



PORTRAITURE

A Short Guide
By Kent DuFault

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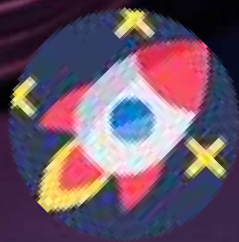
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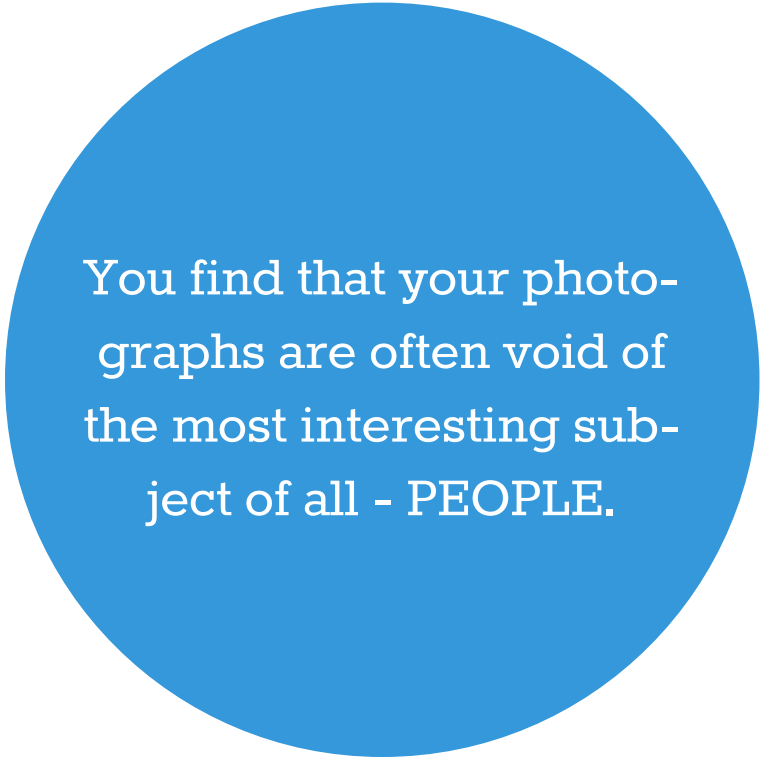
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You find that your photographs are often void of the most interesting subject of all - PEOPLE.

PORTRAITURE - THE ART OF MAKING PEOPLE LOOK GOOD

You love photography. You've been taking pictures for a while now. Maybe you've invested in a better camera, or more lenses, perhaps an external flash, or, you still have that simple little point and shoot digital you've had for years.

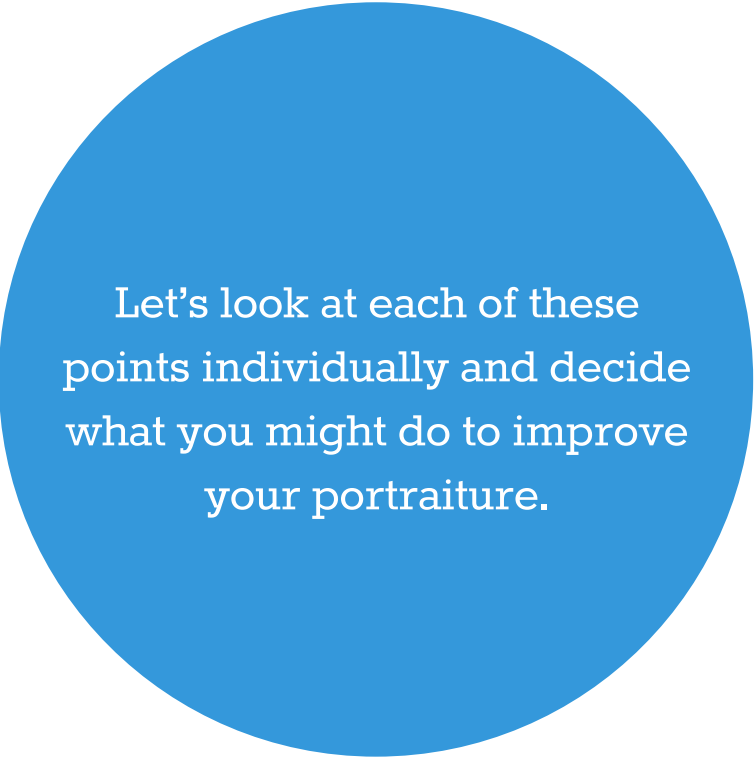
But something is pulling at you from within. You're tired of taking pictures of barns, fences, trees, dilapidated buildings, bridges, etc. You find that your photographs are often void of the most interesting subject of all - PEOPLE.

