8 Tips Every Beginning Portrait Photographer Should Know

By Jill Waterman | 2 weeks ago

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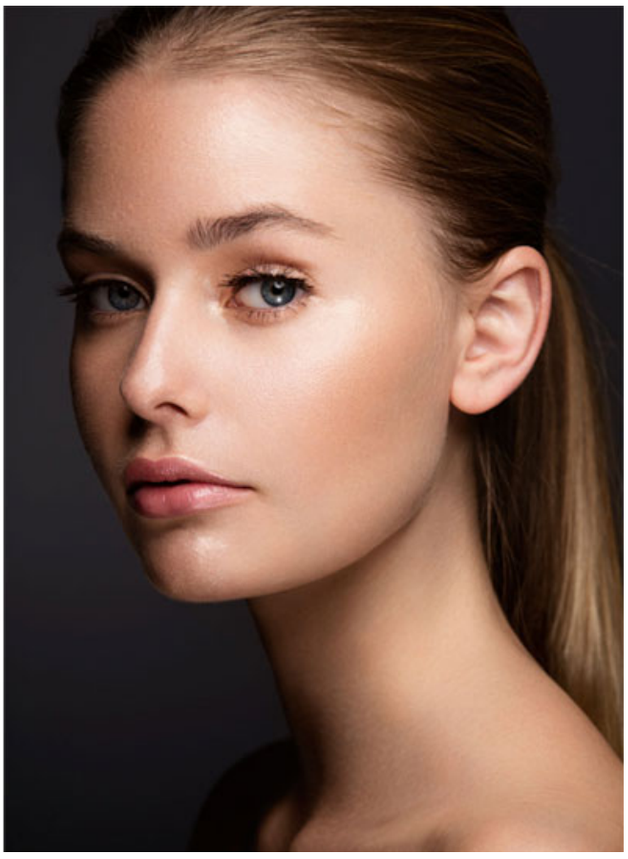


Why is it that some people are considered photogenic and others are not? What can a beginning photographer do to circumvent this when making a portrait?

Before and after photographs © Lindsay Adler

To address this issue head on, we recently spoke with noted portrait photographers Lindsay Adler and Brian Smith, who helped us compile these eight essential tips for creating successful portraits.

"I think 'photogenic' doesn't have to do with the way people look, but instead how they feel and behave in front of the camera," says Adler. "A lot of the time people who don't feel photogenic are already afraid of having their photograph taken, which then shows in their expression. Our job is to break down those barriers, help our subjects feel confident, and then find the angles, poses, and lighting to highlight that individual's strengths," she explains. "Nothing is more rewarding than creating a stunning image for someone who otherwise believed they were not photogenic."

1. Connect with Your Subject and Share in the Process

As Adler points out in the quote above, the recipe for a good portrait entails more than just photo and lighting gear. It starts with the photographer making a distinct effort to connect with the subject so they are at ease with the image-making process. This can often include advance research on your portrait subject and his or her interests—everything from familiarizing yourself with their passions to bring up as a conversation starter, to specific environmental factors, such as their favorite music playing in the studio to make them feel more relaxed during the shoot.

When doing online research, pay close attention to other portraits of the subject you find, and ask yourself what you can do improve on what others have captured. If there's time for the two of you to chat in advance, a few well-directed questions about details—such as your subject's favorite color or article of clothing; if there's a facial angle, a pose or even a past portrait that they like best; as well as whether the portrait you'll be making has a specific purpose or any production specs you'll need to match—can go a long way in making them satisfied with the results.

Noted headshot photographer Peter Hurley discussed this process during a recent presentation at the B&H Event Space. **Click here** to learn more and watch videos of his talk.

2. Be Aware of the Lighting and Environment

Once shoot day comes, make sure you have a solid plan—for both the portrait setting and any setup needed for your camera and lighting.

If you'll be shooting in an interior or studio setting, acquaint yourself with existing options for backgrounds and lighting within the space. Will it be possible to shoot a natural-light portrait or will you need to plan for artificial lighting? Are there clean walls or a simple drapery that you can use for a backdrop, or will you be doing an environmental portrait within the space?

If you'll be shooting outside using natural light, consider the time of day and the direction of the sun in relation to how and where you want to pose your subject. Early morning and late afternoon are the best times for a natural-light portrait, yet you'll probably want to avoid shooting at midday, when sunlight and shadows are harshest. Don't forget that overcast weather can also provide a good opportunity for a portrait with softer shadows and lighting that remains consistent over a longer period of time.

