

An Education in Microstock

[An Education in Microstock](#) [1]

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[Microstock](#) [2] is a great way to learn photography skills, business, personal and technical skills - all with the flexibility of investing as much or as little time as you have available. Microstock is not an easy way to make money, depending on your current skill-set it can be hard work with a lot of learning to do. You may earn a good income with hard work, or you might earn very little and give up, but it's guaranteed you will take away new skills, knowledge and experience from whatever you do.



What Microstock Teaches

Depending on whether you start as an experienced photographer or a photography hopeful there are a series of core skills that are needed to be a microstock photographer, get any of these skills wrong and you'll know right away - the feedback is loud and clear, your images will be rejected!

- Technically good photography, good focus, where to focus, lens selection, choice of aperture etc.
- Image processing, camera settings for low [noise](#) [3] and highest quality.
- Basic lighting for acceptable contrast and correct subject highlighting/illumination.
- Digital image technology, memory cards, computer skills, internet, research and analysis skills.

- Mountains of industry jargon.... do we all know our [RM](#) [4]'s from our MR's ?
- You'll end up knowing cameras, photography and certain aspects of ICT "inside out".

What Microstock Guides you with:



These are the things that you will learn because you are doing microstock. It's possible to 'soldier on' oblivious to good lighting, or managing your own time properly, but eventually most microstockers pick these skills up. Unlike the skills above they don't come for 'free' - it's not quite so obvious when you are getting these things wrong:

Business skills - teaches you a lot about business, but you really have to be careful and 'look in the mirror' every now and again, it won't teach you how to work efficiently, those bad habits, time wastes won't affect your approval rate, they just affect you and your lifestyle (i.e. how much you enjoy microstock).

Lighting, Composition and Styling, you can get by with average lighting, have your images accepted and be none the wiser. What is it that makes some image thumbnails pop out of the page at you? Microstock will certainly teach you proper exposure but that's not lighting, it will get your images rejected if the lighting is too harsh and sometimes if it's too soft or leaves unattractive reflections, the difference between good and average is the difference between sales and obscurity. I remember when I first started out, looking back I think I was completely 'blind to lighting' so long as there was enough for the image not to blur when shot hand held I was happy! what was all the fuss about? lol

Depending on what you do, microstock will also develop lots of **soft skills**, working with models, logistics, planning, and organizational tasks.

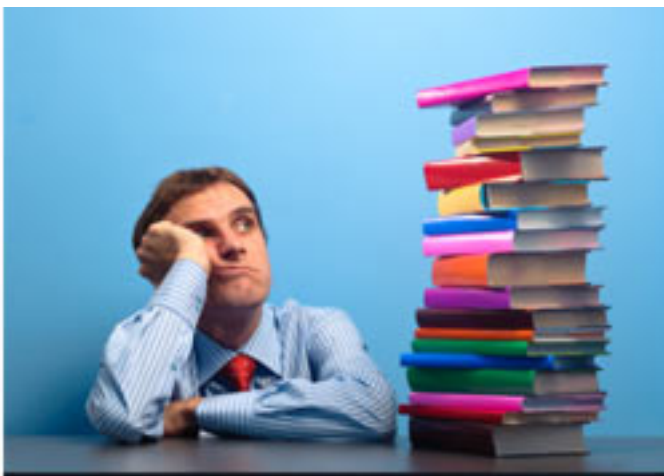
Microstock provides **targets and motivation** to reach them. To a large extent, like life, microstock is what you make it. Money can be a motivation, the previous experiences and knowledge gained are also a great source of motivation to learn more, some just like the recognition of their images being used. Recognition like that is often cited as one of microstocks negative aspects - that people are willing to invest hours of time for just a couple of dollars in return and the satisfaction of seeing their image in use; I think there is a motivational and rewarding silver lining to that 'cloud', it's also a passing milestone in stock photographer growth rather than something that people strive to achieve.

What Microstock Fails to Teach...

These are a few things that if you don't pay attention is quite easy to get wrong with microstock, or even come completely off the rails. Some of this is subjective and depends on your perspective. **You could argue that if you actually make a success of microstock then you will have mastered all of the skills I mention below:**

- Creativity - (contentious!) but a lot of photographers dabble in some interesting sidelines for very good reason! - to stay sane.
- Ego management and self-control.
- Realism - after the initial joy of making a handful of sales in a month, it's time to take a reality check.
- Being a professional - microstock is great for being able to work in as casual a fashion as you like, but in the end it's up to you to 'work smarter' and push your own limits.
- Understanding time is money - despite it being fairly obvious I never fail to be amazed at how little value microstockers attribute to their time, or how little they are willing to pay for a service that will save them time when there is a time consuming or more tedious free option also to be found.
- Common sense! - some people have it, some seem to be rather deprived.

Self-taught Pitfalls



Burnout - if you choose to work purely online and in isolation it becomes very easy to get a one track mind on getting more image sales. It's wise to mix things up a little and vital to pursue other hobbies and passions.

Lack of 'real' support network. Support is there but you have to go look for it and the agencies (rightly so) can only help you so far - they are not there to hold your hand for you. Forums are great

but there is **no substitute for a real life mentor** or similar to bounce ideas off.

Living in a bubble / aka do it all myself: don't! If you *'don't like the idea'* of outsourcing or getting someone to help you with a certain part of your work then perhaps it's time to push your comfort zone and do exactly that. Many people have a strong disdain (sometimes disbelief and horror) for me choosing Margaret Thatcher as somewhat of a role model (for the iron lady's stance, not the blue suits and Ferragamo handbag I hasten to add!) *"Look at a day when you are supremely satisfied at the end. It's not a day when you lounge around doing nothing; it's when you've had everything to do, and you've done it."* - and you can get those things done by employing someone or something to help you.

Smart Learning, Anyone who went to University (or College if you like) learned 'how to learn' and graduated with an education in learning as well as some specialist knowledge in their chosen field. With nobody actually teaching you directly then you need to take care of the learning for yourself. Look out for reliable published literature and training courses to reduce the amount of trial-and-error practice and trawling low quality articles online that may only partly apply to microstock.

Creativity killer, some would say, (I don't think things are that bad) but I can definitely see how it's possible (and I did this myself) to obsess over whether an image was good for stock. If you are out and about and see something interesting NEVER let stock stop you from enjoying what was probably once your favorite hobby. Take photos of things that interest you, go wild and shoot things at high ISO with the knowledge they are not for stock agencies; now re-read that last sentence and see how ridiculous it sounds if you were ever under the opinion that shooting at high ISO was 'living on the edge'. *"That won't sell"* is an important thought process for a stock photographer, just take care that it does not paralyze you into a state of never actually shooting anything or kill any passion you have for photography.

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