What is a Portrait?
Whilst any picture of a person or a group of people can be described as a portrait, what we mean by a portrait is a picture of an individual in a contrived setting, designed to show the subject's features and/or beauty/character at his or her best.

How much of the person is shown in the photo can vary tremendously from just a part of the face to the whole of the body, and perhaps some props too, and because of this both lighting and posing will be affected.

A Portrait doesn't need to look natural, it doesn't need to include the whole face and it doesn't need to have either a 'standard studio background' or 'standard' lighting - what it does need to do is to suit the subject!

Portraits are contrived shots.
What I mean by that is that they're not usually snapshots of something that just happens, a degree of thought and planning goes into their production - and like all planned shots the first step in the plan has to be to decide exactly what it is that you want to convey in your portrait.

We are all complex subjects and most of us have complex roles in life.

As an example, if a woman in her twenties asks you to produce a portrait of her it's very possible that she will be all of the different people listed below and she's almost certain to be at least some of them.

Daughter  
Mother  
Lover  
Employee  
Employer  
Friend

And her parents, children, partner, boss, employees and friends will all see her in different ways. Because of this your first responsibility is to find out why
she wants the portrait in the first place - is it for the Company brochure? Is it for her kids? For her partner?

**Styles**

Like everything else in life, portraiture styles run in cycles. In part, they follow fashion and they have also developed, influenced both by changes in society and by different cultures.

Portrait photography is almost as old as photography itself and the earliest portraits involved daylight studios, where the light was controlled by blinds blocking out light coming in through skylights and windows. But the photographers couldn't control the daylight too much because they relied on the quantity of light as much as the quality and so their main problem must have been getting enough light to actually take the pictures.

Today, although cameras & lenses have improved to the point where daylight can be used in studios fairly easily, nearly all photographers prefer to use artificial lighting of one sort or another, simply because it's easier to control.

And back in the bad old days, cameras were very slow and cumbersome and lenses had small maximum apertures and were difficult to focus. Even more importantly, films were very slow (about ½ ISO) and because of this exposures took several minutes. Because of this the sitters had to be able to keep stock still and were 'helped' in this by sitting in special chairs fitted with neck supports!

The result of course was that every portrait was nothing more than a physical likeness; there was no room for creativity or to show the personality of the sitter.

Fast forward to the middle of the 20th century and nearly every family had their Brownie box camera but the results weren't always up to the standards people hoped for, so it became a tradition for the whole family to troop off to see their local high street professional once a year for a family portrait. It was best clothes and a new hairdo so, once again, the styles were formal, with carefully orchestrated poses and perfect symmetry, often photographed against ornate backgrounds with false and rather grand room settings.

But this style (or perhaps lack of style) couldn't last. In photographic terms, people started buying small cameras and electronic flash became available (both of which made informal portraits easy). And in social terms, people became proud of their working class roots, men stopped wearing suits and people stayed away from professional portrait photographers.
Portrait photography then became the province of celebrity pro and gifted amateur photographers who produced a very wide range of styles, some based on the carefully crafted 1930's Hollywood film studio glamour shots, others based on documentary-style environmental portraits and of course with just about every in-between style too.

High street pro photography was pretty much in decline until the very end of the 20th Century, when 'high key lifestyle portraits' were made popular by Venture. Love 'em or hate 'em, there's no doubt that this one Company has had a major influence on modern portraiture.

This brief article concentrates on the lighting basics; the history above is there just to get you thinking about the styles of portraits that you want to produce.

Throughout this article I'm assuming that you'll be using flash as your light source, simply because flash is the best choice. If you haven't already done so, please download my free introduction to studio lighting by clicking here.

Now that we've established that a portrait is any kind of planned shot, what are the main ingredients? Well, in no particular order, they are

- Purpose
- Style
- Lighting

I'm going to concentrate on the lighting basics.

There’s a popular misconception that lighting is all about quantity. It isn't! People tend to buy their lighting gear in ‘kits’ of 2, 3 or 4 lights plus a few accessories. This can make sense on economic grounds but it’s very wrong to assume that you should use all of your kit, just because it's there. In fact, as you'll see in this article, the starting point for every portrait should be just one light. Less is more, and for many portraits just one light is the right choice, unless the background also needs to be lit.

