



Shooting The Perfect Portrait

A full guide on how to compose, capture, and correct a killer portrait from start to finish.

BY LIAM SULLIVAN

Photography is already hard by itself, but portrait work complicates things further. Capturing a compelling portrait requires a mix of technical and interpersonal skills. The technical half is far easier to teach, but the interpersonal component is easier to build with time. Even if you don't get everything perfect right away, the best way to learn is to try. Portraits are a delicate art and people are complicated. You will learn far more on the job than you can learn from any tutorial. But if you're just getting started, here are some pointers to start you off.

Camera Settings

Mastering your camera settings is the foundation that you will work off of when you're entering the field. There are three core settings you will want to get familiar with, that being shutter speed, aperture, and ISO.

Shutter speed refers to the speed at which your camera's shutter folds up and down

again. Camera sensors are very sensitive, so they only need to be exposed to light for a fraction of a second in order to capture a fully lit picture. For portraits, shutter speed should be kept at speeds of at least 1/125 in order to capture a crisp shot and avoid motion blur, unless introducing blur is part of your creative vision. For outdoor shots, many prefer shooting at fast shutter speeds (between 1/500 and 1/1000) because of how powerful the sun is. If you don't set your shutter speed fast enough in these settings, your shot will come out overexposed.

Aperture refers to the size of the ring within your camera lens, displayed as your lens' focal length divided by a number (f/5.6 for example). The smaller the denominator, the tighter your area of focus is and the more light is let in to your camera. Often you will want to use a wider aperture (f/2.8 or lower) in order to blur your scene and make your model stand out.

ISO is an entirely digital metric, and your



flexibility with this setting depends on your camera body's sensor. The bigger the number, the more sensitive your sensor is to light. If you push the ISO too high, though, your shot will be full of grain as your sensor strains itself to capture as much light as possible. For portraits, you'll want to keep this number as low as possible. If you're shooting outdoors and have an abundance of light available, you can just keep this at its lowest (50-100). If you're shooting at night and are desperate for light, you may need to push it up a tad. I'd keep this under 800 though, because going above that number usually introduces visible grain. If grain is part of your creative vision, feel free to push your ISO super high and bring your other settings down. None of these suggestions should be taken as gospel.

Lighting

Lighting is the most underappreciated technical facet of shooting portrait photos. Oftentimes, the difference between a good shot and a great one is in how it's lit. Unfortunately, you can't always directly control your lighting (outdoor lighting be damned), but you can make the best of what you have by be-

ing smart about how you pick your photo locations.

If you're on a budget, you will likely start off shooting outdoors since the sun is free and nature is beautiful. Unfortunately, this means that your photo quality will be dependent on the time of day and the weather. Contrary to popular belief, direct sunlight is often quite bad for portraits. It is so harsh that models often need to squint to see through it, and it creates a *raccoon effect*, where models have unflattering circular shadows under their eyes.

If you have to shoot in direct sunlight, I'd suggest shooting under a tree or in some other kind of shadowy area. This will almost always work well, because the sunlight will bounce off of your surroundings to light the shadowy area you're in. If you're in nature, you might also get some pretty greenish and brownish hues on your model as the lighting picks up the surrounding colors in your scene. You can also artificially influence this light bounce using a reflector, directing the bounced light where you find it appropriate.

If you're willing to work around timing, the classic **golden hour** look can be quite beautiful. If you're

shooting under golden hour lighting, the cursed direct sunlight turns into a boon, since the sun's strength is much weaker sitting on the horizon line. During this time, your model can look directly into the sun without needing to squint, creating a pretty orange glow on your model's face.

My favorite lighting for portraits by far is *overcast*. It's flat and adaptable to whatever kind of shooting you might want to do. You can shoot out in the open and won't have to worry about any kind of squinting. Overcast light is also less likely to create shadows because of how diffused it is, so shooting in shadowy areas is also doable. You just may have to adjust your shutter speed and aperture to let more light into your camera sensor. Overcast lighting also works well while shooting indoors, as the light is controlled by the windows that it streams through.

As you progress, you may be interested in shooting photos in a studio setting. Studio lighting is an entirely different ballgame, but the broad strokes are the same. Direct lighting is like using sunlight. Harsh, but can work when the light is bounced off of other objects. Softboxes are similar to your overcast lighting, where they create a flattering diffused light. Unlike windows, these can be placed wherever you want in your scene, giving you a lot of creative freedom over how your final shot looks.

