

Digital Camera Accessories:

Digital cameras are great devices that have made photography simple and enjoyable to countless people. They make taking and sharing photos easier and more economical than film could ever do, but a digital camera may not be optimized as is straight from the retail packaging. It needs to be accessorized, and this Tech Tip will take a look at five accessories worth considering for use with any digital camera.

Flash Memory

Most cameras are sold with either a removable flash memory card included, or an onboard memory chip, for storing the images the camera takes. The problem is that the included memory may not be the best for many practical uses, and will need to be upgraded by the end user immediately. The memory provided with many cameras generally is of too low a capacity, and the performance of the modules may not be the best either.

A camera taking images at the high resolutions possible today is going to chew up space on a flash card quickly, and the typical 16MB or 32MB card provided by the manufacturer just isn't going to cut it. I recently purchased a high-quality 3.2 Megapixel (MP) camera that came with a 16MB Compact Flash (<http://www.geeks.com/products.asp?cat=RAM#CompactFlashMemory>) card. I was somewhat surprised to see that I would only be able take 9 pictures at maximum resolution before the card was full, and wondered why the manufacturer bothered to include a memory card at all. The first step to making the camera more usable was to upgrade to a 512MB Compact Flash card that upped the total storage to 299 images while at the highest resolution.

Taking a look around shows that this practice is common, and that even cameras at 5MP and above may include just a 32MB card. When purchasing a camera, this is something to pay close attention to, and if the camera seems to be a good fit otherwise, be prepared to buy a larger memory card at the same time.

The other issue with flash memory is that they are not all able to read and write at the same speed. While a slower memory card may be more than adequate to keep up with playing any collection of digital audio files, when it comes to taking a steady stream of high resolution images, you need media that can keep up. SanDisk's Ultra II series of SD cards (<http://www.geeks.com/details.asp?invtid=SDSDH-512-901&cat=RAM>) provides much higher read/write speeds than your typical SD cards (<http://www.geeks.com/products.asp?cat=RAM#SmartMediaMemory>), which are more than likely the type you will find included with a camera. Having a high-speed memory card may be the difference between capturing a string of high resolution action shots, and sitting in frustration as the light blinks on your camera indicating that it is still writing the previous image.

These details and many others were covered in two previous Tech Tips dedicated to flash memory. If you missed them, please make sure to check out both Part 1 (<http://www.geeks.com/pix/techtips-020305.htm>) and Part 2 (<http://www.geeks.com/pix/techtips-021005.htm>) of that series.

Card Readers

A card reader (<http://www.geeks.com/products.asp?cat=CAM#CameraMemoryCardReaders>) may be just the accessory to consider for use with the new, high capacity flash memory card you picked up with your digital camera. These device can either be installed internally (<http://www.geeks.com/details.asp?invtid=5069-6126&cat=CAM>) or externally (<http://www.geeks.com/details.asp?invtid=HE-660A&cat=CAM>) to your computer, and provide a convenient way to get the files off of all the common flash memory formats used in cameras, digital audio players, and PDAs. Internal ones are great for use with systems that you know will always need these features, but external readers are just as handy, and can be taken with you for use on any desktop or notebook computer with an open USB port.

Not only do these devices provide a convenient interface for accessing the various types of flash memory you may use in a camera, they may be able to do so quicker than using the standard cable provided with a camera. Most card readers take advantage of the high-speed transfers afforded by USB 2.0, and even if your camera supports USB 2.0, the camera's User Interface may slow you down. The card reader will treat any flash memory inserted into it as a disk drive and allow you to browse the contents and copy what you want onto your hard drive quickly. Some cameras use a proprietary software interface that may slow things down or otherwise be inconvenient, but if you can use Windows Explorer (or the equivalent in other operating systems) you can get your photos from a card reader with ease.

Rechargeable Batteries

Many cameras come with rechargeable batteries included, which can make life much easier (and less expensive). Cameras can drain batteries quickly thanks to the larger, color LCD screens that they now need to power, as well as the flash and the other usual functions.

