

**Back-button focusing**; a technique used for years by nature and sports photographers. Back-button AF was first suggested to Canon back in the late 1980s by sports photographers who saw the need for some way to be able to start and stop AF without interfering with shooting continuous pictures.

Most Canon and Nikon DSLR cameras have a button on the back of the camera to control focusing, so other makes can probably do it too. Canon was actually the world's first camera maker to incorporate such a feature, launching it back in 1989 with the EOS 630 (35mm film SLR). It works very well with my Canon 5D and 50D but the technique takes a little getting used to - I commend you to try it.

So what are the advantages?

### **1. Easier to lock focus**

If you are shooting something like a series of portraits of a person, and you want them composed off center, back-button AF makes it super-easy to take as many pictures as you want. Focus on your subject by pressing the rear button (more on which button later in this article). Once in-focus, take your thumb off the rear button. Re-compose the shot to move your subject off-center. Shoot as many pictures as you like.

### **2. Less risk of focus errors with moving subjects**

For sports photographers and others taking action pictures, back-button AF lets you stop focus whenever something might interfere with the moving subject you're tracking — without requiring you to stop shooting. In sports, for instance, it's common for a referee or another player to come between the camera and an athlete being photographed. With back-button AF, it's easy to momentarily pull your thumb off the rear button, and you can still keep shooting by pressing the shutter button fully. The camera instantly stops focusing when your thumb comes off the back button. Once the obstruction is out of your way, you can immediately pick-up your primary subject by pressing your thumb on the back button again.

### **3. Easier macro and close-up focusing**

Frequently, you'll find that it's actually easier to get consistently sharp close-up pictures of small objects by pre-focusing, and then moving yourself forward or backward until

you see the critical sharp focus appear in your viewfinder. Once again, with back-button AF active, you can use the AF to get within general range (press the rear button with your

thumb, then take your thumb off the button), and move a little bit to get things critically sharp. Most important, you can then shoot freely, without AF trying to re-focus each time you touch the shutter button. Finally, touching-up focus with the full-time manual focus feature on certain Canon lenses is simple and quick, and the autofocus never fights you by trying to undo what you just adjusted.

### **Which button is used for back-button AF?**

Once you've activated this feature (see below), you press one of two buttons: either the rear AE Lock button (marked with an asterisk or star icon), or if your camera is equipped with it, the rear AF-ON button. Either is relatively easy to reach with your right thumb on the back of the camera as you shoot.

Back-button AF can be activated by pressing the AE Lock button, marked with an asterisk icon, on some models such as the EOS 30D. On some recent EOS models, such as the EOS 50D, there's a separate AF-ON button that's used instead.

Those cameras with the separate AF-ON button also have a Custom Function that lets you flip-flop the roles of the AF-ON button and the adjacent AE Lock button (with asterisk icon). If you find the AE Lock button easier to reach, you may want to engage this function as well. Activating back-button AF. Back-button AF is engaged by setting the appropriate Custom Function in your EOS camera. Remember, to use any Custom Function, your camera must first be in one of the "creative zone" exposure modes – P (Program auto exposure), Av (aperture-priority mode), Tv (shutter-priority mode), or M (manual exposure mode). Custom Functions are totally locked-out if you're in the full-auto "green zone", or a picture-icon setting like the Portrait mode or Landscape mode.

### **Understanding the on-screen wording:**

The terminology on the menu for this particular custom function may seem a little confusing, so an explanation is in order. The function is headed "Shutter/AE lock button", or similar wording. What this means is that anything before the slash mark refers to how the shutter button will behave. Anything after the slash tells you how the rear button will work if that option is selected.

#### **0: Metering + AF start** (note: there's no slash here)

Factory-default setting. You activate camera's meter and AF by pressing shutter button half-way down. Rear AF-ON button also does same if it's pressed, so you don't get the benefits of removing AF activation from the shutter button when this option is set.

#### **1: Metering + AF start / AF stop**

AF is still at shutter button. Pressing the rear button will actually LOCK the focus; potentially useful if you shoot a lot of moving subjects in AI Servo AF and prefer to activate AF with a conventional half-press of shutter button. Focus is unlocked by removing thumb from back-button.

## **2: Metering start / Meter + AF start**

Back-button AF activation. Shutter button no longer activates AF, but of course fires the shutter. Metering is continuously updated — if you shoot a sequence of pictures, the camera takes a fresh meter reading for each one. There's no locking of exposure, unless you separately press the AE Lock button (this last item is not possible on some EOS models).

## **3: AE Lock / Metering + AF start**

Back-button AF activation. Difference between this setting and option 2 directly above is that when you press the shutter button half-way, your exposure is locked and won't change until you pull your finger off the button entirely. Thus, if you shoot a sequence of pictures in any auto exposure mode, the exposure setting used for the first shot is used for each subsequent shot. Can be useful if you were using back-button AF to easily lock focus and shoot a series of portraits, where you wouldn't expect lighting to change.

## **4: Metering + AF start / Disable**

Similar to setting "0" above, but now, the camera's rear AF-ON button is disabled. AF activation is at the shutter button. Convenient if you're worried about accidentally pressing the back-button and don't want to use back-button AF.

Note: remember that like any Custom Function, you can always return the camera back to factory-default operation by returning that Custom Function to option "zero".