

Portrait Poses

Avoid the temptation of choosing mundane portrait poses that have been done a million times before. If you keep your wits about you and trust your own judgment, you can push boundaries by adopting a unique style that will make your portraits pop.

Innovative Portrait Ideas



When posing your subject, it's important not to have them too stiff and formal. The following are two popular portrait poses:

1. Place a chair on a 45 degree angle from the camera and ask your subject to sit on the same angle but look over their shoulder into the lens.
2. Turn the chair around ask the model to straddle it.

Try lots of different poses until you find something that's comfortable and natural for a particular person.

Portrait Pose Ideas # 1: Head Position

Unless your model has a very thin face, avoid portrait poses where they look head-on directly into the camera. Ask your model to turn their head slightly to one side. Oddly enough, it works well to ask men to tilt their heads away from the camera, while women should tilt their heads towards the camera for the best effect.

Professional photographers call the side of the face that is turned towards you the 'broad side' and the side that is turned away from you the 'short side'. Keep this in mind in discussions on how to light the face for powerful portraits.

Head tipped back slightly will generally give an attitude of “punk”. If the subject's head is tipped back to the high shoulder, it gives an impression of being fun and flirty. Conversely, if the head is tipped down toward the low shoulder, it can convey power or position (especially when shooting up at the subject).

If your subject has a wrinkly neck, large nose or double-chin, ask them to lift their head a little. This serves to tighten the skin and also reduces the nose's shadow across the face.

Portrait Pose Ideas # 2: Facial Expression

Facial expression is one of the most important parts of portrait photography. Big grins don't always make for the best photos. Have your subject adopt an expression that suits their personality and how they would like to be portrayed in the photograph.

One of the best portrait photography tips I know, is to get the model to look down, then up, and take the photo at the precise moment they make eye contact with you. This eliminates the hare-in-the-headlight effect when a model tries to keep a facial expression plastered on their face whilst staring at you for an extended period of time.

Make sure that you capture a variety of expressions. Think serious, pensive, friendly, wide smile, making eye contact, getting the model to look over your shoulder into the distance, facing towards you, facing away from you... the possibilities are endless. Also make sure that you capture both sides of the face as models often have one side that photographs better than the other.

Portrait Poses Ideas # 3: Direction of Gaze



The direction of gaze is an important part of portrait posing in the way that it sets the tone of your image.

When a model looks directly at the camera, the eyes become the focal point and the subject establishes a relationship with the viewer.

When the subject looks outside the frame, it leaves the viewer wondering what they're looking at. This can create intrigue or tension - and can make or break the shot.

When a person looks at something, for example a flower in their hands or a piece of cake, it draws attention to the object, which then becomes the focal point.

When two people gaze at each other in a photo, it establishes a connection between them and draws the viewer into their relationship.

The key is to know what you're wanting to achieve and to experiment with different poses to get the desired results.

Portrait Poses Ideas # 4: Shoulders



One simple but effective posing tip when taking head shot and upper body portraits of people is to angle the shoulders of your subject rather than to have them even or squared in your shot.

The shoulders are the widest part of the subject and therefore visually prominent in the image. When you slightly angle the shoulders it gives your shot balance and leads the viewer's eyes to the main focal point of a portrait, which is the head. It is also visually appealing as it lessens the width of the shoulders slightly.

To get this effect, ask your model to lean in one direction or another or it could simply mean getting them to turn their body a little so you're not photographing them directly front on.

Another posing technique is to frame your subject slightly off center so that one shoulder is out of the frame. Play with different effects, for example, ask your model to slightly lower the shoulder that is closest to the camera and then try it the other way around too.

Rules are there to be broken and in some instances the completely front on symmetrical shot can be both powerful and confronting. So as always – keep experimenting with posing your subject in a variety of ways and see what works best!

Portrait Poses Ideas # 5: Arms and Hands



Bent elbows express a comfortable casualness. Be careful with straight arms, as it expresses a feeling of formality and often stiffness.

If your model's hands are in the shot, try to reduce their apparent size by showing the edges of their hands, rather than the backs or fronts. Fingers should preferably be pointing away from the camera to shorten them. Make sure that the fingers are curved at every joint for a more relaxed look and never interlock the fingers. It tends to look tense.

Take special care with male hands because they're usually bigger and more prominent. Male hands can be lightly fisted (as if holding a small object) while women's hands need to appear elegant.

In this shot, the bride and groom's hands look very relaxed. The groom's hand is partly obscured, which makes it appear smaller.

It's also not a good idea to rest the model's face on their fist as it can potentially distort the face.

Portrait Pose Ideas #6: Feet

Feet hip width apart tends to express strength and is suitable for men. Try placing feet at different angles or heights (on a step, chair etc), which will provide balance in your image.

Portrait Pose Ideas # 7: Couples and Groups

When posing a couple, especially for wedding photos, pose the couple so that they're physically touching or facing each other. This helps to establish a connection between them. Photos look best when the man is slightly taller than the woman - even if they have to stand on a box!

Establishing a connection also goes for family photos or group photos such as sports teams. Pose them in such a way that they are overlapping within the frame.