
Portraits

BASIC TIPS

- Use a prime telephoto lens. Usually in the 80mm to 135mm range. If you have a compact camera or a zoom, you will need to zoom in enough to slightly enlarge the subject. Don't zoom in all the way though. The reasons you need a telephoto lens are:
They have a shallow depth of field and blur the background. They don't distort faces. They allow you to shoot from a comfortable distance.
- Focus on the eyes. The eyes are what you see first in a face. Focus on the eyes, not the nose.
- Use the lowest ISO possible and do not use AUTO ISO.
- Use an aperture that allows you to blur the background. I like the f4 - f5.6 range, but it all depends on the lens and the distance to the background.
- Choose a background that isn't distracting. Look for objects in the background that may appear strange if they line up with your subject. For instance, a single branch that looks like it's coming out of the subject's head.
- Shot outdoor portraits in diffused overcast light or shade. If you must shoot in sunlight, keep it slightly to the side of you so that it hits the face at an angle and use fill flash to help reduce contrast on the face.
- Take one properly exposed pic of a white card for a white balance reference. Color accuracy is vital in portraits.
- If you are shooting jpeg, set your camera for slightly lower contrast.
- Don't get too close or cut off the top of the head. A head shot is actually a head & shoulders shot. Leave yourself a little space for cropping.

BASIC LIGHTING

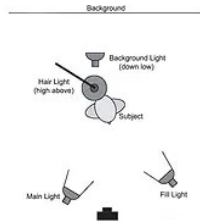
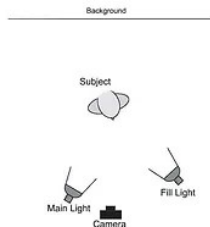
What You'll Need

- A camera with a medium telephoto lens. 80mm works well.
- A sturdy tripod. Forget what you saw on tv, you need a tripod.
- A long cable release or remote release.
- A background. It can be anything, but keep it simple. If you use fabric, take the wrinkles out. Avoid pure white and pure black backgrounds until you get more experienced. I suggest gray.
- A stool or bench for your subject to sit on.
- Lights. They don't have to be fancy but they should be daylight balanced and bright. Strobes are best but continuous lighting lets you see where the shadows are.
- Two light stands and two photo umbrellas if you are using strobes. If you skip the umbrellas your portrait will be harsh.
- Two light stands and daylight-balanced led bulbs if you are just practicing and you don't want to spend a fortune on equipment. LED work lights also work well and some come with their own stands.



THE BASIC SETUP

- White Balance is extremely important in portraiture. Set a custom white balance for your lighting setup or have your subject hold a white card for post process white balancing. Do not skip this step.
- Shoot at the lowest ISO possible.
- Find a large space. Typically you'll want a minimum of 15 feet from the camera to the background. Set the stool or bench at least 3 feet in front of the background. Place a light, we'll call it the main light, next to your camera. Place a second light (fill light) on the other side of your camera and push it a little further away than the main light. See figure 1. This is your basic setup and it will produce a satisfactory portrait.
- We put the stool a few feet away from the wall. We must do this. We don't want a shadow from our main light to be seen on the background. If we put the stool against the background we will see a shadow.
- We placed the two lights at equal distance from the subject. The lights are slightly higher than the subject. If the lights are the same brightness you have 1:1 ratio lighting. Both sides of the face will be evenly exposed. This is not very flattering, though. We want the light ratio to be about 2:1. That means the main light has to be twice as bright as the fill light. If we are using strobes, the fill light can simply be set to half power. Bingo, 2:1 ratio.
- What if we aren't using lights with power settings? Luckily, light is very consistent. If you move a light twice the distance from your subject it is half as bright. If you move it closer to the subject by half the distance, it becomes twice as bright. Closer brighter, farther weaker. So, you can re-position your lights to make the fill light twice as far away as the main light. Bingo, 2:1 ratio.
- As you move your lights you will see the shadows change. We don't want shadows behind the subject. You may need to slide a light sideways, slightly upward or change the distance to eliminate shadows. If you lose track, go back to the basic setup and start over.
- If you are shooting with strobes you can calculate your exposure based on your f-stop and the guide number of the flash. Shutter speed is not very important, use 1/60th second.
- If you are using bulbs you must trust your light meter. Shutter speed is very important. If you can not use at least 1/60th second shutter speed with reasonable adjustments to ISO and aperture settings, you need brighter lights or you need to move them closer.
- Note: The closer the light source, the harsher the shadow. That isn't the only thing to remember about lighting, though. The smaller the light source, the harsher the shadow. That's just as important. Consider a flashlight. It is very bright but it is a small source of light. When it strikes an object it creates a harsh shadow. Now think of a ceiling light. It is stronger than a flashlight but it spreads light around the room and creates soft shadows. The ceiling light is a large light source. So, how do we make a light source larger?
- Umbrellas, soft boxes and bounced lighting. When you bounce the light of the inside of the photo umbrella it reflects off the larger surface of that umbrella. The light source is now larger and less harsh. When you place a soft box on a light, the light passes through a diffusion screen which makes it larger then passes through another diffusion screen which enlarges it even more. When you bounce lighting off a wall or ceiling the light source becomes that wall or ceiling, which is very large.
- The photo to the right is taken with a basic setup. A main light and a fill light. The background is not specially lit, nor is the subject's hair. You can choose to add those lights to your setup. A background light helps separate the subject from the background. A hair light clarifies detail on the hair which also helps to separate the subject from the background. Background lights should be placed on the floor, behind the stool, pointing up toward the background. Hair lights are placed well above and slightly to the rear of the subject. You don't want to create a downward shadow on the face. See figure 2.
- No matter what light setup you use, it is important to limit the amount of ambient or room light hitting your scene. Room light is a different color than strobe lighting and will cause strange color shifts.
- Use lighting to define, emphasize or de-emphasize features. Experiment with various setups. Be sure to keep a written record of your setup designs for reference.



SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Your subject should not wear the same color clothing as the background, nor should they wear black in front of a white background.
- Relaxation is key. Keep it casual and worry free. Take your time.
- Use comfortable stools or benches. If your subject is not comfortable, it will show in the photo.
- Use props to amuse young children and catch their attention. Note: Parents are not props, they are distractions.
- Take a lot of pics, especially if you have multiple subjects.