Take a moment and look at yourself in the mirror. The reason you're here reading this guide is because you have a desire to grow, and the good news is that it isn't all that hard.

Armed with some general knowledge, you can begin to create beautiful portraits with the camera you already own and using resources you already have around the house.

Let's talk about some basic points to consider when you're going to photograph a portrait.

- Lighting
- Focal length of the lens (wide to zoom?)
- Focusing
- Framing - Portrait Type (head shot, 1/2 length, 3/4 length, full length, group, large group)
- Camera shutter speed
- Lens aperture
- Background
- Clothing
- Props



Let's look at each of these points individually and decide what you might do to improve your portraiture.

If you give some consideration to each of these nine points - you've already educated yourself beyond someone else who just raises their camera and snaps the shutter.

Let's look at each of these points individually and decide what you might do to improve your portraiture.

LIGHTING



Professional level portrait taken with simple household items.

LIGHTING

We're going to assume (at this point) that you've not invested in any extra lighting equipment (other than perhaps an external flash).

Lighting is without a doubt the most important factor in creating successful portraits. It is also one of the most difficult elements of photography for beginners to grasp. Light has different qualities and these qualities change. Your ability to control the changing qualities of light is the key to your success.

Picture this in your mind. It's 10:00 A.M. and you're staring at a person twenty feet in front of you. The sun is directly behind that person. You would have to shield your eyes in any attempt to try and see them. wNow, imagine that same scenario only it's heavily overcast. You would now have no trouble seeing them, as the sunlight is now dispersed through all those clouds.

These are two qualities of light. The first scenario is harsh and direct lighting. The second scenario is soft and diffused lighting.



This is an example of how midday sunshine does not provide pleasing light for portraits.

As a beginning portrait photographer, you need to remember one thing - Soft light RULES! Here are some tips on where to find soft light, or, how to create it.

OUTDOORS

1. Shoot your portraits within one hour of sunrise or sunset
2. If you must shoot when the sun is higher in the sky put your subject(s) in the shade: ie. Under a tree, under a porch, next to a building... etc.
3. Use your camera flash to fill in shadows on the face.
4. Use objects to reflect light into the face(s) of your subject(s). Try a building with a white wall. Other household items that work well for reflecting light are: a bed sheet, glue tinfoil to a large piece of cardboard, or, paint a large piece of cardboard bright white.



An example of how soft indirect light through a window can provide pleasing results.

INDOORS

1. Place your subject(s) near a large window with indirect lighting. Picture windows or sliding glass doors work well. Just make sure the sun isn't shining through the window.
2. Find several lamps in your home. Remove the shades. Place them near a light (preferably white) wall and experiment with posing your subject near the wall.
3. If you're using a camera flash try to swivel it and bounce it off a nearby wall or ceiling. If you don't have that option try diffusing the flash through a piece of paper.

These pointers should help get you started. Just remember this basic point about light. A soft, broad, light source is better than a small directional light source.

LENS FOCAL LENGTH

LENS FOCAL LENGTH

This one is a lot easier to understand than lighting.

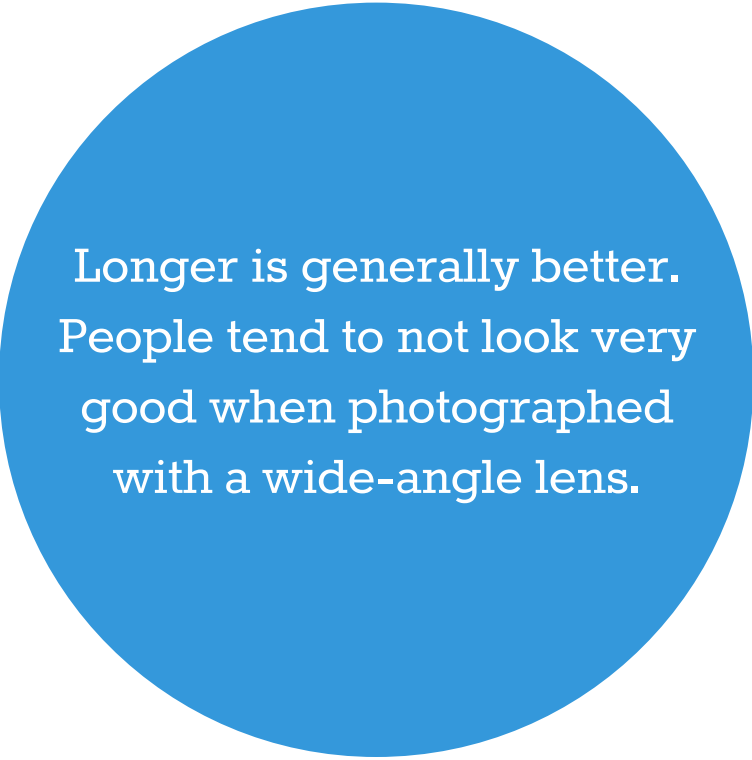
Use the longest focal length available to you.

