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Nikon D300 AF Settings

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Introduction

This is specific to the [Nikon D300](#). See also my [Guide to Nikon AF Settings](#) for other cameras.





Nikon D300 Focus Mode Switch.

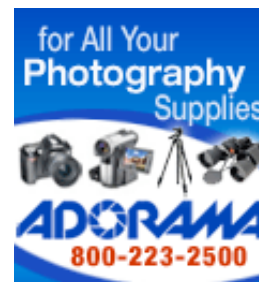
External Controls

There are three controls, one on front and two on the back.

Focus Mode Switch (front)

The front Focus Mode Switch selects manual, or two kinds of autofocus.

M is manual focus, like the 1950s. S is "AF-Single," in which position the camera focuses and then locks. C is "AF-Continuous," meaning the camera constantly tracks focus as the subject moves



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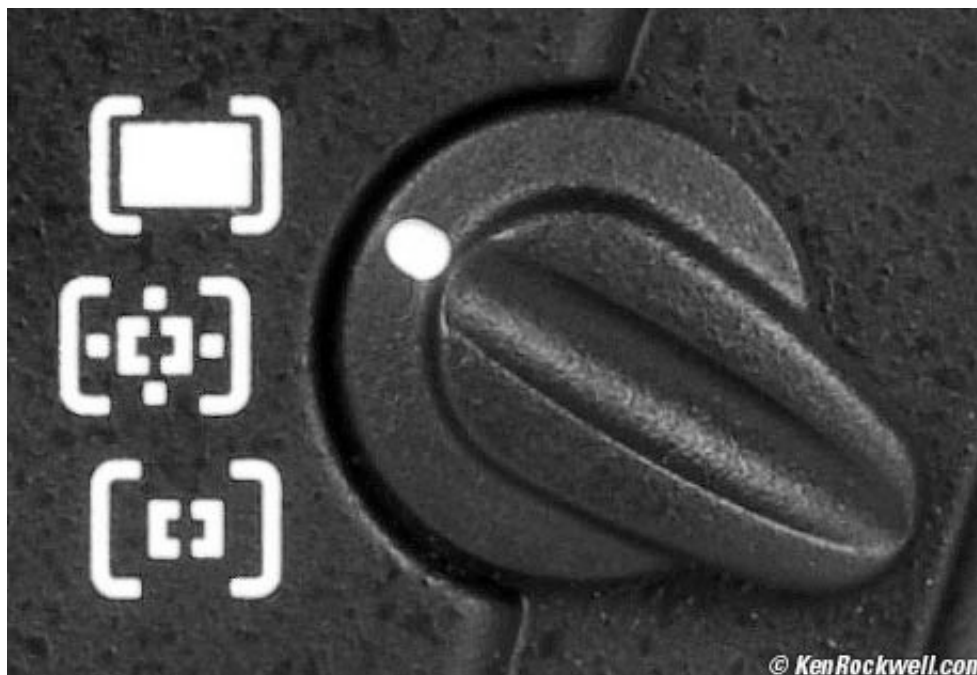
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AF Sensor Selector (rear top)

On the back, the top AF Sensor Selector selects among the many AF sensors, if you want to.

AF Sensor Mode Switch (rear bottom)

The lower rear switch is the AF Sensor Mode Switch. It chooses how the camera uses all, few or one, of the many AF sensors.



Nikon D300 rear AF Sensor Mode Switch.

There are three positions. From top to bottom, I call them the Big White Rectangle, the Crosshair, and the Tit.

Each shows what AF sensors will be used.

The Big White Rectangle mode lets the camera choose the AF points itself by magic. That's why it's a big rectangle: the D300 uses whichever sensors it wants. It works great, but it can take the D300 a moment to pause to figure it out for each shot.

The middle Crosshair position lets you choose the sensor, and then the camera moves it around to track action as selected by you in CSM a3 (MENU > CUSTOM SETTING MENU > a Autofocus > a3). The graphic shows a single sensor, with lines showing that it can move as chosen next by the camera. The D300 can move it in any direction, not just the four ways shown in the icon.

The bottom "Tit" position selects only one fixed sensor at a time. The icon shows just one fixed sensor.

Nikon's Default

As shipped, move the front Focus Mode Selector to S, for AF-Single, point the camera at the subject, hold the shutter halfway, recompose, and shoot.

This is exactly the same way Nikon's N2020 worked — back in 1985.

The N2020 was marketed as "Dual Autofocus." That means it also had a continuous motion tracking mode. That's the C, as is Continuous, position of all Nikons today.

Move the switch to "C" to track moving subjects, however you're still stuck with the center sensor.

To get 23 years of improvements, you have to change the other settings.

AF-S always focuses and locks, and AF-C always keeps tracking the subject.

