

Get great detail  
in your subjects!

# Portrait Photography

From Snapshots to Great Shots

Learn the best ways  
to compose your  
pictures!

**Erik Valind**

Portrait Photography:  
From  
**Snapshots** to  
**Great Shots**

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**Peachpit  
Press**

## **Portrait Photography: From Snapshots to Great Shots**

Erik Valind

### **Peachpit Press**

www.peachpit.com

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**Project Editor:** Valerie Witte

**Production Editor:** Katerina Malone

**Developmental and Copyeditor:** Anne Marie Walker

**Proofreader:** Patricia J. Pane

**Composition:** WolfsonDesign

**Indexer:** Valerie Haynes Perry

**Cover Image:** Erik Valind

**Cover Design:** Aren Straiger

**Interior Design:** Mimi Heft

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## **Dedication**

To the muse; for when she resides in a person,  
we cannot help but to take up our cameras.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank all of my friends, family, and clients who have sat in front of my lens over the years. A real portrait is more about communication and trust than any combination of camera settings. Thank you for trusting me.

I want to thank the people who inspired me to pursue portrait photography in the beginning and who still inspire me to pick up the camera every day. Thank you, Danielle, for being my first muse, for drawing my gaze from action sports and the ocean to the people who actively pursue life instead. Thank you, Keely, for being my canvas and my mirror as I strove to learn how to shape light. You and so many others radiate beauty inside and out, and I hope that over the years I've managed to catch but a glimmer of that on film.

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Finally, I want to thank everyone who has read my books or attended one of my workshops or seminars. Learning one's craft is key to creating better work and realizing the images in your mind's eye. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share what I'm passionate about with you, and for helping me become a better photographer and teacher in the process.

Erik Valind  
New York, NY  
February, 2014

# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>IX</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: TOP 10 TIPS TO BETTER PORTRAITS</b>	<b>1</b>
How to Start Taking Better Portraits Right Out of the Box!	
Poring Over the Picture	2
1. Shoot in Aperture Priority Mode	4
2. Set Your Metering Mode	5
3. Choose Your Picture Style	5
4. Turn Off Your Pop-up Flash	6
5. Step Back and Zoom In	8
6. Focus on the Eyes	10
7. Offset Your Subject in the Frame	12
8. Shoot Down on Your Subject	14
9. Look Out for Clean Headspace	15
10. Turn Your Subject Into the Light	17
Chapter 1 Assignments	19
<b>CHAPTER 2: CAMERA SETTINGS AND LENS SELECTION</b>	<b>21</b>
Use the right settings, composition, and lenses for capturing your photos	
Poring Over the Picture	22
Camera Settings	24
Lens Selection	33
Composition	41
Cropping	49
Chapter 2 Assignments	55

<b>CHAPTER 3: POSING, RAPPORT, AND PROBLEM SOLVING</b>	<b>57</b>
How To Successfully Communicate, Plan, and Pose While Working with Your Subject	
Poring Over the Picture	58
People First; All Else Second	60
Inspiration, Prep, and Props	60
Giving Direction	66
Getting Feedback	72
Chapter 3 Assignments	74
<b>CHAPTER 4: WORKING WITH NATURAL LIGHT</b>	<b>77</b>
Identify the Quality and Direction of Natural Light to Capture Great Shots	77
Poring Over the Picture	78
Understanding Light	80
Overcoming Difficult Lighting Scenarios	84
Chapter 4 Assignments	104
<b>CHAPTER 5: WORKING WITH EXISTING INDOOR LIGHT</b>	<b>107</b>
Conquer the Obstacles of Using Existing Light to Produce Great Shots	
Poring Over the Picture	108
Color Temperature	110
Combating Camera Shake	119
Chapter 5 Assignments	127
<b>CHAPTER 6: ON-CAMERA FLASH</b>	<b>129</b>
An On-Camera Flash Can Light an Entire Scene or Just Add That Extra Sparkle to Your Subject's Eye	
Poring Over the Picture	130
Flash Power	132
Pop-up Flash	134
Speedlights	138
On-Camera Flash Modifiers	144
Chapter 6 Assignments	151

