

Posing Basics

This section covers the fundamental rules of traditional posing—techniques that are illustrated in many of the images in this book. While these rules are often intentionally broken by contemporary photographers, most are cornerstones for presenting the human form in a flattering way.

Types

There are three basic types of poses, each defined by how much of the length of the subject's body is included in the image. When including less than the full body in the frame, it is recommended that you avoid cropping at a joint (such as the knee or elbow); this creates an amputated look. Instead, crop between joints.

Head and Shoulders Portraits (or Headshots). Portraits that show the subject's head and shoulders. If the hands are lifted to a position near the face, these may also be included.

Waist-Up Portraits. Portraits that include the subject's head and shoulders along with at least some of the torso. In portraits of women, these images are often cropped just below the bustline or at the waist. Waist-up portraits are sometimes considered a type of headshot.

Three-Quarter-Length Portraits. Portraits that show the subject from the head down to the mid-thigh or mid-calf. In some cases, one foot may be visible.

Full-Length Portraits. Portraits that show the subject from the head down to the feet (or at least the ankles). In some cases, only one foot may be visible.

Facial Views

Full Face View. The subject's nose is pointed at the camera.

Seven-Eighths View. The subject's face is turned slightly away from the camera, but both ears are still visible.

Three-Quarters or Two-Thirds View. The subject's face is angled enough that the far ear is hidden from the camera's view. In this pose, the far eye will appear smaller because it is farther away from the camera than the other eye.

The head should not be turned so far that the tip of the nose extends past the line of the cheek or the bridge of the nose obscures the far eye.

Profile View. The subject's head is turned 90 degrees to the camera so that only one eye is visible.

The Shoulders

Especially in portraits of women, the subject's shoulders should be turned at an angle to the camera. Having the shoulders face the camera directly makes the person look wider than he or she really is and can yield a static composition. In women's portraits, squaring the shoulders to the camera can give the image a less feminine look (which is sometimes done intentionally to create an assertive mood).

The Head

Tilting the Head. Tilting the head slightly produces diagonal lines that can help a pose feel more dynamic. In women's portraits, the head is traditionally tilted toward the near or high shoulder, but this rule is often broken. Most photographers agree that the best practice is to tilt the subject's head in the direction that best suits the overall image and most flatters the subject.

Chin Height. A medium chin height is desirable. If the chin is too high, the subject may look conceited and her neck may appear elongated. If the person's chin is too low, she may look timid and appear to have a double chin or no neck.

Eyes. In almost all portraits, the eyes are the most important part of the face. Typically, eyes look best when the eyelids border the iris. Turning the face slightly away from the camera and directing the subject's eyes back toward the camera reveals more of the white of the eye, making the eyes look larger.

Arms

The subject's arms should be separated at least slightly from the waist. This creates a space that slims the appearance of

the upper body. It also creates a triangular base for the composition, leading the viewer's eye up to the subject's face.

Arms should always be articulated and never allowed to simply hang at the subject's sides. Simply bending the elbows creates appealing diagonal lines in your composition—and placing these carefully can help direct the viewer of the image to the subject's face.

Most portrait photographers request that the subject wear long-sleeved tops; even if the subject is thin, bare upper arms rarely render attractively in portraits.

Hands

Keep the hands at an angle to the lens to avoid distorting their size and shape. Photographing the outer edge of the hand produces a more appealing look than showing the back of the hand or the palm, which may look unnaturally large (especially when close to the face). Additionally, it is usually advised that the hands should be at different heights in the image. This creates a diagonal line that makes the pose more dynamic.

Wrist. Bending the wrists slightly by lifting the hand (not allowing it to flop down) creates an appealing curve that is particularly flattering in women's portraits.

Fingers. Fingers look best when separated slightly. This gives them form and definition.

Props. Hands are often easiest to pose when they have something to do—either a prop to hold or something to rest upon.

Chest

In portraits of women, properly rendering this area is critical. Selecting a pose that places the torso at an angle to the camera emphasizes the shape of the chest and, depending on the position of the main light, enhances the form-revealing shadows on the cleavage. Turning the shoulders square to the camera tends to flatten and de-emphasize this area. Good posture, with the chest lifted and shoulders dropped, is also critical to a flattering rendition.

Waist and Stomach

Separating the arms from the torso helps to slim the waist. In seated poses, a very upright posture (almost to the point of arching the back) will help to flatten the stomach area, as will selecting a standing pose rather than a seated one. It is also generally recommended that the body be angled away from the main light. This allows the far side of the body to fall into shadow for a slimming effect.

Legs

Whether the subject is standing or seated, the legs should be posed independently rather than identically. Typically, one leg is straighter and used to support the body (or in a seated pose, to connect the subject to the floor). The other leg is bent to create a more interesting line in the composition.

Standing. Having the subject put her weight on her back foot shifts the body slightly away from the camera for a more flattering appearance than having the weight distributed evenly on both feet. Having a slight bend in the front knee helps create a less static look.

Seated. When the subject is sitting, her legs should be at an angle to the camera. Allowing for a small space between the legs and the chair will slim the thighs and calves.

One Leg in Profile. In portraits of women where the legs are bare, it is desirable to show the side of at least one leg. This better reveals the shape of the ankle and calf.

Hips and Thighs

Most female subjects are concerned about this area. For the slimmest appearance in a standing pose, turn the hips at an angle to the camera and away from the main light. In a seated pose, have the subject shift her weight onto one hip so that more of her rear is turned away from the camera.

Feet

Feet often look distorted when the toes are pointed directly at the camera. It is best to show the feet from an angle. In portraits of women, the toes are often pointed (or the heels elevated, as they would be in high-heeled shoes). This flexes the calf muscles, creating a slimmer appearance and lengthening the visual line of the subject's legs.