Day 20: Capture Your People

Some general tips for taking pictures of friends and family

Fill the frame! You don't need a lot of background or context to the picture.

Get beyond the "smiling at the camera" picture.

Capture them doing something.

- People will naturally turn to the camera and smile.
- Say "Keep doing what you are doing."

Expressing some emotion.

Shooting Tips

Focus on the eyes!

Us e a wide aperture to isolate your subject and blur the background.

Use a fast shutter speed to avoid blur.

Avoid harsh light: tone down, and then bounce or diffuse the flash.

Additional Composition Tips

Don't overlook the background entirely - Look for interesting lines and angles.

Create balance by making sure the subject is looking into the picture.

Taking it Further

Take multiple shots -

- Work the scene (coming in Lesson 21)
- Wait for the decisive moment (coming in Lesson 22)

Remember that digital is free!

Additional Commentary

In today's lesson I want to give you some tips for improving your pictures of people. While you may not be doing portraits or fashion photography, we all take lots of pictures of our friends and family. We will cover some tips for capturing people.

Fill the Frame

The number one thing you can and should do to improve pictures of people is to fill the frame with them. Get closer or zoom in on them. Fill the frame with their face or their body. Do not try to leave too much background. Do not worry about your viewer not having sufficient context. Rarely will that happen and, in any event, people are very perceptive about that.

This is a very simple tip, but I guarantee it will dramatically improve your photographs of people. For confirmation, take a look at your favorite magazines and how they present pictures of people in it. It is always much more about the person and less about the background. Take a cue from them and apply this to your own photography.

Beyond Smiling for the Camera

I don't know what percentage of pictures of people in this world are of people smiling at the camera, but I think it must be an insanely high percentage. That seems to be what we take. Photographers incessantly instruct people to smile for the camera. When people sense a camera being aimed at them, they typically turn towards the camera and smile.



Simple "smiling at the camera" picture

There's nothing wrong with that. People generally look good when they are smiling. It may invoke happiness when later viewed. I am definitely not encouraging you to *avoid* taking pictures of people smiling. But at the same time, you need to get beyond it. Take pictures of people doing something other than smiling for the camera.

This can be tricky. You will have to have your camera out for something other than typical photo opportunities. As already mentioned, people will often turn to the camera and smile when they sense they are about to be photographed. To avoid that, make a liberal use of this little power phrase: "keep doing what you're doing."

Composing

When it comes to arranging your subject within the picture, avoid centering the subject unless you have a specific reason for doing so. Recall the lesson on the rule of thirds and apply here. At least keep the person a little off to one side or the other.

But which side? Place them to the side opposite the direction they are looking. That way the person will be looking into the frame. As you may recall from our lesson on balance, this creates a more balanced photo. Of course, if you are actually trying to create an off-balance photo for some reason, you can place them to the side of the photo in which they are looking.

Shooting Tips

While we are discussing tips for photographing people, let's go back and bring in tips from prior lessons so that they can be applied here. First of all, remember that whenever you are photographing a person your focus should be on their eyes. Focus on the nearby if they are not on the same plane of focus. This is extremely important. Missing the focus is almost certain failure for your picture.

You will also need to take steps to ensure there is no blur in your subject. At the same time, background blur is not a problem and may actually be something you want. You can't control this with your exposure settings. When photographing people you will often want to use a large aperture. A setting within one stop of wide-open on your lens is usually a good choice. This will result in an extremely shallow depth of field. That is one reason why the focus is so important. The falloff from sharp to blurry will be quite rapid so if you miss the eye, it will be noticeable. The background blur will avoid distractions from your subject as well.



Sharp subject, blurred background

Using a large rapture has another benefit as well. It will allow you to use a faster shutter speed. Using a fast shutter speed is important because you want to avoid any movement, which will result in blur in your subject. People move, often quite rapidly. Using a slow shutter speed will result in people moving while you have the shutter open. Even shutter speeds that you might think would be fast enough to avoid blur-such as 1/8 to 1/30 of a second-will often result in blurry

photos. Try to keep the shutter speed fast. In the case of a moving subject, assuming you are not using a flash, keep the shutter speed at 1/250 of a second or faster.

Gear Tip

If you want the ability to create lots of background blur, but you are having trouble making your lens, remember the Nifty Fifty. You can buy a 50 mm f/1.8 lens very cheaply. The Yongnuo version is only $50. Even the Canon and Nikon versions are only $125. A lens that opens up to f/1.8 is ordinarily very expensive, so this is definitely something to consider adding to your kit. With this wide of an aperture, the problem will no longer be adding enough background blur, but making sure you haven't gone too far!