What does this mean?

1. Digital SLR users - You want to use a focal length of 35mm to 200mm. Use 35mm to 50mm for groups. Use 50mm to 200mm for individuals.

2. Point and shoot users - Use 1X to 2X for Groups. Use 2X to 4X for individuals.

Here is the basic point to remember about the lens focal length: Longer is generally better. People tend to not look very good when photographed with a wide-angle lens.



Longer is generally better.
People tend to not look very
good when photographed
with a wide-angle lens.

FOCUSING



Example of simple lighting set-up at home. The use of a large window with indirect light and a white board (purchased at an office supply store) to fill in shadows.

FOCUSING

Here is the most important point to remember on the subject of focusing - You want that point of critical focus to be your subject's eyes.

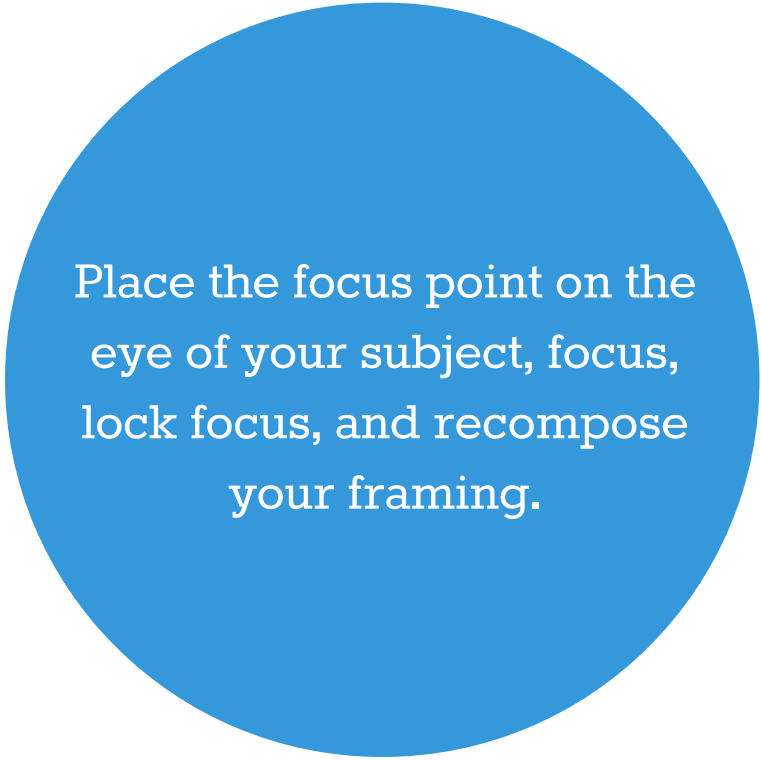
Here are some tips on how to make that happen.

1. Do not use matrix focusing. If your camera has adjustable focus points, set the camera to a single point in the middle of the viewfinder.
2. If you're a digital SLR with a zoom lens - zoom all the way in, place the focus point on your subject's eye, focus, and then zoom back out to frame your portrait while keeping the focus locked. If you're unsure how to lock the focus, check your manual. If you still can't figure out how to lock the focus; go to manual focus.

FOCUSING ON A POINT AND SHOOT CAMERA

If you own this type of camera - set the focus point to a single spot in the center of the viewfinder, adjust your zoom to the proper zoom range (2X - 4X), and place the focus point on the eye of your subject, focus, lock focus, and recompose your framing.

If you can't figure out how to lock focus, go back to matrix focus points and just be aware of what the camera is focusing on.