One light is the starting point simply because portraits are taken indoors because we can control the weather and the light indoors. It's easier and more convenient than taking our shots outdoors – but we want the lighting to look realistic, so we work on the principle that because there's only one sun outdoors then there should only be one sun indoors too. Because of that we use just one light. If using just one light causes problems then we can deal with those problems by adding extra lights (or reflectors) BUT we must always start with one light, and we must always use any extra lights ONLY as problem-solving tools. At all costs, we must avoid using extra lights as extra suns, because if light is seen to be coming from more than one direction then the photo always looks unnatural and 'wrong'.
Of course, in the great outdoors the light varies a lot, and can be anything from the hard, directional light from the sun on a cloudless day, casting strong shadows, to the exact opposite – ultra soft light from the whole sky, when the sun is totally obscured by cloud – and just about every other type of lighting in between these extremes.

And the same lighting effects can be achieved indoors too. The light can be hard and directional, it can be soft with virtually no shadows at all or it can be anything between the two.

We achieve these different lighting effects by using modifiers. Modifiers are simply accessories that fit on a light to change its qualities.

At its most basic, modifiers like honeycombs, snoots, barn doors and spotlights control the spread of the light and, in effect, make the light smaller. They work in different ways but basically they all make the light harder, with sharply-defined shadows. Light from small, hard light sources is very similar to bright sunlight on a cloudless day.

And modifiers like umbrellas, softboxes, silks and scrims work in the opposite way. They make the light bigger and bigger means softer. Light from a really large light source, close to the subject, is very similar to the light from a seriously overcast day.

As photographers, we have to make decisions about whether hard light or soft light suits our subject (and purpose) better. Soft light isn't necessarily better or worse than hard light, and some studio lighting involves a mixture of the two.

Rightly or wrongly, modifiers that produce soft light are more popular than those that produce hard light, so let's deal with them first. There are a few different choices;
- Softboxes
- Shoot through umbrellas
- Reflective umbrellas
- Silks & Scrims

**Softboxes** are useful general-purpose modifiers. Basically they are just a large reflector, the light goes in one end, bounces around off of the interior surface (usually silver but sometimes white), passes through (usually) a diffuser and finally comes out at the front, where the main diffuser is fitted.
The big advantage of softboxes is that the light is controlled, that is it all goes forwards and none of it bounces around the studio, unlike shoot through umbrellas. Also, the design of softboxes means that they can be placed really close to the subject, unlike reflective umbrellas.

Their big disadvantage is that they should be viewed as permanent – they can be fiddly to assemble/dismantle and so aren’t ideal if you need to travel to other people’s homes with your gear, or if your studio has to become your lounge again when you’ve finished shooting.

Softboxes are available in all sorts of shapes and sizes and some produce much better quality of light than others.

**Shoot through umbrellas** fit over the light and go between the light and the subject. Basically they’re like a wet weather umbrella except that the cover is translucent. The light hits the cover, which then becomes a large and therefore softer light source.

The big advantage of shoot through umbrellas, apart from their low cost and portability, is that their design allows them to be placed close to the subject, which means that they can produce really soft light.

But they have a disadvantage too – only about 60% of the light actually passes through the umbrella, the rest bounces back and this ‘spare’ light then bounces off of ceilings, nearby walls etc, often producing extra light from unwanted directions. Bounced light can also reach the lens, which can cause flare.

**Reflective umbrellas** face the ‘wrong way’ so that the light is facing away from the subject and the umbrella bounces the light on to the subject. The advantage of this arrangement is that, unlike shoot through umbrellas, the light is fairly controlled and doesn’t spill everywhere.

The disadvantage is that their design stops them from being placed close to the subject, so the light cannot be really soft.

Umbrellas are also available with detachable covers, these can be used as either shoot through or reflective... And you can get umbrella softboxes too, which are basically umbrellas with a diffuser fitted. They are said to
have the portability of umbrellas and some of the qualities of softboxes.

**Silks and scrims** are different tools but work in a similar way. They are simply large diffusion panels, often fitted to a frame, and they go between the light and the subject. The diffusion panel is similar to that of a softbox. They’re an excellent, low-cost way of getting a really large light source and can achieve various different effects, depending on how close the light is placed to the diffuser.