A popular lighting technique is the three-point

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lighting setup, consisting of a key (the main light) usually placed slightly above the model to emphasize their jawline, a slightly darker fill (side light) that adds brightness to the shadows the first light forms, and a backlight (back light) in order to add dimensionality to the model and separate them

from the backdrop. This looks professional, but also boring. If you want to make things interesting, you could remove the fill light and embrace the deep shadows formed by your main light. You could also move your main light to the side to only light half of your model's face. The world is your oyster.

Posing

Many people feel they aren't *photogenic* enough for portraits. This is demonstrably false. Many of these people simply haven't felt comfortable in front of a photographer before. Your job is to rectify that.

Engage them in some light conversation and see where it goes. Tweak your camera settings while asking them about their week, what they're looking forward to in their lives. Focus your effort on making a connection and getting to know your model as a human being. If they see you as a friend, they will be far more willing to let their guard down.

As you talk, give some subtle cues. Phrases like "chin up slightly" or "put your right hand on your hip", sprinkled in throughout conversation. The important bit is to take emphasis away from the posing and put more emphasis on the conversation at hand. This will make your model think less about their own body and create much more natural looking shots.

You want their subconscious to be interpreting the commands you give so that movements feel more natural. Study your model's mannerisms and default to them. Direct posing is far more likely to look stiff when contrasted with your model's natural inclinations.

Composition

A strong portrait isn't just made by the model, it's also made by what's around them. If you're going to shoot outdoors, keep your backdrops simple. Your photos should draw eyes to your model above all else.

But by all means, be creative with your framing. A centered portrait with the model looking directly into the camera lens is boring, and has already been done millions of times. Try drawing your model's eyes away from the camera, or keeping them on the outskirts of the frame with **Rule of Thirds**. Maybe mix in some negative space, leaving extra empty space around your model to make them pop.

If you're outdoors, encourage the model to interact with their surroundings. Maybe they can run a leaf through their fingers or casually rest their arm on

a fence. These subtleties elevate boring headshots into captivating frames.

Editing

In theory, your photos shouldn't need any post-processing if shot under the right conditions, but this rarely happens in practice. Sometimes your lighting isn't optimal or you miffed one of your camera settings while you were deep in conversation. Editing is best for catching these mistakes and rectifying them later.

I advise against directly manipulating the model's body in any way other than basic cropping and color correction. There is pervasive body dysmorphia in the portrait space, and it is always better to appreciate the model for the person they are instead of trying to edit them to be perfect.

For color correction, analyze your colors and



contrasts and react accordingly. Are your images orange-ish? Try pulling the white balance towards cooler tones. Are your shadows so murky that you are losing details? Try pulling up the blacks to recover those details. The key is editing your photos to look *ethereal*, yet believable. The colors should drag your user into the frame. Adjusting hues and saturations to perk up some of the dull colors in the scene is perfectly acceptable, even if it isn't completely natural.

In fact, you can leverage color grading as a part of your brand. Some artists split tone their images as a defining feature of their aesthetic. **Brandon Woelfel** comes to mind here. Some inject warmer tones into their shadows to lighten them up and create a nostalgic feel, much like the **Mango Street** duo. There are a ton of possibilities here. The important thing is taking one particular element, whether it be rich blues or deep blacks, and feature it in every shot you take. If viewers can identify your style by the way you edit, you're doing great.

I would caution against tweaking sharpness, though. Portraits are mostly still works, unlike sport or event photography. Artificially injecting extra sharpness into a photo almost always looks unnatural and accentuates unflattering features on your

model. If you worry about getting your focus right, I suggest taking multiple photos from similar angles for redundancy. Storage is cheap in the digital age, use it.

Another technique worth looking into is dodging and burning. When photography was limited to film, artists would selectively lighten and darken specific areas of an image by holding a card up to an enlarger as they developed their prints.

Nowadays, we have digital tools to do the same thing. Adding a small amount of exposure adjustment to a brush and painting the image brighter or darker in certain areas is a great way to add selective contrast. This technique is especially useful when you are working on headshots in a controlled environment. Dodging the cheekbones and burning below the jaw can be a great way to draw attention to a model's defining features without directly manipulating their body.

There is a lot of room for creative flexibility here, and you, as the photographer, have the freedom to determine what **YOU** want to prioritize in the image. There is no *perfect* combination of edits, despite what YouTubers selling you presets would like you to believe.