

Portraits - Simple Tips

Charles Edwards

03-14-01

When shooting portraits, there are a few things to keep in mind:

1) Framing - when framing your photo, zoom in or get close enough that you're filling your frame with your subject(s) and not the background. This can be especially important when there is a distracting background, such as a crowd (this tip suggested by subscriber Leslie W. Knight).

2) Aperture - shooting in aperture priority mode (if your camera has it) is another way to reduce the distraction of the background. By using a large aperture, you reduce your depth of field (range that is in focus). By doing this, you can make sure that your subject is in focus, while your background is out of focus and appears softer.

3) Lighting - don't underestimate the importance of a pleasant light source. For outdoor shots, try using your flash to fill in the shadows that may be falling on your subject's face. Indoors, experiment to develop some flash/lighting configurations that work well with your available equipment. Flash photography is a science in itself, so you may want to visit your library or bookstore to do some research if you want to take your flash photography to its fullest.

4) Be Ready - learn to anticipate key moments in your subject's movements and expressions so you can capture them. Prefocussing before shooting can help in this situation so that there is no "lag" between depressing the shutter release and your picture being taken.

5) Experiment and Review - when you take portraits, have a close look at them and review what you like about them and what you could improve. Also, look closely at the professional portraits you see in magazines and try to incorporate some professional techniques into your shooting. By treating your portrait photography as an ongoing learning experience, you'll be rewarded by capturing better and better portraits as time goes on.

Moving Subjects

Charles Edwards

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When shooting horizontal photos of a moving subject, think in terms of dividing your viewfinder into thirds and shooting your subject in either the left third or the right third of the photo. As

well, make sure they are facing towards the middle of the photo so it illustrates where they are going. You don't want them to look like they are leaving the photo or looking "out" of the photo!

Scale

Charles Edwards

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Do you like taking pictures of landscapes, wilderness, or architectural scenes? If so, you'll want to find ways of including objects in your photos that give them a sense of scale. For instance, if you're taking a picture of a giant waterfall, including a person or animal somewhere in the shot instantly gives viewers an understanding of how big it is.

Conversely, sometimes it's fun to leave out any objects that establish scale to make things look bigger. Shooting from a low angle can help accomplish this as well and give your subject the feel of towering high overhead.

Choosing the Background

Stephen Canning

10-27-01

Make your pictures of people "pop" by choosing the right background. Remember that although you see in three dimensions, the camera only sees in two. Your eyes separate the subject from the background, but the camera does not. By choosing backgrounds that are primarily made up of a single color and without confusing details you will get a much stronger photo of the subject and focus attention on them. A clear blue sky is a good example. Choosing busier backgrounds can sometimes lead to what is known as a "merger." This is when something from the background actually seems to be attached to the subject. For example, a distant tree seems to be growing out of the top of their head. If you can't reposition the shot or the background, you can make the background blurry and out of focus by zooming in on the subject or choosing a wider aperture (ie. f/2).

Sunsets

Stephen Canning

11-10-01

When shooting sunsets under expose slightly to bring out the colours of the sunset. Under expose too much and the colours become muddy. Using a long focal length will make the sun seem larger. Also clouds reflect the colours of sunsets, so a few clouds around helps your photos.

When photographing a sunset, keeping a few tricks in mind can ensure that your pictures are out of this world. Positioning yourself on a beach or a highpoint will allow an un-restricted view of the sun and let it get lower and redder before disappearing. Sunsets with clouds in the sky are often much more colorful and interesting than clear skies. Bring more life to your photographs by positioning the horizon away from the center of the photograph. Instead, keep it near the bottom of the shot to dramatically highlight the sky. Keeping some foreground in the shot, such as a person or a tree, will give greater interest and give you a great opportunity to work on silhouette photographs.

Your camera's light meter will often under-expose sunsets because there is still quite a bit of light, so bracketing (taking several shots at different exposures) may be needed to find the perfect exposure. A little under-exposure can help to make the colors of a sunset richer, but too much and it will be muddy. It is often effective to use a long focal length for sunsets, because the sun will appear much larger in the sky. Either choose the longest zoom lens setting on your camera or use a longer telephoto lens on your SLR.