Place the focus point on the eye of your subject, focus, lock focus, and recompose your framing.

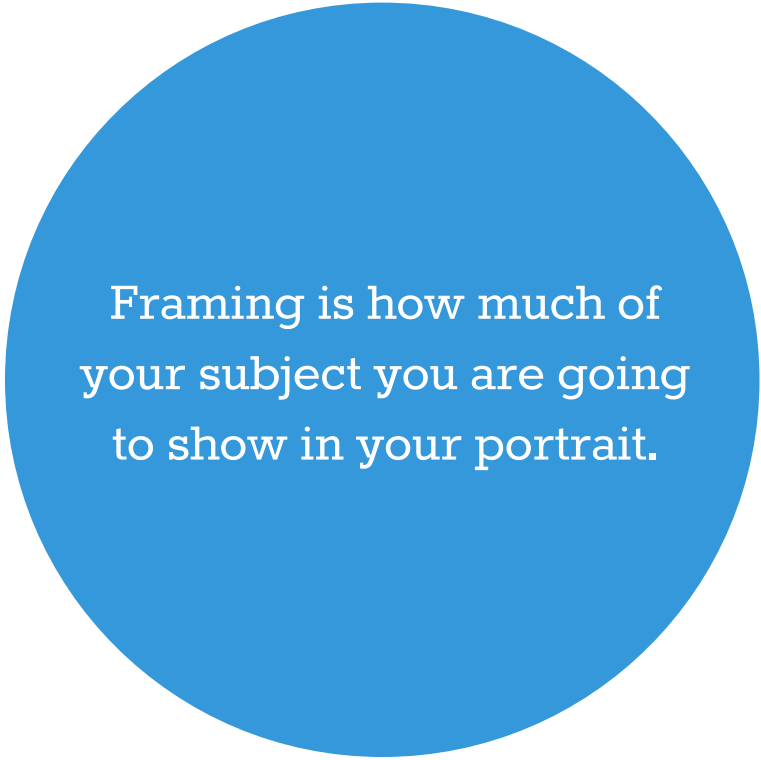
FRAMING

WHAT IS FRAMING?

Framing is how much of your subject you are going to show in your portrait. It's as simple as that. There are basically four options in how to frame your subject(s): the head shot, the half-length shot, the three-quarter length shot, and the full length shot.

1. A head shot is exactly what it sounds like. You see the person's head and shoulders. It works well for one to three people. It's an excellent choice for emphasizing facial features.

2. A half-length portrait is a good choice to show some of the clothing as well as a bit of the background while still emphasizing the subject(s). This choice is also good for one to three people.



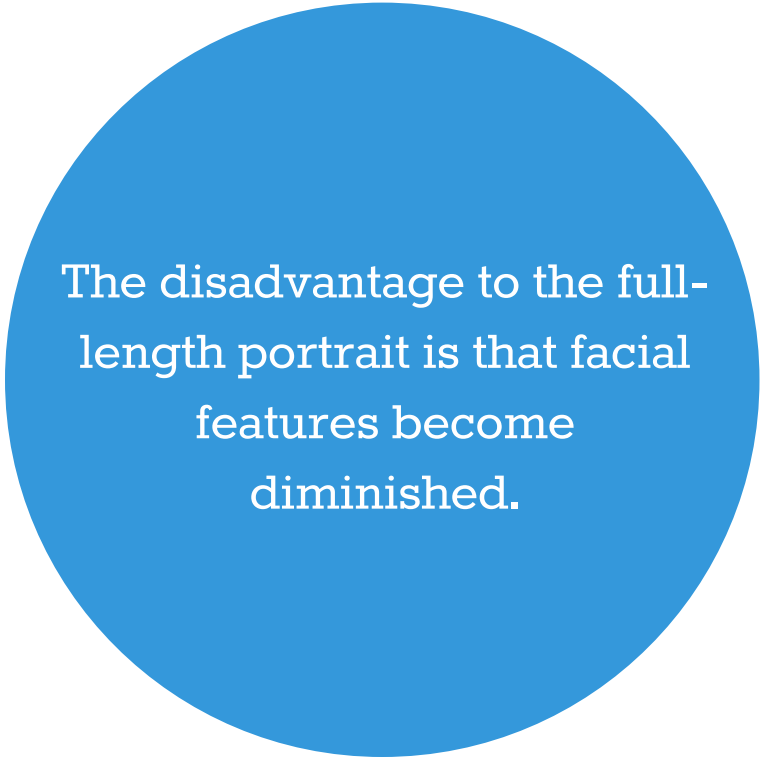
Framing is how much of your subject you are going to show in your portrait.

