A person with extensive tattoos is lying on their back on a green mat. They are wearing a white t-shirt and have their hands resting on their abdomen. The background is a wooden floor. The image is used as a background for a book cover.

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Portrait Photography

From Snapshots to Great Shots

Learn the best ways
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Erik Valind

Portrait Photography:
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Figure 3.6 This skater girl looks like she's been skateboarding for years!

Nikon D700 • ISO 200 • 1/160 sec. • f/16 • 24mm lens

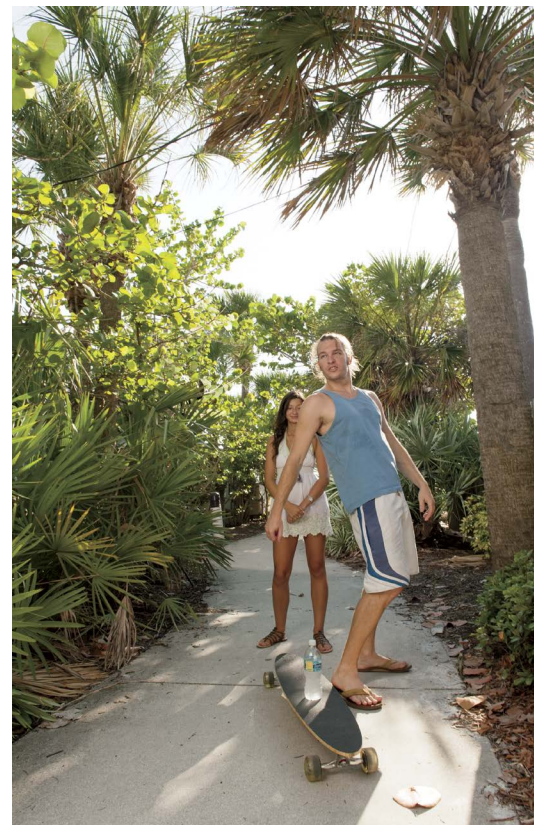


Figure 3.7 The model had never actually skated before, so I jumped in to show her how I wanted her to pose to make it look convincing.

Nikon D700 • ISO 200 • 1/250 sec. • f/11 • 24mm lens

Three Planes of Body Directions

After you've guided the model's body into position, you'll sometimes need to fine-tune poses even further. The only problem is that when you ask a model to turn left, often she'll turn her *entire* body left, even though you just meant her face or shoulders. It's a good idea to start by explaining that you'll be directing your subjects using three major planes: face, shoulders, and hips. Once you've established this understanding, be sure to let them know that you'll be posing each portion independently and not to move anything other than the plane that you reference.

In **Figure 3.8**, I've marked the three different planes you should work with. Now when you direct your model, you can be more specific. For example, you can say, "Turn your hips to the right, move your shoulders more toward the camera, and turn your face to the left." These directions are much more specific than asking the model to just turn left.



Figure 3.8 A model with lines showing the three body planes you can use to give direction.

Nikon D700 • ISO 200 • 1/1250 sec. • f/2.8 •
70–200mm lens

Fine-tuning the Face

The final nuances of a portrait are in the face. The face can look incredibly different when viewed from left to right or up (**Figure 3.9**) and down (**Figure 3.10**). For this reason you'll work with posing the face last. Once your subject is posed the way you want, by simply directing different face positions you can walk away with a variety of shots in a short period of time.

Simply hold up your hand and ask your subject to pretend that you are holding her face. You can also use analogies, such as, “Pretend my hand is a suction cup” or “Pretend I’ve got your nose.” However you choose to phrase it is up to you. Have the subject follow your hand with her head. You can very precisely work the subject’s face in different directions until you find the light or the best angle for the portrait.



Figure 3.9 A model with her face up, highlighting her neck, chin, and lips.

