

Before Pressing The Button

Here I will summarize what I found out in forums and other sources about details to keep in mind to make a great portrait. I will add eventually more as I learn more, for a while this page will be my notes. Don't mind the order of the topics; I'll take care of it later.

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Eyes

As I already wrote the smaller eye should be farther from the camera to make the eyes even in size (see [Facial Analysis](#)). Actually you have to check it long before pressing the button. Catch-light (sparks in the eyes) is a good feature to have, but sometime it goes out of the limits when there are too many catch-lights or they are equal in size and power (in one eye). When the eyeballs are close to the center of the eye sockets it makes even better picture, keep it mind. Or use some retouching to correct it.

Hair

It is another point described earlier - side of head with fuller hair turned to the camera. I may add that splitting of hair may be confusing and better to avoid it. One more thing is that hair should look natural (as everything else) and when some curl of hair lays in an odd way it will diminish the beauty of the picture.

Hands

A long time ago I've read somewhere that hands should lead the eye to the face of the subject. How? It's a tricky question. I am not sure that I can answer it correctly. As I see and remember it, the hands should be held in a way that they form a path from frame borders to the face. They don't have to be tangled and confuse the mind.

Another point we have to keep in mind is the meaning, which hands can and will express. For example, if you have a couple as your subjects and she holds his hand for the wrist (kind of a grip), it may convey a message that he wants to leave and she is trying to hold him. I am not sure that such a pose will make a portrait better. So, watch out.

A few short tips to beware: don't show flat surfaces of hands, better to show edges of fingers, and the fingers should not point to camera. Try to bend fingers at all their joints, it will make them more flexible and gentle, and don't intertwine them. Male hands should be more closed, female should be more open. Use opposing diagonals: i.e. head resting on arm; each pointing in opposite directions. Never rest a head on a fist, well never is a strong word, so just watch out - such a position is not for all people. I think, it may be good for some men to emphasize their strength of character or something.

Dominance

When you have more than one subject you have to avoid linear posing of their heads (especially in parallel with frame borders). It means that some of them have to play a dominant role. The best way for more than two subjects is to place them in a triangle shape. Another point regarding dominance is that dominance may add extra pounds to the dominant subject, that's why place him/her behind other "players" to conceal his/her body.

Composition

It may seem to be a really simple issue. But there are certain issues which we have to consider. Foremost is that eyes are the main point of the portrait in most of the cases, and in a head shot place eyes at one third from the top. Another is the balance in weight between the face and the body. It often important for head and shoulders shot. For example, imagine a profile head shot with the body 90 degrees from the camera. In this case the body has much lesser weight than the head, and by turning the body (not the head) we can restore the balance (it will be somewhere about 45 degrees for the body).

There is another technique, which may help to judge the composition. The lower tip of the chin allegedly should divide (vertically) the body in two equal (by weight) parts. As well professional photographers suggest using dark backgrounds for dark clothes and lighter background for light clothes.

And don't forget the other important points: contrast areas attract most of the attention (better it be the eyes), leave some space for the sight of the subject, vertical frame for vertical composition.

Posing for two (lovers vs. friends)

How would you pose lovers and friends? Tricky question, isn't it? The answer is fairly simple - lovers face each other (as in most photographs), friends are posed as back to back and may be holding their hands or passing a prop.

Sitting vs. Standing pose

"What the difference?" - you may ask. And the answer is extra pounds of weight in the portrait. Standing pose is better suitable for plump people (don't forget to turn their body to make them slimmer).

Head views for several subjects

When you pose a group, watch their head views, the best approach to stick to the basic head views (full, 3/4, profile). And another important point is to ask them to look in one direction.

Shadows

Sometimes shadows may even destroy the portrait. Avoid by all costs double shadows, especially on the face or the neck. Check the shadows on background - nothing should be showing. Some small shadows may be present from branches or other objects when you making portraits on location. No shadows on the background.

Flatness

It is often happens when the fill (or reflected) light is too strong and it washes out all or most of the shadows. The proportion of the main light to fill/reflected should be from 1:1.5 to 1:4 (the smaller difference is used for females and the greater one for males). Sometimes you may consider 1:9 for extremely dramatic portraits, but do not overdo it.

Background on location

One more time, the professional photographers suggest to use a background with a great depth (meadows and mountain vistas), but there are some issues. One of them is to make sure that nothing pops up from the subject heads, another that the contrast of the background wasn't too high (it attracts too much attention and it's hard to control exposure). You may want to avoid vertical lines in the background as well - it adds tension to the portrait. Curves and diagonal lines add dynamic but don't confuse and tense the portrait.