3. The three-quarter length portrait is an excellent choice for small groups. It keeps them large enough in the frame to emphasize facial features, yet gives the portrait a hint of the background to establish a setting.

4. The full-length portrait works well for anything from a single person to large groups. It allows the portrait to be established at a certain location. An example might be a bride in front of the church she was married in.

The disadvantage to the full-length portrait is that facial features become diminished.

When shooting portraits it's usually a good idea to include all four framing options.



The disadvantage to the full-length portrait is that facial features become diminished.

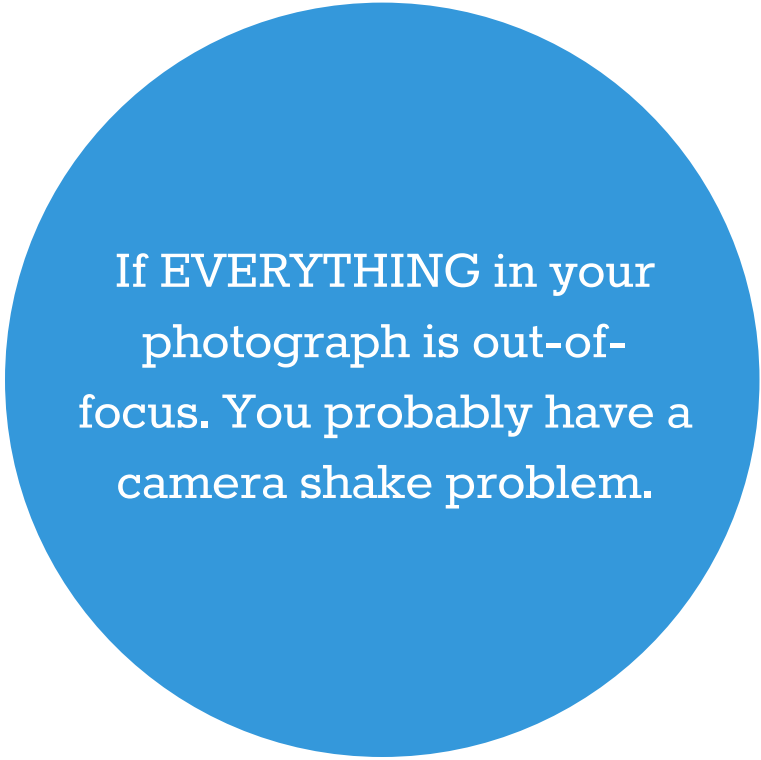
CAMERA SHUTTER

CAMERA SHUTTER

Many beginning portrait photographers forget about this aspect of their picture taking process: the shutter speed.

After all, the subject isn't moving, right? But, most portraits are ruined by camera shake, and camera shake is caused by a shutter speed that is too slow.

Camera shake is often mistaken for being out-of-focus. Here's how you can tell the difference. If EVERYTHING in your photograph is out-of-focus. You probably have a camera shake problem. Here are some shutter speed tips for portraiture.



If EVERYTHING in your photograph is out-of-focus. You probably have a camera shake problem.

1. If you're hand holding the camera, keep your shutter speed at 1/200th of a second or faster.
2. If you have to drop below 1/200th of a second with your shutter speed, brace your elbows against your chest, or brace the camera against an object such as a wall or table.


