

# **HOW TO TAKE GREAT PHOTOS OF PEOPLE**

Of all possible photo subjects, people are the most popular. In this handout, we will concentrate on how you can take great shots of the people in your life.

We'll start out with a few general tips, and then concentrate on taking portraits. You can apply portrait techniques when you take candid photos or other types of pictures. We'll also focus on cameras that use film, but the tips apply to digital photography, too.

## ***General Tips***

- Follow the general rules of good composition when shooting people photos. That means: get close, simplify the background, and use the rules of thirds, framing and leading lines.
- Relax your subjects. Don't begin shooting until you have a rapport with your subjects.
- Photograph from the subject's eye level.
- Include all of the face. Don't cut off hands or feet.
- Focus on the eyes when the face is the primary subject.
- Learn to deal with hats (shadows) and glasses (glares). Fill in shadows with flash or a reflector. Subjects can remove hats and glasses or tip them back to eliminate problems.
- Avoid backs of people and animals.
- Have your subjects doing something, unless it is a formal portrait.
- Keep the horizon straight.
- Hold your camera steady.

## ***Study Portraiture***

To study portraiture, you might begin with books at your library. You can also visit art and photo galleries in person or on the web. Study early portrait masters like Rembrandt. In his portraits, Rembrandt included dress, accessories and personal items that told a story about his subjects. They might have been sitting at a piano, in a kitchen, at work, or with symbolic props (e.g., musical instrument or sword). His subjects looked

comfortable and dignified because they were in their own elements.

Rembrandt also used north light because it is soft and diffused. Clothing was subdued to emphasize the subject's head.

The subject's eyes were off center, above center, and facing into the picture. When hands were included they



served a purpose, such as holding something or gesturing, and were carefully planned as part of the overall design.

Look for portraits in photo albums and frames in your home. Check book covers for portraits of authors, and album or CD covers for portraits of musicians and singers. Leaf through magazines like *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *National Geographic* for portraits of people in the public eye.

Create your own portrait notebook. Note your observations on how the portrait photographers handled lighting, background and posing. Here are some possible categories for your book:

- *Portrait of Face and Neck.* Look at the shadows on the face. Note the direction from which the light is coming. Study the facial expression. Where do the eyes seem to be looking? Is the person smiling? Is the mouth open or closed? Is the person looking at the camera, or away?
- *Portrait of Head and Shoulders.* Note the direction of the light and the facial expression. Also, note in which direction the person's head is turned. Are the shoulders turned in the same or the opposite direction as the head? Is the background plain, blurred or detailed?
- *Portrait of Upper Body.* Study all aspects of the portrait including what the person is wearing and how the person is holding his or her hands.

Have any props been included in the picture?  
What do they tell you about the person?

- *Portrait of Person from the Knees Up.* Study all aspects of the portrait including how the person is sitting or standing and how the knees or legs are positioned. Has the setting become more important?
- *Full-length Portrait of Person.* Study all aspects of the portrait including how the person is sitting or standing. Especially note what is included in the background. Does everything in the background seem to contribute to the portrait? What do you know about the person that you could not have guessed from a picture of just the subject's face?
- *Portrait of Two People.* Study all aspects of the portrait. What has the photographer done so that the heads will not be exactly side by side? How has the photographer indicated the relationship between the people? Are they posed close together? Are they touching? Are they looking at one another? Hints: When you make formal photos of couples, try to pose them so there is a bond between them. Have them touch or join in some manner. To produce interest in the photo, pose them so their eyes are at different levels. However, make sure that at least one meets the camera with his or her gaze. This creates an immediacy and intimacy that invites the viewer into the picture.
- *Portrait of More than Two People.* Study all aspects of the portrait. How has the photographer kept the heads from being lined up next to each other? How important is the setting to the picture? Did some element in the setting help the photographer compose a more visually interesting picture? How important are clothing and props to the success of the group portrait? What device, if any, did the photographer use to focus the attention of the group? Can you find a geometric shape (triangle, circle, trapezoid) hidden in the composition of the group? Hints: Try to create some unity in the group, e.g., all wear uniforms, cowboy hats, party hats, costumes. You could also have them gather around a common focal point, such as birthday cake, family pet,

Christmas tree, new car or machine. For instance, with a group celebrating a youngster's birthday, arrange subjects behind the seated birthday child. All can look at the child, while he or she looks at the camera.

