

# 4-Week Short Course: Portrait Photography

## Lighting on Location and in the Studio with John H. Siskin

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### Lesson #1: Outdoor Portraits

Welcome to class, and thanks for joining me for this online creative adventure! Class participation is so important in the virtual classroom, so if you haven't already, be sure to check out the Student Introductions in Campus Square. Also, feel free to post a question or share a photo in the Q&A, Outtakes and Followups section.



Now for the first lesson ... enjoy!

The significance of a really good portrait is that it provides a special sense of intimacy between the subject and the viewer. It is this intimacy we seek to photograph, not just a face. Even a shot of hands can be a portrait.

So many great portraits have been made over the years that it is hard to know where to start in discussing them. But I would like to call your attention to the portraits of North American Indians made by Edward S. Curtis at the beginning of the twentieth century. This project was a mammoth undertaking to document the remaining American Indian Tribes.

The point I would like to make here is that Mr. Curtis labored under difficulties that we cannot even begin to conceive of. But he managed consistently to make portraits that are intimate and connected to people who were often suspicious of him.

I see too many portraits that don't connect with the subjects. If you aren't familiar with Edward Curtis' work, I suggest that you may want to search him out online. Here's a good site with his [photos](#).

Our purpose in this course is to improve our skills at creating an intimate portrait, which, of course, will mean that we need to learn to see better and see differently. In order to do this, we will first study the *human face* so that we may better bring out the details of the face and render them more three dimensionally in our two dimensional medium.

We need to learn to see the mood of a person as it is reflected in his/her features. It is much easier to photograph a feeling that is really in the face than to direct someone to show a feeling that he/she doesn't have. Part of the skill of making good portraits is becoming a good director, without overdirecting.

In addition to studying the face, we need perception of the subject's feelings. We have two extremes in ways to capture a person. First, we must get them to cooperate and sit for us. Second, place yourself in a position where you can shoot candid portraits. Of course it is possible to catch a candid moment even in the most formal studio setting.

When Curtis worked, he had a large camera with glass plates instead of film. We have a better opportunity to react quickly to our subjects than ever before, so we should be making beautiful and intimate portraits.



**Bonnie Hunt**

This shot is very flattering to a face that shows graceful aging.

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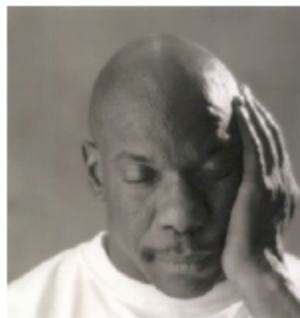
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I think that the first key in making portraits is to "open yourself up" to your subject. Your subject is your partner in making a portrait, so it is best to be sensitive to how you direct him/her. I think that I do better when I tell my subject what my goals are and try to help them into the right frame of mind.

For instance, I often encourage my subjects to close their eyes and imagine special places they have been, sort of a 2-minute meditation. I listen to them talk about what their goals for the session are and what I am hoping to get. Most of all, I try to open myself to that I can connect to them. If I can't connect to them, I know I won't be able to make the best possible portrait of them.

In this class, there are a few difficult things we will need to discuss, because all people do not look alike. One of the most difficult is skin color and other differences based on where your family ancestors originated. For instance, I can use a much longer tonal scale with pictures of people of African origin than persons of European origin.

While we are on the subject, an anthropologist's findings concluded that



**Randy Thompson**

Shot with a home made lens to create a special glow in

children learn to recognize faces based on different criteria depending on the family the child grows up in.

the portrait.  
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A European child looks at hair color and eye color for instance while a Japanese child pays attention to chin shape and other anatomical, physical structurings. Since learning this, I am more sensitive to how people view a portrait.

We will also talk about how a person's body is displayed - another difficult subject. Keep in mind that some poses will be interpreted as aggressive and others as overtly sexual. Actually, those interpretive poses may be related. It is important to be aware of the story your subject is telling with his/her body.

Finally, a photograph tells a story about age. We can control this story somewhat with light and make-up. But we want to make sure we are not telling a story about the age of our subject that he/she would not approve.

## Looking at the Face



**Collin Poole**

This is a good face, good cheek bones and good chin.

The face shows good structure.