Fill Flash

Stephen Canning

11-03-01

Tired of having dark shadows ruin your portraits? If you think that using a flash is only for dark nighttime or low-light photographs, think again.

Dark shadows can appear in eye sockets or below the brim of a hat in the middle of a bright day. Using a "fill flash" will lighten shadows and bring detail back to obscured faces.

With manual cameras, simply tell the flash to fire as you normally would. With some automatic-flash cameras, it may be necessary to select the fill-flash option, often represented by a lightening bolt and a sun.

With other cameras you may need to cover the lens with your hand and press the shutter release button in order to trick the camera into thinking that it is dark enough to use a flash. Fill flash can be particularly helpful in back-lit conditions where a light source, such as the sun, is behind the subject of the photograph. Without a fill flash, the subject can be entirely shaded.

In the examples below, on the left you can see how the subject's face has significant shadowed areas. Two things were done wrong here. First, the subject is backlit by the sky and second, no fill flash was used. Both problems have been fixed in the second photo.



Fog

Stephen Canning

01-19-02

Whether it's the thick pea-soup fog of London or a faint morning mist over prairie wheat fields, photographing fog can result in amazing and moody photographs. A few tricks will help you capture fog-shrouded landscapes in all of their beauty. Your camera's light meter will often be fooled by fog. This is because the fog is light in color, and reflects a lot of light back at the camera. So, your light meter will see all of this light and decide that it needs to limit the amount of light coming into the camera.

However, the rest of the scene is not as bright as the fog. This darker section of the scene, which is normally your subject, will be under-exposed. So, it is necessary to actually take a picture that lets in more light than the camera recommends. You can do this by using a slower shutter speed, wider aperture, + 1 EV exposure compensation or a slower ISO setting. For information on how to use these controls see the My Camera section of the community.

Another option, is to walk right up to your subject or zoom in, so that it fills the entire shot. Then, your light meter will choose the proper exposure for it. If your camera has an exposure locking feature, lock this exposure in and then walk back to recompose the whole shot. Also, foggy mornings can be a great time for close-up photography because there will often be a layer of dew on everything. This can be fantastic for flowers, insects or spider webs. Also, the soft, diffused light of a foggy day is perfect for capturing detail without harsh shadows.



Silhouettes

Stephen Canning

01-12-02

Create great, moody silhouette shots by learning a few simple techniques. The first rule of silhouettes is to have your subject between the sun and the camera, so that the subject will be backlit. This way they will be shadowed, making it easier to get the silhouette effect. If the sun is still fairly high in the sky, you will want to move around until it is hidden behind your subject. If it is starting to dip behind the horizon, direct light is less of a concern.

To make your subject appear as a black silhouette, you will have to under-expose them a bit. The easiest way to do this is to make your camera think that it is bright out. So, point your camera at the sky, which will be brighter than your subject. The camera will choose a smaller aperture in order to limit the amount of light coming into the camera from the sky. Then, lock the exposure on your camera and re-compose the shot to include your subject. Since less light is being captured, there will be less detail in your subject. The under-exposure will pull the detail from them and make them appear as a dark black silhouette. (See this week's "My Camera" section for more information on locking the exposure.)

If your camera can't lock the exposure, you can often still under-expose the picture with other controls. Setting your shutter speed faster, your aperture narrower, your EV to -1 or -2, or your film speed faster will all under-expose your picture as well.

Using Lines

Stephen Canning

01-26-02

Use the natural lines of a photograph to unify the photo and draw attention to the center of interest. Lines can be found just about anywhere, whether a roadside, building or even a shadow. Our attention is naturally drawn to places where lines converge. Diagonal lines draw the eye through the photo, particularly if they originate in one of the corners of a photograph. This can pull together the background and foreground, and offer constant interest in the photo. The top of a building or piece of architecture coming out of a corner can be particularly strong.

A curving line will beg the eye to follow it through the picture, smoothly connecting different elements of the photo. Vertical lines are great for showing height and strength, while horizontal lines are said to evoke rest or stillness. Keep in mind that making the area on one side of a line larger than the area on the other side will highlight the larger area and give a more meaningful composition. For example, try to keep the horizon line either higher or lower than the center of the photograph. Move yourself around until the lines in the photograph are lined up just perfectly to focus attention where you want it to be.



