

O'REILLY DIGITAL STUDIO

Digital Photography

Pocket Guide



Derrick Story



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How Do I...

Tips and Tricks for Shooting and Sharing

By now you and your digital camera have become fast friends and are working together to make great images. But like the art of cooking, and life, there's always more to learn.

This chapter is more conversational than the previous two. The earlier sections of the book were designed for quick reference—to use while standing on the battlefield of photography and trying to survive. (“Quick, should I turn the flash on or off for my daughter’s outdoor birthday party?” Answer: Flash on.)

But now the discussion becomes more free-flowing—like a conversation between two photographers trying to decide the best approach for a given situation. The topics in this chapter focus on both shooting and sharing pictures—what good is a great shot if you can’t get it in front of others?

So, grab a fresh memory card, a charged set of batteries, and prepare for the next stage of your journey.

Shooting Tips and Tricks— How Do I...

How do I...? That’s the question in photography, isn’t it? Most of the time you know what you want to do: capture that sunset, take a pretty portrait, preserve the memory of that monument. The trick is to make the camera see it the way you do.

That’s what you’re going to learn here: the “how to” of photography. Not every situation is covered in this chapter, but if

you master these techniques, there won't be too many pictures that get by your camera.

And when your friends mutter out loud something like, "How do I shoot that object inside the glass case?" You can reply, "Oh, that's easy. Just put the edge of the lens barrel against the glass to minimize reflections, then turn off the flash."

Take Great Outdoor Portraits

When most folks think of portrait photography, they envision studio lighting, canvas backdrops, and a camera perched upon a tripod. But many photographers don't have access to lavish professional studios, and honestly, it's not necessary for dynamite portraits.

PRO TIP

Figure 3-1 illustrates that you don't need an expensive photo studio to take pleasing outdoor portraits. After a little experimentation, a high camera angle was used to minimize distracting background elements. The model was positioned so the sun was on her back to create a rim lighting effect on the hair and shoulders. Then fill flash was added for even exposure on the face.

All you really need is a willing subject, a decent outdoor setting (preferably with trees), and your digital camera. Then you can be on your way to creating outstanding images.

First, start with the two magic rules for great outdoor portraits are:

Get close. The tighter you frame the shot, the more impact it will have. Extend your zoom lens and move your feet to create more powerful images. Once you've moved in close, and have shot a series of images, get closer and shoot again.

Use fill flash. Turning on the flash outdoors is a trick that wedding photographers have been using for years. If you really want to impress your subjects, position them in the

Figure 3-1

Outdoor portrait with fill flash and rim lighting (f-4 at 1/60th of a second)



open shade (such as under a tree) with a nice background in the distance. Then turn on the fill flash and make sure you're standing within 10 feet (so the flash can reach the subject). Your shots will be beautiful.

Once you've found a setting that you like and have everything in order, then "work the scene." Start by taking a few straight-forward images. Pay close attention while you have the model

turn a little to the left, then to the right. When you see a position you like, shoot a few frames.

(Don't get too carried away with this "working the angles" thing, or people will hate you. You're not a swimsuit photographer on a *Sports Illustrated* location shoot. But the point is, don't be afraid to experiment with different camera positions. Just do it quickly.)

Then move in closer and work a few more angles. Raise the camera and have the model look upward; lower the camera and have the subject look away. Be sure to take lots of shots while experimenting with angles, because once you're finished shooting and review the images later on your computer screen, you'll discard many of the pictures that looked great on the camera's LCD monitor. The problem is that when they're enlarged, you'll see bothersome imperfections you didn't notice before.

PRO TIP

What if you need to take a portrait in a chaotic situation, such as this shot of an Olympic Torch carrier on a busy street (Figure 3-2)? One solution is to lower the camera angle and use the blue sky as the backdrop. Don't forget to turn on the fill flash!

Communicate with your subjects and try to put them at ease. Nobody likes the silent treatment from the photographer. It makes them feel like you're unhappy with how the shoot is going.

Here are a few other things to *avoid* when shooting outdoor portraits.

Avoid side lighting on women's faces. Light coming in from the side accentuates texture. That's the last thing most female models want to see in their shots because texture equates to skin aging or imperfections. Use a fill flash to minimize texture and avoid side lighting unless for special effect.

Figure 3-2

**Low camera angle using the blue sky as a backdrop
(f-5.6 at 1/250th of a second; fill flash)**



Don't show frustration. Never, ever, never make subjects feel it's their fault that the shoot isn't going well. They're already putting their self-confidence on the line by letting you take their picture. Don't make them regret that

decision. When shots go well, credit goes to the models. When shots go bad, it's the photographer's fault. Keep your ego in check so theirs can stay intact.

Avoid skimping on time or the number of frames you shoot.

Your images may look good on that little 2" LCD monitor, but when you blow them up on the computer screen, you're going to see lots of things you don't like. Take many shots of each pose, and if you're lucky, you'll end up with a few you really like.

