How to shoot incredible portraits

Take your portraiture to the next level with pro photographer Paul Wilkinson as he reveals his tricks of the trade for lighting and shooting your best-ever pictures of people

Portraits have more to offer than any other photographic genre, in my opinion. You have the same lighting, exposure and composition considerations as with other photographic subjects, but on top of all that, you're dealing with people. Unique, interactive and unpredictable human beings, many of which are incredibly nervous about having their photo taken.

Yes, we portrait photographers also pursue beautiful light, calculate how many more lenses we can justify and dream of the perfect location. But even once the light is right, the location chosen, and the camera set, our job is only just beginning. We also need to place people in that light in a way that flatters them, encourage them to pose and yet look relaxed despite the unnaturalness of the entire endeavour. Then, and only then, do we try to create something – an expression, a feeling – that will connect from our subject's eyes into the eyes and heart of the person looking at our finished image.

Even newborn babies display a preference for looking at human faces over other stimuli, and that preference deepens as we grow older and gain more experiences. We are genetically programmed to be interested in looking at other humans, that's just the way it is.

When we gaze at a portrait, our attention goes straight to the subject's eyes as we try to read their expression and interpret what we see through the filter of our own experiences. →

Paul Wilkinson

Paul is a multi-award-winning international photographer and judge. Together with Sarah Plater, he is the co-author of the best-selling book *Mastering Portrait Photography* (£19.99, Ammonite Press, www.thegmcgroup.com) and co-founder of the free companion site www.masteringportraitphotography.com, where you can have your portraits critiqued by Paul, watch him put lighting techniques into practice on real shoots, and access inspirational tips and ideas.

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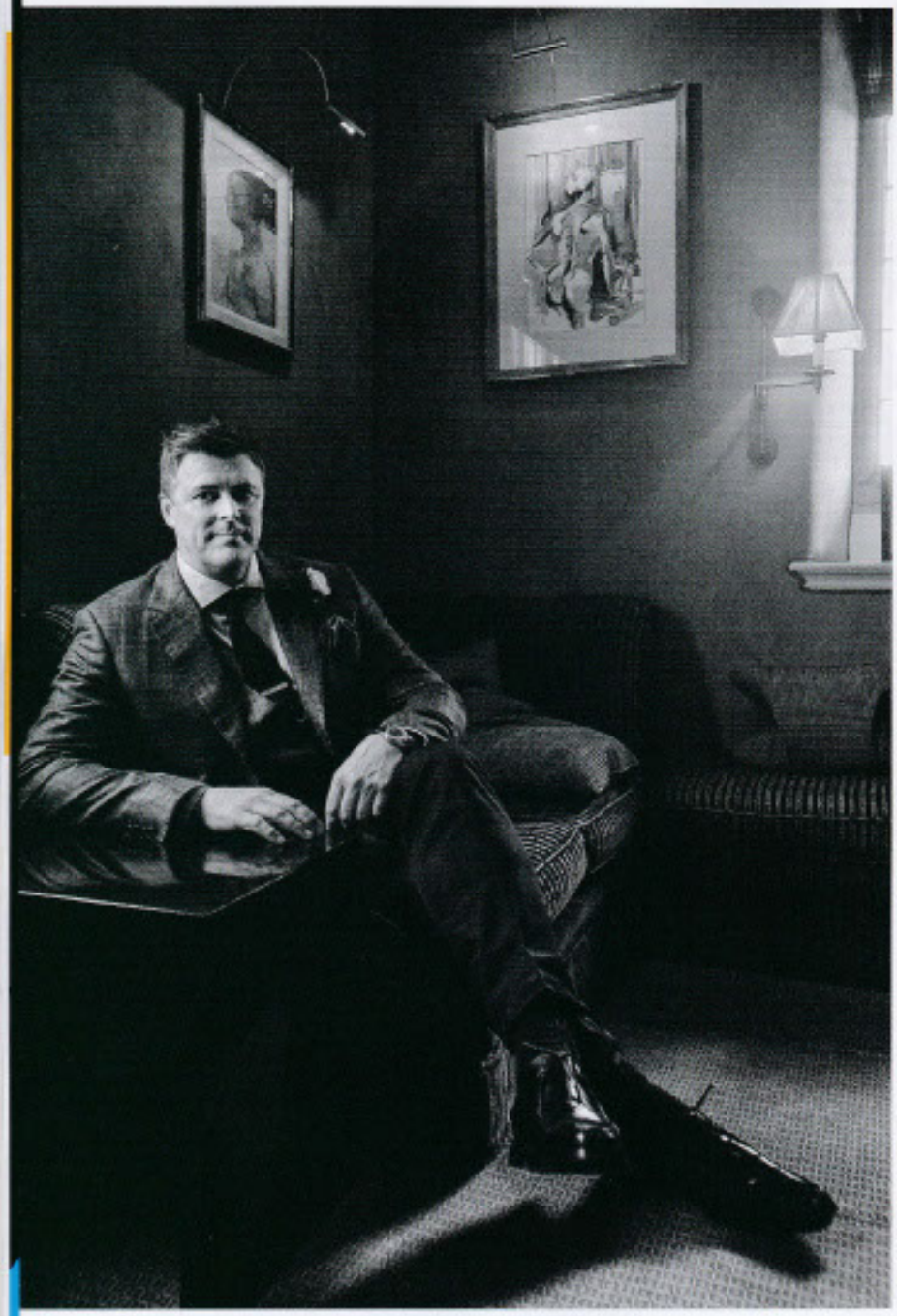

