

12. PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

Extract

OVERVIEW

In this module, we will cover the following topics:

- The difference between studio and on-location portrait photography
- How lighting affects a portrait
- What kind of gear you need to shoot portraits
- How to interact with your clients
- How to handle fidgety children during a session
- How to lay out your studio

INTRODUCTION

With the recent affordability of digital SLR cameras and equipment, many have taken up digital photography as a serious hobby or as a career path. The vast and varied world of portrait photography is becoming an increasingly popular career choice for these new professional photographers.

Contrary to popular belief, portrait photography is not simply constrained to studio head shots or family portraits – the term ‘portrait’ is loosely defined and can include anything from fishermen on their fishing vessel to a CEO portrait for a company website.

Portrait photography is a fantastic way to express your unique talents and also bring in a substantial income to those who build a solid reputation.

Recently, successful portrait photographers have found popularity with their ability to market the uniqueness of their work. For instance,



This portrait of a fisherman is not what many consider a traditional portrait, but it is still considered to be one.

they may be known for their vibrant colours or perhaps they have the ability to brilliantly use props and light to convey a desired emotion.

However, before you delve into portrait photography and book your first client, you need to decide how you want to run your business.

Do you want to market yourself as a studio professional or an on-location photographer with the ability to adapt to any environment? Both have great benefits and drawbacks that vary in importance depending on your specific situation. Finances, space, and time are all deciding factors for your portrait photography business.

Once you decide on how you would like to organise your business, you can then begin to market yourself and build a brand around your talent. While we won't discuss the importance of brand-building in this module, a future module on weddings will cover this subject in more detail.

It also covers how to build your portfolio and the importance of this as well, which is also instrumental in portrait photography.

For now, we will focus on taking beautiful portraits and the best way to interact with your clients.

STUDIO VS. ON - LOCATION

Generally, you can divide the portrait photography business into two distinct categories:

- one that is shot in the controlled environment of a **studio**.
- one that is shot **on-location**, which incorporates the surrounding atmosphere into the photograph.

STUDIO PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

The studio environment is favoured by those who wish to conduct their portrait sessions with more control. The ability to manipulate the lighting, background, and other elements can be a crucial need to some photographers, depending on what they wish to achieve with their portraiture.

This is a typical studio set-up: a large area to work with and a clean background, lights, soft boxes, and various other flash and lighting equipment.



Figure 12.1

This is preferred by those who need ideal lighting and environmental control all the time and can't compensate or otherwise incorporate differences into their work.

For example, one who takes business portraits or is a portrait photographer for a school will need a studio set-up to maintain uniform lighting throughout (Figure 12.2).



In this portrait, you can tell that there are several different lights aimed at the model to achieve this pleasing and complimentary lighting.

Figure 12.2

Alternatively, a general family portrait photographer who takes outdoor portraits has a bit more leeway and does not require a perfectly manipulated atmosphere.

Whether you choose to run a studio out of your home or rent a commercial location, having your own studio can be beneficial in the following ways:

1. GREATER CONTROL

Having the ability to control most all aspects of your portrait shoot can be instrumental, especially if you have delicate or specific lighting requirements. The smallest change in light can greatly affect the mood or imagery you're going for in a portrait.

If you were to take photographs outside or in another location, you may not have the lighting setup you desire, or you may need to spend a vast amount of time to create the lighting yourself artificially.

A studio would be very beneficial in this situation as you don't have to bring equipment with you, and you can take test shots prior to your clients arriving and easily change your lighting to your preference.

Other elements can be controlled in a studio environment as well, such as the weather, the background imagery, and of course, the amount of privacy both for you and your clients. If you choose to shoot in an outdoor, public area, there is no telling what kind of audience you may attract, which can ruin the mood of a portrait session.

2. COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT

In addition to more privacy, your clients will appreciate a studio that is warm, inviting, clean and free of clutter.

Not only does this add to your reputation as a professional portrait photographer, it will also relax your clients which will give you great portraits.

Tip: A reception area for your clients is mandatory for a studio – a place with some chairs, reading material, and light refreshments – so that friends and family who are not a part of the portrait session can wait comfortably.

If you plan on shooting with multiple outfits, it's also recommended to have a changing room available (with access to toilet facilities) so your clients can change in a comfortable atmosphere.

ON - LOCATION PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

Conducting your portrait photography 'on-location' - that is, to bring your camera and gear to your client - can be a preferable alternative to a studio setup. Whether you shoot your portraits in an outdoor setting or in your client's home, the ability to travel to your clients can make you a unique alternative to traditional portrait photographers.

An on-location photographer embraces their surroundings to create a photograph instead of manipulating the environment of a studio.

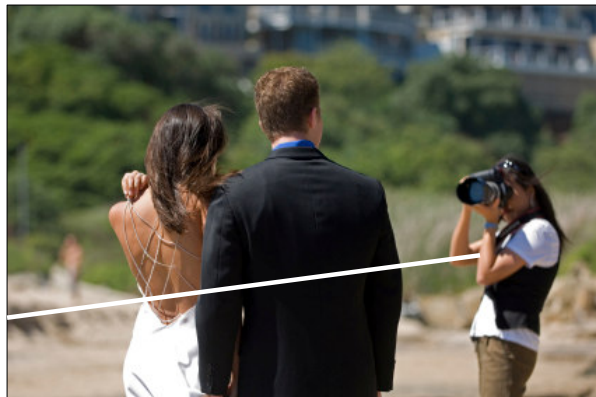


Figure 12.3

1. LESS INITIAL EXPENSES

The obvious benefit to not having a designated studio would be not having to pay for one. Studios can become expensive quickly, especially if you're paying for a commercial location.