Lighting Your Subject

This is often a situation where you will be using a flash. Remember from our lesson on using flash units that you will need to take steps to tone down and diffuse the flash. Either add a diffuser to the flash or else bounce it off the ceiling. In addition, remember to dial it back to avoid harsh, artificial looking lighting. And remember that the closer the light source, the softer the light.

Don't overlook the impact of natural light though. If possible, shoot very early or very late in the day to get the best light. This will have the added benefit of having light come in lower, into the subject's eyes.

At the same time, however, be sure your subject isn't squinting into the light. A simple way to deal with that is to have your subject turn their back to the sun. You can also make sure you stand in shade. If you don't have shade where you want it, use a reflector to shield your subject from direct sunlight.

Enhance Your Photo in Post

We will cover post processing tools later the course, but in this section, I want to touch on a few things that will help you improve your pictures of people.

First, you will want to remove any blemishes or other issues with anyone's skin. We have already talked about using the healing brush to remove distractions, and the same techniques used there will apply here. The best way is to use the spot healing brush in Photoshop.

There are a couple of other techniques you can use to remove blemishes and reduce the size of aging in people. Basically, what you want to do is smooth out the skin. One way to do that is to use the clone stamp tool and drop the opacity (anything under 50%). You just move around different areas of the skin and draw from other areas. The blending will smooth out the skin.

Creating Blur in Post Processing

I'm getting ahead of myself here since we haven't really gotten to post processing yet, but here is another technique you can use in your post processing. You just selectively add blur to the skin. Lightroom does not have a dedicated blur function, but you can use the adjustment brush and reduce the clarity of the skin. In Photoshop, you can add blur to a new layer and then mask out the effect everywhere except where you want it. The specific steps to do so are:

1. Create a new layer by pressing Ctrl+J.
2. Add blur by going to the Filters drop down, select Blur and then Gaussian blur. Set the radius, which will determine how much blur you are adding.
3. Mask away the effect everywhere except portions of the skin where you want it. Go to the Layer drop down, scroll down to Layer Mask, and then choose Hide All. Then select the Brush tool (B) and use it to painted the effect where you want it.

You can also tone down the effect if you decide it is overdone. Do that by reducing the opacity of the brush or of the layer itself.

If this all seems to advanced for you, don't worry about it yet. Just note it for now, and you can come back to it after you have completed the post processing portion of the course, when you will be more comfortable with things. It should make more sense to you then.

To improve the photo, you will often want to sharpen and brighten the eyes. To do this in

Lightroom, grab the adjustment brush and paint in the area of the eyes. Increase the clarity, saturation, contrast, and exposure sliders. In Photoshop, we will use basically the same technique you just used for attic floor above, except you will add sharpness (use the unsharp mask tool). We will cover Sharp and us in much more detail in the post processing section so I won't go into that as much here.

Another good move is to brighten and whiten your subject's teeth. In Lightroom you will once again select the adjustment brush. Most people's teeth have at least a slight yellow-ish tinge, so pull the temperature slider to the left (into the blue area) until they look white. Then increase the exposure slider to brighten them.

A Final Tip

When you are shooting, don't worry if you do not get the shot immediately. It often takes some time. In fact, even if you think you have the shot pretty quickly, don't stop. Keep adjusting and shooting. We will talk a lot more about working the scene and capturing the decisive moment in the upcoming lessons, but for now the idea is to work it more than you might think is necessary. Remember that a pro would spend hours and hours with a subject trying to capture something like we are going to work on in the upcoming assignment.

Day 20 Assignment

Capture Character

Description:

Spend 20 minutes photographing someone you know. Attempt to capture their character as best you can. Display a glimpse into this person's life, whether they are working, playing, or expressing some emotion.

Keys to Success:

- Use anything available in the way of surroundings to help explain the person's character, including props if desired.
- Use any lighting you can, whether that be flash or ambient.
- Remember: the *person* - not the environment - is the subject of the photo. The person should take up most of the frame.
- Enhance your photos in Lightroom or Photoshop when you are done shooting.

Upon Completion of this Assignment:

You've come a long way with respect to photographing people. This assignment requires you to use the exposure, lighting, composition, and processing tools you've learned so far. You should end up with a portrait that you are proud of.