



Skill Guide 4-H Photography

Investigating Portraiture



Portraiture is such a big and controversial topic that you could spend the rest of your life learning about it. This skill guide does not even presume to scratch the surface of the topic. Rather it suggests some ways in which you might begin an investigation of your own.

If, in the course of your investigation, you encounter something that intrigues you enough to want to try it, go for it, give it a whirl, see if you can do it. Then ask yourself what you might do to improve it, or how you can build on your success.

Some portrait photographers are happy to capture a likeness of a person on film. Others are not satisfied unless they capture a hint of personality along with the person's features. Still others willingly ignore features in favor of capturing an impression of the person that somehow seems closer to the essence of who the person really is.

Go looking for portraiture. You can start in books about portraiture at the library. You can go to art and photo galleries. You can look in photo albums and frames around the house. Check book covers for portraits of authors and album or CD covers for portraits of musicians and singers. Leaf through magazines like *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *National Geographic* for portraits of people in the public eye. Decide for yourself what portraiture is and what it tries to do.

Looking at Portraits with a Photographer's Eye

As you look at portraiture, you can learn a lot about such concerns of a portrait photographer as lighting, background, and posing. You might want to create your own portrait watcher's notebook to keep track of your observations.

Exercise

Look for as many examples of each of these categories of portraits as you can find. Learn as much as you can by putting yourself in the photographer's place.



- A. Portrait of Face and Neck.** Looking at the shadows on the face, try to decide the direction from which the light was coming. Study the facial expression. Where do the eyes seem to be looking? Is the person smiling? Is the mouth open or closed?
- B. Portrait of Head and Shoulders.** Again take note of the direction of the light and the facial expression. But this time also pay attention to the direction in which the person's head is turned from the camera. Are the shoulders turned in the same or the opposite direction? Is the background plain, blurred, or detailed?
- C. Portrait of Upper Body.** Again take note of the direction of the light, the facial expression, the direction of the head and shoulders, and the background. But this time pay attention to what the person is wearing and how the person is holding his/her hands. Have any props been included in the picture? What do they tell you about the person?
- D. Portrait of Person from Just Above or Below the Knees Up.** Again take note of the direction of the light, the facial expression, the direction of the head and shoulders, the background, what the person is wearing, how the person is holding his/her hands, and any props. But this time take note of how the person is sitting or standing and how the knees or legs are positioned. Has the setting in which the picture was taken become more important?
- E. Full-length Portrait of Person.** Again study all the direction to the aspects of the portrait including how the person is sitting or standing. Pay special attention to what is included in the background. Does everything in the background seem to contribute to the portrait? What do you know about the person pictured that you could not have guessed from a picture of the person's face?
- F. Portrait of Two People.** Study all aspects of the portrait. What has the photographer done so that the heads will not be exactly side by side? How has the photographer indicated the relationship between the people? Are they posed close together? Are they touching? Are they looking at one another?

G. Portrait of More Than Two People. Study all aspects of the portrait.

How has the photographer kept the heads from being lined up next to each other? How important is the setting to the picture? Did some element in the setting, a stairway, perhaps, help the photographer compose a more visually interesting picture? How important are clothing and props to the success of the group portrait? What device, if any, did the photographer use to focus the attention of the group? Can you find any geometric shape (a triangle, a circle, a trapezoid) hidden in the composition of the group?

Looking at People with an Eye Toward Portraiture

Once you have immersed yourself in portraiture, you will begin to “see portraits” everywhere—as you walk down the street, as you stand at the bus stop, as you sit in the classroom at school. You will also begin to see *portrait lighting*, and you may even begin to ask potential subjects to turn slightly to one side or the other to improve the lighting.

Exercise

With the help of a friend, investigate each of these types of lighting. In each case, see if you can highlight the five principal planes of the face—the forehead, both cheeks, the bridge of the nose, and the chin—while letting gentle shadows provide a three-dimensional look.

A. Outdoors, Hazy Sun. Plan to work about midmorning or midafternoon on a day when there is a light cloud cover or an overall haze. See if you can figure out why this is sometimes called ideal portrait lighting.