Nikon D800 • ISO 100 • 1/200 sec. • f/2.8 • 70–200mm lens

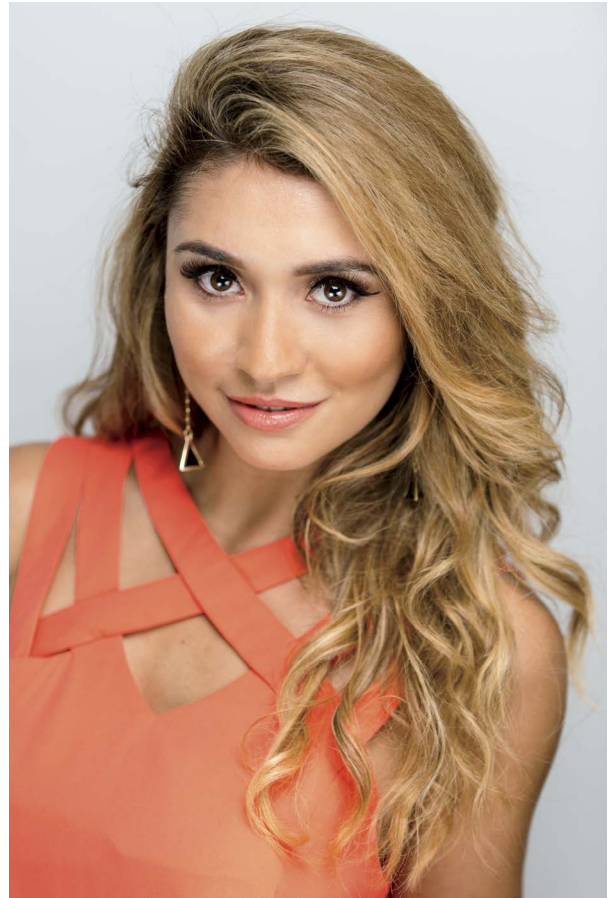


Figure 3.10 A model with her face turned down, placing the proper focus on the eyes.

Nikon D800 • ISO 100 • 1/200 sec. • f/2.8 • 70–200mm lens

Problem-Solving Poses

With the previous posing tips and tricks you'll be able to smoothly work through a photo shoot, minimizing miscommunication and walking away with perfectly posed portraits. Some specific problems will require a little more care to overcome. Let's look at a few common problems and the precise poses that will solve them.

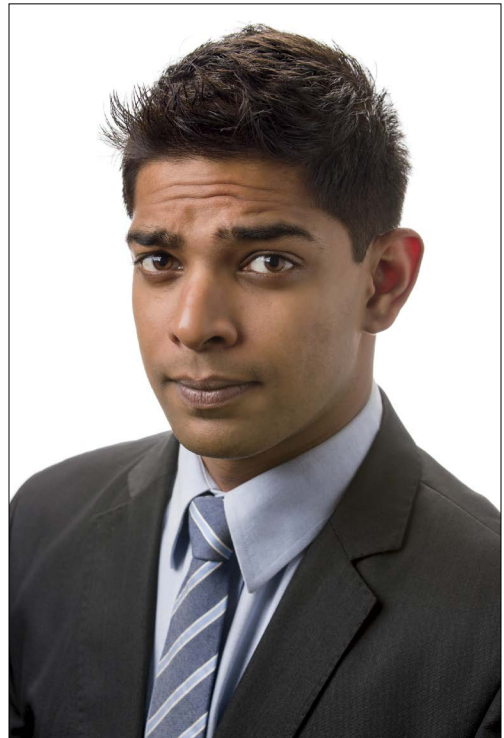
Uneven eye sizes

Not all eyes are created equal. If you look closely, often one eye is larger than the other or one might squint slightly, as shown in **Figure 3.11**. Don't stress about using Photoshop to fix this problem; it's easily remedied with a simple pose. Have your subject face the camera and then turn away slightly, ensuring that the smaller eye is closer to the camera. By not having your subject look straight on into the camera, you can minimize the larger eye by letting it fade into the background. The result of this fix is shown in **Figure 3.12**. To enlarge the eyes even further, shoot down on your subject and have him look up slightly. These are both easy poses that take advantage of the lens distortion to tweak the face.

