Assignment

Portraits

Step 3

Some 'bits and bobs' for Step 3; quite a few little things that have to be covered.

All we're really doing is positioning our model/subject in front of an appropriate background - hitting them with some flattering light - and taking the shot, but there are a few little things that add up to make quite a difference, and if we think about them both before and during the shoot, we can reduce the number of shots we need, and improve the quality of those shots.

So here we go ...

1. First thing to remember is "the camera captures what's there". Sounds a little obvious I know - but most of us have shot several frames and not realised that the kid has ketchup in the corner of his mouth, or somebody else has a few strands of hair across her face. Things that take just a moment to fix before the shoot -- or a lot longer later in Photoshop. Many will say "we can fix anything in Photoshop"; don't believe it! A couple of hairs that pass through an eyebrow - through an eyelash - across the eye - and continue across the face are actually VERY difficult to remove without a trace. So before you start shooting, take a moment to give your subject the final "once-over" – if you're photographing a friend or relative have them bring a few make-up or grooming items – but be sparing on the make-up as it can shine, smudge etc. Consider some background music – or speakers for their iPod (although personally I draw the line at them playing Justin Bieber!). In years gone by, amateur photographers, with less time constraints, would 'shoot' for twenty minutes or so and get the subject used to being in the studio and to just relax..... *then* they'd actually put film in the camera! Wasting a roll of film on a nervous 'model' could cost a lot of money. Of course, professionals didn't have the time to waste and an odd 'wasted' roll of film or two was all part and parcel of the 'sitting'. Now we're nearly all digital, there's no waste of film, but it can still take a while for your model to relax – so don't go expecting great results in the first twenty minutes. The model will come up with poses of his/her own by that time, or generally start to react more – a great time to get the best pictures.

2. People often ask "how close do we put the subject to the background" - in an ideal world, at least a couple of metres (this surprises some people) - but it's going to depend on a number of factors. Basically, the further you can separate them from the background, the more out of focus the background is going to be (which is generally a good thing) - but - if that means bringing them into direct sunlight, or you backing over a cliff, then obviously that's not going to work. It's also going to depend on the type of shot you're doing, and the focal length you're shooting at; 80-90mm lens (or its equivalent in your digital camera, say 55-60mm) is great for head & shoulders but longer lenses puts you further from the subject – which is sometimes not a bad thing. Shoot outdoor portraiture at around F5.6 or larger –

the important thing is your shutter speed. If you're shooting F5.6 with a 200mm lens - with a subject in the shade - it's likely that you'll only be around 1/60th -- and that just isn't going to cut it even with a 'stabilised' lens. Don't be afraid to "up the ISO" to 400 (but higher isn't so good unless you've got a very good 'full-frame' camera). Compared to camera shake or insufficient depth of field, noise is the least of your worries! Sorry if this section sounds a little vague - the problem is that you're all going to have different focal length lenses at your disposal and assuming that you're not going to buy new ones just for portraits, then the best advice I can give is "use a longer focal length if you can, within reason" and "watch your shutter speeds & apertures".

3. Posing. Unfortunately there are many possibilities here. Fortunately there are many possibilities here! (I know, "always helpful"!). It's a can of worms in terms of the possibilities - but - there are a few rules that help us along the way, and those rules can also be broken -- so long as the shot works. If it doesn't then - well - you should have followed the rules! Some things to keep in mind ... looking at lots of portraits on something like Flickr can help you get the feel for what works best.

- First up, it's all about the eyes. For frontal shots the head is usually positioned so that the eyes are centred - and getting them to lower their chin a little can also reveal a little more white below the eyes. For 2/3's views it's acceptable for the eyes to have all the whites on one side, but avoid having the far eye either being partially obstructed by the nose or "hanging out in space" (where you can't see the far side of the eye socket). Also, avoid letting the nose break the cheek line -- it makes it look much longer, and nobody will thank you for that! For profile shots, get the subject to look slightly towards the camera -- it'll give the impression that the eye is centred, even though it's not, and avoid hair showing under the chin ("billy goat effect") get it out the way using a hair-clip or duct tape (I was kidding about using duct tape -- sort of!)

- Second up, consider the shoulders. Normally you'll want to have them at 30 to 45 degrees to the plane of the face. Often having the shoulder nearest to the camera a bit lower makes for a good look, but if the subject isn't comfortable posed like that then what I normally do is get them to face the other way (not quite 180 degrees, but around 120 degrees), and then get them to turn their waist and shoulders back towards me (keeping their feet in position) - this gives a pleasing "over the shoulder" look, and also naturally tends to drop the near shoulder. But - you need to be a bit flexible with this technique (no pun intended!) - if the feet are at the wrong angle to start with then you may end up with a shot that just doesn't "fly" - so vary the starting angle of the feet a bit to see if things improve; it works for some, doesn't work for all. For others, a simple 3/4 shot across the chest with the head turned toward the camera can work a treat. Be aware too that if you shoot slightly up at them it can often make a big difference - and sometimes shooting down on them helps too! Unfortunately there's no substitute for practice & experimentation in this area; try this - try that - Google images and note the posing in the ones you like, and then replicate them.

4. Lighting. We covered lighting (or more specifically "introduction to reflectors") last lesson - so all I'll add here is for the need to reflect sunlight back at our subject in such a way as to pass it ACROSS the face. If you do it right you'll notice a light shadow to the left of and slightly below the nose (then you'll have used what's called LOOP lighting - the most popular

lighting technique). So what you're aiming for here is the loop lighting shadow (so you need to have the reflector off to the side) - but - not so far around that the nose stops the far eye being illuminated (avoiding "dead eye"). Additionally, in natural light we don't want to illuminate the area BEHIND the subject (hence another reason we like to bring the subject forward of the background), but sometimes you just won't have a choice. (Deliberately illuminating the background, or creating other effects like lighting the hair or adding 'rim-light' is something that you can try once you've mastered flash and other studio lighting). Typically we like to have around a 3 to 1 contrast ratio meaning the parts of the face being illuminated by the reflected light are around 1.5 stops brighter than the parts illuminated by the ambient light - so it's important not to have the subject too close to sunlight on one side.

5. Finally, give some thought to rotating your cameras as you take the shots - it adds a lot more energy to the shot. Sure, it's something you can do later in post-processing but (a) you'll have to throw away more pixels when you have to re-crop after the rotate, and (b) if you do it "in camera" you'll get a much better feel for whether the image is "going to fly" when you look at it on the review screen.

More to it than you thought? (Perhaps good, simple portraiture might feature more in monthly competitions from now on!)

Plenty to think about here - I hope your brains aren't in overload! It does sound like a lot, but the best thing to do now is GO TAKE SOME SHOTS. You won't get many of the above things right to start with - but you should get to the stage where you can see your own faults - and then start correcting them - and then "rinse and repeat". It may be bloody - it may be brutal, but remember ...

... what doesn't kill us makes us stronger!

This will be the last lesson on the shooting side of things for now - next time we'll start to look at the processing side of things (and I'll introduce the grey card at that time too).