

Getting started in Portraiture

A portrait is much more than a snapshot. It should tell something about the person, physically or emotionally. It is not just a “road map of the face,” but something well thought out and perfectly executed. In order to capture a portrait you, as a photographer must make some connection with the subject in order to truly capture the essence of what they are about. Often, in a one hour session I have learned more about certain aspects of the subjects life than many people who have known the subject for years may know.

In this lesson we want to explore some of the more technical aspects of creating a portrait. We will touch on the subjects of lighting, background selection, lens selection, clothing, posing and post-processing.

Lighting

When it comes to lighting for portraiture, some form of indirect or diffused light will more often than not work best. Open shade, reflected light or light from a north facing window are all good choices. Lighting into the short side of the face creating a loop or Rembrandt lighting pattern will nearly always produce flattering results. To do this, make sure that the light source is higher than the face, but not so high that shadows fall into the eyes. You want the eyes to be well lit as they are the most important part of the portrait. The eyes have the potential to draw the viewer into the image. Remember that without quality light you cannot have a quality photograph. Lighting should always be your number one consideration in portraiture.



Soft, diffused but still directional light is usually best for portraiture. Notice here, that the use of short lighting makes the face appear more slender. There is a little light being reflected off of the building behind the subject acting as a “kicker” light and creating separation from the background. The eyes are well lit which is very important. The pose is natural, relaxed and believable. The background and clothing are simple, creating a portrait where the subject, not the clothing, commands the viewers attention.

Background

Careful selection of the background for a portrait is critical to the success of the image. Keeping in mind that lighter tones advance and darker tones recede in a photograph, the face should then be the brightest part of the image. For this to happen, medium to darker toned backgrounds will produce the most pleasing results. Simple backgrounds as opposed to busy ones are always better. If it is not possible to find something simple, photograph with a wide open aperture so that the background blurs out. This technique does wonders at simplifying an otherwise busy and distracting background and allowing the subject to advance and stand out.

Lens Selection

Lens selection is very much a personal choice in portraiture, however several things must be kept in mind. Lens selection should be for a reason and not just because “I was too lazy to change what was already on the camera.” I nearly always select a long lens due to their compressing ability. Backgrounds are rendered out of focus easier and my subject then becomes dominant. Proportions are more exact and flattering as well. If using a wide angle lens, it is easy to create distortions that are not flattering to the subject. Things close to the lens will appear larger than they really are, so close-ups using a wide angle lens will make noses appear larger than life.

While I prefer long lenses, many environmental portrait photographers prefer to use wide lenses due to their ability to capture the surroundings in tight quarters. If using a wider than normal lens, careful placement of the subject and careful selection of camera position must be made so as to minimize the negative effects of these lenses.

Clothing Selection

Clothing really can make or break a portrait. Often, the clothes that look so good for everyday wearing are not going to look good in a portrait. Remember that we are freezing a moment in time. If the subjects clothing distract from the overall feeling of the image then the portrait will not be successful. Do you want the viewer to look at the subject or the clothing? In a fashion photograph, it is mostly about the clothing, but in a portrait it is about the subject. With this in mind, I always recommend medium to dark, solid colors and long sleeves. Even in the summer I recommend long sleeves! This allows me to utilize the arms to create leading lines in the composition without being too bright and taking attention away from the face. Covering the arms will reduce visual weight of the subject as well.

The only exception to using medium to dark clothing is if I am going to use a light background, then I will recommend lighter clothing. I want to blend the clothing with the background. Pants should always be darker than the shirt so that flow is created moving towards the face.

Posing

There are entire books written on the subject of posing, so I will keep this simple. There are two rules that, if followed, will make a huge differ-



ence in the quality of your portraits. The first is, if it bends, bend it! Never have someone stand flat footed in a straight, static pose. Shift the weight to one foot, bend the knees a bit, elbows bent, wrists, etc. No joints should be straight and static.

The second rule is, if it comes in pairs, put them on different levels. If you followed the first rule, then this one is easy. Feet, knees, hips, shoulders, elbows, etc. should all be on different planes. This will keep you from having a static composition. When tweaking a pose, remember that S-curves are feminine and C-curves are masculine. You can get away with both for a female subject, but should avoid S-curves with males.

Posing does not have to be difficult. In many cases your subject will naturally pose themselves and all you will need to do is tweak a few small things and you are ready to photograph. Remember the five views of the face and follow them, as they will always help in creating a better portrait. So many times we forget to pay attention to the small things and the finished result ends

Notice the soft, directional light that is found under the canopy of a tree. The soft backlight provides just the right amount of separation from the darker background allowing the subject to advance on the page. The busy background is blurred out by using a long lens (165mm) and a wide open (f/2.8) aperture.

up being less than it could have been.

Post Processing

If you have taken care to create the best possible image in camera, your post processing will be minimal. Color adjustments will be critical, as will basic portrait retouching to eliminate blemishes and soften eye bags. Softening of character and smile lines as well as crows feet may also be necessary. Nearly always some sort of diffusion will also help enhance the portrait. When using diffusion, sharpening the eyes and eyelashes a bit first often will produce better results. Finally, darkening the corners and edges of the image will allow the subject to become dominant.

Assignment

Using natural light, create portraits of both male and female subjects. Experiment with different lighting, posing and backgrounds. Create an image that is more than just a “road map” of the face, but really says something about the subject. Make a contact sheet of your best 20 images. Select your favorite three and retouch them using appropriate portrait retouching techniques, print them and turn them in.