Figure 3.11 (left)
The subject is squared to the camera showing variation in eye size; this is common.
.....
Nikon D800 •
ISO 250 • 1/250 sec. •
f/8 • 95mm lens



Figure 3.12 (right)
By turning the smaller eye toward the camera it appears larger and is now balanced with the back eye.
.....
Nikon D800 •
ISO 250 • 1/250 sec. •
f/8 • 95mm lens



Minimizing glare in glasses

Have you ever photographed someone with glasses? The biggest obstacle when photographing someone in glasses is that dreaded reflection in the lenses. Do you want the easiest solution? Just pop out the lenses! Seriously, if there's no glass, then there's no glare. However, if you're not comfortable doing this, you can fix that glare with a simple pose. By default, many photographers turn their subjects into the main light source, whether it's a strobe light or just the sun. As shown in **Figure 3.13**, this creates glare on the glasses. To eliminate glare, simply have the subject rotate her face to the other side of the camera, and the glare will instantly disappear (**Figure 3.14**). Because you need the light to bounce off the glasses and miss your camera, you just change the angle of incidence of that light source to your camera lens, much like a pool player would bank a shot.



Figure 3.13 Turning your subject into the light source causes reflections to appear in the lenses.

Nikon D700 • ISO 1600 • 1/160 sec. • f/8 • 70mm lens

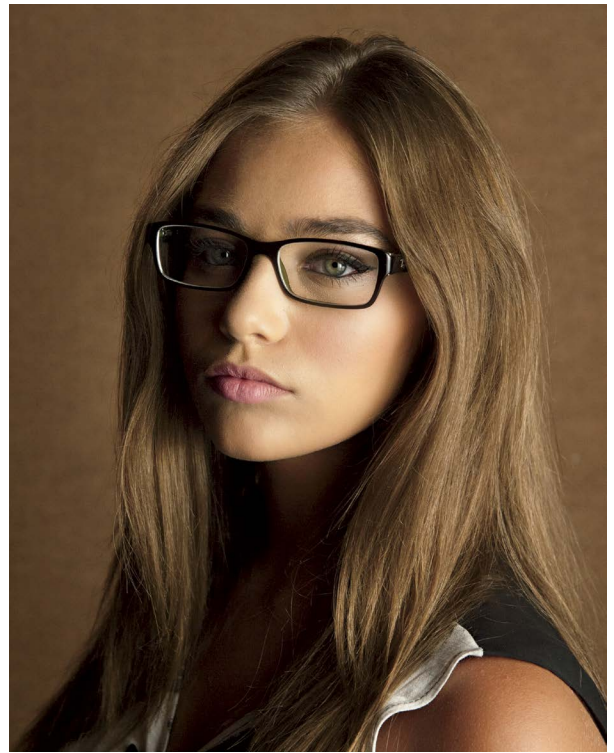


Figure 3.14 By simply turning your subject away from the light source, the reflection skips past your camera lens and the glare disappears.

Nikon D700 • ISO 1600 • 1/160 sec. • f/8 • 70mm lens

What's your good side?

You may have heard models or actors jokingly refer to their good side. When you spend your life in front of a lens, you quickly figure out your flattering angles—and the not so flattering ones too. But most of your everyday portrait subjects have no clue, or do they? One quick way to find your subjects' "good side" is to look at their hair part, if one exists. Normally, people part their hair to unconsciously showcase their favorite side. Pose them with this side of their face turned toward the camera, and they'll love you for it without even knowing why they favor those photos.

If no part exists, simply have the subjects pose freely from side to side and take note of which side they favor. Often, they'll show you more of one side than the other, which is usually a dead giveaway too. Because you want to work with your subjects on making sure you correctly deduce which side is their "good side," eliciting feedback is critical.

Getting Feedback

Share. Share. *Share* those photos! And I'm not talking about after the shoot is over. With today's digital cameras, photographers are constantly staring at the back of their screens but rarely ever show the models what they're looking at. After taking a few photos, if you immediately look down and silently scrutinize the LCD on your camera, it breaks the rhythm of the shoot and is also very disconcerting for your subjects. Turn that camera around and show your subjects a few photos. After all, you're on the same team (**Figure 3.15**). By showing them a good photo, they'll be excited to take more. And by showing them an imperfect photo, you can point out the pose or wardrobe that needs to be adjusted to make the photo great. If you just stand there without saying a word with a "thinking face" on, many subjects will start worrying that they've done something wrong. It's your job as a portrait photographer to avoid this at all costs!