Don't torture models by making them look into the sun. Yes, you were told for years to shoot with the sun to your back. That rule was devised by the photographer, not the model. Blasting your subjects' retinas with direct sun is only going to make them squint and sweat (and swear). Be kind to your models and they'll reward you with great shots.

Avoid busy backgrounds. Bright colors, linear patterns, and chaotic landscape elements will detract from your compositions. Look for continuous tones without the hum of distracting elements.

Now that the basics are covered, here are a couple of super pro tips. These aren't techniques that you should use until you have good, solid shots recorded on your memory card. But once you do, maybe try these.

Soft background portraits. These are simply lovely. A soft, slightly out of focus background keeps the viewer's eye on the model and gives your shots a real professional look. The mechanics of this technique are described in Chapter 2 under "Aperture Priority Mode."

Rim lighting for portraits. When you place the sun behind the model, often you get highlights along the hair. Certain hairstyles really accentuate this effect. Remember to use fill flash for this setup or your model's face will be underexposed.

Set Up Group Shots

Many of the rules for engaging portraits apply to group shots too. So keep in mind everything that you've learned so far while preparing for this assignment.

PRO TIP

Figure 3-3 uses the classic “triangle” composition for a three-person group shot. Notice that distracting background elements are kept to a minimum. The subjects are positioned in the shade to eliminate harsh shadows on the face and squinty eyes. A fill flash is used for even front illumination.

Figure 3-3

**Outdoor group shot beneath a shady tree with fill flash
(f-5.6 at 1/80th of a second)**



The first challenge is to arrange the group into a decent composition. If you've ever participated in a wedding, you know this drill.

Remind everyone in the shot that they need to have a clear view of the camera. If they can't see the camera, then the camera won't be able to see them. Next, position people as close as possible. Group shot participants tend to stand too far apart. That might look OK in real life, but the camera accentuates the distance between people and the result looks awkward. Plus, you can't afford to have this shot span as wide as a football field, or you'll never see people's faces unless you enlarge the image to poster size.

Remember to take lots of shots—for large groups, a minimum of five frames. This gives you a chance to overcome blinking eyes, sudden head turns, bad smiles, and unexpected gusts of wind ruining your pictures.

Before pressing the shutter button, quickly scan the group looking for little annoyances that will drive you crazy later: crooked ties, sloppy hair, and turned-up collars will make you insane during post production.

Finally, work quickly. You're not John Ford making the great American epic, so don't act like it. Keep things moving for the sake of your subjects (and for your own tired feet).

Capture Existing-Light Portraits

By now you've probably realized one of the great ironies in good portrait photography: you should turn the flash on when working outdoors. So guess what the great secret is for indoor portraiture? That's right; turn the flash off. Some of the most artistic portraits use nothing more than an open window and a simple reflector.

The problem with using your on-camera flash indoors is that the light is harsh and creates a very contrasty image. "Harsh" and "contrasty" are not two words models like to hear when describing the pictures you've just taken of them.

Fill flash works outdoors because everything is bright. The flash "fills" right in. But ambient light is much dimmer

indoors, and the burst of light from the flash is much like a car approaching on a dark street.

PRO TIP

Using on-camera flash indoors for portraits (Figure 3-4) creates harsh highlights and ugly shadows on the backdrop. It's nice to have the built-in flash in a pinch, but you don't want to make a habit of using it for indoor portraits.

Of course there are times when you have no choice but to use your camera's flash indoors. It's very convenient, and you do get a recognizable picture. But when you have the luxury of setting up an artistic portrait in a window-lit room, try existing light only.

PRO TIP

Using the light from an open window creates a more flattering portrait (Figure 3-5). The camera is on a tripod for steadiness during the long exposure, and reflectors are positioned on both sides of the model to minimize deep shadows.

First, position the model near an open window and study the scene. You can't depend solely on your visual perception, because your eyes and brain are going to read the lighting a little differently than the camera will, especially in the shadow areas—you will see detail in the dark areas that the camera can't record.

This is why you need a reflector to “bounce” some light into the shadow areas. Many photographers swear by collapsible light discs, but a large piece of white cardboard or foam core will work just as well.

Place your reflector opposite the window and use it to “bounce” the light on to the dark side of the model. This will help “fill in” the shadow area so you can see some detail.

Figure 3-4

On-camera flash produces harsh results for indoor portraits and should be avoided as much as possible (f-2.5 @ 1/60th of a second)



Figure 3-5

Existing light portrait shot in the same setting as Figure 3-4, but with the flash turned off (f-2.5 @ 1/4th of a second, ISO speed set at 50)



PRO TIP

Figure 3-6 shows the existing light setup for Figure 3-5. The model is facing the window with reflectors positioned on both sides of her. The blank wall serves as the backdrop, and the camera is secured on a tripod.

Figure 3-6

**The existing light setup used for Figure 3-5
(f-2.5 @ 1/4th of a second, ISO speed set at 50)**



Now put your camera on a tripod and slowly squeeze the shutter button. Review the image on the LCD monitor. If the shadow area is too dark, you may want to add another reflector. If the overall image is too dark, turn on exposure compensation, set it to +1, and try another picture. If the color balance of the image is too “cool” (that is, bluish), then you may want to set the White Balance control to “cloudy” and see if that improves the rendering.

