Overview of Photography Technique

No one can tell someone else how to take a photograph, but while you are experimenting it is helpful to start with some easy tips, and to get yourself comfortable with some simple tools. Experts say it is a good idea to learn the rules then learn to break them. Fine. But please remember to learn the rules first.

I have come up with a few simple things to keep in mind when approaching people photography, inspired by a Kodak Web page called "Ten Tips to Photographing People." They had a list of tips for amateurs; here is my revised list for more experienced photographers:

Know your camera.
Experiment with shallow depth of field.
Watch your background.
Know your flash range.
Use your flash out of doors.
Move around.
Move it from the middle.
Understand selective focus.
Simplify your lighting.
Simplify your film choices.

Know Your Camera
I will bring this up time and time again, and it sounds very rudimentary, but it is crucial that you know your camera equipment. It will make your life much easier if you first know how to operate your camera, and all of the important accessories. You can get away with only using a camera (no tripod, no lights, no fancy gadgets) for a long, long time. So pick up the camera, and possibly the owner's manual, and start shooting!

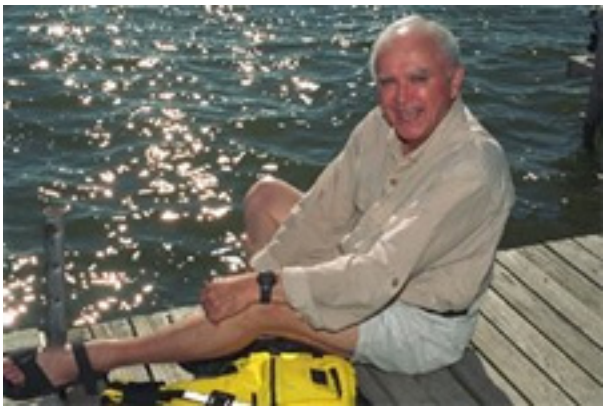
Experiment With Shallow Depth of Field

There are two reasons that people prefer to purchase more expensive lenses with apertures as small as f2.0 and f2.8. One is that you have an additional exposure range in low-light conditions, opening up to f2.8 or f4.0. The other reason is the beautiful images that you get from using a smaller aperture. The subject is crisp and the background falls out of focus. It is great for photographing people and used extensively in fashion. It brings the subject to the foreground and blurs out an otherwise distracting background.

Watch Your Background

Keep your background as simple as possible. You have enough things to think about with a person in front of you (are they comfortable, why did they choose to wear that ugly shirt, how can I stop them from blinking) as well as your camera operation, choice of film, and lighting decisions, that you want to eliminate any additional problems that may arise. The more experience you have photographing people the more at ease you will become with all of the other variables, then you can start to pay attention to the other things happening around you. You do not want to include something unexpected in the frame in the background that will detract from your main subject. It could be a subtle as a highlight or as annoying as a badly positioned bridge.

Using Your Flash



Know Your Flash Range

Knowing your flash range is as important as knowing your camera. If you get comfortable using your on-camera flash, it will open up the options for you to use it more often. You will be surprised at how effective that little unit can be. I suggest doing a simple flash test (shoot a roll of film with a person holding up cards indicating the distance, your flash settings, and your camera settings — do this indoors and outdoors), and you will have a pretty good idea what your flash can do.

Use your flash out of doors

Now that you are at ease with your flash, you will want to use it. Using a flash outside will help even out the effects of sunlight, eliminate shadows, provide fill light in shaded areas, and even out skin tones. Any bit of extra illumination that can be bounced into the subject with give you more light (thus better exposure options), even out the lighting on a subject, and put a nice highlight in their eyes. We will also be discussing the other ways to achieve lighting out of doors without a flash. They include using a scrim and using reflectors.

Move Around

Since it took so much time and effort to set up photographing someone, you want to make the best of it by moving around. I tend to move back, then move close, then get above, then look from below and so on. You will be surprised at what a big difference a small move can make. If you only shoot from one vantage point, it may not be the most complimentary and you run the risk of not seeing something in the frame, which will limit the number of useful images.