## ***Choose the Right Equipment***

Any reasonably well-constructed camera can be used to take a good photo. But what do you know about your camera?

### ***Know Your Camera***

With your camera in hand, look through the viewfinder at a subject that is flat and at about the same eye level as you (a blank wall or door will work fine). Does your camera's viewfinder have frame lines to help you line up the subject? These frame lines are helpful, but only if they're accurate. So, test your viewfinder for accuracy. Again, look through your viewfinder, this time at a wall with pictures and a doorway or window. Before squeezing the shot, make a sketch of exactly what you see through your viewfinder – top, bottom and both sides. Then take the picture. When you get your print back or look at your electronic file, compare it to your sketch. Did you see more (or less) through the viewfinder than the camera did through its lens? If you did see more (or less), remember to compensate in *all* your future photos.

Next, find out how close you can get with your camera without making your subject out-of-focus. On a flat surface (table, counter top or floor) place a dozen pop cans six inches apart in a straight line. Use a yardstick to be accurate. Put your camera flat on the same level six inches from the first can and at a slight angle so you can see all the cans. Squeeze the shutter button. When you get your print back, study it to see which can is closest to the camera and still in focus. Those that are too close to the camera will be blurred. This distance may be one to four feet away – the distance varies with each camera – but you now know how close you can get and still have your subject in sharp focus.

Use the knowledge gained from your viewfinder and distance tests to always “fill the frame” with your subjects.

### ***Choose the Right Lens***

Most portrait photographers agree that you need at least a minimum telephoto lens (75 mm to 135 mm) on your 35 mm camera to take a good close-up portrait of a person. Also, use a good rigid tripod that will hold your camera steady and a cable release that will let you trip the shutter without touching the camera.

With a normal lens (50 mm), you might concentrate on half- to full-length portraits of individuals and small groups. For larger groups, you may need a wide-angle lens.

An effective photo exercise is to take portraits from different distances using medium telephoto, normal and wide-angle lenses. Record which lens works best for which kind of portrait. Then try taking telephoto portraits with and without a tripod and cable release. Can you see a difference in the quality of your pictures?

Whatever type of portrait you want to take, you need a film or camera setting suited to the lighting. Ideally, you also want a light meter that will allow you to determine the proper exposure of the face, the most important part of your subject. If you don't have a meter, bracket your photos to ensure proper exposure.

### ***Choose the Right Location***

When you want to shoot a portrait, find a good location. Choose a spot with a simple, medium-toned background. Minimize patterns, shapes and colors. If you're shooting outside, tree foliage, grass or even a lake works well. When you're shooting head and shoulder shots inside, hang fabric or colored paper. For darker skin, look for a similarly dark background to keep the highlight (and thus the camera's exposure) on the face.



When you've chosen a background for your subject, look through your viewfinder. Is there anything that does not belong? Should you move

the camera a little closer? A little farther away? Should you change from a telephoto to a normal or wide-angle lens? Should you have the person move because there is something distracting in the background? Can you use a large aperture to help blur and simplify the background?

When shooting on location, you may not want a plain background but a background that's appropriate for the subject. For a librarian, for example, that might mean a wall of books in the background. Perhaps you'll want a fantasy background to bring out some hidden aspect of a subject's personality. Sometimes you may want to include a famous landmark in the background to set the scene of the portrait.

### ***Light Your Subjects***

#### ***Indoor Lighting***

As a rule, your portrait light should be *above* the camera lens, not beside or below it. Think of your portrait light as the sun. Because of the sun, we are used to seeing people with the light from above. Any other kind of lighting seems strange or out of place.

Since most portraits are taken indoors, your first lighting choice will probably be flash. If you are going to get in close (3-4 ft.) to your subject, put one thickness of a white handkerchief over the flash. This cuts down on the amount of light so it doesn't wash out the subject.

If you're shooting indoors, "bounce" the flash off a wall or ceiling for more natural lighting. A separate hand-held flash is best and can be positioned far enough away from the lens to avoid red eye.

A pleasing portrait light is daylight coming through a north window (the same light you have outside in the shade). This may light only one side of the face, but it can make a very attractive portrait.

To practice your portrait lighting skills, buy a mannequin head and cheap wig. (Ask display departments and wig shops for sources.) Make sure the mannequin has a lifelike nose, eyes and mouth. Controlling nose shadows is a key to mastering portraiture. Use the mannequin to test lighting patterns, exposure and lenses.

