



FREE DOWNLOAD

Five Small Wins Behind the Camera

A free practice sampler for adults starting photography. Any camera can support the observation exercises.

LEARN WITH INTENTION. CREATE WITH CONFIDENCE.

A WARM WELCOME

Hi, I'm Cynthia!

Photographer, dog mom, and your creative cheerleader.

I'm Cynthia Kotecki, but you can call me Cindy! I'm the owner of Natalia Mae Photography in Portage, Michigan, and I'm so happy you're here.

As a nationally published senior photographer, I love creating portraits that celebrate what makes each person unique. Behind the camera, I'm all about helping people feel comfortable, finding the little details that tell their story, and making room for a little fun along the way.

Away from photography, I'm a proud dog mom to four Newfoundland dogs and have a soft spot for cows. So yes, there's a good chance we could get happily sidetracked talking about animals!

I created Natalia Mae Photography Academy to make learning feel approachable, encouraging, and a little less overwhelming. You don't need to have every setting memorized to begin. Bring your curiosity, give yourself permission to experiment, and let those imperfect practice photos teach you something.

Think of these pages as a friendly nudge to pick up your camera and try. Take one lesson at a time, celebrate the small wins, and remember: your way of seeing the world is worth exploring.

I'm cheering you on. Let's make something wonderful!

Cindy

Cynthia Kotecki

Owner, Natalia Mae Photography

FIELD NOTES + PRACTICE

Start with light and framing

Win 1 / Find clean light

Place a mug near a window. Turn off nearby room lights. Photograph it from the front and side. Look for the change in shadow. Choose the version that communicates the shape most clearly.

Win 2 / Clean the edges

Photograph the same mug on a cluttered surface. Move your camera until bright distractions and awkward overlaps leave the frame. Make a second image. Compare which one directs your eye more quickly to the mug.

Win 3 / Change your distance

Make an environmental image showing the table, then a closer image showing the mug's details. On a phone, avoid extreme digital zoom; move when practical and safe. Notice how each distance tells a different part of the story.

Try it

Spend ten minutes making these comparisons. Save the best pair from each exercise instead of deleting your learning trail.

Check your result

Write one sentence explaining each improvement. "I like it" is less useful than "The darker background makes the rim stand out."

FIELD NOTES + PRACTICE

Build a repeatable habit

Win 4 / Check sharpness

Use a stationary subject and steady support. Focus on an obvious detail and enlarge the result. If it is soft, add light, improve stability, or use a faster shutter if your camera allows it. Repeat before changing multiple settings.

Win 5 / Tell a three-frame story

Photograph an activity through a wide view, a medium view, and a close detail. Use your own hands or a consenting adult. Arrange the images so someone can understand the activity without a caption.

Keep one useful note

After every practice, record the subject, light, one decision, and one next step. Ten focused minutes are more useful than a long session changing settings without a clear question.

Try it

Create a three-frame story and inspect each image for sharpness. Choose one improvement to repeat tomorrow.

Check your result

Can you name what each frame adds? If two do the same job, replace one with a meaningful detail.

FIELD NOTES + PRACTICE

Your next step

The exercise that helped most / why:

My next practice date / one skill to repeat:

Continue with the Beginner Photographer Starter Library

Learn camera controls, natural light, composition and portrait direction, editing and delivery, and your first practice portrait session. Each workbook includes practical assignments and a review tool. Explore the paid collection through the Natalia Mae Photography Academy storefront where you downloaded this guide.

About the Academy

Created by Cindy Kotecki of Natalia Mae Photography to help new photographers build intentional habits and confidence through practice.

Use of this free guide

For your personal learning. You may apply the skills in your own photography business. Do not resell, repost, or repackage this PDF. Share the Academy's signup page instead. No gear, software, individual coaching, or income outcome is included.