Improving your portraiture
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Portraiture is one of the most popular forms of photography, it can be hugely rewarding and produce unique and timeless images.

This guide is not meant to be an exhaustive manual - it is a starting point for you to GET YOUR GEAR OUT and shoot. Like anything, the more often you shoot, the better your results will be. The secret is to go out with a clear plan, and review your images afterwards to see what you can improve upon. If you are going into a big shoot from scratch, you may want to follow step by step, otherwise you can refer to individual points of interest.

1. Plan your shoot & clarify your concept

Not all portrait shoots require a detailed theme - you can certainly get great images sometimes by chance. I want to encourage you to go out of your way to set up specific shoots to hone your skills. The process of stopping and thinking about the results you want to achieve will open up new possibilities.

If you are not sure where to start, look through your favourite magazines, and Google inspirational portraits.

I am going to outline 2 shoot concepts here, which we will follow through in the following sections.

#1 An environmental portrait of a professor - indoors
#2 A conceptual glamour/beauty portrait - outdoors

It is good to develop a clear concept or ‘story’ for your shoot, as well as a runsheet, shot list breakdown of tasks for your photo shoot. Samples of this kind of material are included in my Getting Started with Models Audiobook.

If you have never done this before, it is not too difficult. Sit down and make notes on the following.

- What is the story you want to tell?
- What different shots do you need?
- What locations, props, outfits, equipment and assistants will you need?
- What order should you shoot?
- What is the final use of the images?

2. Choose your subject

In many cases you will actually start with a subject to begin. If so, great - you can skip this point. Otherwise, once you are clear on the type of shoot you are undertaking, and the final shots you will create, you need to make sure you have the right subject/s to realise your shoot concept.
**TIP - Don’t limit yourself to ‘pretty young models’**

In fact, most of the iconic, touching, interesting and emotionally charged portraits are not of supermodels or athletes. Visual interest in an image goes beyond the physical appearance of your subject.

Your concept and end use of the images should drive your choice of subject. If you are shooting a series, such as concept you’re your subject will be easy to choose, you just need to approach them to get them on board. Conversely, if you are shooting for potential magazine submission, you should consider the kind of subjects they tend to publish.

For example, let’s expand concept #2 to be an ‘Ice Princess’ glamour shoot for submission to youth fashion magazines and edgy art publications. In this case, choosing a young and attractive model makes sense.

3. **Develop rapport**

The biggest challenge for many photographers is how to connect with your model and have a great working relationship.

There are two keys to this. The first is bringing your subject into the planning process as much as possible. Getting buy in and having a shared vision for the shoot is critical.

For concept #1, this could be as simple as explaining to the professor the purpose of the shoot, where the images will be used and showing examples of your previous work. There is no need to bring them into the creative or technical side of things.

For concept #2, depending on the experience of those involved, involving people from the start of the process is helpful. When you have never worked together, the process of brainstorming and planning will introduce each person and give you all an idea of what to expect. If the model is very experienced, you may be fine bringing them in at the last minute, briefing them the looks you require, and going for it. The key is open communication about the ultimate goals of the shoot and usage of the images.

4. **Wardrobe, styling, hair and make up.**

Don’t underestimate the value of collaborating with other creative people. Unless you have a strong background in these areas, having a specialist to contribute ideas, or even better include them as a full
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member of the team from start to finish is likely to yield the best results.

Many people think of Make Up as being all about concealing skin flaws - but that is only a small part of it. A good make up artist can shape and sculpt a person’s face, and can create drama to reinforce the overall shoot concept.

Likewise hair and styling are important aspects of many portrait shoots. Whilst you may be able to edit out wandering hairs or the occasional pimple, the wardrobe, hair and overall style of the shot needs to be established before the camera is even out of the bag.

Even if you are not working with a team that includes these specialists, these are aspects worth considering for any shoot. Given our 2 working examples - for the Ice Princess you certainly will want all aspects working in unison to tell a clear story. But even for the professor, you will want to ensure their hair is neat (or messy if that suits the theme), that the clothing is either representative of the personality, or works with the overall scene. You may want to brief the subject on colours and to avoid strong patterns, especially conflicting patterns on shirt and tie.

5. Locations

One of the most difficult aspects of portraiture for some beginners is finding suitable backgrounds. The trick is to focus on the LOOK you want, and work backwards. I say look, rather than scene or result, because as photographers and story tellers, we can make a shot look a certain way without having to go to an exotic location. In my Nude Portraiture video series I take you along to 7 specific different locations to show how to find interesting backgrounds in each challenging situation. Let me give you 2 examples.

A. You want to create a white/grey/black clear background like in a studio, but you are stuck in your crowded house. Find the biggest space of clear wall you have, move any furniture out, take down photos from the wall etc, and you are halfway there. Take a shooting position away from your subject, and zoom in to fill the frame - this will help eliminate other distractions in the room. Remember that if you restrict light from the wall, it will go black, if you add enough light, you can turn any wall white, and you can find any shade of grey in between by controlling the light that falls onto the background. See below and in section #9 - lighting.
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I took this image as a ‘dark and eerie’ themed Halloween shoot. I just wanted a black background - but I actually shot this in a brightly lit room in Tina’s home. You can see that original video here.

B. You want a shot that looks like it was shot in a deep dark forest. You can pack your gear and drive out to the woods and hike to a dark corner - but you probably don’t have to! Step outside your house and find a few trees, find a shooting position that allows you to zoom in a long way to blur out the trees in a way that will completely fill the frame. Then just as indoors, by restricting or allowing light onto the trees, and varying the light balance between your subject and the background, you can make moody and atmospheric shots that look like they were shot in the forest, but may really have been shot on a busy street. See below.
This shot was taken in the middle of the day, using a small aperture, 1/250 second shutter speed and low ISO to make the ambient light very low. Then with a single umbrella light I lit up the subject and the plant.

