5 STEPS TO BETTER HEADSHOTS

Quick Guide
Written by Rhiannon D'Averc

Headshots are one of the **most common** forms of portraiture. Models and actors need them for their portfolios, almost everyone you meet will want to have one to put on **social media**, and they make excellent feature images alongside published interviews or articles.

This makes mastering them a worthwhile pursuit. If you work with models at all, it's likely that you'll spend a good part of your photography career doing headshots. The tips in this guide will take you through five steps to improve your headshots, allowing you to be more confident in your craft and create better images.

Here is what we will cover:

- Understanding Headshot Composition
- Using Light
- Choosing Effective Backgrounds
- Capturing Personality
- Breaking All the Rules

👤 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn how to create amazing portraits, grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: <u>The Art of Portrait Photography.</u>

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Photograph by Jimmy Fermin

The rule of thirds puts the subject front and center.

UNDERSTANDING HEADSHOT COMPOSITION

The standard composition for headshots is very simple, but it's also very effective. These are the general rules that make a headshot strong:

- Shoot in portrait orientation.
- Use the rule of thirds to align the subject: the top of the model's head, the bottom of their chin, and either side of their head sit on the gridlines across the image.
- Keep it tight – don't show too much of the background; normally the model's head and shoulders, or to partway down the chest, are all you need.

These rules may seem strict, but they're the result of generations of photographers figuring out what works best. The reason they work is because they allow the subject to take up the whole of the frame without seeming claustrophobic, and they make the viewer focus on the face. It's also a pleasing composition that just looks and feels better, not to mention being exactly what your client will expect**.**

◇ **Key Lesson:** The rule of thirds is your best friend when it comes to headshot photography. It will keep the subject clear and avoid distractions, while also looking great.

Photograph by Joseph Gonzalez

You can spot the use of the ring light reflected in the model's eyes.

USING LIGHT

The **use of light** is important in all forms of photography, but there are particular ways that it applies when you are shooting headshots. For example, you will almost always want to **avoid shadows** on the face**,** which will deform, hide, or highlight certain facial features, and usually not in a flattering way.

Of course, it can be done well, but if you're using shadows at all, make sure that you know why you are using them. If there's no compositional reason, do you need them? You also need to be very careful in their positioning and harshness to ensure your portrait is still flattering.

To achieve a fully lit face, there are a few lighting setups to try. One is to angle a reflector against the face to shine on any areas where shadows would be present. Another is a two-light setup, in which both lights are pointed towards the model at diagonal angles, each of them eliminating the shadows cast by the other.

Finally, ring lights are a popular option for headshots. Because they go around the camera itself, they can provide full light on the face without getting in the way of the shot. They also create a circular reflection in the eyes of the model, which many photographers enjoy from an aesthetic perspective.

Just make sure to avoid blown-out highlights, especially on oily areas of skin. A bit of mattifying powder on the face and some quick touch-ups in Photoshop can reduce this problem, but if your lighting is too bright to begin with, you won't be able to recover detail.

◈ **Key Lesson:** A well-lit headshot will be more effective. Eliminate shadows and let the face of your model shine through!

Photograph by Albert Dera

Even the choice of a simple colored background, or just plain black or white, can make a difference.

CHOOSING EFFECTIVE BACKGROUNDS

The background of a headshot can have a huge impact on how effective it is. Why? Because a distracting background can ruin the shot and take the focus away from your model.

Taking a look through the examples in this guide, you'll see that the backgrounds are all fairly similar. They tend to be single-color backgrounds, either plain or only lightly textured. The point is that these backgrounds barely require any attention. Our eyes can fill them in without having to study them directly, and they fade away out of our notice. In fact, if I hadn't asked you to pay attention to them, you might not have been able to remember what color the background was after looking away!

A simple background is most effective for headshots because it keeps the focus on the model. Even something like a paneled wood or brick wall can be too distracting, creating leading lines that take your eye away from the subject. Keep it simple and plain, and make sure that the color is flattering to the model and the other colors in the frame.

◈ **Key Lesson:** A plain background is the best background. Don't overcomplicate things. Leading lines can destroy your composition, and the wrong color will feel jarring.

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Photograph by Prince Akachi

With just a hint of a smile, this model becomes more lifelike and filled with personality.

CAPTURING PERSONALITY

A technically perfect headshot can still feel a little flat and empty. Why? Because when the model appears to be nothing more than a mannequin, the image will be lacking. It's important to inject some personality into the photo and make the subject feel like a 'real' human.