Ideally, your subject should be facing the sun, or at an oblique angle with the face lit to define features, while minimizing unappealing shadows. When composing the portrait, it's essential to look beyond your subject and check your composition for issues such as a distracting background, as illustrated by Adler's portrait, below. While it can be easy to overlook a soft-focus geometric shape such as this in the tiny space of your camera's LCD or when peering through the viewfinder, it creates unwanted tension within the image and distracts 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 concern is much greater than simply the occurrence of "Martian" antennas behind your subject's head. Photograph © Lindsay Adler

3. Watch the Dynamics of Your Camera and Lens

In shooting a portrait, you are effectively translating a three-dimensional face into a flat plane of space, so deciding on your lens or focal length and positioning the camera in a way that complements your subject's features will have a significant effect on the success of the resulting image. The overwhelming variety of individual facial features and combinations thereof—from heavy brows to pronounced noses to double chins and beyond—furthers the challenge of capturing a pleasing portrait of any given subject.

Are you coming in close for a headshot or beauty portrait or does your subject want an environmental portrait that conveys a sense of what they do or where they live? Each of these vantage points requires a different approach. Keep in mind that whatever is closest to the camera will appear largest in an image and that wide-angle lenses will amplify this effect. When shooting a close-up portrait, facial features such as a pronounced nose can be particularly challenging, requiring special attention.

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

As in Lindsay Adler's example, below, a longer lens will cause geometric facial elements to look flatter and more compressed, making the face appear fuller and the nose shorter and less pronounced. To capture this subject at her best, Adler traded a typical **85mm portrait lens** for a **200mm telephoto**, set her camera on a tripod, moved back and positioned her camera straight-on, until the model's face filled the frame.

50mm *85mm* *200mm*

As these three portraits attest, the use of a longer lens can help to flatten a subject's features for a more photogenic result. Photographs © Lindsay Adler

4. It's all about the Eyes

The eyes have been called the "windows to the soul." "Nothing could be closer to the truth for portrait photography," says Brian Smith. "When photographing people, you'll almost always want to place the emphasis on their eyes. You could have the perfect composition and exposure, but if the eyes aren't sharp, the entire image suffers."

Smith, a Sony Artisan of Imagery, notes that most Sony mirrorless cameras have a handy feature called Eye AF that allows you to track focus right on the eyes. "You can also use Flexible Spot AF points to place the focusing point right on your subject's eye," he adds. "That way, it's always tack 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 portrait tips. Photographs © Brian Smith

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

Brian Smith is a master of telling a great story through portraits. While he appreciates the precision and acuity offered by traditional 85mm, **100mm**, and **135mm** prime portrait lenses, he generally prefers the focal range offered by a **24–70mm zoom** as he works. "At its widest setting of 24mm, this zoom allows you to capture a lot of environment around your subject," he explains. "Or, for an intimate portrait, select a longer focal length like 70mm. Even when shooting with a prime lens, I move in and out as I shoot, zooming with my feet rather than the lens," he adds.

If you'll be working with children, "don't shoot down from an adult's eye level," he explains. "Getting the camera down to their level will make your images more personal and less imposing. The same is true of adults," he notes. "Seeing eye-to-eye is a great way to make your portraits convey more of the connection you established with the subject."

Tell the story of your subject as completely as you can by moving around, with your camera gear and with your feet, as shown in two of Smith's portraits from Nepal. Photographs © Brian Smith

6. Camera Settings: Watch Your White Balance

The tonality and appearance of your subject's skin plays a huge role in the success of a resulting portrait. Looks can be deceiving to the inexperienced eye and, along the same line, your camera's auto white balance mode can also be tricked by environmental factors such as reflected light off surrounding walls or clothing around the face, or color casts from a lush green garden or the cool ambient daylight of late afternoon shade. Dependence on auto white balance in a portrait situation can lead to inconsistent results, which can cost you valuable time in post and be counterproductive to the relationship with your subject.

A couple of basic accessories to remedy such issues should become essential items in your portrait kit. Serving the same function as Kodak's 18 percent gray card of yore, **a wide variety of white balance cards, filters, and disks**—as well as more advanced **calibrators and checkers**—can help you create a custom white balance for any given lighting situation easily.

If you're working with limited (or bad) lighting and need the subject to shine, you can bounce available light back onto his or her face using **a collapsible reflector**. Available in white, silver, gold, black, or translucent surfaces, these lightweight fabric hoops are held outside the frame and directed toward the subject for a soft fill, to neutralize undesirable color casts, or tame unappealing shadows.

For more on this topic, check out **Tom Kirkman's Explora article** on creating a custom white balance for portraits.