6. Equipment & settings

What is the best lens and camera combination for portraiture? For me, that is a VERY difficult question to answer. To help, at the end of the document I have put together a table of links to products that I have used and find excellent.

What equipment will work for YOU will depend on how YOU like to shoot, and the results YOU want.

As a general guide when starting, going for a focal length of 85mm to 200mm is great for half body, and head and shoulders shots. You get minimal distortion on most lenses in the 85mm to 150mm range, and generally right up to 200mm is looking great.

50mm to 85mm can be a good option if you are shooting full body shots indoors, where you have the space to step back from your subject.

28, 35 and 50mm can also be great when you want to include a great deal of the environment in your shots - such as the example of the professor we are working with.
Comparing these two images, the image on the left was taken at 24mm, and on the right 70mm. The frame has not changed much, but take a look at her features. The eyes, nose and entire head shape has been distorted a great deal at the wide end.

Just be aware that the wider the lens you use:
- the more likely to add distortion
- the more background you will include
- the more important your positioning of the subject in frame becomes.

The last point is really worth emphasising. This is something I demonstrate and emphasise in my Take Control of The Light, Intimate Portraiture and also Educating Tina video series (available in bulk discounts here). If you place your subject on the edge of frame at wide angle, you will introduce crazy amounts of distortion. Likewise if you do not take a horizontally level shooting position. This is something you can use for creative effect, but should be done so knowingly.
This shot was taken at 14mm, very close to the subject. In this case I wanted to get a lot of the beach, but not include the messy shrubs further back, and I wanted to give her very long legs. It should be noted her legs are not represented accurately here, they look longer than reality, and check out the shape of her head. Even though she is not right on the edge of frame, the head has taken a square shape, and is stretching up toward the top right edge of frame.

7. Depth of Field

A concept I focus on in **Nude Portraiture** is **Reveal and Conceal** - how you can put varying levels of emphasis on parts of the shot. This can be with framing, lighting, colour etc - but perhaps the simplest and most effective when getting started is use of your Depth of Field.

Simply put, depth of field is how much of your image will be in sharp focus, measured in a straight line from the camera. I have done several videos on this topic, but all things being equal, you can reduce your depth of field by
- using a longer focal length
- using a larger aperture (like f2.8 or f1.4)
- moving closer to your subject.

Whilst many love the look of a blurred out background in a portrait, it is worth considering the story you want to tell. Should the background be completely blurred? Should some elements remain for context? Should the background all remain sharp?

Take our example of the professor. Here having his office, books and awards all in sharp focus is likely to tell us a great deal of information about him, providing important context. This, like most environmental portraiture, suits a depth of field big enough to give some situational information.
Take a look at this shots - nothing has changed except the aperture and the resulting depth of field. On the left, at f16 we see a tree growing through the side of Tina, coming out her head. There is a concrete line on right of frame and a white tree that is distracting. Not beautiful or particularly useful for giving context. By opening up to f1.4, we blur all of this out and have attention on the model. Just be careful to have enough in focus to catch all of their face sharp.

The image on the left was taken at a market in Lima. An aperture of around f4 was chosen to include the chickens and the sign, but to have the background further back blurred out.
Conversely in the image above right, a wide open aperture of f1.8 was used, to completely blur out the background and focus our attention on the subject. See below.

8. Composition & framing

What should be in your image? What adds to the story or overall look?

It is useful, whenever you frame up a shot to pay attention to ALL of the details in the frame. Does that power pole need to be in the background? Does that trash in the foreground add to the story? Should his hair be standing up from the wind? What about the branch cutting into the side of frame? If an element does not add to the story or look, take it out. Shift your shooting position, focal length or the models position to get a frame that tells the story you want to tell.

** TIP - Anything sitting on the edge of the frame will either be distracting or attract a lot of attention. **

This shot demonstrates both framing and depth of field. All that is in this shot is the soldier and his team. There are no distractions entering the frame, competing for the viewers attention.
9. Lighting

Lighting is arguably the most important aspect of portraiture - the one that will elevate your work to a higher standard. It is also the one most difficult to discuss in written word alone.

The best advice I can give you is to Get Your Gear Out and take the time to practice and learn how to work with light.

I am very proud of my Take Control of The Light workshops and download video series. They walk you through all of the key aspects of light - how to observe it and work with the available light, as well as how to augment, supplement or overpower it with your own created light - all to create the final images you desire.

Take the time to really observe the light present in your scene. Where is the source, where is it strongest and weakest, what shadows is it casting? Is it uniform or patchy? Is it giving the kind of look you desire?

Whether you choose to never use flash or ‘artificial’ lights, or to use them regularly, learning HOW to use different forms of light is a valuable lesson. Learning why the light from a softbox is different to a reflector or a ring flash, why they give differing results and looks, will lift your overall standard of photography. It will help you in all lighting situations.
Looking at these three images above, there are some similarities, and a lot of differences. They are all implied female nude portraits, they all have different modes, tones and vastly different use of shadowing. But all of these shots were take in the same location, on the same day with the same model. The all used simple lights, and took advantage of depth of field, framing, correct gear choice, lighting and posing to create their different final images.

10. Gear List

The list below contains gear that I have used and can recommend. Of course you should buy to your own tastes and purposes.

The links take you to adorama and are affiliate links (ie I get a commission from the sale, you don’t pay any extra).

I will be updating the list overtime, along with this whole document.

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