Rent payments, insurances, utilities, studio equipment and backdrops are just some of the studio expenses you may have to incur.

By having a portable studio, you can eliminate purchasing some lighting equipment (or entirely if you want to be a natural light photographer) and almost everything else that is associated with running a studio.

2. THE CONVENIENCE OF PORTABILITY

Some clients may actually prefer a photographer who takes portraits at their home or location of choice.

For example, if the client has small children which are a hassle to transport, or if they feel more comfortable taking a photo in their own environment, the ability for the photographer to travel to them is highly desirable.

Alternatively, what if your clients want their portrait at a beach or other special outdoor location? Being an on-location photographer, you can easily accommodate their needs.

This service is not just limited to family portrait photography – if a company wants portraits of all their employees, they would need a photographer to travel to them as it would be highly inconvenient to have all the employees travel to a studio that most likely couldn't accommodate such a large crowd to begin with.

Tip: If you plan on being an on-location photographer, make sure you charge your clients accordingly. You can easily forget that things like travel time and petrol can add up quickly. So this personalised service should not come without a fee.

3. USING NATURAL LIGHT

Some portrait photographers are 'purists' when it comes to using light – that is, they only use the available light around them and avoid flash-guns and strobe lights.

While this is neither a good or bad thing – simply a professional preference – there are some distinct benefits to photographing in only natural light.

One benefit would obviously be a less complicated set-up. By not having to make your entire studio portable – which can include flashguns, umbrellas, reflectors, portable power sources, stands, and so on – you can focus more on the model rather than setting up your gear.

Secondly, natural light portraits just seem to have a more authentic appearance. It is something that everyone can envision, especially if you are taking outdoor portraits.

This stunning portrait of a fisherman at sunrise is illustrated by the dramatic shadows of the foreground and colourful background of the sky.



Figure 12.4

For example, if Figure 12.4 above was shot using flash and strobe lighting, it would look unnatural which would contrast with the natural environment surrounding the model.

Tip: An on-location portrait photographer who is shooting *indoors* rather than *outdoors* should consider using flash or some other kind of additional lighting. This has less to do with personal preference than it does with being a knowledgeable photographer. As you may remember from an earlier module, indoor light is vastly less than what is available outdoors – even on a cloudy day – so you may not have enough available light inside to obtain the results you want.

4. NATURAL POSES

A portrait shoot that is conducted on-location will undoubtedly have a less-staged appearance. Whether this is done inside a client's home or at the local beach, you can capture your model with a familiar and

pleasing environment instead of the contrived atmosphere of a studio portrait.

Most beginner portrait photographers choose to be an on-location photographer since the initial start-up cost is generally low, which allows them to build their client base and portfolio before investing in a more costly studio and lighting equipment. This natural progression of a portrait photography business is a fantastic way to not overwhelm the photographer, especially if this is a part-time venture.

Also, it allows you to gradually build up to working in a studio, but at the same time gives you the on-location experience to use as necessary in the future.

EXERCISE 12.1

Take a moment and envision yourself as a portrait photographer. Would you like to work in a studio or be an on-location photographer?

Write down the pros and cons of each as they apply to you. Think about what kind of photography work you would enjoy the most. Then decide if a studio or on-location environment would suit your needs.

REMINDER

Have you completed the following exercises?

- Exercise 12.1
- Exercise 12.2
- Exercise 12.3

Tick each box when you have completed them. Then you can move on to the assignment that follows.

SUMMARY

1. You have thought about whether you want to work as a studio photographer, an on-location photographer, or perhaps even as both.
2. You know how to interact with your client.
3. You are aware of the importance of scouting the site of an on-location photography shoot.
4. You are able to prepare and set up for a portrait sitting.
5. You have the ability to choose your lighting and background.
6. You know how to get your subjects to pose and how to position them.
7. You have an understanding of how to deal with restless and problem children.
8. You are able to present your portraits effectively.

ASSIGNMENT 12: YOUR FIRST PORTRAIT SESSION

For this assignment you will need to find a person, or group of people, to take part in a portrait photography session. This could be friends, family, or you could put adverts up locally offering your services for free to willing participants.

If they like the photos, offer to make them copies as a gesture of goodwill.

Try to adhere to all of the tips and suggestions laid out in this module. While it may be difficult to remember everything, you should be able to go through a portrait session with relative ease.

You should send at least five photos to your tutor. Also perform any photo editing that you think is necessary to enhance your images and describe what changes you made to your tutor.

Include an explanation what you like about your photos and explain the way you've got the subjects to pose. If you had the chance to do this shoot again, what would you do differently?

When you have completed this assignment, send it to your tutor for marking. If you email your assignment, make sure you include your name and assignment number at the top of your work.

NOTE: If you send your pictures by email, they must total no more than 1mb per email. You may have to send your photos over a couple emails to keep the size down.

You may also need to 'crunch' the pictures, that is, reduce them in size and 'dots per inch'. You can do this in Photoshop or Microsoft Office Picture Manager, or online at <http://www.freegraphics.com/art-gifjpeg-cruncher.html>.

Alternatively, if you want to send bigger files, you could use an upload site like www.yousendit.com.

Well, that's the end of the extract. If you want to know more, you'll have to register!

We look forward to welcoming you on to the course, and helping you become a professional photographer.