and draw my attention away from the baby?

By fixing these details during the session, you will save yourself hours in photoshop and prevent you from giving yourself the proverbial facepalm when culling the images in post-production.

5: LIGHTING

Lighting for me is just as important as any of the first four points in the checklist. It really makes the difference between a mediocre image and one that is truly spectacular. Follow these 4 steps to help you on your way to getting the light right.

- [Have the right gear](#)

You can't get the light right if you don't have the right light.

If, like me, you choose to use studio flash make sure that you have a flash unit that is not too powerful for newborn photography. As newborn photographers, we like to photograph at wide-open apertures to get a nice shallow depth of field. Anything from f1.4 - f2.8 is considered to be the ideal apertures for our genre. These wide-open apertures mean that we do not need a lot of light to obtain a perfect exposure.

If your flash unit is too powerful (at its lowest power setting), you will find it challenging to photograph at these apertures without overexposing, so be careful when choosing your equipment.

Now you need to modify the light by using a large umbrella or a softbox/octabox.

Follow this simple rule:

The larger the light source, the softer the light.

As newborn photographers, we want soft light, so you need to have a nice big modifier placed close to the baby to create that beautiful soft and natural

looking light. In my opinion you will want a softbox or umbrella that is at least 125cm across.



- **Keep it simple**

Keep it simple by using just one light. Using two lights will run the risk of filling in the shadows. If you fill in the shadows too much, you will have flat lighting which means that we have little or no shape to the face. We want to capture shape by controlling the relationship between the highlights and the shadows. If you do not like too much contrast in the image, use a white reflector (or place your beanbag near a white wall) to bounce light back into the shadowed side of the face, but be careful not to add too much 'bounce', you will lose that lovely shape.



- **Light Falls from above**

This concept is quite simple but when a baby is lying down on a beanbag, we can get a little confused. I am always looking to get the light to fall from the top of the baby's head diagonally down towards the chin. This will create a loop lighting pattern and is very pleasing.



- **Feather the light:**

I never place my octabox or umbrella pointing directly at the baby. Instead, I 'feather' the light, so the baby is illuminated by the light that is spilling from the edge of the modifier. This light is softer and more pleasing. As with moving your camera angle, the slightest movement of your modifier can also make all of the difference!

To learn how to light the most popular newborn poses check out my [Studio Lighting for Newborn Photography Course over at the Academy](#)



So that is the five-step checklist that I mentally tick off after every shot that I take;

1. Focus
2. Camera Angle
3. Composition

4. Pose
5. Lighting

It may seem like a lot to remember but after a session or two, you will find that it only takes a few seconds to review each image. Once you are satisfied with all five steps, you can move onto the next shot knowing that you have an excellent image to work on later.

I can't tell you how much this will improve your photography, speed up your sessions and drastically reduce the time you spend in Photoshop.

I hope it helps you as much as it has helped me!

Good luck!

To take your newborn photography to the next level check out the variety of in-person and online training courses available over at <https://www.russjacksonacademy.com/store>