



TWOPEASINABUCKET.COM PHOTOGRAPHY COURSE: 12 WEEKS TO BETTER PHOTOS

By Mark & Joanna Bolick

LESSON NINE: Portraits

According to Wikipedia.org, a portrait is "a painting, photograph, sculpture, or other artistic representation of a person, in which the face and its expression is predominant. The intent is to display the likeness, personality, and even the mood of the person. For this reason, in photography a portrait is generally not a snapshot, but a composed image of a person in a still position."

This week our interpretation of a portrait is fairly close to the definition listed above, in that we're concentrating on posed images. (In other words, you're setting up the shot and encouraging your subjects to look at the camera.) However, we're also going to talk about keeping those poses a bit looser to make things fun for everyone involved. So our topics this week are tips & tricks for taking photos of individuals & groups, backdrops that can enhance your photos, and composing casual portraits.

Individuals

In most circumstances, the key to a successful portrait of an individual is to make sure that you're focusing on your subject's eyes.

Other important things to keep in mind:

- capture catchlights when possible
- consider your subject's height - if he/she is taller than you, have them sit or squat down for the photo as a shot with the camera directed up at their neck/chin is not necessarily flattering. Shoot your subject straight on or have them look up at you.
- keep your background simple so that nothing detracts from your subject
- a shallow depth of field (using a low f/stop or portrait mode) can be particularly helpful



Groups

Group photos can be a lot of work, but they can also be FUN! However, never, ever assume that you can get away with just taking one shot of a group. A good rule of thumb is to take the same number of photos as there are people in the group - so if your group is composed of 5 individuals, take 5 photos! (Of course, when you're shooting very large groups, this could get out of hand and take forever - so keep it reasonable.) In addition, it is helpful to eliminate outside distractions (such as other people who are also trying to take photos) when you're taking the photo to keep everyone's eyes on YOU!

A great way to mix up your portraits is to take a formal, full-length portrait of your group, and then take a few steps forward to take a relaxed, head-and-shoulders shot that allows you to see everyone's expressions.



- If you're photographing children, keep in mind that they have short attention spans and that they just might not be willing to cooperate with your previsualized ideas. Also, the distraction rule definitely applies with kids - the fewer people vying for their attention, the better. The most important thing with kids is to not get mad and to go with the flow.
- For very large groups (the shot below includes 40 people, for instance) your main consideration should be choosing a location where everyone will be visible in the photo. It also helps to give your subjects something to do (such as waving at the camera) to ensure that you have everyone's attention and to keep the mood light. Adults, though generally more cooperative than kids, still don't like to feel like they're on the spot, so try not to exhaust their patience.
- Finally, *make sure* to use a higher f/stop when photographing groups to ensure that everyone will be in focus (usually at least f/8.)



Consider Backgrounds & Backdrops

As we mentioned earlier, simple backgrounds are often best for portraits. When you're outdoors, look for natural elements (or put buildings to use) that provide you with a neutral background for your photos -- for instance, a brick wall, a colorful warehouse or barn door, a grassy field, or large bushes -- anything that keeps distractions at bay.



Indoors you'll find hard surfaces that function as backgrounds as well, such as a painted interior wall or a wooden floor. It can also be fun to play with softer backdrops, such as fabrics and patterns. Consider the following:

- A velvet black fabric works well for framing a pregnant belly (this is, of course, an exception to the rule about focusing on one's eyes.)
- A large unrolled roll of white or colored paper set up both behind and under your subject (if they're sitting) works well
- Patterns -- a swatch of fabric, a beautiful homemade quilt, and even artwork can give your portraits a unique and distinct look.



The key to using backdrops is to pay attention to the placement of your subjects in relation to the backdrop. Outdoors, it's often okay to place your subjects close to a background to incorporate some of the building's texture into the photo. But with backdrops (especially soft fabrics) if your subject is too close to the material it can become distracting (for instance, when you can see all the wrinkles in the fabric behind the subject's face.) So it's important to place your subject a good 2-3 feet in front of the backdrop, in addition to selecting a low f/stop that will provide you with a pleasing background blur and keep the focus on your subject.



Keeping Portraits Casual

This week photographer (and 2peas member) Rachel Ludwig has provided us with some great tips & tricks for achieving relaxed portraits for a variety of ages. Rachel purchased her first dSLR over four years ago, and runs her own photography business specializing in portraits & weddings. View her work at www.rachelludwigphotography.com.

Text & photos by Rachel Ludwig

BABIES

- Boppy pillows or bean bag chairs work wonders for newborns. Put a heating pad set on low or medium (make sure it doesn't get too hot!) on top of the bean bag, then cover with a blanket, and you are good to go! Babies seem to snuggle in and fall asleep in no time with this type of setup.
- Babies typically also like swaddling. Choose a favorite blanket and get them nice and cozy!
- The “shhh” sound can work wonders. Apparently it sounds similar to a mother's heartbeat when the baby is in utero. Resting a hand on them until they are settled can often work too.
- Be sure to turn up the temperature indoors a few degrees if you want some “in the buff” shots. If it's too cold, they'll be sure to let you know!



TODDLERS

- The tough thing with toddlers is that they often tend to run away! Containing them (by putting them on a chair, or in a basket) can really help you keep them in one spot long enough to take some photos.
- Play clapping or singing games (such as “If You're Happy and You Know it”, “Pattycake”, or Peek-a-Boo.) This usually works well for my daughter and is bound to get her smiling!
- Give them a small food item or toy they can hold in their hands (like raisins, a toy car, a stuffed animal, etc). Often it's enough of a distraction to keep them entertained for a few shots before they're on the run again.