Great lighting starts with the catchlights

Catchlights are the white reflections of light that appear in your subject's eyes. As light typically comes from the sun or ceiling lights, we're used to seeing catchlights in the upper half of people's eyes. Imagine each of your subject's eyes as a clock face. Place your lights – or position your subject relative to your light – so that the catchlights appear somewhere between nine o'clock and three o'clock in their eyeballs. When the catchlights are in the upper half of your subject's eyes, then there's a good chance that the light is falling on their face from a flattering angle.

Above: In this room were two windows at right angles, so I placed my subject near to the one on camera left, to act as my main light. The other is acting as a cheek and rim light, while the artificial lights above the picture frames add visual interest. Light from different sources actually has different colour casts, which become visible in photographs. Converting to black and white is one way of getting around this!

That's why the last thing you do before pressing the shutter release – interacting with your subject to generate an expression – is as important as getting all the technical details right.

Thankfully there are some quick wins that can get you well on your way to exceptional high-impact portraits. Whether you want to shoot indoors or outdoors, and with or without flash, the same principles apply: the position of catchlights in your subject's eyes, the quality and angle of the light that you employ and, of course, all the psychology involved in creating a portrait that you and your subject will love for years to come.

GET CREATIVE WITH WINDOW LIGHT

You can have all the photographic lighting kit in the world and still not create anything special. Conversely, you can have very little photographic kit but still make what you have go a long way.

If you have a camera, a lens and a window, then you've got all you need to create beautiful portraits. The two main challenges are getting the right

amount and quality of light to create the image you have in mind, and positioning your subject relative to that light so that it's falling on them from a flattering angle.

Position your subject for flattering light

Flat lighting is very fashionable at the moment. To achieve it with window light you simply need to stand with your back towards the light source and your subject directly in front of you. This means that the light will fall across your subject's face evenly, filling out pores and wrinkles in a flattering way. However, I prefer to use light at more of an angle, to give richer shadows and a greater sense of shape, depth and dimension to my subject's face. In addition, flat lighting can make a round face appear wider, whereas angled lighting gives you the opportunity to flatter and slim wider face shapes through the use of shadows.

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Above: I love the way that the afternoon sun raked across this chair in Sam's family home, so I asked her to sit in it for one of the portraits I created that day. The interior of the room was very dark, which meant that light reaching the walls was absorbed, rather than bounced around. The door on the left was painted white on the opposite side, so I angled it to get some light bouncing back in towards Sam. This helped to soften some of the shadows on the nearside of Sam's face.

To get light falling on your subject's face from a more interesting angle, the light source needs to be slightly above and in front of their face. If a window is low, try seating your subject so that the light is coming from a higher angle, or block off the lower half of the window with cardboard.

