
SEVEN TIPS TO MAKE STUNNING BLACK AND WHITE PORTRAITS

Quick Guide
Written by Kent DuFault



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I started my photography journey scared to photograph people. However, my aspiration to become a professional photographer and pay for my way through life with my camera dictated that I do so.

I'm not going to sugarcoat it. It was a long process to reach the point where I was confident enough in my skills that I would take on a paid project.


Early on, I did only black and white photography. I learned about tone and contrast in the darkroom. Photographers today don't have a promising avenue for learning those skills.

That's where guidebooks like this can help you learn quickly and bypass mistakes.

Black and white portraiture is hugely satisfying. I hope you read this guide, take in the information, and put it to use.

Here is what we will cover:

- Starting with a strong composition
- Paying special attention to the lighting: direction, contrast, and texture
- Focusing on the eyes and picking your depth of field (DOF) window carefully
- Using shadows for drama
- Using contrast for style: tonal isolation
- Playing with shapes
- Printing on fine art paper

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn how to create amazing black and white images, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide: [Better Black and White](#).



Photograph by Alexander Krivitskiy

STARTING WITH A STRONG COMPOSITION

One issue that I see with portraiture published online is poor composition. Yes, a portrait is just an image of a person or animal, but remember this: what makes a black and white portrait compelling is the details.

Let's take the image on the left, for example. It's not a horrible shot of this young woman, but the drama is weak because of the composition and framing, which is a shame because the lighting and hair are quite dramatic.

Could this be improved with better composition?



Photograph by Alexander Krivitskiy and
Screenshot by Kent DuFault

*Cropping improves the composition of this
stunning black and white portrait by eliminating
areas of the original frame that were boring!*



Photograph by Alexander Krivitskiy and Editing by Kent DuFault

Key Lesson: Composition is always important. It becomes even more critical in black and white imaging because you don't have color to attract attention and save the day. It's crucial that you study your subjects and sculpt them with light and composition. Look for interesting angles, lines, and shapes that can create a sense of depth and dimension in the image. Remember that the subject's position and posture can also affect the composition and overall mood of the photograph.

PAYING SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE LIGHTING: DIRECTION, CONTRAST, AND TEXTURE

Lighting is vital in creating a dramatic and striking black and white portrait. Consider using natural light, such as a window or open door, to create soft and flattering lighting. Alternatively, use artificial light, such as a strobe or continuous light, to create more dramatic and contrasting lighting. Experiment with different lighting angles and intensities to find the right balance for your subject and desired effect.



Photograph by Denis Agati

Overhead lighting is generally considered taboo in portraiture. It creates strong shadows under the eyes and chin. But you can use that to your advantage depending upon the subject and the story that you wish to tell about them.



Photograph by Kent DuFault

The light in this portrait session was almost non-existent.

The first consideration is always the lighting and your subject. Hard light might be good if your subject is an MMA fighter but not so good if your subject is a child.

When you have no choice but to deal with the light you've been given, look to contrast and texture to add visual interest to a black and white portrait.

The image on the left becomes special mainly due to the contrast and texture of the girl's blowing hair. I also used the difference of the white top against the dull gray background to add story and shape to the subject.

In soft, low lighting, a vignette can add some zing to what might otherwise be a flat-looking photo.



Low contrast is inevitable when the lighting is flat and even. The intensity of the light source doesn't matter.

Photograph by Zulmaury Saavedra


You can also use low contrast to create a mood.




Photograph by Jorg Karg

No matter the lighting quality – soft or hard – when it is directional, texture becomes a solid positive attribute for black and white portraiture.

Texture works well on men, especially when showing character in the face. For women, you don't want a lot of texture in the skin but ample texture in the hair and clothing.

 **Key Lesson:** The first step in stunning black and white portraits is evaluating your subject and the lighting you must work with. Direct overhead lighting is typically considered bad news unless it promotes a theme you have in mind (like the image on page 6). Soft light produces lower contrast and lighter shadows. Hard light creates high contrast with deep-defined shadows. When confronted with low contrast, look for ways to use it in your final product (like the image on page 7).

