



30 More Tips To Improve Your Portrait Photography

1) Use Window Light

Long before flash was invented artists used windows, in particular northern facing windows. This gives a lovely diffused light, which is soft and flattering to the skin. Actually something that studio photographers spend a lot of time and money on re-creating.

2) Never say “Cheese”

I know you want nice smiley photos of your friends and family, but lining them up in front of something and then going “cheese” is always going to look stuffed shirt posed. Instead keep your camera out while you’re enjoying your al fresco picnic, barbeque, time on the beach, and keep snapping away while they are not paying attention.

3) Two people are better than one

Especially if the one person is feeling a bit awkward in the eye of the camera. Two people interacting is much more fun and natural. You can keep them separated so that you are still only shooting the one person – or sit them close together. Give them the job of making the other laugh for a natural smiley picture.

4) Shoot your subjects backside.

Now I sort of mean that literally. We rarely shoot the back of people, but actually when you’ve got your subject walking away and looking back over their shoulder that can be a really lovely photo. Especially if they are walking into the sunlight. It’s a shot I make of my wedding couples, they walk away holding hands and turn and look back to me through the middle – it is always selected for the wedding album. (and shows off the brides dress)



5) The sitter is never at fault.

The worse thing you can say as a photographer is “You look so stiff – you look awkward – you are doing it wrong”. It only makes them more aware of themselves and more stiff. Instead give them things to do, talk to them, make them laugh, make them jump and up down or run around – anything to loosen them up.

6) Get in close, get in closer

Head and shoulders is good, just the face is better. Now, some sitters may not see it that way, my older clients are less happy about seeing all their wrinkles, but their offspring love it because that IS how they see their parents. For younger faces – you just can't go wrong here. If you want a powerful portrait get in close.

7) Don't take 1 shot when you can take 20

We're all digital these days, just keep shooting. Tell them you've got the shot, let everybody relax and keep shooting, shoot before they are ready, shoot after they are finished. And unless you are a complete hoarder, afterwards throw away the ones that don't work.

The more people there are in the group, the more you have to shoot, because at different times 1 or more of your sitters will be blinking, looking away, chatter, coughing or something else.

8) Shoot children at their height

Get down to their level to shoot children, don't shoot the tops of their heads.

9) Shoot up to give power

Want to make someone look stronger in your picture, then bring the camera below their eye line.



10) Shoot down to make someone inferior

The reverse tip, if someone is literally “looking up to you”, they will look inferior or submissive. Now this can be used positively, especially when trying to make girls look sexy or cute.

11) Don't just shoot the face.

Especially for children, but not exclusively, what about a child's feet your grandmothers hands, what about your friends eyes?

12) Find your sitters favourite environment

If you have a choice, put them where they feel most comfortable, maybe it's in their work shed at home, or the childs bedroom. If the sitter is comfortable that helps, but their environment is also part of who they are and part of the portrait.

13) Learn the “S” pose

For women you should to show them how to do the “S” pose to make them look just so, so much better than just standing square to camera.

14) Give your sitter props

They feel much more comfortable with something to hang on to. If they can wave it around and make it part of the picture even better. Flowers, guitars, books, toys, hats, all sorts.

15) KISS your model

Keep It Simple, Stupid. Struggling with softboxes, backgrounds, reflectors, camera settings won't always help. Sometimes you just need to let the sitter be themselves and be happy and relaxed rather than intimidated by your equipment – or concerned about you being flustered.



16) Contrast clothes and location

If your sitter is wearing blue, don't put them against a blue background. If your sitter is wearing elegant, try them in the something grungy. You see these contrasts all the time in fashion photographer because the contrast adds drama and interest.

17) Check the edges of your frame.

While we're talking about backgrounds, check round the edges of your picture to make sure nothing is intruding where it shouldn't and that nothing is being cut off that needs to be there.

