Taking Fabulous Cell Phone Photos

What takes a website from good to great? Pictures, of course! Visual elements can draw readers in by catching their eyes or breaking up long sections of text. Showing off the fun and innovative activities happening in your classroom or lab is easy to do with photos, and you can take great ones yourself using your camera phone and these simple tips. Some of the settings described below may not be available in your phone's native camera application, but there are plenty of great apps you can download for added functionality.

Preparing Your Camera

Practice, Practice, Practice
To get the best results from your phone's camera, you'll want to do a little studying up ahead of time. Open up the camera settings and get to know them – find out what the different features mean and how they affect your photos. Practice makes perfect, so whenever you have some free time, experiment! You might also like to review the camera section in your user manual or owner's guide to pick up extra tricks.

Size and Resolution
When it comes to photos, bigger is better. You can always shrink or crop a photo if it's too big, but there's not much you can do when your photo is too small.

Look in your camera settings for "resolution" or "image size" and pick the largest option. High-resolution photos will take up more storage space, but if you regularly transfer photos to your computer (or a cloud storage service like Dropbox or iCloud), this shouldn't cause problems. You can also reduce the resolution later – 72 ppi (pixels per inch) is fine for online publishing.

Stability
Some camera apps offer image stabilization, which is a great tool to improve your photos. If your pictures keep coming out blurry because you can't hold your phone perfectly still, look for this setting to help you out. If a stability setting isn't available, you can do it old-school by resting your phone on a hard surface or leaning against something solid while shooting.

Exposure and White Balance

Exposure is the process that makes a picture – light striking a sensor. Letting in more or less light for longer or shorter periods of time will affect the brightness and contrast of a photo. White balance is a method of correcting colors that have been affected by tinted lighting. Usually the automatic white balance does a pretty nice job, but play around with these settings to adjust the look and feel of your pictures.

Setting Up the Shot

Choose a Subject

Two basic categories of photographic subjects are people and things. Here are a few tips for each.

Photos of people can add a personal touch to your website. In *Photography Field Guide: People and Portraits*, Robert Caputo of National Geographic reiterates advice you've already read in this guide: don't be afraid to get closer to your subjects. Whether you're shooting a portrait, a group photo, or a candid in the classroom or lab, fill the frame with your subject. Not only does this better showcase the people, but it also helps cut down on distracting background clutter.

Background is also important in shots of objects. It's easy to become so focused on the item you're shooting that you don't notice the yawning student or empty soda can in the background. As with shots of people, try to get close to your inanimate subjects too. Additionally, look for interesting angles that show off the item in an unexpected way. Objects, unlike people, won't get frustrated when you ask for "just one more shot," so take your time getting the best photo.

Landscapes, on the other hand, ought to be shot from a little farther away. Take a step back and capture more of the scene than you think you'll need; this will allow for better horizontal zooming later on, especially if you use the photo as a header image.

Check the Camera

Before snapping your photo, double check that the camera is ready. Wipe off the lens with a soft, clean cloth – it collects a lot of gunk riding around in your pocket! Make sure all the settings are adjusted the way you want them, and ensure that you're using the back-facing camera. The front-facing camera, if

you have one, generally has much lower resolution and will produce lower-quality photos.

Zoom and Flash: Just Say No

"Just because you can doesn't mean you should." This adage applies to several features of your cell phone camera, notably flash and digital zoom.

Instead of using the built-in flash, which can wash out photos and cause the dreaded red-eye effect, work with your environment to improve the lighting. If you're outside, look for a sunnier spot or have your subjects face a different direction. Note that the hours just after sunrise and just before sunset are called the "golden hours" because the indirect sunlight makes for beautiful photos; an overcast day is also great for reducing shadows. If you're inside, turn on more or different lights to appropriately illuminate the shot.

When you pinch to zoom on your phone camera, you can immediately see the image quality lessen. Digital zoom might seem like a great way to get in closer to your subject, but the far better option is to actually step closer! If that's not an option, you can crop the photo after taking it – either on your phone or on a computer. This will result in a higher-quality image that will look much better on your website.

Rule of Thirds

A tried and true guideline for setting up your photo is the rule of thirds. Imagine a tic-tac-toe board over the viewscreen, or turn on the "grid" feature if your camera has one. The main focus of the photograph, the part you want viewers to look at first, should be at one of the four gridline intersections. If your photo includes any sort of horizon line, position it along one of the two horizontal gridlines. This is an easy way to make your photos look more professional.

Adjusting Your Photos

You've done all the prep work and set the scene. Now with the press of a button, you've got yourself a photo! But what if it needs some editing? Maybe you avoided using digital zoom by taking a wide shot that now needs cropping, or maybe you want to use your photo as a header image but it's not quite the right size.

