

# PORTRAITURE.

**Nothing in photography is guaranteed to strike TERROR into the hearts of both subject and photographer more than PORTAITURE.**

From the simplest request “let me take your picture” to the acknowledged realisation “ I haven’t got a decent picture of myself” to the fear of “sitting” and the responsibility of “producing” a good image, no similar and seemingly innocent words are known to terrorise mankind more.

While only a fool would say that “portraiture is simple” nevertheless, by following several easily understood guidelines, acceptable images can be produced without either party sliding abruptly and remorselessly into terminal decline.

**Of these several guidelines three stand out**

**LIGHTING,  
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**Two further important features include**

**FOCAL LENGTH of LENS  
BACKGROUND**

Refining further we need to acknowledge that ISO setting has a part to play, also the use of a tripod can be both beneficial for quality and helpful in other ways. While a remote shutter release, a reflective panel and a ‘slave’ flash gun, can all add depth to the photographer’s armoury of aids to better output.

## **LIGHTING.**

Built onboard camera FLASH is the worst type of lighting for portraits.

The best is either natural light aided by ‘fill in’ flash as the simplest and most accessible to most amateurs, or a full studio kit of floods, strobes, slave flash and projected background if you wish to pursue a professional approach.

Some golden rules:-

**i) Avoid midday summer sun.**

It’s directly overhead, creates very dark shadows and very bright highlights but completely kills all modelling effect.

**ii) Avoid full face flash from the camera.**

Use a clip on flash and angle the flash head indirectly to the subject, together with a reflector and/or a hand held slave flash gun.

**iii) Treat lighting of children as an assault course, better avoided.**

Rely on natural light or a well lit room and set a high ISO number, because children are like mercury, they never stop moving and have to be “frozen” while still in action.

**iv) Sit a serious portrait subject.**

You will need to light the subject to avoid shadow and secure effective modelling. If the subject is glued to a seat where you sit and set them, the lighting will remain correct for focus/exposure and stationary while you release the shutter. This is especially important if using floods.

**v) Measure the light falling on the subject with an accurate hand held meter.**

Again this is required for serious portraiture, otherwise modern built in meters are fine.

- vi) **Use either a “Portrait” lens or the Zoom on your compact, to ensure a non distorted image.**

Not strictly a ‘lighting’ golden rule but “golden” nevertheless and essential if an oversized nose is not to cause the subject great consternation and dissatisfaction.

- vii) **HATS, ladies large brimmed hats (and gents fedoras etc)**

Summer is hat time. Ascot, Weddings, Garden Parties, formal occasions generally. It is the opportunity for mostly women, but frequently men, to scrub up and look good. What better opportunity to “take a snap” and in case the penny hasn’t dropped yet “taking a snap” of somebody, is the nearest most amateurs get to ‘creating a portrait’

**ALWAYS USE FILL IN FLASH (synchro)** the sun is overhead, the hat shades the face (that’s its job), and we want a balanced exposure which shows face AND hat correctly so additionally illuminate the face lightly with fill in flash.

*Probably the most famous UK lecturer on LIGHTING FOR PORTRAITURE was Mr Walter Nurnberg and he wrote a most famous book by that title, I do not propose to either re write or repeat the details here.*

### **REFLECTORS.**

To enhance both light distribution, utilisation and modelling effect, REFLECTORS are a cheap, easy to use and extremely useful aid to portrait photography whether indoors or outside.

The principal is that ANY light, sunshine, flash, flood etc can be ‘reflected’ using a suitable surface. White paper, kitchen foil, bed sheet, in fact almost anything that is light in colour may be pressed into service. One of the most convenient, cheap and very usable reflectors is the windscreen protection screens used to reflect the sun off the screen in summer and thereby keep the car internal free from fading sunlight and excessive heat. They come in both silver and gold foil stuck to a stiffish backing material so are self standing. Use the gold type to soften the harshness of the light, try it, it gives a very pleasing effect, the silver version can be used in conjunction, buy both @ a couple of pounds each and keep both in your car to serve both functions of screen protector and reflector.

### **PORTRAIT LENS.**

In old 35mm film money where a 50mm lens is standard, a 90mm is usually referred to as a PORTRAIT lens. On a 2 ¼ sq format an 80mm, usually fixed i.e. as in twin lens Rolleiflex instruments, was commonly used for portraits.

The purpose of a longer than “standard” focal length lens is to “compress” any projecting features such as a nose, or if side on, an ear.

The worst possible effect is produced by using a ‘wide angle’ lens or ‘minimised’ zoom setting.

### **BACKGROUND.**

If outdoors locate the subject in front of a ‘bland’ background and some distance away such that a largish aperture will render the background out of focus as well as non intrusive.

It may be that an ‘association’ between the sitter and an activity, location or other recognisable feature is to form part of the image, in that case choose carefully and perhaps introduce blur in order to define the sitter as the focus of the image.

In a studio a plain, single pastel shade backcloth might be appropriate.

In a living room a suitable sofa with cushions and directional window lighting may be used to create the whole image effect.

Remember to light the background if necessary and retain the correct aperture setting whilst locating the camera lens at the extreme forward position of where the subject still remains in focus. You may even wish to impart a slight out of focus effect in order to soften the otherwise harshness of a pin sharp image and reflect the nature of the subject. Especially kind in elderly people where wrinkles are not best portrayed or appreciated.

### **FINALLY**

A tip, use a mirror (largish) and with a torch (not pencil point) shine the torch onto your own face at varying angles and positions to teach yourself about the position and intensity of shadows and modelling. Having established a 'pleasing' result translate it into a practical portrait session using whatever lighting is appropriate to your need, and don't forget to intensify your lighting set up by using reflectors to maximise lighting effectiveness.

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