

## How to Photograph People at Work :: Digital Photo Secrets



We all love a beautiful studio portrait. Who doesn't want to see their loved one posed beautifully in front of a pristine backdrop, dressed in a smart suit or gorgeous dress with a perfect smile? This is how we tend to think of portraits, whether they are school portraits, family portraits, wedding portraits, or new baby portraits—they are all some version of the above, beautiful but staged.

There's nothing wrong with that approach, of course (if there was then a whole lot of portrait photographers would be out of work). But there's something that's left out of those shots, some element that grounds that image in reality. We all know that our loved ones are beautiful, but what do those portraits really say about them as people? Sure, you could add a soccer ball or a guitar to one of those poses, but that's really only scratching the surface of who they are deep down. To really capture the spirit of a person, try taking a photograph of him at work. Read on to find out how.



There's an argument to be made for not identifying yourself through your work, but there's also no doubt that our jobs are a big part of who we are. How we dress for work, the kinds of tools we use, how dirty we get—these are all elements that add depth to a photograph and tell viewers something about us. Although it's not the only way to make a statement about a [portrait](#) subject, it is one very good way to put [personality](#) into an image.

## Gear

A standard portrait lens is between 50mm and 100mm in length. These are generally the best [focal lengths](#) for capturing faces, because they don't add distortion and they depict your subject in the most natural, accurate way. But if your goal is to capture some context as well—which is essential when photographing people at work—then you'll also need to bring along a [wider angle lens](#). Finally, don't leave your [telephoto lens](#) at home because it can be useful for capturing important details—and it's also essential if your subject works in a hazardous area such as a working cattle ranch or on a road crew.



## What to include (and what to exclude)

When we've discussed portraits in the past, we've spent some time talking about [how to exclude the background](#). [Busy backgrounds](#), after all, can be a distraction from what your viewer is supposed to be looking at—your subject. So you probably regularly shoot portraits with larger [apertures](#), so those backgrounds will fall off into a nice soft [blur](#). But when you're shooting people at work, you can't follow the same rules because context is more important. [A construction worker in his yellow hat and reflective vest, for example, can stand against a plain backdrop and still be recognized as a construction worker—but without the context of the building site the shot is going to lack a certain amount of meaning.](#) So you don't want to blur out that half-finished skyscraper or the Habitat for Humanity house he's helping to put together—you want to include it in such a way that it's A) identifiable and B) that it adds important information to the photograph.



[Construction Worker](#) by Flickr user jamesfischer

Now, there is a fine line between important information and [clutter](#), and it can be tricky to learn how to identify that line. What you don't want is to have so much information in the background that your construction worker gets completely lost amongst all of that lumber, the digging equipment and the other workers toiling away in the distance. To really start to get the hang of what to include and what not to include, you need to approach each scene systematically, which means that there will be some patience required, for both you and for your subject. Set up and frame the shot and remember that if your goal is to capture a portrait, your subject should occupy a majority of the image. If there's more background than subject, then it's no longer a portrait—it's a shot of the [environment](#) and the human subject is now just an actor in the larger scene. Now look at each of those background elements and ask yourself if the element adds anything to the meaning of the shot. If there's a bright orange digger behind your subject, for example, but your subject doesn't drive a digger, then that element isn't going to contribute to the photo. Other workers will be distractions as well. So make sure you angle out anything that doesn't belong, and include only those things that do.

What if your background is full of important elements, but when you study the scene as a whole it just looks too busy? That's where your aperture comes back into play. Use a larger aperture to get some partial blur on the background—the trick is to make sure that those elements are still identifiable, but to blur them just enough so that they're no longer competing with your subject for your viewer's attention.