At the other end of the scale, snoots stop light from spreading outwards and so produce a controlled, small light. Honeycombs do much the same, but have the advantage that they also control the light by directing it through the honeycomb itself, which makes it ideal if the light is pointing towards the camera – a slight change in angle can stop light from hitting the camera lens and causing flare.

In the shot above, a honeycomb mounted on a boom arm is being used as a hairlight. This kind of arrangement is fine for a seated subject who can keep still, but it requires careful positioning. Reflective umbrellas are a less precise tool for hairlight use (more of a shotgun than a rifle) but they’re a lot easier for subjects who move around.

Barn doors are another way of controlling the spread of light, they were popular in the days of hotlights but there are better and easier ways of controlling flash.

The picture below shows the effect of some of the most common lighting modifiers.
Where should the light go?
Well, this depends on the effect you want to achieve – but bear in mind that ‘natural’ light comes from the sky, which is above the subject, and although of course the angles can and do vary it’s usually a good idea for the light to be above the subject. Placing the light above the subject also emphasises high cheekbones and makes the eyes look larger.
Short lighting makes faces thinner, broad lighting is the opposite of short lighting and makes faces look fatter.

In the shot on the right I used a medium size (4’ x 3’) softbox directly in front of and slightly higher than the model. This emphasised her high cheekbones and left part of her face in gentle shadow, which had a slimming effect. A reflector placed immediately in front of the camera provided fill light.

Wherever you place the light, it becomes your sun. The sun is always above but can be from either side, behind or a bit of each.

In the picture below, the ‘sun’ was the fake studio window behind the subject and lit only the part of the face less visible to the camera. This is known as short lighting (because the ‘short’ side of the face is lit more than the broad side of the face).

Short lighting makes faces thinner, broad lighting is the opposite of short lighting and makes faces look fatter.

In shot above left, fill lighting was used to place some light on the front of the subject. This can either be a separate light or a reflector but whichever you choose to use, fill lighting is always:
1. Less bright than the key (main) light
2. On the same axis as the camera (above or below but never to one side)

It has to be less bright because otherwise there would be two conflicting ‘suns’. And it has to be on axis with the camera, because it has to reach every part of the subject visible to the camera – otherwise it can’t act as a fill. People who believe that the key light goes on one side and the fill light goes on the other simply don’t understand the basics.
It can be acceptable (sometimes) to have two suns, and one of these exceptions is rim lighting (left) where a light is placed each side, behind the subject.

Once again, a fill light was used and as always it was exactly in line with the camera.

Here’s another example of rim lighting, this time with no fill.

This is another shot lit by a medium softbox immediately in front of and above the subject. Used close like this (probably no more than 2’ from the subject) it provides soft, wraparound lighting.

But if small softboxes are used, or if even large ones are used at a distance, the light is no longer soft – it’s all about relative, not actual size.

Both soft and hard lighting can be combined in the same shot, to get the benefits of the emphasis created by the hard light and the flattering effect of the soft light. In the shot below left I used the same medium softbox for fill and added a 5° honeycomb to add the hard lighting and emphasise the high cheekbones. This shot needs some retouching – lighting this hard normally does, but none has been used here.
Some subjects simply cry out for hard lighting, and this shot by talented French photographer Marc Gougouenheim is a good example of hard lighting.

And here’s another example of hard lighting.

I broke all the ‘rules’ in the shot on the right – not only was the light extremely hard but it was also placed very low, to cast a dramatic shadow and add menace to the shot – soft lighting would have made him look like a pussycat!

And here’s another example of hard lighting, which contrasts the softness of the baby with the masculinity of his father.

Children usually have perfect complexions and so don’t need soft lighting.

Lighting ratios
Contrary to what you may read in photography magazines and books, there is no such thing as a ‘correct’ lighting ratio. Suitable lighting for a 70 year-old farmer might be a single harsh light with no fill, and the ratio between highlights and shadows might be as high as 5 stops - a ratio of 32 to 1. Lighting this harsh, from the right angle, will show every line, scar and wrinkle. A girl of 18, with perfect skin, may suit a ratio of 3 stops (8 to 1) and a woman of 30 might need a ratio of 3 to 2. It all depends on the shape of the face, on whether you want to emphasise or hide skin imperfections and on the type of effect you want to achieve.
Both the position and the ratio of the lighting is crucial to all good photos but this does not mean that you should light to a formula - experiment and practice so that you can predict the effect of various lighting arrangements.

