The Program Shift (or Flexible Program) Shooting Feature: Giving it the Recognition it Deserves!

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At this point I count my former students in the thousands and yet have never encountered a single one who has used, or indeed even known about, the Program Shift (Canon, Olympus, Pentax, Sony) or the Flexible Program (Nikon) function. How has it escaped everyone’s notice? The Owner’s Manuals for all brands give it precious little recognition and not one of them has seen fit to actually show an example of how powerful this option can be. I remember one student several years ago who, after having done an in-class investigation into this mode, stated: “So basically you could always shoot in P mode and by using the Program Shift when needed, cover virtually every shooting challenge imaginable.” Years later, I still believe that we could quite easily have a one-shooting-mode (P mode with the Program Shift as an optional function) camera if manufacturers wished to offer us one.

To prove this to my students, I shot one summer in England and one winter in California using only P mode with frequent uses of the P Shift and never, ever lost a shot. Did I feel constrained or hindered in any way? Not at all. In fact shooting in P mode, with this feature firmly up my sleeve, made me confident that I could meet every challenge from sports to landscapes with the quick flick (or not) of a control dial.

Share with me now my profound admiration for the Program Shift/Flexible Shift shooting option.

What is it? While P mode is versatile, the best it can do is offer us middle-of-the-road shutter speeds and middle-of-the-road apertures because it can never really appreciate the context of what it is you’re about to capture. Is it going to be a landscape, portrait or an olympic-level sport? It does the best it can but sometimes this just isn't good enough. The Program Shift or Flexible Program function (let's just call it P Shift from now on) allows us to manipulate (i.e. to juggle) the relationship, the relative values, between the apertures and shutter speeds to offer us more favourable combinations that can better address the necessities of either depth of field or motion. More often than not, it is used for a faster shutter speed than what the camera, by default, offered.

The advantage of P mode that the P Shift inherits. The major benefit of shooting in P mode is that it guarantees (yes, guarantees!) a well-exposed shot. You literally cannot take a poorly exposed shot in P mode whether in the day or night. With this in mind, by using the P Shift, we are still guaranteed a well-exposed shot only now, with us setting a shutter speed (and yes, the aperture value at the same time) we can now have a major say in what the combination is going to be and not have to accept what the camera offers.
How do I do a P Shift? You can do the P Shift by rotating (when in P mode) your Main Dial (Canon), Command Dial (Nikon), Control Dial (Olympus), front e-dial (Pentax) or Control Dial (Sony). As you rotate the appropriate control device just mentioned, you'll see both the aperture and shutter speed values change at the same time. Normally I'll rotate so that my shutter speed increases if the initial setting that I'm offered in P mode is too slow.

How does my camera let me know I've done it?

**Canon:** Canon doesn't show you specifically that you've set a P Shift. Take note of the aperture and shutter speed values that the camera initially offers you to see if they are acceptable and, if they're not (specifically I'm referring to a shutter speed that's too slow for the motion of your subject) then make sure you've turned your Main Dial the correct way to give you a faster shutter speed. You've only got about three seconds to fire once you've performed a P Shift so work quickly.

**Nikon:** Nikon adds an asterix to the letter P to let you know you've done a Flexible Shift such as P*. Nikon will hold the shift until you turn the camera OFF or reset it manually. In addition, Nikon will actually shift the “shifted” values if you move from lighter to darker or darker to lighter locations.

**Olympus and SONY:** Olympus and SONY add the letter S as a subscript to the P on your display to let you know you've done a Program Shift as in PS and will hold the shift until you turn the camera OFF or reset it manually.

**Pentax:** You can use the front e-dial to effect a P Shift but Pentax is not specific on display information that tells you that the shift has been done. The P Shift can be eliminated by turning the camera OFF or manually setting it back using the front e-dial.

The Bad News is... While the Program Shift will work very well to offer faster shutter speeds in good lighting, you may, under poor or limited lighting, have difficulty in doing the shift to set a faster shutter speed. When light conditions are poor your camera may need to initially use the largest aperture and therefore not allow any faster shutter speeds to be set. Note: Higher ISO values often solve this issue if you are willing to live with the resulting grain in your shots.

And the good news is... Keeping in mind that you simply cannot take a poorly exposed shot in P mode (because its primary job is to always offer you a suitable aperture value/shutter speed combination for a well-exposed shot), there is never an issue with over-rotating your control device. You can rotate till the cows come home but the camera simply ignores you when it has reached the acceptable limits.

I believe that every one of the Creative shooting modes serves a specific purpose, that P mode is no exception and that it is very much underrated. What could be a more suitable place to start your Creative Modes education than with a shooting mode that gives you results without having to know much, or indeed anything, about apertures and shutter speeds? Add to this the ability to so easily manipulate the aperture/shutter speed values to serve the needs of depth of field and/or subject motion and you have a very, very powerful shooting mode indeed.

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