For every roll of film you shoot, you should make a contact print, a print that is the same size as your negatives (as opposed to enlargements, which magnify negatives). A contact print from a 35mm negative measures just under 1” x 1½” (24 x 36 mm); a contact print from a 6 x 7 cm negative measures 2½” x 2½” (6 x 7 cm); and so forth.

Because the images are not enlarged, contact prints show maximum sharpness and no visible grain. Contact prints from large-format negatives, are sometimes used as final prints because of their sharpness and sufficient size. A 4” x 5” negative, for example, makes a 4” x 5” contact print, a size large enough to view easily—and an 8” x 10” contact print from an 8” x 10” negative is generally even more satisfying to look at.

A contact sheet is a print, usually on 8” x 10” or 8½” x 11” paper, that represents an entire roll of film. Contacts are best used for proofing—to see what you have in the exposed film—before you spend the time and money to make enlargements of individual negatives.

Contact sheets also provide a useful way to file and keep track of your work, especially when you begin to accumulate a lot of negatives. Assign the same file number to each roll of negatives and the corresponding contact sheet. For example, designate your first-ever roll of negatives as #1; use a waterproof pen to mark #1 on the plastic protector containing the negatives and also on the back of the contact sheet. Or you might include the year you took the pictures in your filing system by using a prefix of “05” for 2005, “06” for 2006, and so forth, designating your first roll in 2005 as “05-1” and your second roll as “05-2.” You also can use the back of the contact print to note additional information, such as the subject’s name and where, when, and how the pictures were taken.

Following are instructions for making a contact sheet.

1. Lift the enlarger head so it sits near the top of its rail, in order to project a wide circle of light when the enlarger is turned on. The circle must be larger than the sheet you are printing on.
2. Set the lens aperture at f/8 to begin with. For a brighter light (and shorter exposure time), open the lens aperture to f/5.6 or f/4 or so; for a dimmer light (and longer exposure time), close down the aperture to f/11 or f/16.
3. Place a fresh sheet of 8” x 10” printing paper, emulsion side up, on the base of the enlarger. Do not use an easel.
4. Position a plastic negative protector containing strips of negatives down on the paper with the negatives emulsion (dull) side down. If you are not using a protector, position individual strips of negatives carefully in rows on the paper, again emulsion side down. The negative protectors are the preferred method, because they are clear plastic and permit light to pass through. They also are safer, allowing you to make the contact prints without handling.
You make a contact sheet by placing your negatives, preferably in plastic protectors, on a sheet of photographic paper under glass to hold them flat. You can fit an entire roll of film on one sheet of paper this way. Contact sheets are useful for keeping a record of your work, and help you decide which images to print. Make sure your negatives are oriented the same way and in numerical order for easy reference.
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1. Gently lower a clean sheet of glass (heavyweight is best) over both the negatives and the paper to hold them flat and in contact. A plain sheet of glass works fine, but there are also commercially made contact printing frames available.

6. Use your enlarger’s timer to expose the paper for a predetermined time—say 10 seconds. The required exposure time varies widely depending on the density of your negatives, the brightness of the enlarger light, the type of paper and developer, and other factors. You can make a test strip first to determine exposure time. But with experience, you should get a feel for how long this exposure should be, especially if you use the same enlarger repeatedly.

7. Process the exposed contact sheet like any other print. If it comes out too dark, try another sheet using less exposure; if it comes out too light, do another sheet with more exposure.

Don’t expect a perfectly exposed contact print every time. As often as not, your film exposures will vary somewhat; a single contact sheet may show some frames with good density as well as others that are too light or dark. This is not usually a problem, as long as you can see the image well enough to evaluate it; almost all contact sheets are for reference only—not final prints.

A sheet of 8” x 10” paper is often a little small to show an entire roll of 35mm film. To counter this problem, you may have to crop part of the roll when making your contact sheet. A better solution is to print one or two strips of negatives on a separate sheet; or you can use a larger-size printing paper, such as 8½” x 11”, to better accommodate an entire roll.

Archival

Over time, images are subject to various kinds of deterioration, such as fading and staining, as well as simple physical damage. The term archival is used broadly to describe the stability of a photographic image over time; with black-and-white photography, this usually means either a negative or a print. Some materials are inherently more long lasting than others; for instance, fiber-based black-and-white papers are considered more stable than RC papers. For maximum stability, consider these other factors:

Processing. For maximum image stability, it is best to use fresh, uncontaminated solutions when developing film and making prints. In particular, make sure you fix and wash negatives and prints for at least the recommended amount of time; use fixer remover for negatives and fiber-based prints before the final wash; and be sure your washing methods are efficient.

Heat and humidity. Both high temperatures and high humidity can cause deterioration of a photographic image. If possible, keep negatives and prints at temperatures no warmer than 75ºF and at average humidity. In particular, keep them away from cars (in hot weather), attics, basements, and other places that typically get hot and humid.

Presentation and storage materials. Keep negatives and prints away from direct sunlight. And when they are not in use, store them or mat them using safe materials such as plastic negative protectors and rag mat board.