The whole point of soft lighting (apart from the fact that it's easy) is that it illuminates the whole of the subject and because it 'wraps around' the subject it minimises wrinkles and fills in shadows. But lighting that illuminates the whole of the subject also makes it look larger (or fatter). Each of the examples below is of identical size.

(above) left to right, we have totally even (flat) lighting, then a ratio of 3:1, then 5:1, then mask lighting, and finally rim lighting. More of these later, meanwhile please take note of the effect these different types of lighting have on the apparent width of the 'face'.

Of course, the few samples in this article are just the very small tip of a very large iceberg – there are hundreds (if not thousands) of different lighting combinations that work, you need to learn by experimenting. Here's a technique that I personally like, called chiaroscuro (from the Italian chiaro (light) and scuro (dark).

Like many photographic lighting techniques, chiaroscuro has its origins in painting. Basically it involves lighting one side of the subject (as you can see, short lighting was used here) and placing the subject on a background that is then lit the opposite way so that the light part of the subject is against the unlit part of the background and vice versa.

**Lighting the background**

Backgrounds can be anything from natural (a real background) to plain white, plain black or anything in between.

The one thing that all backgrounds have in common is that they usually need to be lit separately to the subject.

The reasons for this are that
1. If the background isn’t lit separately then shadows from the subject will show on the background (although, depending on your lighting position, the shadow may be hidden by your subject)

2. The background will photograph darker than the subject because less light hits the background than the subject, which is nearer to the light.

Choice of background is entirely subjective and a matter of taste (or lack of taste). Natural backgrounds are ideal for environmental portraits, for example a shot of a violin maker anywhere except with his workshop as a background won’t do them justice.

The horrible blue backgrounds used by school photographers are popular because they work, and they work because the human skin (regardless of skin colour) contains a lot of red and no blue, so blue backgrounds complement the colour of the skin.

Black backgrounds are dramatic but, like white backgrounds, they compress space and make the shot look 2-dimensional.

A lot of people seem to like pure white backgrounds. This style of photography is often described as ‘High Key’ but in fact high key photography has nothing to do with the colour of the background, it’s about a predominance of light tones and an absence of dark tones.

If you want a pure white background you should start with a white or grey background and you need to light it, as evenly as possible, so that it is overexposed relative to your subject. If you have enough lights and take enough care to get the background perfectly evenly lit then a little bit of overexposure of the background, say ½ a stop (measured by reflected light) will do the job. But if you can’t get the background evenly lit then the level of overexposure will need to be much higher, say 2 stops. And this can create its own problems, because light bounced from the background will reach forward to your subject and may degrade fine detail such as the hair or light clothing/skin. In order to avoid this, you will need to have a lot of space between your subject and the background – say at least 8’, although more space makes life easier.

If you like plain background then there’s an argument that the only colour you need is grey.

- If you have enough lighting power that grey background can become white
- Or it can become any colour you like, simply by putting a coloured lighting gel over each of the lights you use to illuminate it
- Or it can become black, provided that you don’t light it at all and you can move your subject far enough away from the background
- Or it can become multi-coloured or multi-toned simply by lighting it through glass blocks or similar
These photos (of a pig's ear)! Show various coloured lighting gels used on the background. Some of the shots involve a honeycomb and a spotlight was used in No.8.

And the shot on the left shows some of the effects you can get with the humble glass builder's block. Glass blocks are a cheap and very useful tool for the studio photographer because they allow light to pass through, but the light is distorted and because of this the light transmitted through one or more glass blocks can be used, with or without lighting gels, to produce unevenly-lit backgrounds.

The sharpness or otherwise of the effect will depend on the distance of the lamp from the block(s) as well as on the distance between subject and background and the depth of field chosen for the shot.

Top left, the humble glass block.
Bottom left, uneven light passed through a single block
Top right, with lighting gels fitted to the back of 3 blocks - fit them to the front for a less even, more diffused effect.
Bottom right, with a gel fitted to 1 block only

Sometimes, the background looks better if it’s just left to its own devices, as in this beautifully timed shot by Roy Wilson. Again, note that the light was directly in front of the subject. Roy’s website:

As you can see, portrait photography is more about knowledge, care and thought than equipment.

Please click here for a much more detailed tutorial on portrait photography