10 Ways to Take Stunning Portraits

1. Alter Your Perspective

Most portraits are taken with the camera at (or around) the eye level of the subject. While this is good common sense – completely changing the angle that you shoot from can give your portrait a real WOW factor.

Photo by striatic

Get up high and shoot down on your subject or get as close to the ground as you can and shoot up. Either way you'll be seeing your subject from an angle that is bound to create interest.

Photo by TeeRish

2. Play with Eye Contact

It is amazing how much the direction of your subject's eyes can impact an image. Most portraits have the subject looking down the lens – something that can create a real sense of connection between a subject and those viewing the image. But there are a couple of other things to try:

A. Looking off camera – have your subject focus their attention on something unseen and outside the field of view of your camera. This can create a feeling of candidness and also create a little intrigue and interest as the viewer of the shot wonders what they are looking at. This intrigue is particularly drawn about when the subject is showing some kind of emotion (ie 'what's making them laugh?' or 'what is making them look surprised?'). Just be aware that when you have a

subject looking out of frame that you can also draw the eye of the viewer of the shot to the edge of the image also – taking them away from the point of interest in your shot – the subject.

Photo by monicutza80

B. Looking within the frame – alternatively you could have your subject looking at something (or someone) within the frame. A child looking at a ball, a woman looking at her new baby, a man looking hungrily at a big plate of pasta…. When you give your subject something to look at that is inside the frame you create a second point of interest and a relationship between it and your primary subject. It also helps create 'story' within the image.

Photo by paulbence

3. Break the Rules of Composition

There are a lot of 'rules' out there when it comes to composition and I've always had a love hate relationship with them. My theory is that while they are useful to know and employ that they are also useful to know so you can purposely break them – as this can lead to eye catching results.

The Rule of Thirds is one that can be effective to break – placing your subject either dead centre can sometimes create a powerful image – or even creative placement with your subject right on the edge of a shot can sometimes create interesting images.
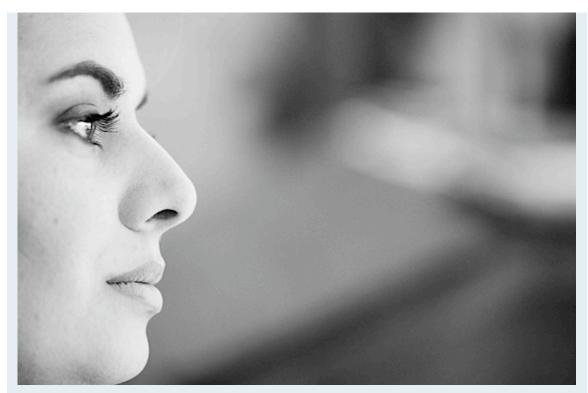
Photo by reportergimmiÃ¢â€žÂ¢

Another 'rule' that we often talk about in portrait photography is to give your subject room to look into. This can work really well – but again, sometimes rules are made to be broken.

Photo by Bukutgirl

4. Experiment with Lighting

Another element of randomness that you can introduce to your portraits is the way that you light them. There are almost unlimited possibilities when it comes to using light in portraits.

Side-lighting can create mood, backlighting and silhouetting your subject to hide their features can be powerful.
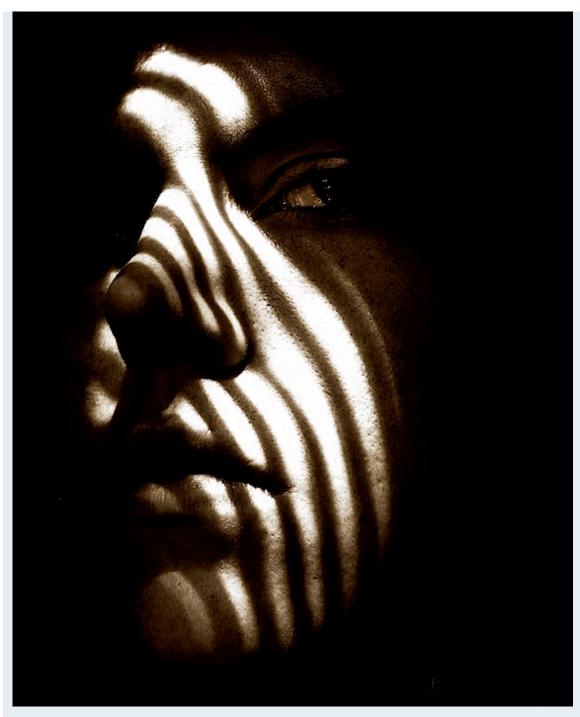
Photo by Bukutgirl

Using techniques like slow synch flash can create an impressive wow factor.

Photo by diskomethod

5. Move Your Subject Out of their Comfort Zone

I was chatting with a photographer recently who told me about a corporate portrait shoot that he had done with a business man at his home. They'd taken a lot of head and shoulder shots, shots at his desk, shots in front of framed degrees and other 'corporate' type images. They had all turned out fairly standard – but there was nothing that really stood out from the crowd.

