

5 BASIC GUIDELINES FOR OUTDOOR PORTRAITURE

Quick Guide
Written by Kevin Landwer-Johan



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Photographers don't always have access to a studio, so it's good to have guidelines for outdoor portraiture. Knowing how to manage taking portraits outdoors will mean you get more pleasing results. You and your subject will both be happy.

Here are five basic guidelines for outdoor portraiture that will equip you well. Understand and use each one of these five guidelines and your portraiture will improve.

Here is what we will cover in this guide:

- Backgrounds
- Lighting
- Style
- Equipment
- Working with the subject



Knowing how to manage taking portraits outdoors will mean you get more pleasing results.

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GET THE LIGHT RIGHT

Light is the essence of photography. With no light, you have no photo. The more appealing you can make the light, the more interesting your portraits will be.

In a studio you have a huge amount of control over the lighting when you are making portraits. You can easily change the location of the lights and their output value. Outdoor portraits can be more challenging. This is because you are relying on a light source that you have limited control over.

Certainly, you cannot change the intensity or position of the sun in the sky. But you can modify the effect that the sun has on your subject. You can also choose to place your subject in the shade or in direct sunlight for different effects.

Using a reflector or fill flash will help you balance the light on a sunny day. These accessories, when used well, will soften hard shadows on your subject's face.

Even in more subdued lighting conditions, fill flash can provide a flattering light. Using a small softbox with your flash will provide a more favorable light than just the bare flash. The key to using a flash or reflector is to balance the effect of it with the ambient light.

For the photo on the following page, I made a light reading for the background and set my exposure to slightly underexpose it. My flash was on a stand to my left pointing through a small softbox and set to slightly overexpose. The result is a portrait of my friend with very light shadow on her face.

As with any photography, the type of lighting you use will affect the style and mood of your outdoor portraiture. I'll address this more later on in the guide.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE BACKGROUND

Placing your subject against the wrong background can ruin your portrait. Be as careful choosing your background as you are about the type of lighting you use.

Consider, too, how much background you compose for. Do you want to crop tight so there's little or no background? Is the background significant to the person you're photographing? When you're making environmental portraits, you will often want to use more background in your photos.

Using a plain background will help isolate your subject. A background with a lot of detail can be distracting.

Sometimes you'll be able to find a background that you can either underexpose or overexpose. I love finding situations where I can create a good exposure of my subject and the background is underexposed. This results in a clean, dark background.

Another method for ensuring that a background is not distracting is to render it out of focus. A long lens and a wide aperture are the easiest ways to achieve this effect. Be careful when using a very wide aperture for portraits, though; make sure that enough of your subject remains in focus.

Positioning your subject so they are far away from the background will also help you make the background out of focus. Don't make the mistake of having your subject too close to the background. Unless you want the person you are photographing to be interacting with what's behind them, it's usually best to have them separated.

By combining your aperture setting and the distance the subject is from the background, you can control how much is in focus. At times you will not want a total blur behind your subject. You will not want it sharp either. Being mindful of how blurred your background is will help you make better portraits.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

KNOW WHAT STYLE OF PHOTOS YOU WANT

Another basic guideline for outdoor portraiture is to know what style of portraits you want to take. You may have a good idea of your own or you may want to collaborate with the person you are photographing.

When someone has requested you take their portrait, it's best to ask them ahead of time what they want. You are providing a service to them and the best way to make sure they get what they want is to ask. They may not have ideas of their own, but if they do, listen and understand so that you can provide photos they want.

People don't always have their own ideas of how they want a portrait to look. This is when you need to discuss your own ideas with them. You may have a particular style of portrait you like. Show them some examples and see if they like it too.

Come up with a few different concepts before the portrait session. Having a plan will help you remain focused on your task. Trying to think up ideas as to what to do on the spot can be challenging.

Do you want a tight head and shoulders portrait or a full-length photo? Is the background important? What style of lighting will work best? Will having some props on hand help make a more interesting picture? Considering these things ahead of time will help determine the style of photo you take.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

TWO ALTERNATIVE STYLES

I asked this young lady how she wanted to be photographed. She said with anything to do with ice cream. It was a fun concept.

I suggested we go for two alternative styles: one bright and summery, fairly typical to associate with ice cream, and the other darker and more somber, for contrast.

For the first set, I made the lighting, colors, and background bright. I wanted happy colors and very little shadow. No matter how fast we worked, the ice cream melted too quickly, so we went with the flow (so to speak).



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

Dark makeup, a black background, and shadows were used to create a more foreboding mood. Chocolate ice cream was liberally applied to help produce a sense of addiction.

A large factor in this portrait session going well was that my friend was totally onboard with the concepts and committed to making them work.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

PREPARE YOUR EQUIPMENT

Turning up to a portrait session without preparing your camera gear will not help you make better photos. Usually you will know some of the circumstances beforehand and make some predictions as to what equipment you'll need ready.

Make sure you have suitable lenses or a capable zoom to provide for the style of portraits you want. A medium telephoto lens, from 85mm to 135mm on a full-frame camera, makes for a good portrait lens. You can have a comfortable amount of space between you and your subject and there will be no distortion. I like using an 85mm or 105mm for close cropped portraits.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

Using a wider lens, say, in the range of 35mm to 60mm on a full-frame camera, is good when you want to show more of the surroundings. I love using my 35mm lens for environmental portraits. There's very little distortion, and this focal length allows me to get fairly close to my subject. By doing this, I can still include a good amount of background in my compositions.