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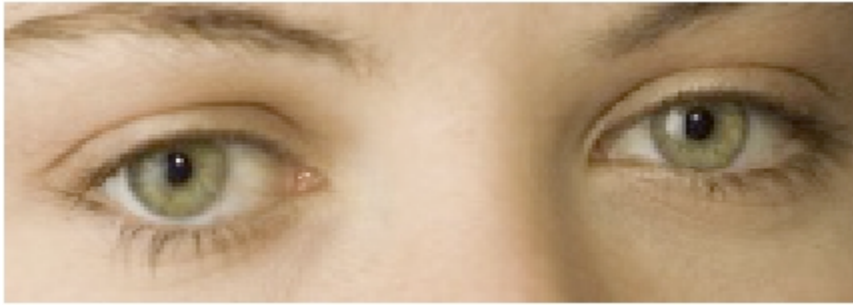
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Ok, from the top down - hair. I don't know how many billion dollars are spent in the U.S. each year on hair care, but you can use this as evidence that hair is important! If you have a make-up artist who also does hair, it is a huge advantage. Several things to consider, if the hair is thinning keep the chin up.

If the subject's hair is similar in tone to the background you will need to put light on the background or the hair, or change to a different background to separate the subject's head from the background.

If the subject has dark hair, put some light on it to create highlights. This makes hair appear glossy and lively.

**Foreheads** are one of the areas where life experience is written on the face. Two things to understand about wrinkles, they are caused by muscle tissue, so if you relax the facial muscles, the wrinkles will be lessened. The other thing is that shadows make wrinkles more prominent. So if you have soft, even light, people will look younger and less worried. You make a soft, even light by using larger light sources.



### **Eyes**

This shows two different kinds of catch light in the eye. A larger diffused catch light from a large light source and a small hard catch light from a smaller light source.

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The eyes have an almost mystical pull in a good portrait. You can help that effect by keeping the subject from squinting. Do not have the sun directly behind you when shooting a portrait; the subject will be unable to open his/her eyes.

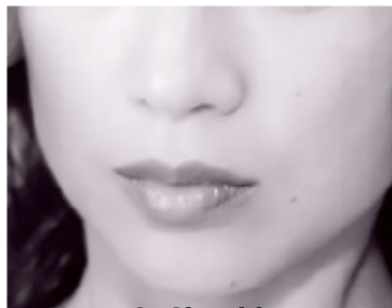
Many women apply eye make-up that is designed to be seen from several feet away. A portrait "feels" like a much more intimate distance; consequently, eye make-up often photographs as garish. This is an excellent reason to work with a make-up artist. They generally do a much more subtle job for portrait photography.

A good portrait often has a catch light in the eyes, a reflection of from one of your lights. This gives the eye a sparkle. I prefer to have a small, round catch light, but almost any small bright spot will help. This is a good reason for using flash-fill outdoors. The catch light will be particularly helpful with someone who has dark eyes.

**Cheekbones** give the face a greater sense of shape. If a subject has no definition in the sides of the face the face will appear round and fat, generally not interpreted as attractive in the U.S.

Lights and make-up help to increase definition of the cheekbones. In this case you want light that will allow you to develop shadows, particularly on the side of the face. An easy way to accomplish this is to have most of your light come from one side of the face.

A large light source, say the sun through a diffuser, at about 30° off the center of the face will leave one edge of the face



### **Nose & Cheekbones**

This shot shows the need to be careful when shooting Asian faces. The softer contours of the nose and cheekbones require careful lighting, lens choice and make-up.

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shadowed which improves the definition of the cheekbone.

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This light will have a similar effect on the nose. It looks good if the light source is big enough. If the light source is too small, the shadows will be unpleasant. There are other considerations with the nose: it is best not to shoot up someone's nostrils.

If you have a person who is "gifted" in the nose department, you can reduce the apparent size of the nose. First, shoot directly at the center of the nose while the nose is pointed directly at you. It helps if you use a telephoto lens. Second, apply flat even light that doesn't create shadows from the nose. This will reduce the tendency of the light to define the nose and the camera to show the nose.



### Mouth

There are a lot of ways to make bad photos of the mouth.

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The **mouth** is a critical feature in a photograph. This is an area where bad make-up will really show. First your subject should not attempt to make the lips look larger by extending lip-gloss beyond the actual lips.