The photographer and the subject agreed that there were plenty of useable shots but they wanted to create something 'special' and out of the box. The photographer suggested they try some 'jumping' shots. The subject was a little hesitant at first but stepped out into the uncomfortable zone and dressed in his suit and tie started jumping!

The shots were amazing, surprising and quite funny. The shoot culminated with the subject jumping in his pool for one last image!

While this might all sound a little 'silly' the shots ended up being featured in a magazine spread about the subject. It was the series of out of the box images that convinced the magazine he was someone that they'd want to feature.
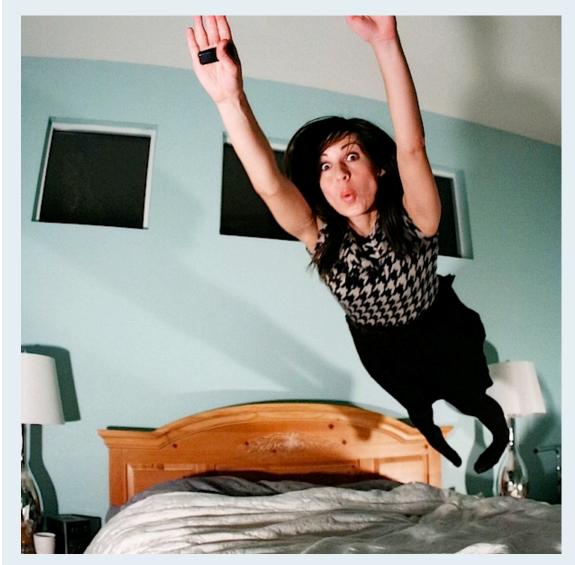

Image by TeeRish

6. Shoot Candidly

Sometimes posed shots can look somewhat…. posed. Some people don't look good in a posed environment and so switching to a candid type approach can work.

Photograph your subject at work, with family or doing something that they love. This will put them more at ease and you can end up getting some special shots

with them reacting naturally to the situation that they are in. You might even want to grab a longer zoom lens to take you out of their immediate zone and get really paparazzi with them.

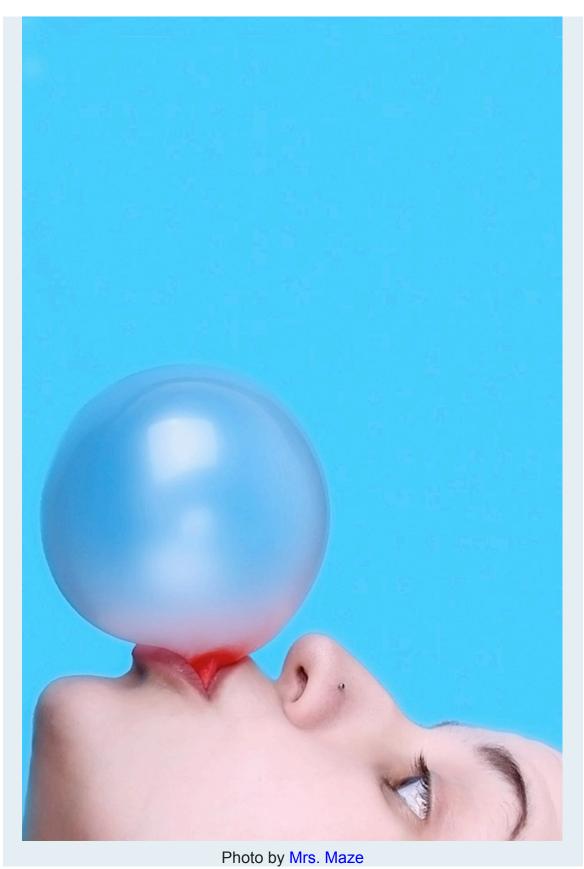I find that this can particularly work when photographing children.

Photo by phitar

7. Introduce a Prop

Add a prop of some kind into your shots and you create another point of interest that can enhance your shot.

Yes you might run the risk of taking too much focus away from your main subject but you could also really add a sense of story and place to the image that takes it in a new direction and gives the person you're photographing an extra layer of depth that they wouldn't have had without the prop.

Photo by Mrs. Maze

8. Focus Upon One Body Part – Get Close Up

Get a lens with a long focal length attached to your camera – or get right in close so that you can just photograph a part of your subject. Photographing a person's hands, eyes, mouth or even just their lower body… can leave a lot to the imagination of the viewer of an image.

Sometimes it's what is left out of an image that says more than what is included.

Photo by Bukutgirl

9. Obscure Part of your Subject

A variation on the idea of zooming in on one part of the body is to obscure parts of your portrait subject's face or body. You can do this with clothing, objects, their hands or just by framing part of them out of the image.

Doing this means that you leave a little to the imagination of the image's viewer but also focus their attention on parts of your subject that you want them to be focused upon.

Photo by BigBlonde

10. Take a Series of Shots

Switch your camera into 'burst' or 'continuous shooting' mode and fire off more than one shot at a time.

In doing this you create a series of images that could be presented together instead of just one static image.

This technique can work very well when you're photographing children – or really any active subject that is changing their position or pose in quick succession.

Image by diyosa