The AF Sensor Selector on the back has been the same since the F5 of 1996. Nikon calls this the "Multi Selector." Tapping the center gets you back to the center sensor. If you knock the "L - •" lever to "L," you'll lock yourself out of selecting the AF points, even though you can still navigate the menus.

My Favorite Settings

The D300 has so many AF sensors and has such intelligent logic that I often set my D300 to the "dummy" Big White Rectangle mode. In this mode, the D300 magically and automatically identifies the correct AF sensor (or sensors) and uses them.

I no longer have to pretend it's the 1990s and choose sensors manually, or pretend that it's the 1980s (or 1950s) and re-compose after focusing.

Even though the D300 has the same AF sensor and settings as the [D3](#), the D300 lacks the D3's computing horsepower to interpret all this data as fast. The D300 doesn't always figure out which sensor to use fast enough, so if it's too slow for you in the Big White Rectangle mode, you may need to use the old-fashioned modes of picking AF sensors yourself.

Here's how I set my cameras. If I don't mention a setting, I leave it at default or it's not related to focus.

Front Focus Mode Switch: C, for AF-C, continuous tracking AF.

Custom Setting Menu a1 (AF-C Priority selection): I set "Release + Focus."

In the default of "Release priority," the camera just shoots, whether or not you're in focus. I never get any other than the first shot or two of a series in focus at this

setting. It's a silly setting which makes the camera work fast in the store, but sucks for moving subjects.

In "Focus priority," the camera waits until each and every shot is in *perfect* focus. This slows it down — a lot. This is the default for the AF-Single setting for still subjects, but a bad idea for moving subjects.

"Release + Focus" is an in-between setting. In this position, most of my sequence shots are in focus. I hit the shutter, and my D300 shoots as soon as it figures out which sensors to use in the Big White Rectangle mode, or immediately in the other sensor modes (Crosshair or Tit).

Set this way, the D300 usually just shoots. If you're way out-of-focus you'll get a fuzzy first shot, but you won't miss it and the D300 will be in focus for the next shot as fast as it can.

Rear AF Sensor Mode Switch: I usually set it to the top setting, the Big White Rectangle. This means D300 magically picks the right sensors itself.

The D300 doesn't always choose the right sensor, and it isn't always that fast (like the D3), so for many uses, I'll use the Crosshair or Tit setting to pick a sensor myself.

When I chose the sensor, it speeds up the D300 since the D300 doesn't need to sort sensors itself. This is one of the biggest differences between the D3 and D300: the D3 automatically chooses sensors, and chooses the right ones, instantly in Big White Rectangle mode.

I can flick the AF Sensor Mode Switch without taking my eye from the finder, and I do whenever I need to.

By setting the **Custom Setting Menu a3 (Dynamic AF Area)** to 51 Points (3D Tracking) in AF-C and the Crosshair mode, your manually-chosen AF point will magically move all around the frame tracking your subject! You'll see it light up and move all around, and it really works. In the Big White Rectangle mode this setting doesn't do anything.

More Settings

The settings above let me just shoot. They work for sports and for still subjects. I just grab the camera and shoot. In AF-C and White Rectangle Modes, no AF sensors light up. You just shoot.

Stills

If I'm shooting still subjects, I'll chose the AF-S (single) mode on front. Now, in Big White Rectangle Mode, the selected sensors light up, and the focus locks as long as I hold the shutter halfway. If the camera's not magically selecting the sensors I want, I'll select them myself in the lowest "dot" (single-sensor) mode of the Rear AF Mode

Selector.

I usually shoot the D300 in the Crosshair or single-sensor mode since the D300 isn't as fast to select sensors automatically.

You're in luck if many sensors light in AF-S and Big White Rectangle modes. This means the camera knows all these areas are in perfect focus.

Sports

For sports with a lot of people running around, use AF-C, the 3D menu option (CSM a3), and the Crosshair mode on the AF Sensor Mode Switch. Now tell the camera which player is yours, and it will track them all over the frame.

Summary

I set the front Focus Mode Switch of my D300 to AF-S for still subjects, and AF-C for moving subjects.

My D300 isn't always fast enough to figure things out with the rear AF Sensor Mode Switch in the Big White Rectangle position. Therefore I usually run my D300 in the middle (Crosshair) position of the AF Sensor Mode Switch.

If I am in the Big White Rectangle mode and the D300 needs help finding the correct AF sensor, without moving my eye, I flick the AF Sensor Mode Switch to the Crosshair setting, which lets me choose the AF sensor and the D300 then tracks the subject. By tracking the subject, the D300 is so smart that it tracks the subject if the subject moves, or if I change my framing.

Acknowledgment: Many thanks to Lindsay Silverman of Nikon, who took my D3 aside and said "watch this" as he taught me how to use CSM a3, 3D tracking. I doubt I ever would have found these on my own.

PLUG

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