Remind your model to sit very still during exposure because you may be using a shutter speed that's as slow as 1/15th of a second, or even longer.

You could increase the camera's light-sensitivity by adjusting the ISO speed to 200, but don't go beyond that because you'll degrade the image quality too much for this type of shot.

Once you've played with these variables, go back to the artistic side of your brain and work on the composition. Try to get all the elements in the picture working together and let nature's sweet light take it from there. When it all comes together, existing light portraits are magical.

Shoot Good Self-Portraits

Some people may think that turning the camera toward yourself is the height of narcissism, but sometimes you need a shot, and no one is around to take it for you. These are the times when it's good to know how to shoot a self-portrait.

Start with the basics by making sure your hair is combed, collar is down, shirt is clean, and your teeth are free from spinach (and lipstick!). Then find a location with a pleasing, uncluttered background. Put the camera on a tripod and set the focus as close to the area where you'll be standing or sitting and activate the self timer. If the room is too dim for an existing light portrait, try using "slow-synchro" flash (see "Flash Modes" in Chapter 2 for more information). This type of flash provides enough illumination for a good portrait, but slows the shutter enough to record the ambient light in the room. Position yourself where you had focused the camera and look directly into the lens. Don't forget to smile.

PRO TIP

When setting up a self-portrait, pay attention to background elements so they don't distract too much from the main subject: you! If you have to use flash, try slow-synchro mode to preserve the room ambience (see Figure 3-7).

Figure 3-7

Self-portrait indoors using the flash set in slow-synchro mode (f-2.5 @ 1/30th of a second)



Take several shots, trying different poses until you hit on a few you like. If you have a remote release for your camera, you can save yourself lots of running back and forth from the tripod to the modeling position.

Creative portraits are sometimes more fun when you're both photographer and model. In Figure 3-8, the rearview mirror of a car is used to frame this self-portrait.

Figure 3-8

**Self-portrait using the rear view mirror of a car
(f-2.8 @ 1/20th of a second, no flash)**



Self-portraits are also perfect for experimenting with different “looks” that might make you feel more self-conscious when someone else is behind the camera. You can try different expressions and poses, and erase the bad ones. The world will never know the difference.

Take Interesting Kid Shots

Children are a challenge for digital cameras, primarily because of shutter lag. In short, kids move faster than digicams can react. But with a few adjustments, you can capture excellent images that you’ll cherish for years.

One of the most important adjustments, regardless of the type of camera you’re using, is to get down to kid level when shooting. This is “hands and knees” photography at its best. And if you need to, get on your belly for just the right angle. By doing so, your shots will instantly become more engaging.

Next, get close. Then get closer. This may seem impossible at times with subjects who move so fast, but if you want great shots, then you've got to keep your subjects within range.

PRO TIP

Kids are a challenge for digital cameras, but if you use focus lock, fill flash, and work at their level, you can capture pleasing shots (Figure 3-9) throughout their years.

Figure 3-9

Go where the kids are to get good shots
(f-4 @ 1/250th of a second, fill flash and focus lock)



Now turn on the flash, regardless of whether you're indoors or out. Not only will this provide even illumination, but flash helps "freeze" action, and you'll need all the help you can get in this category.

Finally, use the "focus lock" technique described in the practical example "Capturing the Decisive Moment" in Chapter 2. By doing so, you can reduce shutter lag and increase your percentage of good shots.

Some of the most rewarding pictures you'll ever record will be of children. Like the child-rearing process itself, kid photography requires patience. But the results far surpass the effort.

Capture Engaging Travel Portraits

Make sure you pack a spare memory card and extra batteries when you hit the road with your digital camera, because these compact picture-takers are perfect travel companions.

The best portraits on the road usually consist of two shots. The first frame, often called the *establishing shot*, is of the point of interest itself, such as an old church. Then the second image is a nicely framed portrait with an *element of the structure* included in the picture.

Why two shots? For the same reason that movie makers use this technique. If you were to include the entire structure and the model in the establishing shot, the model would be unrecognizable. That's the problem with so many vacation shots—they're taken at too great a distance.

PRO TIP

You can't capture the grandeur of great buildings and monuments, and take a portrait, in the same shot. Can you find the model in Figure 3-10? Look in the oval.

On the other hand, if you shoot all of your travel portraits tightly framed only, your viewers won't know the difference between Denmark and Detroit. By using the two-shot method you establish the scene and capture an engaging portrait. Figure 3-11 illustrates the two-shot method.

One last note: don't forget to take pictures of signs and placards. It's a lot easier than taking notes, and the information comes in very handy when recounting your travel experiences.

Figure 3-10

The model is dwarfed within this travel shot of a beautiful mission (f-4.7 @ 1/600th of a second)



Figure 3-11

Once you've captured the establishing shot, you can move in close for the portrait—even if it's of an architectural element

