
MY FIVE FAVORITE PORTRAIT POSES AND WHY I LOVE THEM

Quick Guide
Written by Kevin Landwer-Johan



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When I first started photographing people, I was so nervous. There was no way I was going to suggest a particular pose or direct them in any way. I'd usually take a quick photo or two and hope for the best. After starting work as an assistant in the Illustrations Department of a daily newspaper, I soon realized that I'd need to up my people photography game.


Even though I was only the department assistant, I'd occasionally be sent out on assignment. The Illustrations Department was the arena for the editorial photographers. The photographers' task was to illustrate the stories with our pictures. Most photos published in the newspaper had at least one person in them.

I learned that by asking people to pose in a certain way it would help them to relax and really participate in the process of being photographed. Showing an interest in who they were and their story was

affirming. They felt good about being photographed. I've continued to develop my ideas and now have a selection of 'go to' poses I suggest when I'm making portraits. In this guide, I'll share five of my favorite portrait poses and why I love them.

Here is what will be discussed:

- Portraits of people posing with props
- Posing without posing
- Including people's hands in imaginative ways
- Using a higher POV
- Sometimes you just have to jump

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn how to create amazing portraits, grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: [The Art of Portrait Photography](#).



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

PORTRAITS OF PEOPLE POSING WITH PROPS

Working at the newspaper Illustrations Department, I learned that one of the best ways to connect a person with their story was to use a prop. Getting them to hold something or interact with a meaningful object helped join the dots visually.

For example, I would have football players hold the ball and wear their gloves if they were the goalkeeper, or a scientist with their equipment, or a sculptor holding some clay or other materials. I would include any item that supported and gave a visual acknowledgment to the story the person was a part of.




Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

With my photo of the ceramic artist, we went one step further. It had been a dream of hers to be photographed in a studio with clay. Lots of clay. Everywhere and all over. So, she came with clay and we made good use of it. This was a fun session. Not for a newspaper, but I think you get the idea from the photos.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

With the help of an assistant, we progressively added more and more clay. This then led to another idea for a portrait of a young woman who loved ice cream. This portrait session progressed in a similar manner with more and more ice cream being added to her skin.

 **Key Lesson:** Usually, the more relevant the prop is to the person, the better story your portrait will tell. But sometimes, try using an interesting prop that has no connection with your subject.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

POSING WITHOUT POSING

Another favorite from my newspaper days was to pose people so it looked like they were not posing. Having people look natural in photos creates a different feel to an image. You don't always have to control everything.

As a photographer it's often best to communicate well with your subjects and be clear about what you want. People will sometimes expect that you'll manage every aspect of the portrait. They want you to tell them where to look, how to position their head, arms, hands, and how to do everything just right. This often leads to very contrived, conservative-looking portraits.


My preferred method of getting people to pose so they look like they are not posing is to give them a few prompts. Make a couple of suggestions and then encourage them to continue naturally. Many times, this involves them doing something.

