



CREATIVE OUTDOOR SELF-PORTRAITURE

Quick Guide by Stacey Hill





Photograph by Stacey Hill

I spotted this magnolia tree coming into flower and planned to go and shoot it on the weekend when it would be in full bloom

In my previous guide, we covered the basics of doing self-portraits inside or in a studio. It's a great way to get started and engage with your creativity in a different way, but it has a lot of limitations as far as the surroundings.

While you can composite yourself into various landscapes or environments, wouldn't it be easier just to...go outside?

Yes and no.

INTRODUCTION

Obviously going outside gives you a much bigger scale to shoot on, and you can completely change the background of your image, have a new situation to interact with, and tell really interesting stories with your images.

But it has other issues to consider. Firstly, you are at the mercy of whatever light conditions are happening outside and you probably don't want to lug a whole lot of heavy and expensive lighting gear with you. Access to the site may require permissions and payment, and it could be physically limiting.

Secondly, there are people who will be curious and want to know what you are doing and why, creating a distraction and possibly being problematic to leave out your camera gear while you are in front of the camera.

When you decide to take your self-portraits outside, there are more things to consider. The biggest thing is that you are leaving the comfort of your house/studio where all your stuff is, and you have to go mobile.

That means taking everything you will need and minimizing the extra stuff as much as possible. You need to be able to carry everything with you in one trip, and depending on how far you have to walk to get to the site, it needs to not be too heavy or difficult to carry.

CHECKLIST:

- Plan
- Clothing
- Traveling light
- Shooting solo
- Dealing with an audience
- Compositing



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PLAN


Planning in advance becomes critical. You need to scope the site out well in advance, see what the light is like at different times of the day, and find the best option for what you want. Any access permissions will also need to be secured in advance, and you should notify any security people in advance to stop them interrupting you for acting suspicious. Will there be any privacy around if you need to get changed? How long will you be able to be on site for?

What will your location be? Why? What story will you tell? What will the props or pose be?

Are you shooting for personal or commercial use? This might make a difference as to where you can shoot, as commercial use can often require a permit and fee. Depending on the law in your country/area,

some buildings may also limit photography of the exterior as well, so it would pay to check local bylaws and regulations.

Shooting in publicly accessible areas is often free, but don't just assume it will be. Do your research just in case.

 **Key Point:** Planning in advance can take a lot of time, but doing it properly means it should take you less time to carry out the shoot and have minimal disruptions.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

*This is the swamp I ended up having to walk a distance into for the right composition.
I had to wear shoes; fortunately the ones I had were able to be sacrificed.*

CLOTHING

Generally you will need to be wearing something when you go outside; there are usually laws about indecent exposure. What will the weather be like? Will the temperature be a problem? Will it be uncomfortable to be dressed in many heavy layers of clothing for a long time on a hot day, or in something light and summery in the middle of winter?

How complicated is the clothing? Can you get into it without help? Will you need somewhere private to get changed or can you do it on the side of a busy road?


Can you assemble your costume quickly and by yourself? How portable is it? Can you put it on and wear it underneath other clothes? Will you need a mirror?


Footwear is important. Many images look much nicer in bare feet, but walking across a stony beach or forest floor in bare feet isn't fun. I always pack some light shoes that can be easily removed and hidden – something that you don't care about if you end up sinking past your ankles into a swamp and the brown stain never quite washes out again!

I have a long white dress I put on and then wear some loose layers over the top that I can remove easily when I get to site. Plus I have a wig, so I pin my hair up first so I know all the stray bits are tucked out of the way when I don't have a mirror handy.

Also give some thought to the color and shape of what you are wearing and the texture of the fabric. Does it stand out from the environment or blend in? What do you want it to do? If you need to edit the color in post-processing, can you easily select elements to change them?

If it's a windy day, will the fabric be blown around, not draping nicely and making wrinkles? Will it take to being scrunched up and put on later and look OK?

 **Key Point:** Clothing is a big part of the story you are trying to tell, so put some thought into how it is going to look and how/where you will put it on.

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Photograph by Stacey Hill

One of many poses shot – it was windy and you can see it affecting the line of my dress



Photograph by Stacey Hill


My main prop is my teddy, but I also have a leather doctor's bag that allows extra storage capacity. This is the subject for the dark-blue night image.

TRAVELING LIGHT

Pack everything you think you will need. Take your camera with its lens on (and a small bag), your tripod and remote, your clothing, and any absolutely necessary props, and then put them aside.

Assess what you have left. Look at the pile of the stuff you HAVE to take. Can you easily pack it down and carry it in one trip? What else do you need to take from the remaining pile?

Be ruthless. If you are properly prepared in advance, you should be able to take everything in one go. A couple of short practice runs not far from your car will teach you what you can and can't do without.

 **Key Point:** Be ruthless. We all have a tendency to take too much gear. It should all fit in one bag or be easily carried.

SHOOTING SOLO OUTSIDE

Taking your expensive camera gear outside and leaving it unattended while you pose in front of it can be a concern. Also, depending on where you are, personal security might be a consideration. Plus, the local wildlife could potentially be a concern.


Essentially you have to make the best choices you can here; perhaps take a friend with you. Or go at different times of the day when you might avoid people (or have more of them around).