Move it from the middle

Moving around with the camera and your point of view (as suggested above) is purely a compositional decision. There is a tendency for an amateur photographer to always place the subject in the center of the frame. As an experienced photographer, I am sure you have taken enough images to understand the power of balance and the effectiveness of obtaining a unique composition.

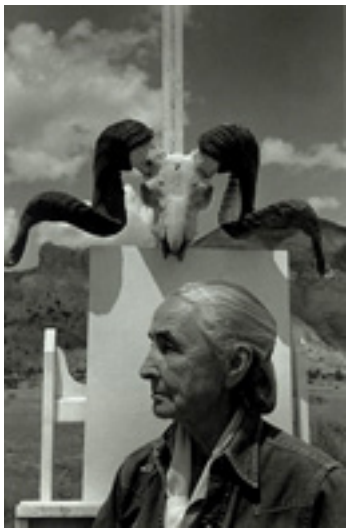
Understand Selective Focus

Play around with your focus. Once you have started to experiment with shallow depth of filed, the next step is to make some decisions on what exactly you want to keep in focus. It is standard portrait protocol to keep the eyes in focus when photographing a person, but it is of course not the only way to approach portraiture.

Simplify Your Lighting

Be as careful as you can and try to eliminate lighting mistakes. Start off as simply as possible — with daylight. Get comfortable with working with daylight (outside and inside), then expand. You have numerous options when it comes to lighting a subject, so try adding one option at a time until you become well versed, then try another. Most lighting can be used in conjunction with each other; you will end up with various lighting setups depending upon the situation.

Quality of Light



Hard Light
Bright sunlight is hard. It can:
create dark, defined shadows that can hide the face
emphasize wrinkles and blemishes
cause unattractive squinting
Soft Light

Light from an overcast sky or a north window is soft. It can:
create soft shadows that don't hide the face
minimize wrinkles and blemishes
reveal subtle skin tones and hues
allow the subject to stop squinting
Light can dramatically alter the appearance of your subject. By simply changing the lighting, you can transform the mood from glamorous to stark.

Direction of Light

The direction of sunlight, especially hard sunlight, changes how people look. Which direction is best will depend on the effect you're trying to achieve.

Front light: Harsh sunlight shining directly into a person's face flattens the face and causes squinting. Avoid these conditions if possible or put your subject(s) in the shade.

Overhead light: At midday, the sun is overhead and casts unpleasant facial shadows. Use the camera's flash to lighten harsh facial shadows. Side light: Early and late in the day, position your subject so the sun strikes only one side of the face. With one side of the face brightly lit and the other side in shadow, you will create a dramatic effect. To reduce the density of the shadow, use a reflector or a fill flash. Back light: Occurs when you position your subject facing away from the sun. This places your subject's face in shadow, eliminating squinting and often adding an attractive outline of light. Be careful so that the sun does not flare your lens. Use fill flash to lighten your subject's face.

Available Light

The most common element used to light your subject will be available daylight. It is usually preferable (most films are daylight balanced), easily available, and requires the least amount of work from the photographer to set up.

The other great thing about working with available light is that it is the least intrusive. You don't have flashes going off, banks of lights to contend with, or collapsible reflectors to move around. Every time you add an element (reflector, on-camera flash, strobe) the number of things you need to pay attention to will increase. Is the flash affecting the subject the way I intended? Will there be any unwanted shadows? Is the strobe firing? Are there any new unwanted reflections? And so on.

You should know instinctively where the sun is and ensure that the subject has the best possible light. If you have the option and you are shooting outside, then plan to photograph your subject(s) in the morning or late afternoon. This doesn't mean you cannot photograph during the middle of the day, but be aware of the bright light, strong shadows, and washed-out colors. And be prepared by bringing a flash or hand-held reflectors.

Examples of Available Lighting Techniques

Daylight is a simple enough concept to understand. Usually what you see through the camera (the evenness of the light, the shadows, the ratio of foreground and background light) is what you will get on film.

Basic Lighting Techniques: Reflectors

You have a wide range of choice when buying a reflector (sizes are listed in Session 4), but one word of advice from me — please buy one! At least one! You will not regret the purchase, especially those of you who are most interested in photographing people. I also use a reflector when photographing interiors and gardens. Believe me, they will prove to be an invaluable tool.

