

Portraits

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What is a Portrait

A portrait is a photograph of a person usually including the face. It can serve several purposes:

- it can be to identify the person;
- it can be there to describe the character of the person (fact or fiction)
- it can have a purely artistic intent

This list is not really complete as it fails to include advertising and fashion.

This tutorial will look at portraits taken by available light. It does not consider studio lighting. That is a whole new can of worms.

Camera Setup

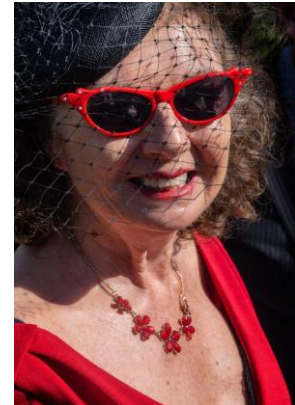
If you are going to take portraits, start by looking at your camera. Set the focal length to the long end of the zoom. This may mean that you have to step back a pace or two. If you try to go closer using the wide end of your zoom, you will end up with a large nose dominating the foreground: probably not what you want!

Or maybe it is? Your choice!

Then, since you want to concentrate on the face, not the background, use a large aperture to reduce the depth of field.

As far as we are concerned the commonest form of portrait is the family snapshot. Here are some examples: images of my grandson. They are taken at the long end of the zoom with the background out of focus.

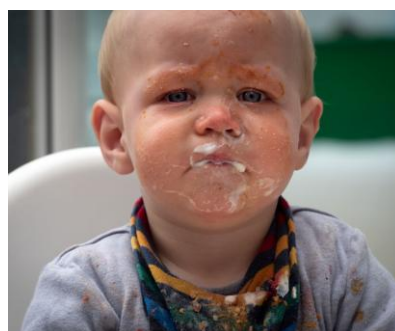
Having set up the camera, there are two things to think about: the light and the background.



Guest at a Wedding



Too Close with a Wide-Angle lens



Grandson

Reality and On Best Behaviour

Light

Let's start with the light.

Outdoors the light is given: the sun. Sunlight is directional. If the sun is low in the sky make sure the light is shining on the face. If you shoot into the light all you will get is a silhouette. If the sun is high in the sky such as midday in summer, the light from above will throw the eye sockets into shadow. Ideally reflect some light into the face from below. A newspaper will do. Mind you, if you are trying to photograph small children... you won't have time. They move too fast!

If you can't reflect more light into the eyes, you can always lift the eyes on the computer. This image of the "Wild Man of the Woods" was taken at midday in Africa. In this case I used Photoshop to lighten the whites of the eyes.

Indoors, it used to be standard to use a flash. These days I don't even own a flash! Flash was needed when film speeds were very slow. The trouble is that the light from a flash destroys any character from the available light. Flash can also produce red-eye. This is where the flash is so close to the lens that the light from the flash enters the eye and bounces back off the retina. What we see in place of the eye is the red colour of the blood vessels in the retina.

So, if not flash, how do you go about it? As you enter the room where you want to take pictures, look around. Where is the light coming from? In many living rooms there is a couch under the window. This is a good place to sit. The light is behind you. You are unlikely to capture much if you are shooting into the light. Incidentally, daylight coming through a window is usually brighter than artificial light. I found I have to increase the ISO anyway... lifting it further to allow for artificial light is a recipe for grain. But if you need to do that to get the picture... that is what you do.



*Wild man of the Woods
Taken outdoors - the whites of the
eyes have been brightened*