B. Indoors, Hazy Sun. Work next to a window. Have your subject turn toward the light. Use a large piece of still, white cardboard or an old home movie screen to reflect light onto the room side of your subject. Experiment with natural reflectors like an open book or white clothing, walls, curtains, rugs, furniture, anything that can help bounce light into the shadow area.

C. Outdoors, Bright Sun. Move your subject to the open shade of a tree or building, or turn your squinting subject so that the sun hits his/her back. Use your big piece of white cardboard to reflect light back into your subject’s face. Notice how even harsh, unflattering light can be controlled.

D. Indoors, Bright Sun. Place a white bedsheet to diffuse the light. Use your white reflector once again to give you a pleasing balance of light and shadow.

E. Outdoors, Overcast. Ask a second friend to position a black umbrella or a black piece of cardboard in such a way that it holds back some of the shadowless light from the side of your subject’s face that is turned



slightly away from the camera. Or take your electronic flash off your camera, diffuse it with a single layer of something white and translucent, and hold it high and to the side of the camera as if it were the hazy sun. Lining up a portrait of both friends, try to figure out how nondirectional lighting might simplify picture-taking of a small or large group.

F. Indoors, No Windows. Create your own “window” by bouncing flash off a nearby white wall or white piece of cardboard. Or try diffusing your off-camera flash by putting something like a white bedsheet between it and your subject. Fill in light on the shadow side of your subject with a reflector or try for a dramatic sidelighted effect.

G. Indoors, Two Flash Units. Try to figure out how you could light your subject using two identical electronic flash units, each with its own power supply. Your remote unit, sometimes called a slave unit, should have a photoelectric cell or “eye” that triggers it when your main flash goes off. For natural-looking results, you probably will want to diffuse your lights by bouncing them off little portable umbrellas or your own homemade reflectors. You also may want to position them so that one acts as the hazy sun and the other acts as the softening light bouncing from the haze in the sky.

H. Indoors, Temporary Studio. Use a white bedsheet as the background, a bounced or diffused electronic flash as your main source of light, and a white cardboard or other reflector to fill in the shadows. Visit a well-stocked photo outlet to get an idea of what is available for bouncing and diffusing flash. Then improvise with materials around the house. You can create a large diffuser, for example, simply by stretching white fabric over a rectangular frame. Or you might spray paint the insides of an old umbrella either white or silver to use as a makeshift, light-bouncing umbrella. Just don't plan to close the umbrella between shooting sessions as the paint might flake off.

I. Indoors, Home Studio. Find a space that gives both you and your subject plenty of room on all sides. Make sure shades or drapes will block any outside light. Walls and ceiling should be painted white to minimize glare. To light your subject, you will need two or three good electronic flash units with moderate to high outputs and variable power controls. You will also need tripod-type stands to hold your flash units and the photographic umbrellas (or their equivalents) that will bounce their light. When you position your lights, try to recreate the natural side lighting of the midmorning or midafternoon sun. Let your main or key light strike the side of your subject from above. Set your fill light at half power or place it farther away from your subject than the main light; position it about the same height as your camera. Try positioning other flash units to highlight your subject's hair, to put a glow of light on the background or to backlight your subject with a rim of edge lighting. Lighting diagrams, which appear in many books about portraiture with electronic flash, can suggest different starting points for your experimentation.

Getting Ready To Take Some Portraits

Most portrait photographers agree that you need at least a minimum telephoto lens (75 mm to 135 mm) on your 35 mm camera to take a good close-up portrait of a person. They would also like to see you get a good rigid tripod that will hold your camera absolutely steady and a cable release that will let you trip the shutter without touching the camera.

With a normal lens (50 mm), you might concentrate on half- to full-length portraits of individuals and small groups. For larger groups, you may need a wide-angle lens.

Whatever type of portrait you want to take, you need a film suited to the lighting. You also need a method or a meter that will allow you to determine your exposure based on the light hitting the most important part of your portrait subject, the face.



Exercise

- A. Using your own or borrowed equipment, take portraits from different distances using each of the three categories of lenses—medium telephoto, normal, and wide angle. Decide for yourself which lens works best for what kind of portrait.
- B. Try taking telephoto portraits with and without a tripod and cable release. Can you see a difference in the quality of the resulting picture?
- C. Practice taking close-up exposure reading from the face of your subject in existing light. Investigate the use of a flash meter for determining your exposure when you are using multiple flash. Find out how you can calculate a multiple-flash exposure by exposing the main light only and bracketing your exposures.