The camera tends to exaggerate the colors of the face, consequently either outrageous or muted color works best on the face in general and the mouth in particular.

When someone uses a lip color that is strong in otherwise normal make-up, the effect may be disturbing.

I feel that the mouth should be closed or closed with a slight smile most of the time, certainly closed if the teeth are bad. In open mouth portraits I like to feature the teeth. The problem is when the mouth is open and the teeth are invisible, or when you see more gums than teeth. People are generally not conscious of how they hold their lips and teeth, so this is an important area to be aware of. Of course a great smile with the teeth is always good, but be careful of a forced grin.

There are easy **chins**, and there are difficult chins. Easy chins are single rather than double. Easy chins show good separation from the throat. Things you can do for a poor chin, aside from growing a beard, is to tip the chin up and use slightly darker make-up on the throat than on the chin. The chin is important to a photograph; it can give the subject strength and determination. One big problem with the throat is when the make-up artist or the subject forgets to blend the face make-up into the throat. This is a very unnatural look.

## Tools for Outdoor Portraits

In addition to your camera and lenses, there are two primary tools for the outdoor portrait: reflectors and strobes. There are many disc reflectors that are very popular. They are inexpensive and easy to carry. Unfortunately, they are tough to use. You almost have to have an assistant who is holding the thing.

An alternative tool is to use a reflective cloth on a light panel. I make the light panels; they stand on their own. This is not as good as an assistant, but it is tough to fit an assistant into a camera bag. I use these in a number of situations, so I am including instructions for building a light panel.

You can of course get a light panel and reflective cloth at many large camera stores. Unfortunately, these panels do not always stand on their own.

The next three shots show a portrait without any additional lighting, with a reflector and with the camera's built in flash used to add light to the face.



**Lance in existing light**

There is too much light coming from behind Lance.

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**Lance light from a reflector**

I am holding the reflector on the right side. The camera is on a tripod. I'm using the self timer. These reflectors are not easy to use without an assistant.

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### **Holding the reflector**

If you are using a self timer sometimes the focus isn't right.

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### **Lance with fill flash**

The source of the strobe light is the built in flash on my camera.

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Your ability to use a reflector is dependent on the light available to reflect. Strobes are more adaptable than the reflector, they don't depend on daylight.

## **Using Strobes Outdoors**

This is probably the best use for the manufacturer's proprietary TTL (Through The Lens) strobe for your camera. This is an easy way to control the light your camera will photograph and create better outdoor portraits. The object of this lighting, called flash fill, is to add light that will primarily affect the shadows in your shot, while leaving the highlights unchanged.

The dSLR cameras on the market have a flash compensation dial that enables you to balance the flash with the daylight. One of the great things about working with digital cameras is that you can instantly evaluate the effect that the strobe has on your shot.

It is important to know that you will often need to turn the flash compensation dial to a negative value to get a good shot. You may want to check this effect out by taking one shot with the strobe and one without it.

You can also do this with a strobe that is not dedicated to your camera, checking your exposure with the histogram and the proofing image. The aperture will affect both the light from the strobe and the ambient light, while the shutter speed will affect only the ambient light unless you go over the sync speed.

If you exceed the *sync speed*, the shutter will be covering part of the shot when the strobe goes off. This will happen any time you use strobes at a shutter speed that exceeds the sync speed.



This is my camera set-up with a Norman 200B strobe. This is almost too much light for outdoor use.

**Norman 200B rig**

I use this set-up for outdoor flash among other things.

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This next shot is from a series I did with Peter Aguilar, using the Norman 200B. The one thing about having a lot of strobe is that you can choose to have a lot of depth of field and still control the amount of light in both the background and at the subject.

More light from the strobe means a higher aperture and more ability to work at a greater distance.



**Peter Aguilar**

This outdoor shot uses flash fill to separate Peter from the background.

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Collin Flash Fill #2

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Collin Flash Fill #1  
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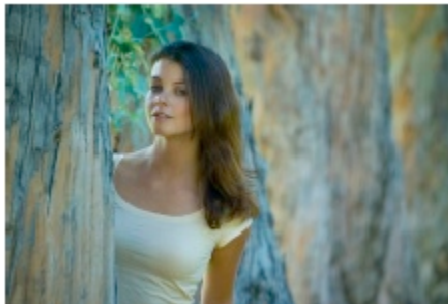
This shot is taken with a modified Vivitar 283. These were inexpensive strobes with good features. In addition to the normal stuff on a 283, mine has an extra capacitor for double the power, a bounce diffuser and a metal foot connector that is also the sync connector.