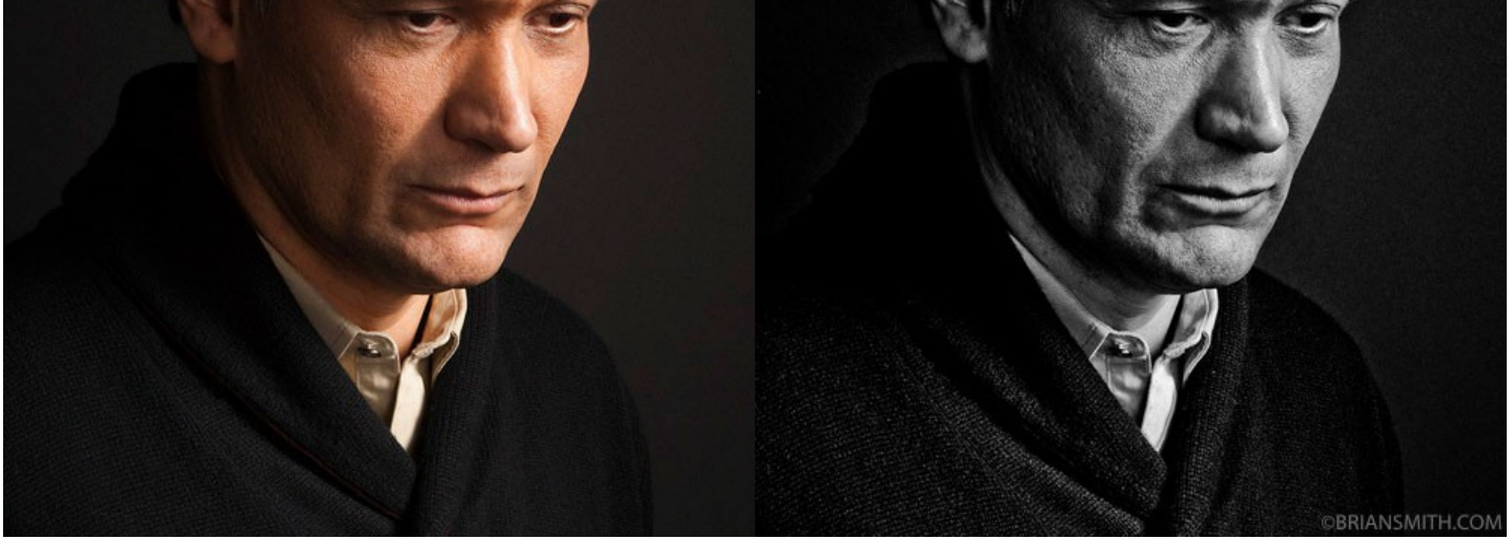
Color contamination (green)

Introduce reflector (neutral key light)

Environmental factors can negatively influence skin color. The unsightly green skin tone in the left hand portrait was the result of the sun reflecting off the surrounding grass and trees. In such cases, Adler recommends overpowering the existing light by adding a reflector or strobe, as shown at right. Photographs © Lindsay Adler

7. The Classic Look of Black & White

In situations where the available lighting makes it impossible to attain a pleasing white balance, converting to black-and-white is a viable option that also imbues a portrait with a sense of classic refinement. “There is something timeless about a black-and-white portrait,” says Smith. “It eliminates the distraction of color and puts all the emphasis on the subject.” Smith prefers to shoot his portraits in raw and convert to black-and-white in post, but notes, “one of the handy features of **Sony’s a7 series mirrorless cameras** is the ability to apply a Black & White creative style. This allows you to view the black-and-white scene in real-time as you shoot.” He points out that, “while the B&W tonality is baked into the JPEGs shot in this mode, your raw files are not affected, which allows you to convert them to your taste in post.”



Smith captured this thoughtful portrait of Jimmy Smits at the Sundance Film Festival. While he prefers to make his black-and-white conversions in post, Sony's Black & White Creative style allowed him to see the image in black-and-white as he shot. Photographs © Brian Smith

8. Did We Mention Raw File Format Yet?

Smith's preferred workflow brings to mind one last tip that is particularly beneficial for novices to adopt. While shooting raw brings with it the challenge of a larger file size and the added complexity of converting files in post, it is especially beneficial when bringing the file to life as a finished portrait.

Raw files are often described as being the same as a photographic negative; after downloading from the camera, adjustments can be made to elements such as contrast, color, tonality, and more, without compromise to the original file. With the JPEG format, on the other hand, the original file is compressed, which results in a loss of valuable image data. For many types of use, posting to social media for example, this is not an issue and, in fact, the smaller file size offers a huge advantage. But each time you take that original JPEG and resize or otherwise change it, you are effectively losing data. If the raw file is your starting point, you will be working from the best available image capture, which will be preserved intact in the storage device of your choosing.

During a recent trip to Haiti, Smith knelt down to the level

of this young child for a compelling portrait. Photograph © Brian Smith

Extra Inspiration and Tips

A popular presenter at the B&H Event Space, Brian Smith offers many more tips for successful portrait photography in these 2013 videos, **Secrets of Great Portrait Photography** and **Location Portrait Photography: Capturing Personality and Place**, as well as in the past Explora article **How to Take Better Portraits**.

Adler offers inspiration and tips about her process as a fashion and beauty portrait photographer in the 2014 video, **B&H Prospectives: Lindsay Adler**. To get a rundown on her most essential gear, watch this 2015 Event Space video **Lindsay Adler: What's In Your Bag**.

To learn more about the photographers who contributed to this article, click on their names below.

Lindsay Adler

Brian Smith

Books by Brian Smith