

## Composing People Pictures

At the heart of composing good people pictures are a few basic decisions: what picture format to use, where to position the subject within the frame, what other picture elements to include, where to position those elements, and which camera angle is most effective.

### Horizontal vs. vertical format

The majority of people pictures are horizontal in format probably because it's easier to hold a camera horizontally. The horizontal format does work best for most group pictures. However, a vertical image can be very effective for pictures ranging from full-length portraits to tight facial close-ups. The unexpectedness of a vertical format can also give an image added impact.

### Subject placement

To hold the attention of the viewer, give your pictures a bold and dramatic arrangement.

Avoid putting your subject directly in the center of the picture unless you are striving for a formal arrangement in which the subject firmly commands attention.

*Rule of thirds:* In candid pictures of people, it's often wise to follow the traditional rule of thirds. Imagine a pair of lines dividing the picture into thirds horizontally and a second pair dividing it into thirds vertically. Place the most important visual element—usually the face (or eyes in a close-up)—on one of the points where the lines intersect.

*Open space:* When a person moves across your camera's field of view, the final image usually has much more impact when the subject is off-center. Leave the open space in the direction in which the subject is headed. Similarly, if a subject is looking off to the side, it's best to leave more space in that direction.



### Backgrounds

Indoors or outdoors, a plain background will focus attention on your subject instead of a dozen other things. Indoors, avoid distracting furniture, toys, patterned wallpaper, and bright lamps. Outdoors, don't let tree limbs, utility poles, wires, signs, and other people distract attention from your center of interest.

### Point of view

As you compose your picture in the camera viewfinder, think about what you want to include, other than your subject that will make the picture better. Simply changing your point of view can dramatically alter the mood of a picture.

*Eye level:* Shooting at eye level, either head on or at an angle, is usually best for most people pictures. It's the way we most often look at the world, so it conveys realism. Too low an angle in a close-up exaggerates the size of the nose, mouth, and chin.

Too high an angle—often the problem in photographing children and seated subjects exaggerates the size of the head compared to the rest of the body. When you photograph children, you may need to kneel or even sit on the ground.

*High and low angles:* At times, however, you'll want to use a different angle to create a certain effect. For example, in a full-length portrait, an eye-level view makes a subject look shorter. A picture taken from a squatting position more accurately indicates height and can lend an aura of authority and power. Even a high angle, which is generally unflattering, can sometimes add drama or eliminate a distracting background.

### Close-ups

Close-ups convey a feeling of intimacy and focus attention on your subject. More distant views tend to emphasize the foreground and include too much that is confusing and distracting to the viewer.

As you look through the viewfinder and move toward your subject to fill the frame, notice how you eliminate things that don't add to the picture. Even though you can crop your picture later if you plan to enlarge it or manipulate it on a computer, it's usually better to crop carefully when you take the picture.

## Lighting and Flash

An automatic flash is included on just about every camera sold today. And most include a fill-flash setting for those less-than-perfect lighting situations that need a little boost. But the camera isn't fail-proof. You still need to know how and when to use these features.

### Fill flash

Fill flash is included on most of today's cameras, and is a favorite feature. It is just enough flash to fill in areas of a picture that would otherwise be too dark.



Use fill flash for sunny day portraits to fill in those dark shadows under the eyes, nose, or under the rim of a baseball hat. It can even help in a difficult lighting situation, such as a dark complexion on a beach, or a child playing in the snow. Fill flash is also useful for side-lit and back-lit pictures. For instance, a backlit scene may have enough bright areas in the background to provide an "average" brightness for the entire picture, but the actual subject is left in the dark. Fill flash balances the scene so that the subject is properly exposed, and the background is left alone.

### **Flash off**

There are occasions when your camera thinks the flash is needed, but in fact it isn't. You probably have a "Flash Off" (or similar wording) setting on your camera. Here are a few examples of when to use it:

- When you are too far away from your subject for the flash to be effective.
- When the flash would create annoying reflections from mirrors and other shiny surfaces.
- At sunset or in other low-light situations where you'd like a foreground subject to be silhouetted.
- Where the quality of the existing light is beautiful, like a kitten sleeping in the sunbeam.
- Where flash is not allowed (steady yourself against a wall and anchor your elbows at your side).

## **Lighting for portraits**

Light can dramatically alter the appearance of your subject. By simply changing the lighting, you can transform the mood from glamorous to ghoulish.

### **Hardness of light**

Bright sunlight is hard and creates dark, clearly defined shadows that can hide the face emphasizes wrinkles and blemishes causes unattractive squinting

Light from an overcast sky or a north window is soft and creates soft shadows that don't hide the face minimizes wrinkles and blemishes reveals subtle skin tones and hues allows the subject to open his or her eyes wide

### **Direction of light**

The direction of sunlight, especially hard sunlight, changes how people look. Which direction is best? That depends on the effect you're trying to achieve.

*Front light:* Harsh sunlight shining directly into a person's face flattens the face and causes squinting.

*Overhead light:* At midday, the sun is overhead and casts unpleasant facial shadows. Use the camera's flash to lighten harsh facial shadows.

*Side light:* Early and late in the day, position your subject so the sun strikes only one side of the face. With one side of the face brightly lit and the other side in shadow, you will create a dramatic effect. To reduce the shadow effect, use fill flash.

*Back light:* Occurs when you position your subject facing away from the sun. This places your subject's face in shadow, eliminating squinting and often adding an attractive glow to hair. Use fill flash to lighten your subject's face.

### **Indoor lighting**

Taking good indoor pictures is challenging because the light is often dim. Natural light is so much brighter than most artificial light that it's usually best to take indoor pictures of people with indirect light from a north window (or any window not admitting direct sunlight).

*Window light:* Soft, indirect window light is good for people pictures. If the side of the face away from the window is too dark, reposition yourself and the subject so more of the face receives window light. Since dim window light may force the camera to use a slow shutter speed, hold the camera extra steady or use a tripod.

*Artificial lights:* Table and ceiling lights don't often provide attractive lighting for people pictures. Try to avoid using them, opting for flash or window light. If you must use them, hold the camera extra steady or use a tripod.

### **Flash**

A built-in camera flash is great for indoor snapshots of people, but not great for portraits. For portraits use window light. Follow these tips for using the flash to take indoor pictures of people:

Position your subject within the flash range for your camera (see your camera manual - usually 4 to 10 feet).

When photographing a group, make sure that all your subjects are about the same distance from the flash.

Ask your subjects to look slightly away from the camera or turn on all the room lights to avoid red eye. Red eye is caused when the flash hits the back of the eye and reflects back into the camera lens. The extra brightness will help reduce the size of your subjects' pupils letting less light in.

Avoid use of the "red eye reduction" flash setting—to many people it's distracting and confusing.

Watch out for shiny surfaces—such as mirrors, windows, and eyeglasses—that can reflect the flash. Stand at an angle to shiny surfaces to prevent unwanted reflections of the flash in your photos. Ask subjects wearing glasses to turn or tilt their heads slightly.

Batteries that are approaching exhaustion will not give full flash power even if the camera is still working.

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