Making sure your camera and flash batteries are fully charged will help the session go smoothly. Clean lenses and filters will make for better pictures. Maybe you'll want to take along a reflector and a stand for your flash. Having all this prepared ahead of time will allow you to pay more attention to the person you are photographing.

CONNECT WITH YOUR SUBJECTS

One of the most important guidelines for outdoor portraiture, or any portraiture, is to make sure you connect with the person you are photographing. When there's a disconnect between a photographer and their subject, the resulting portraits will lack dynamic.

Knowing the style of photo that you want and having your equipment ready means that you can concentrate on relating to the person. You want them to feel relaxed and confident in front of your camera. If they are not, this will show in their expression and typically they will not like this look.

Many photographers spend most of their energy on technical issues of portraiture. They tend to neglect how important it is to connect with their subjects.

Spending a little time to relate before you start taking photos will help build a positive mood. This is easier with some people than others. Shy people who don't like being photographed are the biggest challenge. Confident people are a lot easier to work with.

If you need time to find a good location to take the photos, or to adjust your camera settings, let your subject know this. If they're interested, talk about what you are doing. This will reassure them that you are doing the best you can to make good photos for them.

Once you have your location and settings sorted out, spend some time talking to the person you'll be photographing. This will help them relax and the two of you to connect.

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Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

CONCLUSION

Being prepared for any photo session is important if you want things to go well. Getting the light and background right for the style of portrait you want is vital to your success. Relating well to your subject will have the biggest effect on their expression in the photos you take.

Managing all these aspects of outdoor portraiture is challenging and takes practice. If you have a friend or family member who enjoys being photographed, hone your skills with them. Experiment with different styles, backgrounds, and lenses. Taking photos of the same person many times will help you understand how important relating well with them is.

Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) What is the essence of photography?
- 2) Name two ways you can modify the effect of sunlight on your subject.
- 3) What type of portrait often requires more background?
- 4) How can you make a background appear blurred?
- 5) Why is it good to have a plan for the style of photo you want?
- 6) What range of lens focal lengths are good for environmental portraits?
- 7) Aside from technical considerations, what is one other important aspect of taking portraits?



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:



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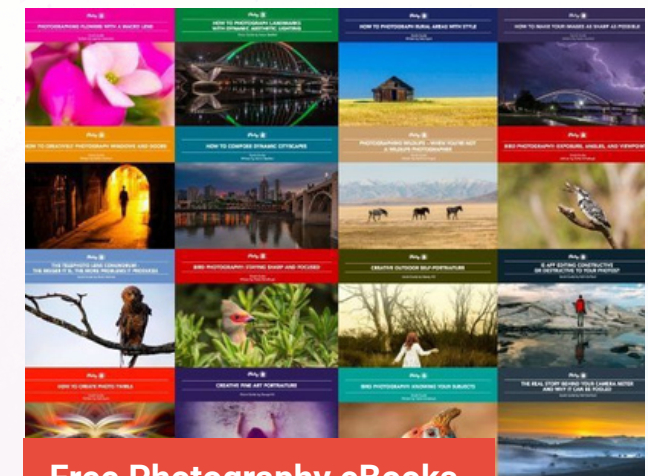
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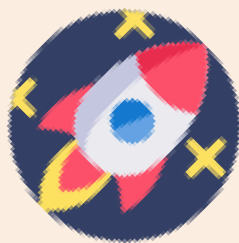
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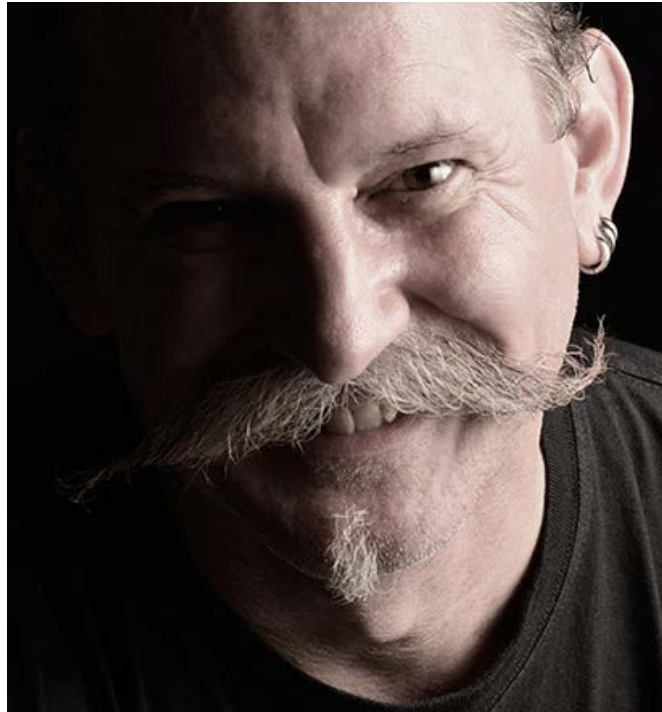
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kevin is a New Zealand professional photographer living in the north of Thailand since 2002. During his career he has worked in editorial, documentary and commercial photography. He now also teaches photography workshops and writes books and articles. You can read his blog [here](#). He moderates a growing [photography group on Facebook](#) and you can see some of his photos on [Instagram](#).

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