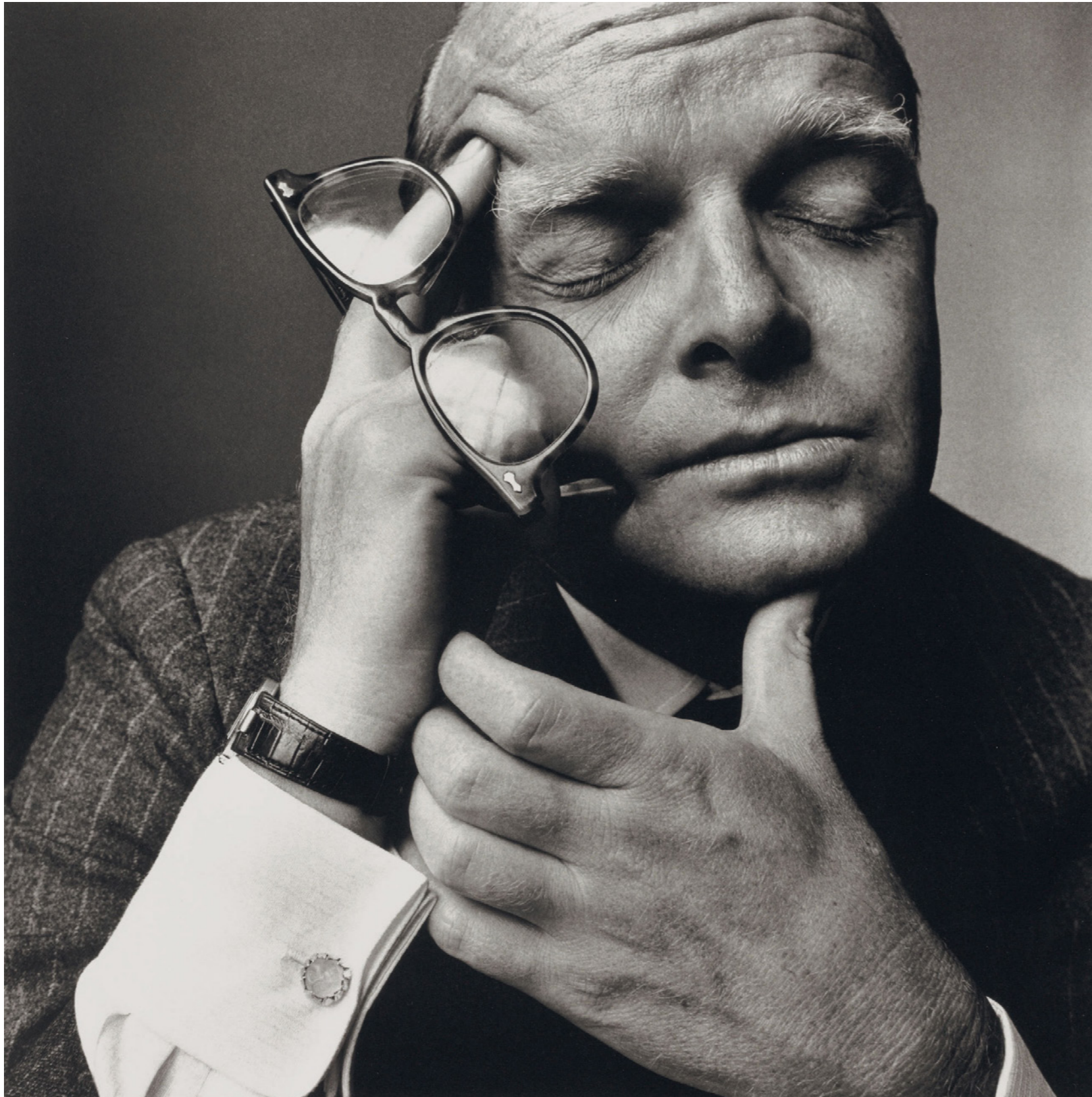


Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

I love photographing artists. I get them doing what they do: being creative. My best portraits using this method are when my subject understands what I'm asking them to do and then pretends that I'm not there taking their photo. I'll often tell them to ignore me and keep doing what they do.

Other times I'll make portraits like this when I find people making things in public, like this man who was weaving a hat with palm fronds in a street market. I asked if it was okay for me to photograph him and he indicated that I could. He continued doing what he was doing and I did not have to interact verbally with him further. I returned to the market and found him a few weeks later to give him some prints.

 **Key Lesson:** Always take more photos than you think you'll need. When people are busy doing something, you are more likely to capture a greater percentage of photos that you won't want to use. Try to predict when the best moments are to take your pictures. Think about the decisive moment.



Photograph by Irving Penn

INCLUDE PEOPLE'S HANDS IN IMAGINATIVE WAYS

I love the images of Irving Penn. His work has inspired me for many years. One common technique Mr. Penn used in many of his portraits was to use people's hands in imaginative ways. Probably the most well-known of these is his portrait of Truman Capote.

Using hands in a portrait can bring more life and creativity when done well. A person's hands can tell you a lot about them. So, when you include them as a meaningful part of your portraits, the images have more life.

How you get a person to position their hands for a portrait determines the feel of the picture. It can make the photo more dramatic. It can help to conjure intrigue, or even provide a sense of peace and rest or reflection.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

Communicating well with your subject is important so that they feel comfortable with what you're doing. Remember that they cannot see how they look, until you take a photo and show it to them. So, first you must convince them that your idea for including their hands in the photo will create a more interesting photo.

It may take a few attempts, and you'll have to tweak the position of your subject's hands. Take a few photos and then get them to move their hands a little. Or you can move them to position them how you want. It always pays to make slight changes, take a few more photos, and show your subject. When working like this, you'll come up with some creative portraits that include people's hands in imaginative ways.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

◆ **Key Lesson:** Always check out a person's hands when you are taking their portrait. Especially older people. They may not like their wrinkly hands, but including them in a few portraits can produce a deeper illustration of who they are.