When working with KIDS:

- Involve them in the overall vision you want for the images. (This works especially well for school-aged children.) Ask them to help you 'design' the session by letting them pick their clothes, a theme, and props. Then ask them to show you their favorite poses. It can also be helpful to show them images throughout the session to see if they like them. I recently did this for my 5-year old's mini Valentine's shoot, and he loved it! He got his 'action shots' and I got the perfect picture for his Valentine's Day cards!
- Speaking of props, incorporate their favorite toys in the photos.
- If you're indoors, set up some crafts (such as painting, playdough, and scrapbooking) or have your child read a favorite book. Also consider outdoors activities such as bubble blowing and sidewalk chalk.
- Let them do something they wouldn't normally be allowed to do, such as jump on the bed!
- When photographing siblings or friends, try to find an activity they can do (or play) together. Last summer I took some pictures of my son Ethan with his cousins, and they were so preoccupied by the dandelions in the field that they barely noticed that I was busy taking lots of pictures!
- Bribery! I'm all about bribery. If it takes some candies, a trip to a favorite restaurant for some fries or some cold hard cash, it's usually worth it to me.



ADULTS:

- Have a good joke or two in mind to break the ice.
- A glass of wine beforehand can help loosen up those who usually hate pictures!
- Use a zoom lens to catch them unaware -- this works for children, too, but is especially useful for adults who tense up when they realize their picture is being taken.
- For couples, have them interact....hugging, kissing, giving piggy-back rides, etc. By having them concentrate on each other it often doesn't take long for them to almost forget that you're there!

WEEKLY CHALLENGE: Take a Portrait

Here's the question we want to consider this week:
What makes a good portrait?

Take a portrait this week!

To consider: You can use any type of camera this week!

Choose one or all of the following options for taking your photos:

1. Take a portrait of an individual.
2. Take a group portrait if you have the opportunity.
3. Take a portrait in front of a backdrop or colorful wall or a fun outdoor setting.
4. Take a portrait with black & white film or convert your photo to b&w. (In fact, we'd love to see both versions - color and black & white, if you care to share.)

Please remember to post your favorite photos from the week in the photo gallery!

Thanks for your participation!



portrait taken using a black backdrop placed over a boppy & natural side light

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Q & A: Interview with Carrie Sandoval

Carrie Sandoval (www.capturedbycarrie.com) is a portrait photographer specializing in black & white images. She has loved art her entire life, and received her BFA in graphic design in '94, but didn't get into photography until after the birth of her son and twin girls. Although self-taught, her art background and use of Photoshop as a graphic designer really helped with her learning curve. She and Britt Woodall will soon be shooting together and working on their upcoming book.

Q: Do you shoot exclusively black & white images?

A: Mostly! I do a lot of color for myself of my own children, but I try to keep my client sessions b&w as I feel that is the reason they come to me. Once in awhile I will show a color image if it just screams color. If I show it in color, I also show it in b&w, just so they have the option.

Q: How do you visualize your photos in black & white when they're still in color on your camera screen (we're assuming you shoot digitally, and post-process your photos to convert them to b&w.) Do you "see" your photos in black & white when you're setting up your shots?

A: Hmm...honestly, that's the first time I've been asked that! Perhaps I always "see" in black & white, or rather, I don't worry about the black and white while shooting. While shooting, I am mostly concerned with camera settings and composition.

Q: Are there certain portrait setups that you rely on to play up the contrast in b&w photos?

A: I really love using a single light source. Most of the time, I have a light source (big glass doors in my studio are my favorites!) to the subject's right or left. This makes for nice soft shadowing on the face. Directly facing the light source will make for flat lighting...which I like as well...just a different look!

Q: Any tips on post-processing images to black & white for us? Do you use actions, super-secret conversions, or have any general tips you can give us for converting our color photos to b&w?

A: And now for my MOST asked question! And I always feel bad if I sound vague, but it's the honest truth. I use no actions and I absolutely love crafting each individual image. I use the channel mixer in Photoshop to get to black & white, but then I analyze the image as if I were in an actual dark room...where would I like to see it dodged? Where would I like to see it burned? "Let's tweak the curves here, and there..." I'm pretty positive I spend more time converting than most people, but I LOVE it! So, I don't mind adding that time to my work flow. I highly recommend playing with all your tools. I am completely self-taught in b&w...Photoshop is awesome. I equate Photoshop knowledge with buying professional black & white film and knowing how to use it (pushing, etc.) and develop it.

Q: In general, for a photo shoot of a single child (a baby, for instance) how long do you spend with the child and how many photos do you take?

A: It depends on the age. Newborns take the longest because they need to be fed, comforted and posed. My newborn sessions usually last 3 hours. All other ages, I usually spend about 1.5 hours with them. That's about when they start getting sick of me, lol! Usually my best shots of older babies and toddlers are taken within the first 20 minutes. And the best shots of children 4+ are usually taken in the LAST 20 minutes, when we're all familiar with each other.

Q: Any favorite tips for shooting babies?

A: Newborns: keep the room very toasty. Remember how warm their fomer home was! I usually warn parents that I will probably sweat, lol! White noise and a bean bag -- I can't imagine doing a session without those 3 things. My typical newborn is 1 week old. At this age they're still so unaware of what's going on, I can get way more poses out of them. Older babies (3+ months) I like to keep not quite as warm as newborns and I try to move quickly because they tire quickly!