With the help of a friend, practice each of the following types of indoor lighting. In each case, see if you can highlight the five principle planes of the face – forehead, both cheeks, bridge of the nose, and chin – while letting gentle shadows provide a three-dimensional look.

- *Indoors, Bright Sun.* Place a white bedsheet over a window to diffuse the light. Use your white reflector to give you a pleasing balance of light and shadow.
- *Indoors, Hazy Sun.* Work next to a window. Have your subject turn toward the light. Use a large piece of white cardboard or an old home movie screen to reflect light onto the room side of your subject. Experiment with natural reflectors like an open book or white clothing, walls, curtains, rugs, furniture or anything that can help bounce light into the shadow area.
- *Indoors, No Windows.* Create your own “window” by bouncing flash off a nearby white wall or white piece of cardboard. Try diffusing your off-camera flash by putting something like a white bedsheet between it and your subject. Fill in light on the shadow side of your subject with a reflector or try for a dramatic side-lighted effect.
- *Indoors, Two Flash Units (Advanced).* Try to figure out how you could light your subject using two identical electronic flash units, each with its own power supply. Your remote unit, sometimes called a slave unit, should have a photo electric cell or “eye” that triggers it when your main flash goes off. For natural-looking results, you will probably want to diffuse your lights by bouncing them off portable umbrellas or your own homemade reflectors.
- *Indoors, Temporary Studio (Advanced).* Use a white bedsheet as the background, a bounced or diffused electronic flash as your main source of light, and a white cardboard or other reflector to fill in the shadows. Visit a well-stocked photo outlet to get an idea of what is available for bouncing and diffusing flash. Then improvise with materials around the house. You can create a large diffuser, for example, simply by stretching white fabric over a

rectangular frame. You might spray-paint the inside of an old umbrella either white or silver to use as a makeshift, light-bouncing umbrella. Just don’t plan to close the umbrella between shooting sessions because the paint might flake off.

### ***Outdoor Lighting***

Many people still pose their subjects looking into bright sunlight. There are problems with this standard lighting technique. Your subjects are forced to squint, which is not comfortable or attractive. Deep, dark shadows form under their eyebrows, noses and chins. These shadows are sometimes so dark that the eyes disappear completely.

If your only alternative is to shoot in the bright sun, try a flash (“fill-flash” or “daylight flash”) or try to bounce some light into the subject’s face with a small reflector or white card. Besides opening up the shadows, this will also put appealing highlights or catchlights into your subject’s eyes.

When you’re shooting outdoors, it’s better to put your subject in a shady area with a shadowed background. You can also shoot on overcast days, when the light is scattered and hits the subject from many directions. Then you are free to have your subject move around and try different poses and you don’t have to worry about squinting. Another advantage to making people pictures on overcast days is that the light in these conditions flatters people. The soft, nearly shadowless light doesn’t show up the wrinkles or blemishes the way that hard light does. Another good time to shoot portraits outside is the late afternoon because it gives a nice, warm, golden glow to your subjects. You can simulate this glow with an 81B or C filter.



Having the sun shine from behind the subject (backlighting) can be effective because it creates a halo and makes your subject stand out against the background. Remember to use a fill flash or

reflector to add light to the face and fill in shadows. For proper exposure, take your camera close to the shaded side of your subject, make an exposure reading, lock it in, then move back to where you want to make your photo.

With the help of a friend, practice each of the following types of outdoor lighting:

- *Outdoors, Bright Sun.* Move your subject to the open shade of a tree or building, or turn your squinting subject so that the sun hits his or her back. Use a piece of white cardboard to reflect light back into your subject's face. Notice how the harsh, unflattering light can be controlled.
- *Outdoors, Hazy Sun.* Plan to work about mid-morning or mid-afternoon on a day when there is a light cloud cover or an overall haze. See if you can figure out why this is sometimes called "ideal" portrait lighting.
- *Outdoors, Overcast.* Take your electronic flash off your camera, diffuse it with a single layer of something white and translucent, and hold it high and to the side of the camera as if it were the hazy sun. Lining up a portrait of several friends, try to figure out how non-directional lighting simplifies taking pictures of groups.

## ***Pose Your Subjects***

Most portraits should be vertical because they look more natural that way. So, keep your camera in the vertical position when subjects are standing or sitting for portraits.

