



◀◀ If the scene has low contrast, and highlights are small and unimportant, like the distant trees, just meter something mid-toned and call it Zone 5. Everything else should fall into place.

◀ Zones for silhouettes

For a silhouette like this, the background is the most important area. Here the sky should be light, but with color: Zone 6, or maybe 6 ½.

Zone 1 Nearly black	Zone 4 Dark color	Zone 7 Light, with texture but faded color
Zone 2 A hint of detail	Zone 5 Middle tone, medium color	Zone 8 A hint of detail, but essentially washed out
Zone 3 Dark, with good detail, but muddy color	Zone 6 Light or pastel color	Zone 9 Nearly white

The Zone System in the Digital Age

In 1940, Ansel Adams, along with his fellow instructor at the Art Center School in Los Angeles, Fred Archer, developed the Zone System. Photographers had long known that they could alter the contrast of a negative by changing the development time: decreasing the development lowers contrast; increasing development raises contrast. Adams and Archer were the first to quantify this and relate it to exposure. They created a precise procedure, which they called the Zone System, for evaluating the light and dark values of a scene, visualizing the finished photograph, exposing the negative, and developing that negative to display the contrast the photographer visualized.

This system is still perfectly valid when using black-and-white film today, but how does it relate to digital photography? There's a fundamental rule in digital imaging: It's easy to increase contrast, but difficult or impossible to decrease it. So, if a particular scene lacks contrast, it's easy to add more contrast—more snap, more punch—later in software, but if the scene has too much contrast—if it exceeds the dynamic range of the camera—then part of the image will either become pure black or pure white, and there's no way to get that detail back.

If you need detail in both highlights and shadows in a high-contrast scene, you're not totally out of luck. Later, on page 50, we'll examine some methods of combining two or more separate exposures to

expand the dynamic range. But for now let's assume that your contrast range is fixed. So is the Zone System still useful? Yes, as a way of setting your exposure quickly and accurately. The methods I've described so far—using aperture-priority or manual exposure with center-weighted metering—both involve some trial and error. The Zone System will lead you to the perfect exposure more quickly. With practice you should get the right exposure on your first try at least 90 percent of the time.

To use the Zone System you have to have a spot meter and use the camera in manual mode. The spot meter can be hand-held or built into the camera, but either way, the smaller the spot, the better.