If a camera does come with rechargeable batteries, it may be worth investigating whether or not it uses a proprietary format, or one of the more common battery types (like AA or AAA). Proprietary batteries may have their advantages, but in general a camera that accepts a commonly available battery may be the most convenient for two reasons:

First, if the rechargeable batteries should happen to run out of charge and you have neither the time nor facilities to recharge them, you can easily pop in common disposable batteries just to keep the camera up and running. This may prove to be particularly helpful while traveling when there is either no outlet for recharging, or you only have access to a foreign power source which requires an adaptor you don't happen to have.

Secondly, another benefit of using a standard battery type comes when the batteries eventually die all together. Rechargeable batteries can only be charged so many times, and as they age their performance may begin to fade before they die all together. Replacing batteries of a standard format is easy and relatively inexpensive, while sourcing a replacement proprietary battery may be much more difficult and much more expensive.

Rechargeable batteries

(<http://www.geeks.com/products.asp?Cat=CON#BatteriesandBatteryChargers>) are generally sold based on their capacity, measured in units of mAh (milliAmp hours). Although real-world performance will vary among cameras and how they are used, a battery with a higher mAh value will generally be able to hold a greater charge and last longer between charges than a lower-rated battery.

The previously mentioned 3.2 MP camera I own came with four rechargeable AA batteries rated at 1600 mAh. Although they last for a respectable amount of time between charges, replacing them with something like this four pack of 2300 mAh AA batteries (<http://www.geeks.com/details.asp?invtid=NIMH-2300MAH&cat=CON>) may provide a noticeable boost.

Carrying Case

Protecting your cameras should be of some importance considering their cost and somewhat delicate nature. Although most cameras are sold with some sort of case, many aren't much more than a form-fitting piece of vinyl, perhaps with a bit of felt backing if you're lucky. There are numerous camera cases out there that can provide more substantial protection for a digital camera, and configurations are available to allow for many of the accessories to be carried in the same case.

A case doesn't need to be expensive to be effective, and even a basic unit, like this one from Lowepro (<http://www.geeks.com/details.asp?invtid=Z5-PUR&cat=CAM>), can provide additional padding, storage space for extra batteries and memory cards, and perhaps a strap or belt loop for carrying it. The important thing is to find a well-constructed case that fits your particular camera well, and offers ample padding to protect it from all the bumps and thumps it may incur while in transit. And if nothing on the market seems to fit your needs, you may get inspiration from this guide (<http://www.rojakpot.com/default.aspx?location=3&var1=213&var2=0>) to build your own camera case.

Tripod

Not all tripods are huge contraptions you would expect professional photographers to carry (<http://www.geeks.com/details.asp?invtid=VPD-TRIPOD&cat=CAM>), as there are miniature tripods (<http://www.geeks.com/details.asp?invtid=BLK-TR-1&cat=CAM>) that may be just as useful and easier to carry as well. The typical digital camera user may not think they have use for a tripod, but they can come in quite handy for a couple of reasons:

First, depending on shutter speed, an image may become blurred due to even the slightest movement. If you don't have a steady hand, a tripod may be just the thing to ensure that your important shots are crystal clear. Close-up shots in particular may benefit from the steady support provided by a tripod, and anyone who operates their camera in "macro" (extremely close up) mode on a regular basis may be pleased with the outcome once a tripod has been added to their cache of accessories.

Second, tripods can also prove quite handy for travelers. If there is no one around to take a picture of you posing with a historic landmark or lounging on the beach, a tripod and a camera with a timer is all you need. The UltraPod (<http://www.pedcopods.com/>) is one of the miniature varieties of tripods that folds up to make it convenient for travel, offers the typical features of a tripod, and as the image on their homepage indicates, it has one other interesting feature: an integrated Velcro® strap allows the tripod and camera to be strapped to any narrow diameter object for even more self-supported photo opportunities. As a long-time owner of an UltraPod I, there have been numerous street signs, fence posts, saplings, etc., that have helped me get a picture I otherwise wouldn't have been able to take without such a device.

Final Words

Digital cameras are great devices that make taking and sharing photographs faster, and, let's face it, cheaper than ever before. Although they may be great on their own, a few key accessories can make them even more convenient, practical, and enjoyable to use. There are other digital camera accessories (<http://www.geeks.com/products.asp?cat=CAM#CameraAccessories>) that may be right for your specific needs, but the five discussed in this Tech Tip are universally worth considering by users from novice to expert.