<b>CHAPTER 7: ADDING ARTIFICIAL LIGHT AND LIGHTING MODIFIERS</b>	<b>153</b>
Deciding What Type of Lighting to Use And When to Use It	
Poring Over the Picture	154
Light Direction, Placement, and Quality	156
Light Modifiers	165
Light Sources	176
Lighting Scenarios	182
Chapter 7 Assignments	189
<b>CHAPTER 8: SINGLE-PERSON PORTRAIT SCENARIOS</b>	<b>191</b>
Bringing It All Together	
Poring Over the Picture	192
Studio Portraits	194
Headshots You Can Bank On	205
Environmental Portraits	214
Chapter 8 Assignments	217
<b>CHAPTER 9: GROUP PORTRAIT SCENARIOS</b>	<b>219</b>
Establishing Depth of Field, Perspective, and Lighting	
Poring Over the Picture	220
Camera Settings to Consider	222
Shooting Couples	224
Family Photos	228
Large Groups and Sportraits	233
Chapter 9 Assignments	239
<b>INDEX</b>	<b>240</b>

# Introduction

Many photo books that you'll see on the shelf do a great job of delving into specific aspects of photography. Some books cover narrow subjects, like studio portrait lighting, or using only natural daylight. I wrote this book with a goal of combining all of the different pieces that work together to make a great portrait, with any subject, regardless of the lighting conditions. Yes, it was a lofty goal, but I guarantee after reading this book you'll approach your subject, your gear, and your locations differently. With this newfound awareness, you'll be creating incredible portraits in no time.

**Q: What can I expect to learn from this book?**

A: In this book, you'll get a well-rounded guide to taking better portraits—from the technical camera settings and lens selection, to the intangible communication and direction with your subjects, and finally, to specific tools and techniques for conquering a wide range of lighting environments to make people look their best.

**Q: What are the assignments all about?**

A: Don't worry, the assignments aren't meant to feel like high school math homework. Personally, I learn best by doing, so each assignment covers techniques that were discussed in the chapter, and they encourage you to go out and put them into practice as soon as possible. This way you can focus on your subject at the next photoshoot, and not on trying a new tip or technique for the first time. Practice makes perfect. Then make sure to share your results with other readers on the book's Flickr page.

**Q: Should I read the book straight through or can I skip around from chapter to chapter?**

A: Definitely begin with Chapter 1. It is designed to improve your portrait photography skills in a matter of minutes, helping you dial in key camera settings and important tips on composition. After that most of the book is broken up in such a way that each chapter covers a specific scenario or lighting environment. You can skip ahead to a problem that's vexing you at the moment, or more importantly, you can use these chapters as references to reread before future portrait shoots.

Nikon D800 •  
ISO 100 • 1/200 sec. •  
f/9 • 70mm lens



# 1

## Top 10 Tips to Better Portraits

### **How to Start Taking Better Portraits Right Out of the Box!**

If you only have time to read one chapter, this is it—the top tips to taking better portraits right out of the gate. It’s not a chapter that tells you to go buy a better lens, or go hire world-class models, or even to fly to exotic locations for better backdrops. It deals with actions you can take right now.


Let’s jump right in and start improving your portrait photography with the settings you have on the camera you already own. With a handful of tips and techniques that transcend equipment, you’ll be taking great shots in no time.

Cameras at the ready!

## Poring Over the Picture

I made sure to have the subject keep her nose turned toward the light throughout the shoot. Having her face aimed squarely at the light kept facial shadows to a minimum.





For this photo of a young model in the park I had to travel very light, as I had no assistant. We also had a short time to shoot before sunset. For these reasons I took only one lens and focused on these basic tips to get a great portrait out on location.

• The camera was set to Aperture Priority mode, which gave me a constant aperture of  $f/2.8$ . This aperture has a very narrow depth of field that is perfect for isolating the subject's eyes, while letting the distracting background go soft.

• Rather than using a wide-angle lens, which would distort the model's face and draw more attention to the background, I zoomed in to 85mm and stepped back to fill the frame with the model.

• By offsetting the model in the frame, I created a more pleasing composition and left room for the model's hair to blow in the wind, guiding the viewer's eye across the frame.

Nikon D800 •  
ISO 100 • 1/160 sec. •  
 $f/2.8$  • 85mm lens



# 1. Shoot in Aperture Priority Mode

Most manufacturers choose to paint their camera's "Auto mode" setting bright green on the mode dial. Maybe that's why when we see it, we instinctively stop thinking and just hit go. Well, from here on out you'll take another route. The goal is to take the wheel and steer. The purpose of Auto mode is to give you an average photo, not a good or great photo, just an average one so you won't return the camera and claim that it doesn't work. On a bright day the "average" for Auto mode setting might put your camera at an aperture of f/16, which renders everything in focus, including your subjects and the distracting background behind them. But in portrait photography, you want the subject to stand out from the background. An easy way to do this is to make the background fall out of focus by controlling the depth of field. (I'll explain what aperture and depth of field are in more depth in Chapter 2). To do this, switch your mode dial to "A" or "Av" for Aperture Priority mode and open up your lens as wide as possible (**Figure 1.1**) by using the smallest numbers available on your lens (f/1.4, f/2.8, or f/5.6). Your camera will then automatically adjust your shutter speed to give you a proper exposure, but the aperture and shallow depth of field will remain constant as you shoot.

