



The Good Guide To Portrait Photography

The Basics:

Creating stunning portrait images is down to two key things - your ability to pose your subject and control the light. It really is that simple. Mastering these basics will transform your people pictures from ordinary photos that show little more than what a person looks like, into professional-quality images your subject will love. Here we're going to deal with the art of posing your subject and lighting skills to create flattering results. Being able to quickly steer your subject into a pose that works means you can concentrate on communicating with them, which always makes for more natural and successful photos. Once your subject is feeling relaxed and confident, you can guide them by fine-tuning their pose. These little tweaks - just a tilt of the head or twist of the torso - can make all the difference between an average snap and a stunning image. For instance, using the natural curves and lines of the body can convey character and mood, and help make composition more dynamic; the position of the arms and hands can make a pose come alive, while the face provides the expression to set the mood. Altering your viewpoint and cropping in-camera can add a vital creative edge, too. So, just follow this guide, practice, and you'll soon be producing portraits like a professional ...

Something To Lean On

Standing on your own in the middle of a studio with a photographer pointing his camera at you can be daunting even for experienced models. It's often better to start your session by giving your subject something to lean against, such as a studio wall or door. This helps them relax and feel less vulnerable, and can help your images by using the texture or shape of the chair/wall as a part of the composition.

What To Do With Those Hands?

Hands On Cheek

It's important that the hands don't compete with the face for dominance in a portrait. Positioning the hand too far forward can be overpowering, and if you see the whole back of the hand, it can be distracting and ugly. Seeing the side of the hand, with some of the fingers slightly bent, looks far more natural.

Thumbs In Pockets

Hands can easily end up dominating a photo and ruining it, especially if they just dangle at the subject's sides. If you're not sure whether to leave the hands in the picture, try leaving them out. Or, if the subject has pockets, get her to tuck her thumbs into them. This looks far better than stuffing the whole hand in there.

Hands On Hips

Directing your subject to put their hands on their hips is a great way of making them look more elegant and less dominant. It usually means the elbows are bent, which adds a dynamic angle to the composition. Resting the subject's hand on their hip can be graceful; tucking the thumb behind the hipbone suggests a bit more attitude.

One Pose That Works

Fashion dictates that most people want to look slimmer, and the best way to do this is to turn the body at an angle to the camera. This gives the appearance that there's less width between the shoulders, so the body looks thinner. For the more stout-of-stature, it's far more flattering than a completely side-on pose, which can highlight a beer belly! Putting the body at an angle yet turning the head back towards the camera gives a more dynamic composition, too.



Head

A small tilt in the angle of the head not only looks more natural, it can make the face look slimmer, especially if it's tilted towards the front shoulder. However, get your subject to move her head around a little. Try some shots with the head tilted forward, some back slightly and some dead straight. Each will give a slightly different feel to the portrait. Eye contact can be important, but bear in mind many women prefer shots of themselves not looking directly at the camera.

Legs And Arms

If there's a body joint you can see in the viewfinder, bend it! Straight legs and arms make a subject look stiff and awkward. When the front leg is allowed to relax, the knee and ankle bend a little, which look far more comfortable. With the weight on the back foot, the front hip is less pronounced. Arms also look much more relaxed and natural when bent slightly at wrist and elbow. Putting a hand on hip means the subject oozes confidence.

Feet

Getting the position of the feet right is the best place to start. Standing flat footed with both feet pointing towards the camera is a no-no as it can look confrontational. If that's not the kind of shot you're after, point the back foot about 90 degrees to the camera and the front foot towards the camera. This naturally turns the body too which is exactly what you are after.

Composition & Crop

Composition is about the way you divide the picture space to give a pleasing sense of impact and balance. The rule-of-thirds is the best known guideline. Divide your picture into a grid of three vertical and three horizontal bands – the most pleasing effect is when your subject coincides with one of these lines. But there are at least two other compositional ideas to try when photographing people.

The triangular composition is ideal for head-and-shoulder portraits, where the head makes the top of the triangle and the body the base. Triangles are also good for group shots, using a higher face in the middle that leads the eyes down to the other faces at each side.

The S-shape composition is particularly strong for women. This is where the head is usually at a slight angle, then the body is turned away from the camera, and the front-most leg has a bend at the knee. It's great for showing off a fantastic curvy figure. Remember: rules are made to be broken and a straight-on portrait slap-bang in the middle of the frame can look modern and edgy.

Cheek & Nose Rules

When shooting a head-and-shoulders portrait, it's best to avoid having the top of the nose break through the line formed by the edge of the furthest cheek. This has the effect of making the model's nose look overly large, even if it isn't. (And, if they do have a big nose, they won't thank you for emphasising it!)

Head-And-Shoulders

A true head-and-shoulders portrait is usually cropped just above the chest, and works best when there's some space above and to one side of the subject. This gives excellent balance to the composition. Cropping really tight, even right through the forehead, can give great impact. Placing the subject at the edge of the frame can also work well for increased drama.

Angles and Viewpoints

You can always tell a good photographer – they own a well-used stepladder and have worn-out knees on their jeans! That's because images can often be improved by looking at your subject from a different angle – often up high or from down low. Unusual viewpoints can add a real twist to your pictures, or help convey a different mood or attitude. Getting down on your knees or up on a ladder can also make your photo session more fun!