I generally let someone know where I'm going and for how long and check in via text. I have been lucky and not had any issues, but I try and be sensible with my choices as well.

There is also the issue of how to set up and focus your shoot with just you, so use a prop. Put your camera bag in roughly the place you will be, set your focus to be sufficiently deep to capture any movement from that plane, focus, lock focus, and then pose in place of the pro. I have a teddy bear I use as a prop which makes an excellent focus aid.

This relies on you having a wireless remote, which I highly recommend. It allows you to change your pose without moving away from your chosen spot, and many different variations can be captured before you go look at it on the screen.

If you have a device that allows you to shoot tethered to your phone, then you can see your pose from the point of view of the camera. I don't have this set up yet, but I am strongly considering getting it.

 **Key Point:** Use your camera bag or prop as a focus prop to allow you to manually set your focus before you step in front of the camera. Use a deep enough aperture to enclose any movements you might make.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

These trees are near a busy roundabout, but I could park on the roadside safely. My focus was set using the tall grasses after I figured out where my best position was with some trial and error shots. A timer delay allowed me to hide the remote and put my hand in position.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

The final image from my Magnolia shoot – this is where I was asked to pose by two car loads of strangers!

DEALING WITH AN AUDIENCE


Eventually you will come across people who will be curious about what you are doing. Kids are often fascinated, especially if you are doing something odd as far as your pose goes, or repeating a certain movement or action over and over again trying to get it right.

It is up to you how you deal with it. I try and ignore them for the most part. I've had people come and ask me if I am OK because they have seen me lying on the ground all crumpled up and not seen the camera, then embarrassment and laughs once I explain.

Sometimes an audience is an inevitable effect of going outside. I would recommend asking them to wait until you are finished and then you can explain. You will have to be OK with people watching you do weird things in public, so be prepared for that.

My oddest experience was one cold spring morning where I was leaping about in front of a magnolia tree in full bloom in a big deserted area near a road. Two cars screeched to a halt and about eight people came running over to me – I had no idea what was going on.

It turned out that they were doing a Birthday Scavenger Hunt and needed something that represented spring. They asked me to pose in front of the magnolia tree with them (I was wearing a long white dress and a long wig) while someone snapped a phone pic and then off they went.

 **Key Point:** There is a good chance you will get an audience, so be prepared for that.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

This heavily composited image was shot in daylight, but I turned it into night time in the final image.



Photograph by Stacey Hill

Unedited RAW image – shot to composite by including a lot of grassy foreground but the tree is chopped off. The top will be blended in – it was a windy day and difficult.

COMPOSITING

If you are shooting to composite your images – either making a really big file by stitching together many frames, or shooting to store backgrounds for future use, or shooting a person to be blended into a background – there are some extra things to consider:

CONSISTENCY

When you blend different images together, they need several things to be consistent or it will be obvious they are different elements.

- Direction and angle of light
- Color tones and temperature
- Camera height, angle, aperture, and focal length





Photograph by Stacey Hill

*The base layer for the composited image above. This was four different images combined.
The railway tracks were a challenge to get the right perspective and angle for all of them.*

BACKGROUND COMPLEXITY

- If you are shooting a tree on a windy day, the branches move. Trying to blend that into multiple shots is very difficult to do well and very time consuming.
- How difficult will it be to remove your subject from the background or blend one into it?

 **Key Points:** Compositing has its own special demands, so make sure you keep those in mind when planning your shoot.

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Photograph by Stacey Hill



Photograph by Stacey Hill

Teddy had his own photo taken as well.

SUMMARY

Taking your self-portrait (or usual portrait) shooting outside opens up all sorts of new vistas and opportunities to create amazing work.

However, it also adds a lot of complexity and new considerations to be accounted for. Some people may think it's too much effort and not bother to try. Other people may be inspired to try out all sorts of new creative endeavors.

This guide is based on my personal experiences, and it covers all the mistakes I made the hard way and all the things I had to learn and think about.

Obviously everyone has different circumstances. If you live in a high-density city environment, there may not be parks and natural areas easily accessible. Instead, you might have interesting stairways, doors, graffiti brick walls, moodily lit alley ways, and bright neon lights.

It's about taking what you have available to you and learning to see it in new, creative ways, and being brave enough to venture out and experiment with them.

I hope you do – it's very satisfying and can result in some memorable images.

Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) What is the most important element of doing self-portraits outside?
- 2) What do I do if people are watching me and asking questions?
- 3) Can I shoot anywhere outside?
- 4) Is there a good time of the day to shoot?
- 5) How do I focus my camera?

Answers:

- 1) Planning in advance.
- 2) It depends on the situation, but try asking them to wait until you are finished and then explain.
- 3) If you are shooting for yourself, most of the time, yes. Some buildings/countries limit photos of the frontage of their premises so get permission first. Commercial use almost always needs permission unless it's a public area.
- 4) Yes, when the light is soft and filtered and not too harsh and the wind is low.
- 5) Use a focusing prop like your camera bag and lock the focus. I shoot in manual to do this.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Stacey Hill invested in her first DSLR back in 2007. While having many adventures out and about in the South Island of New Zealand, Stacey took to blogging about her experiences learning photography. Eventually she discovered the fun and creative possibilities to be had with Photoshop. Stacey can be found having an opinion all over the place:



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