

Subject: When you get a photo taken

I thought the below had some interesting ideas for those times when you get a photo taken and think "Hell, do I *really* look like that?"

PROBLEM: When you look in the mirror, you are seeing a 3-dimensional image because you're still looking through both eyes. A camera has just one eye. Photography flattens images in a way that mirrors do not. It's a totally different way of seeing. Also, depending on the focal length and distance to subject, the lens can create unflattering geometric distortions.

For example if you use a short focal length (that is, zoomed out) and put the camera close to the subject, it creates a fisheye lens effect; for face-on portraits, this makes your nose and forehead look bigger.

SOLUTION: For more flattering photos, have the photographer stand further back and zoom in (although this also exacerbates hand shake --- for best results put the camera on a stable surface).

PROBLEM: Most casual photos are taken with bad to indifferent lighting. When looking at an object in real life, you automatically mentally compensate for the ambient lighting. When you look at an image taken under those lighting conditions in a completely different context, this mental calibration is absent and skin tones, etc. can be exposed in an unflattering way.

SOLUTION: For more flattering photos, ensure that they're taken using ideal light. Your best bet is outdoors around sunrise or sunset, with the light falling at a sideways angle across your face, and while sitting in front of something light-colored (e.g. an open book or a white table) which will reflect light up into your face and soften up the shadows. (Harsh shadows emphasize wrinkles, pimples, and other blemishes; this is why you see photographers use those white reflective panels around models in photo shoots.)

PROBLEM: Many casual photos are taken with direct on-camera flash. On-camera flash usually looks terrible: it makes your skin look shiny/greasy and it throws any minor blemish around the edges of your face into sharp relief. On-camera flash also has a colder (more bluish) color temperature compared to e.g. tungsten lighting or even sunlight. Skin does not usually look good under cold light.

SOLUTION: Serious photographers usually prefer to use a diffuser and/or bounce the flash off a nearby surface for portraits, rather than using bare on-camera flash. If you don't have this gear, then just turn off the flash and do your best with available light as noted above.

PROBLEM: You are standing twice as far away from your image in the mirror as a camera held at the same distance. Unflattering details become more visible at closer distances.

SOLUTION: Take photos at lower resolution, from further away, or slightly out of focus (yes, really: before Photoshop, photographers and cinematographers would sometimes stretch a nylon stocking over the lens or apply vaseline to the lens to soften focus). Or, better, use lighting to soften detail, as noted above.

PROBLEM: Often people put on a fake camera smile or other odd facial expression while looking at a camera. By holding their face in this position, they pull their muscles into an unflattering configuration.

SOLUTION: Stop doing that and relax. Or if you must fake a smile, learn to fake it well: when people smile for real, the muscles around the corners of their eyes crinkle. A mouth-only smile always looks fake. Learn to crinkle your eyes or think of something genuinely funny.

PROBLEM: When looking at a person's face in real life, you mentally average over all that person's moment-to-moment facial expressions. Your mental image of a person's face is therefore actually a "smoothed" representation which discards momentary deviations from that average expression. A camera freezes a sub-second instant in time, during which that person's facial geometry will almost always deviate from that average in some way. For example, when you're talking, your lips or the muscles around your eyes might tic in a particular way that looks funny when captured on camera but which you never notice in real life.

SOLUTION: Get a camera which can take many photos quickly (most dedicated cameras can do this; it's really only cameraphones that are absurdly slow). Always have the photographer push the shutter many times. Out of a dozen pictures, there's a much higher chance that a facial expression from one of them will be close to your desired facial representation. If you only push the shutter once, you're probably going to catch your face "out of position".

PROBLEM: When you see a person in real life, you mentally compare them to other real-life images you've seen. When you see a photograph, you mentally compare them to other people in photographs you've seen, which includes models, movie stars, etc., who furthermore have the advantage that they're usually photographed by professionals. It is hard to live up to this comparison.

SOLUTION: Stop looking at images of celebrities. TL;DR Photography is complicated and does not mimic human vision. Turn off the flash, stand back, and push the shutter repeatedly. Also use a real camera not a cameraphone.