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Photograph by Zulmaury Saavedra

FOCUS ON THE EYES AND PICK YOUR DEPTH OF FIELD (DOF) WINDOW CAREFULLY

William Shakespeare said, "The eyes are the window to your soul." Nowhere is that more true than in black and white portraiture.



Photograph by Talles Alves



Photograph by Talles Alves and Graphics by Kent DuFault

In black and white portraiture, there is rarely a reason not to place the point of critical focus on the eyes. When color is missing to grab our attention, we will gravitate toward another human element that we all understand: the eyes. Always have at least one eye critically focused.

This is where depth of field (DOF) is also a crucial concern.

Key Lesson: In black and white portraiture, at least one eye should be in critical focus. But there is a caveat to this statement. The eye in focus must be the subject area of the portrait.

When composing a portrait, think about the subject's face in typical composition terms. You want a foreground, a subject area, and a background.

The depth of field should (in most cases) cover at least the subject area and possibly the foreground. The background will be your most minor concern.



Photograph by Richard Jaimes

USE SHADOWS FOR DRAMA

💎 **Key Lesson:** In black and white portraiture (and actually in any black and white photography), it's essential to place perception on shapes, texture, and viewer eye movement. This is usually best accomplished with your placement of light and shadow.


Shadows are super dramatic, and if you're not considering them for every shot you create, you should be!