Reflectors come in many sizes and shapes. The most popular surfaces are all silver, all gold, and a combination of the two (where the gold and silver is interwoven). The other side is usually white, but there is also a black version ideal for product photographers who want to eliminate reflected light.

Silver: Silver is the most reflective of the surfaces (the greatest amount of light bounced in) although it can be very cold light, a bit too intense (therefore you get harsh shadows), and sometime a bit too dazzling for the subject (they will tend to squint). You can use a silver reflector from a distance to diminish these effects. It is best to experiment once you are outside by tilting the reflector, and moving it in closer and farther away. Remember, what you see through the lens is normally what you will get on film.

Gold: Although less reflective, the gold reflector casts a warm light. This is great for most skin tones, but it can also reflect too yellow. Again, watch the effects through the camera and move it around until you get the desired results.

Silver/gold: The most useful reflector I own is the combination of the silver and gold. I recommend it if you only want to purchase one. It provides the needed intensity of the silver and the warmth of the gold with a toned down version of each. This is the reflector I tend to grab first.

White: Most reflectors have one side that is pure white (it is difficult to keep clean, but it starts out white). White is useful, but the quality of light can be cold and a bit dull. It is best to purchase a reflector that has a shiny surface (silver or gold or silver/gold) on one side and white on the other.

Filters in Direct Sunlight:

The first image was taken in direct sunlight. The exposure is fine, but half of the subject's face is in shadow. The shadows form patterns (notice the shadow under her hair) that result in very contrasted light. In this case, the light is harsh and causes deep shadows to be cast, such as under her eyes. Due to her position facing the sun, she is also squinting.

Direct Sunlight with Silver and Gold Reflectors:

We get very similar results as with the silver and gold reflectors (even lighting, no shadows, and eyes are visible) but the cold quality of the light with the silver can be improved with a slight warming filter (81-A or 81-B) over the lens.

The results we get using a gold reflector are much warmer. Although warmer skin tones are usually preferable you have to pay attention to the gold reflectors because they can reflect light that is too yellow. If it looks overpowering and too yellow to you in person, then that same harshness will be translated on film. You can always vary its intensity by tilting the reflector up and down or by moving it farther away from the subject.

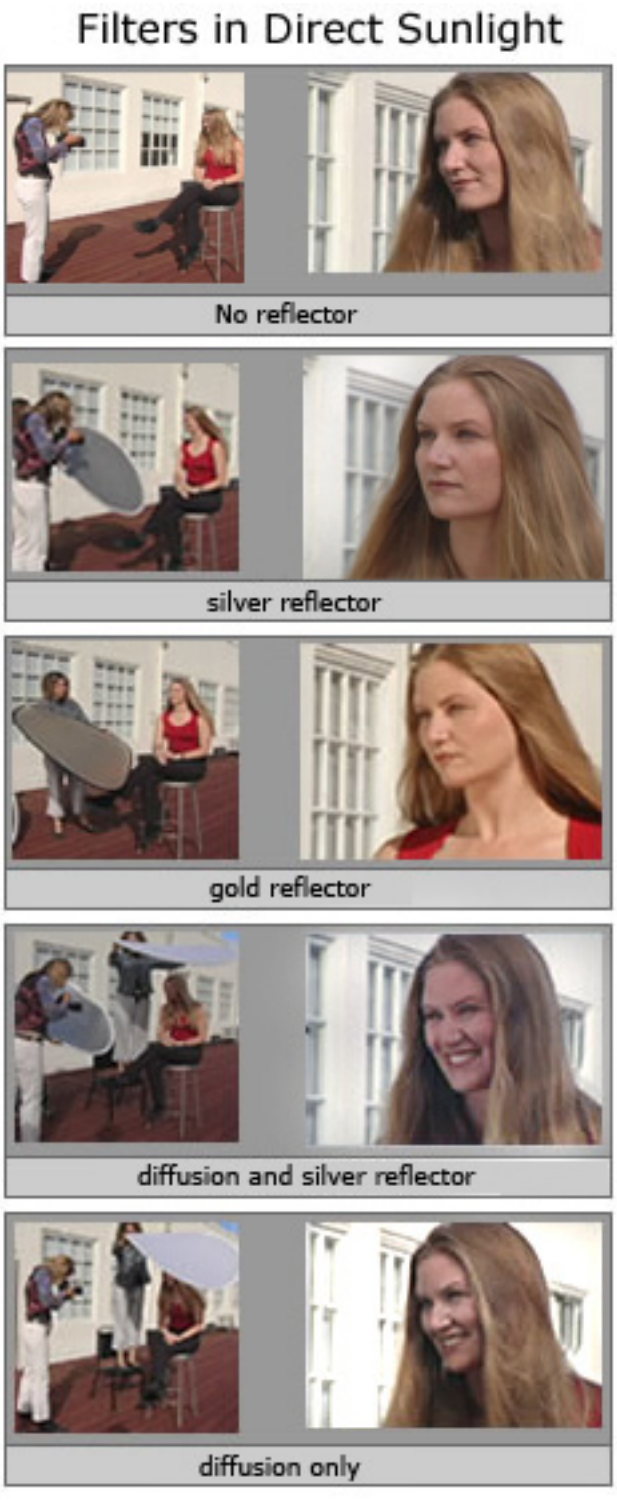
Sunlight with Diffusion:

