

Passionate



Painter

Lighting

Your Portrait Model

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When you paint a portrait, there are times you will be asked to use a specific photo provided by the client. In such a case it will be up to you as the artist to determine whether you can work from that photo to produce results you will be satisfied with.

If the answer is “no,” you’ll need to decide if you would rather turn down the commission. While this may be easier said than done, consider that you may regret committing to working with a reference photo that you don’t feel good about.

I tell my portrait clients they can expect the portrait to only be as good as the reference. So, if the reference is a blurry, small image, I’m going to struggle.

Don’t forget that you really need to see the details of a person’s image to achieve the likeness; the length of the nose, how far apart the eyes are, the angles of the chin. Eye color is something you can “wing,” based on internet reference on the hue of another person’s eyes of the same color (or another photo of your subject). The bone structure in the specific pose you are painting from is not “wing-able.”

If you move forward, at the very least, ask your client for several additional photos of the person, preferably from the same angle, so you can clearly see the specific aspects of their features. Even if you get these, keep in mind that if the lighting is different, you will struggle.

Ultimately, it’s up to you. If your subject is local or you can afford to go to them or bring them to you, the ideal scenario is painting them live as they sit for you.

The second best is taking your own reference photos in lighting you can control.

While this is not a photography course, this download will give you three potential poses to consider, and how to light them. You can certainly google “lighting for portraiture” and get a bazillion reference links. This resource is intended to be a reliable starting point.

We will look at the basics of lighting both your model, as well as your easel. You will see that these are in fact, two very different things.

The equipment listed here is also not fancy, nor expensive. You can certainly purchase more expensive equipment if you want to, such as studio lighting and reflectors. But you can certainly get by with a source of light and a source of reflected light.

Mistakes to Avoid

If you choose to disregard consistent lighting, do it because you made an artistic decision, not because you’ve got bad reference.

Whichever lighting you choose, there are a few things to avoid doing unless they are done on purpose. These are:

- 1) Lighting your model too uniformly. The result of either too much or too little light is a flattening effect. Make sure you have a discernible light source and variety in your tonal values.
- 2) Not leaving reflected light in your shadows. It’s best to have some “life” in your shadows in the form of reflected light in the areas not lit directly. This gives shadows interest and prevents unwanted flattening.
- 3) Lighting your model too harshly. This will not only cause shadows that are too dark, but highlights that are too bright.



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Mistakes to Avoid *continued...*

Remember the diffusing trick of taping or clipping a sheet of translucent velum or tracing paper, or using the Press-and-Seal brand of cling wrap on your clip on spotlights.

The ideal light source is a window to light your subject naturally.

4) Too many light sources. This can cause distracting shadows or not enough shadows. Sticking to one “key” light source and one reflected light source is easiest.

Let’s take a look at three ways to light your model for a portrait.

About the Background

Over the years, I’ve found that getting the lighting right was more important to the portrait than the specific background. Meaning I have yet to purchase the kind of large paper backdrop you see in photography studios (that you also need a stand to hold up). Again, if you have one, that’s great. But you can do just fine without it.

If you’re going for a traditional portrait, in most cases, a plain background is still going to be better than a busy one. If you want a plain background, you can include a wall or corner in your photo, hang a drape, or just simplify or eliminate the background entirely in favor of a gradation of color behind the model, to indicate the light source.

I’ve encountered challenges with the lighting of reference when the model has a less-than-ideal time of day available to pose. In such cases, the background consideration was secondary to getting the lighting I wanted. I’ve even sat my model in a narrow hallway in order to get the lighting right. I later painted in a plain background behind the model for the portrait.

An alternative to a plain background is using the background to add information to your painting about the model. If you do so, consider the lighting, so that it is not at odds with the lighting of your subject.

NOTE: The distance of the light, reflector, and camera from the model are not to scale; the diagrams are intended to show position of each item. Play with the distances of these things to get the result you want.

Equipment

You don’t need to buy a bunch of expensive equipment to get a good reference photo for a portrait. You can start with the minimum listed here and add to it as you like.

Minimally, you’ll want:

- A natural light source such as a window, if possible
- A spotlight or a lamp (or two, depending on how much natural light is available).
- The clip-on spotlights you can get at home improvement stores work. Consider taping or clipping a sheet of translucent velum or tracing paper across them to diffuse the light. The sticky-sided Press-and-Seal brand of cling wrap can also work. Always be aware of how hot your lights are and check the material that is near them or covering them for safety.
- A light stand is handy to have, so you can adjust the height of your lights, but in most cases clipping your light to a chair will work.
- A purchased or homemade reflector. You can use a variety of items as a reflector, including:
 - A reflective sun shield for a car windshield
 - A large sheet of white card stock
- A large mirror. This is an ideal way to add natural reflected light, depending on whether you have a preference for the temperature of the light on your model. If you want it to be warm, you may need to use an incandescent bulb.
- A camera. These days the cameras on smart phones work beautifully. Just make sure that you don’t have the phone at a distance, angle, or setting that creates distortion (unless you want it).