Snow

Stephen Canning

01-28-02

During a snowstorm is one of the best times to reach for the camera. Familiar landscapes are transformed and people are having fun. Using a few simple techniques, you can ensure that your photographs do justice to the snowscape.

The light meter in your camera judges your exposure as though everything should be gray and as a result, it will give you shutter speed and aperture settings that limit the amount of light coming into the photograph. This turns the snow gray in photographs, rather than the glistening white you want to capture.

You can compensate for this by exposing your picture one "stop" brighter than what your light meter recommends: Set your aperture one number lower, use a shutter speed that is twice as

long or set your camera one film speed lower. The brighter it is, the more you will have to adjust the exposure. If you are looking towards the sun you may have to over-expose a full two stops.

A limitation of snow photography is that cold temperatures will suck power from your batteries, causing camera problems. Keep an extra set of batteries with you and keep the camera close to your body for warmth. Also, keep condensation in mind when entering a warm building after being in the cold. This can fog your lens and pull moisture into your camera. It is probably a good idea to keep your camera in its bag until it warms up in the new climate.

Choose colorful subjects when shooting in the snow, in order to bring life and contrast to the photograph. A child in a red snowsuit is always a good choice. It is easier to achieve silhouette photographs in snow, because you can set your camera to expose correctly for the bright snow, which will under-expose a back-lit subject.

Similarly, exposing properly for your subject can over-expose the background, putting them in the middle of a surreal white scene. If your camera has an exposure lock feature, an easy way to set your camera's exposure is to get close enough to your subject or the snow that they fill the whole viewfinder. Use the light meter or automatic exposure control to set the exposure, then set the exposure lock and back up to take the picture.

Double Exposure

Stephen Canning

02-16-02

Use your camera's double exposure mode to create surreal, artistic effects. This can create twins, extra moons orbiting the earth or strange juxtapositions. A double exposure is just what the name suggests: the film or CCD is exposed twice. In effect, one image is being captured and then another is being captured on top of it. Normally, after we take a photo the film is advanced to the next frame or the CCD is cleared. With a double exposure, this doesn't happen.

For example, let's say that one of your friends has always wanted to have a sister, so you decide to make a photographic twin for her. You would use your camera's multiple exposure feature to set the number of exposures to two. Now, since the film or CCD is going to be exposed twice, you have to make sure that during each exposure the amount of light reaching the film or CCD is half of what it would be for a regular exposure. Otherwise, your film will be over-exposed and look washed-out. The easiest way to do this is to use your camera's E.V. exposure compensation and set it to minus 1. (See related link at the bottom)

After adjusting your E.V., take each shot as you normally would. You will need to keep your camera totally still (a tripod is your best bet) during the double exposure of your friend, because otherwise, the background will look disjointed. Take the first shot with your friend standing in one spot. Then, get her to walk a few steps to the side and take your second shot. The photograph will record your friend in both positions, resulting in the "twin" being created.

The multiple exposure and EV exposure compensation controls are found on mid-to-high-end cameras are often represented by ME and EV symbols. Generally, this feature is much more common on film cameras, because with digital images it is much easier to take two different shots and combine them in photo editing software.

Blue Skies

Stephen Canning

04-20-02

Do you want stunning photographs of those blue-sky days? Follow the sunny 16 rule to get the proper exposure on a sunny day. First, set your camera's aperture to f/16. Next, set your shutter speed to 1/film speed. For example, if your film is ISO 200, set the shutter 1/250 or if your film is ISO 400, set your shutter speed to 1/500.

Although the blue sky will usually not be the subject of a photograph on its own, its beautiful color can form the stunning backdrop that many shots need. A great way to bring out the rich color of a blue sky is to use a polarizing filter. This is an inexpensive accessory that screws onto the end of your lens. You will get the greatest effect with a polarizing filter if you are shooting pictures at 90 degrees to the sun rather than towards it or away from it.

If you are in the city, choosing the right day to photograph can make all of the difference. During long periods of clear weather, the sky will often be made hazy and gray due to smog. The morning just after a rainstorm will often have the clearest air and will show you the beautiful deep blue color you are after.

