

Top Ten Tips for Portraits

1 Natural light

Natural or available light can produce beautiful and flattering portraits, and many photographers prefer its subtlety to flash light. However, there's an art to controlling it so you get the best results. Try and avoid direct sunlight, because it can create hard and ugly shadows on faces. Working in areas of open shade, try using a reflector to bounce light back onto your subject. It's easy, relatively inexpensive and can give your portraits a professional look. You don't even have to use a manufactured reflector (although it will last longer) - a crumpled up piece of kitchen foil that's been flattened out again and stuck to card makes a great makeshift reflector, but can be too much - a sheet of white paper or card will do.

2 Try fill flash

Flash *can* be great for portraits. If there's no open shade to work in and you have no choice but to shoot in the harsh midday light, try using a technique called 'fill flash'. Pop a flashgun onto your camera - or, if you're close enough to the subject, use your camera's pop-up flash - and use its light to literally 'fill in' the hard shadows caused by the strong light overhead. The light from a pop-up flash is not powerful but even at a greater range can be enough to give the eyes a 'catch-light' and generally lighten up the face. A light diffuser, which clips onto your camera in front of the 'pop-up' flash, will give a softer light and then you could actually take photographs from around two meters without harsh light and shadow.

3 Use off-camera flash

If you want to get really creative with a flashgun (as opposed to your 'pop-up' flash), try taking it off the camera. Using a special cable or remote trigger you'll be able to light your subject from either side, above or below, and this can create stunning results, giving the impression that you've actually used an expensive studio set-up. Experiment with different positions to see how the light changes the mood of your portrait. You could even put coloured translucent objects in front of the flash to give variations in colour.

4 Ring flash

A ring flash is a circular flash that attaches to the end of your lens. It was actually developed so that medical, forensic and macro photographers could get super close to their subject and still get a good even spread of light. However, in recent years it's been adopted by portrait and fashion photographers for the unique halo-like shadow it creates. Try using a ring flash for your portraits and get a cool and contemporary look.

5 Studio lights

Studio lights give you maximum control. Lights can be of the powerful flash kind (fairly expensive) or 'continuous' lighting, often referred to as 'hot-lights' but now using 'daylight' bulbs to make them quite cool and certainly cooler than previous lighting of its kind which used hot tungsten bulbs. Used with accessories such as umbrellas, soft-boxes, snoots and barn doors you can create a variety of moods and styles to enhance your portraits. If you don't have a studio of your own, most towns and cities will have one available for hire at a reasonable rate. The club has a mixture of 'continuous' lighting and stands available for loan.

6 Environmental portraits

Taking portraits of people in their environment can add another dimension to your images. For example, by photographing an artist in their studio with a wide-angle lens you can squeeze a fair amount of the room into the shot and reveal aspects of the subject's character that might be overlooked with a simple head shot.

7 Pose or candid?

There are opportunities for fantastic portraits whether you give your subject direction or not. A well-taken candid portrait can capture the essence of your subject's personality in a split second, but you'll need quick reactions to get the best results. A more deliberate and considered approach that might involve some direction and interaction between photographer and sitter can also produce magical results, but you'll need make your subject feel at ease. Almost invariably, when working with a model who doesn't often have their photograph taken, even if you know them well, it can take a while before you start getting good results - many photographers using film used to take lots of 'pretend' shots before actually loading any film into the camera.... it would have been wasted in the first half an hour or so. After a while, though, your model will begin to relax, you'll find a few angles and 'looks' that really work well and the pictures will start to flow.

8 Model release

It's a good idea to get a model release from your subject, especially if you have aspirations to use the finished shot for publicity purposes. Create your own model release template, print a few copies and carry them around with you in your kit bag - that way you'll have one handy should the perfect shot present itself.

9 Need a model?

Friends and family can make great subjects, especially if you need to practise your portrait skills. However, a time might come when you want to spread your wings a little further. There are a number of websites that act as a hub for photographers and models to trade services. Inexperienced models who need prints for their portfolios will often be willing to work in exchange for pictures (time for prints) and this can be a great way to hone your skills on a limited budget. Always be upfront about what you want and how you intend to photograph your model before you get started.

10 Learn from the best

A good portrait is often more than a mere visual representation of the subject, and it seeks to reveal something of the subject's personality. Look at portraits and ask yourself what devices the photographer has used to communicate the subject's character. Whether it's great lighting or good rapport, the work of other photographers can help you to build your skills.
