

01 Exposure Compensation

A common photography problem when shooting portraits with light skin tones is under-exposed portraits. You'll notice this more when shooting full-face photos or when there's lots of white in the scene – brides at weddings are a prime example. To brighten up subjects when using Aperture Priority mode, you can try using Exposure Compensation.

To address this, try dialling in up to +1 stop of positive Exposure Compensation to lighten up people's faces.

What is exposure compensation?

Put simply, exposure compensation is a feature on almost all cameras that allows you to make a picture lighter or darker than the recommended exposure. There are numerous instances in which you might want to use this handy function – and we explain all this below in our infographic.

You'll find the exposure compensation button on your camera, marked with a "+/-" icon. Your exposure compensation option gives you incredible leverage as a photographer to fine tune your exposure to take pictures in low-light or high-contrast scenes where you might not have been able to get a quality picture before.

A plus (+) setting makes your image brighter (for instance, making snow appear whiter), while a minus (-) setting makes an image darker (such as shooting your child in a school play, spot-lit against a dark background).

To try it out set your camera to "P" and use the AV +/- button.

02 Aperture advice

When shooting portraits, it's best to set a wide aperture (around f/2.8-f/5.6) to capture a shallow depth of field, so the background behind your subject is nicely blurred, making them stand out better.

Shoot in Aperture Priority mode to control depth of field; in this mode your SLR will helpfully set the shutter speed for a correct exposure.

Specialist portrait lenses tend to have even wider maximum apertures (from f/1.4 to f/2.8) in order to blur backgrounds further.

03 Shutter speed settings

When setting shutter speed, factor in your lens's focal length otherwise camera-shake (and blurred results) will become an issue.

As a general rule, make sure your shutter speed is higher than your effective focal length. For example, at 200mm use a 1/250 sec shutter speed or faster.

This also means you can get away with slower shutter speeds when using a wide-angle lens – such as 1/20 sec with an 18mm focal length.

04 Increase your ISO

People move around a lot as they're photographed, not to mention blink and constantly change their facial expressions – and there's nothing worse than a photo of somebody half-blinking or sneering instead of smiling!

To avoid these problems, and to prevent motion blur appearing, you'll need to use a fast shutter speed.

This will also help to ensure sharp shots and avoid camera-shake because more often than not you'll be shooting portraits handheld.

While in Aperture Priority mode and maintaining a wide aperture, to increase your shutter speed simply increase your ISO (from ISO100 to ISO400, say).

In low light (indoors and outside), you may need to increase it to ISO800, 1600 or even 3200. □A little grain is infinitely better than a blurry, useless photo.

05 Creative compositions

Don't be lazy with your compositions. Too often photographers stand back, thinking it's best to include all, or at least the top half, of their subject.

Zoom in instead to fill the frame for a more inspired photo composition. Positioning your subject to one side of the frame, with 'space to look into', is a great technique to master, as is experimenting with wide apertures to capture a very shallow depth of field.

But remember to make sure your focusing is as precise as possible – with our example, shot at f/2.8, we focused on the model's left eye, which has thrown her □right eye nicely out of focus.

06 Use a reflector

A quick and affordable way to brighten up your portraits and to give them a professional look is to use a reflector. Use them indoors (near windows) or outdoors to bounce light back onto your subjects to fill in unwanted shadows.

Many reflectors come double-sided or with detachable covers, so you get a choice of white, silver and gold reflective surfaces. The white surfaces of reflectors can also double up as diffusers to soften strong direct sunshine.

you can make a reflector by simply using a large sheet of white cardboard – which you can also cover with tin foil for a silver effect – and it should still work well!

07 Focusing your camera

When using wide apertures (especially f/2.8 or faster), your depth of field decreases dramatically, so it's crucial your focusing is bang on, otherwise you could end up with out-of-focus facial features; the person's nose may be sharp but the eyes soft.

With tightly composed photos, focus on the eyes; with wider compositions, focus on the head. To help with pinpoint focusing, manually select a single autofocus (AF) point.

A good technique is to set the central AF point, half-press the shutter button to focus on the eyes/head, then recompose to position your subject off to one side before fully pressing the button – this is often a much faster way of shooting than fiddling with AF points.

Alternatively, set AF points in the top corners and place them over your subject's eyes to take your shot. Either option will help you position your subject off-centre for a more balanced composition.

08 Posing for portraits

How your subject stands, poses and looks will have a dramatic effect on your results. A slight change in facial expression – such as whether they smile or not – can radically change the entire feeling of the photograph.

When shooting, try and capture a range of expressions so you can pick which you prefer when editing them back home on the computer.

Also consider setting up portrait shots where your subject looks off-camera, up or down, or to one side. Play around and see what works.

09 Using fill flash on sunny days

Although it may seem odd to use flash when the sun's out, that's precisely the time when you should use it!

The sun can cause all sorts of problems for portrait photographers: harsh shadows across faces, unbalanced exposures and burnt-out highlights.

Use a bit of 'fill flash' and you'll instantly improve your portraits; your camera will capture a much more balanced exposure, because your flash will light up your subject while the camera exposes for the background.

10 Compose space, rule of thirds, cropping and zooming

Consider how you can pose your subject to be inside the frame. Consider what the image is for and look at ways to fill the frame or capture their face so that they are cropped partly out of it. Use background elements to avoid mergers.

Remember the rule of thirds? In portraiture the rule still applies – you will most often want your subject placed on a node point and their eyes on or close to the top third line.