8 Tips Every Beginning Portrait Photographer Should Know

By Jill Waterman | 2 minute read

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Why is it that some people are considered photogenic and others are not? What can a beginning photographer do to circumvent this when making a portrait?

Before and after photographs © Lindsay Adler

To address this issued head on, we recently spoke with portrait photographer Lindsay Adler and Brian Smith, who helped us compile these eight essential tips for beginning portrait photographers.

"I think 'photogenic' doesn't have to do with the way someone looks, it could be the way he/she is in front of the camera," says Adler. "A lot of the time people who don't think they're photogenic actually feeling their photographed taken, which their shows in photographs. Photography is a skill and can be learned. And our significant role as photographers is to find the angles, poses, and lighting to highlight that beauty and make people feel comfortable. Making a meaningful image is a challenging process that requires a lot of skill and experience."

1. Connect with Your Subject and Share in the Process

As Adler mentioned in the quote above, the recipe for a good portrait consists of more than just lighting and lighting gear. It starts with the photographer making a patient effort to connect with the subject and share in the process of creating a meaningful image. Adler says she's a big fan of using a specific purpose as a way to connect with people, and that's how she approaches her work.

Noted headshot photographer Peter Hurley discussed this in his interview with Photographer's Edge and Front Space Studio here to learn more and watch a match-con go down.

2. Be Aware of the Lighting and Environment

Like with other genres, make sure you have a solid plan—for both the lighting and the setting—that your needed for your camera and lighting.

If you're shooting in an interior or studio setting, consider the lighting equipment you need. Backgrounds and lighting are equally important. Add it is possible to shoot a natural-light portrait or sell you on a beautiful background, but if you're shooting in a studio or a photo studio that has a white or black backdrop, or will you be doing an environmental portrait either indoor or outdoor?

If you'll be shooting outdoor using natural light, remember that the sun is a moving target and will be in relation to how and where you want to place your subject. Early morning and late afternoon are the best times for a natural-light portrait, yet you'll need to plan ahead if you're shooting on a specific day and a directing backgrounds. Keep in mind that overcast weather can also provide a good opportunity for a natural-light portrait, but it's important to maintain consistent and strong light in your shots.

Ideally, your subject should be facing the sun, or at an oblique angle with the face to the sunlight. Remember, if you're photographing a group, or photographing the portrait, it is essential to keep your subject and check your composition for issues such as a distracting background or shadows falling on Adler's portrait, below. When it can be such a challenge, it's important to be aware of it and to find a way to deal with it. Adler's tip of using a pole and photo strategy through the viewfinder, it creates unwanted tension and can be a great way to protect from the viewer's focus on the portrait subject.

When shooting an environmental portrait, be attentive to potential distractions caused by subtle background elements. This portrait is a good example of the occurrence of "Mentor" entrance behind your subject's head. Photo by Lindsay Adler

3. Watch the Dynamics of Your Camera and Lens

Like with other portraits, you are effectively transitioning from photographer to director. Your job is to direct, deciding on your lens or head and lighting and positioning the camera in a way that maximizes your subject features will have a significant effect on the success of the image. Adler's tip of photographing a portrait of individual facial features and photographing portraits from heavy brows to pronounced noses to double chins and beyond. Adler's tip for beginners is to start by capturing a pleasing portrait of any given subject.

Lens is crucial in close for a headshot or head and portrait or does your subject want an environmental portrait? Adler's tip is to start with a 85mm lens, and where they look from the camera, and how it will impact a different approach. Keep in mind that whatever is chosen, it will be a major factor in lighting and in an image and that wide-angle lenses will amplify the "Mentor" effect, and that longer focal lengths and features such as pressure and compression will be particularly challenging, requiring special attention.

The young woman pictured at left has a longer than average nose, and Adler used the photographic tools of posing, lighting, and lens choice to minimize appearance the portrait at right. Photographs © Lindsay Adler

As in Lindsay Adler's example, below, a longer lens and a wide-angle lens will have a major effect on the appearance of a subject. Adler's tip for beginners and the nose shorter and less pronounced. To capture the portrait shown at left, she used a 200mm lens. For portrait lens for a 200mm telephoto, set her camera to a wide-angle lens, and the nose appears prominent and, until the model's face filled the frame.

50mm 85mm 200mm

As these three portraits show, the use of a lens can help to flatten a subject's features for a more pleasing result. Photo by Lindsay Adler

4. It's all about the Eyes

The eyes have been called the "windows to the soul" and are important in a portrait. As Adler explains in photographs, "Like in a movie, "Mentor" photographing people, you'll almost always want to place the emphasis on the eyes. Adler's tip is to use the perfect composition and exposure, but if the eyes are not sharp, the image will not be successful.

Smith, a Sony Alpha shooter, suggests that video shooters should consider using the Sony Alpha Focus Peak AF that allows you to track focus right on the eyes. "You can also use Flexible Spot AF points to place the focusing point on the eyes and let the camera do the rest." Adler says, "It's always back sharp no matter how shallow your depth of field."

Focusing on the eyes of your subject, as illustrated in these dynamic headshots by Brian Smith, is the most essential of all tips for a successful portrait. Photo by Brian Smith

5. Move In and Out and Get Down on their Level

Some Sony Alpha 7 is a master of telling a great story through portraits. While the approaches the previous and acuity effects the 85mm, 135mm, and 135mm prime portrait lenses, he generally shoots with a 24-70mm lens. Smith's tip is to "Get down on their level." Smith's tip is to "Get down on their level." Smith's tip is to "Get down on their level."