



Module 13: **Portraits**

Module overview

In this module you'll learn about the following:

- Introduction to Portrait Photography
- Locations
- Shooting Angles
- Candid Portraits
- Using Props
- Creative Portraits
- Portrait Tips



“A portrait is not made in the camera but on either side of it.”

Edward Steichen
(1879 – 1973)

Tip: although portraits are usually posed, they can also be candid (non-posed).

When you start a portrait shoot, try telling your subject to relax while you take some test shots.

It doesn't always bear fruit, but sometimes these candid shots can be better than the posed ones.

13.1 Introduction to Portrait Photography

Portrait photography is essentially photographing people – that's it. There are so many varieties of portraits that your options are wide open. It can be a chance to experiment and have fun or a chance to capture something serious and thought provoking.



When it comes to portraits, lighting and composition are key. In the example above, the lighting and composition are flat and the subject's expression is blank; and although it's technically competent, it's not very interesting.



Add more dramatic lighting, a stronger composition and a more expressive subject – and the results are far better.

Tip: try not to get into the mind set that better equipment means better photos. If your technique is good, you'll be able to get the best out of any camera and lens.

If you're just starting out, then the chances are you don't have a studio or any studio equipment (we'll deal with home studio set ups later); hence, the focus here will be on non-studio portraits. Shooting outside the studio will give you less control over lighting; but in terms of using natural light in interesting locations, it's worth the trade-off.

13.2 Locations



No matter where you live, it shouldn't be too hard to find some interesting locations. When it comes to this type of portrait, depth of field is important. You can have your subject be a part of the environment (like in the example above) or you can use a shallow depth of field to obscure the background (see example below).



Tip: when you're starting out, you'll probably have to rely on friends and family to be the subjects of your portraits.

If you have a friend or family member that has modelling experience, then use them.

At the very least, it helps if the person you're photographing is comfortable in front of the camera.



Think about the position of your subject in the frame (if in doubt, try the Rule of Thirds). Usually it's recommended to use a wide aperture to blur the background, but there are times when you can break that rule. In this example, the subject's dress and hair colour already stand out against the background, and the composition is a mid-shot, so it's ok to have some detail in the background.



When focusing, make the eyes the main point of focus. It's ok to have soft-looking features if the eyes look sharp. If you're using live view, use the zoom button to get a close-up view of one eye to make sure it's in focus. If the auto focus doesn't look sharp enough, switch over to manual and adjust the focus until it's sharp.

Tip: a 50mm lens is perfect for portraits. The wide aperture range means you can shoot at f/1.8 (or f/1.4 with the more expensive lenses).

When shooting at higher apertures, you have to be extra careful with your focusing. So take your time and make sure it's correct.



If you have a subject who's very comfortable being with being photographed, then make the most of it. Experiment with different poses and positions.

The example above shows another trick you can use: the subject's head is bowed which brings her hair forward, making a perfect background that adds contrast to and shows off her profile. The medium depth of field also accentuates this effect.

Tip: an environmental portrait is not just about the subject but the location. It should be specific to the subject, like their workplace or the location of a leisure activity.

If you can't find someone who will let you photograph them at work, then try asking a friend who plays a sport.



The Magic Hour is great for portraits because it provides soft, warm light. It's also a good source of backlight, although you have to use flash to add some fill light for the face; the pop-up flash is usually sufficient for this, as it produces less light than an external flash.

Tip:

underexposed skin tones are a common problem with portraits and sometimes it's better to overexpose slightly.

This can be done with exposure compensation; this is usually a button on your camera with + and -- symbol on it.



If you live in a city and don't have access to any natural environments, then look for interesting urban areas. Abandoned buildings can be a great location. Just make sure they're safe and if they are boarded up or fenced off it's probably not a good idea to shoot there.

If you're shooting more than two people, try placing one close to the camera and the other further away; use a shallow depth of field to make the person in the background out of focus.

Notice the complementary colour scheme of blue/orange in the outfits!

Tip: even though an ISO setting of 200 might be sufficient, it often helps to go up to 400 ISO to give you a faster shutter speed, which will help you catch facial expressions.



Even you live in a city, there are usually parks that can provide a good location and can offer a contrast in surroundings if the cityscape is visible.

The photograph above also shows another compositional example. Known as the Rule of Odds, it states that if you have a central subject, then place an equal number of subjects either side to add balance. In this case, the central figure is flanked by two groups of two on either side.

13.3 Shooting Angles

The natural instinct is to shoot at eye level, especially with portraits; but if you have the opportunity, try shooting from different angles and positions.



Tip: try the rapid fire technique; taking a series of fast shots can help you to catch that perfect expression.

Set to continuous shooting mode and use a fast shutter speed.

This will mean you will have more photos to go through, but it might mean more keepers.



Try and get as high up as you can (remember to take safety into account) and have your subject either looking up at the camera or lying on the ground.

In the example above, we see that the subject's hair has been spread out, giving an almost weightless feel to the image; and the colour contrasts nicely with the grass, giving the image even more impact.

Tip: your subject doesn't always have to look at the camera.

