What Is... Exposure Bracketing

Exposure bracketing is a simple technique professional photographers use to ensure they properly expose their pictures, especially in challenging lighting situations.

When you expose for a scene, your camera's light meter will select an aperture / shutter speed combination that it believes will give a properly exposed picture.

Exposure bracketing means that you take two more pictures: one slightly under-exposed (usually by dialing in a negative exposure compensation, say -1/3EV), and the second one slightly over-exposed (usually by dialing in a positive exposure compensation, say +1/3EV), again according to your camera's light meter.

The reason you do this is because the camera might have been 'deceived' by the light (too much or too little) available and your main subject may be over- or under-exposed. By taking these three shots, you are making sure that if this were ever the case, then you would have properly compensated for it.

As an example, say you are taking a scene where there is an abundance of light around your main subject (for example, at the beach on a sunny day or surrounded by snow). In this case, using Weighted-Average metering, your camera might be 'deceived' by the abundance of light and expose for it by closing down the aperture and/or using a faster shutter speed (assuming ISO is constant), with the result that the main subject might be under-exposed. By taking an extra shot at a slight over-exposure, you would in fact be over-exposing the surroundings, but properly exposing the main subject.

Another example would be the case where the surrounding might be too dark, and the camera exposes for the lack of light by either opening up the aperture and/or using a slower shutter speed (assuming ISO is constant), then the main subject might be over-exposed. By taking an extra shot at a slight under-exposure, you would in fact be under-exposing the surroundings, but properly exposing the main subject.

Now, most digital cameras have auto exposure bracketing (AEB), meaning that if you select that option before taking your shot, the camera will automatically take three shots for you: one which it thinks it has perfectly exposed; a second one slightly under-exposed; and the third one slightly over-exposed. The amount of under- and over-exposure usually defaults to -1/3EV and +1/3EV, but can also sometimes to specified in SETUP, e.g. you may want to use -1EV and +1EV instead.

When should you use exposure bracketing? Anytime you feel the scene is a challenging one (too much highlights or shadows) as far as lighting is concerned -- e.g. sunsets are usually better taken slightly under-exposed so use exposure bracketing there -- or whenever you want to be sure you don't improperly expose a fabulous shot that you may not get the chance to go back and take again.

Resource: http://www.photoxels.com/tutorial_exposureBracketing.html