This kind of editing can be done with many different programs, from built-in picture management software to Adobe Photoshop. If you're looking for a free (but powerful) option that works on Mac, Windows, and mobile, try Pixlr.
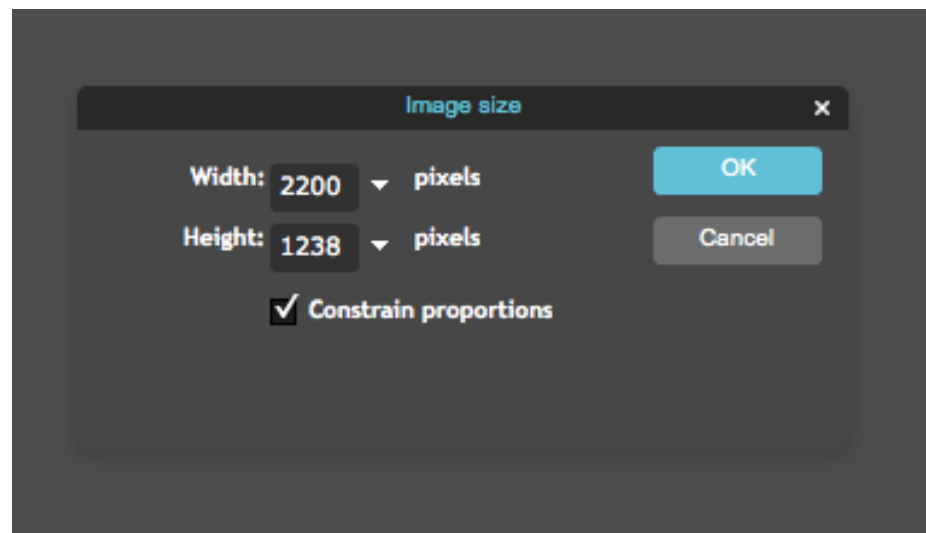
Getting Started with Pixlr

Open your web browser and navigate to pixlr.com/editor. You will be presented with several options for opening an image; you'll most likely want "open image from computer." Select the image you want to work with and click "open."

Resizing an Image

Let's say you have taken a photo that you'd like to use as the tall header on your website. The display size for tall headers is 914 pixels wide by 296 pixels tall, so as long as your photo is at least this big, it will work just fine. If it's any larger, you may want to resize it to save space.

In the menu bar along the top of the screen, click Image and then Image Size. A dialog box pops up showing the current size of your photo – this is a good way to make sure it's big enough to be a header. Keep the Constrain Proportions box checked so your image doesn't get distorted, and change either the width or the height to the value you require. If changing one makes the other too small, change the other instead.
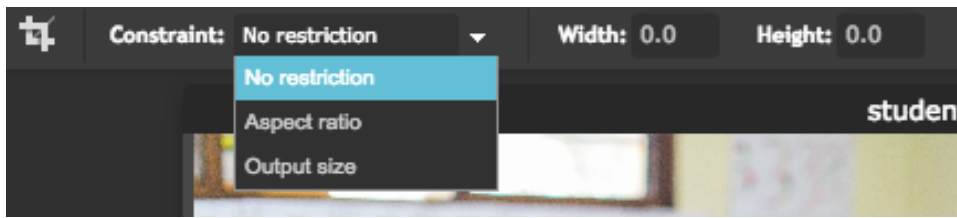

When you are satisfied with the adjustment, click OK to resize your image.

Cropping an Image

Once your image is sized properly, you may want to crop out parts of it. Click the crop tool (located in the upper left corner of Pixlr's toolbar), and the crop

menu will appear at the top of the screen. Here, you can choose a type of constraint and a size.

You can choose to constrain the aspect ratio, meaning the ratio of height to width. This is useful if you want the image to have a particular shape, such as square for an icon or badge. You can also choose to constrain the output size of the cropped image. If you plan to use the picture for something that requires a specific size, like your site header, this is a good way to do it. For either type, you can then enter values for height and width.

Once you've chosen the appropriate type of constraint (or none, if you prefer to freehand it), just click and drag on your photo to define the area to keep. You can adjust this area by moving it around or dragging the corners to change the size. When you're happy, just press enter.

Other Pixlr Tools

Pixlr has lots of tools and adjustments you can use to make your photos look their best. You can sharpen your images, remove red-eye, adjust focus, and even add text. Check out the support page to learn more: https://support.pixlr.com/hc/en-us/sections/201848667-Pixlr-Editor