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Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

GETTING A HIGH POV

Choosing an alternative perspective for a portrait often produces some more interesting results. Sometimes I like to get above my subjects and photograph them.

Looking down from above puts your subject in a rather unusual situation. Most of the time we see other people at eye level. So, by positioning yourself and your camera above your subject, you alter what's normal. This can lead to some very creative portraits when everything falls into place.

I took the image on the left from a foot bridge in Bangkok. I wanted to incorporate the movement of the people passing. I asked my model to stand still for the photos. I explained my technique and she understood well and was excited to experiment. I had my camera on a tripod and used a shutter speed of 1/10th of a second. This kept her frozen and produced enough motion blur in the movement of the passersby.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan


In this studio portrait I hopped up on a ladder to get slightly above my subject. She was comfortable with me trying different ideas. When I suggested I get a few images of her looking up at the camera, she liked the idea. She also liked the results.

This type of angle does not work for everyone. If you're going to try photographing someone from above, you've got to make sure you still get a good portrait.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

This is one of my favorite portraits. I'd already photographed this couple on a few occasions, so knew that they were open to doing things a little differently. I also knew they were patient enough that I could experiment not only with my camera angle, but also with the lighting. I wanted my lights to illuminate both their faces.

 **Key Lesson:** Use this technique carefully. Getting up above someone to take their photos will not always produce flattering results.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

SOMETIMES YOU JUST HAVE TO JUMP

Jump photos are fun. I was working with a group of young people creating a series of different portraits. One of them asked me if they could jump. She told me they often took photos of each other jumping and would love some professional pictures of them in the air. I was happy to oblige.

I've continued to have fun with jump photos, mostly with younger subjects. Both outdoors and in the studio, jump photos produce some wildly varied results. But they are always a whole lot of fun.

Outdoor jump photos are easier. With more space, you can position your subject and give yourself enough space. I'll often get my subject to jump a few times before I take any photos. By doing this, I can take a look at how high they jump and what they do with their arms and legs. I like to make sure that I'm not cropping limbs off. If I need to, I'll change my lens or reposition myself so I can capture the jump and have the desired amount of empty space in my frame.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

In the studio there are a few more challenges. Space in a studio is often limited. This makes jump photos more challenging because you'll run out of space or background space. You are also more restricted with lens choice. Using studio strobes can slow things down. You need to inform your subject that they can only jump once the lights are fully charged and ready to fire. If they get into a rhythm and jump too frequently, then you're going to miss most of them.



◆ **Key Lesson:** For more dramatic jump photos, get down low. This is usually easier outdoors. When you can find a location where your subject is above you and they can jump, photograph them from a low angle. This increases the appearance of how high your subject is jumping.

Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan




Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

CONCLUSION

It takes time and practice to learn anything. Learning to photograph people and develop a skill is challenging for many photographers, but once you start and are motivated to keep going, you'll come up with a set of posing ideas that you can use time and time again.

There are likely a ton of more conservative posing ideas than these favorite ones of mine. Like any photography, there is no right or wrong way of doing what you do. If you like any of these poses, don't just copy them, steal them. Make them your own by including your own creative perspective in how you use them.

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Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) Why was the Illustrations Department in the newspaper called this name?
- 2) What's one of the best techniques for connecting a portrait subject with what they do?
- 3) What's one technique that you can use to capture more natural-looking portraits?
- 4) Why is it important to take more photos of people doing things than you think you'll need?
- 5) Do you need to communicate well with your portrait subjects?
- 6) Does getting up above someone to take their portrait always produce flattering results?
- 7) Is it easier to take jump portraits indoors or outdoors?