I never saw a light I didn't want to improve. One of the things I like about the 283 is that it has a manual power output adapter, shown in the adjoining picture. This enables me to adjust the power I want for a flash fill or other use application. Of course it helps that I can evaluate the light

with my digital camera. Control is only useful when you have feedback. Most of the high-end TTL strobes will do a good a job, though they do not have as much power.

### Looking for Good Outdoor Backgrounds for Portraits

In making portraits outdoors, there are several logistical things to keep in mind. One obvious thing is to be careful about where you place your subject.



**Collin with Trees**

Parks are good places to shoot adults as well as children!

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Collin Walking Between the  
Trees

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The real key here is to stay aware of the whole environment. Doing that starts with getting to the shoot early, if possible. This gives you time to check out the area and choose where you want to shoot.

If you are shooting a young woman, maybe a swing set will make a good picture; but put it out of mind with the senior citizens.

Trees can give a nice contrast between leaves, bark and skin, the canopy can also help you deal with a bright sun. The problem with mottled light, mixed sun and shadow, is that it will fool a meter. So be sure to check the LCD and the histogram.

So I start by checking out the site on that day. I already know the site is good, and where I might like to shoot. But now I need to check what parts of the site might have picnickers, or some other visual problem. When the model shows up, and any other support staff, I want to look organized.

If you can have the sunlight framing the face, the effect is wonderful! There is just a little sun falling on the right edge of her our models face.

But the cContrast between sun and shadow can ruin a shot. In this case, the strobe brought up the light on the face. This reduced the contrast in the shot; . ilt also gives some sparkle to the eye. Also notice that the short depth- of- field isolates the face; . tThis increases the three-dimensionality of the shot. She jumps off the page.



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One more thing I want to mention about the shot: usually I try to avoid having empty space on the left side of the shot. Since the eye enters the shot from the left side, as if reading a page of text, it is good to give the eye something to look at right away. It works in this shot because the face has so much shape.

I didn't take any lighting equipment. The overcast sky was perfect for this shot, and I wouldn't have wanted to



She is a great model. Shot with a Speed Graphic camera.

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carry more stuff.

This shot works very well as a large print. I shot it on 4X5 film so I can print it very large. I point this out because size is an important aspect of an image. A big print will show more detail and have more presence than a small print.

It is always a good idea to think through to the final print. The overcast sky provided terrific light her, for black and white. If I had shot this in color I

would have needed to warm up the color of the light.

Color of light is one of the most important aspects of controlling light. We'll talk more about this in other parts of course.

I love shooting children in a park. The nice thing about flash fill is visible in this shot. The background is dark, which is good since this background is dull.

If you put more light on the foreground and compensate for the light on the foreground, then the background will become darker. Parks are more comfortable for kids than a studio is. You can usually find a good park nearby!

Time of day or night is really important! Early morning and late in the day or early evening has the best light color for portraits. The light is warmer and more flattering at these times of day.



**My Niece Isabel**

Shot with a Norman 200B for flash fill. This enables me to make a dull background a little darker.

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## **Building a Light Panel**

Light Panels can be essential to your portraiture photography. But don't worry, they are easy to build. Here are some step by step instructions.

### **MATERIALS**

- 3 pieces 10 foot PVC pipe 3/4-inch schedule 40 (that's the thick stuff).
- 4 pieces T connectors.
- 2 pieces straight connectors.
- 2 pieces corner connectors.
- 4 pieces end caps.
- 2 yards, plus a little white cotton broad cloth, 42 inch wide.
- 1-foot elastic strip.
- Glue, PVC glue, any PVC glue. Try to use the PVC glue outdoors.
- Glue (white wood glue - something along that line).



**Light Panel**

I sometimes refer to these as scrims also. They allow you to make a small light source into a large light source.

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You can get all this stuff at Lowes or Home Depot, or a bunch of other places; it's common material.

## HOW TO ASSEMBLE

Cut the PVC in to the following lengths.