CAMERA SHUTTER

3. Slow down and hold your breath when releasing the shutter button.

4. Use a tripod, or monopod, if you have one.

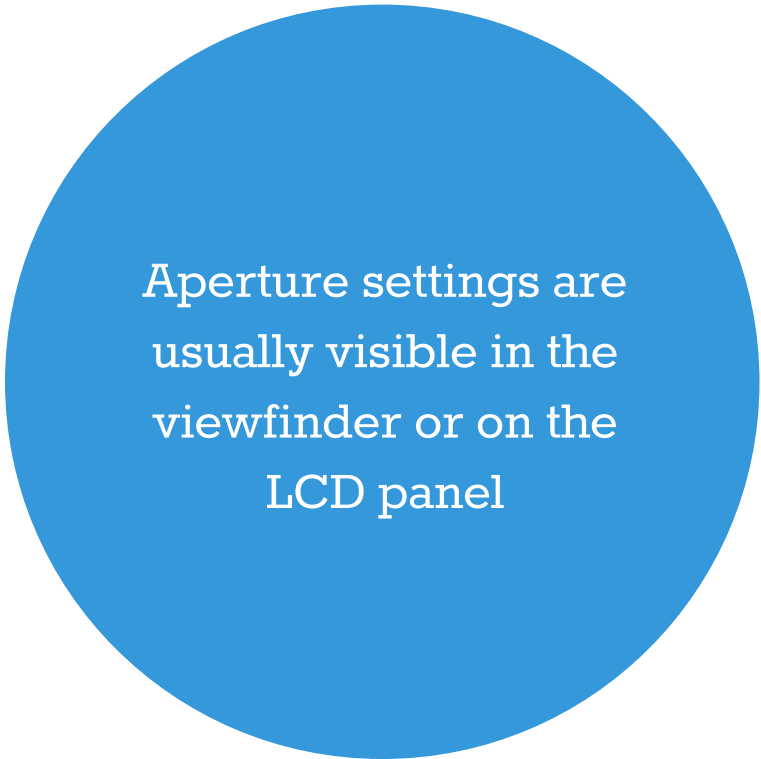
Here is the most basic piece of advice on shutter speed.

Use the fastest one available to you.



Use the fastest one
available to you.

LENS APERTURE



Aperture settings are usually visible in the viewfinder or on the LCD panel

LENS APERTURE

The subject of lens aperture can become quite complicated. For the purpose of this guide - we're just going to give you some simple advice.

1. Keep your aperture (f-stop) at f/5.6 - f/8.0 for a single person to a group of three.
2. Keep your aperture (f-stop) at f/8.0 - f/11.0 for larger groups.

If you're not sure what a lens aperture is just remember this; when you hold your camera up and press the shutter button down, three things happen: the camera focuses, it sets a shutter speed, and it sets an aperture. The shutter speed and aperture settings are usually visible in the viewfinder or on the LCD panel on the back of your camera. Look for them.

The aperture setting will look something like this: f/4.0, f/5.6, f/8.0, f/11, f/16. Adjust your camera shutter speed until the number displayed matches the advice given above. Check the shutter speed and make sure that it hasn't gone too slow.

BACKGROUND



This is an example of how a busy background can distract from your subject.

BACKGROUND

This is probably the simplest aspect of your portrait to control. Yet, many beginning portrait photographers often overlook it.

Remember, a portrait is about the person in your photograph.

Here are some tips for backgrounds.

1. Unless the background is important to the story you're trying to tell with your portrait, include as little of it as possible. Let's say you're shooting a portrait of your spouse in front of the Eiffel Tower. It would make sense to include enough of the background to indicate where you were. But, if you're shooting a portrait of your spouse at the local park you don't need to see the restrooms and the trashcans behind them.
2. If you include background, try to keep it simple. Busy backgrounds detract from the subject of your portrait - the person.



An example of a simple background to focus the viewer on the subject's expression.

BACKGROUND

3. Watch out for objects directly behind your subject.

You don't want telephone poles growing out of their head.

4. Be aware of the light to dark ratio of your subject to the background. If your subject is wearing all black, it would be difficult to execute a good portrait against a dark wall in an unlit alley.

Conversely, a person dressed in white and placed against a light background will also cause you problems.

Try to find a location that provides something in the middle - middle tones - even lighting.

CLOTHING

CLOTHING

The choice of clothing is very subjective.