Using Your Viewfinder with Savvy

The more you work with people, the more you talk with them as you take pictures, the more you look at them through the viewfinder of your camera, the more you will begin to understand what makes them look their best.

Part of what you see will be a reflection of your attitude. If you are casual and friendly and you talk about topics that interest your subject, you'll see one thing. If you are overly serious and caught up in your equipment, you'll see something entirely different and probably less appealing.

You can fine-tune your attitude just as you can make other subtle changes that will affect what you see through the viewfinder.

Exercise

Enlist the aid of a friend or relative for this experiment in looking through the viewfinder.

- A. Background.** Is there anything in the viewfinder that does not belong? Should you move the camera a little closer? A little farther away? Should you change from a telephoto to a normal or wide-angle lens? Should you have the person move because there is something distracting in the background? Can you use a large aperture to help the background? Do you really want a plain or blurred background, or does this person need a familiar environment or perhaps a fantasy environment to bring out some hidden aspects of his/her personality?
- B. Posing.** Does the position of the subject in the frame look good? Would the subject look better slightly off-center in one direction or the other? How about a full face view or a profile? Which is your subject's better side? Does the chin look better tilted up or down? Can you improve your composition by raising or lowering your camera position? Would you like your subject to lean forward a bit, change the direction of his/her shoulders, bring hands together, relax elbows, put one foot in front of the other? Would it be easier to show your subject what you want by doing it yourself? Would it help if you let your subject know what you are trying to accomplish? Could you turn your subject into a member of your portrait team by letting him/her look through the viewfinder at you posing for the camera lens? Would your subject seem more relaxed if you gave him/her something to do, to hold, or to think about?
- C. Rapport, Timing, and Tempo.** Can you use your sense of humor to elicit the kind of facial expression that you want? Can you anticipate your subject's reaction and time your picture-taking to the moment when he/she is looking relaxed and natural? Does it make sense to take more than one picture at a portrait session? Can you establish a tempo of picture-taking that allows your subject to warm up before you take a series of pictures in fairly rapid succession?

Directions for Further Exploration of Portraiture

Wedding Photography. Find out everything you can about formal and candid wedding photography. Try to determine what makes wedding photography different today than it was in your parents' or your grandparents' time. Seek out the best wedding photographers in your area and take a look at their work. Try to find a photographer who might be willing to let you observe him/her at work.

Studio Portraiture. Find out everything you can about formal studio portraiture. Learn the meanings of such terms as lighting ratio, broad lighting, short lighting, Rembrandt lighting, butterfly lighting. Find out what corrective posing, clothing, and makeup techniques can help flatter subjects. Find out how soft-focus lenses and diffusion materials can de-emphasize wrinkles and blemishes. Find out about studio backgrounds like seamless paper, special screens, and custom-painted canvas backdrops.

Group Portraiture. Find out everything you can about group portraiture. What kind of guidelines do portrait photographers give to subjects in advance? How do they coordinate clothing, props, and location? How do they build a group? How do they focus the group's attention? Do they direct their conversation to the whole group or do they talk to individuals and let the group react? How do they know when to take the picture?

Baby and Child, Glamour, Executive, Environmental, and Interpretive Portraiture. Find out enough about each type of portraiture to decide if you want to learn more.



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Developing Your Own Style

Each time you take a portrait you are developing your personal portrait style. Even when you try to imitate a portrait you have seen, you always bring something new, something that could originate only with you, to your portraiture.

At first you will probably want to try as many types of portraiture as you can. Each time you succeed at what you try, you will want to save the resulting portrait for your portfolio.

As you develop a flair for a certain type of portraiture, you will want to put it at the front of your portfolio as an example of not only what you can do, but also what you want to do.

If you show your portfolio to a portrait photographer who needs a “go-fer,” you may be able to work in his/her business as a volunteer or paid, on a part-time basis. If you show your portfolio to people who need a portrait taken, you actually may be able to develop a small business of your own.

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