

Better Query Saul: 'P' is for Professional

Of the many shooting modes on your camera, there is one that I would propose for a photographer who is just starting out, or one that needs to change settings quite quickly – that setting is 'P' on Nikon, Canon, Sony and Olympus cameras.

When I look at a subject that I wish to photograph, I generally want to do one of the following things:

1. Shallow depth of field to emphasize the subject as in a portrait
2. Maximize depth of field --have everything in sharp focus from both near and far, for example, in a landscape
3. Freeze motion as in stopping the motion of runners in a race
4. Slow motion to get a milky smooth waterfall
5. Maximize sharpness

Getting the correct exposure means having an appropriate combination of aperture, shutter speed and ISO. Make choices for 2 out of these 3 and the third is determined. For the first objective, I would select ISO = 100, I would open up the lens, i.e., aperture = 2.8 and let the camera determine the shutter speed. For objective 2, I would keep ISO=100, select an aperture of f11 or f16 and let the camera select the shutter speed. Objective 3 would entail a fast shutter speed – perhaps 1/1000, ISO=100 and I would let the camera determine the aperture. The fourth objective would cause me to choose a slow shutter speed – 1/30 or perhaps 1/15, ISO=100 and let the camera determine the aperture. Lastly, the maximize sharpness I would choose an aperture setting around f6.3, f8 or f11 – that's generally leads to the sharpest images.¹

Now if I'm out shooting and one shot is a portrait, the other a landscape and the third a photo of something that I want to be very sharp, I would either switch to manual exposure, or keep shifting between, aperture and shutter priority. But there is another option.

The 'P' or Program selection, couples the aperture and shutter speed to maintain the same exposure value for a given ISO. For example, if I were outdoors on a sunny day, I might have these options:

1. f16 and 1/125
2. f 11 and 1/250
3. f8.0 and 1/500
4. f5.6 and 1/1000
5. f4 and 1/2000
6. f2.8 and 1/4000
7. f2.0 and 1/8000

¹ All of these choices assume that there is adequate light. If not, ISO would need to be adjusted.

Now if I wanted to blur the background for a portrait I might choose f2.8 – the camera would set shutter speed to 1/400. If I then wanted to maximize depth of field, I would not have to change to shutter priority, in the 'P' mode all I would do is rotate the dial until the combination f16 and 1/125 came up. If there is insufficient light, I would simply adjust my ISO and get my new combinations as displayed in the 'P' mode.

I think 'P' is a good choice for someone new to his/her camera. Set ISO=100, turn mode dial to 'P'. Select one of the objectives given above and turn the dial to the appropriate aperture or shutter speed. If, for example, you can't get to f16 with a shutter speed that is 1/60 or greater (a sort of minimum for handheld photos) increase the ISO until you have an appropriate shutter speed.

And 'P' is not only for newbies – I know some professional photographers – mainly shooting weddings – who use 'P' all the time.