

Assignment

Portraits

Step 2

We worked out in Step 1 that we DON'T want to be shooting in harsh light because it gives unflattering hard shadows - so choosing a location in the shade gives us the soft light we need.

Unfortunately though, it's still not quite ideal -- for a couple of reasons:

1. It's likely to be flat (no direction), and
2. It's likely that your model is going to be illuminated to exactly the same degree as your background and thus we'll end up with a background that's just as dominant as our foreground, and that's not a good thing either.

So - what to do about it ...

Basically, we need to introduce some direction and at the same time try to illuminate our model more than our background so that when the camera meters off the model (foreground zone) we end up with more of a subdued background ... and if that happens to form some kind of natural vignette, then so much the better.

Two simple ways to achieve the foreground boost / direction that we need are to use either some flash (ideally very soft or diffused flash), or simply reflect some sunlight back onto the model. We'll cover flash later - but for now, we'll just stick with reflectors (a) they're cheap, and (b) they match the colour temperature of the main light PERFECTLY! ...

Most experienced portrait photographers normally use one of two types: either a plain white variety, or a silver variety. In most cases you can get these from any photographic store - they're usually circular and in the region of 80cm to 110cm in diameter (but "fold" up much smaller) - a white / silver variety isn't as common - but you can usually get a 5 in 1 (black / white / silver / gold / translucent) which is probably the better investment as the other surfaces can also be put to good use. A variation on the basic theme can be bought for a bit more still in the form of what's called a "tri-grip"; they're kinda triangular in shape with a handle in one of the corners which makes it easier to position & hold with one hand (better for positioning higher), but at the end of the day, the regular round ones work pretty well anyway. If you're not sure about this, just use a large white card - it will give 'soft' light and work quite well.

In an ideal world you need an assistant to hold and position the reflector, but it is possible to mount them on something ... but not quite as convenient as it's not just a case of reflecting light back at the model - it's also desirable to impart a flattering lighting pattern

in the process which is quite fiddly when you're trying to adjust a stand. The other issue that can be quite a problem with silver umbrellas is that the reflected light can be very hard for the model to tolerate - it's like having the sun reflected into your eyes from a mirror; so having that done momentarily from a distance isn't too bad, but if the reflector is too close it's pretty hard on the model, and won't win you any favours. I like to use the white reflector or plain white card - you can get a LOT closer (and the closer the light source the BIGGER the light source = the softer the light) - and they don't fry eyeballs!

So that's your next assignment - to get yourself a reflector or two... even if it's a large card. Best choice is to grab a 5 in 1 - if you're on a tight budget then grab one with silver on one side and preferably white on the other (although mostly they'll be gold on the 2nd side) - but if you go for this option, be prepared to come up with SOMETHING white that you can cover it with to knock back some of its efficiency (thin white sheet / white paper). If you're on a next-to-nothing budget consider making something out of white card and/or crumpled oven foil.