Portrait Photography

Portrait photography is the art of capturing the inherent character of your subject within a photograph. While that quizzical definition covers the basics, portrait photography goes way beyond just clicking pictures of people.

Great portrait photography is a result of combining the right technique with an artist's expression.

Technique: Using the correct camera settings, compositions, angles, lighting, backdrops, and poses.

Art: It's about capturing a stunning and emotive portrait that evokes feelings in the viewers and captivates their attention.

First practiced by artists such as Picasso, portrait paintings have a great history of storytelling. Taking great portrait photographs is the modern form of the same

technique. While it requires much less effort than painting, capturing the expressions and emotions that make up good portrait photography can take time to master.

Great portrait photography is as much about following the rules and guidelines as it is about breaking out of the mold. We have put together an exhaustive list of best practices and techniques on how to take good portraits.

1. Focus on the subject

The subject is the most important aspect of portrait photography. Making the subject comfortable with you is an essential factor for a successful portrait photography session. Take out time to connect with your client before the photoshoot and, if possible, meet up in person. It is best to get to know each other and let the subject know more about your style of photography and what exactly you will be looking for in the shoot. Discuss your ideas about the shoot with your subject and factor in her preferences and abilities in your plan.

Even if you are familiar with the person being photographed, people can get uncomfortable when they get in front of the camera. It is always a good idea to keep communicating with the model before and during the shoot.

2. Find the right location

The location you choose for the portrait shoot is going to be a significant influence on the final results. Shooting outdoors in natural light gives the best results but poses many challenges. You would need to plan according to the weather, time of the day, and changing lighting and environment conditions as the day progresses.

Avoid shooting in direct sunlight as it produces harsh shadows and can make your subject to squint. Choose mornings or late afternoons when the sunlight gets diffused, and you get a lovely, warm, natural glow.

3. Getting the pose right

Figuring out the right portrait photography poses for your subject that portrays them in the most flattering way is always a new journey.

Getting your subject to pose in a way that complements them while keeping in mind the lighting, camera angle, and background is always an exciting puzzle. Try out various combinations of poses and angles to find the best options for your shoot.

After you have found the right pose for your subject, you can always make subtle changes to make every shot perfect.

4. Take candid shots

Getting subjects to pose can sometimes give less than optimal results. Some people are just not comfortable posing. This discomfort is particularly apparent in child portrait photography where posed portraiture images can come off as forced and unnatural.

Getting your subjects comfortable and shooting them doing their usual, natural activities can yield fantastic portrait shots.

Tip: Using a longer zoom lens to step out of the immediate proximity of your subjects can make them lose the shyness or stiffness of being photographed.

5. Capture emotions and expressions

Artistic portrait photography is all about finding emotions and expressions in portrait pictures. Getting your subject to emote is easier said than done. Make sure that you avoid fake smiles and blank looks. A genuine sparkle in the eye, a faint smile, a confident expression - these are the recipes for creating portrait shots that will shine. Work with your subject and give them time to get into the zone. Forcing or hurrying this process will not work.

6. Learn how to use your camera

Portraiture photography, first and foremost, is about your artistic expression and technique, which takes a lot of practice to perfect. Once you start understanding the nuances of portrait photography, its time to invest in a good camera and lens. There is no such thing as the best camera for portrayals, as most cameras nowadays can capture great portraits. Its a matter of understanding how to use them efficiently under different lighting and environmental conditions.

Get a decent DSLR camera that would give you control over portrait photography settings and deliver sharp, high-resolution images in the RAW format that you can work on in post-processing. Check out a detailed guide in Photodiode for working with a DSLR camera for beginners. Experiment with camera settings so that you understand your tools and can use them to capture the best results.

7. Choosing the right lens

As with all photography, the camera lens is the most vital tool in catching the right shot. Again, there is no such thing as the best lens for portrait photography. It is up to you to decide which lens fits the scenario best. If you are going for a shot where the scenery or background is a crucial part of the picture, then it's better to use a wide-angle lens.

A medium telephoto lens like 85mm or 105mm will enable you to strike a balance between your model and the background.
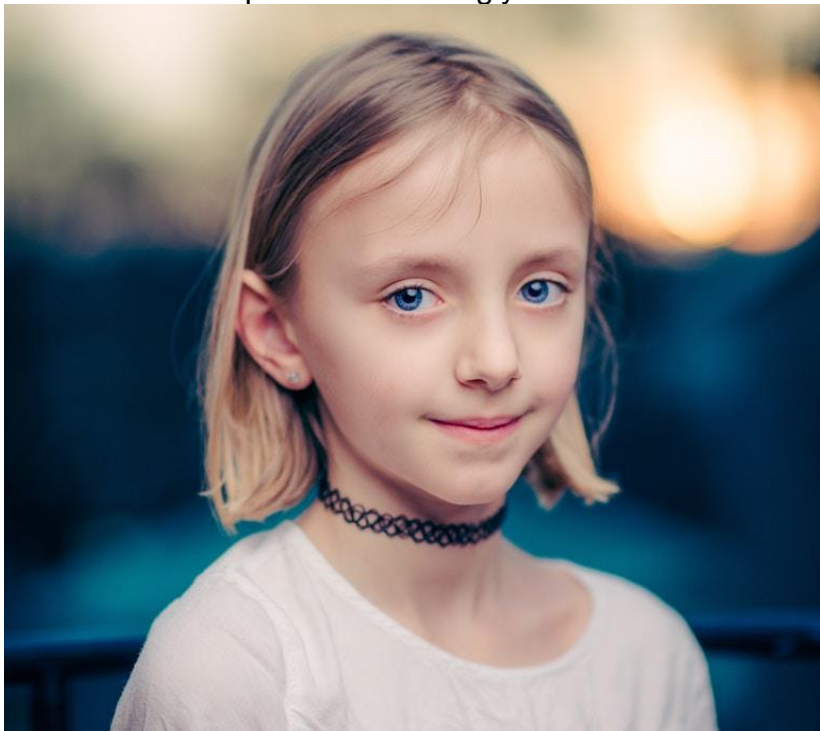
If the photo is supposed to be tight, focusing on the subject only, then a 70-200mm f/2.8 telephoto lens is an excellent choice. It enables you to zoom in and focus more on your subject. You also reduce the amount of background and foreground distractions on display.