Campfires

Stephen Canning

05-11-02

Do you want to take great pictures of your friends or family sitting around the campfire this summer? If so, you need to get the right exposure. First, don't use a flash to photograph around a campfire as it is the warm colorful light of the campfire that is going to make your photograph work. The pale white light of a flash will take away from this effect. Turn your flash off before considering this type of photograph. You can do this on compact cameras by choosing the "flash off" mode.

Campfire scenes can be difficult to photograph because of the difference in brightness between the fire and the subjects. Exposure tables will recommend an exposure around 1/125 of a second at f/2 if you are using ISO 400 film for campfires. However, this varies between scenes and only applies if your camera has the ability to adjust these controls. A better way to get the right exposure is to base it on the brightness of the face of one of your subjects.

After all, this is the part of the picture that you want to be properly exposed. So, being careful not to block the light from the fire, zoom in on or walk towards the subject until their face fills the entire viewfinder. Then, your camera will be able to choose the correct exposure for the shot. If your camera has the ability, lock the exposure to this setting and then re-compose the shot to include the entire scene. Cameras with spot metering or center-weighted metering can make this easier.

Here are a couple of examples of the kinds of results you can expect when using these methods in low light conditions.



Hiking Photography

Stephen Canning

04-27-02

Do you want to get great nature photos? Take your camera into the backcountry with you to get unique photos from off the beaten track. You won't want to carry too much photographic gear with you when you are hiking and many outdoor photographers invest in a high-quality compact camera for particularly daring or weight-conscious trips.

For other trips, bringing along a camera with adjustable shutter speed and aperture will be worth the extra weight. A small folding tripod is lightweight and opens up all kinds of new possibilities. It can be particularly crucial during low-light sunset photographs. If it won't put it at risk, keep your camera around your neck. You can get padded and water-resistant bags made just for this purpose. You will be much more likely to get those great shots if you don't have to hold up your hiking partners by digging around in your bag for the camera.

Also, keeping your camera around your neck will give you the opportunity to quickly get action pictures with your hiking partners walking through the shot. This can provide a sense of scale and added interest. If you are hiking with photography as one of your main goals, you will probably want to spend less of your day on the trail and more of it exploring with the camera. If it is an overnight trip, try to plan your campsite in a particularly scenic spot so that you will have easy access to great scenery for sunset and sunrise shots.

If you can take just a bit more time with each photo, try to note your camera settings so that you can learn from your successes later, this will save time and increase successes in the future.



Grad Photos

Kris Butler & Stephen Canning

05-18-02

While most grads still head off to have portraits taken professionally, as parents and relatives we would still like to get great photos of them on our own cameras if we can. People wearing flowing black robes and tasseled caps tend to look noble and important, so take your picture to enhance this effect. One of the best ways to do this is to use a low point of view. Crouch down to your knees and take the photo looking up at your subject.

Graduation ceremonies are normally very busy with a sea of gowned and nervous graduates. This can create a busy background, which takes away from your subject. Find a simple background to go along with the simplicity of the black robe. By crouching down far enough you may be able to use the sky as your background. You could also put your graduate next to some trees or bushes.

Placing your graduate next to a wall may work as well, especially if it is on an attractive or architecturally interesting building. Taking the photo on an oblique angle to the wall will add some perspective and can give the feeling of looking into the future in a way appropriate to graduation. In addition, using a small aperture such as f/2 will put the background a little more out of focus, further simplifying it and putting more attention on your subject.

The most flattering portraits are often taken with telephoto lenses and the camera set back a long way from the scene. Telephoto lenses have a different perspective and tend to compress space. This will "flatten" your subject's face a little, which, although it may sound funny, actually looks good on film.

You will probably want your graduation portraits to be posed, but this doesn't necessarily mean that you want them to be smiley. Try some with your graduate smiling, grinning, thinking, stern or any other range of emotions. Talking to them while taking the pictures will often bring out unexpected expressions and put them at ease. Remember that this moment will only come once, so although everyone may be a bit anxious and thinking about the busy schedule, try to give your photo taking the time it deserves.

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