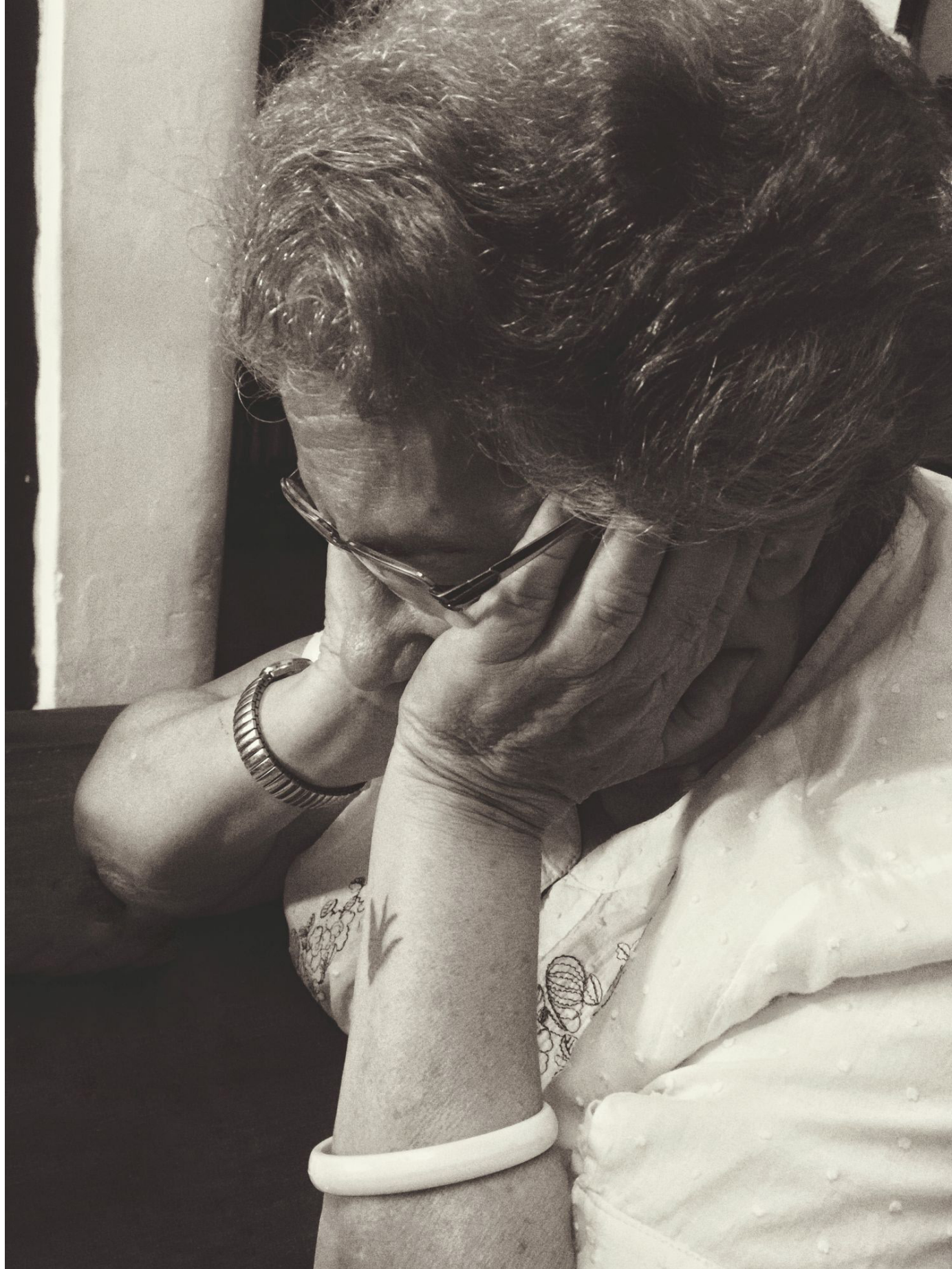


Photograph by Andres Hernandez

Ansel Adams is world-renowned for his black-and-white photos. One of the reasons why was his dedication to tonal values that included deep, rich blacks and vibrant, clean whites with a full scale of tone in between.

This tone scale is easier to achieve now (digitally) than in his day (film and darkroom).


 **Key Lesson:** Strive for deep, rich blacks and creamy, vibrant whites. Use tone to direct the viewer's attention through your black and white portraiture.



Photograph by Kent DuFault

CONTRAST FOR STYLE: TONAL ISOLATION

Contrast is kind of the 'ugly forgotten cousin' to light and shadow. Contrast is fundamental, and photographers usually emphasize keeping it under control and within acceptable boundaries.

 **Key Lesson:** You can use contrast to subliminally send a message about the subjects in your photos.

The image on the left uses low contrast to maximize the message displayed in the older woman's body language.



Photograph by Denis Agati

High contrast tends to inject a feeling of energy.

Key Lesson: Using contrast to direct a viewer's eyes to a particular location within your black and white image is known as tonal isolation. Take the image on the left as an example. We have two portrait subjects. Higher contrast fits the mood of their attire and location. Tonal isolation has been used to add greater visual weight to the woman. The man is still quite visible and a critical element of the story, but he is indeed supplicant to her as the subject area.



Photograph by Kent DuFault


Another example of the power of tonal isolation is through contrast. This scene is quite busy, yet the eyes go right toward the man sitting on the bridge. Why? The power of tonal separation!



Photograph by Kent DuFault

PLAYING WITH SHAPES

This was a neighbor of mine, and I was fascinated by the shape of his hair. I wanted to accomplish two things with this black and white portrait. Firstly, I wanted to emphasize the shape of his hair. Secondly, I wanted to reveal his face so the viewer recognized who it is in the picture.

 **Key Lesson:** Study your black and white portrait subjects for interesting shapes in their face, hair, and body. Consider creating a dramatic shape through your choice of pose, props, and makeup.



This black and white portrait also uses shape to create drama. The difference between the image on the left and the image on the previous page is that the shape was present in the subject for the image on the previous page, and in the image on the left, the photographer (me) used shape, tone, contrast, and critical focus placement to create drama.

Photograph by Kent DuFault



Photograph by David Hofmann


PRINTING ON FINE ART PAPER


Printing a fine art black and white image, portrait or otherwise, is the final step in this process. Black and white photographs are presented best on paper rather than on screen.

Printing your black and white portrait on fine art paper can add a tactile and emotional dimension to the photograph. Choose paper with a matte or textured finish to enhance the black and white tones and create a more immersive experience. Alternatively, consider printing the portrait on a metal or acrylic substrate to create a modern and sleek look.

Printing at home can be challenging, but it is another step in the process for an artist.

There is no shame in printing at a commercial lab. That's primarily what I do these days.

 **Key Lesson:** If you use a commercial lab to print your black and white portraits, get to know them. Find someone you like and stick with them. Use art paper versus standard printing paper for additional creative input.