[farmer](#) by Flickr user Robert S. Donovan

## Candid vs. posed

Some photographers will argue that [candid photos](#) are always better than posed, and others believe that you can get an honest, natural look in a posed portrait, too. Whether or not you choose to pose your subject for this type of photo is wholly dependent on who that person is and how well you know him, but I like to recommend doing a little of each. I'm sure I don't have to remind you what a beautiful thing it is to no longer be bound by the number of frames on a roll of film—you can really shoot as many images as you want, and try as many different things as you like, which can only help improve your photography in the long run.

If you know your subject, you may have an easy rapport with him, which will help you get more relaxed looking portraits. If you do plan to shoot posed photos, remember that the key to doing this well is to make sure that they don't actually look like they've been [posed](#). And that, of course, means that you have to get your subject to relax.

Professional portrait photographers have a lot of different strategies for making this happen, but of course no one strategy works best for every photographer. It's up to you to try on a few different techniques and see which one you have the most success with. Remember that your success will also depend on your subject, so no one strategy works for every subject, either.

Personally, I find conversation to be the best relaxation technique for otherwise tense subjects. If you can get him talking about something that interests him, you're going to end up with a portrait of a more relaxed, engaged, and

interesting looking person. Fortunately, you are one step ahead of the game since you are photographing that person in his place of business. He's already got something to talk about, especially if he is the sort of guy who is particularly passionate about his work. Ask him questions about his tools, his tasks for the day, his favorite parts of the job, or his least favorite part of the job. If you can get him talking, you're going to capture a much more compelling photograph than, say, if you just have him look at the camera and say "cheese."

Candid photos are a little easier, particularly if you're photographing a person you know. Just hang back a little and let him do what he ordinarily does at work, remembering the guidelines from above. These are candid shots, but that doesn't make context any more or less important than it would be in a posed photographs. Remember that your subject is still the most important element in the frame, so you need to give him the most real estate.



[Sweeper](#) by Flickr user Jerzy Durczak (a.k.a. "jurek d.")

Remember that you don't have to shoot strictly portraits, a few long shots of your subject within his environment will also give your viewer an interesting perspective on who he is and what he's doing. It can actually be easier to start out with longer shots, because you and your camera will be less of a distraction for your subject. Hang back and try not to get away, and then gradually move in closer. If your subject acts a little stiff or unnatural because of your presence, that's okay. Just wait and at some point he'll start to get wrapped up in work and forget that you're there. If he doesn't, it's okay to let him know you're going to take a coffee break, and then slip back into the room a few minutes later when he's less focused on your presence and more focused on what he does every day.

## Photographing strangers

It could be that your subject isn't somebody you know, and then you need a whole different approach. I would have to say that photographing strangers ranks right up there with public speaking and death as things photographers are most afraid of. I do think that once you've done it a few times, however, you're going to find it that it's a lot less scary than it once was. You may even find that you enjoy it—what better way is there to meet new and unusual people than to approach them directly and ask permission to take a photo?

Street photographers have a lots of different techniques for photographing [people they don't know](#), and pretty much all of them will swear by one technique or another even if it bears no resemblance to the favorite techniques of other street photographers. You will have to decide which one works best for you. Stealth shots are one way to go—shoot from the hip, or you can use your reversible smartphone camera to trick your subject into thinking that you're shooting a selfie. You could also take the opposite tack—get right in the person's face, take the shot, and walk away. But if you really want to capture the essence of the person and what he does for a living, you may find that you get better results overall if you introduce yourself and spend some time with that person.



[young worker](#) by Flickr user Nicolas Alejandro Street Photography

## Conclusion

Again, how you approach any sort of portrait photography really is up to you, your own personal style, and the person that you are photographing. Like so many other things in life, this is something that's going to get easier with practice. So start out by photographing your friends and family in their places of business, and then move on from there. You may even find that you can move on from there in the same workplace setting—switch from photographing your dad to photographing your dad's coworker, for example. Once you feel comfortable with that, it will be a much easier matter to move on to taking photos of strangers. Just keep one thing in mind—context is just as important as subject. If you can master the art of including both, you're going to have some great photos, whether they are of strangers or otherwise.

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