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8. The background matters

The focus in portraiture, as expected, is on the subject model. However, there are more intricacies than just that. Sometimes, an interesting background can add a lot of drama to the photograph and help your subject stand out.

In most cases, though, blurring the background correctly can add more emphasis to the subject. So it is imperative to see how the background will turn out and to adjust the shutter and aperture accordingly.

9. Design a color palette for your images

You have to consciously design the visual look and feel of your portrait shots, and for this, defining a color palette helps. Using complementing colors when it comes to clothing, backgrounds, props, and even in post-processing can add to the overall impact of the portrait shots. Keep in mind your subject's skin complexion when choosing a color palette. Color palettes would also depend on the type of portrait photography you are undertaking. Family portrait photography images look great in warm hues and greens, whereas business portrait shots look impressive in dark blues and greys.

10. Lighting

If you have ever taken a physics lecture about light, you would have learned that light is directional. Lighting is critical to a photographer and forms the golden rule of lighting in photography. Directional lighting is the reason why standing in front of a light source will make the subject dark and hardly visible. Similarly, having a light source to the side will make half the subject light up and the half in shadows.

For a fully lit picture, it is also easier to stand facing a light source. The creative use of the sun as a light source in outdoor portrait photography can produce stunning results. A good photographer should be able to use the available lighting to his advantage.

However, you will not always be shooting in the sun. If you are using a portrait photography studio, you should also be comfortable with artificial sources. More specifically, think about investing in a flashgun. It is a quick and portable.

Many people are hesitant in the use of flash, but it can be useful in the dark scene or add drama to portrayals. Flash can also be used with the sun, to balance out exposure and unevenness of natural lighting to create the perfect portrait photography lighting setup. You may also use a camera with a low aperture to get the most details in a picture taken in a less lit area.

Another useful tool for lighting is the use of Reflectors for turning hard shadows into softer ones. Reflectors are cheap to buy, and if you are an amateur on a budget, they might be a good starting point.

Tip: There are infinite possibilities when it comes to portraiture photograph lighting. You can create a mood using side-lighting. Silhouetting your subject using backlighting can be impactful.

11. Try out different angles.

Most portraits photographs are shot by placing the camera at the eye level of the subject. Shooting at the eye level produces excellent portraiture shots with the subject's eyes becoming the focus of the photograph. However, choosing an unconventional angle can make your portraits stand out.

Create interesting angles by shooting your subject from high up, looking down at the subject. Or you can shoot from a shallow position, getting as close as you can to the

ground and looking up at your subject. These angles can add a lot of impact and variety to your photographs.

You can make your subjects look slimmer, thicker, shorter, or wider, depending on the angle from where you are shooting them. Move around the scene and see what specific angle captures the image best. Tilting the camera can also add a dramatic effect to the picture.

12. Using props for effect

Adding props to your portrait photography is a great way to add a dash of color, excitement, and impact to the shots. Using props creatively can completely alter the nature of the photograph. You can develop your signature style by experimenting with shapes, textures, colors of props.

13. Break the Rules

Understanding the rules and practicing them can be a precursor to get creative and break the rules. When you break the rules, you create unusual and unique work that would make your brand.

Think out of the box and experiment with different portrait photography ideas, camera angles, composition, and even model poses. For example, while the Rule of Thirds is an effective formula to compose balanced images, breaking this rule by placing your subject on the edge or right in the center can create compelling, impactful photos.

Tip: Shooting black and white portrait photography creates intimate, personal portraits

14. Shoot a Series of Shots

Using the 'burst' or 'continuous shooting' mode of your camera to click a series of shots that capture the different poses of your subject in motion is a great technique.

The series of images can be presented together, creating a sense of drama and movement, or you can pick the shots with the perfect expressions from the bunch of pictures.

15. Editing and post-processing

While taking a photograph is undoubtedly essential, beginners can often neglect the importance of proper editing and retouching in professional portrait photography. A lot of the "professional" feel of the images is due to appropriate editing techniques.

While this is a whole different subject on its own, some simple techniques can significantly improve the quality of your pictures. Purists may see editing as a negative, but programs like Photoshop are just tools to enhance your images.

Consider a situation where you have taken a headshot and part of the body is not visible in the frame. Perhaps one of the hands is too widely spread to include in the frame. Now you would need to crop the hand to retain focus on the face. When cropping extremities, however, you should be careful to crop halfway between limbs or joints. Cropping half a bicep or half a forearm will make your image better proportioned. Always avoid cutting off fingers, shoes, or hair from the image, as this has the tendency to ruin your portrait.

There are a lot of different tools you can use but the most common ones by far, are Adobe Photoshop and Lightroom. For good reason too, as they can easily do all the things you need to do while remaining relatively affordable.