Carefully look at your composition before you shoot. Does the position of the subject in the frame look good? Would the subject look better slightly off center in one direction or the other? How about a full-face view or a profile? Which is your subject's better side? Does the chin look better tilted up or down? Can you improve your composition by raising or lowering your camera position? Would you like your subject to lean forward a bit, change the



direction of his or her shoulders, bring hands together, relax elbows, put one foot in front of the other? Would it be easier to show your subject what you want by doing it yourself? Would it help if you let your subject know what you are trying to accomplish? Could you turn your subject into a member of your portrait team by letting him or her look through the viewfinder at you posing for the camera lens?

Carefully check for anything that could be distracting in your photo. Nothing should draw attention away from the subject. Clothing, jewelry and props should be subdued unless it is a fashion shot. Anything that detracts, subtracts.

Professionals use posing techniques to make "flattering" portraits that accentuate a subject's positive features and minimize the negatives. For a wrinkled face, for example, they use diffused lighting, lower the main light and use a three-quarter pose. For a double chin, they raise the main light, tilt the chin upward and use a high camera position. For baldness, they lower the camera position, use a screen to shield the head from highlights, use no hair light and blend the top of the head with the background tone. See Kodak's *Professional Portrait Techniques* for more ideas.

Professionals also shoot "environmental" portraits to emphasize a subject's character or type of work. Each subject leads many lives: parent, spouse, boss, sports fan, worker, etc. The photographer takes time to know the subject, then decides which "person" to photograph. The final photo is designed to capture the subject's environment, not just his or her face or body.

## ***Relax Your Subjects***

Seating your subjects will help relax them. A stool is best; they can put their feet on the floor or on a rung. Ask them to sit at a 45 to 60 degree angle to the camera, not straight on. A female subject can put both hands together in her lap. A male can put his hand closest to the camera on his knee, his hand away from the camera on his pants pocket.

Sitting at an angle and with proper hand placement will do much to enhance your portraits. But don't ask your subjects to sit like this too long. It may

seem awkward to them and they will want to hurry to get the picture over. Encourage them to be patient because the camera thinks they look terrific!

You can help relax your subjects by engaging them in conversation. Most subjects seem more relaxed if you give them something to hold or think about. Get them to laugh or smile with a joke. Remind friends and family of a silly event that you've shared together. Give children something to play with.

## ***Take Your Best Shot***

Then be ready to take your photo. People hate to wait while you adjust your camera. Have your shots planned and your camera adjusted before you ask people to pose.

Generally, you want to get as close as you can. Don't shoot a person's whole body, unless clothes are important. Crop tightly and fill the frame with the person's face. The eyes are the most important single element. Viewers are drawn to the eyes, so make sure the eyes are in sharp focus. Use eyelashes as your focal point. Compose your photos so that the eyes are near the "golden mean" (rule of thirds).

Shoot at eye level. For child subjects, that means kneeling down. If the subject is looking slightly to one side, add extra space to that side.

If you need to control the exposure, zoom in or get close to your subject's face, then press the exposure lock button. Keep this button pressed down while you recompose and take your shot.

Try to anticipate your subject's reaction and time your shot to the moment when he or she is looking relaxed and natural. Take several photos as quickly as you can. Then thank your subject.

## ***Develop Your Own Portrait Style***

It takes a long time to become an expert portrait photographer. But all the famous photographers and professionals started by knowing the same basic things that you now know.

Once you've conquered the basics, experiment. Go beyond. Be creative! Each time you take a portrait, you are developing your personal style. Even when you try to imitate a portrait you've seen, you bring something new to it, something that only you could add. Each time you succeed, add the portrait to your portfolio.

### *Sources:*

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Photos by Wisconsin 4-H Youth: "My Sister, Kristin," page 1, by Sara Terry, Sauk County; "Elyse," page 3, by Sarah Hansen, La Crosse County; "A Little Angel," page 4, by Cory McKeegan, Sauk County; and "Cowgirl," page 5, by Heather Rasmussen, Sauk County.

### Information sources included:

- *Focus on Photography* Web Site
- "How to Photograph People" and "How Can I Take Better Photographs of People?" on the *PhotoSecrets* Web Site
- *Investigating Portraiture*, IS320, National 4-H Council Skill Guide, developed by Kodak
- *Photography 101*, Home Learning Package, Wayne Sproul
- *Taking People Pictures*, Don Wishart, retired Iowa 4-H Photography Specialist