**Figure 1.1**  
A camera menu showing the use of Aperture Priority mode to lock in a large aperture for a shallow depth of field.



## 2. Set Your Metering Mode

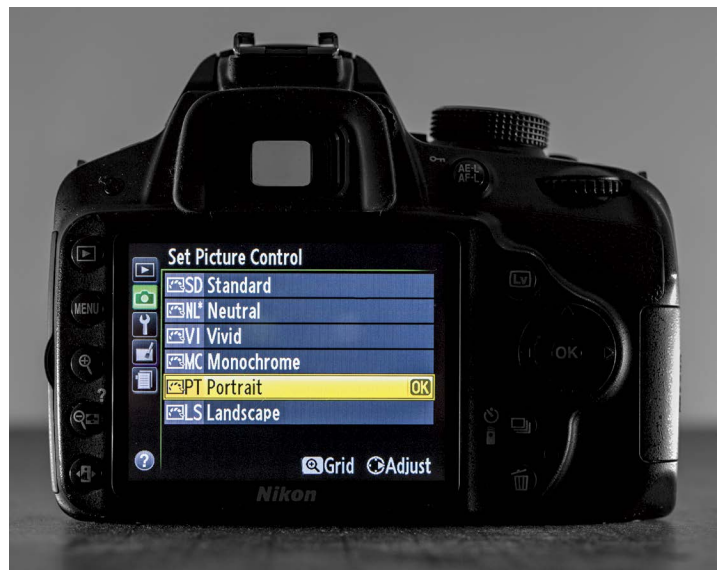
Your camera has multiple metering modes to choose from. These modes tell your camera how to prioritize the scene when calculating the final exposure. Current cameras do an amazing job of this, allowing you to focus on subject interaction and composition. By default, your camera should be set to “multi-zone metering,” which is specifically called Matrix Metering (Nikon)  or Evaluative Metering (Canon) . This setting breaks up the frame into sections and weighs them against each other to decide what is most important in the scene, and sets the exposure accordingly. For most portraits, you should leave your camera at this setting. Simply set it there, let the camera do the math, and just sit back and direct the subject.

When you’re just getting started, this is the most versatile metering mode for the different kinds of portraits you’ll be taking. In Chapter 2, I’ll cover other metering modes for heavily backlit subjects and other tricky lighting conditions that you’ll want to explore after finishing this book.

## 3. Choose Your Picture Style

Picture Control (Nikon) or Picture Style (Canon) settings specify how your camera interprets the RAW data in a photo and displays it on your screen. When you shoot in the JPEG format, these settings are “baked in,” meaning they are permanent. If you shoot in the RAW file format, these settings can be changed later in postproduction software, like Adobe Lightroom, Apple Aperture, or Adobe Photoshop. (I recommend that all portrait photographers learn about the RAW file workflow because it gives you much more latitude to modify your images after they’ve been taken.)

For portrait photography purposes, access this menu area and set it to the Portrait picture setting (**Figure 1.2**). This will put the priority on optimizing skin tones and color saturation while reducing sharpening for softer skin texture. Whether you’re shooting RAW, JPEG, or both, you should set your camera to this mode once and forget it. Every photo thereafter will be primed for more pleasing portraits.



**Figure 1.2** A camera menu showing the various Picture Styles or Controls. Setting this control to Portrait results in better skin tones and colors.

## 4. Turn Off Your Pop-up Flash

Most people can immediately see the difference between a professional portrait and a snapshot, but not everyone can articulate what makes that identifiable difference. The pesky pop-up flash on your camera is often the culprit. So right off the bat, *turn that thing off!*

In portrait photography, you're taking a beautiful three-dimensional subject and capturing a moment that is then shared via a two-dimensional medium—a computer screen or a print. During this transition you literally flatten out your subjects. To preserve that flattering 3D feel, you must shape your subjects with light by using the contrasting shadows to define that shape. So whether you're using the sun, lamplight, or a small flash, you want to ensure that the light not only illuminates your subject, but that it casts some kind of shadow as well.