18) Check the edges of your subject

Now move back to your subject and check around the edges of their face – make sure there is no telegraph pole growing out of their head, that they are turned just enough to show their face or figure. If they have hands near the face, make sure they are posed properly.

19) Then check edges of the face.

In particular: (a) that there are no stray hairs floating where they shouldn't – a single stray hair across the eye ruins the picture and you can't photoshop it; (b) that their fringe, curls or whatever aren't hiding too much of the face and in particular their eyes – and that includes stopping catchlights in the eyes,.

20) Now you're set - shoot the hell out of it.

You've done all your checking, now get lots of shots very quickly, get your subject smiling, looking up, looking down, looking sad, feeling happy, singing, shouting, pulling faces.

21) Long noses point to camera



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Now, while this is going on and the subject is naturally moving their head around – your job is to stay on top of things. For example, if the subject has a long nose, then keep moving the camera so the nose is always direct to camera.



21) Bent noses point away from camera

Ideally so the bend is “away” rather than “towards” the camera, but try and avoid the straight-on.

22) Don't hide behind the camera

Finally while all this is happening you've got your nose glued to the back of the camera, which is OK, but that's not an excuse to stop interacting with your sitter – in fact it's the reverse, keep talking, keep encouraging them, there's a reason why “Yeah, Cool, Terrific, Gorgeous, Brilliant, Hot, Smoking, Wowser, Triff, Stunning” are part of a professional photographers vocabulary – nothing makes better pictures than telling your sitter that they are doing great (even when they are not).

23) Use an ultra-wide lens for fun

By ultra-wide I mean 24mm or less – all the way down to a full 180 degree fish-eye. Now when shooting this wide you get lots of distortion, so the trick is to frame and compose to make the most of that distortion. What is close to the camera will look huge, what is even only a little distance away will look absolutely tiny.

24) Use a long lens for portraits

Somewhere along the line it became “common knowledge” that a 50mm lens is the correct lens. Absolute bollox – I see more portraits ruined by 50mm lens than for any other reason. A 50mm lens distorts a portrait, whether just a head and shoulders or a full length shot. A minimum starting point for me is 70mm and ideally you should be out to 100-120mm. This gives a much more flattering perspective and does not distort the body shape.

25) Get out of your sitters face

On a related note, if you use that 50mm lens you are going to find to get any kind of headshot you are right up your sitters nose, intimidatingly close.



26) Get a 50mm lens.

What? Well the thing is that for both Canon and Nikon cameras they both have 50mm lens which are (a) incredibly cheap, (b) incredibly sharp and (c) incredibly fast. Which adds up to a lens you can set to f1.8, gives you a fast shutter speed even in low light, and a lovely focus on your subject.

27) Use depth of field to focus attention

Depth of field refers to the area of the image that is in focus, often not very much, maybe even just an inch or two, with the rest of the image getting progressively out of focus. The trick is to make sure the background is really, really out of focus, so it has the aesthetically appealing, non-distractive, blur – the correct term being “bokeh” (rhymes with ok).

28) Focus on only one thing

Now normally you focus on your sitter, but instead you could choose to focus on some other part, let's say on hands doing something or holding something. Focus on just the eye-lashes so the rest of the face is soft. Focus on a prop. Focus on one person, with another standing further back and soft.

29) Focus on the eyes - check lashes for sharpness

In general though a good portrait needs the eyes to be in focus – if the eyes are soft you haven't got a picture. If you want to check, then just look at the eyelashes, if they are clear and distinct you are OK, if they are blurred then so is the eye. This is quick way of checking on your LCD screen where otherwise it can be difficult to tell.

30) Use the correct focus mode

Modern cameras have all sorts of ways of focussing, “active” for sport, “multi-spot” to cover areas. The one you really want to use is the “single-point” focus mode. This gives one point of focus – which you basically want on the eyes. With a single point of focus you usually have control of whereabouts in the frame that is – I like mine to focus in the upper third when the camera is in portrait orientation.