Skylights can produce beautiful light, but avoid positioning your subject directly underneath them. Our eyebrow ridge blocks light from directly overhead reaching our eyes, which means unflattering shadows and potentially no catchlights, either. Instead, move your subject so the light is falling from slightly in front of them, and check that you can see catchlights in their eyes. →

Alternatively, side light and back light can work beautifully, too. For side lighting, position yourself and your subject side-on to the window, letting the far side of their face fall into shadow. This creates quite a dramatic, angular lighting style, which is great for adding definition to cheekbones and jaw lines. To make it that little bit more flattering, simply ask your subject to turn their nose slightly towards the window.

For back lighting, position your subject between the window and your camera. Ask your subject to look 90 degrees away from the window and watch how the light changes on their face. Adjust their position back and forth, but still parallel to the window, and notice how the light changes from a rim light around the edges of their face and hair, to a light falling from slightly in front, cascading delicately across their features.

Working with different light levels

The size of the window, the time of day, the season and the brightness of the room decor will all affect how much light enters and bounces around the interior of the location.

If intense sun is streaming directly through the window you want to use, try hanging a white bedsheet across the window to soften and diffuse the light, or use a window on the other side of the building. In the northern hemisphere, artists love north-facing studios, as the sun never enters the glass directly. Instead, it is bounced, reflected and diffused outside before passing through the glass, giving a beautiful, soft light. In the southern hemisphere, the opposite is true.

Use broad or narrow lighting to better flatter your subject

There are two main types of portrait lighting: broad and narrow. Imagine a subject standing in front of your camera, standing towards you, and a light or window to camera left. If you ask your client to turn their nose slightly towards the light, the nearside of their face will be more shadowed than the side furthest from the camera. This is called 'narrow lighting', and is most flattering for the majority of people, but especially for those with broader faces. If you then ask your client to turn their nose slightly to camera right, the nearside of their face will be lit and the side furthest from the camera will be in shadow. This is called broad lighting, and suits people with a more narrow face shape.

Right: My main flash is to camera left, in front and above of the boys' heads. I've placed a second flash diagonally opposite the first, behind and to the right of the boys and facing towards them. I've underexposed the sky to make it dark and moody, and used a low camera angle to make the boys look heroic.

Below: There's a single Speedlight on a stand behind this couple, facing towards them, and covered with a plastic bag to protect it from the sleet.

If light levels are too low, try moving your subject closer to the window, or look which direction the sunlight is coming from (even if it's diffused by clouds) and try a window on that side of the building. Alternatively, you can increase your ISO, decrease your shutter speed and use a tripod or open up your aperture to compensate.

DRAMATIC OUTDOOR PORTRAITS

You can use Speedlights, portable flash or continuous lights to supplement or replace natural light outdoors to dramatic effect. There are now more product options than ever, with third-party brands offering high-quality location lighting at very affordable prices.

Unless you opt for continuous light you'll need a trigger so that the flash fires at the precise moment the shutter is open – I prefer radio transmitters as they're reliable and don't require any cables.

You'll also need tripod stands and adapter brackets, so that you can position your lights at the optimum height and angle, or you could ask a willing assistant to hold them for you.

Position the light source

I often use one flash as my main light, with a second as a rim, hair or cheek light. I raise my main light to above head height, so that the catchlights appear in the top half of my subject's eyes. My second flash is at a similar height if I want to light my subject's hair, or a foot or two lower, if I want to create a light along my subject's jaw. Use these positions as a starting point, but bear in mind that the right height also depends on the distance between the artificial light and your subject. The greater the distance between the light and your subject, the more the vertical angle diminishes, so you'll need to raise the height of the light accordingly. →