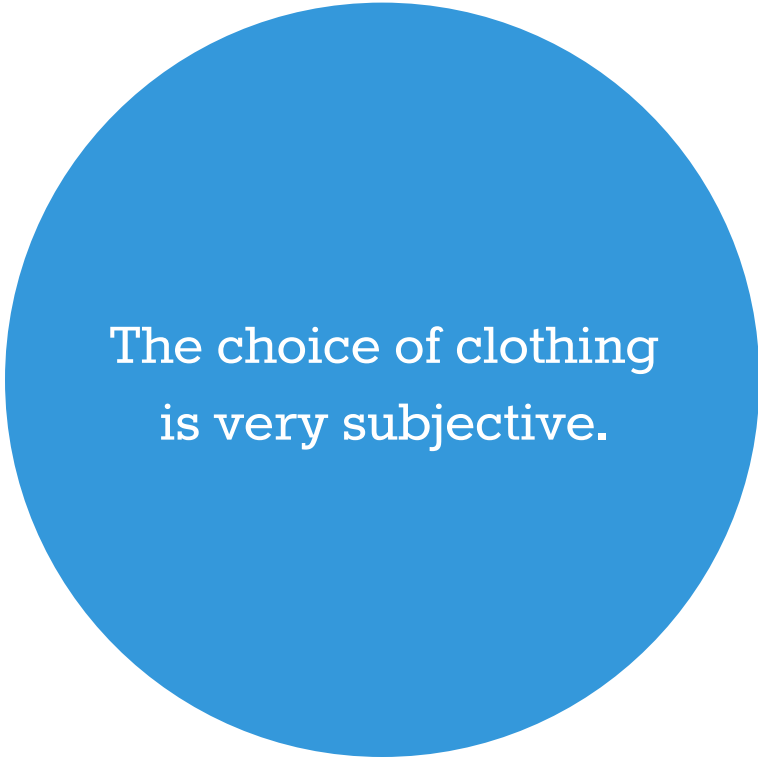
We prefer solids to patterns.

In general, our rule is - Don't let the clothing subtract from the subject. But, there is a school of thought that clothing is part of the subject.

What they choose to wear is part of their personality.

We can't argue that point.

Clothing is an area where you experiment freely without technically hurting your portrait session.



The choice of clothing
is very subjective.

PROPS

PROPS

Props often come into play when you're trying to say something about your subject.

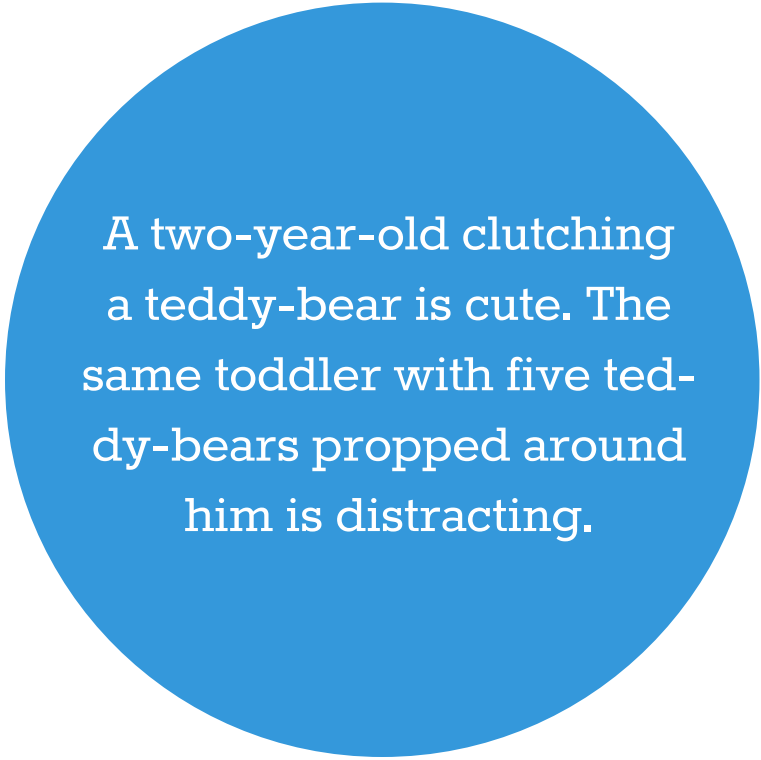
Perhaps, you're shooting a portrait of your son, and he just scored the winning touchdown in the championship game for his high school. So, you pose him sitting, his back against the goalpost, he's holding a football, and his trophy sits next to him on the grass.

These are props. They help tell a story.

Our best advice as relates to props is - Keep it simple. Don't let the props overwhelm the subject. A two-year-old clutching a teddy-bear is cute. The same toddler with five teddy-bears propped around him is distracting.

Now that you've empowered yourself with the basic knowledge of great portraiture, we hope that you'll go out and give it a go. Photographing people is a lot of fun.

It will bring an exciting new level to your hobby!



A two-year-old clutching a teddy-bear is cute. The same toddler with five teddy-bears propped around him is distracting.



Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (*and FREE!*) photography resources:



3 Free Photography Cheat Sheets

Grab 3 free photography cheat sheets that will help you understand the basics.

[Download Cheat Sheets →](#)



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