So why not use the pop-up flash? It's true that the pop-up flash creates shadows like anything else, except that the light source is placed directly on top of your camera or *on-camera axis*. This means that the shadows it casts are behind the subject's head and can't be seen by the camera, which gives you that "snapshot" flat shadowless image that you want to avoid. Here are two examples of that pesky pop-up flash ruining a portrait: In **Figure 1.3**, the flash overpowers the daylight ambience, and in **Figure 1.4**, you can see its effect indoors, with a shiny, flat-looking model and an extremely underexposed background.



**Figure 1.3** The pop-up flash ruins an outdoor shot with plenty of available light.

Nikon D3200 • ISO 100 • 1/160 sec. • f/5.6 • 70mm lens



**Figure 1.4** The pop-up flash flattens out the model's features and leaves the background in the dark.

Nikon D3200 • ISO 800 • 1/200 sec. • f/8 • 70mm lens

Let's turn off that flash and take both of those photos again. I'll use Aperture Priority mode as discussed earlier to allow the camera to expose for the subject's face without the meddling flash. This should make a *big* difference, right? Look how natural and three-dimensional the people and environments look now in **Figure 1.5** and **Figure 1.6**.



**Figure 1.5**  
Using Aperture Priority mode and no flash, the lighting no longer flattens out the model, and more detail and natural contours are visible on her face.

.....  
Nikon D3200 •  
ISO 100 • 1/160 sec. •  
f/5.6 • 70mm lens



**Figure 1.6**  
Using Aperture Priority mode and just natural light the resulting portrait looks more three dimensional and natural.

.....  
Nikon D3200 •  
ISO 800 • 1/80 sec. •  
f/2.8 • 70mm lens

## 5. Step Back and Zoom In

Most cameras come with a kit lens, which certainly isn't the best lens available or the one and only lens you'll likely own. But it's like a new toy that actually comes with batteries in the box! What fun would a new camera be if you couldn't immediately start taking an assortment of photographs with it? These kit lenses usually give you a range of focal lengths to work with, from fairly wide angle to medium telephoto. They are certainly versatile enough to get you started.

Often, a person's inclination is to zoom that lens out as wide as it will go. This allows you to see everything, right? Then they frame up their subjects and take the shot. The resulting images often look like the photo in **Figure 1.7**. Did you notice the telltale signs of a snapshot again? When you're shooting with a wide-angle lens, you do gain a larger field of view, but at this wider lens range there is noticeable distortion and bulging of the image. The result isn't that bad for landscape photos, but it's awful for portraits. Notice how this distortion stretches the face as it nears the edges of the frame, as well as makes the nose look rather bulbous.

**Figure 1.7**  
A badly distorted portrait taken with a kit camera lens zoomed all the way out and placed close to the subject's face.

Nikon D3200 •  
ISO 450 • 1/30 sec. •  
f/4 • 18mm lens



Your goal as portrait photographers is to make your subjects look their very best, not to apply carnival mirror tricks to their beautiful smiling mugs. These dreadful results are easy enough to correct: Simply zoom that lens all the way in and just step back. When photographers speak of “portrait lenses,” they are referring to lenses in the telephoto range, generally from 85mm to 135mm and higher. Lenses on this end of the range have distortion as well, but it manifests itself as a more pleasing compression, which flatters a person’s face. Now compare the image in **Figure 1.8** to the last one I took. Much better, right?

To take a more flattering portrait photo, remember to use the longest lens you have available and just step back until you fill the frame with your subject’s face.

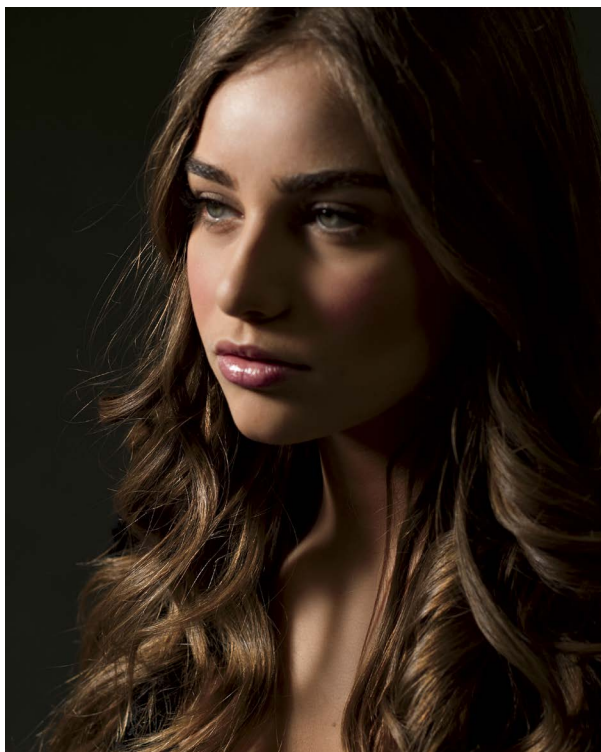


**Figure 1.8** A good portrait taken with the same camera settings as the portrait in Figure 1.7 after zooming the kit lens all the way in and stepping back.