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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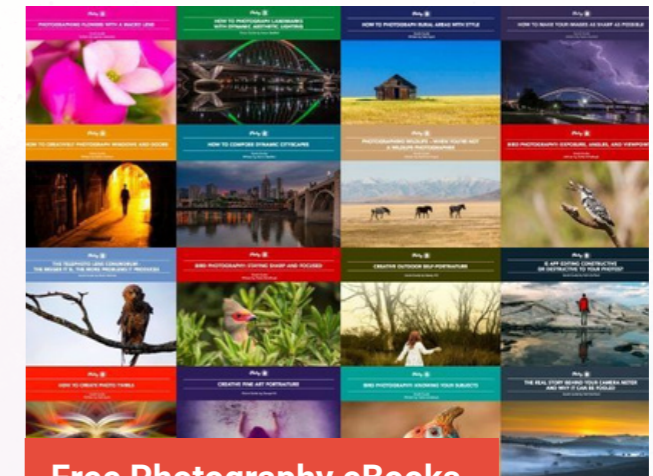
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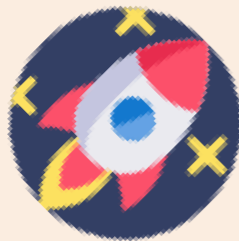
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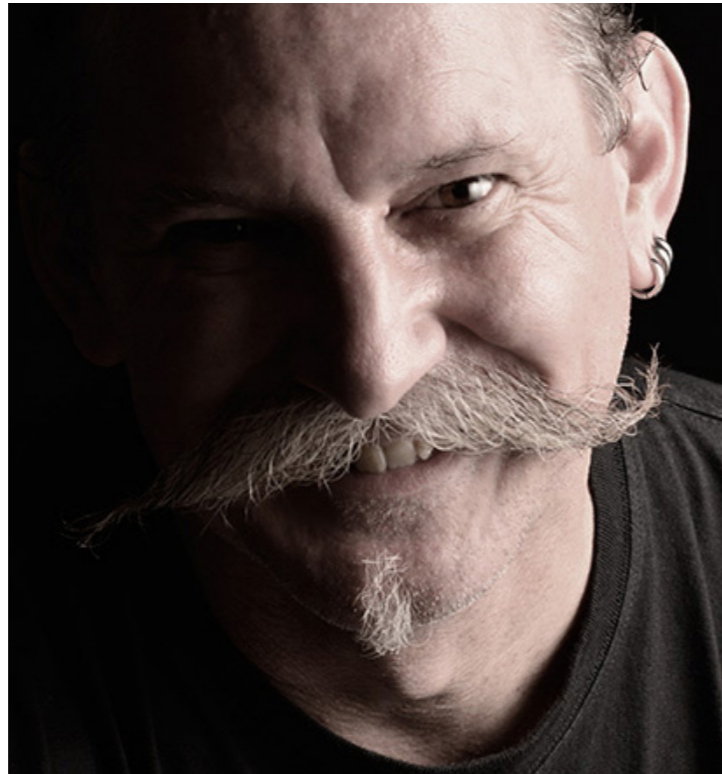
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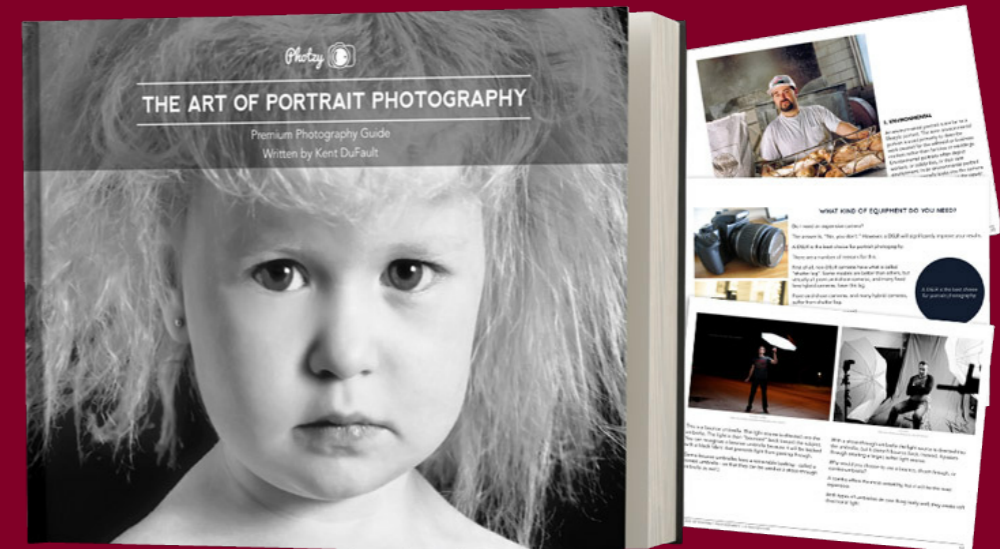
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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 runs [photography workshops based at his home](#) in rural northern Thailand.

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