There are no more distracting shadows on her face, the skin tones look even and she does not look as uncomfortable. The shade we cast from the diffusion disk will not only give her eyes a break from the direct sun but it will also keep her cool.

Sunlight with Diffusion and Silver Filter:

With the additional use of diffusion with a reflector, you gain control of the lighting, but it requires an additional hand to hold the two pieces. You can obtain the same results by placing the subject in the shade then bouncing in light with a silver, gold, or silver/gold reflector.

The diminished light that results from the use of diffusion material will require more exposure. As you can see, this opening up of the aperture (from f11 in direct sunlight to f8 with diffusion) did two things, it put the background out of focus and it lightened up the background in relation to the subject. Due to these changes, the contrast between background and subject increases, and the subject stands out in the foreground.



Basic Lighting Techniques: Artificial Light

Artificial light can include on-camera flash, off-camera flash, or strobe.

Flash
One of the hardest things to do, but one that can look great when you pull it off, is to use your flash so subtly that you can hardly tell. The trick is to get the flash to act as a slight fill light.

If your flash has a swivel head then use it. This is designed to let you bounce (and to reflect) light off the ceiling, walls, etc., and selectively illuminate your subject. It also softens the results of the flash producing a very soft effect.

I make sure that I am holding the camera as steadily as possible; if I can use a tripod, I will. Then with my flash set to TTL mode (check your manual) I get the flash to make up the difference in exposure. This is optimal for photographing scenarios where there are different lighting sources.

On-Camera and Off-Camera Flash
Your flash may be a built-in option on your camera or a portable flash unit that attaches to your camera. The built-in flash is useful because you never have to remember to take it along with you, and if you get into the habit you can use it every time you shoot, inside and outside. The camera manual will take you through the use of the flash, but you should still experiment with exposures and distances to get used to the camera's limitations.

The advantage of a removable flash is the portability. It can become an off-camera flash with the use of a stand. Then you have the option of moving it to one side of the subject or the other, closer or farther, above or below. You also have the option of using more than one flash. You can purchase infrared sensors that attach to the small portable flash units, and then they will automatically fire when any other flash is triggered.

Strobe
Although I sometime drag my strobe equipment outside, it is normally used for lighting indoors. You will learn more about using a strobe when you take location and studio lighting classes.

Follow these tips for using the flash to take indoor pictures of people:

Taking Indoor Pictures

Position your subject within the flash range for your camera (see your camera manual). When photographing a group, make sure that all your subjects are about the same distance from the flash.

Make sure your subject is a few feet from a wall to avoid the dark shadows that can occur when using a flash indoors.

Turn on all the room lights to avoid red eye. Red eye is caused when the flash hits the back of the eye and reflects back into the camera lens. The extra brightness will help reduce the size of your subjects' pupils letting less light in.

Watch out for shiny surfaces such as mirrors, windows, and eyeglasses that can reflect the flash. Stand at an angle to shiny surfaces to prevent unwanted reflections of the flash in your photos. Ask subjects wearing glasses to turn or tilt their heads slightly.