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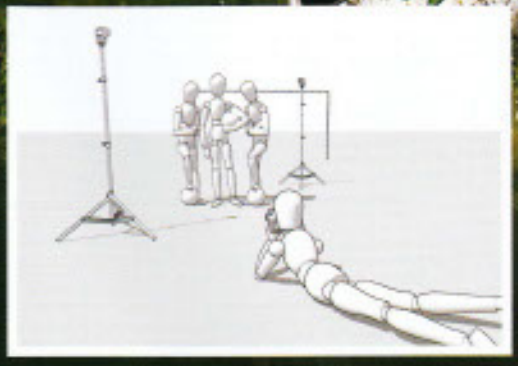
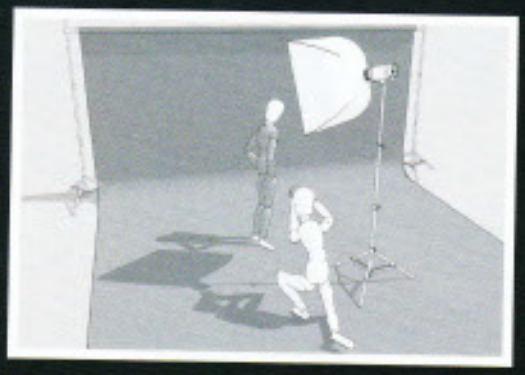




If you want your artificial light to blend in with the ambient light, then position it relative to your subject, so that the light it casts could conceivably originate from any visible light sources, such as a street lamp, sunlight or even the moon.

For a more dramatic effect, however, you can use artificial light to overpower the ambient light, add a rim light around your subject, or even act as your only illumination after dark.

Set the exposure and flash settings

If you want to make a daytime portrait look like it was taken at dusk or midnight, get the exposure right for the ambient light first. Set your camera to underexpose the scene as desired, making sure your shutter speed remains within the sync range of your flash. On most cameras this is between 1/160 sec and 1/250 sec, but some offer High Speed Sync (HSS) flash, which enables you to choose a faster shutter speed. Of course, you don't need to consider sync speeds if you're using a continuous light source.

Next, add in your artificial light and take a test shot. If the effect of your artificial light is too strong, then turn the power down, add a modifier, or move it further away from your subject. If the effect of your artificial light isn't powerful enough, dial it up, use it without a modifier and/or move it closer to the subject you're shooting.

If the artificial light is how you'd like it, but you want to brighten the ambient light, decrease your shutter speed. Conversely, to decrease the impact of ambient light on your exposure, increase the shutter speed (while staying within the sync range if you're using flash).

Above: I've separated the dark tones of my subject from those of the background by using two rim lights. These are strip boxes, placed behind my subject and angled back towards him to create a subtle halo of light along the edges of his hair and clothes.

Left: I've angled the studio flash away from my subject and towards the background, so that some of the light falls on the dark-coloured paper roll behind her. This trick stops all the tones merging together, so that you can still make out the outlines of my subject's form.

Above right: I've used two lights facing towards the paper roll behind my subject to create a pure white background. Without these, the white paper would look grey when I expose for my subject, because she is closer to the light than the background. The main flash is to camera left, and my subject's nose is turned towards the light. This means that the side of her face nearest the camera is in shadow, giving the flattering impression of a narrower face.

> **It used to be common wisdom that you should always shoot pale subjects and pale clothing on a dark background and vice versa**

SUBTLE STUDIO LIGHTING

It used to be common knowledge that you should always shoot pale subjects and pale clothing on a dark background and vice versa. Otherwise, the tones would all merge together and you couldn't see the edges between the subject and background.

Personally, I prefer the visual sophistication of a low-contrast, limited colour palette. I love photographing light-toned hair, faces and clothes on a white background, and dark-toned hair, faces and clothes on a dark background.

This approach means your eye isn't pulled towards areas of high contrast, and focuses the viewer's attention on the subject's eyes and face. It does, however, require a little more thought and control when lighting your subject to create the effect you have in mind, whether you're using one, two, or even three studio lights.

Choose the effect you want to create

Do you want to visually separate your subject from the background behind him or her? If so, a rim →

The effect of focal length and camera angles

Whatever is closest to the camera looks bigger, an effect that is exaggerated by wide-angle lenses. To minimize this, I almost exclusively use a 70-200mm f/2.8 telephoto lens. I like to shoot from slightly below my subject's eye level, as this makes them the 'hero' of the portrait, with the viewer looking up at them. However, with a shorter focal length, this low camera angle could emphasize parts of the body that are areas of potential insecurity for my subjects, such as their thighs and bottom. A telephoto lens avoids this, flatters my subject's face and compresses perspective, ensuring a small but pretty background can fill the frame around my subject.

light, hair light, or cheek light will help. This effect is created by a second and perhaps third light angled towards your subject. Avoid overpowering your main light by using a lower power setting on the second and third lights, or by positioning these lights slightly further away from your subject. This gives a much more subtle effect that doesn't compete with the main focus of your portrait, which is usually your subject's face.