How can you do this? It's useful to know something about your subject. If, for example, you're working with an actor who loves taking roles as the villain, you can get them to **emote** evil expressions and menacing looks. If your subject is a happy person, you can get them smiling and laughing**.**

If they're a big flirt, get them to flirt with the camera. If they're naturally very serious, allow them to direct a frown at the lens. A blank or posed expression rarely makes as much impact as something natural and genuine. Have them look directly at the lens, too; eye contact will make viewers feel like they have connected with the model.

Lacking all else, a smile usually does the trick – not a posed smile, which can feel forced, but rather a genuine one. Get your model to feel relaxed and happy, tell a few jokes, and make them laugh. You can even tell them an anecdote about something stupid you've done – they will feel more comfortable in your presence and that real smile will come through. Just keep your finger on the trigger so you're ready!

◇ **Key Lesson:** Know your subject, even if just by chatting to them on set. Getting that genuine expression will feel much more real, and if you're working with an actor, they should be able to pull off anything!

Photograph by Nathan Dumlao

Breaking the rules of composition can make for a more arresting shot!

BREAKING THE RULES

The first four steps towards creating better headshots have been all about learning the rules. But if there's one thing we know about rules, it's that they're meant to be broken!

Once you have mastered a great headshot using the first four steps, the final step is to push yourself further. Break the rules of composition. Bring something into the foreground. Use props. Work in different ways. Figure out what is more effective, and sometimes that might be something which is unique to the shoot you're on and can never be replicated.

Photography is a creative art, and you'll get further with it if you're able to employ your own creative efforts. Find your own unique spin on things. After you've captured the traditional headshot in each session, there's nothing wrong with experimenting and seeing if you can make some magic.

◈ **Key Lesson:** Knowing the rules empowers you to break them. If you've become an expert on technical headshots, let loose your creative side to find unexpected results.

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Photograph by Rhiannon D'Averc

CONCLUSION

When you are shooting headshots, consider the following:

- Use the rule of thirds for strong composition
- Focus on the model only, not the background or their clothing
- Keep distracting elements to a minimum
- Eliminate shadows or, if using them, make sure they are flattering
- Get a genuine smile or another expression from your subject
- Show their genuine personality
- Break the rules, but only when you're sure you understand them

Self-Check Quiz:

1. What compositional rule makes for the most effective headshots?

2. What are headshots used for?

3. What kind of backgrounds make the best impact for headshots?

4. Which three lighting setups are best for portraits like these?

5. How can you trigger a genuine smile?

6. How can you put your own unique spin on headshots?

7. When should you start trying to break all of the rules?

Learning Assignment:

Bring a model into the studio and work on creating the perfect headshot. This may take hours, and you'll want to take a break to see whether you've captured it now and then. Try different backgrounds, different crops, and different lighting setups to learn how they will affect the final image.

When you've got what you think is a perfect headshot, it's time to throw all of that out the window. Get creative until you've completely run out of ideas. Now review the session. Which was the single strongest image, and why?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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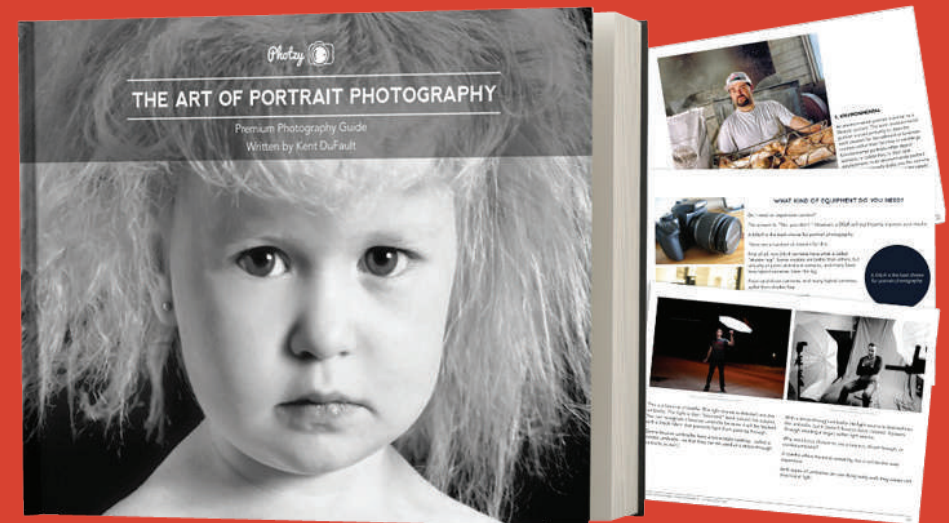
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