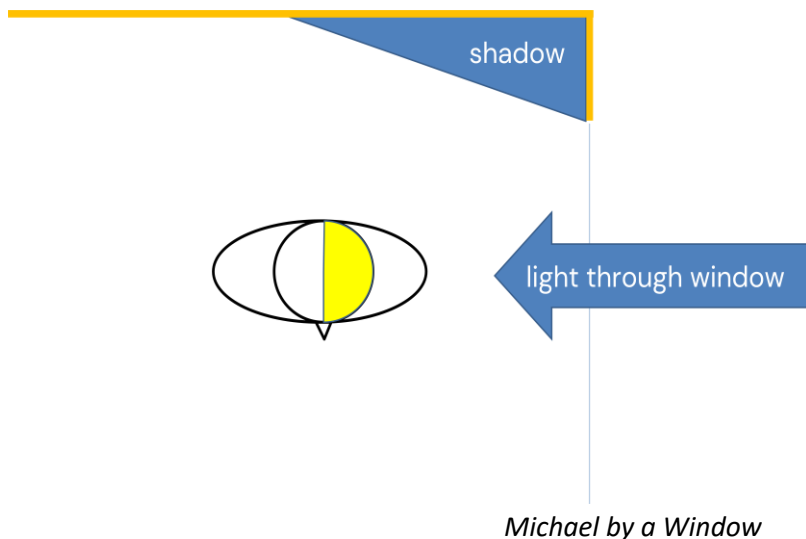


Eyes have been lightened slightly



*Granddaughter
Taken indoors by available light.
The background is a large television
screen (switched off)*

When using window light, look the effect of the light on nearby walls. Look at this picture of Michael next to a window. The lit side of the face is contrasted with the shadow behind. Meanwhile, the shadow side of the face is contrasted with the lighter, lit wall behind. This works because the short wall next to the window throws a shadow.



Michael by a Window

Background

The next thing to look for is a background. A blank wall is good but people rarely leave walls blank! They always hang something garish or show off their latest piece of chipboard from IKEA. Be creative – a large screen TV provides a fairly large plain black background.

Outdoors you still have some control over the background. Look around you. Look for something fairly flat and even. A leafy hedge for example.



Grandson with Biscuits outdoors in front of a leafy hedge

Another option if you can't find a blank background is to crop (don't go in close... use the long zoom as I said earlier). Camera Club judges will complain that this is a no-no. Ignore them.

Here are images with the face cropped.



*Fancy Dress
Indoors by window light to the right*



*Diana, Princess of Wales
David Bailey (1988)*

If it is good enough for David Bailey it is good enough for me.

For someone who works with their hands, their hands can be as expressive as their face. If you are putting together a portfolio to represent a person rather than a single image, supporting a picture of the face with images showing skills and hobbies will add an extra dimension.



*Woodworker's Hands
(Westonbirt)*

Simple Posing

The older the subject, the more control you have and the more formal you can be. You can start posing the subject. Getting them to look at the camera is a good start. But you can improve things by twisting the body. The picture looks less static and the shoulders take up less of the width of the picture. This “body twisting” was a technique used by renaissance artists to make cold marble look alive. Michelangelo’s David uses exactly the same body rotation as the modern mugshot.

Michelangelo knew what he was doing and we have been copying him ever since!



Modern Mugshot



*David
Michelangelo 1501-1504*

Full Length Portraits

Moving back from the head and shoulders portrait there is the full length portrait.

The same principles apply but you are going to find it more difficult to find a plain background. You may need to identify a background somewhere else and take the subject to it. Look around this room (in the Chantry). What options have you got? I suspect that once you have pinned down the windows as sources of light you don't have a lot of options.



*My cluttered
garage*

You could, of course, build a studio in your garage but that is probably going a bit far – even if you could bear the thought of clearing it out first! The garage that is!



*Full Length Portrait
Taken at Newark Park*

Environmental Portraits

So, if you can't have a blank background you can try what is sometimes called an environmental portrait. This is where you take the image in a room or with a background which says something about the subject (fact or fiction).



Violin Maker



Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde



Juliet

Add props to support the image. So, going back to my cluttered garage, a model engineer could be photographed with all the garage clutter and, perhaps, crouched over a lathe. Think of jobs and hobbies. What backgrounds or props could support the picture?



*Modern Miss with a Mobile Phone
"Prop"*

Costumes and Re-enactment

It has become popular to photograph people as if they are visitors from the past: moving away from photography as reportage to photography as theatre.



"The Sealed Knot"



Below Stairs

Groups such as the Ragged Victorians or the Sealed Knot provide costumed actors. In a similar vein, any re-enactment day can offer opportunities: from Ancient Rome, to the English Civil War to WWII.



Soldier Aiming



Civil War Soldier



Ready to Fight

Search the websites. Look for costume days from English Heritage and the National Trust. Masks, hats costumes... all can help. So a Halloween image might require a portrait of a witch.

Getting Arty

Then there is the purely artistic portrait. Here it is purely the shape and colour which matter. It need not be the whole face. Just an eye can make a picture.



Detail of Costume



Striped Face