Alternatively, you can angle a light directly towards the background, creating a halo of light behind your subject, or you can use the 'waste light' from the feathering technique below to subtly lift a dark background.

Feather your lights

Instead of facing your softbox or umbrella so that the light shines directly towards your subject, angle it away slightly. This is called 'feathering the light' and it results in a much gentler transition between highlights and shadows on your subject's face. This is particularly flattering for subjects with wrinkles and blemishes, as skin imperfections look less pronounced under softer light.

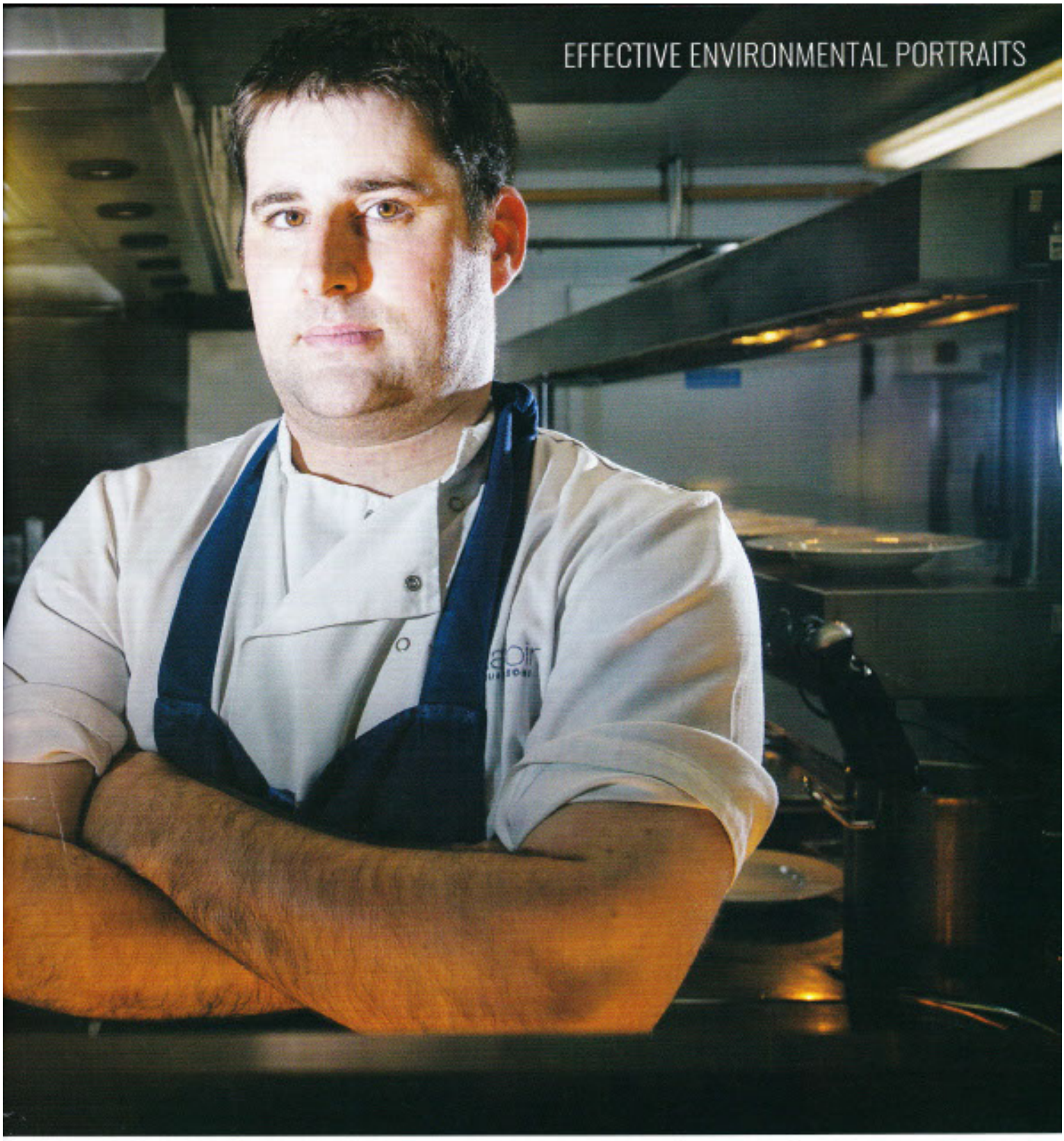
Angle the modifier so that only light from its edges reaches your subject, rather than the harshest light at the centre of the box or umbrella. Then, decide where you want the rest of the light – the 'waste light' – to fall. If you want it to drop on the background, perhaps to separate a subject's dark hair and clothing from a dark paper roll, then angle the light slightly away from the subject and towards the background.