I’ve encountered significant distortion when taking a photo with an iPhone angled toward or away from my subject, creating an awkward zoom effect. If you use a phone camera, make sure you hold it perpendicular to the floor — meaning, straight upright, like the angle of a wall, 90° angle to the floor.

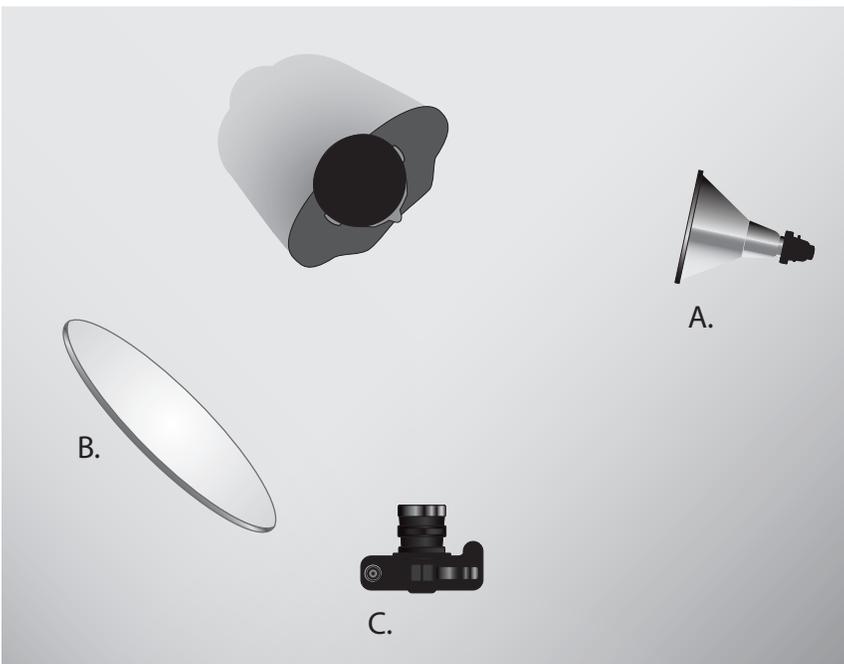


Rembrandt Lighting



Have you ever noticed the small triangle of light under the eye of the non-lit side of the face on Rembrandt's portraits? This is the style of lighting we now call "Rembrandt" lighting, and is an attractive and traditional way to light your model.

The important aspect of each of these lighting methods is that there is some light within the shadows to maintain volume and color (chroma).



A. Set your light at a 45° angle to your subject, just above the model's head.

B. Set up a reflector on the other side of your model at the same height as your light source

C. Take the photo from between the light and the reflector. Your model should be right in front of you, facing slightly towards the light.

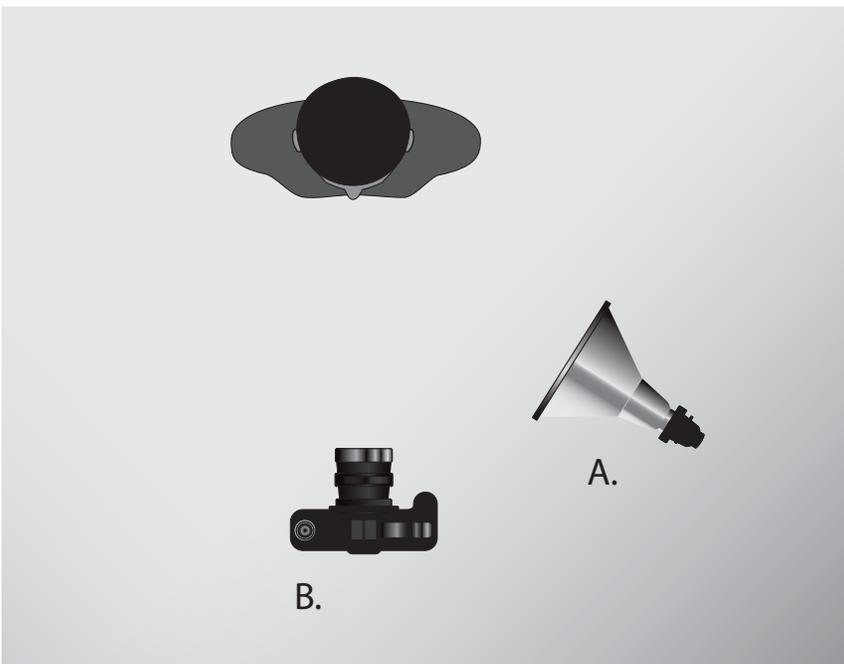


Loop Lighting



Loop lighting is another attractive way to light your model. It gets its name from the small shadow cast by the nose onto the cheek. The result of this lighting will be similar to Rembrandt lighting, but your shadows won't connect. Watch that your shadows angle downward slightly without being too long or connecting. You also want to make sure you keep those highlights in the eyes we all love to paint, called "catchlights."