Nikon D3200 • ISO 450 • 1/30 sec. • f/4 • 55mm lens

## 6. Focus on the Eyes

When you're trying out various compositions, you don't want to lose sight of the real target—your subject's eyes. Many poetic references describe the eyes as the gateway to the soul. As photographers, your goal is to keep those eyes in focus and at the forefront of the photograph. This becomes extremely important as you work with lenses capable of a very shallow depth of field. I'll talk about depth of field more in Chapter 2, but for a quick example look at **Figure 1.9**, which was taken with an 85mm f/1.4 lens. Notice that the area in focus is very narrow and completely in the wrong place. You'll see that I accidentally focused on the lock of hair in the back, and the subject's eyes are not in focus at all. **Figure 1.10** is a step in the right direction: The back eye is in focus, but the front is not. Although one eye is in focus, it's the wrong eye. When only the back eye is in focus, it creates an awkward experience for the person viewing the photo. **Figure 1.11** finally shows that front eye in focus, which draws you in and results in the strongest portrait!



**Figure 1.9** The very narrow area of focus completely missed the model's eyes.

Nikon D700 • ISO 110 • 1/250 sec. • f/4 • 85mm lens



**Figure 1.10** Only the back eye is in focus here, which makes for an awkward portrait.

Nikon D700 • ISO 110 • 1/250 sec. • f/4 • 85mm lens



**Figure 1.11**  
This is the correct use  
of a narrow depth of  
field, with the front  
eye being tack sharp.

Nikon D700 •  
ISO 110 • 1/250 sec. •  
f/4 • 85mm lens

## 7. Offset Your Subject in the Frame

Framing your subject is the next critical factor in enhancing your shots. Let's quickly refer back to Figure 1.8 again because there are actually two aspects of that photo you can improve. The wide-angle distortion was fixed by stepping back and zooming in on the subject, but this still leaves the subject smack-dab in the center of the frame. Centering your photo can make for a very boring composition, because it doesn't guide your viewer's eye through the frame. Rather than centering your subjects as though their face was the middle of a bull's-eye, try to move them around in the frame. Leave some empty or negative space, like the image in **Figure 1.12**. This creates a sense of tension in the photo and invites the viewer to follow the model's gaze across the image. Or, try to put something complementary in that now empty space, like a nice background to place your subject in a scene (**Figure 1.13**).



**Figure 1.12** The model was offset in the frame for better composition.

Nikon D700 • ISO 100 • 1/250 sec. • f/4 • 85mm lens



**Figure 1.13** The model is offset in the frame, and the negative space is used to showcase her surroundings.

Nikon D800 • ISO 100 • 1/400 sec. • f/3.2 • 35mm lens

## 8. Shoot Down on Your Subject

You never want to *look* down on someone, but you should absolutely practice *shooting* down on your subject when you're taking his or her portrait. Next time you're photographing someone, think about where you're standing. Is the subject taller than you? Are you looking up her nose ever so slightly? **Figure 1.14** shows an example of a portrait from the perspective of a photographer who's shorter than his subject. It's not the best angle of most people, is it? When you're shooting up at someone, you exaggerate that person's chin and nose while minimizing the eyes. This is the opposite of flattering.

Remember that your focus should be on the eyes. To bring those back as the main attraction, all you need to do is shoot down on your subject. You don't need to run out and get shin implants or only photograph children. This is why in most professional photo studios you'll find apple boxes on hand for you to stand on, giving you the high ground to shoot from. However, you probably won't be shooting in a big studio most days, so I recommend getting a lightweight step stool to take with you on location. In **Figure 1.15**, you can see how from a higher perspective the focus is back on the eyes, and the chin and nose fade away. Perfect.

**Figure 1.14 (left)**  
Shooting up at someone like this is unflattering because it exaggerates the nose and chin while minimizing the eyes.

Nikon D800 •  
ISO 200 • 1/250 sec. •  
f/5.6 • 70mm lens

**Figure 1.15 (right)**  
Shoot down on people to focus the image on their eyes, while minimizing necks and noses to make people look thinner.

Nikon D800 •  
ISO 200 • 1/250 sec. •  
f/5.6 • 70mm lens