If you don't want the light to fall on the background, for example if you want a white paper roll to render as a mid grey rather than a pure white, then angle the light slightly away from your subject in the direction of your camera. This means that the unwanted light from your modifier won't actually

A man in white overalls becomes a chef in his kitchen; a kid with a skateboard becomes a hero at the skatepark

Above: My shoot with a team of medical practitioners was over when I saw this location. It was a dark, oak-clad corridor with a window at one end where soft light was filtering in through the glass. This surgeon's dark suit matched the tones of the corridor and I thought it would make a great shot that conveys the prestige and calibre of the practice.

Above right: Here, light was shining from the fluorescent strips in the ceiling and the bulbs in the hotplates behind the chef. I wanted to position him so the elements of the scene lead your eye towards him, but his face would've been in shadow. To avoid this, I supplemented the light with two Speedlights, one on camera left and one to the right of the scene behind the chef and aimed towards him. I set my camera so the background would expose correctly, then turned on my Speedlights so that the chef's face would be correctly lit.



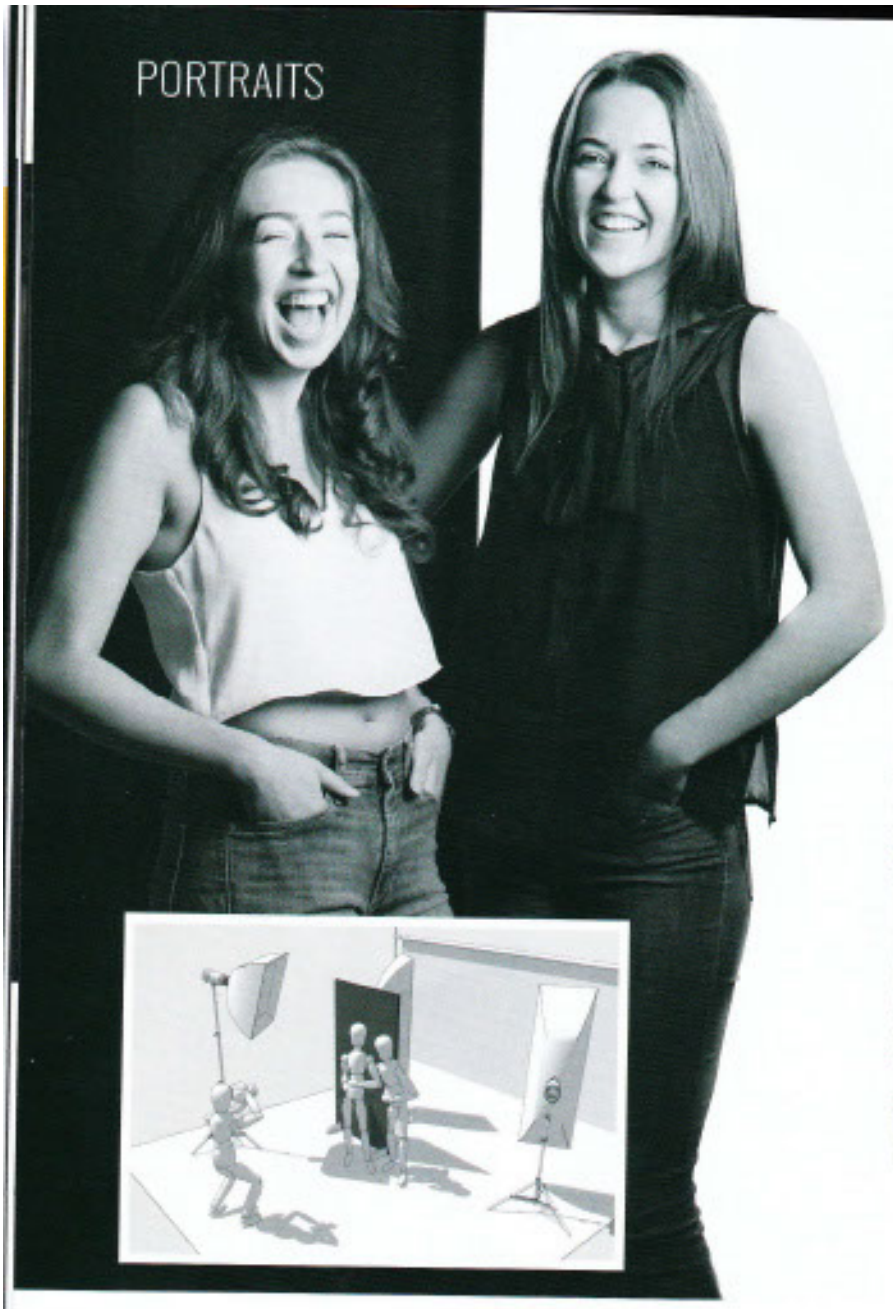
affect your subject or the rest of the scene (providing it doesn't bounce off any other surfaces in your studio, of course). You can also choose to move your subject and light further away from the background so that less light falls on it.

EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL PORTRAITS

Environmental portraits help to give the viewer a much clearer sense of who the person in the photograph really is, rather than just what they look like. A man in white overalls becomes a chef in his kitchen; a kid with a skateboard becomes a hero at the skatepark. →

Understand the qualities of soft and hard light in portraiture

There's a misconception that soft light and cloudy days are the best options for portraits, but that's not necessarily true. If you want an edgy, dramatic image, then the defined highlights and shadows from a small or distant light source like the sun, a Speedlight, or a bare bulb might be most effective. If you want to create a bigger catchlight in your subject's eyes, reduce the appearance of blemishes and create a gentle, low-contrast portrait, then a large or close light source, like diffused window light or a softbox, will help you achieve that. The best type of light depends on the effect you want to achieve.



The details in front, behind and around your subject add context and narrative to the image. Your role as the photographer is to decide where to place your subject within their environment, and which parts of it you want to include in the frame to tell the subject's story.

Assess your options

When I arrive at a location, I'll look around the available spaces to assess the natural light.

Finding great light is always my top priority and, if there aren't any suitable natural light options, I'll use an artificial light or two, either to supplement the ambient lighting or overpower it altogether.

But what does great light look like? It can be hard, with harsh shadows, or soft and diffuse, with gentle shadows. My preference depends on the subject and the commission. I might decide to use soft light to flatter a subject and disguise skin imperfections, or I could choose hard lighting to accentuate the drama of the scene. The best type of light depends not only on what you have available, but also your intentions for the photograph.

It's quicker and easier to use available light as there's less setup time and you can better visualize how it will look in the final image. During the day, turn off interior lights and open all the curtains and blinds so you can see the quality of the light – hard, directional sunlight or soft reflected window light, for example. Look for large, high up windows as these will spill light from a more flattering angle, or places where you can lower your subject relative to the light, such as steps or a chair.

At night, or if there is limited daylight, explore the options offered by the existing artificial light sources. Smaller light sources like lamps can often be moved into better positions (and put back again afterwards), while seating your subject or asking them to tilt their head slightly can work as a compromise if fixed light isn't coming from a perfect angle.

Above: I've posed these two friends so that they are facing towards each other and slightly overlapped. This helps to convey how much they love spending time together. I asked them both to wear clothes of a similar tone, but they turned up at the studio in tops of opposite colours. In response to this, I decided to run with an opposite theme in the background!