Try asking them to look in different directions and move their head to different angles.



If you can't get high, then try going low. Shooting up from a low angle can be equally dynamic. However, it's important to know when to use this technique and when not to use it. Some body types can be made to look unflattering by shooting in this way.

Also, if your subject is wearing a short skirt, then it's definitely not recommended. This is another example of why it's a good idea to think in advance about what your subject is wearing. Comfort and practicality should not be discounted so easily.

Tip: if strong light is available, try positioning your subject so that only one side of their face is lit. This can create a dramatic effect. Just make sure your exposure is set to the lighter part of the face.

13.4 Candid Portraits

A candid portrait is where you catch your subject unaware; it's a spontaneous, non-posed shot. To catch these, usually you have to be fast or at least discreet. They can be taken during a photo shoot when your subject isn't expecting to be photographed (this works well with inexperienced models, as they are in a more natural and relaxed frame of mind) or a person you see in an interesting location (see example below).



Candid portraits can be more expressive or they can be more intimate; they are moments that are difficult to capture, which can make them more striking than staged portraits.



Tip: the more you shoot, the more chances you have of capturing a great candid shot.

Avoid using flash, because this will make your subject instantly aware that they are being photographed. Increase the aperture and ISO if you need to compensate for no flash.

In some cases, they can be complete accidents. In this example, the subject was supposed to be the street art, but two people casually walk into frame, amid conversation and oblivious to the camera. It adds life and character to the photograph.



Tip: if you want to vary your subject's position, have them lean on something. Sometimes people don't know what to do with their hands when they're being photographed. When they lean on a wall or a table, it can give them something to do with their hands.

13.5 Using Props



Props can be a useful tool for portraits. They can be something you find in your house (like a book) or something bought especially for the purpose of photographs (like a pair of swords).



For safety purposes, it's better to use decorative swords as opposed to real swords. Using props can add another element to your portraits. It helps to put some thought into your choice of props. Don't just choose random items: if you know what your subject is interested in, that can help to select a prop that reflects that interest.

Tip: the internet is a great resource for editing tutorials.

Some can be tedious and complicated, though.

The best tutorials are usually in video form. Look for professionals that have lots of subscribers and you will probably find some helpful information, especially when it comes to post-production editing.

13.6 Creative Portraits

Sometimes you might have a crazy idea for a portrait; if so, then try it! Many will require some post-production editing, but many creative portrait ideas are easier than you might think.

In case you're wondering what's so creative about this portrait, then look carefully at the two faces.



Did you notice? It's the same person. This not too difficult to create. The most important thing is to use a tripod and keep it in the same position, and to keep the exposure the same for every shot, otherwise you'll have problems making them match. Photograph your subject in one outfit (take several shots), then when they've changed clothes place them in a different position (it has to be any area that was empty during the first series of shots) and take another set of photographs.

Then choose your favourite shots from each series; next, using editing software, place one image on top of the other and erase the empty space from the top image. If your exposure is the same, then the effect will be seamless.

Tip: don't limit yourself to shooting in landscape or portrait format.

The square format has its advantages and looks good when posted online.

Tip: when shooting indoors, try positioning your subject by a window, not with the window directly behind them; make sure the light is hitting the subject's face.



By using a similar technique of taking different elements from multiple shots and combining them into a composite image, the impossible becomes a reality.



Tip: if you're unable to find a friend or relative to pose for you, try looking online.

There are many websites for models and photographers, and many models that are starting out will pose for free in exchange for photos to help boost their portfolio.



If you want something simpler, try using the rapid-fire technique and pasting your favourites together to create a series of action images.

13.7 Summary

- Portraiture is probably one of the most varied fields of photography.
- Lighting and composition are key.
- Choose your locations carefully.
- Wide apertures and fast shutter speeds are recommended.
- For blurred or soft focus backgrounds, use a prime lens or a telephoto lens zoomed in on your subject.
- Candid portraits are more difficult to capture, so be patient.
- Don't limit yourself to shooting at eye level.
- Props are not essential, but the right prop with the right subject can transform an image.
- Experiment: if you have an idea, no matter how crazy, try it.

Assessment 13

- 1) Why is a 50mm lens good for taking portraits?
- 2) What is a candid portrait?
- 3) What is an environmental portrait?
- 4) True or False? You should always shoot your subjects at eye level.
- 5) If you're shooting portraits in low light and you cannot use flash, what should you do?
- 6) If you're shooting portraits in a nature setting, is it a good idea for your subject to wear something red?
- 7) Explain the reason for your answer to Question 6.
- 8) True or False? The background of a portrait should always be blurred.
- 9) What is a good technique to use when shooting candid portraits?
- 10) Why would you use exposure compensation when taking a portrait?

13.9 Assignment

Find someone who is willing to be photographed, select a location (an outdoor location would be preferable but indoors can work if you have sufficient light) and shoot as much as you can. Try all of the different techniques and methods described in this module.

Then go through all of your images on your computer and see which methods work best. If you feel that some techniques were less successful, don't discard them – think about where you went wrong and try to improve on them next time.