

Sunny 16 Rule

Stan Johnston, 1/03

An old photographic rule of thumb says that the proper exposure for a subject in full sunlight is f/16 with a shutter speed that is the inverse of the film speed. In other words, with 100 speed film, use 1/100 sec; with 400 speed film, use 1/400 sec., etc. Sometimes even with automatic exposure, it is useful to have a manual point of reference like this. With light that is less than full sunlight, for an unusual subject, or for a special effect, you can make appropriate deviations from the rule, but at least it gives you a starting point.

Here is an interesting application: What is the proper exposure for a photograph of the full moon in the evening sky? The answer, surprisingly, is f/16 and the inverse of the film speed. After all, the moon is a piece of about 20% gray rock sitting in full sunlight, and if you want to get some texture on the moon's surface rather than just a burnt out circle, that is the right exposure. Try it!