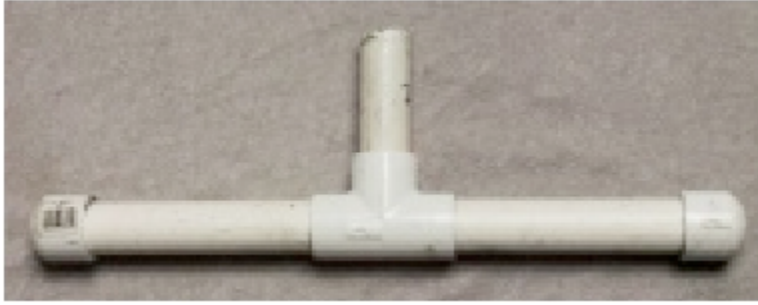
- 2 pieces 42 inches
- 4 pieces 36 inches.
- 2 pieces 6 inches.
- 4 pieces 10 inches.

## ATTACH

- Only glue a PVC connector to one side of pipe except on the feet.
- 2 corner connectors to the same piece of 42 inch PVC.
- 1 straight connector to one piece of 36 inch PVC; make 2 of these. You should have 2 pieces of 36 inch PVC without any connectors and 2 pieces with one straight connector on each.
- 2 T connectors to one piece of 42 inch PVC. You want to glue the PVC into the hole that is at a right angle to the straight through hole.

If you have trouble with this put the thing together without glue. It should be a rectangle 42 inches by 72 inches. When you are through it should come apart easily to go into an equipment bag. You might try this with the feet also, before you use glue.

The feet will fit into the open holes on the second piece of 42 inch PVC.



### **Light Panel Foot**

This shows how to assemble the foot for the light panel.

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Take 2 of the 10 inch pieces of PVC and glue them into the straight through sides of a T connector. Glue an end cap onto each of these. Glue a piece of 6 inch PVC onto the open side of the connector; this will fit into the bottom of the frame you just made.

Now the fabric. Finish up with a piece of reflective gold or silver or white cotton broad cloth that is tight in the frame, so measure the frame! Make your hems with glue; this should enable you to use up any extra fabric. Cotton glues well, nylon doesn't; so if you use nylon you'll probably need to sew the ends. Sew pieces of the elastic ribbon on each corner; this will hold it onto the frame.

You have made a useful photographic tool. We'll see how useful in the coming weeks!

In Lesson #2 we will be exploring ideas for *Portraits at Home*.

### **Important Information about the Assignments for this Course**

Since lighting is very important to this class, it is vitally important to provide information, with your shots about the lighting on the shot. While I can often read your light from the shot, many of the other students can't. Consequently, I think we should give everybody in the class the chance to learn from everybody's work, so please upload that information. I will send an e-mail to remind you if you skip this.

Additionally, most of the people in this class are either doing some professional work *or* want to do some professional work. Basically, we all want to step up a notch. One way to do this is to treat the assignments as professional assignments. What I mean by this is to pay attention to the details of the assignment. Of course, this includes the number of images, but it also means to make new images for the class, as you would for a

real job.

I would also like to see you work with people who are not members of your family. For instance, next week's assignment is a photo of people in a home setting. I know this is not always possible, and that's all right. If you upload a picture of your neighbor's family in their kitchen, I will be more interested than if you upload a picture of your family in your kitchen. You will learn more from photographing people who are not relatives, and isn't that the point? It would be wonderful if your assignments are all on time, but I would *much* rather you did your best work. Consequently, I will critique late assignments as if they were on time. I am told that you can upload an assignment up to two months late. Fine, I will critique it when I see it. Do keep this in mind that, if you upload after the class ends, I won't see the upload unless you email me.

I will always respond to your questions and assignments as fast as I can. You are entitled to that service!

## Your Assignment: Outdoor Portraits

I hope you'll take some time to make some new outdoor portraits. Please upload only three of your favorites. It would be particularly good if you would experiment with flash fill or reflectors to adjust the light in your shot. Of course, if the weather is cold where you are, you can go ahead and upload images you already have. Please upload your three (3) best. Please discuss the light you used and why in each shot. If you can shoot a set-up that would be great, go ahead and upload any extra set up shots. You can use your phone to shoot set up shots.



### **What?**

Made for the heck of it.  
Published in Wraparound  
Magazine. Norman Strobes

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Thanks! John