Choose what to include

What you leave out is just as important as what you decide to include. What helps to tell your subject's story and what is just unwanted visual clutter? There's always some compromise to be made, as the more environmental details you include in your shot, the smaller your subject becomes in the frame. This means that the subject's features, body language and expression become less impactful and increasingly difficult to read, unless the image is viewed at a much bigger scale.

On the other hand, however, you might want to capture a wider shot to include some negative space. Negative space is the visual equivalent of a pause, and

Distract your subjects to generate better expressions

People often feel nervous about being photographed. To get a more relaxed expression from your subject, you need them to momentarily forget about the camera lens. To do this you can pose a question, ask them to think about something, or you can say something that you hope will trigger a reaction. Think of the cinematography cue, 'lights, camera, action'. Get your lighting right, then your camera settings. Then interact with your subject so that their eyes aren't glazed over and their expression is fully engaged when you take your shot. Of course, not every portrait has to have a smile, but the eyes should convey some feeling or expression that the viewer of your portrait can read into. Distracting your subject for a second or two is a great way to achieve this, as is being genuinely interested in the people you are photographing!

refers to any part of the image that doesn't have subjects or objects within it. Negative space gives the eye somewhere to rest within the composition, and also allows for text or design elements to be overlaid on the image later, such as if it will be used in a magazine spread, for example.

GREAT GROUP PORTRAITS

For many people, being in front of a camera is a little unnerving. It's hard to 'act naturally' when you feel on display, so people often forget how they would normally sit, stand and position their hands and feet. It's my job to guide people into poses that will look genuine and relaxed, but which create a pleasing composition. For group shots of friends and family members together, I also want to capture the love and connection they share.

Create shapes in your composition

A row of multiple people, standing or sitting facing towards the camera, lacks visual interest at best and looks like a police line-up at worst. Instead, arrange people to create shapes within the composition, and vary their posture, so that everyone looks like an individual within the frame.

Try to avoid having two or more people's faces on the same vertical or horizontal line within your image. One of the strongest shapes you can create in a composition is a triangle, with one person's face slightly higher than the other two. If you're photographing groups of more than two people, simply seek to create lots of triangular shapes with your subject placement.

Sometimes this is easy to achieve, for example if a family have young children who are all different ages and heights. Other times it's more difficult, for example with wedding parties and corporate shoots.

If you have steps, chairs or boxes to hand you can use these to arrange people at different height levels. If you don't have these, then you can get some of your subjects to lean against a fence or wall, or seat them on the ground in different ways. If those aren't options, then try varying people's stances, so that not everyone is facing the same direction and standing in the exact same pose.

Above: If you drew a line between the noses of these family members, you'd get a triangular shape. This is a compositional device that makes a portrait much more interesting and visually pleasing than a row of people.

Above left: I wanted to create an architectural portrait with a romantic feel and needed to exaggerate this couple's height differences to achieve it. I had Geng lean against the lamppost while Gib stepped off the curb and snuggled into Geng. The height difference the curb created means Gib is looking up towards Geng in a way reminiscent of two dancers in a ballet. Read the full story behind this shot (and why it took so long to capture!) at https://pwfoto.co/tourist_hotspot.

> **What helps to tell your subject's story and what is just unwanted visual clutter? There's always some compromise to be made**

Encourage connection and interaction

Gaps between people can often look exaggerated in photographs. Encourage groups of loved ones to get close and cuddle, hold hands or even simply overlap each other slightly to convey their connection in a more visual way.

Facing people towards each other, or subtly tilting their heads together, helps to convey a sense of affection and friendship, whereas leaning, looking or facing away implies dislike.

Watch out for people self-consciously clasping their hands in front of their crotch or letting both arms dangle redundantly by their sides. Instead, provide suggestions for what your subjects can do with their hands, such as putting one on a hip or in a pocket, folding their arms, or holding on to a loved one nearby in the picture.

Once everyone is close together with their faces and bodies creating a pleasing composition, initiating some interaction can help to diffuse any tension and create genuine expressions. For example, you could ask everyone to look at a specific person in the group, ask them questions about each other or gently tease them, if appropriate!