If you use a reflector with this pose (or any pose), be sure you don't set it up too low. You don't want to light the underside of the model's nose creating odd shadows.



A. Set your light at a 30° to 45° angle to your subject, just above the model's eye level.

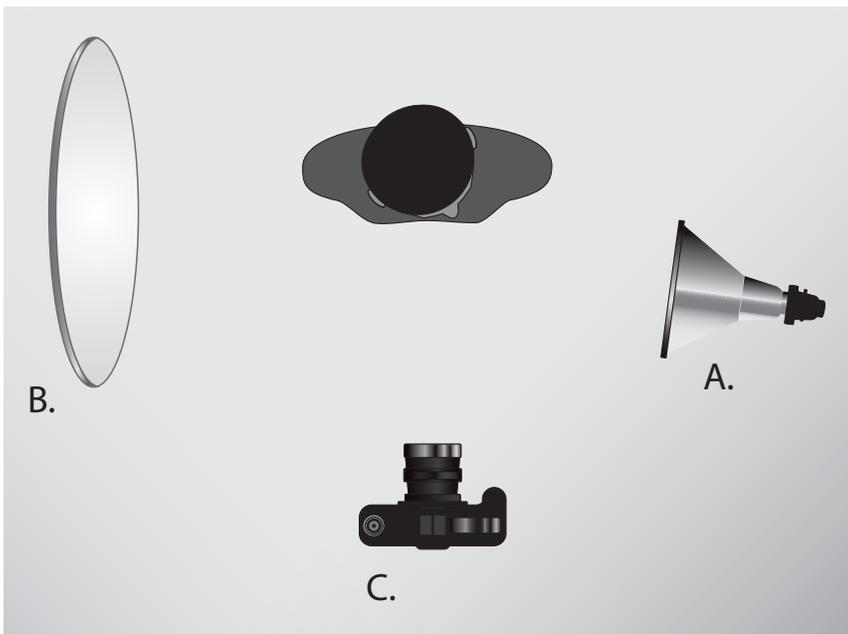
B. Take Your Photo from right in front of your model as they face you.



Short Lighting



Short lighting may sound unflattering, but is actually flattering for most people, as it has a slimming effect. In this pose, the face is turned 3/4 from the camera, and the far-side of the face is lit instead of the broad, or near-side. In a 3/4 pose like this, the near-side will appear broader (or wider). The far side appears “shorter” or narrower. Lighting the short side of the face therefore, has a slimming effect on the model.



Since the larger area of the face you see here is in shadow, use a reflector opposite your light source to bounce reflected light back onto the broad side. You want to be able to “see into” your shadows to bring that side of the face to life.

A. Set your light to the far side of the model's face, and slightly above it.

B. Use a reflector if you need so that there is some light in the shadows on the dark side of the face.

C. Stand in front of your model and have them turn at a 3/4 angle toward the light. It's up to you if you want the subject's shoulders square to the camera or turned. Take the photo while standing in the middle of the unlit side of the face.

Remember that the distance of the light, reflector, and camera from the model are not to scale; the diagrams are intended to show position of each item. Play with the distances of these things to get the result you want.



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Parting Shots

- ✓ Taking your own photos (or lighting a live model) is preferable to grabbing a stock image, because most stock images are devoid of the shadows that give portraits interest and volume.
- ✓ Remember the angle of the camera or your horizon line can create mood – are you eye level with the model? Below the horizon looking up? Above, looking down?
- ✓ A professional camera is great to have, but the camera on your phone will do in a pinch (and sometimes is far better, depending on your phone). Just remember to get far enough back to avoid “fish-eye” distortion, and to keep camera phones perpendicular to (at a 90° angle from) the subject
- ✓ Follow your creativity, but remember, a 3/4 pose is going to provide you the most depth. If you do go for the 3/4 view, you’ll probably want to include the “notch” to give the edge of the face added interest.
- ✓ Natural light is great, if you can get it, so that it shows the model’s real skin tone without the influence of warm or cool lighting – unless that’s what you want – YOU are the artist!.
- ✓ Your subject’s eye contact, or lack of it, can be used as another element in the “story.” They may be looking right at the viewer, or looking at something else... Maybe off into space... Whatever you do as an artist, do it mindfully and on purpose!
- ✓ Some poses create lighting that is too extreme and thus flatten out the subject, creating a more graphic look. Don’t go there unless it’s on purpose!
- ✓ Remember the lesson on how to make the eyes follow you while you are standing centered and approximately four-feet in front of the person. Make sure you can see the whites on both sides of each eye.
- ✓ Use a reflector or low-light source to create reflected light in your shadows to give your portrait life.
- ✓ Shadows around the model can create mood, too. Look at the light and shadows around the model from an abstract, compositional point of view.

