

Assignment

Portraits

Step 1

Here begins a journey.

Let's set some basic parameters, so we all know what we're talking about.

For this assignment, "Portraiture" means head & shoulders and/or 3/4 length shots of "models" who are willing participants; are prepared to pose - and are willing to follow instructions. And in this first series of lessons we'll work on outdoor portraiture and natural lighting, so you can put away your 1200 watt-second strobes & portable generators.

I'm not trying to make this sound like a dictionary definition (it's not) -- but I did want to set the above scene for what we'll cover in this series, and just as importantly, what we're not going to cover, e.g. ...

Not covering ...

- Family snaps (where one or family members pauses for a second, says "cheese" whilst the photographer goes "click"), and
- Environmental portraits where for example shots are captured of a worker in their surroundings (although many of the techniques may well be useful for these types of shooting).

OK - with that out the way, the first things we'll look at are **backgrounds and locations ...**

In reality getting this right is about 1/3 of the battle, and the good news is getting a suitable background & location is actually pretty easy when you know what to look for; we're really only looking for 3 things:

1. Some place that's out of direct sunlight. Direct sunlight is horrible for portraiture (in fact it's not great for most types of photography) - direct sunlight gives harsh shadows - washes out skin tones - and it makes models squint; generally it's just plain unflattering. So, we need a shady place, free of direct light (including dappled light shining through tree branches). Sounds simple enough, but I could show you wedding party shots taken by full-time professionals where dappled light shining through tree branches onto faces of the wedding party has produced far from ideal results - so be sure it's one of the things you look for when gazing through the viewfinder. Don't forget that poor lighting like this can be 'handled' by our eyes and brain - the camera isn't so clever.

2. OK - we've found some places in the shade - but - it's not quite that simple; what I didn't tell you is that we also need a place in the shade WITH SUNLIGHT CLOSE BY. If we pop our

model into the shade then already we're streets ahead - but - a shot taken under these types of condition often has no direction to it and the subject will be reflecting levels of light similar to their surrounding and won't "pop" (or "stand out") - recessed areas like eye sockets will be dark, and the images just won't sing. If however you can get your model in the shade - but have sunlight close by (or a fill flash, but that's a different lesson) then some of that light can be reflected back towards the model, making them brighter than their surroundings AND illuminating recessed areas like eyes. Get this right and you'll suddenly be able to reveal pleasing eye detail (like eye colour and patterns) rather than just 2 black holes where eyes used to be.

3. Lastly, we want the location to be appropriate - all too often people aim for a "portrait" but end up with all kinds of clutter in the background. Now I'm not saying that some of these things CAN'T be used - but - until you know HOW to use them, they're best avoided. What I find works best is a simple repeating pattern - the likes of trees & shrubbery CAN be used, but again, it has to be handled properly; unless you have the lenses and techniques to throw it significantly out of focus then more often than not it ends up being sharp enough to be a distraction, but not sharp enough to be pleasing; whereas with more regular patterns it doesn't seem to matter quite so much. Clearly, you're at an advantage to have a camera that can operate on a narrow Depth of Field, to blur out unnecessary and distracting areas.... so a DSLR is preferable (but not essential) over a Compact.

So there you have it - Backgrounds and locations. In summary ...

1. In the shade
2. Sun close by
3. Simple background with no distractions

So here's your **first portraiture shooting assignment** -- have a look around your home / street / community, and select 2 or 3 locations that meet these criteria - take shots of them if you like, but mainly just make a note of them.

To finish up part one, take a look at the portraits you like to get an idea of how the above applies.