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Photograph by Kent DuFault

CONCLUSION

Remember, producing stunning black and white portraits takes time and practice. Start with these tips and techniques and experiment with different lighting, editing, and printing styles to find your unique style and voice. With dedication and persistence, you can create beautiful and impactful black and white portraits that capture the essence of your subject.

Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) What should all black and white portraiture start with?
- 2) Why is composition even more critical in black and white portraiture than in color?
- 3) What three attributes of the lighting should you pay special attention to?
- 4) True or False: Overhead lighting is always bad in a black and white portrait.
- 5) True or False: You should always strive to create soft lighting, as hard lighting never works in a black and white portrait.
- 6) What can you create when you use low contrast?
- 7) What type of lighting produces low contrast?
- 8) Where should the critical focus be placed?
- 9) When considering the DOF window, what area of a black and white portrait is of the least concern?
- 10) Shadows are important for two reasons. Name them.
- 11) What can contrast help to do?
- 12) In a black and white portrait setting, where can you find shapes?



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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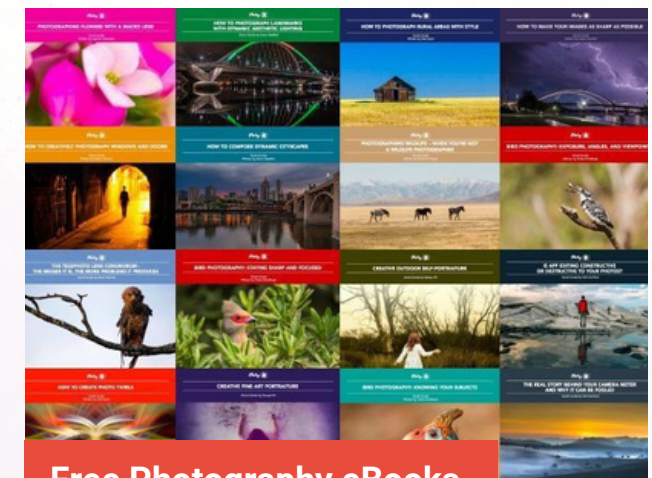
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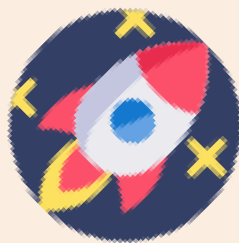
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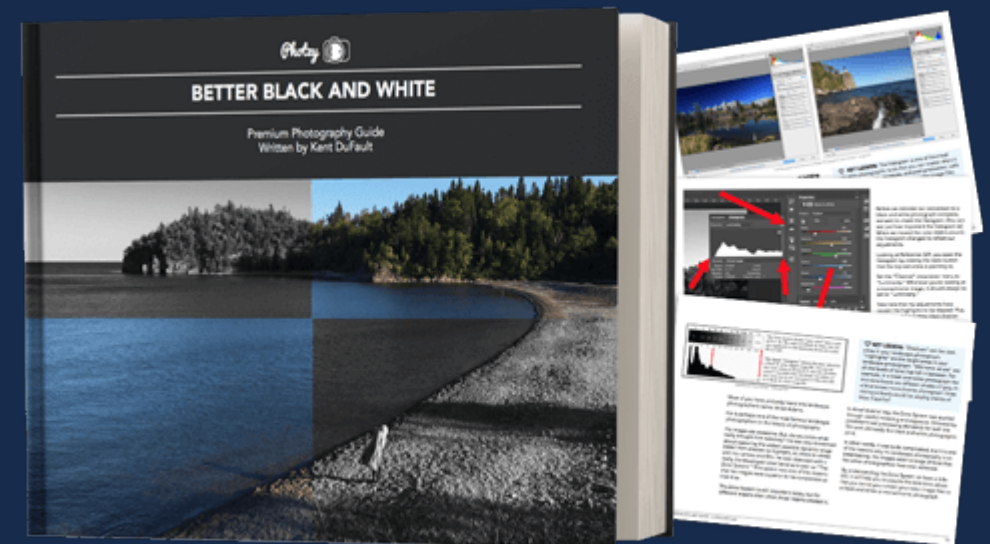
Kent DuFault is a professional photographer and author.

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